

APPRECIATION OF THE AIR SITUATION
IN THE MEDITERRANEAN THEATRE
DURING THE PERIOD 11/7 - 31/8/1941.

A report issued by the German Liaison Staff with
Italian Air Force Supreme Command.

Translated by:

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1.9.47.

The British have during the last few weeks further strengthened their Air Forces in North Africa by ferrying aircraft, - especially fighters - via Gibraltar or Egypt. These serve as air cover, provide reserves for the coming offensive and are used to protect supply shipping bound for Tobruk. These activities force our fighters to go into action in large numbers, making heavy demands on our personnel and supplies. Nevertheless, the lack of flying training and experience among newly arrived British aircrews has cost them severe losses. On 21/7, for example our fighters managed to shoot down 4 British bombers and 8 fighters in the Bardia-Sollum area without loss to themselves.

In the opinion of Fliegerfuehrer Afrika (Air Officer i/c Africa Command), the reason airfields in Western Egypt are so heavily occupied, especially by fighters, may be that there is a shortage of aerodromes in Palestine and Syria, and that these formations will be required for later action in the near East.

The offensive activities of British bombers have increased of late. They have been directed primarily against harbours, and secondarily against airfields. In the period covered by this report, the town and harbour of Bengasi have been attacked 29 times, while the town and harbour of Derna have been attacked 20 times. In addition, 25 attacks were made against German and Italian aerodromes and positions. Apart from buildings in Bengasi and Derna, these attacks caused only minor damage, as they were carried out by small forces from a great height. They did however cause unrest among the troops and population and hindered loading and unloading operations. As the British are very well informed about all German and Italian shipping movements, thanks to their skilled intelligence services and effective reconnaissance, they try to attack the transports before they reach port or during unloading. They also frequently raid the harbour of Bardia on nights, when the Italian cargo-submarine is in dock.

Due to the weakness of the Italian Air Force in Sicily, Malta has constituted an ever growing threat to our shipping in recent weeks. There are estimated to be approximately 80 aircraft stationed on Malta, not counting those in transit, compared with 40 in Mid-April, and about 60 in May. In this way the British can exercise permanent "control" over our shipping traffic, interfering with its regularity, and causing us considerable losses.

Tripoli is attacked almost daily from Malta and British aircraft frequently raid the Sicilian ports. In the period covered by this report 26 attacks were made on Tripoli, 34 attacks on ports in Sicily, and 16 attacks on convoys. The heaviest attacks on Tripoli took place on 24/8 and 26/8 and in the night of 29-30/8; in the latter attack 2 merchant steamers in the harbour were badly hit, and 2 motor yachts and 2 minesweepers sunk. 12 of the attacks against convoys were successful, 12 ships being hit by bombs or aerial torpedos, 5 of them being sunk.

As has already been stressed in the last Report, the Italian Air Forces in Sicily and North Africa are inadequate to stop the activities of the British Air Force and Navy. Air Command Sicily at present consists of: 65 first-line bombers, and 120 fighters, while Squadron V has at its disposal 70 first-line bombers and 135 fighters. Two further fighter Staffeln are on their way to Africa. Naval reconnaissance aircraft total 7 Staffeln with some 50 aircraft in Sicily and 3 Staffeln with some 15 aircraft in North Africa. In addition 4 Army reconnaissance Staffeln are available, some of which have lately taken part in the protection of coastal shipping.

Excluding the formations operating on the Cyrenaica front, the Italian Air Force regards as its most important duty the protection of convoys and the guarding of the disembarkation ports at Tripoli and Bengasi. During the period covered by this report, 1509 aircraft were employed on these duties, - an average of 30 aircraft per day. The difficulty in guarding convoys from the air is that the range of the Italian fighters is insufficient to allow the adequate coverage of the 600 km. sea route from Sicily to North Africa; in the areas not covered by fighters, 879 bombers have therefore been employed. As an addition to the above-mentioned 120 fighters, 15 aircraft of the new Re 2000 type have recently been transferred to Sicily. This is a single-seater aircraft with a cruising speed of 360 km/h at 4000 m and an endurance of 4 hours. But the situation is not likely to improve to any extent through their use, as they are not equipped for bad weather flying, and have no self-sealing fuel tanks.

/Besides

Besides the guarding of convoys, the attacks on Malta as a submarine and aircraft base also declined considerably. Italian aircraft attacked the town and harbour of La Valetta only 11 times, while only 25 raids were carried out against the airfields of Halfar and Miccabba. Furthermore, these attacks were carried out with far too small forces (those on La Valetta on the average with only 5 aircraft, those on the airfields with 11 aircraft) to allow good results to be expected. In this way no great success in the attacks against Malta is to be expected in future. Nor can one hope that the Air Forces in Sicily will be adequately strengthened. This could only be achieved if the Italian High Command would relentlessly reduce the strength of the Italian Home Command, and even then Sicily could only be reinforced to a limited extent. Besides Squadron V and Air Command Sicily only Squadron IV possessed a larger number of aircraft (64); but of these 1 Geschwader (at present 18 aircraft) is to be transferred to Rhodes. Within the numerically strongest Italian formation, Squadron II with 4 bomber Geschwadern, 3 Geschwadern are in the process of being reorganized, of which 1 Geschwader should be ready for action by mid-September; of 5 fighter Gruppen a mere 2 are organized. Until now the Italian High Command has shown no intention of transferring any of the few movable formations to Sicily.

It is therefore desirable that Sicily be once again occupied by units of the German Air Force. If this were done, the aircraft of III./KG z.b.V.1 now flying daily between Sicily and Africa could be protected; otherwise we must reckon with a further reinforcement of British effectives on Malta and a definite threat to the activities of III./KG z.b.V.1 - until now the only safe connection with Africa.

In the Central Mediterranean the Italian Air Force has been more successful. A large convoy was attacked from 22nd - 24th/7., while on its way from Gibraltar to Egypt; 6 merchant vessels were sunk and others damaged. 60 aircraft were used in this operation on 24/7 and 167 on 23/7, the Italian Air Command Sardinia also taking part.

The Italian air formations, (Division Pegaso) under General Raffaelli, co-operating with the German Luftwaffe under Fliegerfuehrer Afrika are keen to get into action. Although the Italian fighters are inferior to the latest British models in speed and armament this disadvantage is partially made up by the greater battle experience of the Italians. The main burden of the fighting in the air is still, however, borne by the German units.

During the period covered by this report, Tobruk was attacked by the Germans 39 times, by the Italians 16 times, Marsa Matruh by the Germans twice, by the Italians 19 times, Fuka and other airfields, by the Germans 6 times, by the Italians 15 times. The attacks of the German and Italian Air Forces were especially directed against British naval and merchant vessels bound from Egypt to Tobruk. These shipping movements follow a regular pattern; after darkness has set in, the ships leave the Sidi Barrani area for Tobruk, spend 2 hours there and are back at their bases again by day break. Although our units have been moved up to Gambut, it is nevertheless difficult for the Stukas to reach the enemy ships in sufficient daylight. In addition, the ships are generally well escorted by fighters. Despite these difficulties, German and Italian aircraft succeeded during this period in sinking 7 vessels and in damaging 21 vessels, of which the German Air Force accounted for 3 and 9 respectively, and the Italians for 4 and 12 vessels respectively.

In Africa, during the period of this report 34 British aircraft were shot down by the German Air Force, while the Italian Air Force accounted for 22 British aircraft. In comparison, over the same period the German Air Force lost 13 aircraft and the Italian Air Force 25 aircraft in the Mediterranean theatre.

In the Eastern Mediterranean (i.e. between Egypt, Cyprus-Syria and Palestine) comparative peace reigned after operations in Syria had ended. Except for some Italian air attacks on Cyprus, neither side carried out any large-scale operations. Alexandria only was attacked 5 times by a total of 72 German aircraft, while the Suez Canal area was raided 14 times by a total of 157 aircraft. No serious damage was caused to either target; British anti-aircraft defences have been strengthened.

By mutual agreement, the Italians did not take part in these attacks against Alexandria and the Suez Canal, because their aircraft have insufficient speed, armament and range to combat the strong enemy fighter and anti-aircraft defences. For the same reason the Italian aircraft based on Rhodes fly reconnaissance only as far as the Nile Delta. The reduction in combined operations is particularly regrettable, since the Italian formations are far more successful when working in direct co-operation with the German Air Force. It might be better to transfer the Italian formations on Rhodes to Sicily, with the exception of the forces necessary for the protection of Rhodes and shipping in the Aegean.

Italian reconnaissance is adequate as regards the number of aircraft employed but from a lack of uniform leadership and sometimes from inaccuracy, sighting reports to be followed by bombing attacks are frequently useless or require further checking.

Reports issued by the Italian information services, partly based on news supplied by unreliable agents, are often inaccurate, exaggerated or untrue, and tend to cause unnecessary alarm and mistaken counter-measures.

The Italian Y-Service is still in its infancy. An improvement is only likely if the service is put under German command or manned by German-trained personnel.

As far as the supply situation of the Luftwaffe is concerned, - decisive for the successful defence and continuation of operations in North Africa, - there has been a slight improvement during this period, although this improvement is by no means adequate. Due to the steamer "Ossag" managing to reach Bengasi at the end of August, and better air protection being afforded to coastal shipping between Tripoli and Bengasi, stocks of aviation fuel for 1 - 2 months could be built up in the operational zone of Cyrenaica. The supplies of engines and ammunition are at present adequate. Through the employment of field repair sections repair possibilities have been considerably improved, and the serviceability of our units has shown a corresponding increase.

The construction of a second fuel depot with a capacity of 7 million litres in mid-September at Tripoli and of a similar one at Bengasi at about the beginning of December 1941, will mean that there will be storage space for enough fuel to provide for several months of active operations.

The fairly difficult motor-vehicle situation will also improve slightly during September, (partly through the buying of stock in Italy and partly through the allocation by RLM/LE/K of about 150 vehicles), provided that their transport to North Africa can be achieved without serious losses. To these must be added a number of vehicles purchased in Tunis, which were not of any great value. Nevertheless, in view of the heavy wear and tear on all vehicles in the desert, these will not be able to solve the transport problem from the ports of disembarkation to the front; in order to eliminate our difficulties, having special regard to the fighting expected, it is essential that further columns be brought over from Germany. As one Staffell of III./KG.z.b.V.1. is about to be posted to Patras, essential supplies for Africa will have to use the air route via Greece to Cyrenaica on a greater scale. Even if by the employment of III./KG.z.b.V.1 our current needs can be met, it must still be remembered that should an offensive be launched, further formations will have to be transferred to North Africa, and the transport units strengthened.

In spite of the present reasonably satisfactory supply position it must be emphasised that there is likely to be a very serious crisis indeed if shipping losses and traffic delays continue at the present rate. This is because lost Italian shipping space cannot be adequately replaced, and because air transport can never become a fully effective substitute for transport by sea.

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