

El Agheila to Tripoli

“ON to Tripoli !” was the battle cry as the Western Desert campaign moved toward Christmas on the calendar and Sirte on the map. By the 20th of December Rommel had retreated west of the town of Sirte and the Eighth Army was well on the way towards its immediate goal. The roads of Tripolitania were rapidly being cleared of mines and booby traps to allow the main Allied forces to be brought up more rapidly and more safely.

At this time Rommel was believed to have at his disposal roughly 60,000 troops and about 100 tanks. The German air forces were thought to number 120 aircraft in Tripolitania ; 640 more in Sicily, Italy, Sardinia and Tunisia, plus 205 in Crete. The Italian air forces were believed to be distributed as follows : 300 in Tripolitania, 205 in Sardinia, 355 in Sicily, Pantellaria and Tunisia, 110 in the Dodecanese and 70 in Greece.

In Tripolitania part of the MC-202 fighter force previously in the forward area had been transferred to Castel Benito, outside of Tripoli, presumably to provide defense against the impending raid of our heavy bombers.

To the bleak, windswept landing ground at Gambut in the Western Desert there came on December 19 something new under the African sun in the way of Liberators. Painted a light green instead of the familiar desert brown of their Ninth Air Force brothers, the 93rd Heavy Bombardment Group roared in from England to help out for a while with the business of blasting the Axis out of the Middle East.

For General Pat Timberlake of the bomber command the arrival offered an extremely pleasant reunion. In command of the visitors was Colonel William Timberlake, his brother. With General Brereton, the two brothers sat down briefly to talk business, and during the ensuing two months before they were called back to England, the 93rd dropped a goodly poundage of bombs on Axis targets strewn all the way from Tunis to Naples and south to Palermo.

The visitors operated under what could not be described as exactly ideal conditions. Originally scheduled to perform only a limited number of missions before their return, the weeks dragged by and found them still at it, with no departure date in sight. With them the 93rd had brought only bare necessities, such as could be carried in their aircraft. Ground personnel was nil, or almost so. Clothing, while adequate, did not include many changes. Supplies were the same.

Borrowing what they needed from the Ninth Air Force, and going without a certain number of things which could not be borrowed, such as natty uniforms to wear on leave in Cairo, the 93rd got along admirably. They soon had a reputation in the Western Desert for setting one of the best tables in the business, and for that reason attracted many visitors. When Colonel Timberlake and his men took off for the last time from the landing ground at Gambut, they left behind a lot of goodwill and admiration, and took with them to England plenty of brand new shiny decorations.

The Ninth Air Force was becoming a factor to be reckoned with. By the end of December, the tiny organization which helped out so gallantly at Alamein and along the coastal road to El Agheila, numbered 12,779 officers and enlisted men.

On December 22 another ship had arrived at Port Tewfik. This time it brought several very necessary and long awaited additions to the air force administrative set up, as well as additional service personnel.

On this ship were the rear echelon of Headquarters Squadron, Ninth US Air Force ; Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Ninth Fighter Command ; Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Ninth Air Service Command. Of these, the Ninth Fighter promptly trekked out to a patch of desert near Alexandria to await orders. Meanwhile they acclimatized themselves in a particularly rugged fashion.

Desert life was strong diet to this group of headquarters personnel. For lack of facilities tents were crowded and officers stood in mess lines like enlisted men. Mess lines were serpentine and spread out with five yard intervals between men so as to present poor target. With GI rations in hand not more than two men were allowed to sit together on the sand. Here was their first taste of war on its tender edges, still far behind the lines.

The pitching of tents and the digging of slit trenches added touches of realism and blisters to book-keeping hands. No sooner were tents pitched, occupants settled and trenches dug than officers from Cairo flew in ; took a look and ordered wider dispersal. Trenches aren't easily moved.

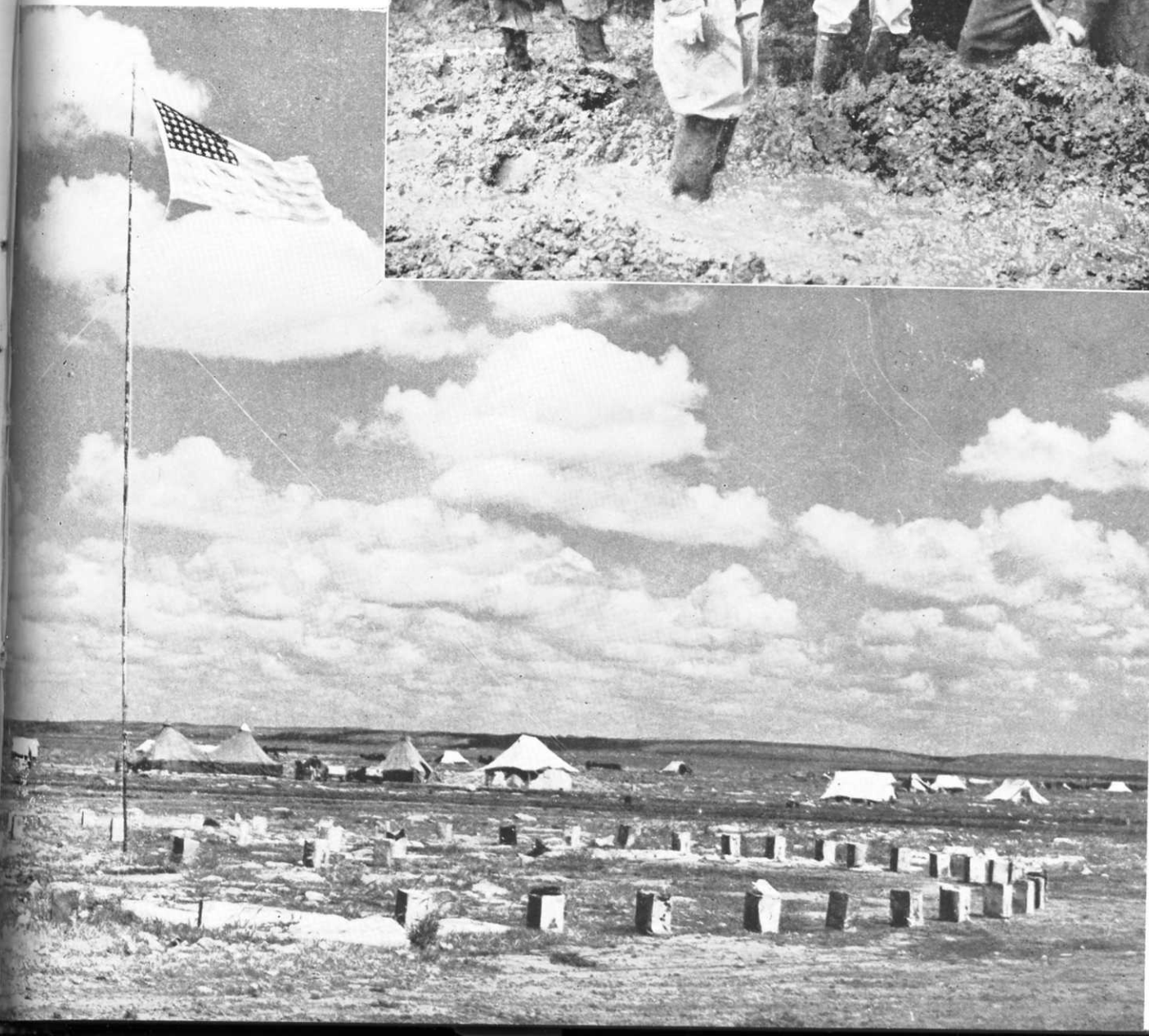
This was the situation when Christmas came to Landing Ground 91. Services were held in spite of the order against grouping in the open and while the bulk of the camp population raised their voices heavenward in song some of the more practical souls remained in half completed slit trenches and drove their picks and shovels toward hell. Two myths of the desert were exploded for the uninitiated. The night could be bitterly cold in December and January and the sand was only a coating as discovered in digging in the brick-like soil underneath. The warmer British battledress and extra blankets had to be issued to officers and enlisted men alike.

The sand storms began late in January. Clouds of choking, blinding dust whipped along by a high wind descended on the camp. Visibility was reduced to a few feet and it became difficult to find anything but the mess tent and little use to find it.

Sand in the Spinach is an American institution but dust in the water, on the spam, on the bread—that belongs to the Western Desert. With the storm at its height and the atmosphere

Right: Digging a "Lib" out of the mire at an African Aerodrome

Below: Typical desert camp of Tactical Units



a dense, brown cloud the heavier sand flows along the ground in rivulets covering or partly covering everything and drifting to the windward like fine snow. It fills slit trenches and drainage ditches and weights down tentage. The rule is to stay inside a battened-down tent as much as possible. Gas masks are frequently used. No matter how the cracks are chinked the dust gets in and even finds its way inside tightly closed trunk lockers. It knows no bar.

The water shortage situation was also novel to the American of multiple bath-tub homes and push button existence. Steel helmets rendered more service to those headquarters soldiers as basin and bath-tub than they were likely to render as protection.

The desert round about was littered with the debris of battle from the Alamein stand, tempting American ingenuity, and tents soon took on some of the synthetic comforts of home with oil cans for seats and containers and wrecked plane parts fashioned into various gadgets, some useful, some not.

Dust could even hide rank insignia and in the British battledress worn by all it was often difficult to distinguish between officers and men at saluting distance. This points to the experience of Sgt. Worden Lovell, American Army photographer. Sgt. Lovell was in a hurry. He was also lost.

He was driving his jeep along a whisper of a road in the Gabes area, at the start of the El Agheila advance, anxiously trying to contact an advance unit of the Eighth Army. Rounding a turn on two wheels, he came upon a small group in British battledress. The jeep ground to a halt. Calling to one of them, the sergeant asked the location of the unit he had been seeking. Let's have the rest of the story in the sergeant's own words.

"Instead of answering my question, he asked me what I wanted to know that for. Here I was in a helluva rush and in no mood to carry on a long conversation. I told him so pretty plainly, I guess—and with a few personal remarks, demanded the information. He talked back to me just about as plain and walked away.

"I happened to see a British photographer whom I knew standing nearby and remarked to him that that fellow must be a sergeant the way he talked to me. 'You're wrong there,' he replied, 'that's General Montgomery'."

Most of the Air Service Command and Air Force personnel went to work immediately in Cairo. Some of them were reassigned to other units which, for example might at the time have been short on typists and long on file clerks, or *vice versa*.

The other big incoming unit, the 17th Air Depot Group, set up shop at Heliopolis Depot near Cairo to await customers.

RED CROSS CLUB

To help keep the swelling volume of American soldiers in the Middle East happy the American Red Cross on December 24 officially opened its main club in Cairo. Formerly the Grand Hotel, one of the city's leading hostelrys, the new facility was, in the words of several of its visitors, "really something."

Complete with a contingent of hostesses imported from the states, the club began to turn out meals, arrange tour parties to the Pyramids, to Luxor, Memphis and elsewhere in the Delta. Word soon got around that a GI soldier could—all for free—spend his leave at the hotel and sleep in a real bed with an inner spring mattress. He could attend dances at which suitable girl friends were provided, and most important of all, the place was run for him, and him exclusively. “Pardon Sir,” says the big M.P. at the door, “but officers aren’t allowed in here you know.”

Present on opening day was Lieutenant General Frank M. Andrews, commanding United States Forces in the Middle East. He said he thought the Red Cross had done a damn good job. So did the boys.

Christmas was many different things to the men of the Ninth Air Force in 1942. It depended on where you were, and what their job was. To some, in Cairo, it meant a big dinner at Shepherds or some other hotel with the gang, or an invitation to a private home. Not in fact a much different Christmas than that of many officers and men in camps throughout the United States.

In the desert it was different. There were no combat operations and there was a corresponding lull in other business, but force of long habit kept most of the men doing something or other constructive anyhow. As at Thanksgiving time there was turkey, and there was even in some cases wine, purchased by men on leave in Cairo and since hoarded jealously against just such an occasion. There were the usual chapel services, and altogether the men in the desert, with their usual buoyancy, made Christmas, 1942 quite an occasion.

There was still another kind of Christmas enjoyed by personnel of the Ninth Air Force, however. Christmas in the hospital. The 38th General, just outside Cairo, is a big and modern institution which boasts everything from electric bedpan washers to the last word in a Frigidaire morgue. A great percentage of its patients are Ninth Air Force men, recovering from everything from broken necks to sinus trouble, both occupational ailments rather common among flyers.

There was a tree in every ward. There were presents from the Red Cross. For those who could take it, there was a big dinner. And at night there was carol singing outside the wards.

To his men throughout the Middle East, General Brereton sent this message: “We, with our gallant allies, find ourselves far from our homeland on Christmas Day. No one of us could say with truth that we enjoy the reality of being separated from our families, our friends and neighbors. However, I know I express the thoughts of every officer and enlisted man of the Ninth Air Force when I say with a real and extreme sense of satisfaction that our purpose in being here justifies our temporary absence from our native land.

“By our presence here we have shown our acceptance of the fact that only through allied victory in this war can ‘peace on earth and goodwill towards men’ be restored, and it is this successful conclusion we seek to insure, freedom for all that we may celebrate our future Christmases with our loved ones.”

PATROLS REACH SIRTE

Back at the front, Rommel was still moving west during the last days of December. Allied light armored patrols were already beyond Sirte, pushing the retreating enemy back. Near Buerat the Axis forces dug in with the apparent intention of making a stand, but aerial photos showed that the line was not developed to any great extent, and it was the opinion of the allied high command that the engagement there would be, if anything, a delaying action.

At the same time Allied air power was closing in on the remaining Axis supply ports in North Africa from three directions, hammering Tunis, Bizerta, Sousse and Sfax with devastating effect.

Since early the same month, when the incessant pounding of heavy bombers made the great supply base of Tripoli virtually unusable to Rommel's forces, Ninth Bomber Command Liberators had concentrated their efforts on the Tunisian harbors. Meanwhile British aircraft from Malta continued to strike at the same targets, as did British and American aircraft from the North African bases of the 12th Air Force.

The sweep of long range Allied fighters from North Africa as far east as Tripoli and heavy bombers, from the Middle East as far west as Tunis must have been, to the Axis, confusing.

Since December 15, when B-24's of the Ninth made their first Tunisian attack, one termed a "perfect mission" on the railway repair yards at Sfax, up to the successful raid on Sousse December 29, Bomber Command heavies had pounded the North African ports almost every other day, meeting only slight resistance from enemy anti-aircraft fire and token opposition from enemy fighters. Axis strategists had obviously expected all heavy bomber raids on these objectives to come from the west, and were not prepared to meet them from the east.

The December 29 attack on Sousse gave the first indication that the Axis was no longer surprised by these blows from the east. Seven enemy fighters were on hand over the target to intercept our bombers, and two of them were shot down. None of our aircraft was lost.

In the Sfax attack numerous direct hits by big bombs completely destroyed the railroad repair yards. Between that raid and the Sousse attack, when direct hits caused one ship to explode, set fire to two others and started large fires in warehouse and barrack areas, Ninth Air Force B-24's dropped nearly 200 tons of high explosive on the Tunisian bases.

"At the present we're seeking out the enemy's supplies and supply installations," said General Strahm, Chief of Staff. "We're making it tough for him to get anything in and we'll make it tougher for him to get anything out when that time comes."

New year's day and the day following produced a rather less kindly celebration than Christmas. Bringing in 1943 the way it should arrive, 15 Liberators of the 98th Group dumped high explosives on Axis shipping in the harbor of Tunis, damaged the turning basin and a nearby railroad junction. They also shot down an ME-109 on the way home, "just for luck," as one of the gunners announced later.

The next day, B-25 mediums of the 12th Group joined with Liberators of the 376th Group to pull one of the most important, best timed and most accurate raids so far in the campaign.

Their target was the Axis airfield at Heraklion, Crete, whose planes had been giving the Allies a certain amount of trouble for some time. The idea was to give Crete a taste of what the Germans had for some time been giving Malta.

Taking off from a secret assembly point, the B-24's were the first over the target. After they had made their bomb run and started for home the mediums came in at a much lower altitude to polish off the job and cover anything which was still left undestroyed.

The man who planned the raid was Lt.-Colonel Alfred F. Kalberer of Lafayette, Ind. He had been an airline pilot in America, and later became chief pilot of KLM Dutch Airplanes.

Colonel Kalberer had led the first raid by American planes operating from the Middle East, against the Rumanian oil fields, and also the second, the highly successful attack on the Italian fleet.

The colonel and his pilots fooled the Axis this time by coming in much higher than was expected. As the Liberators swept over the target the bursts of their bombs on the landing strip of the big airfield far below were clearly visible. Not a single stretch was left in usable condition. Several fighter planes apparently attempting to take off to intercept the bombers were destroyed before they could get into the air.

The mediums, following the heavies in, finished up the job by wrecking the dispersal areas around the drome, but they didn't get off as easily as the Liberators. Although one of the enemy planes was shot down, two of the B-25's were also lost, forced down at sea on their way home by motor failures.

In all, it was estimated that 20 enemy fighters, plus several bombers, were destroyed on the ground as the result of the raid. In addition the landing field was so badly wrecked that there was little danger of its being used for a long time to come by German and Italian aircraft bent on attacking the Middle East.

A dramatic aftermath of that raid did not come to light until later when the crew of one of the medium bombers lost on the way home arrived in Cairo for a rest after spending three days at sea in one of the worst Mediterranean storms in years.

The first 25 hours they spent in a rubber lifeboat, the remaining two days in an RAF rescue launch which was itself disabled and almost capsized.

"When the airplane hit we plunged right into a wave 15 feet high and got an awful jolt," Lieut. Monroe P. Schwartz of Philadelphia, the navigator, said. "We all managed to get out, however, and to get into our rubber boat. We were tossed around and never thought we could make it until we were picked up. That night the air went out of one side of our boat and the valve froze so we couldn't blow it up again. Then it began to leak."

"The next morning a searching plane spotted us and dropped chocolate, along with a note saying that help was on the way. It wasn't until that afternoon that the launch found us. They pulled us aboard and we fell exhausted on the deck. They wrapped us in blankets but then the storm got worse and the launch was tossed about almost as bad as our rubber boat

had been. The rudder was torn off and we drifted helplessly. We all thought the boat would be overturned but we finally reached shore about 200 miles from where we should have put in." There were seven men in the party, including an army newsreel photographer who said his greatest disappointment was that he couldn't take pictures of it all.

The Royal Air Force sea rescue organization to which the crew of this medium bomber and several other Ninth Air Force pilots owe their lives is a highly competent, risk-taking group of men.

Twin engined Hudsons, Warwicks and Wellingtons are used as "spotters" which patrol the Mediterranean in search of overdue aircraft which are believed to be in a certain area. Once the survivors are discovered, a radio message is sent back giving the bearings.

The rescue itself is carried out either by high speed launches or amphibian aircraft equipped with emergency medical supplies and plenty of warm blankets.

Air-Sea rescue facilities were first made available in the eastern Mediterranean in October, 1941, and since that time have rescued 237 persons, including 16 American flyers.

By a coincidence, the crews of the first two American aircraft to land in the sea were rescued by one of the RAF's American built launches. The second of these was the one involving the crew of the B-25 which was forced down on its way back from Crete.

BEURAT OFFENSIVE

The Eighth Army offensive which aimed at driving Rommel's forces out of Tripoli got underway on the Beur line at 7.15 on the morning of Friday, January 15. Heralded by a three day air offensive, directed mainly against the airports, harbors and communication lines of the enemy, the push extended from the coast line to the tip of the southern flank northwest of Bungem. The British pushed a heavy wedge into the enemy right flank which threatened eventually to outflank and cut off his retreat along the coast. He was therefore forced to withdraw.

In the preliminary air attacks, the medium bombers of the Ninth Air Force were out in strength over the battle area. Backed up by the RAF and the South African Air Force, the main target was the airport of Bir Dufan, where over a hundred German and Italian planes were based. Motor transport and troop concentrations in the Ghedahia area were also bombed and strafed by pilots of the 57th Group operating as fighter bombers, and the Spitfires of the RAF.

In the fierce aerial battles which developed during the course of these raids at least eight Axis fighters were shot down, and about a dozen probably destroyed.

The heavy bombers of the Ninth meanwhile switched the weight of their offensive from the Tunisian ports to targets nearer at hand, attacking Tauorga, Churgia and Misurata, as well as the port and road junctions of Tripoli itself.

Even night time brought no respite for the enemy, as his westbound traffic between Zuara and Tripoli was strafed with cannon and machine-gun fire after dark.

Aerial reconnaissance indicated that Rommel was pulling back his non-mobile forces in preparation for another general withdrawal, and the battle which was expected to develop around Beurat was not as violent as anticipated.

In an eight day offensive, the Eighth Army pushed Rommel's forces back more than 248 miles, from Beurat, wiping almost the whole of Tripolitania clean of Axis opposition.

The Desert Fox again escaped with the majority of his forces intact, withdrawing each night under cover of darkness.

The final attack by Ninth Air Force bombers had been as recently as midnight, the twenty-second, when B-25's of the 12th Group attacked important road junctions in the city.

For Italy it was the end of her African empire. For the Eighth Army and the men of the Allied air forces supporting it, it was but the end of one phase and the beginning of a new and final one, destined to eliminate the Axis armies from all of Africa.

It is well to remember, too, that the German and Italian armies retreating along the coast to Tunisia were but a remnant of the force that pushed its way invincibly into Egypt, and then failed with victory in its grasp.

In the long and costly retreat so far, Rommel lost more than 700 airplanes on the ground and in the air, plus 380 of his tanks. The killed, wounded and prisoners ran into the tens of thousands.

His combat strength at Tripoli was estimated at 20,000 German troops and perhaps 15,000 Italians, whereas at El Alamein there were 46,000 Germans and 47,000 Italians.

The first American to enter Tripoli was, justly enough, a flyer from the 57th Fighter Group of the Ninth Air Force, who had been shot down in aerial combat over the desert and found his way to a British advance unit. He rode into the fallen African metropolis with them, in a General Sherman tank, also made in America.

He was Lieutenant Richard W. Kimball, of Minneapolis, Minn. His story began three days before the occupation, on January 20, when his squadron was ordered out in a dive-bombing mission. Their objective was enemy motor transport on the highway from Tarhuna to Castel Benito.

"Just as we dove on the target," Kimball said afterwards, "I saw four ME-109's patrolling the road. Before we could get out of the way they were on us from the rear. I saw one of our boys get one of them. Looking down I saw another slightly below me and climbing. I turned in and raked him across with a three-quarter burst. He turned on his back and went down in flames. The others took off. I looked around and couldn't find the rest of my squadron on account of the clouds. I had already unloaded my bombs on the road before the fight started, so I decided to head for home."

"Suddenly I found myself being shot at from behind by another ME-109 which put three bursts into my tail and then pulled off. I was hit in the right shoulder and involuntarily jerked back the stick, momentarily losing control of the plane. I recovered and dove, under the impression that I had been hit by ack ack. I went through a cloud and came out in the clear."



Air Chiefs in the Desert :

Left to Right : AIR VICE MARSHAL A. CONINGHAM BRIGADIER-GENERAL A. C. STRICKLAND
LIEUTENANT-GENERAL FRANK M. ANDREWS

"The next thing I knew, I got four hits from a Breda gun, striking the engine, gas tank, rear fuselage and elevator. Although the ship was now on fire, I decided I'd better fly it as long as I could in the direction of home. I managed to keep in the air four or five minutes. Then the fire came through the floor of the cockpit and I thought I'd better bail out. I cut the switches, climbed out on the right wing and jumped. Just then the elevator came off and struck me over the right eye, knocking me unconscious.

"I came to after falling what I judged to be about a thousand feet, and pulled the rip cord twisting around in the air to see if the chute was opening. As a result I was head down when it did, and I got a terrific yank. As I descended I remember looking at my watch and trying to plan what I should do when I landed. Safely on the ground, I started walking east, and pretty soon came to a military camp. I was afraid it might be the enemy until I saw some General Sherman tanks, and some jeeps, and I knew then it must be British. They explained that they didn't have anything going to the rear, where our landing ground was. Everything was going forward, and wouldn't I like to go with them. I said I would, and the next morning we all rode into Tripoli together."

ARMY ENTERS TRIPOLI

The entry of the Eighth Army into Tripoli, while technically not a part of the history of the Ninth Air Force, nevertheless represents one of the objectives for which it fought, and one of the achievements in which it took just pride.

The first Americans officially in the city were actually not air force men, or even army men. They were two drivers of the American Field Service Ambulance Corps, Edward Munce of Harrisburg, Pa., and William Van Cleef of Woodbridge, Conn.

These two men, dive-bombed by Stukas eight times between Benghazi and Tripoli, always near the front during battles doing their vital job of evacuating the wounded, entered the city with the 11th Hussars, still close to the front.

Thoroughly expecting to be ambushed by Axis anti-tank guns, as the Hussars had been the day before, everybody was suprised when there was no opposition. The only living things to be seen in the light of the early dawn was an occasional cat or dog, and a few camels which some Bedouins were racing towards the city apparently in order to get in on any loot which might be available.

"We entered the main square at about 5.30 a.m.," said Munce. "It was a couple of hours before anybody else arrived and still pretty dark. We saw people timidly opening and closing the shutters of their apartment houses as if they were wondering what was going to happen. Then the Highlanders came in, sitting on tanks with their pipers playing. Five of the pipers then got down and did their traditional march past, blowing away for all they were worth as functionaries of the Italian police arrived to receive the British high command and hand over the keys to the city."

Except for occasional airmail letters the residents of Tripoli had been largely out of touch with Italy for the past several months. There had been no passenger ships operating for months because of the vigilance of our fleet and air force.

About 400 Italians had been evacuated from the city during its last weeks in Axis hands by airplane. Those remaining were tremendously keyed up by the bombings of Tripoli harbor, and mail which they had received from home telling of the devastation of Italian cities by U.S. Air Force and RAF bombings.

In addition the greater part of Tripolitanian residents were long weary of the war, partly in view of the shortage of coal, which had curtailed agricultural development as the electrically operated irrigation system only functioned part time.

General Montgomery requested the collaboration of Vice Governor Francesco San Marco in administering the newly conquered territory, which was promised. The Vice Governor arranged for several hundred Italian government employees to remain in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica under his jurisdiction to keep the wheels of administration turning, and the occupation proceeded quite smoothly and with a minimum of friction.

The story of the long march from Alamein to Tripoli, and the part played therein by the Ninth U.S. Air Force has an interesting sidelight in an account of the salute exchanged at about the time of the fall of Tripoli between two American "soldiers," one on the fighting front and the other on the production front at home.

It began in a west coast airplane factory where an inspector, E. F. Custenborder of San Diego, Cal., completing the final check up of a heavy bomber which had just rolled off the line wrote "OK" and then as an afterthought added his name and address.

In due time the big bomber reached the Middle East and was assigned to Lt. Paul D. Pestel of Columbus, O., pilot of a Ninth Air Force heavy bombardment group. The combination must have been a good one, because early in January at a certain desert air base General Brereton awarded Lt. Pestel the Distinguished Flying Cross for "extraordinary achievement in aerial flight."

The plane, nicknamed "Lil De Icer" after a well known comic strip, withstood anti-aircraft fire and pursuit, and soon led the squadron both in number of missions flown and combat hours. One day the crew chief found the inspector's inscription on the fuselage and letters were exchanged between commander and inspector.

Wrote Custenborder: "I am a field mechanic and have six men working under me. We go from nose to tail of the ship, making it ready for flight. You have no idea how proud we feel when she makes her shakedown and the pilots come back and OK her. My crew have a top "E" for their work. I took your letter and snapshot down to the plant, and it went the rounds from the janitor to the big boss. My crew feel like they are now your "angels" or something."

FLYING COMMANDOS

The arrival of the Allied armies in Tripoli and the refitting of the harbor there shortly afterwards so that supplies could be moved up in bulk by sea both for air and ground forces also provided a slight breather for the planes and crews of the Air Service Command or more specifically, the 316th Troop Carrier Group.

As pointed out previously, these hard working and comparatively anonymous airmen swung into action about Thanksgiving time, and how indispensable they had been was a lot clearer when Tripoli had fallen and an accurate appraisal of all contributing factors in the victory became possible.

By the last of January the transport fliers had a nickname of their own, bestowed by American war correspondents who had often ridden with them to and from the front. It was "the flying commandos."

Considering their accomplishments one high ranking Ninth Air Force officer put it this way: "They've worked like hell. More than half the men have been flying over a hundred hours a month. They worked overtime without complaint and they've been flying the tails off those transport ships.

"I know they're young. But they've learned a flying technique that's marvelous. And they share work. When it's time to load or unload a plane the pilots, crew chief and radio operators all pitch in to help if necessary. Even some of their Colonels and Majors have calloused hands. I've seen many officers roll up sleeves to give a private a lift with heavy cargo that had to be moved in a hurry."

From the ninth of December to January 24, the day after the fall of Tripoli, the transports carried more than 3,000,000 pounds of cargo including more than 500 thousand gallons of gasoline. In addition, they evacuated more than 1,400 casualties from the forward areas. They carried jeeps, tractors, rations, bombs, ammunition, water, engines, plane parts and on one occasion Thanksgiving turkeys.

During the advance from Alamein the "commandos" enabled the air forces to keep pace with Rommel's retreat. An hour after an advanced landing ground was made ready for occupation by Allied air forces, the transports would soar in with bombs, gasoline and oil.

War correspondents in the desert agreed that one of the most amazing sights of the campaign was to see the big DC-3's come hurtling over the desert just behind the German retreat. The pilots literally skimmed the sand, flying low as protection against enemy aircraft.

One afternoon at a landing ground west of Sirte a Stuka raiding party came diving out of the sun to bomb an Allied landing field. Our own bomb line was only 35 miles ahead. Before the smoke and dust of the attack had cleared the first DC-3 came roaring in with badly needed supplies.

On another occasion during the advance on Tripoli, bulldozers worked all night amidst enemy artillery fire to level a landing field torn up by the enemy, and shortly before dawn the first Ninth Air Force transport plane poured in supplies enough to allow the 57th Fighter Group to operate against the guns which had been doing the shelling.

Several of the big ships have been damaged by inadvertently touching off land mines on recently occupied landing grounds, but the men who fly them become used to taking calculated risks, and during the entire campaign up to Tripoli they lost only three aircraft on operational missions. This record is the more remarkable when it is realized that the majority of the pilots graduated from flying schools as recently as August. They had six weeks training during Texas army maneuvers, then came directly to the Middle East.

Under a war department reorganization most of the sergeant pilots flying these ships later became "pilot officers" and many of them were elevated to second lieutenancies.

The shortage of aviation and truck fuel had become a standing joke among the officers and men of the Afrika Korps, although a rather tragic one for the Axis cause. A captured German officer said that Rommel's war cry was: "Auf zum Angriff! Spirit ist da! (Forward to the Attack! Petrol has arrived!)"

Beyond El Agheila the 12th Group moved forward and took up an estimated one third of the medium and light bomber task. They carried that portion of the load on through to the fall of Tripoli.

The record of the fighter pilots had been perhaps the most colorful contribution to the Allied air offensive. After Alamein and during the long retreat along the coast they destroyed upwards of sixty enemy aircraft against the loss of less than half that many of their own. Their total of probably destroyed and damaged enemy aircraft was equally as good.

The 57th Group with its attached pilots of what was later to be the almost equally famous 79th Group, took part in every phase of the offensive, moving forward in repeated jumps to occupy new landing fields on the heels of the enemy before the dust settled.

The percentage of the load carried grew steadily, reaching peaks of one-fourth, and then one-third of the total daily fighter sorties made.

Summing up, General Breerton had this to say of the part played by his men from Alamein to Tripoli:

"I feel that we have carried a logical share of the load and that we have struck a telling blow against the enemy. Without the complete cooperation of the Royal Air Force and without our complete cooperation with them, air power could not have played the vital role it has in this battle. Tripoli would not now be in Allied hands. I am proud to command the Ninth Air Force, and extremely proud of our association with the Royal Air Force. Together we shall move forward to even greater successes."

RECAPITULATION

Cumulative figures through January 23.

BOMBER ACTIVITY

<i>Group</i>	<i>Missions</i>	<i>Sorties</i>	<i>Bombs in Tons</i>
376th	87	658	1224
98th	106	677	1099
12th	109	763	876
93rd (since Dec.)	13	147	296
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TOTALS :	315	2245	3495
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FIGHTER ACTIVITY

The tally for the 57th Fighter Group up to January 23 was as follows : 3,244 sorties on all kinds of missions ; 84 aircraft destroyed, 17 aircraft probably destroyed, 31 aircraft damaged.