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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

TRANSLATION No. VII/65

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THE MEDITERRANEAN CAMPAIGN

Review of the situation in the Central and  
South-Eastern Mediterranean, for the period  
July 11 - August 31, 1941; issued by the  
German Liaison Staff with the Italian Air  
Force and dated September 9, 1941.

TRANSLATION VII/65

corrigenda :-

page 5, last paragraph should read

'The Sicilian Command now consists of some 65 serviceable bombers and 120 fighters; the 5th Squadra (N.Africa) consists of . . . . . '

page 6, 2nd paragraph, line 11 should read

'Apart from the 5th Squadra and the Sicilian Command, the 4th Squadra alone has a large number of bombers (64); but of these, 1 Geschwader (at present 18 aircraft) is to be sent to Rhodes. Of the numerically strongest Italian Squadra at home (the 2nd Squadra with 4 bomber Geschwader), 3 bomber Geschwader are refitting; . . . . . '

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Review of the Situation in the Central  
and South-Eastern Mediterranean for the  
period July 11 - August 31, 1941

Issued by the German Liaison Staff with the Italian  
Air Force and dated September 9 1941

(a) Situation on land

The supposition made in the Italuft Liaison Staff's report Ic Br.B. No. 228/41 (secret) of July 11, 1941 that the new British Commander-in-Chief would wage a large scale offensive against Cyrenaica after thorough preparations and after the end of the period of greatest heat, has been already confirmed. The Italian Supreme Command expected an offensive at the end of July. The situation in North Africa at the end of August is marked by the fact that both sides are preparing for the British attack expected in the autumn. From the results of reconnaissance and from other reports, it can be seen that the enemy is establishing an advanced supply base by setting up fuel, water and war material stores, field hospitals, etc. in the Sidi Barrani area and probably in the Giarabub area as well. A striking observation made about the middle of August was the strong concentration (purely temporary) of motor vehicles, including tanks, in the area of Sidi Barrani and south-west, and particularly on the high plateau to the south of Bugbug. On August 16, Italian air reconnaissance reported an estimated number of 750-800 vehicles; formerly in the same area; only a small number of vehicles had been spotted. In the middle of August, for the first time stronger concentrations of vehicles numbering about 300-400 lorries were sighted in the area of the Siwa and Giarabub Oases. It seemed as if the plan were to bypass the right flank of the Sollum Front from Giarabub or, to thrust deep into the occupied area of Cyrenaica. But since reconnaissance results in the second half of August showed that the number of vehicles fell to the original figure and the end of the month found Giarabub clear of vehicles, it is to be assumed that vehicle movements in the middle of August were relief forces or represented a British precautionary measure; the British may have feared an Axis offensive with the formation of the 5th Light Division into the 21st Panzer Division.

On the other hand, these rapid British movements prove that if there is an attack a rapid concentration of enemy troops must be expected. There is also the possibility of their bringing up troops from the Nile area by railway to Mersa Matruh without great difficulty.

Regular and accurate air observation of a possible enemy concentration area is therefore specially important.

The distribution of British power in Western Egypt has undergone no great change. The Empire Troops in the Mersa Matruh-Sollum area comprise 2-3 divisions, while it is assumed that there are 4 divisions between Mersa Matruh and Alexandria.

Despite constant German and Italian air raids, there is no general change in the situation at Tobruk. So far, we have not succeeded in putting an effective stop to the fort's nightly provision with supplies of ammunition, war materials and personnel by destroyers and small steamships. It appears that there are even leave personnel passing from Tobruk to Egypt. According to statements made by men of Fliegerführer Afrika, the anti-aircraft defences over Tobruk have become so strong that they are not far behind those over Malta. The bombardment of the harbour by German and Italian artillery cannot have any greater effect until accurate howitzers are brought up. The sinking of a German howitzer battery on the crossing from Naples to Tripoli was an especially hard blow for this very reason. In the meantime, two new howitzer batteries have reached Tripoli; it is expected that they will be

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operational in the near future. It is impossible to mine the harbour entrance adequately, because the British are in a position to clear the harbour mouth with their minesweeping apparatus. And on the other hand, the Italians have no submarines at their disposal to use in ambush near Tobruk, because those Italian submarines which are in the Mediterranean are fully occupied with protective duties. The strength of the Tobruk garrison is supposed to be about 20 battalions, 6 artillery regiments and 3 anti-aircraft regiments. The many thrusts, strong and weak, made by the British Tobruk garrison appear to be made in order to discover the weak spots in the front of encirclement; this is to prepare for a break-out which is to be expected at the same time as the coming offensive on the Sollum front.

Changes in the German and Italian organisation in Cyrenaica are to be noted as opposed to details given in the last report. At present, the Sollum front from the coast at Halfaya Pass to Sidi Omar is held by the Italian 55th Division, "Savona" X, reinforced by Italian artillery, 5 German flak batteries, 4 German "oasis companies" and a reinforced battalion of motorised infantry; behind them, as a mobile reserve in the area Sollum-Bardia-Marsa Luch is the German Afrika Panzerkorps, comprising the 15th and the 21st Panzer Divisions.

In Bardia is an Italian garrison, about 3 battalions and 2 artillery formations strong. Tobruk is surrounded by the XXI Italian Corps, consisting of the "Brescia", "Pavia" and "Bologna" Divisions. The Ras Mdauar sector to the west of the Tobruk Front is held by the German Herft Group (115 Panzergrenadier Regiment). All these German and Italian formations in the area Sollum-Tobruk are under the command of Panzergruppe Rommel. Further back, in the Derna area are the Italian "Trento" (motorised) Division and the "Ariete" Armoured Division; they form the reserve for the Italian Supreme Command. During September the Italian "Trieste" Motorised Division is expected, in which case 6 divisions would be ready for defence (besides the 3 divisions at Tobruk) should the British attack in October.

Panzergruppe Rommel awaits the British attack calmly and confidently as long as the enemy forces are not much greater than those they used in July. At present the supply of fuel and ammunition for the Panzer Corps gives no cause for anxiety. The only cause for anxiety is the serviceability of motor vehicles which are exposed to great wear and tear by excessive use, bad roads and desert sand. For this reason, supplies from Tripoli, where there are considerable stocks and personnel reinforcements, are doubtful.

In Italian East Africa small Italian groups in the area of the Tana Lake, near Gondar, Uolchehit and Culquabert are putting up stiff resistance to superior British and rebel forces. Despite their operations, which are to be acknowledged with every respect, they could not prevent the majority of British and South African troops from being evacuated. Further resistance on the Italians' part cannot alter the situation.

(b) Situation at sea

Now, as ever, the British Fleet dominates the Mediterranean. In the period covered by this report, it has not come out to take part in any large scale actions, but it has made several thrusts into the Western Mediterranean, to send off planes from an aircraft carrier for Malta and the Eastern Mediterranean. The Italian Fleet has been unable to prevent operations by the enemy's naval forces, but

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in cooperation with the Italian Air Force it did prevent the Mediterranean route being used for regular British convoy traffic. Large transports from Britain and America to Egypt usually go round the Cape of Good Hope and through the Suez Canal.

Only from July 22-24 a large convoy of 18 ships bound for Egypt with troops and war materials and protected by the Gibraltar Squadron slipped through the Sicilian Narrows, where escort duties were taken over by the Alexandria Squadron. But the British paid for this breakthrough with heavy losses.

According to Italian reports, 6 of the 18 merchant ships with a total tonnage of 50-60,000 tons were sunk; 6 warships, including 1 battleship and 1 aircraft carrier, were damaged.

Success is to be attributed to the Italian Air Force alone, which attacked with all its available forces from Sardinia, Sicily and North Africa. But neither the Italians, nor the German formations in the area south of Crete, succeeded in re-establishing contact with the broken remnants of the convoy passing through the Eastern Mediterranean.

It can certainly be assumed that single enemy ships pass through the Mediterranean unseen, under cover of suitable weather; this can be seen from the changing occupation of La Valetta harbour by merchant ships. There are also signs that British ships make use of the Italian flag to mislead us. In the period covered, British heavy naval forces took part in no great activity. After the naval battle of July 22-24 some of the warships had to be laid up for repairs; some (for example, "Warspite") had to be brought to ports outside the Mediterranean area. But destroyers of the Alexandria Squadron were used in regular service on the route from Mersa Matruh to Tobruk. Their task was not only to protect the smaller merchant ships making for Tobruk, but themselves to carry personnel and materials. In the last days of August, several enemy units, consisting of cruisers and destroyers, were sighted in the area south of Crete; presumably they were shadowing the new convoy route from Greece to North Africa.

In supply voyages to Tobruk, whose regularity was known to the German and Italian High Commands, British ships were frequently attacked by the combined Air Forces. In these operations, the following were sunk: 2 tankers, 1 merchant ship, 1 destroyer (probably). Damaged: 7 destroyers, 2 light cruisers, 1 auxiliary cruiser, 4 merchant ships.

Now, as formerly, the most dangerous British weapon in the Mediterranean is the submarine, especially those operating from Malta. In the period covered, there were 36 British submarine attacks in the Mediterranean; of these, 19 were successful.

Seven submarine attacks were made on convoys between Italy and North Africa; in these attacks, 2 merchant ships and warships were sunk, and 1 merchant ship and 1 warship were damaged. In addition, 7 single smaller ships on the convoy route were sunk, and 2 ships were damaged. German and Italian defence was more successful than before, and both the Italian Navy and Air Force took part in this. Seven British submarines were definitely destroyed; 2 British submarines were probably damaged or sunk. But even these success can bring no change to the over-all situation, because the British can replace immediately every submarine lost.

A table of German and Italian shipping losses from July 11 to August 31 is to be found in Appendix 1.

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Because of the danger to the relatively slow convoys, two new methods have been tried for some weeks:

- (i) Use of Italian submarines to bring urgent supplies to Bardia.
- (ii) Use of fast convoys or single ships from South Italy along the west coast of Greece to Benghazi.

From the beginning, both methods have proved their worth, but these alone cannot deal with all the supplies that are needed. Besides, the British know of them already so we must expect more trouble. The steamer "Bellona" with a cargo of P.O.L. urgently required, which was bound for Bardia was forced to turn round twice; the "Ossag" making for Benghazi, was forced to stay in Greece for some time; and the steamer "Cilicia" crossing from Greece to Africa was first attacked by an aircraft and then when it was trying to turn back to Kalamati, sunk by a submarine.

British surface craft and submarines as well as the Royal Air Force are causing these disturbances to Italo-German sea traffic. The situation could certainly be improved by reinforcing convoy escorts with Italian destroyers and torpedo boats, and more especially with the light naval forces allotted to the Italian Fleet. For some time, the Naval Liaison Staff have been trying to obtain this, but the Italian Navy maintains that it is not in a position to meet their demands, because all its units are operating in various parts of the Mediterranean, and the 14 large submarines in the Atlantic could not be withdrawn. It was the wish of the German Navy that the latter should remain in the Atlantic. On the other hand, the Italian Air Force has, of late, made a considerably greater effort to protect the convoys; but numerically and from the viewpoint of range, their formations are inadequate. It is therefore still necessary to demand the reinforcement of the Italian Air Force in Sicily which was repeatedly asked for by Superaereo Liaison Staff. Moreover, more Luftwaffe formations must be sent to the Mediterranean area.

Recently, the defences of the ports of Tripoli and Benghazi have been improved by setting up flak and coastal batteries and by intensifying fighter cover. The German flak artillery has proved its worth in the defence of Benghazi. In addition, a net boom was laid across the harbour mouth at Benghazi. This has already warded off a torpedo attack by an enemy submarine on August 16. So far, Italian flak cannot meet the demands made on it; both supplies and training are inadequate. For a time, there was even a shortage of ammunition. We cannot allow large scale British attacks to have repeated success, especially night attacks, like the one made on Tripoli on the night of August 29-30. During the defence of ports against day and night attacks made by the Royal Air Force, the Italians shot down 3 aircraft over Tripoli. Over Benghazi, at least 19 aircraft were shot down, 16 of which were shot down by German flak (with the help of Italian flak and searchlights); besides this, Italian fighters definitely shot down 13 aircraft and probably shot down another 8. As before, we must try to have more German flak units brought in.

In spite of improved harbour defences, submarines lurking in or just outside the harbours have sunk or damaged 8 ships.

(c) Situation in the air

In the course of the last few weeks, the British have increased their air forces in North Africa; they have brought over more fighters via Gibraltar and Egypt. They use these for protection in the air, build up a reserve for the coming battle and use strong formations to cover

the movements of their supply shipping to Tobruk. Thus they force our fighters to step up operations, and this leads to a greater drain on men and material. On the British side, of course, the lack of flying training and experience on the part of the newly arrived aircrews is making itself felt and is leading to heavy losses. It was for this reason that our fighters were able to shoot down four British bombers and eight fighters in the Bardia-Sollum area on July 21; and this without loss to themselves.

In the opinion of Fliegerführer Afrika, the large numbers of fighters occupying the airfields in Western Egypt may mean that the British, for lack of suitable airfields in Palestine and Syria, are keeping formations here which are destined for later use in Asia Minor.

Lately attacks made by British bomber formations in North Africa have increased. They were directed firstly against the harbours, and secondly against the airfields. In the period covered the following were attacked:

Town and harbour of Benghazi	29 times
Town and harbour of Derna	20 times

In addition there were 25 attacks on German and Italian airfields and positions. In general, these attacks have caused no great damage, except to buildings in Benghazi and Derna, because they were carried out by weak forces from a great height. But in every case they caused uneasiness amongst the troops and the civilian population and they hindered loading and unloading operations. Thanks to their very well trained signals service, and to their good reconnaissance, the British are informed of all German and Italian shipping movements; they attempt to attack the transports at sea and during unloading. The harbour of Bardia has been regularly attacked on the nights when the Italian supply submarine made port.

Owing to the weakness of the Italian Air Force in Sicily, the threat to the German-Italian sea route to North Africa has increased from Malta in the last few weeks. The number of aircraft permanently stationed on Malta, apart from those being ferried over via the island, is assumed to be about 80; in the middle of April, it was about 40, and in the middle of May about 60. With these, the British can constantly control our sea traffic, upset its timetable and cause us considerable losses by attacking the large convoys. Moreover, the almost daily attacks on Tripoli are made from Malta; recently, the Italian seaports in Sicily have been visited by British aircraft more frequently than before. In the period covered there were 26 attacks on Tripoli, 34 attacks on Sicilian ports and 16 attacks on convoys. The heaviest attacks on Tripoli took place on August 24, August 26 and in the night of August 29-30; in the latter attack, two merchant ships were severely hit in the harbour and two motor yachts and two minesweepers were sunk. Twelve of the attacks on convoys were successful; in these, 12 ships were hit by bombs or air torpedoes and five of them were sunk.

As was stated in the last report, the formations of the Italian Air Force now stationed in Sicily and North Africa are insufficient to stop the British air force and naval operations.

Luftwaffe Sicily now consists of some 65 serviceable bombers and 120 fighters; Luftflotte 5 consists of some 70 serviceable bombers and 135 fighters. Two more fighter Staffeln will shortly be brought to Africa. To these figures can be added naval reconnaissance aircraft: in Sicily, numbering 7 Staffeln with some 50 aircraft and in North Africa 3 Staffeln with about 15 aircraft. There are also 4 army reconnaissance Staffeln, some of which are to be used for escorting coastal shipping.

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The Italian Air Force - excluding those formations operating on the Cyrenaica front - has as its most important task the protection of convoys and of the harbours of Tripoli and Benghazi. For this task, 1,509 aircraft were used in the period covered by the report, an average of 30 aircraft daily. So far the cause of the difficulty of convoy protection by the Air Force is the short range of Italian fighters over the 600 km. stretch of sea between Sicily and North Africa. For this reason, only bombers of the S79 type are used in the area not covered by fighters. Lately - apart from the 120 fighters mentioned above - 15 aircraft of the new type Re 2000 have been sent to Sicily; these are single-seaters with a speed of 360 km. at 4,000 metres height and a duration of 4 hours. But both from the point of view of their numbers and their performance, no decisive improvement in the situation is to be expected, because they are not fitted for trips in bad weather, and their tanks are unprotected. In addition to convoy protection, attacks on Malta as a submarine base and an aircraft base fell further and further behind.

Italian aircraft attacked the town and harbour of La Valetta only 11 times, and the airfields at Halfar and Miccabba 25 times. Moreover, the attacks were made with much too weak forces (an average of 5 aircraft against La Valetta and an average of 11 aircraft against the airfields) to expect any great effect from them. In the future, no success can be obtained against Malta in this way. Adequate reinforcement of the Air Force in Sicily is not to be expected in the near future. This could only be done if the Italian Supreme Command took formations from the Air Force in Italy itself to carry out this important task. But even in this case, only small reinforcements could be given to Sicily. Apart from Luftflotte 5 and Luftwaffe Sicily, Luftflotte 4 alone has a large number of bombers (64); but of these, 1 Geschwader (at present 18 aircraft) is to be sent to Rhodes. Of the numerically strongest Italian Luftflotte at home (Luftflotte 2 with 4 bomber Geschwader), 3 bomber Geschwader are refitting; of these, 1 bomber Geschwader is supposed to be ready for operations in the middle of September. Of five fighter Gruppen two are out of action. Up to the present, the Italian Supreme Command has openly no intention of posting the few formations which are to be released for Sicily. Thus, as we said before, a fresh occupation of Sicily by formations of the German Luftwaffe is desired. By means of these, the aircraft of III./KG z.b.V.1 operating daily between Sicily and Africa could be protected. But on the other hand, further reinforcement of the British forces in Malta and planned attacks on aircraft belonging to III./KG z.b.V.1 must be expected. Previously, traffic belonging to III./KG z.b.V.1 was our only safe communication with Africa.

The Italian Air Force in the Mediterranean had greater success to record when from July 22-24 it attacked the large convoy from Gibraltar to Egypt. Six merchant ships were sunk, and other ships were damaged. In this action, in which the Italian Air Force from Sardinia also took part, 167 aircraft took part on July 23 and 60 aircraft on July 24.

The Italian Air Force formations under the command of General Raffaelli (Pegasus Division) which are cooperating with Fliegerführer Afrika are very eager for battle. In speed and armament the Italian fighters are inferior to the latest British fighters, but the greater experience of the Italians makes up for this disadvantage. As before, the main weight of battle in the air rests on the German formations. In the period covered, the following targets were attacked:

/Tobruk:

Tobruk:	By Fliegerführer Afrika 39 times by the Italians 16 times,
Mersa Matruh:	By Fliegerführer Afrika twice by the Italians 19 times,
Fuka and other airfields:	By Fliegerführer Afrika 6 times by the Italians 15 times.

Attacks by the German and Italian Air Forces were mainly made on British warships and supply ships on the route from Egypt to Tobruk. This supply takes place in such a way that the ships leave the Sidi Barrani area after nightfall and, after two hours halt in Tobruk, reach their base at dawn. In spite of our having posted formations to Gambut, it is frequently difficult for the Stukas to reach these ships in sufficient daylight. Moreover, the ships generally sail under strong fighter cover. In the period covered, however, the German and Italian Air Forces succeeded in sinking 7 ships and damaging 21 ships; of these, the Germans sank 3 and damaged 9, while the Italians sank 4 and damaged 12. In battles over North Africa, German aircraft shot down 34 British aircraft and Italian aircraft shot down 22 British planes. In the same period in the Mediterranean area, the enemy shot down 13 German and 25 Italian aircraft.

After the close of the battle for Syria, things were relatively quiet in the Eastern Mediterranean area (between Egypt, Cyprus-Syria and Palestine). Apart from some Italian attacks on Cyprus, none of the Air Forces took part in large operations. The Luftwaffe attacked Alexandria 5 times with a total of 72 aircraft and the Suez Canal Zone 14 times with a total of 157 aircraft. We did not succeed in permanently crippling the ports and the Canal; British anti-aircraft defences have been strengthened.

In accordance with arrangements, the Italian Air Force took no part in these attacks on Alexandria and the Suez Canal because their aircraft were inferior to the heavy enemy fighter and flak defences in speed, armament and range. For the same reason, the Italian Air Force generally makes its reconnaissance from Rhodes only as far as the coast at the Nile Delta.

That combined operations cannot take place is all the more to be regretted because the Italians generally put up a much better show when they are working in immediate cooperation with the Germans.

It should be considered whether it would not be better to send the Italian formations on Rhodes to Sicily; that is, of course, with the exception of those formations which are absolutely necessary to protect Rhodes and the sea traffic in the Aegean.

In the numbers of aircraft used, Italian reconnaissance in the Mediterranean may be considered adequate; but it lacks on the one hand unified direction by a single High Command, and on the other, sufficient accuracy. For this reason, visual reconnaissance is frequently useless for bombing operations; or else it requires a second examination.

Just as frequently, reports coming in from the Italian Intelligence Service, which are partly founded on information from unreliable agents are inaccurate, exaggerated or incorrect; these give rise to the danger of unnecessary anxiety and wrong measures.

The Italian wireless listening service is also in its infancy. An improvement can only be expected if this service is put under German command or if the personnel are taught by German instructors.

In the period covered, a slight but by no means adequate improvement can be claimed in the supply situation for the Luftwaffe; the latter is a decisive factor in the defence and pursuit of operations in North Africa.

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The arrival of the steamer "Ossag" in Benghazi at the end of August and the Luftwaffe's increased share in coastal shipping between Tripoli and Benghazi meant that fuel supplies for 1-2 months could be built up in the Cyrenaica area. Supplies of motors and ammunition are at present adequate. Work done by the Field Workshops Unit have made a considerable improvement in repair facilities and have increased the formations' operational readiness.

The setting up of a second tank store (to take 7 million litres) at Tripoli about the middle of September and of another of the same size at Benghazi about the beginning of December, 1941, will create so much storage space that fuel can be stored in preparation for several months fighting.

In the course of September there will be a slight improvement in the rather strained vehicle situation after purchases made in Italy and the allocation of RLM-IE/K (a total of about 150 vehicles); that is if we succeeded in bringing the vehicles to North Africa without great loss. In addition to these, we will have a certain number of vehicles bought in Tunis; but these are not entirely satisfactory.

But with the heavy wear and tear on vehicles caused by the desert sand, these new vehicles cannot solve the transport problem from the ports of discharge to the front. To solve our difficulties, especially in the light of the expected battle, it is most necessary to bring some columns from Germany. After the imminent posting of a Staffel of III./KG z.b.V.1 to Patras, important supplies for Africa will be brought in increased quantities via Greece on the air route to Cyrenaica.

Even if the facilities for present supplies given by III./KG z.b.V.1 are still adequate, it is still to be considered that in the event of an offensive which will necessitate the posting of other formations to North Africa, reinforcement of transport units will also be necessary.

Despite the fact that there is no immediate threat to supplies, it must be pointed out that if shipping losses and the delay in the movements of convoys and single ships continue at the same level as before, a very severe supplies crisis must occur relatively soon. This is because Italian freight space which is sunk cannot be adequately replaced and also because air transport can never be a complete substitute for sea transport.

German and Italian shipping losses in the  
Mediterranean from July 11 to August 31, 1941

D = German ship

	Central Mediterranean	North African coast	Eastern Mediterranean
Sunk by mines	2 tankers 1 steamer 1 motor ship (fire)	1 motor ship	1 tanker
Damaged by mines	nil	nil	nil
Sunk by submarines	6 steamers 1 motor yacht 1 motor ship 1 coastal defence ship	3 steamers 1 motor yacht 1 tug 2 motor ships	2 motor yachts 1 steamer
Damaged by submarines	2 cruisers 1 1 tanker 1 steamer	2 minesweepers	nil
Sunk by the R.A.F.	1 steamer (D) 4 steamers 2 E-boats	1 motor yacht 1 gunboat 2 magnetic minesweepers 2 smaller motor yachts	1 U-boat (SCALPA) missing
Damaged by the R.A.F.	1 steamer 2 steamers (D)	1 motor minesweeper 3 steamers 2 tankers	nil

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Same as for Translation VII/64