Second PHASE MAP

Oct. 23 to Dec. 14

LEGEND

AXIS → ← 8th ARMY

AREA COVERED

0 100 200 300
SCALE OF MILES

OCCUPIED NOV. 21st

RETAKEN NOV. 13th

RETREAT DEC. 14th

SARDINIA
ROME
Naples
Taranto
TYRRHENIAN SEA
SICILY
MALTA
TIRANA
ALBANIA
GREECE
IONIAN SEA
ATHENS
AEGEAN SEA
ISLANDS
CRETE
CYPRUS
BIZERTA
TUNIS
Enfidaville
Kairouan
Sousse
Fondouk
Sfax
Gabes
Mareth
TUNISIA
TRIPOLI
Zuara
TRIPOLITANIA
Sirte
Gulf of Sirte
El Agheila
Beughazi
CYRENAICA
Tobruk
Alexandria
El Alamein
Qattara Depression
Port Said
Suez Canal
CAIRO
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
LIBYA
EGYPT

SGT. Nathan H. Glick

General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery

The Battle of El Alamein

NIGHT comes quickly in the Western Desert. On October 23, 1942, it spread like a cloak over the masses of men, guns and machines lying in readiness before the Alamein line.

Behind his minefields and his wire Rommel, the desert fox, was at bay. His lines extended from the Mediterranean Sea on the north to the militarily impassable Quatarra depression on the south, a distance of 28 miles. Seventy miles west the city of Alexandria lay quiet and sleeping—but not soundly.

In the center of the Axis line was a bulge, thrusting towards the positions of General Sir Bernard Law Montgomery's Eighth Army. The bulge had existed since August, marking the high tide of Axis fortunes in Africa. It had been created at the cost of two desperate attacks, the chief value of which had been to prove that further attacks were useless.

The German and Italian forces behind the line from Quattara to the sea consisted of the 15th and 21st Panzer divisions, the 90th Light Division and the 164th Infantry Division, all German, plus the Italian 20th, 21st and 10th Corps. Within the 21st Corps were included the Ariete and Littorio armored divisions.

The British Eighth Army comprised the 10th Corps, of which the 10th and 8th armored divisions were a part as well as the second New Zealand division ; the 13th corps, including the Seventh armored division, and the 30th corps, made up of the 51st Highlanders, the Fourth Indian division, the Ninth Australian division and the First South African division. At exactly 21.40 hours the night of the 23rd, the Eighth Army launched one of the greatest attacks in modern military history on the Axis forces.

"To break down a wall," Commander in Chief, General Sir Harold Alexander, had said, "one inserts a crowbar beneath it and pries a hole." This in effect is what was done.

To the accompaniment of an artillery barrage which exceeded in power any in World War I, the wall was breached.

Through the original hole, moved the infantry divisions, clearing minefields and opening a wider gap for the armor. The battle was joined, but as yet far from being won.

Behind the two great armies were the opposing air forces, and if the question of who rules the ground was yet to be decided there was no argument about who controlled the air.

In the preliminary estimate of the situation prepared by British GHQ, the comment was made, " Air strength will be vitally needed in the initial phases. The Allies enjoy superiority in the air. The Axis will suffer from numerical deficiency and from aviation fuel shortage. The enemy can reinforce its air strength from other fronts quickly but it cannot move supplies and fuel in a proportional scale for sustained, heavy activity."

Behind the battle lines were mustered 1,117 RAF aircraft and 164 war planes of the United States desert air force. Counting those based in Sardinia, Crete and the Dodecanese Islands, the Axis had available only 713 planes.

In the four days preceding the opening of the offensive the Allied air forces had made an average of over 700 sorties a day, softening up their prey. So important was the part they played that the date and hour of the great attack itself was made contingent on the time when air commanders could give assurance that the skies were already won.

So well were they won that on October 24 the Allied fighters and medium bombers concentrated most of their fury not on the Axis air force, but on the front line gun positions, tank groups and infantry positions of the defending Italo-German army.

It was here that the United States desert air force did some of its best work.

Hard hitting Mitchells of the 12th Medium Bomb Group, protected sometimes by Warhawks of the 57th Fighter Group, and sometimes by RAF Spitfires, dropped 96,000 pounds of bombs during the first day of the battle, while the fighters droned overhead guarding against enemy planes which seldom appeared. On several missions our flyers reported seeing no enemy aircraft at all, while on others Axis fighters were seen but refused combat. Only once did the Messerschmitts come down out of their usual seat in the sun to give combat, and then only briefly, without result.

In their wake the British and American pilots left wrecked tanks and trucks, blazing supply dumps and pock-marked landing grounds. To the Eighth Army, they were a big help. The next day, October 25, while slightly shorter in number of missions flown and pounds of bombs dropped, was long on victories.

In the face of gradually increasing air opposition, seven enemy fighters were shot down by the Allies, of which four were credited to the Americans.

One of the victors was a little known second lieutenant named Lyman Middleditch, of Waterwitch Club, Highlands, N.J. On that day " Middleditch of Waterwitch," as the cowling of his P-40 proclaimed, shot an ME-109 off the tail of one of his squadron mates and thence into the ground, chalking up the first of a series of victories which extended from Alamein to Cap Bon, to make him one of the leading aces of the Ninth U.S. Air Force.

AIR VICTORIES INCREASE

From Cairo meanwhile, General Brereton watched the antics of his eagle brood and found them good.

" I am extremely proud," the General said. " Veterans of two years and more of desert aerial warfare are praising the work of our fighter and bomber pilots. Those who were not seasoned combat flyers when the present fighting began are now operating like veterans.

They go out on every mission with a determination to find and destroy the enemy, and they are doing a good job of it.''

The victories meanwhile still mounted. While the Eighth Army was exploiting its preliminary successes on the ground and mopping up in the wake of the first narrow break through, the pilots of the 57th Group alone shot down 22 enemy aircraft. It took them five days and cost them two of their own ships. When the scores were added up on November 30, it stood as follows : 14 ME-109's, 4 MC-202's, 4 Fiat CR-42's.

To put an effective American period on the first phase of the battle, Middleditch on October 30 shot down three of Germany's best pursuit planes.

The former printer's devil who tried for three years to get into the air corps before he could make his blood pressure and his pulse jibe the way flight surgeons required, found himself in '' a whole skyfull of 109's,'' and picked out the nearest ones as his target.

These and other like exploits made good sense to General Strickland.

'' They have the stuff,'' the general said. '' They know the advantages and limitations of the airplanes they fly. They don't try to fight the Messerschmitt at his superior altitude, but lure him down to our altitude, fly rings around him and shoot him to pieces.''

By this time, Montgomery and his troops had bent the enemy's lines badly inwards, started to disorganize his armor, and placed a wedge between the panzer divisions on the north and those on the south. A German counter attack following intensive reconnaissance was expected, but it failed to materialize except for spasmodic probings at the advancing Allied columns. These probings, never in strength, constituted the last attempt by the Axis to take the initiative in the battle.

During the first four days the Allied air forces had averaged 811 sorties a day. At the first sign of any enemy armor concentrations which might have indicated counter attack, air force fighters and bombers smashed the formations.

During one particularly spectacular mission, medium bombers of the American 12th Group, in co-operation with British Bostons, dropped 80 tons of explosives within an area of six square miles.

On October 30 the communique said, '' There was no let up in Allied air support of ground activity. Numerous enemy fuel and supply dumps as well as motor transport were hit and set on fire.'' It was an old story, but a good one.

Further behind the enemy's lines things were also going well for the air force. Heavy bombers of the RAF and United States Liberators of the First Provisional Group on the night of October 25 plastered Tobruk harbor, burning a destroyer and exploding a tanker.

The story has been told by captured German officers that Rommel himself was standing on a hill behind the harbor watching that raid. The German commander had been losing tankers for some time. His supplies of aviation gas were running low. Too low, in fact, to allow him to operate what aircraft he had at maximum efficiency. A good share of these losses he could charge off to the US 1st Provisional's repeated raids on Benghazi and Tobruk, his two chief Mediterranean ports.

So Rommel watched while the tanker tried to weave its way out from under the hail of bombs bursting around it. The tanker almost made it. Almost, but not quite, because a direct hit from one of the last bombers over the target, sent it up in flames almost at the dockside. Irwin Rommel, the prisoner said, turned away quickly. "My last tanker," he said sadly.

Fuka, a small town located on the coastal road west of Alamein, next came in for a little special attention by the American air force. Site of a large Axis landing ground, its planes had been giving the Eighth Army some small trouble, and to the 57th Fighter Group went the task of doing something about it.

Attacking in waves, just before dawn, the Warhawks came in low over the sea from the north, made a sudden hop over the coastal ridge behind which lay the offending air field, and proceeded to rake it from one end to the other with machine gun fire.

The Germans were so completely surprised that they had no opportunity to get their anti-aircraft in action, and its effectiveness at the low altitude of the attack was dubious anyway. The defenders opened up with the usual array of pistols, Mausers, sub-machine guns and anything else near at hand, and actually did succeed in shooting down one of the P-40's, but it must have been slim consolation for the mass of over a dozen Axis planes left wrecked and burning on the ground.

" We really scrubbed it," commented one of the pilots later that day. " We are never going to have to go back."

On the thirtieth, the shape of things to come must have been abundantly clear to the Axis commanders. The Australians were advancing steadily westward on the north, and what had been a dent in the enemy's northern sector had now become very nearly a complete break through. The Allied air forces meanwhile whipped up their offensive to a record high of 729 sorties on the last day of the month. So far, they had destroyed 32 Axis aircraft, with a probable destruction of twenty-one more and damaged thirty-one. Losses stood at fourteen aircraft, of which three were American.

So began the last phase of the battle of Alamein. By November, 3 weakened from the steady battering of his armor and badly split, Rommel's resistance was beginning to crumble. An ever growing volume of traffic jammed the shore road westward through Sidi el Rahman and the tiny towns of Ghazal, Daba and Fuka.

Onto this crowded highway the RAF and the United States Desert Air Task Force shifted the main weight of their attacks. The 57th Group celebrated the beginning of the end by shooting down, on November 3, three German Me-109's and damaging several others on the way home from a hard day of bombing and strafing enemy troops and transports. There were no losses. By this time, enemy air activity had approached the vanishing point. They did attempt a couple of Stuka raids the same day, but no damage was done and one of the Stukas actually bombed his own infantry, so great by now was the confusion of position.

The third of November was also a big day for the Flying Fortresses of the former First Provisional Group now the 376th. In a broad daylight raid on Tobruk harbor, the B-17's left two Axis merchant vessels blazing hulks, and wrecked the docks by which they lay.

Including one of General Brereton's original squadrons brought with him from India, these big bombers made their attack without fighter escort, over a long route involving a deep penetration of enemy territory.

Over the target several ME-109's rose to meet them, only to see one of their number spin into the sea as the bombers cut loose with their machine guns. When still another ME started down smoking the enemy decided they had had enough, and the bombing run proceeded unhindered.

Later reconnaissance showed that in addition to the destruction of the two merchantmen, at least half of the jetty had been blown away and a nearby fuel installation consumed by flames.

The victory made Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder of the RAF very happy indeed. He messaged General Brereton : " Glad if you would convey my hearty congratulations to the First Provisional Group on the good bag at Tobruk, which is especially valuable at present critical stage of operations.

The towns of Fuka and Daba fell on November 5, and the Axis ground forces, now in full retreat, deserted desert tracks completely for the faster but more vulnerable route furnished by the paved coastal road, a decision which would have been costly indeed had it not been for the rains which came on the sixth, hampering Allied air activity for the first time since the beginning of the offensive.

On the fifth of November the Eighth Army main headquarters moved westward from its battle site near Burg-el-Arab to Daba. The battle of Alamein was in the past.

During the fourteen days of the big push American warplanes had made a total of 1,366 sorties. During the longer period from October 1, when air activity in preparation for the offensive first began to build up, to the end of the battle, November 6, they had shot down 45 enemy airplanes, sank or seriously damaged an incalculable number of tons of Axis shipping, and knocked out hundreds of tanks and motor vehicles. All this had been accomplished at the cost of only six aircraft, four fighters, one medium bomber and one heavy bomber.

Organizations taking part in these operations were the 12th Medium Bombardment Group, the 57th Fighter Group, augmented by pilots and crews of what was later to become the 79th Fighter Group, at that time just breaking in, the Halverson Squadron of B-24's, the 9th Squadron of Flying Fortresses and the 98th Bombardment Group of B-24's.

The chronological account of their activities during the battle, as here set forth, is far from being the whole story.

The true picture is not a thing of facts and figures, but of flesh and blood. It is a story of toiling mechanics, of sober faced combat crews huddled in stuffy desert tents for briefing, of tense minutes over targets, when the skin crawls on the back of the neck and hands holding the controls ache with strain.

Landing Ground 174 was typical of many others occupied by the desert air force at that time and subsequently. A community of scattered tents draped around the flat piece of desert designated as the airdrome, there were few comforts. Outside of each tent was the familiar slit trench, about three steps and a long dive from the cots within. They were used frequently.

Three pyramidal tents hitched end to end formed the mess hall, briefing room, officers' club and what have you. Here and there along the paths between areas burgeoned the desert lillies, the air forces name for their occasional comfort stations consisting of half buried gasoline cans with stones in the bottom.

The various staff sections, S-1, 2, 3 and 4 each had their own tents, as did the transportation section, medical section and others.

These were connected by field telephone sets.

The men ate British rations up until Thanksgiving, 1942. At that time sick and wounded were taken to hospitals of the RAF, pending arrival of our own, and most of the administrative and supply services were also British.

Military courtesy was tacitly understood in these desert camps, and frequently tacitly ingored in its outward forms. The uniform of the day consisted of whatever the weather and the job at hand seemed to indicate. From British battledress, a favourite garb, to a pair of dungarees and nothing else. Shaving was usually a painful bi-weekly ceremony carried out with the aid of half a helmet full of precious water and many epithets.

Early in November, the 57th Group unexpectedly had a visitor. Out of the sky in his Douglas transport dropped Major General Brereton, on a very special mission.

Taxi-ing up to the operations tent in a cloud of fine red dust, the general cut his motors, climbed out, and requested the immediate presence of Colonel Mears, the group commander. " I want to pin the Distinguished Service Medal on Middleditch," said the General.

Colonel Mears looked slightly Embarassed. "How long have you got Sir?" he asked respectfully.

" Fifteen minutes."

The colonel gulped audibly, but he was a good soldier. " Well Sir," he said, " we'll try."

During the next ten minutes the general's eyes grew wide with wonder. From the cook tents came men in GI aprons and caps made of flour sacks, mechanics from the line in grease stained overalls, stripped to the waist, ambled up side by side with squadron clerks in their shirt sleeves and nattily dressed pilots ready for an evening's leave in " Alex." This aggregation fell into what vaguely resembled a line and awaited developments.

Meanwhile a slender figure climbed down from its perch astride the partly dismantled engine of a P-40 fighter, and legged it towards the waiting formation in response to a hasty summons delivered in person by the group commander. Reaching the end of the line, the figure slowed to a walk and marched sedately out in front.

Coming to a snappy halt exactly six paces before the decorating party, Lt. Lyman Middleditch saluted his general the best way he knew how, while a roll of American manufactured toilet paper bulged embarrassingly out of the patch pocket on the front of his dirty dungarees with one end fluttering in the breeze. The decoration proceeded as scheduled.

RE-BIRTH OF THE NINTH

While the combat groups were busy at Alamein and points west, big things were afoot in the three storey brown stone building at 8 Rustum Pasha, Cairo.

Ninth U.S. Army Air Force Headquarters in Cairo

Here, at air force headquarters, was the abode of the policy makers, the strategists and the administrators of what was rapidly becoming a sizable American factor in the scheme of North African warfare.

Through the mimeograph machines in the basement there ran on November 12 an ordinary looking ink soaked stencil entitled General Orders No. 1, but it was not ordinary in its implications.

It announced the activation of the Ninth United States Air Force, comprising all United States Army Air Force units in the Middle East theater, and succeeding the United States Middle East Air Force.

Further paragraphs of the same order activated the Ninth Air Service command and the Ninth Bomber Command. Brigadier-General Patrick W. Timberlake was designated commanding general, Ninth Bomber Command, and Brigadier General E. E. Adler, commanding general, Ninth Air Service Command.

Earlier, on November 1, another order had abolished the first provisional bombardment group and established the 376th Group, the nucleus of which was the old Hal Squadron and the Ninth squadron of B-17's which had come from India with General Brereton.

To many of the veteran heavy bomber men this was a sad occasion. To cheer them, and to pay tribute to what had been a fine organization, General Brereton sent these messages of praise and thanks.

The General wrote in part. " Upon the occasion of the deactivation of the First Provisional Bombardment Group, I want to express my extreme gratification to all officers and enlisted men of the Halverson Detachment and the Ninth Bombardment Squadron from India, for their meritorious service since commencement of U.S. Air Force operations in this theater. Operating in the face of many difficulties, the efficient and tireless efforts of all of you, willingly given, have received most favorable comments not only from the whole of the Middle East, but from all those who have followed your activities so closely in the United States.

" Combat and maintenance crews and supporting personnel all performed their duties in a manner which sanctions the name of hero to every member of the First Provisional Group, both officers and enlisted men. I commend you for your work well done and have an assured confidence that you who are now members of the 376th Bombardment Group and those who return to India will carry on in untiring devotion in the performance of duty worthy of the best traditions of the United States Army Air Forces."

Following the return of the 9th Squadron to India there were no flying fortresses stationed east of Algiers in the African campaign. They were all Liberators.

The 376th Group celebrated their new designation by moving from Lydda, Palestine, to Abu Sueir, Egypt on the Suez canal, becoming neighbors of their sister group, the 98th, which moved in from their previous station at Ramat David, Palestine to the same area. This was the home base of the heavy bombers of the Ninth Air Force until February, when they moved north-west to Gambut, a plateau located in the Libyan desert just south of Tobruk.

The Ninth Air Force was growing. From a strength of 5,800 officers and men at the end of September, the roster had jumped to 10,495 officers and men on the last of November. Most of the new arrivals were much needed and long awaited service personnel, come to free the combat units of their dependency on RAF and British army services of supply, and maintenance.

To these units, the arrival of the service troops meant welcome relief from a myriad of dull but necessary tasks not immediately connected with flying. It allowed them to concentrate for the first time unhampered on their number one job of keeping as many ships as possible in the air as often as possible.

The bulk of these supporting organizations arrived in the same unheralded obscurity in which they were destined during the ensuing months to perform so many vital tasks.
To the pier at Port Tewfik on the southern end of the Suez canal there came on October 31, a great grey liner. In happier days she had been not grey but white, and her number had been a name.

From within her jammed holds and troop compartments she disgorged an entire air depot group, military police companies, ordnance companies, quartermaster truck companies, field hospital units, bakery and laundry detachments, headquarters clerical detachments, and last but not least more than a hundred American nurses, the first to enter the Middle East.

Nearly 10,000 men came down the narrow gangways to the blacked-out dock and its waiting trains and trucks that night. By dawn they were all gone, spirited away to the transit camps where they would reorganize and rest up a few days from their long voyage.

Officers called it one of the smoothest and quickest debarkations ever staged.

While these developments were taking shape comparatively quietly behind the lines, there was still very much of a war going on up in the Western Desert. Blasted from his positions at Alamein, Marshal Rommel was embarked on the first stages of what the German press was still continuing to call his " strategic withdrawal " through Cyrenaica.

The bombers and fighters of the Ninth Air Force and their comrades of the RAF continued to harass his retreating steps.

The heavy bombers of the 98th and 376th Groups, from their new home bases in the canal area now began their famous series of " two hop " raids, first on Tripoli harbor and later on continental Italy itself. The schedule was to fly to Gambut in the Libyan desert one day, refuel and strike at their target either that night or the next morning, returning sometimes directly to the home base, sometimes stopping again at Gambut.

To service and maintain these transients, one of the lonesomest, busiest and most nondescript camps of the entire Ninth Air Force was established on the high desert plateau behind Tobruk, dignified on the map as the town of Gambut, but consisting actually of one stone blockhouse.

There, with a tribe of Senousi Bedouins for next door neighbors, a conglomeration of air force detachments ranging from bakers to oil bowser drivers did a rush housekeeping business for their important visitors in the B-24's.

On days when there was no mission scheduled the camp was a singularly lonesome place to be. The field was empty of planes, or nearly so, and there was little of the steady hustle and bustle characteristic of a landing ground which served as permanent " home " for a unit.

When the Liberators roared in from the east things woke up with a bang. Oil bowsers drove out to the line, ambulances took their places in front of the " ops " tent, the cooks turned up the fire under the coffee urns. Tents for the visiting crews were made ready, and soon the area swarmed with gunners, bombardiers and pilots in their leather flying suits trucked in from the dispersal areas where the planes were parked.

Usually the combat crews brought up the latest mail to their buddies in the advanced detachment, along with the latest news from the Delta. Supper on these days was a hurry-up affair, because there was briefing to be done in the big intelligence tent if the Liberators were to take off that night. If not, everybody went to bed early in preparation for the next day.

When the last plane had left the field on its way to the target there set in a period of waiting which was not without strain. When fewer ships came back from the mission it didn't necessarily mean losses. They might have landed at an intermediate field or might even have decided the gas supply was sufficient to return to the home base in the Delta without stopping. But this was not often.

The best times were when the big ships came back in daylight, signalling the success of their mission by zooming in formation low over the field before landing. Everybody was happy then. The crews would come over to the cook-tent for a hot cup of coffee and a sandwich before reporting to the intelligence tent for the " interrogation," then hasten out to the ships again for the long hop back to their home base.

The advanced base would then settle down to its usual bored existence until the next flights arrived. In the interim there were several methods of amusement. They were : 1. Visits ing the Senousi and bartering for eggs. 2. Souvenir hikes for the purpose of discovering interesting items left behind by Jerry when he vacated the fields some time before. 3. Visiting the Free French artillery units stationed some miles away to look at their one female nurse. 4. Visiting the Senoussi camp and bartering for more eggs. This tended to be tiresome.

DESERT CAMPS

The 57th Fighter Group at this time was enjoying a period of comparative quiet. As one of their pilots put it, " We were always busier than hell when Jerry holed up because we had to blast him loose. When he was on the run we didn't work so hard."

Being highly imaginative people, the stars and supporting cast of the " Flying Circus " had some far-fetched ideas during this period. Among the more amusing of these was the ten square feet of sand roped off in front of a pilot's tent adorned with " Keep off the Grass " signs.

Another famous placard was their " Los Angeles City Limits " markers, which always went up, at each end of the airdrome, as soon as a new site was occupied. Working as they did, usually surrounded by British units, these markers led many a stray American truck driver

and staff officer on his way to the front to stop at just the proper place for a good cup of American coffee. "They used to say they never knew there were any American units around until they saw our signs," the boys explained. "It sort of made our visitors feel at home."

There were three seasoned squadrons now—the Fighting Cocks, so named for a gamecock mascot which they had brought with them from the States ; the Black Scorpions, which took this title when a sergeant found one of the deadly spiders in his bedroll, and the Exterminators, who were originally designated as "Squadron X" for sheer lack of name.

The Exterminators have a queer emblem which looks, in the words of one biographer, "like a cross between Donald Duck, a Goon, and Winston Churchill's cigar."

During these days the squadron mess tents of the 57th greatly resembled fraternity houses. Pilots off duty sat or lay around in various stages of undress, some played cards, some read and the rest talked. A battered GI radio phonograph blared out "Chattanoogu Choo Choo" or "White Christmas."

Just in front of the door in the Black Scorpion Mess was a bar constructed of plain boards painted a gorgeous sky blue. The tables were long and sway-backed affairs made of unpainted crate wood. Some of the chairs came from German tents by way of the Arabs with no questions asked. The Nazis had apparently got them from Italian colonists homes in much the same manner.

The kitchen was in the back of the tent behind a table stained with grease spots that withstood frequent scrubbings. The cooking apparatus was a mysterious collection of pots, pans and oil burners that only the cooks understood.

After Thanksgiving time, when the Americans were at long last eating American and not British rations, a sample menu was something like this : Fried potatoes, ham fritters, boiled corn, white break, marmalade, peanut butter, cocoa, blueberry pie. Most of the men gained weight.

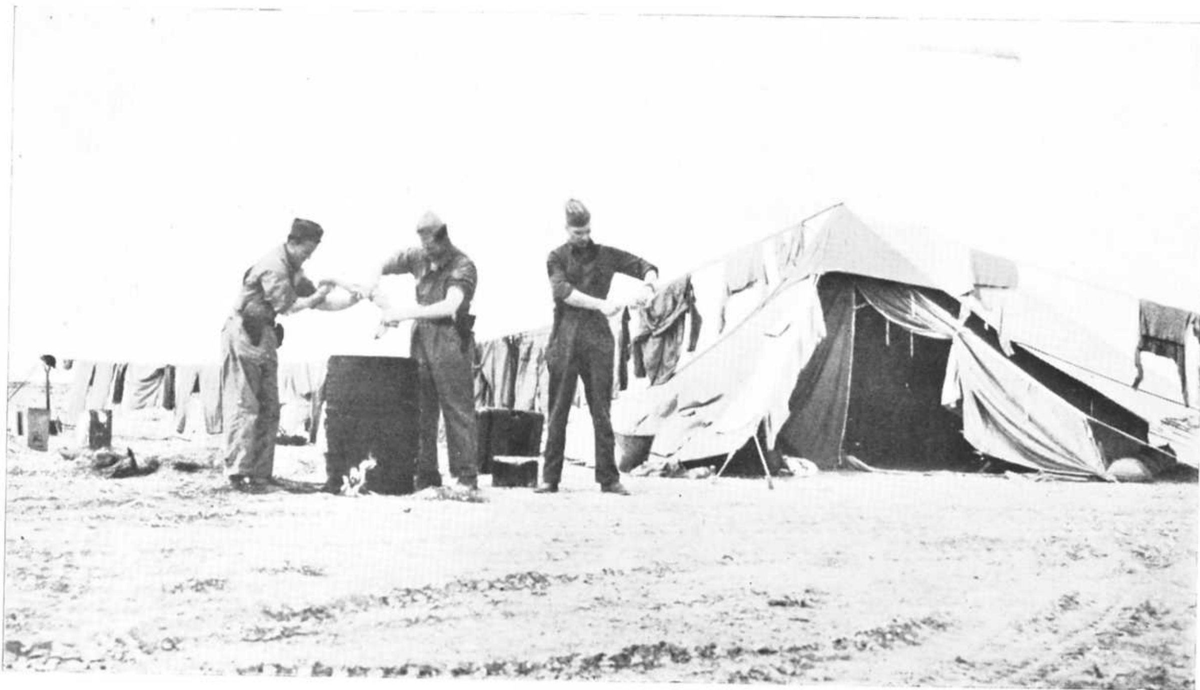
On the nice days the desert wind was a welcome antidote to the warm round sun that sent its unimpeded rays through the crystal blue of the Mediterranean skies. But on the other days the tents were damp with the driving rain and the wind was chill and unwelcome.

The Black Scorpions also had a cat which they called Zuara Zue. Zuara had her own personal box, mess gear and blanket.

Three cherished possessions the Exterminators had. One was their bar, the smooth metal-grey top of which was once the wing of an Italian fighter. Below it hung duralumin sheets, also captured, forming a modernistic front. On these sheets were painted the names of the squadron's flyers, past and present, and swastikas or fasces to indicate their score of destroyed enemy planes.

The other two prides were the "The Green Goose" and a Macchi 200 fighter. The Green Goose was a captured Savoia bomber which the Exterminators were always hoping someday to convert into a flying general store which would truck up certain luxuries from Cairo.

Bathroom in the Blue



Wash Day in the Desert

But the Goose had a central motor which persisted in the annoying habit of catching fire whenever the plane was flown. Luckily the Goose was a metal job, but it is still much nicer to fly a plane with non-inflammable motors. By the time the Squadron chased the Germans out of Tunis the Green Goose was still present and still burning, despite the best efforts of the best squadron mechanics.

The Macchi 200 was the special responsibility of one of the squadron's pilots who had formerly been with the RAF as a test pilot, and consequently had learned to pilot practically any type of military aircraft, friendly or enemy. The engine was never all it should have been, but the ship was useful for little errands.

During their spare time the hard working ground crews of the 57th had their own hobbies. One used to cut rings from the duraluminum parts of wrecked German planes, while another manufactured captains and lieutenants bars from the same stuff, which were presented to the squadron officers to wear " for luck."

Others amused themselves profitably by rebuilding captured enemy trucks, several of which were usually in use, augmenting the group's ground transport fleets.

The majority of the 57th operations between Alamein and El Agheila were as strafers and fighter bombers, keeping up a steady and relentless pressure on the retreating Axis columns. The chronology of the Eighth Army's advance at this time was : Tobruk November 13, Benghazi November 20, and Mersa Brega (east of El Agheila) November 28.
The first attack by American bombers on Tripoli took place at dusk Nov. 21, when both the 376th and 98th Bomb Groups took their Liberators over the harbor installations with high cost to the Axis.

On board one of the big ships was Yank correspondent Sergeant Burgess Scott, who wrote the following account of the attack :

" The Yank airmen attacked in two waves, about five hours apart. The first wave was virtually uncontested, and the second easily avoided a heavy but inaccurate curtain of flak. No enemy fighter aircraft were seen by either attacking group. As an observer in the last airplane of the first group over the target, I saw part of the terrific damage that was done. I saw the explosion and a huge column of billowing flame and smoke roll up from a great waterfront warehouse. Then I saw more explosions on the slender mole that encircles Tripoli harbor like a half bent arm, with the warehouses where the bicep would be.

" Repeated explosions came from one of the fires, and they told me later that it was an ammunition warehouse. I was lying stretched out on the flight deck of our B-24 when the bomb run started, and I looked backwards and down through the bomb-bay doors, leaning out as far as the tube on my oxygen mask would let me to watch the bombs away.

" I reached out and patted the huge bulk of the one nearest me, and then as an afterthought scratched my initials on its blunt, ugly nose with my pencil. An instant later it jerked suddenly and fell away.

" I strained to watch it drop, and it seemed a very long time before it hit. I'm not sure I saw it, but as near as I could tell, it landed on the mole, near the bend of the elbow.

"The group of our bombers that came over later also scored hits in the warehouse area, and gave us a report later on the damage our first wave had caused. It seems we hit a merchant vessel, which none of us knew earlier, although we were certain we had come very close to one. The later group saw it, half sunk and still smoking, being towed from the harbor entrance.

"The American raid on Tripoli was that seaport's first aerial attack since the start of the Western Desert campaign, and the first U.S. action against the city since the early 1800's, when United States marines were sent there to curb the activities of the Tripolitanian pirates. We were seeking to curb the activities of a much worse pirate this time.

"The planes made the long hop to the target unescorted, and the lack of opposition in the air and from the ground attested the air-tight security of the surprise. Sitting with the crew, however, you sensed in them a feeling of near disappointment when the skies remained clear even after the first stick of bombs exploded. Gunners held their posts throughout, but the practice bursts at the start of the trip were the only shots fired."

THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving, 1942, broke cold and clear as usual in the Western Desert. Air Force men toppled out of their canvas cots from beneath the five blankets necessary to keep them warm, and bleary eyed pulled on their heavy British battle dress over handle-bar GI underwear. From the petrol tin in the corner of the tent they carefully poured into their steel helmets enough water to wipe the sleep out of their eyes and possibly shave, robbed their canteens of more precious drops to brush their teeth, and went out to stand in the chow lines for breakfast with mess kits dangling in their hands.

It was business as usual for everybody, but there was time out for church services in most Ninth Air Force units. The young chaplains prayed earnestly for the safety of their men, and expressed the hope indirectly that God in His compassion would see to it that they beat the ears off of Jerry in time to spend the next Thanksgiving with their folks in the States.

After services the men filed quietly out of the combination chapel-mess-interrogation-recreation tents and went about their usual hundred different tasks, from working on planes to trucking water, to bringing up supplies from the quartermaster dumps. There was no actual combat missions that day so the combat crews had it easy.

Being Americans, and being a long way from home some of the boys felt kind of empty in the pits of their stomachs when they thought about Mom and Pop and the snowy linen which was probably being then spread on the family table, but nobody said much about it. They did hope though for a good dinner.

They needn't have worried. Sentimentalist that he sometimes is, Uncle Sam had really gone the whole hog this time.

From bases in Syria to the deserts of Cyrenaica, every U.S. fighting man got a pound of top-grade American turkey, plus fresh frozen peas, corn and all the fixings.
Following the age old custom of the American army, the officers that day deserted their own messes to eat with their men.

How the quartermaster corps managed to get frozen prime turkeys from Texas and fresh vegetables from other parts of the United States into the middle of the African desert is a military secret, possibly because they took more than their share of the shipping space on Trans-Atlantic airplanes some days beforehand, but anyhow there they were. Through careful arrangement with the Army Service forces, the food was packaged and delivered by air to all bases in the Middle East.

Two of the regular embellishments of a Thanksgiving dinner were missing after all—cranberries and pumpkin pie. Not a regular item of issue, the cranberries were not found available in the Middle East, so jams and applesauce replaced them. Sweet potato pie, which the Southerns thought even better than pumpkin was a worthy substitute.

To add a festive air to the occasion, General Strahm, Chief of Staff of the Ninth, and General Strickland also went into the desert to have dinner with the troops. It was a pretty good thanksgiving day after all.

COMBAT CAMERA UNIT

The Ninth Combat Camera Unit, Ninth U.S. Air Force, will be long remembered as one of the toughest, hardest working, most gallant, cynical and most colorful organizations in the Middle East theater of operations.

Activated on November 30, pioneer members of the unit lugged their chemicals, lenses, enlargers and print paper up three long flights of stairs to the roof of Air Force headquarters building at 8 Rustum Pasha, and got down to business. Their tempers, the legend goes, were originally spoiled by those three flights of stairs and were constantly aggravated by too many personal requests for prints.

With key personnel drawn from top flight Hollywood newsreel studios plus a battery of young and eager still cameramen fresh from the army's photo school at Lowry Field, Col., the unit numbered seven officers and twenty-six enlisted men.

There have been few of the unit's cameramen to be seen around Cairo. Attached to the various combat units in the field, they showed up at headquarters only occasionally, to repair a camera, bring in some rush prints and head back into the desert.

In the rocking bellies of B-24 heavy bombers and medium Mitchells, these cameramen snapped, during the African campaign, some 3,000 still photos and over 70,000 feet of motion picture film, both black and white and color. They shot pictures of Axis harbors, troop concentrations, tanks and gun emplacements before and after attack, confirming the damage announced in the communiques.

In between missions they made documentary photos of air force installations and training activities, faithfully recorded life at the desert bases for official perusal and for the press.

At the request of the Persian Gulf Service Command, the unit made a complete photo record in motion pictures and stills of the aid-to-Russia lend-lease route, from the assembly of planes and unloading of freighters on the Persian Gulf to delivery of the material at the Russian frontier.

A complete record of the work of the 12th Medium Bomb Group was photographed in color motion pictures.

The organization's cameramen, most of whom wear the silver wings of flying combat crew-men, were often required to set aside their cameras during a mission to help man machine guns. One of their officers, Lt. James Bray, was given official credit for shooting down two enemy aircraft. Captain Raymond Fernstrom, was wounded in the leg by ack-ack while shooting pictures during a target run in a B-25. Sgt. Joseph Appleton, one of the outfit's crack " still " men, was once forced down in the Mediterranean with other members of the crew of a Liberator bomber, and was rescued by an Allied battleship. All of these men and several others have been decorated for their work.

Lt. Jesse Sabin was the first American photographer to enter Tunis after the city's fall, and made movies of the Allied occupation. Two other photographers of the Ninth were the first US army photographers to enter Tripoli.

ROMMEL DIGS IN

During the two weeks from November 23 to December 6, the Eighth Army continued its slow, steady advance with little opposition from the enemy. Innumerable mines and booby traps held down their speed and the Axis fought a constant delaying, rear-guard action. On November 23, Montgomery's forward units had reached a point approximately 16 miles south of the town of Agedabia.

For the next few days weather conditions were bad, but by November 27 the enemy was contacted some 20 miles further west, near Bir es Suera by advanced elements of British light armor. On the twenty-eighth these units were still in contact in about the same locality, and the situation became clear. The enemy had decided to stand, and was withdrawing for that purpose to prepared positions in the El Agheila area.

For the first time since Alamein, the Fox had really dug in.

In order to break the deadlock, the Allies threw in the full power of their air force, fighters and medium bombers operating as usual against Rommel's troop concentrations and motor transport ; heavy bombers against the port of Tripoli further to the rear. The 57th Group, operating in conjunction with Spitfire squadrons of the RAF flew low over Mussolini's triumphant Victory monument at Marble Arch, bombing Italian and German troops encamped in its shadow.

Nearly a hundred of the hard flying P-40's took part in these fighter-bomber sorties in a single day, and only on one occasion did enemy fighters close with our pilots to attempt to stem the onslaught. Results : Two ME-109's were shot down and several others damaged.

On another day, December 9, the Axis airmen were not so shy, and the result was described by an American pilot as " one of the biggest dogfights of the campaign to that date."

The battle again took place almost directly over the towering form of the Marble Arch, and the objective of the Allied fighters was originally designated as a nearby airdrome. The score when the battle ended stood at seven crashed ME-109's plus half a dozen others badly shot up and probably destroyed. One American pilot was lost.

Captain George D. Mobbs of Little Rock, Ark., led one of the flights. "It wasn't as easy as it sounds," he said afterwards. "It's true I got two of them, but I also had my narrowest squeak. My ship was shot up, all my guns out, and in this shape I led a formation of five Messerschmitts almost all the way home.

"I could hear one of the pilots with me yelling into his phone, 'Hey, you guys, come back here, you're missing something. I've surrounded six of the bastards.'

"The other fellows apparently didn't hear him, because they didn't turn. I had my hands full myself and couldn't go back, but he got out of it OK but shot down only one of them while he was doing it.

"Meanwhile I got into position on one in particular and squirted him in the belly. I hadn't seen the crash of the one I got earlier, so I thought I'd watch this one and I followed him down. That's where I made my mistake, because just as he hit the deck, pow ! a 20 millimeter cannon shot hit my wing right alongside the cockpit. My leg burned and I knew I'd been hit, but not bad. All I thought about was getting out of there, and I did.

"On the way home the German ack-ack along the Agheila line started trying to pick me off. They came pretty close because I wasn't flying very high, but I remember reflecting that it must have been just as uncomfortable for the Jerry's that were chasing me. Either they were afraid of getting hit by it themselves or they were running short of ammunition, because one by one they quit the chase, and I came on in alone. I made a belly landing, and counted 40 holes in the ship."

LEADERS MEET

The big Fortress droned high over the heads of the struggling armies of the western desert ; over the sands of Libya and the mountains of Tunisia, finally to alight at a base near the western end of the Mediterranean.

Awaiting the ship was a lean, baldish American with three stars on his shoulders and a great responsibility. He was Lt. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander-in-chief for North Africa. His visitors were General Brereton, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder of the RAF. The occasion marked the first meeting of the air commanders of the Middle East with the high command of the north-west African theater. The date : November 29, 1942.

The decision taken at that meeting were to be felt months afterwards, when with the Axis driven into the north tip of Tunisia the desert air force and the warplanes of the north-west African air force were to combine operations and produce an air blitz the like of which the Axis had never seen before and doubtless hopes never to see again.

The series of conferences took two days. They were, said General Brereton on his return, "highly satisfactory."

LIBERATORS OVER ITALY

In their offices at Grey Pillars, British Middle East GHQ at Cairo, General Timberlake and his staff officers walked around during the first three days of December with preoccupied airs.

On the fifth of December the reason was clear. " Liberator bombers of the Ninth US Air Force," the communique announced, " yesterday, December 4, bombed warships in the harbor of Naples, Italy." The attack marked the first blow to be struck by United States air power against continental Italy itself.

In one of their most successful missions of the campaign, B-24's of both the 98th and 376th Groups dropped more than 111,000 pounds of bombs on heavy units of the Italian fleet present in the harbor. Numerous hits were scored on the harbor installations, fires were seen on the moles, direct hits were made on several cruisers and at least one battleship.

Vesuvius, hovering in the background, was outclassed and looked on amazed.

The high command's intelligence summary for that week made the reason for this raid quite clear. " The key to Rommel's defenses at Agheila," it said, " lies in the struggle which both sides are waging for supplies and reinforcements. Air supremacy will decide, and in Libya the Axis is definitely the underdog," If the desert air force could help it, Rommel's supplies weren't even going to leave Italy, much less arrive in Africa.

Backed by the heavy bombers, plus the mediums and fighters which covered the front lines from their newly captured landing grounds in the forward area, the indomitable Eighth Army saw to it that Rommel's holdout at Agheila was shortlived.

At high speed and with the greatest secrecy, two strong tentacles reached out from either flank of Montgomery's forces, along either side of Rommel's position. As they reached they grew in strength, becoming a pair of strong pincers which threatened to close behind his back. To prevent this catastrophe the Desert Fox was forced to take to the road again, in a desperate race to escape the jaws. Wily as ever, he made it. With a headstart from El Agheila, and travelling along the tarred coastal road, the Axis forces held a great advantage in speed over the flanking forces, which were travelling through trackless desert, beset with mines and wire.

The Allied air forces continued to patrol the skies over the battle area, subjecting the Axis airdromes to continual bombing, while the sturdy DC-3's of the Ninth Air Force 316 Troop Carrier Group winging their way from the Delta to the front, delivered much needed gas, bombs and other supplies to help press the attack. The chase was on again, and Tripoli itself was the only stop in sight.

TROOP CARRIERS

This phase of operations marked the first appearance in force of the United States Ninth Air Force 316th Troop Carrier Group.

Before the Air Transport section of the Ninth Air Service Command was organized in the Middle East, the task of hauling vital war materials by air was borne by three C-47 Douglas planes which were loaned for this purpose by the Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Ninth Air Service Command.

These cargo ships, used to their limit to meet the enormous demands of field units, made daily flights from June 1 until November 30, 1942. Based at Lydda, Palestine, they each made round trips which added up to approximately 1,200 miles a day. The situation was greatly relieved on November 15, when the 316th arrived in the Middle East with 52 freight-carrying aircraft.

The 316th Group well earned the plaudits of the Ninth Air Force and the Empire Forces for the help given to the Allied advance across the Western Desert. The use of these planes helped solve a great supply problem which the Axis had not been able to solve for its own forces. Unless you were a statistician with a penchant for figures the actual details of the vast amount of freight, men, munitions transported would mean little. But these figures meant a big part of the difference between victory and defeat to the Allies in the Middle East.

Where Rommel's supply columns had failed, America's "flying box-cars" succeeded.

In order to meet the demands for gasoline, the 316th Group flew barrel after barrel to front line bases in record breaking time, enabling the Allies to maintain constant pressure from the air on the Axis all the way.

In addition to aviation gasoline these planes moved bombs, water, rations, tires, aircraft parts, ammunition and men.

A few figures draw an interesting comparison between shipping by air and shipping by motor vehicle from El Adem to Agedabia, distance 425 miles by truck and 250 by aircraft.

Delivery was made by air in half the time required by motor vehicle. A truck can carry 15 drums of gasoline while the Douglas plane had room for three additional drums. A round-trip time for a truck was six days. By plane it was only half a day. The high point was the arrival at Agedabia of forty-nine transport planes during one day carrying a total of 48,510 U.S. gallons of aviation gasoline. The flight from El Adem was completed in one hour and fifty minutes. This would have been a three day trip for fifty-nine trucks.

RECAPITULATION

Cumulative figures through December 13

Bomber Activity

Group		Sorties	Bombs dropped (in pounds)
376th	B-24's	451	1,982,000
	B-17's	114	359,000
98th	B-24's	505	1,886,000
12th	B-25's	551	1,037,000
	TOTALS:	1,621	5,264,000 or 2,632 tons

Principal Targets and Pounds of Bombs Dropped within Area

Target	Pounds	Target	Pounds
Tobruk	1,211,000	Suda Bay	244,000
Benghasi	1,018,000	Maleme	156,000
Landing Grounds	764,000	El Daba	108,000
Convoys	425,000	Candia	107,000
Navarino Bay	320,000	Tripoli	245,000
		Naples	191,000

Fighter Activity

Up to December 5th, Warhawks of the 57th Fighter Group had made 1,646 sorties, flying all types of missions. Enemy aircraft casualties due to their operations include : 34 ME 109's, 6 MC 202's, 4 CR 42's and 8 JU 52's destroyed. 6 ME 109's, 1 MC 202 and 2 CR 42's probably destroyed. 24 ME 109's, 1 MC 202 and 3 CR 42's damaged.