

## Retreat Accelerated

**L**ET the Axis radio write the introductory sentence for the beginning of the end of this story: "Our forces have made an orderly retirement to prepared positions," they said of Mareth on March 6.

They may well have prepared this in myriad copies, army style, and then dropped a sheaf with each backward leap.

Wadi Akarit, Sfax, Sousse and finally Enfidaville, way stations along the enemy's Northern course, were touted as strong points but they afforded brief sanctuary under a hail of fire from land and sky.

Speed of retreat marked this last phase, but the strategical value of that speed was neutralized by the matching speed of pursuit. There was no time for the strengthening of defensive positions, or regrouping or the organizing of effective rearguard action. Bomb lines fairly leaped across war room maps during that period from March to May. Retreats of forty to forty-five miles a day set military records.

On March 6, the opening day of this phase, the Axis stood behind the French built and German bolstered Mareth line, which was still somewhat of a military question mark. A battalion of German infantry had made a surprise attack on the Eighth Army's forward positions opposing Mareth on the night of the fourth, but was quickly repulsed. Otherwise activity up to the night of March 6 had been limited to patrolling.

With an American armored force on the West nearing Gafsa and the Faid pass, narrowing the gap through which Rommel must retreat, the signal for the Allied offensive was expected momentarily. Whether Rommel would put up a real fight at the Mareth line; whether he would execute another delaying action, while his main force retreated farther North to consolidate with Von Arnim's army were the questions confronting tacticians.

Strong Allied air and ground forces which had made glowing history from French Morocco Eastward were engaging Von Arnim farther North and stood ready to block any Westward "orderly retirement" of consolidated Axis armies.

In a rising crescendo of bombardment operations and fighter sweeps, pilots and combat crews of the Ninth during March joined in the all-out Allied effort to smash the Mareth defenses. A total of more than one and a half million pounds of bombs were dropped during the month on Axis objectives, from gun emplacements and motor transport on the roads behind the Mareth Line to harbor installations and shipping in Naples and Messina.

The heaviest weight of the Ninth's air strength was woven into the fabric of the Allied aerial offensive against the forces of Von Arnim and Rommel in Tunisia. Bomb-carrying Warhawk fighters and Mitchell medium bombers pulled all stops in their non-stop battering of the Axis defenders of Mareth, Gabes and Sfax.

Flying wing to wing with Royal Air Force and South African Air Force light bombers and fighters, they virtually doubled their now famous shuttle service of Alamein. The resultant deluge of steel and fire in cooperation with the vicious ground onslaught of the Eighth Army was a vital blow in the smashing of the Mareth defenses.

With the beginning of the push, fighters and fighter-bombers roared out over the Mareth area as escorts for bombers, on offensive patrols, and with bomb loads of their own. In company with the RAF and the SAAF they strafed enemy transport and tanks, hit troop concentrations, gun emplacements and opposing enemy aircraft.

From the start of the Tunisian campaign Allied air forces have had clear air superiority over the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica, and have been able to concentrate their effort effectively against Axis ground targets rather than in tangling in aerial combat with German and Italian fighters. Thus totals of tanks and motor vehicles destroyed from the air reached new high figures, while totals of enemy aircraft destroyed fell off.

During March, Ninth Air Force fighters accounted for 10 Axis aircraft destroyed, seven probably destroyed and at least 11 damaged. In addition to their bombing activities, aerial gunners on medium and heavy bombardment aircraft destroyed at least three enemy aircraft and probably destroyed or damaged others.

The number of ground targets destroyed cannot be measured, nor can one count the number of troops killed, wounded or put out of action due to destruction of their transport which made it impossible for them to escape from onrushing ground forces.

Ninth Air Force medium and fighter-bombers alone dropped nearly a million pounds of bombs on Axis motor transport and bombers alone dropped nearly a million pounds of bombs on transport and tanks during the height of the drive to break Mareth. Results were clearly visible in lines of wrecked trucks, burning tanks and shattered gun emplacements.

The Ninth during the month counted losses of 23 aircraft, most of them to enemy ground fire. Since start of its operations in June, aircraft of the Ninth had dumped approximately three and a half million pounds of bombs on Axis targets; destroyed 101 enemy aircraft and sunk 43 ships. Twenty had been listed as probably sunk and 27 damaged along with 47 aircraft probably destroyed and 63 damaged. During the period American losses were 87 aircraft. Heavies of the Ninth continued plastering Naples harbor from their base at Benghazi in daylight raids, flying 36 sorties during the week through intense ground fire with the loss of only two ships.

### **MARETH LINE BROKEN**

On the night of March 6, the enemy carried out two converging attacks on Eighth Army positions along the road from Toujane to Medenine. Both were repulsed at heavy cost to the attackers. Fifty-two enemy tanks were destroyed.

On March 10 Rommel attacked again, this time on the extreme left of the Allied line at Ksar Rhilane. This thrust, indicating Rommel's nervousness at the possibility of being out-flanked, was made by thirty armored cars supported by artillery. In the extreme Northern sector, Von Arnim was also making conspicuously unsuccessful attacks and the Berlin radio summed up the situation with unexampled accuracy when it said: "Our forces have come up against stronger enemy resistance and have ceased their movements for the time being at least."

Rommel faced the zero hour on the Mareth Line with a force depleted in infantry and dangerously depleted in armor. His rear was threatened by American armor units which were less than fifty miles from the coast at Sened Station and only 60 miles from Gabes at El Guettar. The Eighth Army was on his front and his right flank was menaced by the Free French at Ksar Rhilane and by the New Zealanders. Overhead was the Air Force between Rommel and Gott. The element in his favor was the weather, which hindered, but did not stop, flying for several days prior to the push. There was no let-up on Naples. The harbor continued to catch hell from the heavens.

The Fifty-Seventh Fighters by the middle of March had built an imposing record of 3,652 sorties on all kinds of missions with a total of 89 enemy aircraft destroyed; 20 probably destroyed and 39 damaged.

The 79th Fighter Group at this early period of its activity had flown six missions with a total of 119 sorties. All of its missions were bomber escort and no enemy fighters had been encountered.

Then on the night of March 27 the Mareth Line cracked. The bulk of the Eighth Army poured through and advanced rapidly to Gabes, while the enemy entrenched along the Wadi Akarit.

In the main the Mareth Line was rendered untenable for the enemy by the threat of the flanking force southwest of El Hamma. The supply problem for this force had been simplified by the occupation of the passes at Hallouf and Kreddache. Eight thousand prisoners had been the bag of this and preceding operations in the vicinity.

Throughout the operations which resulted in the clearing of the entire region around the Mareth Line the air units rendered what General Montgomery described as "superb support." Air Vice Marshal Broadhurst, commanding the Western Desert Air Force, received this message from General Montgomery shortly after the fall of Mareth:

"I would like to convey to you my great appreciation for the superb support to the land air forces under your command yesterday, and in fact every day since the battle began. Such intimate support has never to my knowledge been achieved before, and it has been an inspiration to all troops. The results have been first class. I sincerely hope that you have not suffered many losses. Please convey to all concerned the grateful thanks of myself and the whole army for the truly magnificent effort."

And this at a time when there was ominous friction between Rommel and his air marshals. Medium bombers of the 12th Group turned their attention to Sfax and nearby el Maou airdrome. Sixteen ships bombed the 'drome on the 29th of March and destroyed 12 enemy ships on the ground, four of which were the troop carrying JU-52's. Dense columns of smoke rose from the field to confirm the accuracy of the bombardiers.

Throughout the week the heavies were attacking Messina, Palermo and Naples again. The ack-ack aim was getting better and as the defended territory shrank the batteries became more concentrated. Two medium bombers were lost during the week and many more ships were holed by ground fire. In the crash of a B-25 near Zarzis all of the crew parachuted to safety. The other was seen to go into the sea with its crew.

B-25's, the next week continued to pound Sfax, el Maou and the heavies returned to Naples, Palermo and Messina. Only one ship was lost this first week in April, one of a mission of 25 B-24's which bombed Naples. But the cryptic notation at the end of operations reports: "All our aircraft returned safely," was appearing with heartening regularity.

Our fighters and bombers were not meeting the anticipated enemy opposition in the air. Two factors were chiefly responsible. The attacks by Allied heavies on supply convoys and ports across the Mediterranean called for increasing air protection which made fewer enemy planes available for desert operations. The second factor was a rather rigid rule of German air strategy against attack without superior force. A third but less important factor was that enemy fighters were needed to protect Axis air transport fleets which were ferrying supplies to Rommel and Von Armin from Sicily, Sardinia and Italy. Oddly enough the big JU-52 transports were also bringing troop reinforcements to Africa from the mainland and what is still more strange this one-way passenger service continued almost up to the fall of Tunis.

Although exact figures on the ratio of friendly and enemy air strength must remain the inviolate property of Air Intelligence, the Allies had a sizable superiority and they increased that margin not so much by building up their own force but by reducing the enemy's. According to Intelligence estimates on March 20 there were 1,785 enemy war planes in the Mediterranean battle area. Just two weeks later this figure had shrunk to 1,670. This meant a withdrawal of aircraft for other jobs. A week later the figure stood at 1,600 and it settled down to a fairly steady rate of decline until the final galloping days when the Fifty-Seventh's Palm Sunday Goose-shoot upset all figures.

### RAIDS OVER TRIPOLI

Through February and March the enemy had been making sporadic raids on the strategically important harbor of Tripoli which the British set to clearing immediately upon occupation. Originally the twin-engined JU-88's came from Sicilian bases, to Gabes where they were bombed-up and fueled and then dog-legged the short distance to Tripoli to drop their bombs, mines and torpedoes. The harbor, due to its importance, was well protected by barrage balloons and closely knit anti-aircraft batteries. The methodical Hun would send his

high-flying "recce" about noon and if the harbor held enough shipping the bombers followed about dark, and he usually used moonlight to maximum advantage. Results were never commensurate with the cost of these forays because the ack-ack and RAF Beaufighters, the cat-eyed birds of the night, took heavy toll. It became virtually a suicide mission for the enemy, this Tripoli trip, and few weeks passed when there wasn't at least one body of a German airman washed up on the beaches from a craft that didn't get home.

But there came a night when the harbor defenders were caught with their balloons down. March 19 should have had moonlight according to the chart but it was cloudy and overcast and raining at Tripoli.

In came the JU-88's about dusk before the heavy rain had started. They darted out of cloud cover, skimmed over the roofs of the houses of the town and swept into the harbor. Big bombs dropped with a deafening roar and at least two found their marks on ships. An oil tanker went up in flames and a British ammunition ship began a series of explosions which increased in intensity through the night and continued for three days. A destroyer was also hit, but was saved from sinking. There were surprisingly few casualties and other ships in the harbor were miraculously saved though some were damaged. The enemy paid with the loss of five planes, four to ground fire and one to the Beaufighters.

The Tripoli harbor ack-ack barrage on the nights of these attacks was a thing of grim beauty. With the Bofors sending streams of bright incendiaries into the night sky, punctuated at bass drum interval by the heavies and searchlight shafts criss-crossing, arcing and swaying in the heavens, it was not unlike a huge fair-time fireworks display.

There was some enemy air activity during this period by forces based in Greece and on Crete. While the most of this was reconnaissance of shipping, harbors and coast area from Palestine to Tripolitania there was some mine-laying and torpedoing, none of which was effective. Ten days after the cracking of the Mareth line the Eighth Army was off again. As at Mareth the chief obstacle on the Wadi Akarit was a fissure thirty feet in depth extending five miles inland from the sea. At the railroad bridge the Wadi was 100 yards wide, but the water channel was only two yards wide, thus making it a less serious obstacle than the Zigazou in the Mareth position where there was a fifty foot stream of running water.

General Montgomery launched his attack at first light on the 6th of April and the enemy defenses were overrun on the first day of the attack. No less than five crossings were made over an anti-tank ditch connecting the Djebel Fatnassa and the Djebel Rumana, enabling armored elements to establish a strong bridgehead. By 10 o'clock that night 5,300 prisoners had passed through the cages. The Spezia and Trieste divisions paid a heavy toll.

Rommel made one more attempt to dig in at Skhirra and Sebskret en Noual, but pursuit was too close and he was finally forced into open country and the speed of his retreat had to be stepped up.

Less than five days after the Wadi Akarit break-through, Sfax and Mahares were occupied and the bag of prisoners had built up to 10,000 and it included the Italian General Mannerini, who had commanded the Sahara group.

The Americans due west of this theater and the Allied forces to the Northwest had been active meanwhile both in the air and on the ground, holding Von Arnim's forces at bay and closing toward the Eighth Army's main position. The First Army was heading down the road toward Mateur, but in this mountainous country where visibility is limited by thick undergrowth, spectacular advances could not be expected in the face of a resolute enemy.

Naples, Palermo and Messina were still receiving the attention of the heavies and the medium bombers of the Ninth while the fighters were bombing and strafing landing grounds and transport columns till hell wouldn't have them. By far the greater amount of damage was done to trucks on the highways, paralyzing movement of entire units and pinching off tentacles of the enemy's squirming mass in its northward plunge.

There appeared in operations reports in the early part of April, accounts of a new type of air-weapon being used by the enemy against bomber formations. Enemy pursuit ships dropped clusters of bombs directly into the formations from a position about 1,000 feet above. No damage occurred from the initial use of this type of attack. Four observers brought back essentially the same story. The bombs appeared to be about the size of fifty pounders and were dropped in clusters of five to seven. They seemed to burst at a given altitude and they did not appear to be the previously used Butterfly bomb.

From close study of the reports and interrogation of crews it became apparent that two types of clusters had been used in the several unsuccessful attacks, which indicated that the enemy might be testing their relative merits.

### ESCAPE UNDER FIRE

Another interesting story came from operational reports the first week in April.

Fliers of the 57th had begun to specialize in getting into and out of tight spots. Major Archie Knight, whose business ordinarily had to do with the weather lived up to this tradition in an adventure he had while returning from a Fighter sweep near Gabes. Read his own sortie report :

" Our formation consisted of three squadrons. I was flying in Captain T. W. Clark's section with two other pilots flying in medium cover position.

" As our formation turned inland from the sea over the coast north-west of Gabes, 25 plus ME-109's and ME-202's were encountered. Our section was attacked by five ME-109's and Captain Clark and I turned into the attacking aircraft, and as the turnabout was completed both Captain Clark and I fired, causing damage to three of the enemy aircraft who were seen to peel off pouring black smoke.

" My aircraft had been hit in the spinner and the coolant system and as glycol and oil sprayed over the ship, I lost Captain Clark due to engine difficulty. Considering my position and believing myself too far West of the lines to make it safely, I decided to continue the flight in order to obtain clearer vision.

" I soon saw a P-40 in trouble with an ME-109 on its tail. I slipped down and with a few short bursts from the rear put an end to this enemy aircraft who rolled over and plunged into the sea. When I pulled up from this attack I fell into a spin from which I recovered at too low an altitude to bail out. Faced with the necessity of crash landing, I put my ship down in a salt marsh just west of the German lines.

" My position was about one mile north of the present German artillery unit, and about 500 yards from the sea. The Germans tried to come out and get me, but were forced to keep under cover due to British forces controlling the area with fire from high cliffs to the east. Although the Germans continued machine-gunning and shelling my grounded aircraft, I managed to remain a poor target by hiding in a fox hole which I had dug with my pocket knife. Bursts of shrapnel from a near miss nicked one of my fingers.

" At dusk I made for the water front and, minus my parachute, started swimming for safer shores. Carrying my wrist watch in my mouth and with the aid of my Mae West, I was able to swim and wade several miles across a small bay. Reaching shore, and after walking approximately 10 miles, I reached a British gun position about midnight.

" I spent the rest of the night in an advanced station hospital and in the late afternoon of the following day, I was glad to rejoin my unit."

More than one fighter of the Ninth had his plane shot out from under him over enemy territory and baled out to land safely and a few were able to bring their own stories back with them through the German lines. When they did their stories were usually good, as witness the case of Lieut. Walter H. Reed.

Lieut. Reed became a member of the " Late Arrivals " Club in early April when he came back to his unit to claim his " flying boot " with this yarn :

" We took off late in the afternoon with a jammed military road as our objective," he said.

" Everything went well on the way to the target. We encountered no enemy opposition or anti-aircraft fire to speak of. When we were in position over the road our flight peeled off and went down to drop our eggs, I was so intent on the road I never realized how low I was, but from habit I pulled the bomb release and began to bank away from the road.

" I was moving pretty fast when all of a sudden my entire right wing seemed to decide it needed a change of contour. One moment it was the familiar mottled camouflage and the next it looked as though a giant can-opener had tried to pry it open in several places. Obviously a heavy ack ack burst had made a direct hit on me. The next thing I knew the wing tank was burning fiercely and the motor began to race full speed as though it meant to tear itself out of its mounting.

" I'm not too clear on what happened next, but I do recall rolling back the cockpit-hood and unsnapping the safety harness. By that time the cockpit was so full of smoke and flames I had to draw my legs up under me to keep from scorching my shoes and flew the plane with the stick only. Rather instinctively I must have pulled back on the controls and shot up about 500 feet.



“ Just what I was going to do in the end hadn't occurred to me, but despite all the confusion I was aware of a tank battle going on immediately below me. I had decided to stay with the plane and attempt a crash landing when the decision was taken away from me. One moment I was in the cockpit, and the next I was being hurtled through space as though a strong spring had catapulted me out of the ship. Later I was told that the entire tail assembly and part of the fuselage itself had snapped off. Naturally this threw the nose of the plane forward, throwing me out and ahead.

“ It must have been pure instinct that caused me to pull the rip-cord. I didn't know just what my altitude was, but I prayed I would have time enough for that silk to open. It did.

“ I could see tracers and hear the noise of the battle going on below me, and I expected to be shelled myself. By twisting sideways I saw the remnants of the plane strike the ground and explode right by a cross-marked truck. The crosses reminded me that I still might fall into German hands. I took advantage of a slight easterly wind and pulled the shrouds to steer away from them. I landed flat on my face and must have been stunned, because the next thing I knew someone was beside me holding me down. For just a moment I thought it was a German soldier trying to keep me from escaping, but when I looked at the insignia on the arm that was holding me I was relieved to see the familiar “ New Zealand ” identification.

“ We must have lain there about three minutes when my captor suddenly jumped up and practically tossed me bodily behind a small escarpment with a slit trench behind it. The first thing I asked was, ‘ Where's Jerry ’? and my friend pointed with a jerk of his thumb, at the time tersely commenting, ‘ E's one ‘ undred yards 'r so over there.’

“ It seemed to me as though all the fireworks in the world had been turned loose but the New Zealander assured me it was merely a little shelling before they went over the top for their next objective. They seemed very much at ease. In fact they gave me a cup of tea which they had been calmly brewing right in the midst of the battle. The soldiers sharing the trench with me even apologized for the delay in taking me back of the lines, but they were soon due to advance and were waiting for a flare signal even then.

“ Suddenly there was a scramble and I was left alone, but not for long. One of the unit officers drove up in a jeep, collected me and the hastily abandoned chute, and scurried back to their headquarters. That evening they took me back to my own field..”

Several American flyers of the Ninth Air Force have been wearing for varying lengths of time, in addition to their other decorations, this strange emblem of a silver boot, with wings attached to the heel, just over their left blouse pocket.

The “ flying boot ” is not bestowed by Kings or Governments, originated by the RAF Middle East Command, it is the official insignia of one of the most exclusive clubs in the world, the “ late Arrivals.”

Requirements for membership in this singular organization are quite simply defined, but not simply achieved. A flyer has to be shot down or forced to bale out of his aircraft and thereafter make his way on foot or otherwise back to where he started from. When he makes his way back on foot it generally means from enemy territory.

Originator was Wing Commander George Houghton, RAF public relations officer and former British newspaper man, certificates are presented along with the little silver boots. Lieut. William Bruce Campbell, Lieut. Arlie Claxton, Lieut. Adrian K. Stahl, Lieut. Dale R. Deniston, Lieut. Thomas T. Williams and Major R. F. Worley are on the roster from the Ninth Air Force.

Some of the returning pilots didn't have to walk back.

There is the story of Lieut. Arlie Claxton who baled out over the battle area and rode back to the Allied lines crouched on top of a British Armoured Car.

While attacking a column of armoured cars Claxton's plane sustained a direct hit which broke his oil line and filled his leg with shrapnel. He had to jump directly over the battle field and was finally sighted and picked up by a British armoured car under such constant fire that it could not stop long enough to take him inside.

Clinging to the top, they bounced along for an hour before a lull in the fight permitted a halt long enough for the crew to take him inside. Claxton was finally delivered to a first aid post where the shrapnel was removed, his wounds dressed, and he was sent to the rear, eventually rejoining his own squadron of the 57th. Claxton's squadron did not receive word of his rescue until nineteen days after he was reported missing.

Stahl, Deniston and Worley were all shot down during routine fighter missions, made crash landings behind their own lines and hitch-hiked their way home.

### SUICIDE MISSIONS

Returning to the strategical arm, April 2, witnessed something new for the heavies. Three volunteer crews of the Ninth Bomber Command took their Liberators on "suicide" missions over Axis Mediterranean bases and all returned.

The attacks, against Messina, Sicily, and San Giovanni and Crotone, Italy, are made at "zero" altitude against heavy fighter opposition and sporadic ground fire and resulted in tremendous damage to specific targets hit.

First of the three "suicide" raids was made on the great Italian Chemical works at Crotone by Lieut. Norman C. Appold and his crew of six: Lieut. C. H. Gerry, the co-pilot; Lieut. D. C. Odell, the navigator; Lieut. J. V. Hogan, the bombardier; and Tech. Sgt. F. G. Yakimovicz, Staff Sgt. H. L. Small and Staff Sgt. C. H. Givider, all crewmen.

"We came in out of the darkness just over the top of the buildings," Lieutenant Appold said. "It was a complete surprise to them and they didn't have to throw any more than a little light stuff at us before we salvoed our load in the middle of their buildings and climbed away. The explosions were terrific."

The attacks on Messina and San Giovanni were directed against the ferry terminals, through which supplies for the Axis Tunisian forces flow down to the toe of Italy's boot, across the Straits of Messina and are trans-shipped to North Africa via Sicilian ports. They were made at the first light of dawn Friday morning by pilots, Lieut. Brian W. Flavelle and Lieut. Jerome Dufour and their volunteer crews.

"They told us it was a suicide mission," Dufour said, "but it turned out to be murder for the enemy. We came into the target at full throttle skimming over the water of the harbor at about 20 feet altitude. The waist gunner called up on the interphone and made some crack about wishing he had brought his swimming suit with him. It broke the tension and we all felt better."

Dufour and his crew bombed the San Giovanni ferry terminal, while Flavelle's ship attacked the Messina, Sicily terminal across the straits.

"I had just pulled the nose up and was getting set to make our run on the target when we got Jerries in our eyes," Dufour continued. "There was a whole covey of them and right in our face a JU-52, leading the parade. I let him have it with my nose guns and they tell me he crashed into the sea. I was too busy to notice myself."

Both Flavelle and Dufour praised the work of their bombardiers, whose accuracy resulted in great damage to ferry terminals on both sides of the straits, one ship sunk and another probably sunk, besides the destruction of the JU-52 and probable destruction of another enemy aircraft.

Flavelle's bombardier was Lieut. W. W. Hannah and Dufour's was Lieut. Robert W. Merrel. While Dufour and his crew were over the San Giovanni terminal, Flavelle's ship was working havoc on the Messina end, with almost identical results.

Said Flavelle: "Hannah salvoed his bombs in the heart of the ferry terminal. We plowed right through ground machine gun fire to the target. Scared? Well, we didn't have time to find out."

Flavelle's co-pilot was Lieut. John C. Ryan and Dufour's Lieut. William K. Russell.

Other crew members were Lieut. Malcolm McIntire, navigator; Technical Sergeant Donald W. Gorman, gunner; Staff Sgt. Melick J. Janacek, gunner; Sgt. Robert M. Bowden, radio operator; Staff Sgt. Tim O McLaughlin, engineer; Tech. Sgt. William S. Lutz, gunner; Staff Sgt. John P. Gotham, gunner; Tech. Sgt. John H. Cleveland, engineer; Staff Sgt. Leonard J. Stephens, gunner.

Names, interesting because they show a cross section of the basic nationalities which mold into a fighting young America and because the names of men who volunteer for the one-way ticket tasks should be perpetuated.

#### ENFIDAVILLE LINE

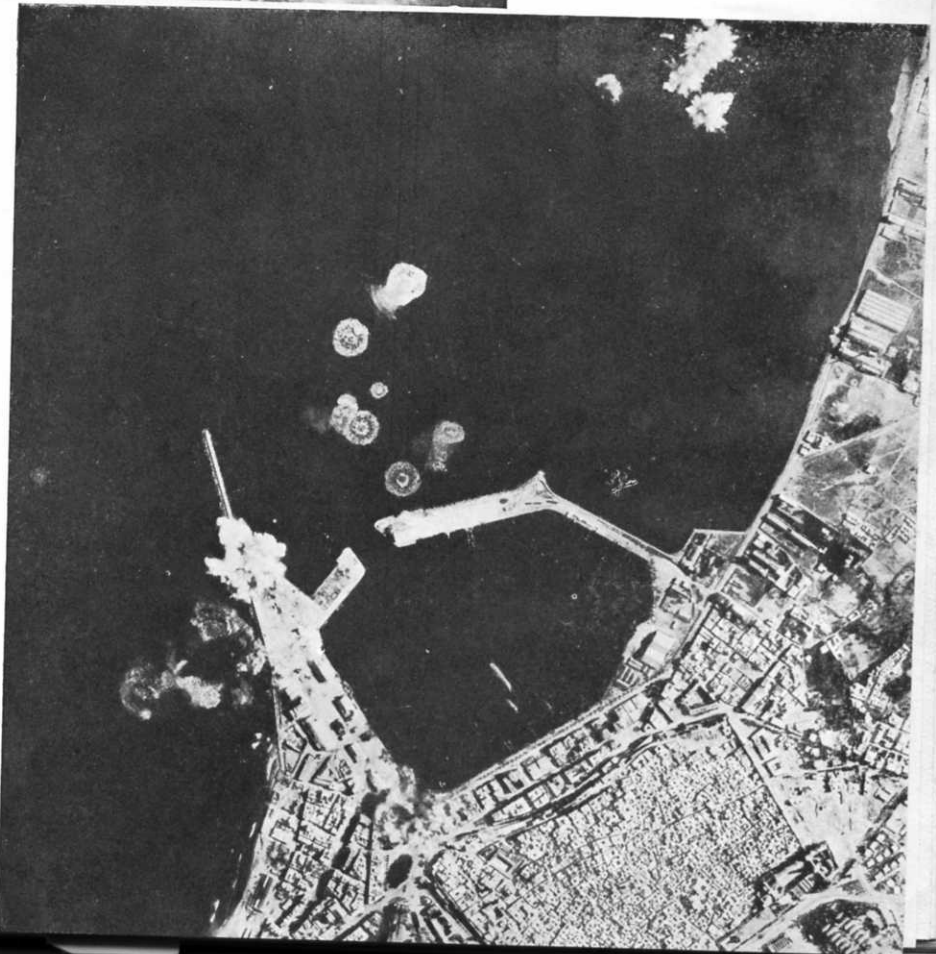
There was no let-up in the bombardment of Naples, Palermo, Messina and Catania and the only variation from the routine of the operations reports was the appearance of some new targets of the Libs. Such names as Pizo, Cosenza and Crotone were beginning to appear. One Lib was lost in a mission of 24 April, 11 over Naples in an attack by fifteen enemy fighters approaching the formation from all sides. Otherwise the reports continued to claim hundred per-cent returns.

During this week ending April 17, the enemy ground forces had been driven to another purported strong defense line. This line ran from Enfidaville on the coast due West to the



Sfax, one of Tunisia's most heavily bombed cities.

Liberators aim at Shipping off Souse.



high ground at the south end of the Tunisian backbone, Djebel el Hadjar. The advance of the Eighth Army from Sfax to Enfidaville was delayed by mines, demolitions and difficult country, obstacles with which the supporting air forces could give little aid.

Rommel and Von Armin were then defending an area of about half the size of the state of New Jersey. The area embraced natural positions of great strength, but Enfidaville, nevertheless, proved to be only a pause.

General Strickland at the start of April looked over his fighters in the field and was pleased. On his return from a tour of the front lines he was sufficiently enthused to write General Brereton: "The effort put forth by the American flyers here during the past week has been one for the books. They went after everything that was moving or firing."

"The losses sustained by the fighters were limited compared to their many successes," General Strickland continued. "They actually picked out enemy 88 mm. anti-tank guns on the sides of hills and destroyed quite a number of the crews as well as the weapons." The General included a report on one day's activities of one group alone, the 79th which showed the following damage done: 22 trucks destroyed, 101 trucks damaged, 2 trailers damaged, 20 tents strafed, 3 machine guns silenced, 1 20 mm. gun silenced, 1 Breda gun silenced, 1 armored car damaged, 1 house riddled and "much personnel destroyed." In addition the same group operating as fighter bombers secured two direct hits on a vital bridge held by the Germans. As a result of the day's operations, two of the group's aircraft failed to return.

The Ninth acknowledged its first ace April 8 in Captain Middleditch.

Captain Middleditch had brought his tally of victories to five ME-109's a week previously in a dog-fight over Tunisia.

Captain Middleditch described his ace-making victory as follows:

"We were flying in a formation of eight, and it was the first we had seen of the enemy in some time. We spotted some twenty plus ME-109's which came in to attack, rather hesitantly, I thought. Things didn't look too good for us at first, but their hesitation gave us the opportunity to get set. They probably thought we were baiting them with a small formation, since we'd had things so much our own way during the past few days.

"After a few minutes of maneuvering one of the Jerries made a pass at me. He was a little late in pulling out. I saw my tracers go into his wing root and some pieces flew off the right wing. Then I noticed a few 'golf balls' float by my prop and knew that some of Jerry's friends were on my tail. I quit my victim and went into a spin to evade. It worked. But I missed the opportunity to see the plane I'd hit go into the deck. The ground forces later confirmed this crash."

### CAPTURE AND ESCAPE

Outstanding among the accounts of fighter exploits in the story of the crash-landing, the capture, and the escape of Willie Teetee.

Lieut. Thomas T. Williams, called Willie Teetee to distinguish him from another Williams in the Exterminator squadron, is a tall, quiet lad from Denver.

Willie Teetee was reported missing, but somehow his squadron commander wasn't much worried. He just felt like Willie would be back. And Willie did get back, a little late for interrogation, but brought his intelligence officer this story :

" We were on a strafing mission against some motor transport and everything was going okay until I got a direct hit in my oil tank and oil radiator. It wouldn't have been so bad, but the oil caught on fire. It got hot in that cock-pit !

" My plane was blazing and I had to make a belly landing. To make it a little more complicated, the windshield was covered with soot and oil. I set the plane down, and naturally got out and away from it. When I had a chance to look around the first thing I saw was two German soldiers.

" They came toward me shouting ' Halten ! ' That was just what I didn't do. I ran. But I ran into a German patrol. That finished that. I never could seem to choose right. I was their prisoner ; but considering the fact that I had been strafing them a few minutes before, they were pretty civil, though they did make sure I understood what was wanted by poking me in the ribs with their pistols.

" They took me to a field station, asked me routine questions and I told them my name, rank and serial number. Then they called in the field surgeon who fixed up my burns. While he was working on me he kept pointing towards the blazing motor transport we had set on fire and he muttered, ' You Americaners, you ist too goot ! ' Then the camouflage officer came in to ask me how visible the German gun positions were from the air. We had never seen them actually, but I told him they were plainly visible from 6,000 feet. He seemed upset, and I imagine he had his men working most of the night trying to improve an already perfect job.

" A staff car showed up after a while and three German officers took me to the operations tent. There they sat me down and gave me what they considered a banquet ; sauerkraut, canned beef and ersatz coffee. They told me Germany would emerge the ultimate victor in the world struggle and that their African campaign is a scheduled retreat according to what they called a master plan. They brought out canned wine and we started trying to drink each other under the table. I seemed to be getting the advantage so they stopped that.

" Sometime later I was put into the prisoner of war cage. It was a cage, alright. It consisted of an inner fence of five strands of wire, and a second or outer fence of practically escape proof barbs. It looked as though I were going to spend the duration. But I hadn't been in the inclosure ten minutes before an RAF pilot came up and introduced himself. He waited until the guards were busy at the far end of our small compound and then told me that he was planning to escape that night and asked me to come along. He had made a careful study of the schedule and habits of the guards. He had a canvas water bottle and I had eight malted milk tablets, so I decided to try it.

" We waited until slightly after dark. The sky was overcast, which made it almost pitch dark. When the sentry was at the far end of his post we wriggled through the first fence. We had to crawl about 15 feet before we were lying by the last tangle of wire. By that time we had to lie and wait for the sentry to walk past us to the other end of the cage. He came

so close I was afraid he would step on us. It seemed as though we were making so much noise breathing that he couldn't help but hear us, but he passed right on by us. We had trouble getting through the second tangle of wire, but we did it by sacrificing a little clothing and some skin. My tearing sweater sounded as loud as a machine gun to my ears.

"The cage was right in the middle of a town and we thought we would do better by using the most crowded streets instead of trying to slip off down side lanes. We finally got away from there and managed to walk about fifteen miles out into the country before day-break. We found an abandoned farm house and hid in it all day.

"The next night we started travelling again and had some bad luck. We wandered into a German camp in the dark. The sentry challenged us and when we didn't answer he began shooting. The whole camp turned out and organized three searching parties. That wasn't so bad as the searching parties kept contact with each other by yelling, so we knew pretty much where they were all the time. Once they got mixed up and shot at each other. We finally ended up in a wadi where we spent the rest of the night.

"Some natives found us there the next morning. They weren't armed which was lucky for us. They wanted to detain us, but didn't know just how to do it so they left and we did too. We went over to an olive grove and hid all day. From there we could see the wadi and we could see German armored cars searching it.

"If there had been plenty of food and water it would have been simpler. We had to ration the malt tablets and drink very sparingly.

"The nights were especially difficult as we were only wearing jackets and it was cold. We slept from pure exhaustion during the day. By the fourth night we looked like a couple of wild animals. We hadn't had a shave for about five days. We had completely used up our water supply and had eaten all the malt tablets. When we finally stumbled in to the Americans we didn't care much whether they were friends or foes."

From out of battle fields and aerial combats emerge many bizarre stories which have varied from the ridiculous to the sublime. Tales of narrow escapes and close calls are plentiful. But here is a new one added in the closing chapter of the Desert Campaign. It concerns the remarkable coincidence involving the prophesies of Captain Raymond Fernstrom, top-notch photographer of the Ninth Combat Camera Unit and formerly ace Hollywood lensman. For a long time the Captain predicted he would be shot in the left thigh and that he would be going back to the United States after the injury healed.

Captain Fernstrom was known among the younger combat crewmen of the Twelfth Bombardment as a great morale builder. His keen sense of humor came to the rescue when the going was the toughest, and he could be depended on to liven dull moments too.

In gatherings around the mess tent he would act out for the entertainment of the boys his triumphal return home as a wounded veteran. A high-light was his visit to the Stork Club, where he would occupy two chairs, one for his gimpy leg, while admirers swarmed around to hear his tall tales and rattle his medals.

The dynamic and flamboyant cameraman who had filmed newsreels at the North Pole and from Lindbergh's plane, had prophesied correctly even to three awards.

It happened over Northern Tunisia a few weeks before North Africa became the exclusive property of the Associated Nations. The Captain was grinding out pictures of bombs dropped over the Cape Bon area when a shell fragment found his left leg just above the knee. No one else in the Mitchell bomber was injured and the plane rode home safely.

Back at the base the story takes on a different character. As they started to remove him to the stretcher, Fernstrom halted their effort and yelled for a cameraman. For weeks he had been vainly trying to get the picture he wanted of wounded being removed from a plane. This was his chance and he didn't lose it. A cameraman obliged and the picture was one hundred per cent professionally made. The wound was not serious and Captain Fernstrom was soon en route to the Stork Club, to which for him, New York City is attached.

### BATTLE OF CAPE BON

Enemy air activity seemed to come to life momentarily like the final jerk in a death struggle. Algiers, Derna, Enfidaville, El Djem, Barce and Benghazi saw intruders in their skies. Estimated air strength of the enemy held fairly static at 1,600 planes in spite of Allied tolls which could only mean arrival of enemy reinforcements—like blood to a corpse. But Palm Sunday dawned to change the Axis status boards. That brings this narrative to April 18 and the Allies' most fruitful battle of the campaign.

Through the April skies over Cape Bon that Palm Sunday afternoon droned a hundred enemy transports escorted by upwards of fifty fighters, all flying perfect formation.

In a matter of moments that drone swelled to thunder. The armada had met the Fifty-seventh on patrol.

Forty-six Warhawks with RAF Spitfires flying top cover swept in with blazing guns and the air became a whirling, screaming mass of diving planes and gun-fire. Junkers transports blew up in mid air; Junkers dived into the sea and on to the beaches, some crash-landing. Some dropped like spent rockets, streaming smoke; some fluttered down in crazy-control like falling leaves; some landed in the water and bounced like skipped stones. Then the Messerschmitt fighters began falling through from above and it became a problem of dodging falling enemies while shooting others down. So closely packed and disorganized was the mass that it became difficult to keep clear of friendly fire.

The beaches and the surf below became littered with wreckage. Troops jumped from some of the planes as they neared the water, others poured out of crash-landings on the beach. Eighty per cent of the wrecked planes were flammers and at one spot the sea beneath became a sheet of fire.

Up above the Spits fanned the ME-109 and 110's down to the Warhawks' fighting level and for fifteen blazing minutes hell reigned above and debris rained below.

The Black Scorpions, Fighting Cocks, Exterminators, squadrons of the 57th well earned their names and the less experienced Yellow Diamonds showed what they had learned with a little plus over their mentors.



When the Warhawks had exhausted their fuel margins and had to turn homeward, the score stood at 75 planes destroyed, including 58 of the three-engined troop carrying JU-52's and 14 high flying ME-109's and 110's and one ME-109 and two Italian fighters who blundered up to the level of the Spits.

Of eight American pilots missing after the battle two were reported the next day to have landed safely in friendly territory.

The few terse phrases of the routine mission report underlined with comment in the language peculiar to American fighter pilots lends graphic detail to the story.

The mission report, a typical one, came from the Commanding Officer of the 57th, Colonel Arthur G. Salisbury. The only added touch was this aside from the youthful commander.

"I've been telling everyone that the 57th is the greatest bunch of fliers in the desert, but now I won't have to make that speil—everyone knows they are the greatest. Boy, am I happy!"

Here is what the report said, with comments that participating pilots made about its various phases:

"16.50-19.05 47 Warhawks ordered up on fighter sweep over enemy lines. One a-c returned early. x x x."

"Damn it all," remarked the unfortunate pilot of the returned ship, who was not identified.

"We hadn't gone anywhere before I developed engine trouble and had to turn back. I had a feeling the gang was going to run into something, and it made my bones ache to miss it. Colonel Salisbury might have been the happiest man in the desert when the boys started coming back with their yarns, but I can tell you who was the saddest."

"x x x Formation flew to point X, picked up cover, then NW to point A and along coast to point B, where 100 plus tri-motored transports were encountered (some Savoias but mostly JU-52's) flying on deck in NE direction escorted by 50 plus ME-109's and ME-110's flying from 4,000 down to deck. Enemy a-c were engaged x x x."

"Look around and take it easy, boys" came the voice of Captain James G. 'Big Jim' Curl on the interplane radio. "It may be a booby." Curl, who is from Columbus, Ohio, was leading the 47-plane formation. He briefly searched the sky overhead to be sure the Spitfire cover was there, then on the radio again, this time less cautious and with a note of glee: "Juicy, juicy, juicy. Let's get 'em boys."

"x x x Enemy a-c apparently not aware our presence until we struck x x x."

"They were flying the most beautiful formation I've ever seen," was the comment of Lieut. William B. Campbell of Blissfield, Mich. "It seemed like a shame to break it up. Reminded me of a beautiful propaganda film. They seemed to be without a leader after our first attack and just continued to fly straight ahead. That was suicide."

"x x x Some enemy a-c believed to have bellied in at point C, apparently a L.G. (landing ground). Many a-c, 20 to 40 JU-52's were seen to belly land on beach Cape Bon. Between 50 and 60 fires were observed in vicinity of beach x x x."

(" There were so many targets in the air and crashing into the deck, and so many of us after them, I was afraid I was going to be left out," said Lieut. MacArthur Powers of Inwood, N.Y. " We almost fought among ourselves to get to the enemy." Powers shot down four JU-52's and an ME-109 within 20 minutes to cinch the title " ace ".)

" x x x A considerable number of personnel, many believed to be troops were reported by pilots to have leaped out of crashed e-a that bellied in x x x."

(Lieut. Harry Stanford of Munising, Mich., who accounted for three JU-52's corroborated that report. He had a look at the scurrying personnel from deck level, and this is how he got there : " I got two transports with my guns, then drove on a third. But when I pressed the tit nothing happened. My guns were jammed. It made me so damn mad when the guns didn't bark I decided to get that third guy if I had to dive him into the drink. Sure enough, he saw me coming and dived to get away, and he couldn't pull out. He went in with a tremendous splash. I skimmed along the deck and sailed for home. You should have seen those Jerries scam from the wrecks on the beach.")

" x x x The pilots of the ME-109's were considered to have flown their a-c in a confused and inferior fashion after the engagement began, probably due to the low altitude and disorganization caused by the Spitfire attacks above. x x x."

(" The ME's were all messed up," said Lieut. R. J. Byrne of St. Louis, Mo., who shot down three of them, from his position in top cover with the Spitfires. " I got three of them, but that isn't anything. Wait until the rest of the gang gets back. I had a ringside seat for the whole show. All you could see were those big ships coming apart in the air, plunging into the sea and crashing in flames on the beach. Their fighters couldn't get in to bother our ball carriers at all.")

" x x x 80 per cent. of the JU-52's destroyed are estimated to have been flamers and very few transports, if any, left the target area. x x x."

(And said Captain Roy E. Whittaker of Knoxville, Tenn., who shot down three of the transports and an ME-109 to run his victory string to seven : " It was a pilot's dream. I've never seen such a complete massacre of the enemy in my life. I was afraid someone would wake me up.")

x x x The final note on the mission report, except the full box score of participating pilots, was this : This organization realizes the tremendously important part played by the Spitfire cover, which shot down three enemy fighters in the melee in our last mission of the day. For the splendid cover provided and the job of keeping enemy fighters, although greatly outnumbered, occupied throughout the battle, go our heartiest thanks x x x.

Describing the engagement, Captain Curl said " When I first saw the Jerry planes they were right beneath us, about 4,000 feet down. Camouflaged as they were with green coloring, it was rather difficult to distinguish the transports against the sea. When we got nearer they looked just like a huge gaggle of geese for they were traveling in perfect ' V ' formation, tightly packed. The boys simply cut loose and shot the daylights out of



MAJOR ROY E. WHITTAKER



CAPTAIN ROBERT BYRNE



MAJOR JAMES CURL



CAPTAIN LYMAN MIDDLEDITCH

NINTH AIR FORCE ACES

them. What concerned our pilots most was the danger of hitting our own aircraft, for the concentration of fire was terrific and the air was filled with whistling and turning machines. There were cases of pilots missing the transport they aimed at and hitting the one behind. It was as fantastic as that, you just could not miss.

"There was no real fighter opposition because the British Spitfires that were flying our top cover did a grand job in keeping the Messerschmitts so busy that they could not interfere with our attack to any extent."

Captain Curl said that the enemy ships were so tightly packed that he sometimes had three in his sights at the same time and that he saw one of his squadron mates get two of them with a single burst from his machine gun. Capt. Curl, having been previously recommended, became Major Curl the day after he became Ace in this battle by bagging his third, fourth and fifth enemy planes : two Junkers and a Messerschmitt.

Returning Warhawks brought back to base that Sunday evening three other newly made aces and a big and glorious job for the artistic crewman who paints victory trophies on fuselages. The aces were : Lieut. McArthur Robert Powers, Inwood, L.I., New York, who shot down four JU-52's and one ME-109 to bring his total to seven enemy aircraft destroyed ; Lieut. Richard E. Duffey, Walled Lake, Mich., who shot down five JU-52's and damaged an ME-109 and Capt. Roy E. Whittaker, Knoxville, Tenn., who was credited with three JU-52's destroyed and one damaged and one ME-109 destroyed to bring his total to seven.

Praise came from high places and so did enemy bombs. While General Brereton was receiving congratulations for the men of the 57th those men were dodging bombs back at their base near el Djem. For two sleepless nights, April 19 and 20, Jerry pounded their home field in angry retaliation.

A much-decorated pilot, Lieut. Allen H. Smith, was killed by a bomb fragment and there were seven men injured. Three aircraft were hit, trucks and trailers damaged, tentage shredded and personal belongings scattered, buried and destroyed. The 314 squadron had ammunition storage and gasoline tanks hit and destroyed.

A nearby RAF camp was bombed for two nights at the cost of one killed and four wounded. Slit trenches on those nights more than earned the hard labor which went into their digging. The next day the 57th moved even closer to Jerry, but he didn't return.

On that same Palm Sunday, Archbishop Francis J. Spellman, Roman Catholic Bishop of the United States Army, a visitor from America, conducted services in a convent chapel in war torn Sousse.

During the previous three days Archbishop Spellman had visited a number of advanced air bases of the Ninth and had held services in Sfax, El Djem, Tripoli, Benghazi and Malta. Time and again he paused to hold services for American soldiers in poppy-strewn fields under the open sky.

The Archbishop also witnessed the presentation of the coveted air medal to enlisted men by General Strickland at an airfield near Sfax.

## AIR FLEET OVER BARI

The Ninth Bomber Command which had been steadily increasing the scope and weight of its operations reached the peak on Easter Monday.

Seventy Liberators roared over the boot heel of Italy on that mighty mission to jam machinery of Italy's aircraft production at industrial Bari.

It was a formidable display of air offensive power which sent 150 tons of bombs to the destruction of assembly plant, hangars and planes. The once busy airdrome which had sent so many new ships to the aid of the Axis was left a shambles.

It was the heaviest concentration of Liberator bombers ever dispatched on a single mission by the Ninth U.S. Air Force and it nearly blasted from the map that strategically important Italian assembly works on Italy's southeast coast.

Thundering over their target in continuous waves the big bombers dropped high explosives, incendiaries and fragmentation bombs for a well balanced diet of destruction. Several large oil storage tanks adjacent to the airdrome made good burning. Nearby railroad yards also took a few blows. Terrific explosions, raging fires and clouds of smoke paid unwitting tribute to the accuracy of the bombardiers.

Colonel U. G. Ent, the commanding officer of the bombers led his fleet over the target. Returning pilots reported a scene of utter chaos on and about the airdrome. "From our altitude it appeared that not a square foot of the target area escaped direct hits from our bombs," declared one of the bombardiers. "I saw one hangar practically disintegrate," a navigator said. "The roof blew off and then a second violent explosion completed the demolition. It just seemed to fly into small bits."

Enemy pursuits tried to leave the ground as the first planes came over but bombs nailed them to the runways.

Early the next day aerial photos substantiated what had seemed like exaggerated eye-witness accounts of the extent of damage. Many direct hits were counted on the wreckage of hangars and repair and assembly buildings and smoke still reached skyward from slow burning debris. The number of planes destroyed on the ground was even larger than original estimates. Photo intelligence confirmed more than fifty destroyed or badly damaged.

The attack took the enemy completely by surprise. There was no opposition from the air and all seventy of the Liberators made it safely back to their Libyan desert base.

The Bari airdrome was Italy's greatest assembly base. A few fierce minutes had made of it the Axis' greatest aircraft morgue. And ghost planes do no damage.

## LIBERATORS PROVE TOUGH

Many incidents developed to underscore the toughness of the Liberator under attack. Time and again they gambled against heavy odds and came doggedly home.

Witness the story of "Miss Julie" and "The Arkansas Traveler" which fits into the narrative at this period.

Late in April these two tough old war birds brought their crews to safety after a terrific aerial battle over Italy in the course of which they destroyed two of the swarm of enemy aircraft which attacked them. These two were part of a formation of twelve heavy bombers which took off from their African base to bomb Naples.

As they approached the target they were met with ack-ack of heavy intensity. Damaged, "Miss Julie" dropped behind. Immediately, several ME-109's which had not dared to attack the whole group, surrounded her. Feverishly, her gunners pumped at their guns, fighting them off.

In the meantime, the "Arkansas Traveler" had been damaged also by the anti-aircraft fire and it, too, fell back, joining "Miss Julie." Ten ME-109's jumped the two American aircraft which were badly shot up. Three guns went out of commission and the ships' motors were smoking as if afire. The Nazi pilots closed for the kill.

Aboard "Miss Julie," an aerial photographer dropped his camera and grabbed a gun. A minute later, he shot down one of the ME's. The other waist gunner, accounted for another enemy craft.

By this time, two motors on each ship were gone. The tail gunners managed to get their weapons into action again, however, and as the big ships circled and made for home they kept up a heavy fire at their pursuers who finally gave it up as a bad job and turned back.

With difficulty, the pilots kept their badly-damaged craft in the air until Malta was reached. Investigation then revealed that the landing gear on both planes had been shot away. Both pilots successfully crash-landed their ships and when the two veterans of a hundred battles in the sky finally came to a stop and the crews climbed out, it was found that no member of either crew had so much as a scratch.

Upon examination, "Miss Julie" had 95 bullet holes in her wings and fuselage. The "Arkansas Traveler," had been hit 103 times.

The low casualty record of heavy bombardment operations as a whole was better than good. One group, as an example, had lost less than one per cent of its planes per mission which was regarded by its officers as exceptional. The missions averaged seven hours flying time and some of the initial attacks were made over a round-trip distance of 2,000 miles. Crews without battle experience were in combat with the enemy two weeks after leaving the United States. In the first five months of the campaign the loss was only one-half of one per cent.

Looking backward through a satisfying April the Air Force was able to count three million pounds of bombs sent against Axis shipping and military installations from fighters and from medium and heavy bombardment during the month.

The April tally brought to more than thirteen million pounds the total weight of bombs dropped by the Air Force since it began operations in the Middle East.

Fighters made nearly three thousand sorties during the month with a score of 101 enemy aircraft destroyed, fattened by the Palm Sunday battle.

Heavy bombers directed their 471 missions during the month as usual on targets which struck at Axis supply.

Mediums battered landing grounds, railroads, tanks and motor transport in close support of the advancing Eighth Army.

From all these operations, so highly destructive, 34 aircraft are missing. A majority of pilots and crew members however, returned safely.

### **79th SINKS SHIP**

The Seventy-Ninth Fighters, desert veterans by now in a fast-moving campaign, turned their deadly aim toward the sea. Four tons of Kitty-bomber sent seven thousand tons of Axis destroyer to an ignominious grave on the last of April. It happened off Cape Bon, now double anathema to the enemy. It gave to the Ninth Air Force its first fighter plane naval victory. The bomb was dropped by an American of the RAF but with the "Hell's Belles" squadron, Flying Officer William D. Gatling.

Proceeding westward toward the tentacle of land that puts Tunisia in easy reach of Sicily, the destroyer was using violent evasive tactics when sighted by the patrolling fighters. The ships' maneuvers succeeded in turning the first bombs dropped into near-misses. Then, in a dive from 6,000 to 1,500 feet, the pilot released a bomb which struck squarely amidship. A burst of black smoke shot skyward and the explosion shook the planes above.

While the American P-40's finished off the victim RAF Spitfires kept eight ME-109's busy above, executing the kind of team work Jerry had been unable to meet.

Fighters of the 79th also fired the dock at an Axis shipping point on the Cape nearby with three direct hits and a near-miss.

The fighters were not to rest on one naval victory. Before the passing of another week in May they had sunk two more destroyers and one troop ferry. Damaged also were four destroyers and two small boats, more reasons why there was no Dunkirk.

The 79th had come a long way in miles and accomplishment since it began independent operations in the middle of March. It was short by calendar measurement only. They had escorted 103 bomber missions without the loss of a single bomber due to enemy aircraft. These were all daylight raids of the South Africans, the RAF and the American mediums, with bombers making the runs usually at the vulnerable level, of 5,000 feet.

In those two action-packed months from mid-March to mid-May they had flown 195 missions including 3,836 sorties over Mareth, the el Hamma corridor through the Gabes Gap and points north. Through that period not one of its aircraft made a forced landing due to engine failure. Helmets off to their maintenance men.

### **TWO NEW GENERALS**

In the intervals between gun flashes and bomb bursts the early part of May saw two Colonels in the Middle East raised to the rank of Brigadier General, the decoration of General Brereton by the Netherlands government and the visit of two Chinese military men. Congress gave stars to Colonel Uzel G. Ent, commanding the Ninth Bomber Command and Colonel Gilbert X. Cheves, chief of staff to Major General Robert W. Crawford, Commanding General of the Army Service forces in the Middle East. The young General Ent had been West Point athlete and balloon pilot and blimp observer as well as army flyer. He was a graduate of Command and General Staff School at Leavenworth and had been a military attache in South America.

Georgia-born General Cheeves was also a college athlete, was in the cavalry in World War I and later in the armoured forces.

General Brereton received the Cross of a Grand Officer of the Order of Orange Nassau with Swords. Civil in character, except that swords are added for members of the armed forces, the decoration carried no citation.

The two Chinese officers besides visiting headquarters toured advanced air bases of the Ninth in Tunisia. Major General Lam Wai-ching, a tall soft-spoken man of 42, was a student at the University of Utah in 1919. He received his flying training in California, was commissioned in the Chinese Air Force and then added to his flight training at the Russian Air School in Moscow. Major Hwang Ts-Piao, 32 got his flight training in China and abroad. They were members of the Chinese Military Mission to North Africa.

The log was finally closed on the Halverson project early in May with the return to Cairo of sixteen American airmen from internment in Turkey. Some of them had been there nearly a year, dating back to the time of forced landings of the Roumanian bombing mission. There was a humorous note to the May social calendar. A troupe of four American camp entertainers, the Yatch Club Boys, lost their guide car while jeeping up to an advanced unit and almost drove into the Afrika Korps lines. Believing it was still ahead, Jim Brown at the wheel just kept going faster to catch up. Flashes in the sky up ahead and ominous rumblings called their attention to the hills far ahead on which there were long lines of the wrong kind of troops, climbing ant-like up their sides.

The Jeep did a rapid about face almost involuntarily. The waiting guides back at the fork of the road saw a light streak come from the direction of the front which solidified into the Yatch Club Boys. They were convoyed into camp at a closer interval between vehicles to continue their programs under the auspices of the Ninth Air Force Special services division instead of the Afrika Korps.

### MAXIMUM EFFORT RAIDS

Echoes of Bari were heard in a series of maximum-effort raids by the heavy bombers on Italian ports. Reggio di Calabria, on the boot and Augusta and Catania on the east coast of Sicily saw their skies darkened by fleets of half a hundred Liberators and watched their ships and docks go up in flames and smoke. It was pin-point bombing and precise. RAF Spitfires escorted and from the three missions only two bombers failed to return.

First on the list, May 6, was Reggio di Calabria harbor, where the nail of the big toe would be on Italy's boot.

The big bombers soared over the target in perfect bombing weather during the early afternoon to drop a quarter million pounds of high explosives, all of which found a mark. At least two large merchant vessels received direct hits. From one there was a terrific explosion. Photographs taken while over the target showed the U-shaped harbor ringed with bomb bursts.

Ack-ack was light but accurate. Fighters swarmed in after the run and one fell to Liberator guns.

Reggio di Calabria is important to the Axis war effort in that it is the terminus of electric rail lines running down the West coast of Italy. It is only ten miles from Messina, the



Sicilian port and terminal of the San Giovanni-Messina ferry system, which carries a great portion of the Axis supplies for the North African Campaign.

Catania harbor was attacked May 11 and here also more than a quarter million pounds of bombs left trails of fire and destruction. A hit tanker exploded with much greater violence than the bombs. Another ship was broken into three pieces and an ammunition ship was damaged. Spitfires again guarded the skies overhead.

Augusta harbor got its quarter million pound quota of high explosive on May 13. Here hits were observed among more than 20 motor vessels moored in the main harbor. A flotilla of seaplanes was also damaged and oil storage tanks were fired. Hits were also made on a coal yard and nearby Forts Garzia and Vittoria in the outer harbor.

Here enemy fighters appeared in greater number, but the Spitfires were there also and from this mission on the last day of the desert campaign all of the crews returned safely. The heavy bombardment pressure was on with a will.

The eyes but not the guns of the enemy airmen were trained on the African coast the first week in May. Axis reconnaissance was spotted at many points from Port Said to Tripoli; perhaps gathering intelligence to properly time their "orderly" collapse.

Collapse began in the late afternoon of Friday, May 7 with the occupation of Tunis and Bizerta by forces moving in from the south west. It was hastened by the capture of Mateur by the First Armoured Division of the Second U.S. Corps on May 2 against desperate resistance. More than fifty thousand prisoners had been counted by the Allies. Enemy resistance was now confined to the approaches to Cape Bon peninsula.

Inadequate preparation for, and feeble attempts at evacuation were made. Jetties had been built at many points along the coast of the peninsula. Axis ships waited, but on the bottom of the straights instead of alongside. The Royal Navy was there. They remembered Dunkirk. In two days, the 7 and 8 of May, they sank 42 Axis ships between Tunis and Sicily.

Air Forces gave unsparing support in the closing days of the campaign. Of special consideration was the blow dealt to enemy air transport. On five April days, the 5, 10, 11, 18 and 22, combined Allied Air Forces had destroyed 232 Junkers 52's and 21 Messerschmitt 323's at a cost of 35 Allied planes. These losses were inflicted on the enemy at a critical point in the Tunisian fighting, when the time element precluded satisfactory replacement. They disrupted the transport system and produced that state of helplessness which led cornered hordes on the peninsula to choose surrender instead of annihilation, bringing active resistance to an end May 13.

Erwin Rommel, the Desert Fox, too valuable for sacrifice, had fled to "Somewhere in Europe" and 175,000 Axis prisoners were in the net including the hard fighting General Von Arnim.

Africa was purged but there was no surease for the Mediterranean islands as heavy bombers, now joined by the mediums stepped up the tempo of their attacks.

"Saeeda" to Africa was drowned out by salvos over the sea as the longest sustained drive in military annals over the world's oldest battle ground came to end.

**RECAPITULATION**

Cumulative figures through May 15.

**BOMBER ACTIVITY**

<i>Group</i>							<i>Missions</i>	<i>Sorties</i>	<i>Bombs Dropped in pounds</i>			
12th	..	..	..	..	..	..	158	1464	1718			
98th	..	..	..	..	..	..	137	1165	2139			
340th	..	..	..	..	..	..	13	191	288			
376th	..	..	..	..	..	..	127	1121	2270			
<b>TOTALS</b>							<b>435</b>	<b>3941</b>	<b>6217</b>			

**FIGHTER ACTIVITY**

<i>Group</i>							<i>Missions</i>	<i>Sorties</i>	<i>Enemy Aircraft</i>		
									<i>Dest.</i>	<i>Prob.</i>	<i>Dmgd.</i>
57th	..	..	..	..	..	..	375	5080	148	22	65
79th	..	..	..	..	..	..	170	3144	30	10	11
<b>TOTALS</b>							<b>445</b>	<b>8224</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>76</b>