

THE DECISIVE CAMPAIGNS OF THE DESERT AIR FORCE 1942-1945



BRYN EVANS

**The Decisive
Campaigns of the
Desert Air Force
1942–1945**

Other titles by Bryn Evans:

With The East Surreys in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy
1942–1945

(2012, Pen & Sword Books Ltd)

The Decisive Campaigns of the Desert Air Force 1942–1945

Bryn Evans



Pen & Sword
AVIATION

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by

PEN & SWORD AVIATION

An imprint of
Pen & Sword Books Ltd
47 Church Street
Barnsley
South Yorkshire
S70 2AS

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ISBN 978-1-78346-260-5

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Typeset by Concept, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, HD4 5JL.
Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY.

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Dedication

For Jean,
and for all who have served in the blue of the RAF,
and other Allied air forces.

The Lost (extract):

Think of them. You did not die as these
caged in an aircraft that did not return.
Whenever hearts have song and minds have peace
or in your eyes the prides of banners burn,
think of these who dreamed and loved as you,
and gave their laughter, gave their sun and snow,
... To them this debt you owe.

Their lives are ended, but dreams are not yet lost
if you remember in your laugh and song
these boys who do not sing, and laughed not long.

Herbert Corby*

* *The Lost*, p. 80, from *The Terrible Rain – The War Poets 1939–45*, Brian Gardner, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1966.

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Acknowledgements

My very first acknowledgements must be to Roderic Owen and Sir Arthur Tedder GCB. In 1948, for his ground-breaking book on *The Desert Air Force*, Roderic Owen was fortunate to gain an interview with Tedder who, at the time, was Marshal of the Royal Air Force Baron Tedder of Glenguin. In the Air Ministry in London an apprehensive Owen was ushered in to the office of the Chief of the Air Staff. In response to a previously formal request, Tedder, who had been the architect of the Desert Air Force (DAF), gave Owen a draft text of a 'Foreword' for his book. Owen was both pleased and relieved to find it most appropriate and acceptable.

Owen, himself a veteran flyer of the DAF, recounted how he then asked if he could next write Tedder's biography. In his typically self-deprecating way, Tedder responded by asking, 'Why?' After discussion Tedder reluctantly agreed to Owen taking it on. One of the arguments Owen used to persuade Tedder was that an Air Force interpretation of the war was required, 'to counter those orthodox military and naval interpretations'.¹ Later, in 1966, Tedder would publish his own autobiography, *With Prejudice*. My efforts in writing *The Decisive Campaigns of the Desert Air Force* rest on many shoulders that have come before me, but none more so than those of Owen and Tedder.

There is another connection to those times, more than sixty years ago. Much of my underlying motivation for this book comes from my parents. My father Cliff served in RAF Bomber Command from 1939 to 1945. My mother, Tamar, told me of lying in bed in the months before I was born, and listening to the Luftwaffe bombers droning above as they flew over Doncaster on their way to bomb Sheffield's steelworks. Consequently, during my childhood in the late forties and early fifties in the UK, my parents imbued me with the deepest respect and awe for what the RAF had done to turn back the German bombing raids.

Before going any further I must make two important apologies. The first is to the Allied navies, whose operations I was unable to cover in the scope of this book. The Allies' naval forces were the foundation rock without which the North African and Italian campaigns could not even have been commenced.

The second apology must go to the ground support staff of the Desert Air Force, whose gruelling, round the clock work and dedication can never be understood fully and appreciated. From as early as 1942 until 1945 their

sustained ability to keep DAF aircraft serviceable and flying combat operations, even on the very day on which they relocated to a new airfield hundreds of miles distant, is beyond comprehension.

I cannot begin to find the words to thank the many veterans of those times, to whom I have spoken in my research. In particular, I must sincerely thank Jack Ingate, Frank Jensen, Lloyd Leah, Bill McRae and Lloyd Wiggins, but the interest and support from everyone, veterans' families and friends, has been inspirational to me. And again I must apologize for not being able to include all the contributions I have received. Yet, without such help, I could not have written a word.

Once again I am indebted to my editor, the well-known military historian and prolific author, Richard Doherty, for his passionate advice and suggested revisions. Drawing on his encyclopaedic knowledge and his many books on the North African and Italian campaigns, Richard has uncovered some quite unique and invaluable research material. As with my previous book on the East Surrey Regiment, I am especially grateful to Brigadier Henry Wilson at Pen and Sword Books, for taking on my proposal for this book, and making me get it done!

I am particularly appreciative of the many military histories on the air war in the Mediterranean, North African and Italian theatres, and must sincerely pay tribute to authors Chaz Bowyer, Andrew Brookes, John Herington, Christopher Shores, Andrew Thomas and, of course, Roderic Owen and Sir Arthur Tedder. There are too many research sources to list in their entirety, but a special thanks goes to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, Australia, the Imperial War Museum and King's College in London, and the Royal United Services Institute of Australia in Sydney for access to their archives and collections. I have tried to attribute the most influential sources I have consulted in my research, and I can only apologize if I have inadvertently missed any.

Above all I owe everything to my wife Jean. Her love, interest and encouragement have been indispensable to my writing of this book.

Bryn Evans
Sydney
January 2014

Note

Owen, *Tedder*, p. 9–11.

Author's Note

During the Second World War, and for many years after, certain German aircraft manufactured by Bayerische Flugzeugwerke (BFW), such as the Bf109, were commonly referred to as the 'Messerschmitt 109' or 'Me109', particularly by Allied pilots and air crew. The terms were derived from the well-known designer Willy Messerschmitt, and his partner Robert Lusser. Airmen from those days still use the term 'Me109'. I have used the technically correct, and now widely accepted, Bf109, except where direct quotes use Me109 from referenced sources.

Foreword

While researching a British regiment in the Second World War¹ I was troubled to understand a recurring conundrum. From the Battle of El Alamein and the Operation TORCH landings in north-west Africa shortly after in late 1942, as Churchill predicted, it was the turning of the tide. Allied armies fought their way from Egypt through Libya, Tunisia, Sicily and the length of mainland Italy, without any major reverse until final victory in May 1945.

This was despite the German forces and their defences being advantaged by the mountainous terrain, massively favourable to a defending army, first in Tunisia and then Italy. After Cassino the Allies' Fifth and Eighth Armies even lost some of their best divisions, transferred to Operation OVERLORD and the north-west Europe front. Yet it seems that histories of the campaigns and veterans speak consistently of the German soldiers' professionalism and training, and of their superior weapons and equipment. Most problematical of all is that the Allied armies hardly ever enjoyed a two-to-one advantage in ground troops, and were often outnumbered.

It can be argued that the Allies in North Africa and Italy, through the breaking of the Germans' Enigma code, had better intelligence, and overall employed greater flexibility and innovation in their tactics. Certainly the Allies' offensive strategy, compared with Hitler's 'defend to the last man' mindset, was an advantage. So, too, was the air superiority established by Allied air forces, of which the Desert Air Force (DAF) was a renowned leader.

The name 'Desert Air Force', itself sounds bizarre, suggesting a contradiction in terms, an incongruity, not unlike imagining for instance, an 'Army of the Sea'. In 1948 in his classic book, *The Desert Air Force*, Roderic Owen said, 'To trace the history of the Desert Air Force is to try and dissect the sinews of a myth.' Although the DAF origins can be said to have taken shape in 1940, it was only officially given the name Desert Air Force in May 1943, when it was about to leave North Africa and its deserts and never to return.

Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder GCB, who was commander of the DAF for some of its early years, stated in Owen's book that the DAF played a lead role, and was '... the key to the ultimate victory' in Europe'.

Those readers who have never heard of the DAF, or know little of its history, I can imagine may be thinking, 'Can Tedder's statement really be valid?' When you listen to some of the pilots who flew in the air battles in

North Africa and Italy in the Second World War, you gain an insight into Tedder's belief.

One veteran I met in Sydney, Squadron Leader Bill McRae DFC AFC, who is now 101 years old, flew the first Wellington Mark VIII torpedo-bomber in July 1942 from the UK to Malta. It was equipped with the latest top-secret radar, to enable it to find and sink enemy ships at night.

Another veteran I visited in Adelaide, Wing Commander Lloyd Wiggins DSO, who is now closing in on his century in years, piloted one of those Wellington Mark VIII torpedo-bombers to snuff out Rommel's last hope during the Battle of El Alamein.

DAF was made up of both air force formations and individual airmen from nearly every Allied nation. From the early years Americans, Australians, British, Canadians, New Zealanders and South Africans were prominent, either in their own national wings or squadrons, or in RAF formations, within DAF. Later DAF embraced airmen from many other Allied nations, such as Czechs, Free French, Greeks, Poles and Yugoslavs.

Roderic Owen believed DAF gained its strength and *esprit de corps* from its very diversity of nations and cultures. A common cause welded them together.

When you hear of the experiences of men such as McRae and Wiggins, it transports you back to those times, when those campaigns hung in the balance. They paint a picture of the life and death struggles of airmen, as the DAF and Allied air power sought to subjugate the Axis air forces, and make the difference for Allied armies on the ground in North Africa and Italy.

The exploits of the many DAF airmen recounted in this book are but a tiny fraction of the thousands who comprised this legendary air force. But read the stories that follow, and you will better understand the history that they made. And you can be the judge as to whether the Desert Air Force was the Allies' leading tactical air force of the Second World War, and whether Lord Tedder was correct, and DAF was a fundamental key to the Allied victory in Europe.

Bryn Evans
Sydney
December 2013

Note

1. *With the East Surreys in Tunisia, Sicily and Italy* (Pen & Sword, 2012).

Prologue

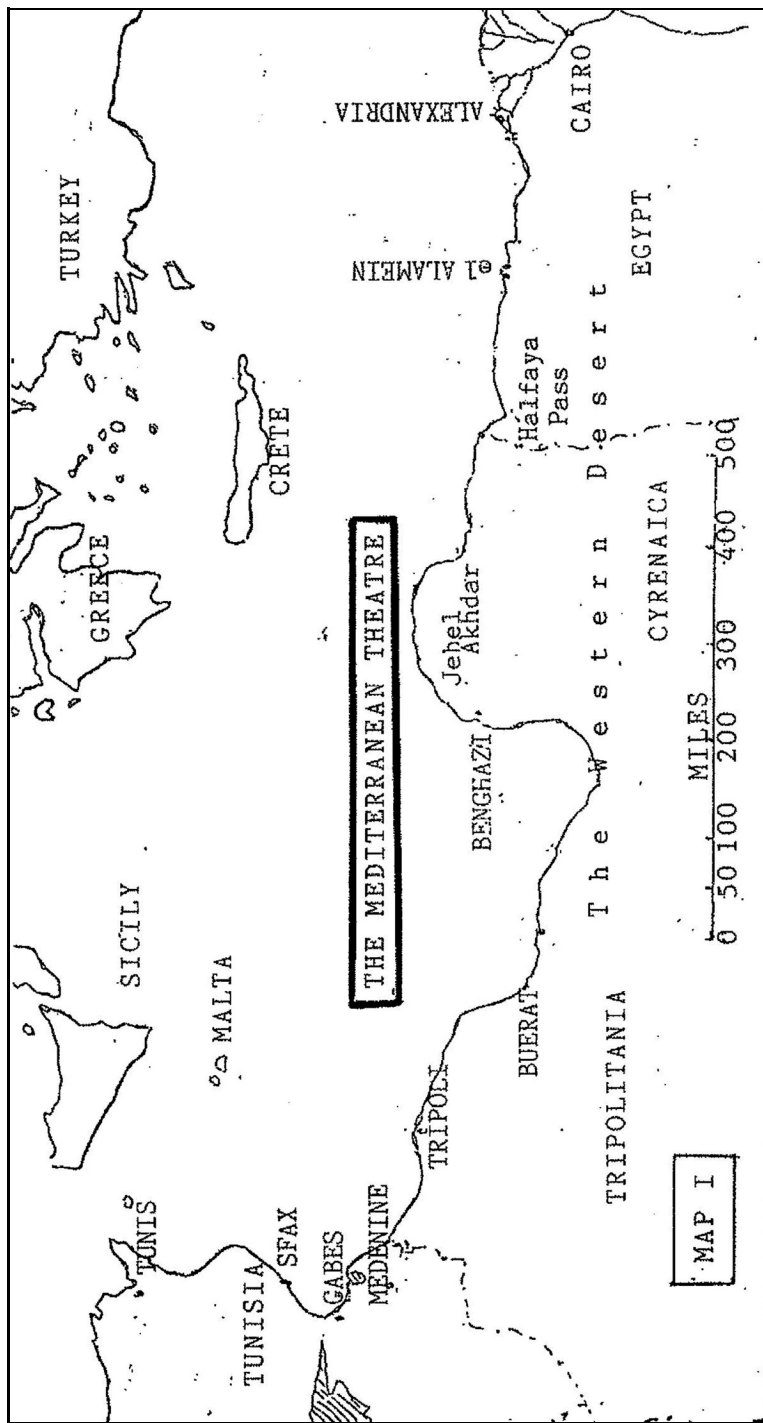
In Preston railway station in northern Lancashire, it was one o'clock in the morning on a cold November night in 1940. In the gloomy wartime black-out the queue of servicemen and civilians inched slowly forward towards a restaurant counter. Each person was probably dreaming of warming their hands, around a mug of tea or coffee. In the line was Air Vice Marshal Arthur Tedder. Following a meeting on a new 40mm aircraft gun with Rolls Royce in Barrow, he was waiting for a delayed connection to London.

Finally AVM Tedder arrived at the counter, paid for a mug of coffee, and took it back to a vacant table. As he bent to sip the steaming drink, a crumpled evening newspaper on the floor caught his eye – 'AIR CHIEF CAPTURED'. An RAF aircraft en route to Cairo, transporting Air Marshal Owen Boyd to take up the position of Deputy to Air Marshal Longmore, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief RAF Middle East, had made a forced landing in Sicily. There Boyd had been taken prisoner by the Axis authorities.

Only a few days earlier Longmore had requested London that Tedder be sent out to be his Deputy. Churchill had rejected Tedder, and approved the appointment of Boyd. Now the hazardous Mediterranean air route to Egypt had claimed another victim. The Germans must have thought Air Marshal Boyd was a choice prize to have fallen into their hands. If it had been Tedder, it may well have been, and the war may have taken a very different course.

Arthur Tedder was born on 11 July 1890 in Glenguin, Scotland. At Cambridge University he studied history, and gained a reserve commission as a second lieutenant in the Dorsetshire Regiment. On the outbreak of war in 1914, and after a short spell serving in the Colonial Service in Fiji, he returned to Britain and took up a promotion to lieutenant in the Dorsetshire Regiment. When he seriously injured his knee, he gained a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps, and gained his wings in 1916. He saw service as pilot, squadron leader and wing commander in France, Britain and Egypt during the rest of the war.

In the inter-war years promotions and senior appointments in the RAF followed, until he was promoted to air vice marshal in 1937, and in July 1938 Director General for Research in the Air Ministry in London. In 1939 his department came under the Minister of Aircraft Production, Lord Beaverbrook. Such were Tedder's considerable abilities and communication skills, he had a way of inspiring people, and his subordinates did not need his



The Mediterranean Theatre in 1942, showing the enormous span of the North African campaign, from Egypt through Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, the Western Desert to Tunisia.

specific orders to follow his lead. With Lord Beaverbrook somehow they did not get on, and their poor working relationship was a factor when he was passed over by Churchill for Air Marshal Boyd.

Now, in that poorly-lit Preston railway station, Tedder's mind must have raced. When he arrived in London next morning, he may well find himself to be back in favour, and soon bound for Cairo after all.¹

* * *

As Tedder had anticipated, on 30 November 1940 he departed London as Acting Air Marshal, on a flight to Cairo to be Deputy to Air Marshal Longmore. So as to inspect the airfields, facilities and arrangements for ferrying aircraft to Egypt, he was aboard an Imperial Airways flight via Lisbon, then Freetown, Lagos and Takoradi in West Africa, before flying west to the Sudan, and finally north to Cairo.²

It would be under Tedder's leadership in due course, that the Desert Air Force would be created. In the North African and Italian campaigns of the Second World War, the Desert Air Force (DAF) pioneered collaborative and close army-air support, which became the template for Allied forces, and an indispensable strategy for victory in both the European and Pacific theatres.

The Desert Air Force (DAF) was a blend of airmen and squadrons from nearly all the Allied countries. DAF airmen from a wide spectrum of cultures and countries, displayed a no-nonsense approach to their mission and operations. Uniforms were replaced with whatever attire was most practical and effective for the conditions, with a similar attitude to any bureaucratic processes and procedures. Everything became secondary to the priority of getting the job done.

The first formal origins of the DAF would come in November 1941, when Air Marshal Tedder appointed Air Vice Marshal Sir Arthur 'Maori' Coningham in command of a number of squadrons from No.202 Group RAF in Egypt, to form the Western Desert Air Force (WDAF). Its charter was to provide close air support to Eighth Army in the Western Desert of North Africa, and in effect became the first Tactical Air Force of the RAF. In February 1943 it would absorb some of the squadrons which were supporting British and US forces in Tunisia, and be renamed simply as the Desert Air Force (DAF). From that time the DAF also formed part of the much larger North-West (Mediterranean) Allied Tactical Air Force (NWATAF).

* * *

However, in June 1940 when war commenced with Italy in North Africa, the main operational arm of the RAF Middle East was the small No. 202 Group, predominantly based in the Egyptian Delta near Alexandria. On 13 September 1940 six divisions of the Italian Tenth Army, which was around three times the size of British Army forces in Egypt, advanced from Cyrenaica in the east

of Libya and crossed the Egyptian border. Despite being equipped with obsolete and few aircraft, mainly Gloster Gladiator bi-plane fighters and Bristol Blenheim bombers, 202 Group helped the British Army's Western Desert Force (WDF) to resist the Italian forces, and push them back from the border into Libya.

In December 1940 General Wavell, C-in-C Middle East, decided to go onto the offensive. In Operation COMPASS a strong armed reconnaissance force, under the command of General Sir RN O'Connor, crossed the border into Libya, and attacked the Italian Army. Despite some RAF squadrons having been transferred to defend Greece, two squadrons of Hawker Hurricane fighters had recently arrived from the UK. With the Hurricanes added to the remaining fighter squadrons of Gladiators and Gauntlets, Blenheims and Wellington bombers, 202 Group was able to give effective support to the WDF, and counter the Italian Air Force, the Regia Aeronautica.³

In the first week of Operation COMPASS, medium bombers such as Bombays and Wellingtons, hit Italian airfields every night. To protect its air bases the Italian Air Force had to weaken its patrols over its front lines. By the end of the first week the RAF had destroyed 74 enemy aircraft. O'Connor's force drove the Italians back across the Cyrenaica border, taking Sidi Barrani, then Bardia by 4 January, Tobruk by the month's end, followed by Benghazi, on its way to reaching as far as the border of Tripolitania. The new Hurricanes were prominent as the squadrons of 202 Group inflicted significant losses on the Italians' aircraft and airfields.⁴ By the time Benghazi was taken, the number of Italian aircraft claimed shot down, found damaged or destroyed, had climbed to around 1,100.⁵

Also in December 1940 in another beginning, Acting Air Marshal Tedder took up his appointment in Cairo as Deputy to Air Marshal Longmore. Tedder's first task was to stand in temporarily for a sick Air Commodore Collishaw, as commander of 202 Group. It was timely for Tedder to see how, as the Cyrenaican coastal airfields were captured, and became available in January and February 1941, that for a brief period Hurricane fighters could fly direct non-stop to Malta. Shipping convoys to and from Malta were able to gain some measure of air protection.⁶

In February 1941, due to supply constraints and sheer exhaustion, O'Connor's advance came to a halt on the Tripolitania border. Soon after on direct orders from London, further elements of both Army and RAF were redeployed to defend Crete and Greece. Unfortunately around the same time, the first German forces under General Erwin Rommel were beginning to arrive in Tripoli, to reinforce the Italians. In the second week of February, Benghazi was severely bombed by the Luftwaffe, forcing the Royal Navy to pull out its ships, shore-based sailors, boats and other equipment from its port. The WDF looked at its depleted strength and made preparations to

withdraw. In late March Rommel led his Axis Army, now with the Luftwaffe's support, in a counter-attack on the weakened British force.

Rommel's offensive soon forced WDF back into Egypt, leaving only Tobruk in a besieged situation. When German forces also completed their occupation of Yugoslavia, Crete and Greece, this conversely strengthened 202 Group, for it allowed some surviving aircraft to withdraw and return to Egypt. Further transfers of squadrons from East Africa, and a large delivery of Hurricanes from UK, provided some welcome relief and consolation for RAF Middle East.⁷

* * *

The fall of Crete and the Royal Navy's loss of ships to Luftwaffe attacks, proved a number of things in Air Marshal Tedder's thinking. Without the possibility of air cover from Cyrenaican airfields Crete had been doomed, and the Navy unprotected. Malta was now alone and in mortal danger. It meant that the Mediterranean sea passage was effectively closed to Allied shipping. Tedder could see that the age-old strength of sea power had been compromised permanently.

The conclusions that he drew were that, air power must be joined to sea and land forces in both strategies and operations, and that air power must be exercised jointly with the other two services. At the same time but with a pre-eminent priority, air power must be used to first win the air war with the enemy air forces.⁸

From the disastrous defeats in Greece and Crete, Tedder developed his view of a 'cycle of interdependence'.

The safety of the shipping route depended upon the Army capturing the Cyrenaican airfields, from which aircraft could take off to protect naval vessels convoying merchant shipping. The capture of the airfields by the Army depended on the Navy, provided with air cover, escorting merchant vessels containing Army supplies to Alexandria, and upon the RAF providing air support for the Army as it advanced. The RAF could only provide efficient air support for the Army, or air cover for the Navy, if it had established a degree of superiority over the enemy air force, but the RAF, depended largely for its supplies upon the safe arrival of the merchant vessels, hence upon the safety of the shipping route.⁹

Tedder was asserting the committed doctrine and theory of the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Portal. The air war must be won first, to establish and sustain air superiority. To do this the RAF must be independent from the other two services, and retain its ability to be flexible and concentrate its operations as required to support either the Army or Navy.¹⁰

* * *

By June 1941 when WDF launched its Operation BATTLEAXE offensive, some squadrons of 202 Group had been re-equipped with American aircraft such as the Curtiss P-40 Tomahawks and Martin Marylands. The strengthening of 202 Group, also included the first South African Air Force (SAAF) squadrons.¹¹ Operation BATTLEAXE was an attempt to regain the Cyrenaican coastline, where airfields were essential to provide air protection for Malta and the sea routes through the Mediterranean. The Army demanded an air protection umbrella of fighters over the battle area, to which Tedder reluctantly agreed. However he sent the medium bombers in interdiction raids against Tripoli and Benghazi.¹²

Tedder was urged by the Army to take risks to provide army protection and support over the battlefield to a maximum possible level. On 11 and 12 June thirty-six Hurricanes were moved to forward airfields. When the offensive began on 15 June, 202 Group had tasked four squadrons of Hurricanes, two of Blenheim bombers, one of Tomahawks, and one of armed reconnaissance Hurricanes, to direct support of ground forces. Although the number of aircraft was still below that of the Axis air forces, Tedder thought it gave the RAF some level of air superiority.

In the event there was a paucity of information supplied by the Army, on which to direct bombing or strafing of Axis forces. Through maintaining fighter patrols over the battlefield, and in the face of much enhanced Axis air forces, thirty-three RAF fighters were lost. Tedder was concerned that the over-emphasis of such tactics, would lead to the Axis air forces gaining air superiority. He expressed his view that to maintain air cover protection over the battlefield indefinitely, or to use air attacks to turn back enemy ground forces, could only be contemplated if the Axis air forces were near totally eliminated.¹³

While WDF incurred heavy losses in tanks, and the RAF in aircraft, the Axis forces retained their positions. Only supply shortages restrained Rommel's Deutsches Afrika Korps from counter attacking. Both sides eyed each other as they rebuilt for the next battle.¹⁴

The failure of Operation BATTLEAXE in only a few days brought much Army criticism of the poor air support, as they saw it, arguing that the RAF should become subordinate to the Army. The disagreement went as high as Churchill, who gave his ruling:

The idea of keeping standing patrols over our moving columns should be abandoned. It is unsound to distribute aircraft in this way, and no air superiority will stand the application of such a mischievous practice.¹⁵

Tedder's resilience, nerve and persuasive logic won the day. Operation BATTLEAXE was a failure, but it proved to be a catharsis, and a foundation for Tedder's greatest opportunity in the future.

Tedder appointed AVM Sir Arthur 'Maori' Coningham as the new commander of 202 Group, and he commenced transforming it into a tactical air force. In July No. 253 Wing was formed, with two squadrons of Hurricanes and one of Blenheims for close army-air support. A few months later in October/November 1941, with three more fighter Wings, 258, 262 and 269, the Western Desert Air Force (WDAF) was established.

On 18 November 1941 the new British Eighth Army attacked in Operation CRUSADER, supported by twenty-eight WDAF squadrons, which included six of Hurricanes and five of Tomahawks. The fighters were backed by Blenheim, Boston and Wellington bombers.¹⁶

For a week before the start of Operation CRUSADER, the RAF and the Navy struck at enemy ports and shipping, to prevent Axis supplies reaching Tripoli and Benghazi. WDAF bombing raids hit Tripoli and Benghazi, Axis supply lines to their front lines, and Axis airfields. Tedder took the long view that, it was by choking off the enemy's supplies, and building air superiority, the war in the Mediterranean would be won.

Despite it being alleged once again that the RAF was inferior in numbers to Axis air forces, Tedder insisted that the RAF would gain superiority. He believed, and again convinced the Army and London, that his strategic long view to gain air superiority to support the Army in North Africa, would in time be the difference to bring complete victory.¹⁷

When another campaign surfaced in the media for WDAF to be subordinated to Army control, Tedder strongly disagreed. He pointed out that protection for the Army's ground forces was but one element of a spectrum of air force operations. Tedder was not afraid to be blunt in rebutting the Army's criticism, that WDAF's inferior number of aircraft meant that the Axis had air superiority:

I set little store by numerical comparisons of strength. Serviceability, reserves, supply, and morale are vital factors in any real comparison.¹⁸

Operation CRUSADER had three main objectives: to gain and occupy the Cyrenaican and Tripolitanian coastal cities and ports, so that the RAF could use their airfields to protect shipping through the Malta 'narrows'; to relieve Tobruk; and ultimately to drive the Axis forces out of North Africa, so securing Egypt.¹⁹ Over two months Operation CRUSADER forced the Axis armies to withdraw to the west, and Tobruk was relieved.²⁰

Regaining the Cyrenaican airfields enabled air cover to reach across the sea to Malta, and allowed three convoys through to the besieged island. The success of Operation CRUSADER brought an immediate reaction from Germany. In an ominous move the Luftwaffe transferred Fliegerkorps II from Russia to Sicily.²¹

In January 1942 WDAF put its first American P-40 Kittyhawks into operations with No. 3 Squadron RAAF, and in March the first squadron of Spitfire

Mark Vs took to the skies. Also in March AVM Coningham re-formed WDAF into two groups: 202 Group to oversee the squadrons and units based in the Egyptian Delta, and 211 Group to command the Wings and Squadrons over the front lines. Two Wings were re-numbered with designations they would make renowned for the rest of the war – 253 becoming 243 with four Hurricane and two Tomahawk squadrons, and 262 becoming 239 with three Hurricanes and three Kittyhawks.²²

Although by early January Eighth Army had regained nearly all territory lost a year before, Rommel counter attacked almost immediately in late January. Once again Eighth Army had to retreat to the Gazala Line in Cyrenaica to make a stand. The Axis Panzerarmee once more in late May attacked breaking the Allied lines near El Adem. In early June 1942 Rommel instructed the Axis air forces to pound the Free French forces in the remote oasis of Bir Hakim into submission. Bir Hakim was a former Turkish fort, which the French gallantly defended from 26 May to 11 June, when they finally pulled back to join Eighth Army. The French had bought precious time. While the Luftwaffe diverted its efforts in this dubious strategy, Eighth Army was forced to retreat further from Gazala to Tobruk, but was able to do so virtually untouched by enemy aircraft attacks.²³

Using squadrons such as Nos 3 and 450 Squadrons RAAF, with their recently introduced Kittyhawk fighter-bombers, able to carry 250lb and 500lb bombs, and medium bombers, WDAF was able to respond with attacks on enemy supply convoys and troop concentrations. In addition the small number of Spitfires, such as the Spitfire Mark VBs of No. 145 Squadron RAF flying as escorts for Hurricane fighter-bombers, were beginning to make their presence felt. It was fortunate, but also a sign that Tedder's strategy was beginning to pay off, that WDAF was achieving a measure of air superiority, enabling it to cut off many Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica attacks, and protect the retreating Eighth Army columns.²⁴

Despite WDAF being much strengthened, close to its base airfields, and supplies in the Egyptian Delta, and with that advantage able to check the Axis air forces, Eighth Army was being pushed back again into Egypt. The delivery to WDAF of new and up to date aircraft was still highly susceptible to interception by Axis aircraft through the Mediterranean. Ferrying of aircraft from Britain remained mostly dependent upon the long and round-about route across Africa, which was slow and increasingly congested. A significant numerical advantage in aircraft over the Axis air forces still eluded WDAF.

A crisis point was approaching quickly. Holding onto the Cyrenaican ports to protect Malta and the sea routes, was now a lower priority. Eighth Army's very survival, and the whole Middle East was in the balance. By inference, Tedder's strategy that air power would make a crucial difference, and the future of the embryonic WDAF, were also approaching the acid test.

Notes

1. Owen, *Tedder*, pp. 121/2; Tedder, *With Prejudice*, pp. 32–4.
2. Tedder, op. cit., pp. 32–4.
3. Bowyer and Shores, *Desert Air Force at War*, pp. 6–9.
4. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., p. 9; Owen, *Desert Air Force*, pp. 43–5.
5. Owen, *Tedder*, p. 134.
6. Tedder, op. cit., pp. 29–38.
7. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., p. 10; Owen, *Tedder*, p. 136.
8. Owen, *Tedder*, pp. 138–9.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 139–40.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 140–1.
11. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., pp. 10–11.
12. Owen, *Tedder*, pp. 142–4.
13. Tedder, op. cit., pp. 124–8.
14. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., p. 11.
15. Owen, *Tedder*, pp. 142–4.
16. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., pp. 11–12; Owen, *Desert Air Force*, p. 315.
17. Owen, *Tedder*, pp. 150–2.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 151–5.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2.
20. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., pp. 11–12; Owen, *Desert Air Force*, p. 315.
21. Owen, *Tedder*, pp. 151–5.
22. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., p. 12.
23. Owen, *Tedder*, p. 160.
24. Bowyer and Shores, op. cit., p. 13; Vader, *Spitfire*, p. 108.