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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

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AIR OPERATIONS BY THE 5TH SQUADRA AEREA

(ITALIAN AIR FORCE COMMAND IN AFRICA)

BETWEEN OCTOBER 20, 1942 AND JANUARY 31, 1943.

Translated from the official war diaries.

TRANSLATED BY

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P R E F A C E

This is a report of the activities of the 5th Squadra during the operational phase which began with the defensive battle of El Alamein and ended with the retreat from Tripolitania and the manning of the Mareth line.

This phase falls into two distinct periods:

1st period - from October 20, 1942 (beginning of the air attack against our bases and battle in Egypt)

until November 20, 1942 (temporary strengthening on the El Agheila line)

2nd period - from November 21, 1942 (El Agheila line)

until January 30, 1943 (consolidation on the Mareth line).

1st PERIOD

I. SITUATION ON THE EL ALAMEIN LINE ON THE EVE OF THE BRITISH ATTACK

After having decided to remove the menace of the pressure being exercised against Alexandria and the Canal, the enemy mobilized all the resources of their Empire in order to reconstruct the air and ground forces of the 8th Army which were half destroyed in the battles in Marmarica and Western Egypt, and then to throw them into battle against the Axis.

General Montgomery quickly began preparations for the decisive attack during the first days of September after Field-Marshal Rommel's manoeuvre for the occupation of the Delta zone and the attempt to reach the banks of the Red Sea had failed.

The supply of British aircraft went on in ever increasing numbers and was continued during October and November. Among them were many American aircraft, mainly bombers complete with crews.

Towards the end of October there were about 1800 aircraft ready for use in the sectors of Alexandria, Cairo and Suez. To these had to be added about 800 aircraft consisting of those in reserve, those being assembled and those being repaired.

On the eve of the attack, the opposing forces were:

| GROUND FORCES | AXIS | BRITISH |
|-----------------------------|------|---------|
| Tanks | 400 | 1100 |
| Armoured cars | 200 | 400 |
| AIR FORCES | | |
| Fighters | 150 | 1200 |
| Bombers and fighter-bombers | 180 | 800 |
| Various aircraft | 400 | 600 |
| total | 730 | 2600 |

The great difference in numbers was due to the following reasons:

1. The British front was supported by well supplied bases in Egypt which contained all kinds of repair shops, stores and depots, with a network of roads which united the ports of the Red Sea, the Suez and Alexandria, and joined on to the road going to the front;
2. The Axis front was supplied by the only two existing roads (road and rail), which linked Tobruk, Mersa Matruh and El Daba.

The only ports at our disposal which allowed our steamers to unload were Tobruk and Bengasi, which were about 600 to 1000 kms from the front;

3. The British were in the very fertile Delta zone, whilst we were in the Egyptian desert and Marmarica;
4. While a lorry took one day to go from Port Said to El Alamein, one of ours took 3 days from Tobruk and 5 from Bengasi.

The critical period of the battle for Egypt and Italian North Africa began on the day when Rommel had launched the last reserves of the mechanized army into

battle, in a supreme attempt to fill in the gaps in our front, which were due to the hammering attacks of Montgomery's 8th Army, and when the Italo-German forces were forced to withdraw to Gyrenaica.

The 5th Squadra Aerea had employed all their Mc 202's and a large number of Mc 200's, Cr 42's and Cant/Z/1007/bis aircraft in the skies over Egypt, in order to fight for the dominion of the sky alongside the German Air Force against the massive formations of the R.A.F. After a few days of fighting, the small number of aircraft and small supply of fuel was exhausted, and we could not count on replacements and more fuel from the mother country.

The scarcity of air supplies of all kinds (fuels, engines, spares etc.) due to shipping transport difficulties, which had begun during the first days of September got worse; so much so that during the retreat the air units had to limit their operations because of lack of fuel and many aircraft had to be taken by road for lack of effective engines.

The aerial blockade which the enemy created along the coasts of Libya and Egypt was felt at the most crucial moment of the fighting and was a success in spite of the use by 5th Squadra Aerea of 50% of their efficient aircraft for the protection of the ports and convoys, and the continuous sacrifice of the crews who carried out their escort and patrol duties, night and day.

Our fighter aircraft which were given the defence duties were inferior both in speed and armament to the R.A.F. aircraft, and were in no condition to put up any effective resistance against the massive enemy formations.

The audacity, courage and spirit of sacrifice of our pilots, which was proved in many encounters, could not be effective against much more powerful and ever increasing aircraft formations.

II. AIR ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BY THE FRONT LINE UNITS DURING THE BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN, OCTOBER 20-31, 1942.

(a) Operations carried out by the fighters.

The enemy offensive was preceded by violent and heavy bomber attacks against the advanced Italo-German airfields. The attacks were started on the morning of October 20, and were mainly aimed at Fuka (H.Q. of the 4th Stormo) and Abu Aggag (H.Q. of the 3rd Stormo), causing heavy and irreparable damage to our fighter units.

Italian fighters met the massive formations of bombers with strong escorts, over Alamein, Qotafia, Fuka, etc., engaged them in violent and hard combats and inflicted heavy losses on them.

Judging from approximate calculations the enemy employed an average of 700 aircraft per day between October 20 and October 31, against our fighter formations, airfields and the 'A.C.I.T.' front.

On October 20, 3rd and 4th Stormo fighters met the enemy in 8 violent combats, which began in the morning and went on until twilight.

In the first encounter between 14 Mc.202's and 24 bombers with heavy escorts, which took place over Fuka, 2 P.40's were certainly shot down and one P.40 and one Spitfire probably. 7 other Mc.202's which attacked 24 bombers escorted by Spitfires and Curtiss P.40's, shot down 3 enemy fighters. During a third combat over Qotafia, a formation of 12 Mc.202's broke up a formation of 25 Hurribombers escorted by Spitfires and P.40's, shooting down 3 enemy aircraft.

14 Mc.202's which were on patrol over Alamein encountered a formation of 20 Spitfires. The exceptionally violent combat ended after 3 Spitfires were shot down, with 2 others probably destroyed; two damaged Mc.202's landed in our

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lines with the pilots slightly injured.

A fifth combat between 14 Mc.202's which took off from Fuka, and 24 bombers with twice as many P.40's and Spitfires, ended with a brilliant victory for the 4th Stormo fighters, who shot down 11 enemy fighters and machine-gunned many others which were forced to desist from the fight. The only Mc.202 hit landed in our lines with the pilot unhurt.

During another combat between a formation of 13 Mc.202's of the 3rd Stormo and 30 bombers which were escorted by a large number of fighters, 7 Spitfires and Curtiss P.40's and two multi-engined aircraft were shot down.

During the afternoon, when 12 Mc.202's encountered 24 heavily escorted bombers, 5 fighters and 2 bombers were shot down; one Mc.202 failed to return. 6 enemy aircraft, including 2 four-engined planes were shot down during the last combat between 9 Mc.202's and 19 escorted enemy bombers.

A total of 44 enemy aircraft were shot down by our fighters on October 20, and 13 others probably destroyed; one Mc.202 failed to return and three landed in our lines after being hit.

In spite of the heavy losses suffered by the enemy on October 20, the attacks against our airfields, communication routes and front were continued with an ever increasing intensity.

Our fighters again encountered the enemy formations and were engaged in violent combats. Although the 3rd and 4th Stormos had suffered greatly from the bombardments against their airfields, they were engaged in four combats on October 21 against enemy formations which were 3 or 4 times larger.

During the days which followed, the aggressiveness of our fighters gradually diminished, due to the losses suffered on the ground. The enemy, however, still feared our fighters, who made them pay dearly for every attack. From October 22-31, our units were engaged in 27 combats and inflicted very heavy losses on the R.A.F.

An idea of the part taken by the 5th Squadra Aerea during the battle of El Alamein is shown by the following figures of the losses inflicted on the enemy from October 20-31.

95 aircraft shot down
41 aircraft probably destroyed
378 aircraft machine-gunned in the air.

(b) Machine-gunning and ground attack operations.

During the battle of Alamein Cr.42 aircraft with glider bombs were used in both ground and machine-gunning attacks against mechanized forces and enemy gun emplacements.

The following operations were carried out:

On the night of October 24, a formation of Cr.42 bombers attacked vehicles and marching columns in the El Hamman zone without appreciable results. On the return flight, 8 fast motor boats were sighted and attacked near Ras Daba. The motor boats which were heading west, were obviously going to carry out nuisance operations against our lines of communication. The attack against the above motor boats was continued by another formation of Cr.42's who hit one of the craft whilst the others altered their course.

During the night of October 27, a formation of Cr.42's attacked the railway between El Hamman and Imait and an unspecified enemy unit at El Alamein.

On the afternoon of October 27 a bombing and machine-gunning operation against enemy batteries was carried out in support of our counter-attacking troops.

43 Cr.42 aircraft escorted by a large number of Mc.202's and Me.109's were used. The formation was immediately attacked by large numbers of enemy fighters and only a few Cr.42's were able to carry out the mission, while the rest did not reach their objective, and dropped their bombs as soon as they were attacked. Two Curtiss P.40's were shot down; two Cr.42's did not return, two landed in our territory.

During the nights of October 25 and 30, the Cr.42's carried out two operations in the El Alamein zone, against the El Alamein and El Hammam railway and road.

A total of 104 Cr.42's was used.

The results obtained were slight, and it was not worth while continuing the attacks.

If the support given by the Cr.42's to the ground operations during the advance into Cyrenaica and Egypt was of any consequence to the victorious fighting as far as Alamein, it must be remembered that the support was only possible because of the crisis which the R.A.F. was undergoing, which left the supremacy of the skies to the Italo-German fighters. As soon as the numbers of the opposing aircraft increased (this came about two months before the El Alamein offensive) our fighters were met by enemy forces superior both in quantity and quality. These large numbers of aircraft with the aid of spotters foiled every surprise attack. The use of Cr.42 aircraft had to be limited to the areas where there was no possibility of encounters with enemy fighters, (e.g. operations carried out against vehicles in desert zones and convoy escorts against submarines and torpedoes) and to night raids against nearby enemy roads of communication. The above were the decisions taken, following the use of Cr.42's during the day.

(c) Reconnaissance activity.

Tactical reconnaissance on the front was carried out by Mc.202 patrols; to the south of the desert zone, reconnaissance was carried out by patrols of Cr.42, Cant.Z, 1007/bis and Ghibli aircraft.

The results obtained by the fighters of the 3rd and 4th Stormos were the ones upon which the Commando Squadra based their orders for retreat.

III. CONVOY ESCORTS AND PORT PROTECTION

During the El Alamein battle and the retreat, the units in Cyrenaica which did not take part in the operations on the front, were used for escorting convoys and for the protection of ports while the steamers were unloading. The work carried out by these units was exceptionally strenuous and difficult, the pilots, usually flying from 6 to 8 hours per day.

On October 25, the fighters defending Tobruk attacked a patrol of Beaufighters, one of which was shot down and 2 machine-gunned.

On October 26, one of our important convoys which was sailing to the north-west of Tobruk and which included the tanker 'Proserpina', was attacked in a series of attacks by bombers and torpedo-bombers escorted by fighters.

Our few inadequately armed fighters intervened during the attacks but did not manage to guard the 'Proserpina' which had become isolated from the rest of the convoy at a distance of about 5 miles. The ship was hit by enemy aircraft which had managed to get away from the combat.

During the combats on October 26, our escorting fighters and others which had intervened when the alarm was given, obtained the following results:

| | |
|----------------|--|
| shot down | 2 four-engined aircraft, 2 Bostons, 2 Beaufighters |
| probables | 1 Maryland type aircraft, 2 four-engined aircraft |
| machine-gunned | 7 four-engined aircraft, 9 Bostons. |

During a bomber raid on Tobruk on November 2, aircraft on patrol and aircraft which had taken off on the 'alert', engaged and machine-gunned effectively 4 four-engined aircraft.

On the same day, aircraft which were escorting one of our convoys which was attacked by bombers shot down 2 twin-engined aircraft.

On November 4 and 5, fighters on defensive patrol over Benghazi engaged four-engined enemy aircraft in combat and obtained 3 probable hits, making a total of 15 machine-gunned in two days.

IV. RADAR SERVICE

(a) On the Alamein front

The German and Italian fighter units at the front were supported by a radar service which the G.A.F. had set up near El Daba.

The 5th Squadra organized an alarm service for the Italian fighters by means of a telephone system between the radar station and the 4th Stormo Command Mc.202 with H.Q. at Fuka. The above Command had set up a sending and receiving system in order to guide the fighters during flight. The service which was carried out by competent personnel facilitated the use of the fighters on the alert and obtained good results.

(b) At Tobruk

The A.A. defence of Tobruk was entrusted to flak and D.I.C.A.T. (A.A. defence organization).

Flak had a radar service which was 'hooked up' by means of telephone and radio to the 13th Gruppo Fighter Command at Bu Amud.

But this means of communication never worked perfectly, so that the news of sightings always reached the airfield too late; that is when the enemy aircraft were actually attacking the port.

As a result of this, the Gruppo had to carry out continuous patrols over the Port Comman area, which was a burden to the pilots and costly in material.

Towards the end of October an understanding was reached between the German and Italian Commands, which permitted the use of a defence section to go into operation when the alarm was sounded.

(c) At Benghazi

There existed an old type of radar set manned by specialised I.A.F. personnel. The installation had been set up following orders from the High Command for the use of the D.I.C.A.T. Command (A.A. defence organization).

The sighting and alarm signals reached the defence Fighter Group from the D.I.C.A.T. Command. In spite of the communication lines between the above Command and the K.3 Alarm Section (K.3 airfield), communications were not very speedy, so that it was necessary to carry out patrols over the port.

Following the intervention of the High Command of the Libyan Armed Forces and the O.B.S. Command, the radar set was put at the disposal of Flak Command (German A.A. defence) with which the Fighter Group kept in touch by telephone.

Good results were obtained after this and aircraft could take off in anticipation of the arrival of enemy aircraft.

V. ARRANGEMENTS FOR REDUCTION IN MATERIAL

From the second half of October, when the enemy attack was being planned and the enemy offensive was expected to begin in the near future, the Commando Squadra arranged that the stores at Mersa Matruh and at Tobruk which had been overstocked because of the possibility of an advance towards the Delta and the Canal, should be reduced and that the excess material should be brought back to a more appropriate H. Q.

As soon as the offensive had begun, even the heavier material which was in excess for the units in the line was brought further back.

It was also arranged that all the unserviceable aircraft which could not be repaired, were to be sent back towards Cyrenaica within 5 days.

Our advanced aircraft which had been sent to their positions to take part in offensives with the Units in the Fuka zone, found that they were very exposed when the enemy carried out their first offensive from the air, which as usual preceded the ground operations. The Units suffered so much that it was thought necessary to bring several to the rear.

The 4th Stormo Mc.202 and the 50th Stormo Cr.42, were transferred from the Fuka zone to Martuba airfield. This was necessary as the 4th Stormo had been reduced to 10 aircraft, following the losses suffered on the ground and in the air, and it was neither convenient nor justifiable for it to remain indefinitely under enemy bombardment without being able to do anything.

The remaining 4th Stormo aircraft were passed on to the 3rd Stormo, so that they could operate efficiently on the front until the retreat of the A.C.I.T.

The 4th Stormo regained its efficiency by making use of 28 Mc.202's which had been sent from Italy and the aircraft which had been repaired by the S.R.A.M. (repair service) and the "squadriglie".

The 50th Stormo Cr.42, had undergone a similar fate and the order was given to pass the most efficient of the aircraft on to the 5th Stormo at Abu Smeit.

On the other hand, even if the Stormo had been strong enough, it would not have been possible to keep more Cr.42 aircraft in the line than the existing number of fighters were able to protect.

The Commando di Squadra was also concerned with the formation of a reserve in the rear which could come into operation when needed. The need arose when the Sollum ridge was abandoned and the 3rd and 5th Stormos which had operated in close cooperation with the ground forces were replaced in their duties by the 4th and 5th Stormos.

VI. BATTLE ORDER OF THE UNITS OF THE 5TH SQUADRA AEREA ON NOVEMBER 1ST 1942

Following the above-mentioned movements, the battle order of the units and commands of the 5th Squadra on November 1 was as follows:

| | |
|--|----------------|
| 5th Squadra Aerea Command | - Derna |
| Eastern Sector Tactical Command | - Fuka |
| 3rd Stormo Mc.202 | - Abu Smeit |
| 5th Dive-Bomber Stormo Command | - " " |
| 101st Dive-Bomber Gruppo Cr.42 | - " " |
| 191st Recce Squadriglia Cant/Z/1007/bis. | - Mersa Matruh |
| 94th Fighter Squadriglia Mc.200 | - Sidi Barrani |
| 12th A.P.C. " Ca.309 | - Siwa |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|
| Central Sector Tactical Command | - Derna |
| Tobruk Air Force Command | - Tobruk |
| 2nd Fighter Stormo | - Bu Amud |
| 4th Fighter Stormo - Mc.202 | - Martuba |
| 50th Assault Stormo - Cr.42 | - " |
| 131st Torpedo Gruppo - S.79 | - Derna |
| 47th Assault Gruppo - Cr.42 | - " |
| 35th Bomber Stormo - Cant/Z/1007/bis. | - Barce |
| 15th Assault Stormo Command | - Benghazi K.1 |
| 46th Assault Gruppo Cr.42 | - " " |
| 150th Fighter Gruppo - Mc.200 | - " K.3 |
| 131st Torpedo Gruppo Command | - " " |
| 174th Torpedo Squadriglia | - " " |
| 66th Recce Group Command | - Barce |
| 131st Squadriglia - Ca.311 | - " |
| 87th Squadriglia - Ca.311 | - Benghazi K.3 |
| 12th A.P.C. Squadriglia Section | - Derna |
| 12th " " " | - Gialo |

The units in Tripolitania to the west of El Ageila were part of the I.A.F. and of the Tripolitania Command which had its orders direct from Superaereo.

VII. RETREAT FROM EL ALAMEIN TO THE LIBYAN BORDER

The Supreme Command arranged for the formation of lines for rear-guard action, in case El Alamein had to be abandoned. The first ran North and South through Fuka, the second was at Mersa Matruh and a new line at Halfaya Pass.

In accordance with this, the 5th Squadra Command put the units in the Fuka zone (3rd Stormo - Mc.202 and the 101st Gruppo - Cr.42), ready to move at any moment and to supply the material necessary in the event of the front breaking up. The following orders were given:

(1) The 3rd Stormo and the 101st Gruppo had to retreat, using the intermediate airfields in the Gambut - Bu Amut zone, in such a way that the route of the fighters ensured protection for the troops.

(2) The 94th Squadriglia Mc.202 at Sidi Barrani had to continue escorting the landing craft between Mersa Matruh and Tobruk, take part in the protection of the roads, and be ready to retreat to the Tobruk zone at the last moment.

(3) The 191st Squadriglia R.S.L. at Mersa Matruh had to return with their Stormo to Barce following orders from the Squadra.

(4) The Eastern Air Force Sector Command received orders to carry out the movements of their units in accordance with the Luftwaffe, which was in a better position to judge the ground position and to move quickly.

The breaking up of the El Alamein front took place on November 3-4. The strong enemy pressure along the coastal road and the threat of encirclement by a strong motorised column which was moving south of the road, forced us to leave Egypt far quicker than had been foreseen. Resistance in the Fuka zone was not even attempted by Rommel's army who retreated immediately, from the barbed wire to the old line.

The 3rd Stormo and the 101st Gruppo left Abu Smeit airfield at sunrise on November 5, when the German tanks which had left the line were already on the coastal road. The above units went to Bir el Astas airfield. Following operations during the day they were obliged to

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continue their journey on the following day and proceeded to Bu Amud, as they could not make any use of the airfield at Sidi Barrani because it was so small. The 191st Squadriglia went from Mersa Matruh to Barce on November 5. The 94th Squadriglia moved from Sidi Barrani to Bu Amud on January 6.

From November 1 to 5 the units of the Eastern Sector who were in continuous movement and who had the minimum supply of fuel borrowed from the German Air Force, used 146 aircraft on the front in escort operations with fighter-bombers and Ju.87's (reconnaissance, patrols, ground protection and ground attacks).

In three combats some enemy aircraft were shot down, with two others probably destroyed, and 7 were machine-gunned.

VIII. RETREAT FROM HALFAYA PASS TO EL AGHEILA

Since the A.C.I.T. columns were closely pursued by strong enemy armoured units and underwent heavy bombardment from large air formations day and night, they could not put up any resistance at Halfaya Pass, and Marshal Rommel ordered the retreat of all the forces to the west of Mersa El Broga. Tobruk had to resist for a length of time in order to give the troops a chance of getting away towards the west.

In accordance with A.C.I.T. Command, the 5th Squadra issued the following orders of retreat to the commands and units:

- (1) For the reasons given above the Eastern Sector Command had to carry out similar movements to those of the Fliegerführer and had to keep in close contact with them.
- (2) The units in the Bu Amud zone (3rd Stormo Mc.202, 101st Gruppo Cr.82, 13th Gruppo Mc.200) were to be the first to retreat. The 4th and 50th Stormos who were in positions further inland were to replace the units mentioned above. The 3rd Stormo, the 5th Stormo Command and the 101st Gruppo were to retreat at the latest possible moment and to halt at Benghazi. The 4th Stormo which had been reinforced by aircraft from Italy was to remain at Matruba till the last. Column protection, reconnaissance etc. was entrusted to the 4th Stormo. After that they were to retreat to Benghazi and to use the Transport Group aircraft to transport their personnel and material. There they were to replace the 8th Group, for the defence of the port and Ara dei Felini. The 50th Stormo were to leave Matruba and reach Buerat by stages.
- (3) The 2nd Stormo Command at Bu Amud was to move on to Benghazi K.3, with the arrival of the 3rd Stormos. The 8th Gruppo was already there (consisting of 150th Gruppo aircraft which were sent back on November 9) in order to provide for the defence of the fort and for road patrol from the Djebel to Agedabia. With the arrival of the 4th Stormo it was to move on to Nufilia.
- (4) The 13th Gruppo Mc.200 at Bu Amud was to retreat to Nufilia, with their material reduced in efficiency.
- (5) Following orders from Superaereo, the 131st Torpedo Group at Derna was to move on to Misurata airfield on November 8.
- (6) The 12th Squadriglia Ca.309 from Siwa was to unite with the sections from Derna and Gialo at Agedabia, with the duty of controlling any trouble arising in the area. Afterwards it was to move on to Sirte and then to Misurata.

- (7) The 47th Gruppo which was at Derna for convoy escort was to go to Agedabia in order to protect the right flank of the retreating troops and to control any threatening moves from the south-west. Afterwards it was to carry on to Tamet.
- (8) The 35th Stormo at Barce - Cant/Z/1007/bis was to go directly to Bir Dufan.
- (9) The 66th Group - Ca.311 with its Squadriglie at Barce and at Benghazi was to go to Tamet Airfield.
- (10) The 15th Stormo Command with the 146th Gruppo - Cr.42 at Benghazi K.1 was to go to Tamet.
- (11) The 133rd Torpedo Group Command and the 174th Squadriglia - S.79 at Benghazi were to go to Misurata.
- (12) The 148th Navy Squadriglia at Menelao was to move to Pisida. Following orders from Superaereo, the 196th had to withdraw from Benghazi right away.
- (13) The Central Air Force Sector Command who had formed a tactical command at Derna on November 1, in order to be able to carry out operations for convoy escorts, was to go to Misurata with the last unit leaving the sector.
During the retreat, the Commander of the Central Sector was to undertake the responsibility of directing and controlling the movements of the units when leaving their respective airfields.
- (14) The Derna Squadra Command was to go to the Misurata zone. In order to keep contact with the units during the retreat, it was setting up a tactical command at Martuba which was to move on later to Benghazi, Ara dei Felini and then to Nufilia. Afterwards it was to join with the Command at Misurata.
- (15) In order to facilitate the retreat of the fighter Squadriglie which would move last because of their road protection duties, the 145th Transport Group was being sent from Castel Benito to Benghazi K.3 to transport personnel and material.

The movements were carried out in spite of the following facts:

- (a) the material at our disposal was insufficient and the roads were obstructed and under enemy fire;
- (b) orders from the High Command did not get through or they got through very late, due to lack of communications;
- (c) the time taken for retreat was far quicker than had been foreseen by A.C.I.T. Command.

IX. ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT DURING RETREAT

(a) Protection of troops

All the units employed in the difficult task of protecting the columns moving along the roads of Marmarica and Cyrenaica gave proof of high morale, the spirit of sacrifice and aggressiveness. Officers and privates alike did not allow themselves any rest but fought during the day and slept on the bare earth at night; the only food available being soaked biscuit (note: galetta - a large biscuit issued to Italian forces).

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The personnel retreating with the equipment from one airfield to another, along roads under fire would stop at night in order to refuel the aircraft which had landed at twilight and so enable them to take off at sunrise on the following day.

Although our fighters which had been used at El Alamein and at the various fronts for weeks were now operating with very reduced efficiency, they were still engaging the enemy over Tobruk, Ain El Gazala, Benghazi, Agedabia and Sitica, fighting with great courage against formations of Spitfires, Curtiss P.40 and P.46 which were attacking with formations of overwhelming superiority.

(b) Nuisance attacks

During the first phase of the retreat (El Alamein to Halfaya) the 35th Bomber Stormo - Cant/Z/1007/bis carried out several nuisance raids at night against the enemy lines of communication.

The use of aircraft for the raids was very limited due to the lack of fuel, which was mainly reserved for the fighters with the duty of protecting the roads.

2 operations, with a total of 6 Cant/Z/1007/bis aircraft were carried out from Bu Amud airfield against the road from El Daba to Alamein and one operation was carried out by 3 aircraft on the night of November 7 from Barce, against the road between Fuka and El Daba.

(b) Reconnaissance and communication services

The reconnaissance carried out during the retreat along the roads between Siwa, Giarabub and Gialo, and between Gialo and Agedabia, during the march of the 'Giovani Fascisti' Division (Fascist Youth) and the communication services with the moving columns were of great importance.

With their inadequate aircraft the desert pilots sighted and machine-gunned the enemy armoured cars and lorries from a low level more than once in the region of Garut Farut. Often they landed in the open desert near the troops, in order to give the officers news of our marching columns and of the enemy.

The section of the 12th Squadriglia from Gialo, distinguished itself in a most praiseworthy manner during the missions.

During the period between November 6 (retreat to Halfaya) and November 20 (temporary consolidation on the Marsa El Brega line), which was a period which was always marked by a shortage of fuel, the units carried out the following activities:

| <u>Type of operation</u> | <u>Number of aircraft used</u> |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Protection of troops and road traffic | 266 |
| " " ports | 77 |
| Nuisance raids (night) | 9 |
| Reconnaissance (carried out over ground) | 120 |
| Communications with troops and desert reconnaissance | 12 |
| Coastal reconnaissance | 21 |
| Ground attacks | 55 |
| Aircraft escorts | 94 |
| Enemy aircraft shot down | 4 |
| Number of combats | 7 |
| Enemy aircraft probably destroyed | 3 |
| " " machine-gunned | 12 |

X. RETREAT OF THE ADMINISTRATION SERVICES

As soon as the enemy had begun the offensive on the El Alamein front, the following directives were issued by the Squadra Administration:

- (1) To ensure the following for the troops operating on the front; material for fighting and living, especially munitions, fuel and spares (engines, propellers, etc.);
- (2) To send all available vehicles to the advanced sector to reinforce those already there and to ensure the retreat of the commands, units and forces stationed in Egypt;
- (3) To send all aircraft and engines with the units towards Benghazi within five days;
- (4) To begin sending by rail all the surplus material which was then in the stores at Mersa Matruh and Tobruk;
- (5) To lead all the material from the advanced stores and depots, which was not of immediate use, on to vehicles and to pour the small amount of fuel remaining into the tanker lorries so that it was at hand for the units;
- (6) To speed up the repair of aircraft, engines and vehicles at the workshops in the rear and the S.R.A.M. (repair service);
- (7) To make provisional arrangements for relieving the existing services in the Tobruk and Benghazi zones;
- (8) To make useless everything which the enemy could employ, either by destroying it or by setting it alight, and especially the airfields, which were to be ploughed up and mined.

Between November 1 and 4, arrangements were made for the removal of the stores of fuel, lubricants and munitions and the M.S.A., M.O.R.A. stores and Demanio (workshops etc.) and also for the 3rd Mobile Workshop and the 28th and 29th Repair Units to retreat. The Officer-in-Charge remained in the area with a small number of personnel and the spares and material necessary to meet the requirements of the troops in the line.

The Demanio soon got the Bir El Astat airfield ready for the time when the 3rd Stormo and 5th Gruppo would retreat from Abu Smeit.

The Telecommunications Service was responsible for the recovery of radio-telegraphic and telephone material from the unarmed airfields in the Fuka zone and the several units in the rear.

The Technical Service recovered and transported 22 unserviceable aircraft (mainly Mc.202's) to Benghazi by the ordinary route.

A total of more than 1,500 tons of material was evacuated from Egypt.

When the impossibility of resisting at Sollum was confirmed by the sad experiences of the previous retreats, which indicated that the enemy would not stop before reaching El Agheila, after having cut off Cyrenaica from El Mechili, the Administration received orders to evacuate Mersa Matruh, El Adem, Derna and Gebel. On the morning of November 12, the last personnel left Tobruk. 1,137 tons of material were evacuated from the Tobruk zone and 13 aircraft, mostly Mc.202's and Mc.200's.

/On

On November 10, the Administration Offices were transferred from Derna to Benghazi and later to Sirte. The Commanding Officer, together with the various section heads and a small number of personnel, remained at the tactical H.Q. in order to direct operations.

Between November 12 and 14, the evacuation of the most important stores, installations, workshops and fuel depots in the Benghazi zone was carried out and 1145 tons of material were transported to Tripolitania, besides 31 unserviceable aircraft. Altogether, in 750 trips, the Administration, excluding the unit and airfield organisations, transported the following:

4192 tons of material;
66 unserviceable aircraft.

XI. SUMMARY OF THE UNIT MOVEMENTS

As was foreseen, the units of the East and Central Sectors carried out orderly movements on the following dates:

- (1) 4th fighter Stormo - November 1, retreat from Fuka to Martuba. November 13, from Benghazi K.3. and on November 15 formed a front at Ara dei Felini airfield.
- (2) 50th Assault Stormo - November 1, transfer from Abu Smeit to Martuba, at Benghazi on November 11, Ara dei Felini on November 12, Beurat airfield on November 15.
- (3) 3rd Fighter Stormo - Left Abu Smeit airfield on November 5, reached Bir El Astas Bu Amud on November 6, Benghazi on November 10, Nufilia on November 11, and was in battle order at Tauroga on November 16.
- (4) 5th Assault Stormo (101st Gruppo) - transferred from Abu Smeit to Bir Astas on November 5, Bu Amud on November 6, Agedabia on November 9, was in battle order at Nufilia on November 10.
- (5) 191st Reconnaissance Squadriglia - re-entered Barce airfield on November 6 and joined again with the 35th Stormo.
- (6) 94th Fighter Squadriglia of the 8th Gruppo - Beginning of the retreat from Sidi Barrani airfield to Benghazi K.3 on November 6, where they joined their Gruppo.
- (7) 8th Fighter Group - With H.Q. at Bu Amud, passed on all the serviceable aircraft to the 13th Gruppo on November 4, and moved on, November 8, with all personnel and equipment to Benghazi K.3, where they took charge of all the 150th Fighter Gruppo aircraft which were sent back. At Nufilia on November 13, at Shegdan on November 17.
- (8) 150th Fighter Gruppo - Turned all aircraft over to the 8th Gruppo on November 5 and sent back on November 9. The pilots and specialist NCO's were sent to DERNA where they took off for Lecce on the same day on the S.A.S. (Special Air Services) aircraft. The other ranks were sent to Zavia, to be sent to Italy later on.
- (9) 2nd Fighter Stormo and 13th Fighter Gruppo - Bu Amud to Benghazi K.3 on the November 9, Nufilia on November 13 in battle order at Ghindel on November 17.
- (10) 35th Bomber Stormo - Transferred from Barce to Bir Dufan on November 13.
- (11) 15th Assault Stormo Command - From Benghazi K.1 to Sirte on November 13.

The subordinate commands:

46th Assault Group - from Benghazi to Tamet on November 13. Then to Sorman on November 18 with the Stormo Command.

47th Assault Group - Derna to Agedabia on November 9, Tamet airfield on November 15.

Misurata on November 18, reached Sorman and the Stormo on November 25.

(12) 131st Torpedo Group - Derna to Misurata on November 8.

(13) 133 Torpedo Group - with the 174th Torpedo Squadriglia.

Benghazi K.3 to Misurata on November 14.

(14) 12 Squadriglia A.P.C. - Siwa to Derna on November 8, Agedabia on November 9 with the Derna and Gialo Sections, Sirte on November 15, Misurata on November 17.

(15) 66th Reconnaissance Group - Retreat with the two Squadriglie (one from Barce and the other at Benghazi K.3) to Tamet on November 12, Zuara on November 26.

(16) 1487 Squadriglia (Navy) - Menelao to Pisida on November 11.

XII. FIRST REPATRIATIONS OF THE UNITS

When the units began retreating, Superaereo ordered the repatriation of the 148th Navy Squadriglia from Pisida on November 15 and the 196th Navy Squadriglia from Benghazi on November 15.

With the completion of the retreat of the units, Superaereo ordered the repatriation of the 131st and 133rd Torpedo Groups and the 66th and 68th Reconnaissance Groups, which left as follows:

The 131st Gruppo left Misurata bound for Pisa. (stopping at Naples)

Seven S.79's took off on November 22. Eleven S.79's took off on November 23.

The 133rd Gruppo left Misurata bound for Pisa (stopping in Rome) on December 1 with seven S.79 aircraft.

The 66th and 68th Recce Groups left Zuara bound for Palermo on November 28 with a total of 21 Ca.311's and 2 Ca.312's.

The total number of aircraft transferred to Italy was as follows:-

25 S.79, 21 Ca.311, 2 Ca.312 and 11 Cant. Z.501 aircraft.

XIII. SQUADRON BATTLE ORDER ON NOVEMBER 30, 1942

As a result of the movements of the units, the Sector areas on November 30, 1942 were as follows:

EASTERN AIR FORCE SECTOR - Territory to the east of a line through Sirte.

CENTRAL AIR FORCE SECTOR - Territory comprised within the Sirte line and the 14th meridian.

WESTERN AIR FORCE SECTOR - Territory to the west of the 14th meridian.

The battle order of the units on the same date was as follows:

EASTERN AIR FORCE SECTOR

4th Fighter Stormo (Mc.202) - Ara dei Felini airfield.

2nd Fighter Stormo Command with the 8th Gruppo (Mc.202) - Ghindel airfield

5th Dive-bomber Stormo Command with the 101st Gruppo (Cr.42) - Nufilia

CENTRAL AIR FORCE SECTOR

3rd Fighter Stormo (Mc.202) - Tauroga

50th Assault Stormo (Cr.42) - Buerat

13th Fighter Gruppo (Mc.200) - Tauroga

35th Bomber Stormo (Cant/Z/1007/bis) - Bir Dufan

12th Squadriglia A.P.C. (Ghibli) - Misurata

103rd Sahara Squadriglia (Ghibli) - Misurata

WESTERN AIR FORCE SECTOR

15th Assault Stormo (Cr.42) - Sorman

64th Recce Group (Ca.313) -Zuara

1st A.O.I. Gruppo Command (Ghibli) - Mellaha

104th Squadriglia - Mellaha

Saraha Air Force Command 26th and 29th Squadriglie (Ghibli - S.79 Cr.42) - Hon
airfield, with two sections at Sebha

614th A.S.R. Squadriglia (Cant.Z.501) - Karmanli seaplane base

145th Navy Squadriglia (Cant.Z.501) - Pisida " "

145th Transport Group (S.82 - S.75) - Castel Benito

Sezione Allarme (aircraft employed to give warning) Mc.202 (of the 3rd Stormo)
- Castel Benito.

XIV. SUMMARY OF 1st PERIOD

OCTOBER 20 UNTIL NOVEMBER 30, 1942

Total operational flying hours 5981 hrs 20'

Number of aircraft employed:-

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| Fighter combat and escort | 1840 |
| Attacks against ground objectives | 126 |
| Bomber attacks | 56 |
| Ground reconnaissance | 404 |
| Coastal reconnaissance | 49 |
| Naval reconnaissance | 19 |
| Convoy escorts | 613 |
| Transport | 7 |
| A. S. R. | 11 |
| Protection of ports | 501 |
| | <hr/> |
| | 3126 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Combats | 72 |
| Aircraft shot down | 106 |
| Probably destroyed | 54 |
| Aircraft machine-gunned | 399 |
| Aircraft lost in combat | 25 |
| Aircraft destroyed on ground due to enemy air operations | 22 |
| Aircraft damaged on ground due to enemy air operations | 88 |

G. 181509

2ND PERIOD

I. SITUATION OF THE OPPOSING FORCES ON THE EL AGHEILA LINE

When the Axis forces reached the El Agheila line they were exhausted. Rommel's army had lost the main part of its mechanized vehicles, which had been destroyed at El Alamein and abandoned along the roads in Egypt, Marmarica and Cyrenaica along with a number of infantry units.

In spite of the new troops, the general situation on the new front had worsened. Larger numbers of our aircraft had met the enemy during November. As a result of the number of enemy aircraft which had arrived and our present losses, the number of our aircraft had diminished by the end of November, while the number of enemy aircraft had increased. The same could be said for the ground forces, armoured vehicles and artillery.

Below is shown the number of opposing forces on November 30:-

| <u>GROUND FORCES</u> | <u>AXIS</u> | <u>BRITISH</u> |
|-----------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Tanks | 80 | 400 |
| Armoured Cars | 100 | 200 |
| <u>AIR FORCES</u> | | |
| Fighters | 100 | 1200 |
| Bombers and fighter-bombers | 120 | 900 |
| Miscellaneous aircraft | 300 | 700 |
| | <u>520</u> | <u>2800</u> |

II. BATTLE ORDER OF THE SQUADRON UNITS

Our Air Force battle order between El Agheila and Tauroga was complete on the November 20, 1942.

The fighters were in the Ara dei Fileni zone, assault aircraft between Ara dei Fileni and Nufilia, and bombers at Bir Dufan.

While it was possible for the 4th Stormo Mc.202's to protect our line which was developing from Marsa El Brega to Marada, it was also possible for the 2nd Stormo (Mc.202) and 5th Stormo (Cr.42) assault units to intervene in operations against enemy mechanized vehicles and against infiltrations of vehicles from the south. On the other hand, the 50th Stormo at Beurat could also provide escort for the landing-craft on coastal service between Misurata, Beurat, El Sum and Sirte.

The 35th Stormo at Bir Dufan could carry out night operations against the enemy lines of communication in Western Cyrenaica and the port of Benghazi.

The 3rd Stormo at Tauroga had reorganized in men and material, both of which had been severely tried in the retreat from Alamein to El Agheila, in order to build up a reserve for the 4th Stormo.

The Squadron battle order on December 1 was as follows:

SQUADRON COMMAND - Zliten

TACTICAL COMMAND - Area 20 km. to the west of Ara dei Felini

/I.A.F.

I.A.F. Sector East
- Ara dei Fileni

4th Fighter Stormo - Ara dei Fileni
2nd Fighter Stormo - Ghindel
(8th Gruppo)
5th Dive-bomber Stormo - En Nufilia
(101st Gruppo)

CENTRAL I.A.F. SECTOR
Misurata

3rd Fighter Stormo - Tauroga
50th Assault Stormo - Beurat
13th Fighter Group - Tauroga
35th Bomber Stormo - Bir Dufan
12th Squadriglia A.P.F. - Misurata
103rd Sahara Squadriglia - Misurata

The Tripoli Air Force Command which had been formed a month before was dissolved on November 16. The command and units which formed it were returned to the 5th Squadra on the same day, restoring the Western I.A.F. Sector which was as follows:-

WESTERN I.A.F. SECTOR
Zanzur

| | |
|--|-------------------------|
| 15th Assault Stormo | Sormo |
| 64th Recce Group | Zuara |
| 1st A.P.C. Group Command | Mellaha |
| 104th Squadriglia | " |
| 26th Sahara Squadriglia | Hon |
| 99th " " | " |
| 1st 'Alarm' Section (Mc.202) | Castel Benito |
| 82nd Fighter Squadriglia | " " |
| 614 A.S.R. Squadriglia | Karamanli seaplane base |
| 145th R.A. (Reconnaissance) Squadriglia | Pisida seaplane base |
| 145th S.A.S. (Special Air Service) Group | Castel Benito |

On December 1, the 102nd Bomber Squadriglia was formed at Castel Benito, with S.79 aircraft.

III. SECOND REPATRIATION OF THE UNITS

In order to keep the most efficient units in Libya (men and material) and to repatriate those who did not have sufficient material at their disposal, and the personnel who were too tired to be usefully employed, Superaereo arranged for the return of several units to Italy:

Dive-bombers : On December 6, 1942, the 5th Dive-bomber Stormo Command and the 101st Group Cr.42, who transferred their aircraft to the 159th Group.

/Assault

- Assault : On December 7, 1942, the 50th Stormo Command and the 158th Gruppo Cr.42 who had left all their efficient aircraft with the 159th Assault Group.
- Fighters : On December 10, 1942, the 10th Fighter Gruppo who left all their efficient aircraft with the 9th Gruppo. On December 11, 1942, the 8th Gruppo Mc.202 who left all their aircraft with the 13th Gruppo.
Pilots of the 9th Group flew back to Italy several aircraft which were in need of general overhaul.
- Bombers : On December 7, 1942, the 86th Bomber Group of the 35th Stormo, who left their best aircraft with the 35th Bomber Group, and took back to Italy seven Cant/Z/1007/bis which needed alteration.

The total number of aircraft which took off for Italy was 7 Cant/Z/1007/bis and 3 Mc.202.

At the same time the repatriation by air which had been going on from the beginning of November was accelerated for all the personnel including officers, N.C.O's, privates, specialist personnel and government officials who had completed a minimum period of service of 12 months for officers, 18 for N.C.O's and 24 for privates.

IV. BILLETING, SUPPLY AND TRANSPORT ARRANGEMENTS

(a) The disposal of units in Sirtica and Tripolitania

The events which had induced us to speed up the retreat from Cyrenaica more than had been foreseen by the Mechanized Army Command had not permitted us to equip the camps in Sirtica quickly enough to obtain the efficiency needed to meet the increased enemy air strength.

For this reason the greatest priority was put on the construction of anti-shrapnel walls on the existing airfields in Sirtica, for the protection of aircraft. These were also built later on in Tripolitania using heaps of stones and sacking.

Besides this, the Sghedgan, Ghindel and Nufilia airfields were extended, as they had previously been insufficient for the fighters and assault aircraft (Mc.202). They were levelled and runways were built, the personnel were housed and the access roads were repaired. This was carried out in co-operation with the G.A.F. who shared the few airfields with the 5th Squadra.

In order to give Misurata airfield a certain amount of freedom, as it was full of aircraft needing repair and was used for landing special air service aircraft, two strips 1100m. by 200m. were constructed in the vicinity, near Crispi village. Another take-off strip was also built adjoining the already existing one at Castel Verde (Gars Garabulli).

The lines of communication between the Squadra Command and the surrounding airfields were improved. Between Tripoli and Sirte the copper aerial which was already there was put in use and a Siemens cable stretched from Sirte to Ara dei Felini. All the airfields, unit H.Q's, stores and depots were connected by line with the Sector and Squadron Commands. An aircraft locator was put in the Ara dei Felini and then in the Tauroga zone, for the use of the Fighter Stormos.

The repair workshops (S.R.A.M.) continued to operate at Misurata and Tripoli, while the one at Ben Ulid was moved to Mellaha because it was too exposed.

The vehicle repair workshops at Gars Garabulli, Mellaha and Bu Meliana absorbed the personnel coming from Cyrenaica.

/(b)

(b) Supplies of the Sahara Units

Following agreements reached by the Armed Forces Libya High Command, the Sahara Air Force was reinforced at Hon with a Squadriglia of S.79's and a section of Cr.42's (with glider bombs), as a measure against enemy attacks from Tibesti and S. Algeria, against our garrisons at Sebha, Mourzuk, Gatrum and Um El Areb. At the same time, a Squadriglia of Cr.42's of the 159th Gruppo was standing by, ready to intervene firstly at Beurat and then at Misurata, in case of attack. In order to ensure a certain amount of autonomy of supplies for the Sahara Air Force, a certain amount of fuel and munitions were being put aside at Hon and Sebha, in case the units had to be called upon at a moment's notice without time to send supplies by ground routes.

V. UNIT ACTIVITIES IN THE EAST AND CENTRAL SECTOR, NOVEMBER 20 -
DECEMBER 15, 1942

The activities of the units in the above sectors, was as follows:

- (1) Protection of the ground troops and routes of communication, aircraft spotter service and fighter-bomber operations against mechanized vehicles.
- (2) Reconnaissance of the enemy front and the surrounding territory under our control.
- (3) Coastal convoy escorts.

The activities were limited for lack of fuel; on certain days in the whole of Libya, there were less than 100 tons, the maximum needed for the aircraft available. Many operations, especially by bombers, were carried out with fuel supplied by the G.A.F.

When it is seen that the daily average was between 80 and 100 tons, it can be understood how critical the position of our Air Force was during the battle for Tripolitania and to what extent the effective cooperation of the Air Force had to be reduced.

The 5th Squadra Aerea cooperated efficiently in the ground battles in spite of the limited amount of fuel.

(a) Fighter operations, indirect escort, troop protection

The 4th Stormo Mc.202 at Ara dei Filini carried out daily fighter operations in the protection of road traffic, indirect escort for Italian fighter-bombers and Stukas, in attacks against armoured motor vehicles and in acting as spotter aircraft along the lines, making use of a radar set which was at their disposal.

The operations carried out by the Stormo between November 23 and December 1 in close cooperation with units of the Fliegerführer are particularly outstanding. During these operations, which were mainly as escorts for the fighter-bombers, the Mc.202's in spite of heavy A.A. fire, dive-bombed and shot up roads, vehicles, emplacements and troops. During these operations 25,000 rounds were fired from 12.7 guns and heavy losses were inflicted on the enemy, especially in vehicles.

On November 24, an Mc.202 which had been hit by A.A. fire had to make a forced landing near El Agheila; the pilot was slightly wounded.

On December 1, a formation of 12 Mc.202's which were escorting Mc.200's in an attack against a concentration of vehicles were engaged in combat with 12 Curtiss P.46's over Marsa El Brega. One P.46 was shot down. One Mc.202 and one Mc.200 did not return.

/Air

Air activity during the first fortnight in December was limited because of the lack of fuel; it was also hampered by adverse weather conditions.

The main part of the activities was patrols for the protection of the troops along the coastal road.

On December 6, a 3rd Stormo patrol of Mc.202's who were on protection patrol in the Balbia sky (between Ghindel and Tauroga) intercepted 2 Beau-fighters who were machine-gunning the road traffic. One of the enemy aircraft was shot down and the other was effectively machine-gunned. On December 14, a patrol of Mc.202's which had taken off when the alarm was sounded, shot down a Boston type aircraft in the sea to the north-east of Tamet.

(b) Attacks against ground objectives

During the first two weeks in December, the 2nd Stormo of Mc.202's with glider bombs carried out some particularly effective operations and obtained exceptional results.

An attack against a concentration of enemy vehicles to the south of El Akmar was carried out on November 26 by 10 Mc.200's. On November 17, another attack was carried out by 8 Mc.202's and Stukas against vehicles and tanks, 20 km. south-east of Agedabia. 5 fires were observed. During the return flight vehicles in Balbia were attacked. Another operation with glider bombs and machine-gunning attacks in the Cor El Ghisma zone against a concentration of vehicles was carried on November 28, with good results. Direct hits were obtained on the installations, and fires developed.

On November 29, the attacks were directed against the concentrations of mechanized material in the Mascialla zone but without result because of heavy A.A. fire. Two Mc.202's landed in our lines with damaged engines; the pilots were unhurt.

On November 30, 9 Mc.200's attacked the depôts and motor transport at Wadi Faregh. Even in these operations the heavy enemy A.A. fire prevented us from observing the results.

On December 1, the 2nd Stormo carried out two attacks. One with 8 Mc.200's in the El Akmar zone, where several fires were observed, the other with 4 Mc.200's 10 km. east of Marsa El Brega.

All the aircraft returned safely during the first operations, but two Mc.200's were lost during the second.

(c) Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance was carried out by Mc.200's who signalled the movements and concentration of enemy columns daily. On these occasions flights were carried out for a distance beyond 400 kms. from their bases, to the limits of their flying range.

In the desert, reconnaissance was carried out by units of the Sahara Air Force and Cr.42 aircraft.

(d) Escorts for the light shipping bound for the advanced lines

During the period of the building up of the El Agheila line several convoys of landing craft and small ships from Buerat reached Ras El Aeli, other small ships reached Dirte, submarines and other ships reached Buerat.

All the above convoys were escorted by Cr.42's and Mc.200's between Buerat, Sghedgan and Nufilia, where the aircraft were stationed.

/VI.

VI. RETREAT TO THE WADI ZEM ZEM - GHEDAIA LINE

Following the continuous increase of the enemy forces on the El Agheila front, especially of the armoured divisions and the resumed air offensive, the Libyan High Command and A.C.I.T. decided to begin the retreat in stages from the El Agheila to the Wadi Zem Zem - Gheddaia line, as they were in no condition to resume the offensive. As a result of this decision, the 5th Squadra Command issued operation order 4279/OP/6 on December 5, ordering the units, stores etc, to retreat to the west of Tauroga airfield, which remained an advanced camp for the fighters. The movements of the units were carried out in perfect order and without incident.

On December 6, the 4th Fighter Stormo together with Ara Dei Fileni airfield organization was transferred to Misurata and then to Castel Benito, to carry out the important duty of protecting the port of Tripoli, which had become the only place for disembarking material from Italy. Front line duties had been undertaken by the 3rd Stormo who had in the meantime regained their efficiency.

Ara dei Fileni was emptied of all installations and material of all types including fuel, munitions, A.A. defences and all sorts of flying material which was still serviceable or could be repaired. Nufilia airfield (East) was transferred complete with installations to Beurat, where they formed part of the existing airfield organization. The two united organizations were then transferred to Gars Garabulli. The Sghedan airfield outfit was transferred to Mellaha in order to be dissolved later on. The Sirte and Tamet airfield organisations were transferred to Mellaha in order to be dissolved also.

On December 7, the Eastern Sector Tactical Command was transferred to Gioda village. The 35th Stormo Command and the 95th Bomber Group were transferred to Bir Dufan and El Asaba.

On December 10, the 159th Group transferred from Beurat to Misurata and on December 18 to Gars Garabuli.

Following orders from Superaereo, the 12th Squadriglia was dissolved on December 10. Personnel and material were passed on to the 103rd Squadriglia A.P.C.

The movements of the ground front which were begun on December 6, were carried on gradually. Violent combats took place on December 13 and 14 on the Marsa El Broga line with consequent losses by the A.C.I.T. The protection of these units in movement and the resulting road traffic was carried out in a most economical manner, with the use of one Squadriglia of Mc.202's of the 2nd Stormo with an advanced H.Q. which was firstly at Sghedan and later on at Tamet.

In the afternoon of December 26, the enemy occupied Sirte. On December 28 they reached Wadi Tamet.

Before abandoning the airfields in Sirte, all the fixed installations were destroyed and the take-off strips were ploughed up. Many of the airfields were also mined and left littered with wreckage, such as the following:

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| <u>Ara dei Fileni</u> | - Mined and littered with wreckage; 33 blast walls and trenches destroyed. |
| <u>El Merduma</u> | - Mined by the Germans, as it was their unit H.Q. |
| <u>Sghedgan</u> | - Completely ploughed up. |
| <u>Chindel</u> | - Completely ploughed up. |
| <u>Sirte</u> | - Partly mined and partly ploughed up. |
| <u>Tamet</u> | - Completely ploughed up. |
| <u>Buerat</u> | - Completely ploughed up. |

/With

With the formation of a line at Beurat, alterations were made in the Sector areas on December 7: the Eastern Sector Command was given the area to the east of the 14th meridian; the Western Sector Command that to the west of the 14th meridian; the Central Sector Command that to the south of the 30th parallel.

Following the military events, the last Command was dissolved on the January 1, 1943.

VII. EAST AND CENTRAL SECTOR UNIT ACTIVITIES DECEMBER 16, 1942 -
JANUARY 15, 1943

(a) Protection of troops and attacks against ground objectives:

During this period the Mc.202's continued their duties of protecting troops, both in movement and stationary, and of protecting of road traffic.

The Mc.200's made repeated attacks on ground objectives with glider bombs and shot up mechanized transports and enemy airfields.

During December, our Mc.202's were engaged in two other aerial combats: the first was against enemy aircraft which were shooting up the road traffic at Balbia, between Nufilia and Tauroga, and the second took place in the sky to the north-east of Tamet, against one enemy reconnaissance aircraft.

During the course of these actions, one Beaufighter and one Boston were shot down and one Beaufighter was badly damaged.

By far the most effective activities were carried out during the first two weeks in January, with the following operations in particular: an attack against a concentration of 400 vehicles in the Bir Ziden zone with good results (Mc.200's with glider bombs), and another attack carried out against road traffic in the Sirte and Tamet zones with Mc.200's and 202's, which resulted in hitting 60 of the vehicles, of which 12 were set alight.

A third attack carried out by fighter-bombers in the Bir Ziden zone against concentrations of mechanized and armoured vehicles, and a fourth against an enemy motorised column between Tamet and Buerat were highly successful. 60 vehicles were machine-gunned and hit, 12 of which were overturned and one set alight.

Another attack with glider bombs was carried out in the Bir Ziden zone on January 8.

Two A.A. batteries were sighted and 30 vehicles were shot up. The escorting fighters were engaged in combat with a formation of Spitfires and Curtiss P.40's. Two enemy fighters were shot down and 8 were machine-gunned. One Mc.202 did not return.

On January 11, a formation of Mc.202's attacked West Tamet airfield which was occupied by enemy fighter units. 4 aircraft were set alight on the ground and 9 were damaged. On the return journey 62 vehicles were shot up. The escorting Mc.202's were engaged in combat with a formation of Spitfires and Curtiss P.40's (three times as many). In various extremely violent combats which were carried out by fighters of the 3rd Stormo, 4 Spitfires and 2 P.40's were shot down and many others were machine-gunned. Two Mc.200's did not return.

The operation against Tamet was repeated on the following day with 8 Mc.200's. Several aircraft were hit on the ground, one of which was certainly destroyed. During the return flight, vehicles and A.A. batteries in Balbia were machine-gunned. Two Mc.200's did not return, after being attacked by an unspecified number of P.40's. One enemy aircraft was shot down.

/On

On January 13, a formation of Mc.202's intercepted an enemy formation which was acting as bomber escort and attacking Bir Dufan airfield. Our fighters shot down 1 Spitfire and machine-gunned 5 others.

On January 14, during another combat in the same zone, one Spitfire was shot down and another probably destroyed. 2 Bostons and 1 Spitfire were machine-gunned.

On January 15, a formation of our Mc.200's with glider bombs attacked the inhabited part of Buerat and scored hits on vehicles, A.A. batteries and the redoubt.

The above operation was carried out in close cooperation with the G.A.F. During the operations which followed, on the same or on similar objectives, the Italo-German fighters were used indiscriminately by the fighter-bombers of both air forces.

(b) Night nuisance raids

In order to carry out nuisance raids and offensives against the enemy during our rest on the Beurat line, night bomber operations were carried out with Cant/Z/1007/bis and S.82's taking off from Misurata.

During the night of December 23, three Cant/Z/1007/bis carried out a bombardment of Ara dei Fileni, using fuel supplied by the G.A.F. The operation was repeated on the night of December 25 with two aircraft.

During the night of December 28, an S.82 aircraft dropped 420 bombs on Ara dei Fileni and Balbia. The same type of raid was repeated during the night of December 30.

During the night of January 1, the same airfield was attacked by two Cant/Z/1007/bis with 50 kg. bombs, and during the night of January 2 by one Cant/Z/1007/bis.

During the night of January 6, one S.82 aircraft dropped 450 bombs on Sirte airfield and in the vicinity. The operation was repeated against the same objective during the night of January 9.

The activities of the bombers had to be reduced at the beginning because of the condition of the airfields as a result of the rains; later they had to be suspended because of lack of fuel.

(c) Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance over enemy territory was continued with growing intensity. Mc.202's were used with specially trained pilots. Each enemy movement and the arrivals of enemy aircraft on the airfields was noted. Reconnaissance in the desert was carried out by Cr.42, S.79 and Sahara Air Force aircraft.

(d) Actions against enemy saboteur elements

Enemy saboteur elements which had been transported by air from the desert zone, infiltrated into the Tripoli Djebel and into the Misurata zone, and attempted acts of sabotage at different times against military roads and installations. Our aircraft intervened by dropping fragmentation bombs and machine-gunning lorries and armoured cars.

On December 7, Sahara Air Force S.79's attacked a concentration of vehicles in the Tagrifet zone, with fragmentation bombs and machine-guns. 6 aircraft were destroyed and 6 others were badly damaged.

On December 15, a Ghibli machine-gunned and badly damaged 7 enemy lorries in the Wadi Zachen zone.

/On

On December 17, an S.79 machine-gunned and dropped fragmentation bombs on 5 enemy vehicles near Zella.

On December 18, during a reconnaissance carried out by 2 Mc.202's towards the Gars Bu Haida fort, a suspected Arab encampment was machine-gunned. Near Bir El Rabeia they attacked 3 armoured cars and 4 lorries, one of which exploded. Our aircraft underwent heavy A.A. fire.

On January 11 and 12, during a reconnaissance flight by our Cr.42's to the south of Tripoli, a group of enemy lorries were attacked and 6 were badly damaged.

(e) Convoy escort activity and port protection

All possible cooperation was given by the Air Force to provide escorts for the convoys going to and from Italy, and for the coastal convoys. But the results obtained were not in keeping with the attempts, since our aircraft had to carry out attacks on formations consisting of bombers and torpedo-bombers with numbers of fighters escorting them for distances far greater than our range of operation.

Two Mc.202 Squadriglie were stationed at Castel Benito in order to protect Tripoli, and later the whole of the 4th Stormo backed by an outstanding radar service was stationed there.

Our fighters carried out their duties very successfully until the eve of the retreat from Tripoli.

Among the operations which were carried out, the following are worth mentioning:

On December 19 Mc.202's which had taken off on the alarm from Castel Benito, engaged over Sabratha 7 Beaufighters which were attempting to attack our landing craft on coastal service. Three aircraft were shot down and another probably destroyed, and 3 others were machine-gunned.

On January 9 10 Mc.202's which had taken off on the alarm, intercepted and machine-gunned 5 Bostons in the sky over Castel Benito and left them badly damaged.

On January 12 the enemy attacked Castel Benito airfield, using 12 Boeing type aircraft, 2 Lockheeds and 6 single-engined aircraft. Our Mc.202's which had taken off on the alarm attacked this formation 18 times. In spite of the violent enemy defence in which 5 of our aircraft were hit several times, two four-engined aircraft were shot down.

With these aircraft shot down, the 4th Stormo gained their 500th victory.

On January 15, 12 Mc.202's of the 4th Stormo took off on the alarm and attacked a formation of 12 four-engined aircraft near Tripoli. One enemy aircraft was shot down 10 kms. to the north of Castel Verde, the crew of four baled out into the sea. 7 other four-engined aircraft were badly damaged. One Mc.202 did not return.

On January 18, 12 Mc.202's of the 3rd Stormo which had been transferred on January 17 from Tauroga to Castel Benito, engaged 12 four-engined aircraft escorted by 12 fighters. One of the aircraft which was hit by bursts of fire fell near Pisida, another fell in the sea and the crew baled out. A third was to be considered probably destroyed and 3 escorting aircraft were badly damaged and others were also machine-gunned.

On January 19, 7 Mc.202's of the 3rd Stormo were engaged in combat with 7 four-engined aircraft over Tripoli. One of the aircraft was shot down 35 km. north-east of Tripoli. 8 of the crew baled out.

VIII. OPERATIONS IN THE LIBYAN SAHARA

(a) Air operations between December 25, 1942 and January 1, 1943

Sebha and Hon

According to information from various sources and radio interception, a column of vehicles or light armoured vehicles supported by aircraft was leaving the Tibesti and Korbu zone, to attack our garrisons at Murzuk, Sebha, Hon and Ghat. The Sahara Air Force which had been reinforced with aircraft and supplied with as much fuel as the situation permitted, intervened with all its aircraft to defend our besieged garrisons, and it inflicted heavy losses.

On December 25, an S.79 bombed and machine-gunned a concentration of about 80 enemy vehicles in the Djebel Demuaze zone, and set one alight, while others were damaged. On the same day another S.79 and four Cr.42's with glider bombs took off for the same objective but returned because of bad weather conditions. A third S.79 did not reach its objective, as it was met by enemy fighters which had taken off from the temporary landing strips near Demauze.

On December 26, a formation of Cr.42's with glider bombs attacked a concentration of vehicles in the zone to the east of El Gatum with fragmentation bombs, after overcoming heavy A.A. fire. 8 vehicles were destroyed and 10 damaged. One of our aircraft was hit by A.A. fire but managed to return.

On the morning of December 27, another formation attacked a concentration of about 60 heavy vehicles in the area 15 km. south-west of Megedul. Even during the course of this operation our aircraft underwent heavy A.A. fire. 3 vehicles were destroyed and others were damaged. The operation was repeated in the afternoon with good results.

On December 19, Cr.42's and one S.79 attacked enemy forces which were resting in the El Bder Oasis area. The operation must have been very successful as dense columns of smoke were seen.

On December 31, Bder Oasis was again attacked.

On January 1, 1943 an enemy column attacked a fortified position near Um El Araneb. The Sahara Air Force cooperated and intervened with machine-gunning and fragmentation bombing operations.

(b) Retreat of the Sahara garrisons

The Libyan Armed Forces High Command ordered the retreat of the Sahara forces towards the Tripoli Djebel, following enemy infiltrations in the Bu Ngem - Hon zone and the pressure which was brought to bear against our garrisons at Murzuk, Sebha and Um El Araneb.

Units of the Sahara Air Force carried out the retreat in full cooperation with the Sahara Command by protecting the moving columns, reconnaissance and communications.

Sebha garrison was the first to retreat; they left in a column of vehicles during the night of January 4 for Sciueref and Mizda. The S.79's, Cr.42's and Ghiblis were transferred to El Assaba; several touched down at Hon and then flew on.

The retreat from Hon followed at once (night of January 5).

General Mannarini, the Sahara Commander, left with the main part of the forces and went to Mizda.

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The Commander of the Sahara Air Force and his units left Hon by transport aircraft on the morning of January 5 for El Assaba, where the Command was transferred.

(c) Operations at El Assaba between January 6 and 18

Beginning from January 6, our pilots began to carry out communication flights with the marching columns and referred their results to the Sahara Command, which had reached Mizda.

The Sahara Commander again had transport on January 6 from Hon, where he was returning from Mizda.

On January 7, two S.82's of the S.A.S. Group went to Hon to get the fuel and other material which the S.81's of the Sahara Air Force had been unable to transport. On the way there, a strong enemy column was sighted going from Ghirza to Gheriata; on the return journey on the following day, another column was sighted at Wadi Zem Zem to the east of Ghirza.

On January 10, the small garrison at Sciueref was attacked by the enemy. An S.79 aircraft was sent at once, which carried out a successful machine-gunning and fragmentation bombing attack; but the few Italians were overpowered.

On January 11, one S.79 and three Cr.42's of the 15th Stormo from Mizda carried out an operation in the Sciueref area and the enemy was forced to retreat after being bombed and machine-gunned; in this way our column moving from Hon was able to continue without opposition.

Reconnaissance was continued between January 12 and 14 to protect the retreating columns and offensive activity was also carried out against enemy units who were encircling Sciueref and various vehicles were hit and set alight.

Reconnaissance in the area to the south of Djebel was continued until January 18, to ensure the retreat of the Sciueref, Gheriat and Mizda garrisons.

When the retreat of the Sahara garrisons was complete, the Sahara Air Force was transferred back to Italy, after having skilfully carried out its duties.

IX. ORDERS FOR THE RETREAT TO THE HOMMS - TARHUNA LINE

Because of the threat that the Beurat line might be encircled from the south by the enemy, the Supreme Command decided to move our troops to lines further to the rear. The date for the beginning of the retreat from the Beurat line had to be arranged by the A.C.I.T. Command.

The Supreme Command was also arranging for a first rearguard line at Homs-Tarhuna, where our forces had to make the best of the mountainous territory and hold the enemy back for three weeks; a second line at Tripoli-Djebel was also to be held for three weeks. Our main line was formed at Mareth, Tunis.

As a result the Squadron Command issued orders so that all units stationed more to the east might be ready to begin the first part of the retreat towards Tripoli.

The following orders were given to the administration:

- (1) The workshops, stores, depots, S.R.A.M. and S.R.E.R. in the Misurata zone to be moved towards Tripoli - Sabrata.
- (2) Provisions and arrangements to be made for the dismantling of the workshops and other similar services such as the S.R.A.M., S.R.E.R., stores, depots and Commands in the Gars Garbulli zone, the city of Tripoli and Castel Benito.

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- (3) The materials obtained from the movements carried out in (1) and (2) were to be divided as follows:
 - (a) the best of the material to be transported to Tunis;
 - (b) surplus material to be sent to Italy;
 - (c) material which could not be transported or was in bad condition, to be destroyed.
- (4) Unserviceable aircraft were divided into four classes according to their condition:
 - (a) those which could be in active service within a short period;
 - (b) those which could be flown after a few repairs;
 - (c) those which required lengthy repairs;
 - (d) those which could not be repaired.

The first were to be flown to Tunis, the second flown to Italy, the third loaded on ships and transported to Italy and the fourth to be destroyed.

- (5) The destruction was ordered of all the Air Force equipment in Tripolitania and the ploughing up and mining of all the airfields.
- (6) Repairs to be carried out on Tunisian territory, from the boundaries of Tripolitania to Tunis, to be ready to receive the whole of the 5th Squadra and its administration, along with the above mentioned material, and places to be arranged for the incoming material itself.

From January 1 to 20, 1943, all the personnel of the different administrative services carried out their duties tirelessly in order to complete the various duties.

The evacuation of the stores, depôts and workshops was only made possible by the personnel who were possessed by a great sense of duty and who understood the situation, not only of the Libyan Air Force but of the whole of Italy; they allowed themselves neither rest nor uncertainty and they overcame all the difficulties which occurred.

The personnel concerned, excelled themselves in repairing aircraft and vehicles, and they repaired more machines than seemed possible.

X. THIRD REPATRIATION OF THE AIR FORCE UNITS

In considering the requirements in the Tunisian theatre and the capacities of the Air Force in the territory where the 5th Squadra would have been stationed, the I.A.F. Chief of General Staff, at the suggestion of the 5th Squadra Command, ordered the repatriation of the units which would not be found very useful in the new battle order.

Following this, operation order No. 10072/OP/2 was issued which arranged for the following to be left in Africa:

3rd Fighter Stormo with their Mc.20's, plus those left by the 4th Stormo.

13th Fighter Group: one Squadriglia of Mc.202's and two of Mc.200's.

614th A.S.R. Squadriglia, which was to be repatriated as soon as Tripolitania was evacuated.

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The following were to be repatriated right away:

4th Fighter Stormo Command and the 10th Fighter Gruppo, after having given all their serviceable aircraft to the 3rd Stormo.

2nd Fighter Stormo Command.

35th Stormo Command and 95th Bomber Group.

64th Reconnaissance Group.

159th Assault Group.

15th Assault Stormo.

102nd Bomber Squadriglia.

1st A.P.C. Group.

145th Navy Squadriglia.

Sahara Air Force, 26th and 99th Squadriglia.

145th Transport Group.

The units left one after the other, on the following dates:

The 4th Stormo and the 2nd Stormo Command personnel left Castel Benito between January 16 and 19. A number of pilots of the 4th Fighter Stormo were given the duty of flying to Italy the aircraft needing overhaul (Mc.200's and Mc.202's).

The 95th Bomber Group and the 35th Stormo Command left on January 9, with eight Cant/Z/1007/bis which took off from El Asaba, and five Cant/Z/1007/bis which took off from Misurata.

The 64th Reconnaissance Group left Zuara on January 8 with 13 Ca.313's and 3 Ca.312's.

The 47th Assault Group left Zuara on January 8 with 23 Cr.42's.

The 159th Assault Group with the Section of Cr.42's of the Sahara Air Force retreated to El Asaba and then to Gars Garulli on January 15 with 32 Cr.42's.

The 46th Assault Group and the 15th Stormo Command left Zuara on January 19 with 27 Cr.42's and 2 S.79's.

The 102nd Squadriglia left Castel Benito with 3 S.79's between January 11 and 14, and left Zuara during the night of January 20 with two S.79's.

The 103rd Squadriglia left Zuara during the night of January 19 with 9 Ca.309's.

The 15th Assault Stormo Cr.42 was repatriated on January 19 with the 46 Group bound for Vicenza.

The 104th Squadriglia and the 1st A.P.C. Group Command left Zuara on January 20 with 13 Ca.309's.

The Sahara Air Force, 26th and 96th Squadriglie left Bir Ghnem on January 20 with 4 S.79's, and Zuara with 6 Ca.309's.

The 145th Transport Group left between January 19 and 21 with nine S.82's, two S.81's and five Ca.133's (medical), taking off from Castel Benito, Bir Ghnem and Zuara.

The 145th Squadriglia left Pisida on January 19 with one Cant/Z/506.

In January, the following aircraft were sent to Italy from the airfields in Tripolitania:

82 Cr.42
13 Cant/Z/1007/bis
11 S.79
16 Ca.313 - 312
27 Ca.309
9 S.82
2 S.81
5 Ca.133
1 Cant/Z/506
12 Mc.200
2 Mc.202

Total = 180 aircraft

XI. RETREAT TO THE HOMS - TARHUNA LINE

After having undergone fierce fighting during the course of the day, the A.C.I.T. began their retreat during the night of January 19 from the Buerat to the Homs - Tarhuna line. As a result of this, orders were given for the retreat of the Squadra units.

The commands and units were transferred as follows:

On January 17, the Eastern Sector Command from Tauroga to Castel Benito, and the 13th Group from Villaggio Crispi to Sorman airfield.

As previously stated, the remaining units were to be repatriated and were to make use of Zuara airfield for taking off, whenever necessary.

Meanwhile, Squadra Command transferred from Zliten to Zanzur.

XII. RETREAT TO TRIPOLI AND THE FALL OF THE CITY

Unfortunately events were piling up. It had only been possible to hold the enemy at Tarhuna for three days, instead of 2 to 3 weeks.

Marshall Rommel had to decide to abandon the line itself, which meant that the enemy meeting with no resistance in the Djebel, would then be at the walls of Tripoli.

The urgent need then arose for the Squadron to evacuate the Air Force installations from Tripoli and Castel Benito airfield. The following operations took place on January 21:

- (1) Evacuation into Tunis of the stores of ordinary and special material from Mellaha and Castel Benito, and of all the material which had come from the east, including the material which had been piling up at Sabrata during the last days.
- (2) The Gars Garbulli, Bu Meliana and Tripoli vehicle workshop machinery was stripped and loaded on motor-vehicles, motor-boats and shipping in the port of Tripoli, to be transported to Tunis or to Italy.
- (3) Stripping and loading on vehicles of the workshop machinery of the S.R.A.M. at Mellaha, the S.R.A. at Castel Benito and Zavia, the S.R.M.'s at Suk El Giama, Tripoli and Porta Benito and the propeller and aircraft instrument-checking workshops at Tripoli.

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- (4) All the special material which could not be transported was destroyed.
- (5) Destruction of the fixed installations at Castel Benito and Mellaha.
- (6) All the bombs which could not be carried were made useless.

At the same time the Administration was seeing to:

- (a) getting all the fuel at the depôts in Tripolitania and transporting it to Tunis;
- (b) collecting the telephone lines, Siemens cables etc.;
- (c) speeding up the repair of aircraft and vehicles to the maximum.

The administration was also arranging the men and material for ploughing up and mining the airfields which our units had gradually to abandon.

The defence of Tripoli, which had at first been thought possible, was not attempted for the following reasons:-

- (1) because of the strong enemy pressure along the coastal road which did not permit us to carry out an effective and lasting resistance;
- (2) in order to avoid the destruction of the city;
- (3) in order to avoid the threat of the whole of the A.C.I.T. being cut off from the remainder of the retreating forces in Tunis by enemy columns moving in from the south.

During the night of January 22 it was decided to evacuate the city and the Port Command Area. The troops were to retreat to the Zavia line, then to Zuara and finally to the border zone.

XIII. ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BETWEEN JANUARY 15 AND 22, 1943

While the troops were retreating, patrols were out along the roads, attacks were made against enemy mechanized transport and reconnaissance was carried out along the routes from the south and south-east.

Among the operations carried out by units of the 5th Squadra during this period, the following are worth mentioning:

The attack carried out on January 15 by a formation of Mc.200's escorted by Mc.202's against the small fort and the inhabited part of Buerat, where emplacements and a number of vehicles were hit.

Two attacks carried out on January 20 by a formation of Mc.200's and Mc.202's against concentrations of tanks 30 km. east of Garian, and a third attack by Mc.200's escorted by Mc.202's against mechanized vehicles in the area to the south-east of Tarhuna.

The aerial combat which took place over Garian-Tarhuna on January 21 between a reconnaissance patrol which consisted of 6 Mc.202's and 40 Curtiss P.40's, and a second combat between 7 Mc.202's and 25 P.40's over Tripoli. During these combats, one P.40 was shot down, 2 others probably destroyed and 12 badly hit; 2 Mc.202's failed to return.

The combat between a patrol of Mc.202's and 30 Lockheeds, in which one enemy aircraft was shot down and two were badly machine-gunned; one Mc.202 failed to return.

The attack carried out by Mc.200's on the same day against a concentration of vehicles near Corandini village; one Mc.200 was lost.

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The combat fought on January 28 by two of our S.79's and 11 Mc.202's against 20 P.40's, in which one P.40 was shot down and 3 Mc.202's were forced to land outside the airfield.

XIV. TRANSFER TO TUNIS

Before retreating to the Tunisian airfields the 5th Squadra Command provided for intermediate airfields at El Assa and El Uotia. The bad condition of the runway at El Assa did not permit us to make use of the airfield, which was occupied by the Germans instead, who having a considerable number of transport aircraft were able to bring in the necessary material and equipment by air. El Uotia airfield was also reserved for the German units after having been chosen by the Fliegerführer.

The Squadron Command also examined the possibilities of using the various airfields in the Ben Gardano, Bordj Sidi Toui and Foun Tatahouine areas. The condition of the ground on the above airfields, which had been ploughed up to a large extent, and the small dimensions of the landing strips made us decide not to use them.

It was decided that the 3rd Fighter Stormo at Castel Benito should transfer directly to Medenine airfield, and the 13th Gruppo should go from Sorman to Gabes.

The airfield organizations were transferred as follows:

The Tauroga and Medenine airfield organisation to the 3rd Fighter Stormo;

that of Crispi airfield to the 13th Fighter Group;

that of Mellaha Oasis airfield to El Melah (Gabes);

El Assaba to Mahares;

Sorman to East Gabes;

Zuara to Mokenine Oasis.

The other organisations at Misurata and Gars Garbuli were dissolved; the personnel were sent to the Zavia stage of the journey and the airfield material was turned over to the depôt set up at Sabrata.

The Castel Benito and Pisida organizations were dissolved at the retreat. The personnel were sent to Tunis in order to be repatriated.

The workshops, stores and depôts were transferred under the care of the Administration to the north of the Gabes parallel (between El Methuia oasis and Sfax).

The evacuation of the stores, depôts and workshops in the Tripoli area, where all kinds of material had accumulated for years, was carried out by the administration during those days of feverish activity. It was very difficult due to the shortage of materials and the congestion of the roads.

XV. COMMAND AND UNIT MOVEMENTS

The Eastern Sector Command moved to Medenina on January 20.

The Western Sector Command moved to Gabes on January 21 where it was dissolved. The Sector Commander and a restricted number of personnel were

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employed for inspection of the airfields and airfield defences under the Squadron Command.

On January 22, the Squadron Tactical Section and the 18th Fighter Gruppo flew to the Command which was temporarily at El Hamma.

On January 23, Tripoli was abandoned by our troops.

The 3rd Stormo which had begun to transfer on January 21 arrived on the same day at Medenine. The 13th Group which had left Tripolitania last and had only begun moving on the morning of January 22, also arrived on January 23. This unit which had been severely tried during the last days, would have had to go to El Hamma, but as the levelling of the landing-strips had not been finished they were established at Eastern Gabes.

XVI. SQUADRA ORDER OF BATTLE IN TUNIS

On January 24, the Italian Air Force General Staff ordered that the 5th Squadra should extend its jurisdiction over all the Tunisian territory. The units were to be grouped under two Sector Commands: North and South. The existing Air Force Command had to be dissolved.

Instead, the Command continued to function independently for a time, but with a limited territorial jurisdiction limited to the Sfax parallel, which marked the limits of the North and South Sectors.

On January 24 the Squadra order of battle was as follows:

Squadra Command - Mellah oasis

Southern Sector Command - Medenina area

3rd Fighter Stormo - Mc.202's - Medenina airfield

13th Fighter Group - Mc.202'2 and Mc.200's - Eastern Gabes airfield

Northern Sector Command - (formerly Tunis Air Force) - Amilcar (Tunis)

6th Fighter Group - Mc.202's - Sfax airfield

368th Assault Squadriglia - G.50's - Sfax airfield

384th Assault Squadriglia - Mc.200's - El Aouina airfield (Tunis)

XVII. AIR ACTIVITIES BETWEEN JANUARY 23 AND 31

5th Squadra activities during this period consisted mainly of road protection between Zuara, Ben Gardane, Medenina and Gabes. Reconnaissance was also carried out towards Nalut and flights were made to maintain communication with our Bir Allag garrison moving towards the north.

But the activities were limited by the reduced efficiency of the units as a result of the continuous movements from place to place, adverse weather conditions and muddy airfields.

A total of 88 Mc.202's were employed.

On January 30, a formation of 12 Mc.202's carried out a successful machine-gunning operation against a concentration of armoured cars and vehicles between Bir El Bera and El Uotia. Two heavy vehicles were set alight, two others turned over and also went on fire.

/XVIII.

XVIII. SUMMARY OF THE SECOND PERIOD - BELLIGERENT ACTIVITIES FROM
DECEMBER 1, 1942 TILL JANUARY 31, 1943

Flying hours 2220 hrs.20 mins

| <u>Type of operation</u> | <u>Number of sorties</u> |
|---|--------------------------|
| fighter operations and indirect escort | 783 |
| attacks on ground objectives | 175 |
| bombardment | 117 |
| ground reconnaissance | 108 |
| naval reconnaissance | 19 |
| coastal reconnaissance | 27 |
| convoy escort | 133 |
| transport | 16 |
| A.S.R. | 15 |
| port protection | 112 |
| Total | 1505 |
| combats | 21 |
| enemy aircraft shot down | 28 |
| enemy aircraft probably destroyed | 4 |
| enemy aircraft machine-gunned in flight | 77 |
| aircraft lost on operations | 13 |
| aircraft lost on the ground due to enemy activity | 17 |
| enemy aircraft set alight on the ground | 5 |
| enemy aircraft damaged on the ground | 15 |

GENERAL SUMMARY

FROM OCTOBER 20, 1942 UNTIL JANUARY 31, 1943

Flying hours 8201 hrs.40 mins

| <u>Type of operation</u> | <u>Number of aircraft used</u> |
|---|--------------------------------|
| fighter operations and escort | 2123 |
| attacks on ground objectives | 301 |
| bombardment | 173 |
| ground reconnaissance | 512 |
| coastal reconnaissance | 76 |
| naval reconnaissance | 38 |
| convoy escorts | 746 |
| transport | 23 |
| A.S.R. | 26 |
| port protection | 613 |
| Total | 4631 |
| combats | 93 |
| enemy aircraft shot down | 134 |
| enemy aircraft probably destroyed | 58 |
| enemy aircraft machine-gunned | 476 |
| enemy aircraft set alight on the ground | 5 |
| enemy aircraft damaged on the ground | 15 |
| aircraft lost in combat | 27 |
| aircraft lost on the ground due to enemy activity | 35 |

/OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVATIONS

Although the abandonment of Libya was a pity, it had become necessary and inevitable if the forces remaining after the battle of El Alamein were to be saved. This battle had been won by the enemy because of very great superiority of armoured material, artillery and air power.

The British success was certainly due to the superiority of the R.A.F., which was far greater in quantity if not in quality than the Axis Air Force, and which was more effective first in the strategical field and then in the tactical.

All the individual Italian and German units which took part in the unequal combat gave good proof of moral courage, spirit, aggressiveness and willingness for sacrifice, and gave of their utmost in the battle for Libya.

Mention should also be made of the maintenance personnel who co-operated so efficiently in all emergencies. Especially the automobile and technical services who worked miracles to repair and transport un-serviceable aircraft, engines, workshops, fuel, munitions, food and all kinds of material.

The Demanio service was particularly outstanding in the way in which it destroyed the airfield installations and landing grounds which had to be abandoned, and in the way that installations were provided on the new airfields where units had to operate.

During the first half of November, action accelerated increasingly and every programme was outrun by events.

Often the 5th Squadra had to overstep the limits of the orders given by the High Commands and had to act speedily to save equipment and materials which were necessary to keep the units going.

During the retreat the serviceability of the units was very low as the aircraft were without the necessary maintenance for several days because the equipment was in continuous movement.

At the same time air operations were of course reduced as the Squadra was practically down to one Stormo. As a matter of fact, of the two units which reached Tunis, only the 3rd Fighter Stormo could be relied upon as the 13th Gruppo Commander and the two Squadriglia Commanders were put out of combat during the transfer flight from Sorman to Gabes on January 22.

COOPERATION WITH THE GERMAN AIR FORCE DURING THE BATTLE FOR LIBYA

(a) From Alamein to El Agheila (October 20 - November 14, 1942)

At the beginning of the El Alamein battle, the German Air Force had their units stationed at Qotaifia, Turbia, Bir El Aba, Qassabba and Northern Fuka. These forces came under an Air Force Command (Fliegerführer) and were composed of:

3 Fighter Groups (Me.109)

1 Stuka Group (Ju.87)

1 Reconnaissance Squadron (Ju.88 and He.111)

1 Courier Squadron

The units had a total strength of 80 fighters, 30 Stukas and 40 reconnaissance aircraft.

The Me.109's were used for protection patrols over our troops along the roads and as bomber and fighter-bomber escorts. The Stukas carried out operations against enemy armoured and mechanised vehicles. The reconnaissance aircraft carried out accurate surveys over the lines and airfields, and gave the exact daily situation of the enemy air and land forces.

Daily reconnaissance was also carried out over Alexandria and along the Delta, the Suez canal and towards El Qattara.

During the period between October 20 and 31, the Germans used an average of 131 aircraft daily in Libya and were engaged in a large number of combats with enemy fighters. Successful attacks were also carried out with Stukas and Jabos against vehicles, tanks and emplacements. During these operations 62 enemy aircraft were shot down and a large number of vehicles and tanks were destroyed. 30 German aircraft were lost, some of which landed in our lines.

Between November 1 and 4, the German Air Force in worthy competition with the Italian Air Force, continued their efforts to gain the supremacy of the skies from the R.A.F., which was persisting in its attacks against our troops and airfields.

On November 1, the enemy launched a heavy attack in the area to the north of the front on the Tel El Eisa heights. The German Air Force intervened with dive-bombing attacks between November 1 and 4, using a total of 127 aircraft, including Stukas and Jabos, and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy armoured vehicles.

During the retreat to El Agheila, the fighters gave cooperation in the protection of roads, and were engaged in combats over Egypt, Cyrenaica and Sirte. Reconnaissance was carried out along all the roads, with particular regard to the southern flank of our line, which was retreating.

63 enemy aircraft were shot down between November 1 and 16 by the German fighters; 22 German aircraft were lost, several of which managed to land within our territory.

Like the Italian ones, the German units retreated in relays, in order to give the fighters a possibility of protecting the moving columns. At first, they moved from Qotafia to El Qassabam and moved on to Gambut at a later date, where they remained from November 7 to November 10. After that, the fighters were based on Martuba and Derna while the Stukas occupied Marua, which they left on November 13.

/(b)

(b) El Agheila front (November 15 - December 14, 1942)

Between November 14 and 19, the Fliegerführer units were based on the airfields at Ara dei Fileni, El Merduma and En Nufilia:

On November 19, the German Air Force was as follows:

| <u>Type of aircraft</u> | <u>Number of effective aircraft</u> |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| fighters | 70 |
| Stukas | 20 |
| Jabos | 20 |
| various types | 30 |

In accordance with agreements made by the German Air Force in Africa with the 5th Squadra Command, their duties were; to carry out daily reconnaissance over the El Agheila, Agedabia, Antelat, Hashiat and Agheila routes; to make one or two strategical reconnaissance flights; to have fighters standing by and supported by a radar station; to intervene if necessary with Stukas and Jabos against mechanized vehicles.

The first Heinkel 129's arrived in Libya during the retreat and they attacked a column of armoured vehicles on November 17, 40 km. south of Gambut, and 12 tanks were destroyed. The use of the aircraft which could have influenced the course of operations a great deal in our favour, was hampered by technical defects, such as faulty carburettors, so that the results hoped for were not obtained.

During the rest on the El Agheila front (November 16 - December 14, 1942), while the Fliegerführer carried out operations in the tactical field, Fliegerkorps X in Greece intervened in the strategical field and attacked the roads in Egypt and Cyrenaica, and the ports at Tobruk and Benghazi with day and night bomber operations.

Accurate reconnaissance was also carried out on the roads in Cyrenaica and Egypt, and on the airfields and take-off strips from Marsa El Brega to the mouth of the Nile.

During this period the German fighters were engaged in a number of combats and 26 enemy aircraft were shot down.

In attacks against ground objectives, the enemy suffered heavy losses in vehicles, armoured material, barracks, stores etc. Successful attacks were carried out in the Gambut zone, along the roads between Tobruk and Tini, Derna and Ras Hilal, in the area north-east of Agedabia, in front of the Marsa El Brega positions, south of Benghazi, near Tocra and Solluch, Wadi Faregh, in front of Tolmeta, east of Cirene and to the west of El Sucra. The Tobruk and Benghazi ports were continually attacked and kept under control. On December 7, direct hits were scored on the mole, and one ship in Benghazi was set alight.

During heavy attacks against the Agedabia, Benina, Maraua, Derna, Martuba and Gambut airfields, several aircraft were destroyed on the ground, and barracks and installations were hit.

Aircraft coming from Crete carried out several attacks against enemy navigation along the coasts of Cyrenaica. During one of these attacks on December 8, a direct hit was scored on a 10,000 ton merchant vessel.

(c) Buerat Front (December 15, 1942 - January 15, 1943)

As the Marsa El Brega positions had become untenable it was decided to retreat to the Wadi Zem Zem Gheddaia line (Byerat zone).

/The

The German as well as the Italian Air Force was forced to limit its operations during this period due to lack of fuel.

After a short rest at Tamet, the German Air Force took over the airfields at Bir Dufan, Zanzur and Misurata on December 13.

In order to obtain the maximum results in Italo-German operations, the maximum collaboration was established between the Eastern Sector Command and the Fliegerführer, and all the operations were carried out with mixed Italo-German units. Our Mc.200's carried out attacks against ground objectives escorted by Me.109's and when the Stukas and Jabos attacked they were escorted by our Mc.202's.

Fliegerkorps X continued to attack objectives in Cyrenaica, especially ports, roads and airfields.

A ship was hit at Benghazi on December 15; on the following day, the mole and depôts on the quay were hit. During an attack carried out against a convoy in the vicinity of the Cyrenaica coast on December 20, a 7000 ton merchant ship was sunk and a 5000 ton ship was hit twice. On the same day a third ship was hit at Benghazi. The mole was hit during an attack against Derna port.

Operations were carried out against the Benghazi, Benina, Barco, Derna, Martuba and Gambut airfields, where aircraft were destroyed on the ground and installations, stores and workshops were hit.

The Fliegerführer made full use of its units and carried out daily reconnaissance over the lines, interception flights, protection patrols for the troops, and Stuka and Jabo attacks against armoured vehicles and enemy troop concentrations. The fighters were engaged in many combats and severe losses were inflicted on the R.A.F.

During the period between December 15, 1942 and January 15, 1943, the German Air Force operating in the sky over Libya, shot down 72 enemy aircraft; 18 German aircraft were shot down by A.A. fire and lost in combat.

(d) Retreat to Tunis (January 16-30, 1943)

The retreat of the A.C.I.T. from the Buerat line towards Tripoli and the border began on January 15. The German Air Force was based on the airfields at Castel Benito, Al Assa and Zuara, where they remained until about January 20.

Zuara was the last of the airfields to be left by the fighters, which went to Tunis on January 23, after Tripoli had been abandoned by our troops.

While Fliegerkorps X continued their attacks against ports, roads and airfields in Cyrenaica, and kept the land and sea lines of communication towards Egypt under control, the German Air Force in Tripolitania carried out attacks against the enemy's air and ground forces. Even during this period, they were engaged in a number of combats, and tanks, vehicles and gun emplacements were destroyed in dive-bombing attacks.

20 enemy aircraft were shot down between January 15 and 31, 11 German aircraft were lost.

A.H.B.6 DISTRIBUTION:

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