KITTYHAWK PILOT

Michele Lavigne
and
James Edwards

KITTYHAWK PILOT

By
J. P. A. Michel Lavigne
and
J. F. (Stocky) Edwards

~ ~ * * ~ ~

rev 2011.03.14

ISBN 978-0-986-88750-5
Cover Artwork by Adrian Low
Published by Yellow Dog ePublishers at Smashwords
http://www.ebook-publisher.ca
http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/stemcat5

This book has been published in eBook format by Yellow Dog ePublishing with the kind permission of Stocky Edwards and Michel Lavigne.

If you find any errors in the formatting of this book (spelling mistakes, etc), please email us at: YellowDog@shaw.ca . We will provide you with a free update once the errors have been corrected.

If you enjoyed this book, won't you please take a moment to write your review? Reviews help other readers make more informed decisions. Thank you.

This book is dedicated to the following Canadian pilots of No. 260 Squadron who were lost in action in North Africa:

Flying Officer R. S. Kent
Pilot Officer Dick Dunbar
Flying Officer Vic Thagard
Warrant Officer Stan Bernier
Warrant Officer E. Tomlinson
Flight Sergeant Stauble
Sergeant George Tuck
Sergeant Tak Takvor

~ ~ * * ~ ~

If you enjoyed this book, you may find more books by Michel Lavigne at: http://bit.ly/h0w6Jn
These books include:
Hurricanes over the Sands: Part 1
Kittyhawks over the Sands
G/C A.U. “Bert” Houle

CONTENTS

~ ~ * * ~ ~

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first and most sincere thanks are to my friend, James F. "Eddie" Edwards for his close collaboration in writing "Kittyhawk Pilot." Without him, the writing of this book would not have been possible; the WW II official records on 260 Squadron were, for the most part, incomplete and of no use in any way for such a book. Fortunately, Eddie has a fantastic memory of the events which occurred almost forty years ago.

Naturally, it took a lot of deep concentration for Eddie to transfix himself to the war years and relate specific details, especially since almost all of these stories have not been discussed since that time. For my part, it's my nature to be determined in having a job done completely and with the exact characteristics. I really think accuracy should always be the number one rule for any historian. So, in doing the actual book, it has been a great pleasure to work with Eddie who never flushed on any of my queries. "You have invited and forced me to relive my desert flying and combats over again," wrote Eddie in a letter to me in September 1981. "I think this has been good for me, especially since you have been able to dig out some thorny areas that have never been known or disclosed to anyone else. This has brought you and I rather close in friendship."

My sincere thanks too are for Mr. W. Ronald Cundy of Australia, who gave invaluable assistance, providing documents and answering my numerous queries and to Mr. Bill Cartwright of Vancouver, who provided a copy of his WW II diary and gave me permission to quote from it. I also thank Mr. A. Mel Arklie of Winnipeg, Mr. Nelson E. Gilboe of Seminole, Florida, U.S.A., and Mr. Bill Stewart of Montreal, who also provided documents and answered queries. All these fine people are ex-260 members.

I'm also particularly indebted to Mr. Giorgio Pini and Mr. Nino Arena, both Italian authors and historians, who carried out a great deal of research for me in the official records in Italy about the Regia Aeronautica. It's certainly the same for my friend, W/C Fred F. Lambert, who did invaluable research in England for me. Sincere acknowledgements, too, to the Honorable Walter G. Dinsdale in Ottawa and especially to Group Captain Albert U. Houle of Manotick, who has written the foreword to my book "Kittyhawk Pilot."

"Merci Beaucoup."

Michel Lavigne

A TRIBUTE TO WING COMMANDER EDWARDS

J. F. "Stocky" Edwards is an excellent example of the Canadian youth who grew up in the hungry '30's. He regarded work a privilege - the only way to earn his daily bread. He probably never heard of the silver spoon type of living.

He was born at a time when courtesy and respect were taught in every home, and when patriotism was a part of every Canadian. It is little wonder he rallied to serve his country in time of war.

Before he entered his teens he was already well on his way to responsible manhood. He had learned many lessons which would help him become one of Canada's greatest fighter pilots. Good mental and physical conditioning, participation in competitive sports, and experience gained while setting his trap lines were to prove extremely valuable.

It was typical of Stocky to enlist early in order to do his share to stop Hitler. Anyone knowing him could have safely bet he would apply to become a fighter pilot. His self-confidence, his preference to rely on himself, almost to be a loner, would influence him to select that role. However, as the author so aptly writes, his dedication and sense of responsibility made him a good team man and leader. The hardships and dangers of the Western Desert merely acted as a catalyst to his determination to excel, to help others, and to survive.

I first met Stocky in Italy in December 1943. His reputation had been well-known throughout the Mediterranean theatre for nearly two years. He had a DFC and DFM sewn beneath his wings. They acknowledged more than a dozen confirmed victories.

As a Non-Commissioned Officer he had led officers in a service which was usually quite rank conscious. In that same RAF Squadron he was promoted from Sergeant to Flight Lieutenant by battle-tested squadron commanders who recognized his ability to lead, shoot straight and survive.

Stocky remained in the Permanent Force knowing his battle knowledge would help to train a peace-time force. Although he had been on his third tour, promoted to Wing Leader and decorated with two DFC's and a DFM, the RCAF thought he could best serve at the rank of Flight Lieutenant.

Those who had avoided active service, making sure they would not hear a shot fired in anger, acted in a natural way. They protected their future rapid promotions by demoting the decorated upstarts from the war zones.

Completing thirty-two years of service, he retired with the same rank he had earned in less than four years as a fighter pilot. At that rank his knowledge of how to train future fighter pilots could be permanently throttled. He could not interfere with a peacetime mentality.

This is a story that should be told. Desert fighting was not experienced by many Canadians. It did not get the publicity it deserved. Decorations were harder to earn out there.

We must remember — the march into Germany started at El Alamein.

Houle, DFC, CD, MSc., BA Sc., P.Eng. Group Captain

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 1: THE BOY FROM BATTLEFORD

The events leading up to the Second World War were far removed from the small prairie town of Battleford. Much of the world had declined, until the final moment, to heed the warning signs of impending conflict. Circumstances had decreed that a young Saskatchewan boy would be well prepared for the role he was to play.

When war broke out in 1939, Jim Edwards was in grade twelve and determined to enlist. It was not surprising that he wanted to join the Air Force. It was an exciting thought, but more than that, Jim's formative years had developed in him the initiative and skills which would compel him to seek the role for which he would be most suited. By the time Jim Edwards entered young adulthood, he had become a responsible and diligent worker, a bright student, a healthy, competitive athlete, and a skilled marksman. These characteristics were ingrained at an early age and nurtured throughout his childhood.

The days had always started early for young Jimmy and his brother Bernie. Every morning, by a quarter to six sharp, they were at the old Canadian National Railway station where they clambered aboard Bob Speers' milk wagon, ready for another round of deliveries. They and the other youngsters who met there each morning would put their system to work; as the wagon made its slow trek, allowing just enough time for the boys to make each delivery before it moved on, they ran from wagon to door and back again, with one member of the team remaining on the wagon to load the crates.

On winter mornings, when the slower horse-drawn sleigh was used, the boys could count on over two hours per run in temperatures that could drop to forty degrees below zero Fahrenheit. In the summer, when Mr. Speers brought the truck to the station each morning, the job usually took less time. Averaging a two hour run each morning through the seasons, the boys were rewarded for their efforts when they each received two quarts of milk. Even though milk only cost ten cents a quart in those days, it went a long way to help supplement the family food supply. Besides, the early morning run was healthy and invigorating; it kept them fit. It was one of Jimmy's first jobs. He was nine years old.

But it was not all work and no play for young Jimmy. As a boy, he joined in games of cops and robbers and hauled his sled up the town hill in winter to come careening down the snow-covered slope. There were plenty of outdoor activities with which a young boy could keep himself busy. When berries and mushrooms were in season around Battleford, he picked dozens of gallons and took them home for the eating.

At home, he had chores to do. The Edwards' household was heated by a wood-burning stove. Thirty-foot poplar poles were delivered to the house and Jim and his brother bucked them up and carried the wood into the house. As if he had little else to do, the youngster managed to attend Boy Scout meetings and mass on Sundays. On weekends, he checked the trapline he ran along the Battle River.

Jim showed an interest in hunting at an early age. He had learned to shoot small birds and animals with a slingshot and bow and arrows. When he was only nine years old, he began using a .22 rifle and by the time he was twelve, his father judged both Jim and Bernie capable of handling a 12-guage pumpgun. The boys hunted Hungarian partridges, pheasants, and prairie chickens on the wing. From upland game they advanced to waterfowl, ducks and geese. Situated between the junction of the Battle and North Saskatchewan Rivers, the area around Battleford lent itself to first-rate hunting. By the time he was eighteen, young Jim was known to be a good wing shot. His hunting experience as a boy would prove useful later.

So would his belief in the premise that he must work for what he received. While still of high school age, Jim and his brother spent the summer holiday months working on Bob Speers' dairy farm. Both boys crawled out of bed at 4 o'clock each morning and by 4:30, they had begun milking twelve or more cows by hand. The job was usually done by 7 a.m. when separating the milk and cleanup would

begin. An hour later, they could be found seated at the breakfast table and, after a hearty meal, they would make their way out to the field to mow or rake hay with teams of horses. At 4:30 in the afternoon it was milking time again, but this time, sixteen or more cows needed attention. After cleanup and supper, they often accompanied old Bob Speers himself on a milk delivery to a couple of dozen summer cottages at a nearby lake before heading home for bed and a good, sound sleep. They made fifty cents a day and worked seven days a week. There was no fieldwork on Sundays.

Work or play, Jim did everything with gusto. Nothing he undertook became a passing fancy. Every ounce of energy he could muster was used to achieve a top rating in each endeavour he took on. In school, he was an avid student, holding first place in his class until he went to college in grade ten.

When he started high school, he was still making the early morning milk run. In the winter, after deliveries were made, he'd stop for breakfast before making the two-mile trek to college where classes began at 9:30 a.m. After school, he'd retrace his steps, often running or jogging all the way. Usually, he was home by 5 o'clock, but after supper he'd be off again to practise hockey or to meet another team in game play. His love for the game was obvious. When he wasn't playing for the St. Thomas College team, he was on the ice as one of the Battleford Midgets or Juveniles. On evenings when no games were scheduled, Jimmy could usually be found skating at the rink.

Eventually, his excellence in skating and the game of hockey became his forte, and at one time, he hoped to use it to further his education and attend university. He had been invited to attend Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, U.S.A. (Bing Crosby's Alma Mater), and he had an opportunity to try out with the Chicago Black Hawks when he decided instead, to join the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Later, the Chicago Black Hawks and his missed opportunity would come to mind. It was one of the few things he would really miss during the war.

Jim had always been active in sports. At school he played baseball until the hard times of the 1930's set in. It was then everyone switched to softball, because a few balls, bats, and a catcher's mitt were all the equipment required. From the time he was sixteen years old until he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, Jim pitched or played shortstop for the town's senior ball team. If he wasn't playing ball, he would spend his spare time swimming in the river, playing golf, tennis or soccer.

Although youthful in years, he was already a young man, full of energy, physically fit and had a positive attitude when news of the war came to Battleford. In his last year of high school, Jim and two close chums, Bruce Innes and Cyril Gosling, spent long hours discussing how they could contribute to the war effort. The idea of joining the Royal Canadian Air Force dominated the conversations. Two of their school friends, Bill Lewis and Gerry MacDonald, had already left high school to go to England and join the Royal Air Force. To the boys still at home, it was thrilling and inviting.

At that time, senior matriculation was required to become a pilot. Although Bruce Innes was in his first year at university, Jim still had to complete his grade twelve. The trio decided they would enlist in the RCAF in 1940. Bruce left first in June and was accepted immediately. Cyril broke his foot about that time so had to wait until the following year.

Bruce was to complete two tours on Spitfires; however, he was severely wounded in the leg over Dieppe in August 1942. He staunchly refused to be sent home, even though his wound plagued him constantly. He was to become a Squadron Commander by the end of the war.

Cyril Gosling was finally able to enlist in 1941 and went to Malta to serve on Spitfires just as the Blitz ended. He proved to be a fine shot and became a double ace in quick time. Nevertheless, Cyril Gosling was one of the unfortunate. He was shot down off Sicily in July 1943. After his airplane was hit, he was seen bailing out, landing in the water, and climbing into his dinghy. He was never to be heard from again.

When the 1940 school year ended, Jim hitchhiked the gravel road to Saskatoon, about one hundred miles away. There he was given his medical examination and signed up as a pilot in the RCAF. One of the tests for aircrew required an applicant to hold his breath for as long as possible. Unknown to him at the time, Jim set a record which would hold throughout the war. He held his breath for more than three minutes.

Once the tests were over, the recruiting officer advised the young Canadian to return home. He was told to wait for call-up in two to three months time. Jim had only enough money for one night in a hotel room and very few meals. The next day, his funds exhausted, he started walking back to Battleford. Although there was some traffic on the road, no one stopped to offer the young recruit a ride.

After almost a full day of walking, he found himself some forty miles out of Saskatoon, at Borden, Saskatchewan. Tired and hungry, he made his way to a restaurant where the bus to Battleford made a stop. He sought out the manager and told him of his plight. Jim was lucky. The manager kindly offered to loan him the $3.75 it would cost to buy a bus ticket home. While he waited for the bus, the manager offered him something to eat. Although Jim has since repaid the gentleman, he has never forgotten the neighbourly offering of help to a total stranger.

While waiting for his call-up to the Air Force, Jim went to work on a friend's farm in northern Alberta. He returned to the Battleford area in time for harvest that fall. He was driving a team of big, black Percherons, hauling and pitching bundles of wheat into a threshing machine, when he received word of his acceptance into the RCAF.

This time, he received a rail warrant and meal tickets. He was to report to the Manning Depot in Brandon, Manitoba.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 2: TRAINING

James F. Edwards enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in October 1940. The first few weeks were spent at Manning Depot in Brandon followed by six weeks of guard duty at the MacDonald Bombing and Gunnery School. Edwards then spent another few weeks at Initial Training School in Regina, Saskatchewan before he finally arrived at No. 16, Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) at Edmonton, Alberta where, on Tiger Moths, he officially began his flying career.

Until then, young Edwards had never driven a car; he had never seen the cockpit of an airplane, or even stepped within a hundred yards of one. But he was determined to become a pilot. He felt some unseen force urging him on.

Jim made his first flight in a Tiger Moth on 30 January 1941, in aircraft 4189. His instructor, a competent civilian pilot, Mr. J. Findlater, was both patient and understanding. First he kept Jim busy remembering the names of different airplane parts and how they worked in the scheme of flying. In the air, he had the greatest difficulty with gliding turns when coming in for a landing. The young pupil had trouble understanding the importance of maintaining airspeed by keeping the nose down in a gliding turn with the power off. However, it wasn't long before the lesson was learned. Mr. Findlater took charge while Jim sat in the passenger's seat as they climbed to about one thousand feet. He soon saw what happens when a pilot tightens the turn and allows the nose of the aircraft to come above the horizon without adding power. It was a lesson Jim would never forget.

With delays in the opening of the Advanced Flying School at Yorkton, Saskatchewan where Jim would be transferred next, extra flying hours were a bonus for the recruits. Flying the shiny, black and yellow Tiger Moths, he managed to log eighty-three hours of some of the most enjoyable flying he ever had in the service. A real airplane, The Tiger Moth was a fantastic dog-fighting machine. It could manoeuvre like no other airplane. By the time he had completed his seventy-first and last flight on the Moth on 27 March 1941, he had fallen in love with the aircraft. He had spent about two months with the machines while finishing that phase of his training.

At the completion of EFTS, the class looked forward, with anticipation, to the advanced flying school where they would take to Harvards. With the Service Flying Training School (SFTS) at Yorkton still not complete, the pupils were posted back to Manning Pool in Brandon to fill in time. With a large number of airmen in house at Brandon, there was rarely a dull moment. Packed mostly with recruits, the Brandon Depot also housed aircrew including Leading Aircraftsmen (LAC) who wore white felt patches in their wedge caps to designate their position. Drill sergeants saw they were kept busy by taking them on route marches twice a day. With the extra troops in town, the evenings ran high with competition for the local girls. No one could be surprised when they heard the rumour that all airmen with white on their hats were sure to be carriers of venereal disease. The girls were warned; airmen with patches of white should be avoided!

On 12 April 1941, Jim and his fellow LAC's finally arrived at No. 11 SFTS in Yorkton, Saskatchewan, for the next step in training. It was the first flying course to be conducted in Yorkton and everything, from Harvards to the instructors, was new. While a few of the instructors were seasoned and, in general, commissioned officers, most were experiencing their first time as student instructors. For his first six weeks in Yorkton, Jim received instruction from Flight Sergeant (F/Sgt.) England. Later Sgt. Martin was his teacher. Young Edwards took his first flight in a Harvard marked with serial number 2999, on 13 April and before his last trip on 20 June he had flown 109 trips at the Yorkton School. He had spent 102 hours in the air, seventeen at night.

The Harvard was an excellent trainer for advanced flying and pilots at the Yorkton School found it especially good for aerobatics. However, the engine was a little noisy with the prop in fine pitch, and it

had a decided tendency to ground loop when stalled to land on three points. Strangely enough, a three-point landing was quite fashionable during the days Jim Edwards spent at the southern Saskatchewan training ground. It was used for landing on grass fields with short landing runs. Later, when he was flying operational fighters, Jim discovered that wheel landings with the nose slightly up, just above the stall, was the only sure method. Jim believed the aircraft should be under control at all times and that when a pilot stalled an aircraft, even in landing, he actually lost control momentarily. Some aircraft with short fuselages, are inclined to dart to one side the moment the tail wheel comes down. If the tail wheel is held off until it drops under its own momentum, it will run straight ahead with no tendency to ground loop.

Because they were students in the first class at Yorkton where the trial and error method was among the tools of learning, the boys at SFTS were permitted more flying time than usual. When it came to an end, there was at least one proud boy from Battleford ready to receive his wings. James Edwards was made Sergeant Pilot in the RCAF.

After graduation from Yorkton the boys made ready for disembarkation before taking the train for Halifax and overseas. The ride on the troop train east took several days and nights and throughout the trip, the men experienced feelings and took part in events they will not likely forget. Some were sad and others were more than humorous.

Airmen, soldiers and sailors filled the railway stations across the country anxiously waiting for their hour of departure to the east. The station at Winnipeg was no different.

"The railway platform was crowded with relatives and friends saying goodbye to their loved ones. As the train slowly began to pull out of the station one of the troops, who had a beautiful tenor voice, began to sing Be Seeing You'. He sang it with such feeling that the result was contagious and almost catastrophic." Jim recalled years later, "Everyone on the platform joined in. As the train pulled away into the night, there were many men with tears in their eyes and sobs in their throats."

When the train stopped to take on fuel and water at a place called Little Long Lac in Northern Ontario, Jim remembered, "some of the boys had planned to run to the liquor store, purchase some refreshments and bring them to the train. The train normally stopped for about twenty minutes, which seemed like ample time to carry out the mission. However, the store was some distance away and many of the troops had not come back when the conductor prepared for boarding.

"One of my friends, Bill Barker, had the quick presence of mind to run out in front of the engine and hang onto the railroad tracks. He yelled to the conductor, 'You can't go yet. You've got to wait for my friends. You'll have to run over me first!'

"The conductor got excited and ran to the front of the train. At the same time, the engineer stuck his head out of the engine window and wanted to know what was going on. Then, like the conductor, he climbed down from the engine to investigate. All this time Barker pretended to be hanging onto the rails for dear life. He refused to be moved.

"By the time the conductor decided to call the local law enforcement officer, the troops had arrived back and smuggled their goodies aboard the train. All of a sudden, Barker jumped up and shook hands with both the conductor and the engineer while apologizing for holding up the train. Before they knew it, he was aboard with his buddies. The conductor dismissed everyone and got the train underway."

When the train finally arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the young airmen were billeted in a huge, old stone building not far from the waterfront. Somewhat like an old warehouse, its ceilings were held up by walls filled with broken windows. Wharf rats made their homes in and around the old building and Jim spent sleepless nights practising his aim by throwing boots and anything else he could find at the rodents.

Never before had Jim been this far away from home, and during the past six months, his 'firsts' had been many and varied. It was the first time he'd cast his eyes over the Atlantic Ocean and the huge ships waiting in the harbour. To him, the sights and sounds were fascinating. Interested in his surroundings the young Canadian enjoyed every aspect of his new life with the exception of one; he will never forget the smell of the fish along the docks. The odor made an impression that lasted for years. It would be a long time before he would be able to put fish in his mouth!

Late one evening around the middle of July 1941, Jim was aboard a convoy of some two hundred ships that left the Halifax harbour for Great Britain. He travelled on the Ausonia, a swift, armed merchant cruiser carrying hundreds of Australian groundcrew and many Canadian aircrew. Jammed with troops and makeshift sleeping quarters and kitchens, the ship quickly became a troop carrier. The Ausonia stayed with the convoy for two or three days before it broke away one evening setting a fast cruise speed for Iceland. When the ship was docked, the passengers disembarked for a ten-day stay in a tented camp.

With little else to occupy their time, the troops took to walking to the hot springs about two miles from camp where they soaked in the warm water and made small talk. During their stay, they made it regular routine to go on a route march to the playing field where the Canadian boys attempted to teach the Australians how to play the game of softball.

"Most of the Aussies were good athletes," Jim recalls. "They had played most sports before, but our style of ball was entirely new to them. Even though we play ball from an early age, it never occurred to me that the game was filled with complicated rules. We argued about whether a player was safe or out and it seemed, as the game progressed, we kept adding more rules. Sometimes, I guess, it appeared the rules contradicted themselves.

"The Aussies finally had enough. They thought we were putting them on and the more we tried to explain, the more angry they got. Soon it got to the point where they were going to beat us up!

"Fortunately, the parade officer called everyone to order and prepared to march back to camp. But the Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) appointed to the Canadian flight was one of the strongest Aussie contenders and I refused to march with him."

Eventually Jim was escorted back to camp privately and put on charge. He was marched before the officer commanding and offered his point of view. "I couldn't understand why the Canadians couldn't march themselves," Jim said. The officer commanding offered him some sound, fatherly advice and dismissed the case."

It wasn't long before the boys were packing their gear and preparing to move on. During the first week of August they embarked on the Leopoldville, an old merchant ship of the Belgian Congo. Unlike the Ausonia which was manned by auxiliary naval personnel who had been called for wartime service, the Leopoldville's crew was made up entirely of civilian natives from the Congo. It took two days and three nights to reach Greenoch, Scotland where the troops disembarked and boarded a train which took them to a large depot near Leamington, south of Birmingham, England. Old friends had been reacquainted and new friends were made.

Each morning the troops gathered on the parade square where groups of between thirty and forty men were called to proceed to various Operational Training Units. If ever there was a roulette wheel for career decisions, it was there. Young Jim Edwards wished more than ever the wheel would send him to a Spitfire squadron. He watched as men received their orders to various places and positions. Some went to Coastal Command and others were sent to Bomber Command. Luckily, he knew, accommodation at these Operational Training Units (OTU's) were limited at this stage of the war.

Finally his name was called. James F. Edwards, with thirty-nine others, was instructed to proceed to 55 OTU at Usworth, Durham, near Newcastle. He would fly Hurricanes. At least some of his prayers had been answered. What mattered most was that he had been chosen to become a fighter pilot.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 3: FIGHTER PILOT

At 55 Operational Training Unit, the last stop before being sent to an operational squadron, Jim joined sixteen of his comrades from Yorkton, as well as sixteen Australians who had taken the course following his.

Jim's operational training started when he took his first flight in Hurricane fighter number 4123 on 14 September 1941. He discovered the Hurricane I was a joy to fly and a forgiving airplane, but he believed it was too docile and underpowered to pose a threat to enemy aircraft in combat. The thick, straight wing and the humpbacked fuselage didn't hold any promise for improvement. During those months in late 1941, he wondered how Canada could put so much labour and expense into building an aircraft which had already been surpassed as a fighter by the German Messerschmitt 109's as demonstrated during the Battle of Britain. How, he wondered, could Canadian people be led to believe in their great war effort?

Apart from these doubts, all went well for the young Canadian pilot until the first day of October. That day he had already flown two trips with another student in a Master, a dual operational trainer, practising instrument flying. Over the noon hour, Jim had flown a Hurricane on a formation flight and after lunch, once the aircraft had been refuelled, he had gone on another formation flight.

It was the fifth time he was airborne that day that his aircraft's engine stopped. He was flying formation in cloud and was forced to put his Hurricane 2805 down in a field. He had been in the air about forty minutes, flying close formation to the left of his instructor in dirty black clouds when his engine cut out. Breaking away, he managed, by his own cockpit instruments, to penetrate the murk. With a cloud base of about five hundred feet, there was little time to do anything but force-land.

Searching the ground below, Jim saw fields in front of and around him - each only a few hundred square yards and all surrounded by fences and hedgerows. A glance at the smoke pouring from a farmhouse chimney told him the wind direction. He quickly decided on a nice, flat little field to his left. He banked and side-slipped his Hurricane, stalling it over the fence row. In almost one motion, the aircraft belly-landed within twenty-five yards of the fence and slid to a stop about seventy-five yards further across the field.

Walking to the farmhouse about a quarter of a mile away, Jim met the farmer and his family. They treated him to tea while he waited for the OTU crew to act on his forced-landing report. He had landed about seventeen miles from the base and in short order a lorry and crew were to his rescue. The aircraft was raised and inspected. Only one panel on the bottom side of the aircraft was caved in. It was removed, banged out and replaced and the Hurricane was declared flyable once again. Unfortunately, the size of the field and fences made a takeoff impossible. The aircraft was loaded aboard a carrier and transported back to base.

When Jim had first noticed his problem in the air, he thought the fuel supply might have run out. He was probably half right. Because the battle-weary Hurricane engines had been cutting out on takeoff when the main tanks were used first, an alternative had been established. As a result, it had become standard procedure at 55 OTU for the young pilots and their section leaders to begin takeoff on the thirty-five gallon reserve tank. When practising formation flying, the section leader would call the 'switch over to main tank' command after becoming airborne.

When Jim left the airstrip with his section that day, he was guided into intense cloud. Concentrating on maintaining close formation, he found it almost impossible to take his eyes away from the others to check the cockpit instruments. When his aircraft had been safely landed, Jim found the fuel selector switch in the reserve tank position. Although the young pupil did not agree with the 'switch-

over' alternative his leaders found adequate, his forced-landing could have been avoided had he moved the selector switch in his Hurricane cockpit.

Jim never argued the point. Instead, once back at the Usworth base, he followed procedure. Filling out his first accident report which began, "I have the honour to report that...," and ended, "your obedient servant," he felt humiliated and degraded by the phrases. He had no choice.

The next morning Jim found himself in front of his flight commander, providing an explanation for bending one of His Majesty's fighting aircraft. The explanation fell on understanding ears. "Now that you have gained some valuable experience at the expense of the Crown," the flight commander said, "you should be all the more appreciative of your good fortune to have become a fighter pilot."

Little time was lost. The young Canadian was soon back on the airstrip preparing for more hours in the air. He logged four flights in the Hurricane on 2 October and continued his training until the day came to pack his gear and move on. Although one author reported later that Jim had "committed a blunder which probably delayed his being commissioned," a promotion was not in danger. The Operational Training Unit was not a place where commissions were handed out. Young pilots were forced to wait until serving on an operational squadron or had already received promotions while at service schools.

On 20 October 1941, Jim completed his course at 55 OTU. He had spent approximately forty hours on the Hurricane I's and was ready for a second trip across ocean waters. After a few days leave, he was sent by train to Warrington, a large overseas depot near Liverpool. From there, the young Canadian was given yet another leave. He travelled to London where he met, for the first time, an uncle and aunt and cousins before he shipped out on another convoy. The Cunard Liners which left the docks of Liverpool were headed for the Middle East.

October had turned to early November and off the Bay of Biscay and Gibraltar the weather had turned the seas to a vicious sniper shooting its spray at the crew on deck. For the first time since he enlisted, Jim was no longer in training. With other budding operational pilots on board, he was selected to perform shift duty, manning the machine guns on ship security. As the storm brewed, Jim watched huge waves break over the bow, making their way to the back of the ship. The young passengers sought comfort in believing the rough waters would hamper enemy aircraft operations.

When the weather cleared, Jim could see ships in all directions. Destroyers and cruisers surrounded them. Fascinated, he watched as a battleship waited patiently for the waters to calm. In rough seas, the vessel was not tossed by the waves, but bobbed up and down as water washed over the main deck and, occasionally, leaped as high as the big guns on the deck above.

Heading down the west coast of Africa, Jim's ship left the main convoy to stop at Freetown, Sierre Leone, West Africa. The stop would mark the beginning of another new experience for the young Canadian pilot. After a few days in the harbour, the wheel of chance was spinning its fortunes. Sergeant Edwards, along with a number of other pilots, had been chosen to ferry Hurricanes and Blenheims overland across the continent of Africa to Cairo, Egypt.

Aboard DC aircraft and then a Sunderland flying boat, the young pilots were taken first to an Royal Air Force (RAF) Ferry Unit about 800 miles down the African coast to Takoraki, Ghana where they were checked out on Hurricane IIB's. The Hurricanes, with their long range tanks, would be used to make the trip to Cairo. Jim left Takoraki on 17 December 1941 and flew cross-country with five other Hurricanes to Accra and Lagos before bedding down for the night.

The pilots awoke to find weather conditions poor. They waited at Lagos and the next day, continued their journey to Kaduna and on to Maiduquri where, on the 19th, Jim's aircraft was declared unserviceable. The young Canadian pilot received orders to return to Takoraki and 21 and 22 December were spent on a DC-3 belonging to the American Airlines.

Assigned as the second pilot in a Blenheim IV, Jim began the trip again just two days before Christmas. Prior to their arrival at Cairo's Heliopolis airport six days later, the aircraft had touched down at Kano, El Geneina, El Facher, Waidi Saedna, Wadi Haifa and Luxor. Again a wheel of chance awaited them.

In Cairo, where another large aircrew pool stood by, troops once again covered the parade square where their names were called and postings were provided. From the Egyptian capital, men would be sent either to a Hurricane squadron in the Western Desert or travel to Burma or India in the Far East.

It took about two weeks for the wheel of chance to land on Sergeant Edwards' fortune. While he waited at Helio, sometimes called Hel I, Jim joined his comrades who had taken the long way around the Cape of Good Hope to get to Cairo. During the long days of uncertainty, they blinked in awe at the bright, hot sun that shone in an endless sky and marvelled at the flat, sandy wastes that stretched across the horizon. The days were long with little to occupy the pilots' time but to wonder when they would be ordered to leave.

At last, after some fifteen days of waiting, Jim received his instructions. He would be posted to an operational squadron in the Western Desert. Assigned to 94 Squadron of the Royal Air Force, he would be a member of the Hurricane fighter squadron at Antelat, located about 180 miles south of Benghasi and some 650 miles west of Cairo.

On 18 January 1942, Jim and eight other pilots were flown in a Bombay aircraft to a base called Tmimi. In order for the captain of the Bombay to find the exact location of 94 Squadron, they spent the night at Tmimi. In the morning, they continued their journey, maintaining no more than 50 feet of altitude. The new pilots learned there were Messerschmitt 109's in the area and it was wise to fly low and unobserved.

As they landed near the mess tent at Ante late after their trek, the pilots were greeted by ack-ack guns nearby. Disembarking from the aircraft, the young Canadian saw two Junkers 88's appear from a low lying cloud and drop their bombs on their airfield. The timing was perfect. They had indeed arrived at an operational squadron in the Western Desert.

Before many minutes had passed, they saw someone waving them into the mess tent. With no other official welcoming party than the cook who watched them land, the boys found cover. In the mess tent three bedraggled and well-worn fighter boys half-heartedly introduced themselves and provided a momentary update. Three other pilots were doing stand-by at the runway. But there was little chance they would have scrambled after they saw the bombs; the Hurricanes were over their wheels in mud and couldn't even be taxied, let alone fly. Sergeant Edwards learned the unit had lost some pilots and numerous aircraft a few days before his arrival. He saw a squadron full of demoralized men, lacking in almost every department. The picture was not encouraging for the young, green pilot who had just arrived at his first operational base from OTU.

By the time the new arrivals had made their way to the mess tent at Antelat, the 8th Army had reached the limits of its first westward advance under General Auchinleck. Now it was running out of steam and resources. Even to the Canadian newcomer, the entire area appeared in shambles. Rommel had solidified his forces near El Agheila and was counter-attacking. Retreating army personnel speeding eastward told the pilots at Antelat the front had been broken and the Jerries were advancing. Rommel was beginning his famous push. He would retake Tobruk and eventually advance to the El Alamein line by the end of June 1942.

In the early morning hours following the arrival of the new pilots, the four remaining Hurricanes of 94 Squadron were towed to drier ground and flown eastward to more friendly territory. The squadron camp was struck and everyone moved eastward by vehicle across the desert. During the trek, young

Edwards found himself riding beside the driver of a three-ton lorry. He discovered, first hand, how rough the desert really was away from the beaten trails.

The squadron regrouped at Mechili airfield for a few days. Jim managed to get three flights on Hurricane II's but by 30 January they were moving again. This time they went to Landing Ground 110 (LG-110) where they gave away all the remaining Hurricanes and began their conversion to P-40 Kittyhawks.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 4: 94 SQUADRON

94 Squadron of the Royal Air Force had first been formed in October 1918. The men were trained in England with SE-5a's when World War I was coming to an end. With a *'wolf's head erased'* as its badge and *'average'* as its motto, the squadron had seen only one month in action while flying out of France before the Armistice. When the war was over, the squadron had returned to the United Kingdom and was disbanded in June 1919.

During the second Great War, 94 Squadron reformed at Aden in March 1939 as a fighter squadron. It was to form the Protectorate's Defence Force against suspected opposition from the Italians in Somaliland. From September 1939, the squadron had maintained one flight of three aircraft by day and another by night on combat readiness. They had also flown convoy patrols and, occasionally, took part in policing sorties. Until June 1940, their missions had been quiet.

The squadron saw its first action when one of its aircraft brought down an Italian bomber off Ras Imran Island. At the end of the month, the unit had begun bomber escorts and ground-attack sorties on Macaaca airfield. It was then the enemy had retaliated. They began raiding Aden by day and night and on each occasion, the pilots of 94 Squadron had been forced to scramble. They had often been unable to make contact because their Gladiator aircraft were too slow for the enemy advancements.

In April 1941, 94 Squadron had moved to Egypt. In May a detachment was sent to Habbaniya to strafe the Arab insurgents and serve as an escort to the Audax and Oxford bombing raids during the siege. Meanwhile, the rest of the squadron had been in action in the Canal Zone flying Hurricanes at night, scoring numerous victories. In October 1941, 94 Squadron was finally declared operational and was moved to the Western Desert of Africa.

By 13 November, under the leadership of Squadron Leader H. C. Mayers, a Battle of Britain veteran, 94 Squadron had arrived at LG-109, south of Sidi Barrani in Egypt. They became part of 258 Wing. Once they were settled, action was soon to follow. During 'Operation Crusader' the unit's main task was ground attack duties against the German and Italian troops and transport. During the last two months of the year, the boys of 94 Squadron had achieved success against the African Corps and Italian troops. They had destroyed numerous targets on the ground, including several enemy planes. In addition, the enemy had suffered a loss of five pilots, shot down in the air.

Teaming up with 260 Squadron in December 1941, 94 Squadron had joined their companions flying sweeps. Both units began losing planes and pilots to the Me-109's during the weeks that followed. When Sergeant Edwards arrived with the unit on 19 January 1942, he learned from the surviving pilots that no less than six of their comrades had been shot down by the Messerschmitts a few days before. No longer was 94 Squadron full of the pride it carried during 1940 and 1941. It was lacking in pilots, leaders and almost everything else that could be named. By the end of January it was off operations and back to LG-110 to begin its conversion from Hurricanes to P-40 Kittyhawks.

On the first day of February the boys received nine Kittyhawk I's and two Tomahawks. They wasted no time converting the aircraft and by 3 February Sergeant Edwards was taking his first flight in a Tomahawk. Two days later he was soaring the skies in a Kittyhawk.

Although the picture appeared brighter with the new aircraft in place and a great desert ace as their new commanding officer, it wouldn't be long until disaster would strike again.

Squadron Leader Ernest 'Imshi' Mason was considered superb in his flying abilities, having been part of the first Libyan Campaign. The Commanding Officer had survived the campaign and had been credited with seventeen victories. Imshi had joined the RAF in March 1938 and been trained in the Middle East. He had joined 80 Squadron before the beginning of hostilities in the Desert and a while later, his flight had formed the nucleus of a new unit named 274 Squadron. The daredevil Britisher from

Liverpool had shone over the sand dunes in his Hurricane, combating the Italian aircraft of the Regia Aeronautica during the Libyan Campaign. He flew forty-four sorties against the Italians in a one-month period from December 1940 to January 1941.

In April he found himself fighting German aircraft over Malta where he had been sent to lead a flight of 261 Squadron. Battling against the Luftwaffe, he had soon been shot down and wounded by the high-flying Me-109's. The British ace was then stationed in Palestine and Iraq for a brief time. After a period of rest, he arrived in the Western Desert to join 260 Squadron in January 1942.

Imshi became the new Commanding Officer for 94 Squadron in February. When he arrived to take charge, the unit had less than a full complement. Apart from Squadron Leader (S/L) Mason, Flight Lieutenant (F/L) Hawthorne, F/L Shelfort, F/L Forsyth, Pilot Officer (P/O) MacKillop, P/O Usher, P/O Moon, F/Sgt. Phillips, F/Sgt. Maxwell, F/Sgt. Stone and F/Sgt. Woods who were considered experienced pilots, new pilots who had arrived at the same time as Sgt. Edwards made up the rest of the force at 94 Squadron. Sergeants Stewart, Wallace, Cliff, Whigston, Rutherford, Laurence and Brown were Canadians while Sgt. Musker came from New Zealand. All were Sergeant Pilots and none were prepared for what was to come.

"On 14 February," Sgt. Edwards remembers, "Squadron Leader Mason, with about a dozen pilots, flew to Gambut 2 to renew operations with their new Kittyhawks. I stayed at LG-110 with a number of new pilots to continue training. I don't believe anyone had a dozen hours on the aircraft at that time."

In spite of the short time the young pilots had in training, "the next day, the Commanding Officer (CO) led six Kittyhawks from 94 Squadron and twelve from 112 Squadron on a low-level sweep over the Messerschmitt 109 (Me-109 or Bf-109) airfield at Martuba. The Kittyhawks were supposed to catch the 109's on the ground. The plan was to approach the field undetected, then climb for an altitude of two to three hundred feet so we could dive on the Me-109's when they scrambled. But the Messerschmitts were especially quick to scramble and could get airborne and climb above the Kittyhawks before they turned across the field. Usually, one or two Me-109's would be shot on takeoff, however, some would manage to climb above the Kittyhawks and hack the P-40s to pieces.

"The operation proved to be a complete disaster for 94 Squadron. One of the 109's was able to get airborne and shot down five aircraft belonging to 94 Squadron and severely damaged one belonging to 112. Included in their victories was the death of S/L Mason, commanding officer. Such was the prowess of the 109 in the hands of an experienced desert pilot."

Without a commanding officer, and having suffered crippling losses with Hurricanes and now the Kittyhawks, 94 Squadron was again withdrawn from operations. The squadron went to Gasr El Arid (LG-115) near Gambut, to recuperate and retrain. They were joined by the men left behind at LG-110. On 22 February Jim Edwards was among the new pilots to regroup with 94 Squadron at Gasr El Arid where they continued training.

Within a few days, a new commanding officer had arrived. Squadron Leader I. N. MacDougall was an experienced pilot and an efficient leader. Another Battle of Britain type, MacDougall had flown Defiants with 141 Squadron in 1940.

On his arrival at LG-115, the Squadron Leader quickly assessed the situation and appraised the condition of his unit. He immediately undertook to guide his men through a period of intensive training on their new Kittyhawk I's. For the next three weeks, MacDougall spent hours briefing the pilots, telling them what operations were all about. During that time, Sgt. Edwards was able to log an additional nineteen hours on the Kittyhawk. He flew flight formation, practised air firing and dogfighting attacks and flew in battle formation. He, and other green pilots of the unit, desperately needed the training.

At last, on 21 March the squadron was again declared operational. They were sent on operations sur-le-champs, joining their companion, 260 Squadron.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 5: THE HAWK OF MARTUBA

The retreat of the 8th Army in January and February had stopped about thirty miles west of Tobruk. At Gazala a line was formed inland from the coastal road, scantily marked by barbed wire and hastily constructed minefields. It was necessary to make the line as strong as possible to save Tobruk as the base for a fresh attempt to wrest back Cyrenaica and its airfields. Without them, the Island of Malta could not be replenished, and without Malta, there could be little restraint on the Axis reinforcement in Africa. The war had taken a dangerous new turn. Singapore had fallen to the Japanese; India was being threatened and Malta was under continuous air bombardment. The German advance in Russia made Egypt more vulnerable to attack through Turkey.

Behind the military lull at Gazala was an army in the process of reorganizing and restocking. Supplies were being brought forward by sea and along the hard-worn, much-bombed ribbon of tar that ran from Alexandria. The sea raged on one side of the well-travelled road while endless desert and a single rail track lay on the other. The railhead had been pushed forward and supply dumps were accumulating.

Beyond Gazala, in the haze of dust, the enemy was engaged in the same activities. Both enemy and Allied air forces were kept busy attacking the other's supply lines and airfields and harassing their troops. Each was making strategic, tactical plans and photoreconnaissance as well as guarding their own seaports. The Axis kept watch over their port at Benghazi while the British safeguarded Tobruk. Air force personnel had no rest. The need to attack the enemy and safeguard their own defences left little time to refit and train. It was a time when newly arrived squadrons had to be diverted to the Far East.

On 1 March 1942, the Western Desert Air Force was reorganized, and a new Wing, 233, was formed. It was made up of 94 Squadron, 260 Squadron and South African Air Force (SAAF) Squadrons 2 and 4. Flying both Kittyhawks and Tomahawks, 233 Wing joined 239 Wing, equipped mainly with Kittyhawks, and 243 Wing, flying Hurricanes, to make up 211 Group.

When the Western Desert Air Force (WDAF) was reorganized, the single-engined Hawker Hurricane and P-40 Kittyhawk or Tomahawk were facing the single-engined Messerschmitt 109F of the Luftwaffe and the single-engined Macchi 202 of the Regia Aeronautica. The German twin-engined Me-110 and the Italian biplane CR-42 were used mainly for ground attack duties. The 110 also acted as a long-range fighter and night fighter but, like the single-engined Italian Macchi 200, was rarely encountered by the Allied fighter boys. Although the 202 was a fine fighting aircraft, it was only operated at certain periods in the desert and eventually disappeared from action in the area.

For the Allied pilots, the main threat rested with the Me-109F, a formidable fighter when in the hands of a capable pilot or a good shot. The Hurricane was no match for the 109; the Tomahawk was at its best at low altitudes. The Kittyhawk was considered the DAF's best fighter aircraft. Although the Kitty's were an improvement over the Hurri's and the Tommy's, few considered them a match against the Messerschmitt. Nevertheless on 21 March 1942, when 94 Squadron was declared operational at Gasr El Arid, the aircraft would again face the deadly 109's.

On the same day the squadron became operational, sections of four aircraft were sent at twenty-minute intervals to patrol the Gazala-Tobruk area. On the second patrol, the pilots were attacked by six 109's over the sea north of Gazala. The Messerschmitts had the upper hand in the dog-fight, taking P/O R.H. MacKillop from 94 Squadron. In the same combat, P/O Crosbie's aircraft was damaged.

Two days later, the boys were part of a fighter escort to South African bombers on their way to bomb Martuba West, an enemy fighter base. Again the 109's would interfere.

The section had been ordered to hit the enemy base and its satellites with the hopes of tying down Axis bombers and allowing an Allied convoy to find its way clear from Alexandria to Malta. The

assault on Martuba would give the enemy more to think about than the cargo the Allied convoy carried. With the army's loss of Cyrenaica in the previous months, the only airfields which could successfully cover the passage of a westbound convoy from Egypt were back in enemy hands. While Cyrenaica had been under British control, much of the convoy had fought its way in, but an attempt made in February had ended in costly failure. Now, they were trying again.

The mission to attack Martuba was like flying straight into a lion's jaws. The complex of airfields was well defended by anti-aircraft guns, and it was home for Gruppos of Macchi 202's as well as the Jagdgeschwader 27 (JG-27), made up of an entire wing of Me-109's. Although the 202 units boasted a host of experienced pilots, it was JG-27 which posed the main threat. This particular Geschwader (Wing) was made up of three full Gruppen, totalling about ninety aircraft. Each boasted its Experten, or great flying aces. Among them was the most successful of all, Leutnant Hans-Joachim Marseille, a Berliner with I Gruppe who had already made fifty-two confirmed kills. Other great aces with JG-27 at the time included Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz of II Gruppe, with forty-six kills to his credit, and Oberleutnant Gustav Rodel, the commanding officer of 4 Staffel who claimed thirty-two victories. Hauptmann Gerhard Homuth, commanding officer of 3 Staffel, had tallied forty-four kills while Oberleutnant Ludwig Franzisket of I Gruppe had made his twenty-eighth victory when he shot down MacKillop of 94 Squadron two days before. Other aces in the enemy camp included Feldwebel (FW) Horst Reuter, the fighter of II Gruppe who one day in January shot down from above no less than six of 94 Squadron's Hurricanes, and Hauptmann Ernst Dullberg, a Battle of Britain veteran and commanding officer of 5 Staffel.

There were others stationed at Martuba who were also chalking up kills and marking their victories. Leutnant Werner Schroer, Feldwebel Gunther Steinhausen, Leutnant Friedrich Korner, Hauptmann Eric Gerlitz, Leutnant Friedrick Hoffmann, Hauptmann Erhard Braune, Leutnant Karl von Lieres und Wilkau, Oberfahnrich Willi Kientsh, Leutnant Hans Remmer, Oberleutnant Ernst Borngen and Leutnant Eric Schofbock were making names for themselves as dangerous opponents who shot to kill from their high-flying Me-109's.

The attack was scheduled for 23 March. Twelve Bostons from 24 SAAF Squadron led by Major Ritchie Tennant left their home base that day to bomb Martuba. Their escorts were P-40 Kittyhawks from 94 and 260 Squadrons and among them, in a Kitty with the letters FZ-F on its fuselage, was Flight Sergeant James Edwards. It was his first operational sortie of World War II.

As usual, the Allied formation was to approach the enemy airfield from the east, flying parallel to the Mediterranean coast. Sometimes bomber escort missions, especially when the targets were coastal airfields of troop concentrations, were flown out to sea, crossing back in near the target. Usually, however, operations were conducted over the desert floor from where the coastline could be seen in the distance as a visible navigational guide both to and from the target, depending on the altitude flown. On that day, Edwards could not know as he headed out on his first mission just how valuable that visible coastline would be a short while later.

As the bombers and escorts made their way to Martuba, the young Canadian glanced ahead and downward. Even from an altitude of 10,000 feet and a distance of ten or fifteen miles, he could see clouds of dust rising from the airfield. He suspected enemy fighters were scrambling. But he could do no more than speculate as his Kittyhawk claimed most of his concentration; it was important that he stay as close to his leader as possible.

In no time, it seemed to the young pilot, the Allied aircraft were over the enemy field and his first battle had begun. His leader moved out a little and Jim, weaving behind, saw first one, then another, and immediately after, a third of the lead bombers go up in flames. They began falling away with flak bursts surrounding them. The leading Boston flown by Major Tennant lurched out of control and raced

to the ground engulfed in flames. No one got out. A fourth aircraft, also trailing fire from flak, held course long enough to drop its bombs and then it too, fell out of formation.

As his friends in the bombers went down, two tiny silhouettes coming straight up through the second bomber formation with fascinating speed caught Jim's attention. It was his first glimpse of the fearsoMe-109's in combat. Knowing the havoc they could wreak, he couldn't help being in awe of the deadly Messerschmitts and the pilots from III/JG-27 who were so daring and showed such total disregard for the large number of Allied aircraft surrounding them.

Under cover of their Kittyhawk escorts, the South African bombers began turning a sharp left, putting their noses down toward home. Jim was following his leader, F/Sgt. Phillips, into a turn when an Me-109 popped up almost between them and a little to one side. A quick wing-over put it on Phillips' tail. But the enemy pilot had committed a fatal error in positioning himself almost directly in front and within fifty yards of Edwards' Kittyhawk. Without hesitation, Jim squeezed the trigger. The 109 exploded; wreckage flew in every direction.

Elated with his kill, but knowing there was no time to waste celebrating, he turned his attention back to locating his leader who had taken a turn to the left. What he saw instead was a Messerschmitt's infamous white spinner with the dangerous, black hole in its centre, closing fast from the right side. Instinctively, he jammed the stick forward hard. The Me-109 had been positioned for a perfect deflection shot; Jim had even seen the tracers pass right over his cockpit. He half-rolled his Kittyhawk to get control and dived to the deck.

Feeling the effects of the past few minutes furious activity, his first kill and his first close call, Jim searched the sky for familiar aircraft. Concerned that he had been separated from his leader on his first operational sortie, the bombers, other escorts and F/Sgt. Phillips were nowhere to be seen. The young Canadian set course for home, making his way along the coast.

After flying for what he considered a reasonable length of time, however, Jim hadn't been able to locate the airfield. He was to learn over the next year and a half that desert flying was not at all like flying over lush, green countryside dotted with cities and urban sprawl, as it had been in England. There a pilot could very quickly familiarize himself with the local surroundings, and almost navigate "from pub to pub.” But it was not so in the desert.

Edwards was to recall later, "In severe contrast to the normal scenery, was the desert floor. Seen from above, it offered no evidence of habitation or life. There were shades of sand, brown and darker spots or lines were intermixed and, to the novice, it was described as the `Bundoo'. There was nothing of note for miles in the vastness below. Some pilots had more trouble than others finding their way around; novices could be right over an airfield and not recognize anything at first glance. Then, the sun would glitter off an aircraft perspex or something else on the ground, and the entire camp would come into focus. It would become obvious an airstrip lay in the centre."

Some of this Jim learned that eventful day as he searched for home base. Maintaining course, he watched the ground for recognizable landmarks and, eventually, came into familiar territory. Setting his throttle back to slow cruise, he spotted bombers flying a circuit pattern in the distance. Relieved, he knew he was home free. From the bomber field, it was ten minutes to his Kittyhawk Squadron's landing ground.

Jim taxied his Kittyhawk to a remote dispersal spot on the airbase and jumped out. He had been off the ground one hour and forty minutes. Because he had arrived later than the rest, he found no ground crew to greet him. Hitching his parachute up over his shoulder, he set off for the operations tent about a half-mile hike away. As he made his way across the field, a station wagon pulled up beside him in a cloud of dust. The commanding officer, seated beside another pilot, asked no questions but demanded Jim "get in.” Bursting with excitement but aware of the tension, the young Canadian barely

contained his urge to let someone know he had just shot down his first Me-109. He climbed into the vehicle for a silent trip to the operational tent.

Not until they arrived did Jim learn why Squadron Leader MacDougall was upset. Three of his pilots had not returned. Among them were F/L Hawthorne and Jim's missing leader, F/Sgt. Phillips. The bombers had gone over the enemy airfield at 6,000 feet, an altitude most lethal for the light ground fire and the squadron had not stayed together.

Before many minutes passed, the telephone rang. An Army forward unit reported two Kittyhawks from 94 Squadron had landed short of fuel beside some of their tanks. They had been refuelled and were on their way home. Looking more hopeful after receiving the Army's message, it seemed S/L MacDougall noticed, for the first time, the young Canadian seated before him. "What happened?" he asked.

In spite of his anticipation and his anxiety to answer that very question, Jim's voice failed him. He managed to muster a squeaky note. "I shot down an Me-109," he told the squadron leader. After the thrill of the action in the air, the report seemed anti-climactic to Jim. On the ground, he couldn't decide if he should feel pride or shame. He felt overjoyed and abashed at the same time.

When Flight Sergeant Phillips showed up at the base a short time later, Jim's feelings became less confused. His leader had been one of the pilots given fuel from the army tanks. Forgiving the Canadian for losing him on his first operational mission, Phillips confirmed Jim's victory over the 109. He claimed another as damaged after it had passed over him and engaged in a dog-fight which sent the enemy aircraft reeling. A third pilot, F/Sgt. Maxwell, had claimed another 109 in the raid on Martuba. In all, the mission chalked up two Me-109's destroyed and one damaged. One Kittyhawk and its pilot, Flight Lieutenant Hawthorne, had been lost.

The raid on the enemy airbase was also responsible for Jim's new name. Shortly after the results were tallied, Wing Commander Beresford, leader of 233 Wing, began calling Jim Edwards the "Hawk of Martuba." Although he may not have realized it at the time, it was a name worthy of the conduct Jim showed in battle. In his first encounter with the enemy aircraft, he had escaped unscathed. He had arrived home without a scratch and had been credited with one confirmed victory. The "Hawk" had shown superb flying techniques; his shooting ability was evident. As Jim rejoiced, he also knew he would have to face the 109's again and again. He realized, too, that next time, it might be more difficult to come out victorious.

His realization was affirmed just two days later when 94 Squadron lost another pilot to the treacherous 109's. The pilots of 260 Squadron had been ordered to serve as cover for a second raid on the Martuba base. Along with the aircraft from 260, nine Kittyhawks from 94 Squadron provided close cover to the Bostons who undertook the venture. This time, four 109's, again from III/JG-27, were able to take off before damage could be done. The Messerschmitts waged a constant attack on the formation as it fought its way back to Tobruk. Sgt. Laurence, a Canadian pilot who had arrived in the desert at the same time as Jim, was shot down and killed on his first encounter with the enemy. Enemy records show he was the victim of either Feldwebel Waibel or Unfz. Gruber. Both were NCOs of JG-27. The death of the Canadian meant three pilots had been killed in as many missions.

Two days later the unit was serving as escort again. On 28 March nine Kittyhawks were to provide medium cover while twelve others from 450 Squadron acted as top cover. Tomahawks from 2 SAAF Squadron were to fly close escort.

They approached the target and bombed the base without serious injury. Flak was intense and seven Bostons from 12 SAAF were holed; two were seriously damaged.

It didn't take long for the Me-109's to make an appearance. As the Allied formation was turning away from its target at Martuba, they came from high above and pounced on the Australian unit flying

top cover to the Bostons. From below, Flight Sergeant Edwards, on his second operational sortie, saw frantic activity above him. He watched as the 109's dived down and then pulled upward again. While most stayed high, Jim noticed some of the Messerschmitts continue their dive into the path of 94 Squadron. As two passed in front of his aircraft, he fired several bursts of ammunition. The first 109 made a steep climb and the other rolled over and headed west. Although Jim thought he had hit the second aircraft, it was impossible to tell for sure and once back at the base, he made no claim.

Although the escorts had done their job well and no Bostons were lost in the fourth raid on Martuba, the Allied protectors had not escaped unharmed. Two Kittyhawks were lost and word came through that Pilot Officer Crosbie had been shot down by Feldwebel Gunther Steinhausen. At first, 94 Squadron heard P/O Crosbie had only been wounded and was with a field ambulance unit, but on 5 April his comrades learned he was dead. He was the tenth victim of the German flying ace from I/JG-27. The raids had become a costly venture for the men in the sky but they had succeeded in their goal. They had successfully diverted enemy attention away from the convoy below; the ships had been able to pass the trouble spot along the African coast and reach their destination safely.

As the following days passed, there were times when Jim and his comrades sat idle. Sandstorms were brewing and before too long, operations came to a standstill. During the first half of March the scorching '*Khamseen'* would blow for days on end turning the desert landscape into a swirling fog. In the wind, tent poles would snap and tents would collapse; sand jammed the aircraft guns; scored and scratched cockpit canopies and ruined food. Eyes, ears, noses and fingernails became filled with grit. On a day bad enough to ground aircraft, visibility would be no more than five to eight yards and haze hung inside the tents which, even at midday, were dark and gloomy. A man leaving his tent could walk twenty to thirty yards and become lost and disoriented in the storms. When the wind blew sand into aircraft engines through normal air intakes, it could wear out the moving parts in a matter of hours, turning lubrication oil into an abrasive waste. Even though the desert aircraft were fitted with special air filters, the storms caused drag and resulted in reduced performance.

For weeks during the spring of 1942, the weather alternated between sudden downpours and sandstorms. When one landing stretch was a quagmire with its dugouts flooded, another could be smothered in dust blown on winds that were razor-sharp. As the spring turned to summer, the men became accustomed to temperatures that climbed to 108 degrees Fahrenheit inside their tents.

But, as Edwards was to recall later, "Everyone soon adapted and learned to get along with the bare essentials. There was always a high degree of camaraderie, living and fighting together, trying to get the most of what was necessary to battle the enemy. Everyone was too busy or engrossed to become bored or lonely.

Over the next year and a half, the boy from Battleford would take desert living in his stride. He would find that during trying periods there would be shortages of food; with only Bully beef or 'hard tack' to eat and only enough water to make tea, brush one's teeth and wash one's face, "but nobody went hungry or suffered any ill effects."

Usually there would be lots of extras — bacon, potatoes and fruits from South Africa and Australia. "They came in tins and few complained. Besides, there was no one to complain to; no one really cared to listen to such trivia. There were even times when we were able to shoot gazelles for fresh meat. We even had quail," Edwards would recall.

"Personally," he would say years later, "I never thought much of being anywhere else. In fact, I was having the time of my life. Little things didn't matter; only the important things counted. Uniforms and parades were unheard of and not necessary. Only rank insignias were worn with any regularity. There was no such thing as a social function or party or special gathering that might pro rate anyone's rank or position."

An added consolation came from the fact most of the Kittyhawk squadrons operated from new landing grounds graded out of the desert twenty or thirty miles from the coast. The men were seldom bothered by flies or other crawly creatures that were more than prevalent at older bases along the coast, and, thankfully, there were no diseases common to the other inhabited areas.

That spring, while Jim was becoming accustomed to desert living, he was also gaining on-the-job experience as a desert pilot. There were missions to run and an enemy to encounter. Jim was among members of 94 Squadron sent to El Adem on 2 April. The pilots were to stand by for escort service to a bomber mission. Because of the dust storms at Gasr El Arid, the bomber escort was cancelled and the boys, along with 2 SAAF Squadron, decided on a sweep over Gazala Airfield. They were met by Me-109's which came from above. As Jim flew his aircraft to avoid the enemy planes he fired shots but couldn't judge if a connection was made. 2 SAAF Squadron lost two Kittys to the 109's on the trip.

The next morning, ten Kittyhawks from Jim's squadron climbed toward the sun to fly close cover with eight others from 260 Squadron. They were to serve as top cover to Boston bombers whose goal was Derna airfield. Flying No. 2 to Pilot Officer Usher, Jim saw Messerschmitts attacking even before the Allied formation reached its target. 260 Squadron was being bounced and one of the enemy aircraft was coming through the top formation, heading straight for the bombers in a wide, diving-turn. Jim and his leader took action. Turning into the enemy, they fired from about two hundred yards and watched the 109's engine explode. In a ball of fire, it rolled over and careened to the ground below. Although both Jim and his leader had fired, the young Canadian pilot believed the deadly blow had come from Usher's direction.

Undeterred by the attacking 109's, 94 Squadron continued with the bombers to the Derna target. Some fifteen or twenty minutes later, on the return flight, they met more 109's. As the Kittyhawk escort protected the fast-retreating bombers, the 109's continued their harassment. P/O Moon and Sgt. Musker were shot down.

Musker survived the crash and was taken to Tobruk hospital with a broken nose and a concussion but Moon never came back. F/Sgt. Edwards had fired several times at the fleeing 109's but saw no hits. He returned to the base unscathed.

The 109 attacked by Jim and his leader on their advancement to Derna was flown by Leutnant Wildau, a pilot from the famous JG-27's 3 Staffel of Marseille. Records show that he was killed after crashing near the Via Balbia. They also show that P/O Moon and Sgt. Musker were both brought down by Unteroffizier Walchhofer, an NCO pilot of II Gruppe, JG-27.

Two days later, as 94 Squadron pilots were on their way back from a wing sweep with their companion Squadrons, 260 and 4 SAAF, they found a lone Junkers 88. The aircraft, a recce machine from I(F)/121, was destroyed about thirty-five miles south of Gasr El Arid by 94 and 4 SAAF Squadrons.

The next day, the German army began moving forward again. It was 6 April 1942 and they were making moves to consolidate around Sidi Breghix and Segnali. It was a day Jim Edwards would remember years later:

"There was another bomber escort to Derna airfield. 94 RAF was flying close cover, 2 SAAF was flying medium and 4 SAAF was providing top cover. Wing Commander Beresford was leading.

"The 109's attacked the top squadrons before we reached the target. Dog-fights were taking place above and behind us. Flying close escort around and just back and above the bombers, I could see the 109's attacking the top and medium cover squadron aircraft, but it was hard to tell what was really taking place.

"Close escort was very frustrating. It might have been a little safer from the 109's than flying top cover, but it gave me the jitters. I felt helpless because I couldn't do anything. But, that's what the Air

Force calls discipline or formation discipline — doing what you are told to do and not what you would like to do."

Once again, 94 Squadron formed the only escort over the target. The pilots flew over and out without incident, but, as before, they were greeted by 109's as they headed for home.

"They came from nowhere," Jim said. "We twisted and turned to avoid the attacks. I fired several bursts at a 109 that had pressed home its attack on a Kittyhawk ahead of me but I didn't score. F/L Shelfort was shot down."

Over a week went by for the boys of 94 Squadron without mishap. The skies were calm and it was time their luck changed for the better. For months, the Luftwaffe fighter pilots had been claiming victories over the Allied planes in air combat. But, on 13 April Jim and his buddies witnessed an incident which would brighten what had become dark days.

"We patrolled El Adem-Tobruk at 12,000 feet," Jim recalled. "Our section of four landed at El Adem for standby with 260 Squadron and 4 SAAF Squadron. While we were on the ground, six 109's came over, strafed and dropped small bombs. They destroyed one Kitty and damaged several Tomahawks. Sgt. McKay of 260 had a finger cut off by flying shrapnel.

"Two Tomahawks of 4 SAAF were patrolling the field. Captain Harrison, flying one of them, put on a spectacular air display right in front of us. Attacking the 109's, he shot down one right over the field at low level and took after the other. He was on its tail right at ground level. The 109 did everything to shake him off, but Harrison's Tomahawk hung on. He closed the gap and chewed the tail off the 109 with the propeller." As Jim and his friends on the ground watched the display, they were witnessing the Tomahawk at its best — at low level altitudes.

In the days that followed, Jim and the other pilots from 94 Squadron saw little action. Sandstorms were brewing and the Desert Air Force, like the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica, were restricted by conditions out of their power to control. For the rest of April and during the month of May the pilots were forced to keep their feet on the ground much of the time. Only between storms could they fly operations, and on two occasions, Jim had trouble.

On 19 April he was scrambled for an interception, but the engine of his Kittyhawk, FZ-I, cut out on takeoff. Managing to make a wheels-down landing, the young pilot and his aircraft found safety. Only two days later, he climbed skyward in Kittyhawk FZ-S on another scramble. This time his aircraft developed an oil leak immediately after takeoff. Oil began siphoning out into the cockpit and by the time he had landed, the floor of the cockpit was covered with it.

Back in another Kittyhawk that afternoon, Jim was practising 'shadow firing'. Playing his own private game to improve deflection shooting, he would fly parallel to the sun at fifty to one hundred feet above the flat desert. Best at mid-afternoon, the sun cast the aircraft's shadow at ninety degrees to the aircraft, right off the wing tip. When he turned toward the shadow, it moved forward and when he laid off the proper deflection and fired, the .50 bullets would kick up dust in the shadow on the desert surface.

"We had to fly south of base for several miles and chose an uninhabited area to conduct the exercise," Jim recalled after the war. "And because we would be flying at low altitudes, we had to be careful not to become mesmerized and fly into the deck. Besides watching our distance from the ground, we were always on the lookout for the 109's.

"If anyone were watching without knowing the object of the exercise," Jim added, "they would have thought we were wasting ammunition. More than that, they would likely have used that old desert expression and branded us as being 'around the bend' or 'sand happy'."

Practising shadow firing was a one-man exercise but Squadron Leader MacDougall saw the need for teamwork. During the lull in operations, he set out to give his boys another intensive period of training. They began practising the finger-four formation each time the weather permitted. According to

Jim Edward's log-book, he was in the air with three other aircraft practising the formation twice on 23 April and again on the 24th and 28th. They were at it again on the 1st, 8th and twice on the 9th of May. For F/Sgt. Edwards, the practise formations were interrupted twice. He was scrambled over El Adem on 22 April and served as an escort for Maryland bombers on the 25th. Both missions were uneventful.

Despite the intensive courses in retraining, losses to 94 Squadron had been heavy, long since outstripping the claims for the unit. Between 21 March and 10 May 1942, the squadron had lost six pilots and seven Kittyhawks to the Me-109's. In return they claimed only three and one half enemy aircraft as destroyed and another damaged.

So it was that, abruptly, on 10 May 94 Squadron was ordered to hand its Kittyhawks over to 2 SAAF Squadron and withdraw to the Delta area. 94 Squadron was re-equipped with Hurricanes for patrol duties in the Eastern Mediterranean and later over the Greek Islands. They did not return to the front lines.

Flight Sergeant Edwards, however, was to be posted to another desert unit.

"On 9 May I was airborne on squadron practise formation. It was my last flight with 94 Squadron, RAF. The next day, we were ordered to hand over the Kittys and withdraw from the desert."

"The news was a shock to the squadron and particularly to the commanding officer, S/L MacDougall. He had tried hard to revive the squadron and I believe it was beginning to shape up. The last two weeks of practise flying and working together were making a difference. We had practised the finger-four formation, attacks and tactics enough to begin to know our leaders and fellow pilots. Actually, the squadron was starting to gel when the knockout blow came."

Even though the squadron had been making progress, Jim could identify its weak points. "I had three commanding officers in a little more than three months and I never did see the first one. Flight commanders came and went so fast that I didn't really know who they were."

94 Squadron had operated in the desert for just over six months since 24 October 1941. They had lost seven Hurricanes on 14 January 1942 and four Kittyhawks on 15 February over Martuba. "We certainly didn't set any record for losses to the 109's since every other squadron in the desert had six or more pilots shot down in a single operation on a number of occasions," Jim revealed. "Maybe they had taken too long to get operational on Kittyhawks." Whatever the reason, the powers that be saw fit to withdraw them to the Delta.

"I had mixed feelings about the whole thing but I was too far down the totem pole to ask questions," Jim said.

When the orders came to withdraw, F/L Williams, Sgt. Stewart, Sgt. Meredith, and three others were posted with F/Sgt. Edwards to 260 Squadron. As Jim and his buddy, Bill Stewart, threw their kit bags and parachutes over their shoulders, only a few came to say goodbye. "Other than my friend Lindy Cliff, who I had known since SFTS where we received our wings together, only a few other sergeant buddies saw us off and wished us good luck. The CO didn't even put in an appearance." Jim and Bill Stewart walked across the field to join 260 Squadron.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 6: FLYING THE KITTYHAWK

According to Jim, "260 Squadron didn't appear any better off than 94. They, too, were in need of new equipment and had converted to Kittyhawks several weeks after the change took place at 94 Squadron. "

The Kittyhawk was one of the many designations in the P-40 series. Designer Donavan Reese Berlin of the Curtiss Company had the first P-40's ready for flight on 4 April 1940. Just over a year later the company's Chief Test Pilot, Lloyd Child was in the air again testing the aircraft. For the first time, the Kittyhawk was flown 22 May 1941.

The first series of P-40's to come off the assembly lines were delivered to the US Air Corps in 1940 and the second group in production went to Britain, also in 1940. They were H81-A1's and the RAF called them "Tomahawks," the Mk. I's. Lacking firepower and armour plate, they were relegated to training duties.

The next group, made of P-40B's and P-40C's, was delivered to Britain and to the AVG of General Chenneault in China during 1941. To the RAF, the planes became known as the Tomahawk Mk. II. In the Desert, a few squadrons began using Tomahawk IIB's on operations in June 1941. Powered by V-1710-33 Allison engines, they had fuselage armour, armour-glass windshields and self-sealing tanks.

The Mk. II and Mk. IIA had two fuselage-mounted .50 caliber guns and two .303 Browning guns in each wing, while the Mk. IIB, flying over the desert, was equipped with two .50 and three .303 guns. The C-model, similar to the B-model with the exception of fittings, provided for 52-gallon belly tanks, had new radios and re-designed internally-sealed fuel tanks.

While others were flying Tomahawks over the desert, 260 Squadron, the unit in which Jim would serve most of his time in the Desert Air Force, converted directly to Kittyhawks, the Mk. I.

With the Kittyhawk Mk. I came the beginning of the H87 series, powered by the V-1710-39 Allison engines. The US Army Air Corps' designation for the export model Kittyhawk Mk. I was P-40D while the Kittyhawk Mk. IA was P-40E and El.

Kittyhawks began arriving in the Western Desert late in 1941 and the first ones, equipping 3 RAAF Squadron, began operations at the beginning of 1942. By early spring, many of the Tomahawks of the Desert Air Force had been replaced. According to the log book of Jim's friend and fellow pilot, Ron Cundy, 260 Squadron began training on the Kitty I in February 1942, and was flying it on operations in the middle of the following month. Both Cundy and Jim Edwards' log books would show the squadron was flying both the Kitty I and IA in action during the summer of 1942. Serial numbers for the Kittyhawk I's ran from AK571 to AK999 and AL100 to AL230. The Kittyhawk IA's ran from ET100 to ET999 and from EV100 to EV699.

Compared to its predecessors, the Kitty I's radiator was enlarged and moved forward; the nose guns were eliminated; the fuselage was shortened by six inches, and the landing gear legs were slightly shortened. It had a redesigned canopy, a shallower fuselage and a thrust-line raised with new propeller gearing. The P-40E was similar to the P-40D except that it had three .50 caliber guns in each wing and the El had wings beefed-up internally for more external stores.

In September 1942, 260 Squadron would receive its first Kittyhawk Mk.II and immediately put it to use on operations. The big difference between the two was the Packard-Merlin V-1650-1 engine in the II instead of the l's Allison. The American designation for the Kittyhawk II was P-40F to P-40L, a lightweight version of the former also designated Kittyhawk II. The RAF serials for the Kitty II's ran from FL-219 to FL-488. The fighters had 170-gallon belly tanks and three .50 caliber guns per wing. The P-40F and all subsequent P-40's would become known as Warhawks to the Americans. Jim and his comrades at 260 would also call their Kittyhawk II's 'Goshawks'.

Many models comprised the F and L series. Compared to the straight F, the F-5 had its fuselage lengthened and its rudder and fin moved rearward of the horizontal tail; the F-10 also had a long fuselage and manually operated cowl flaps replacing electric cowl flap activation. The F-20 was the same as the F-10 but was equipped with a demand-type oxygen system of constant-flow. The lightweight version P-40L had only two .50 caliber guns per wing; armour had been eliminated, fuel capacity reduced and it had a shorter fuselage.

In December 1942, 260 Squadron would see their first Kittyhawk. The P-40K was fitted with the Allison V-1710-73 engine and the M with the Allison V-1710-81. Serial letters for the RAF export version were FR and, naturally, as the Mk.II had been an improvement over the Mk.I, so was the Mk.III over the Mk.II. Similar to the P-40E, the P-40K had thirty-one feet, eight and a half inches of fuselage length but was equipped with large fillet around the vertical fin and its new engine had an automatic boost control. In the I series, the K-5 had a shorter fuselage with large fin fillet and a rotary valve cooler; the K-15 was a winterized version without the emergency hydraulic system. The M series reverted to the Allison engine V-1710-81 and featured a cooling grill which had been added forward of the exhaust stubs. It had a long fuselage as all succeeding P-40's did. The P-40M-5 was similar to the M-1 with permanent carb air filter and reinforced ailerons while the M-10 was built in the same fashion as the M-5 with fuel pressure warning signals, air vapor eliminators and visual landing gear indicators replacing gear warning horns. It was these versions of the P-40 Curtiss that 260 Squadron would fly at the end of the North African campaign.

All P-40's had a wing span of 37 feet, 4 inches, and a wing area of 236 square feet. They had a tread of 8 feet, 2 inches. The Kitty I was 31 feet, 2 inches long while the Kitty II and III was 33 feet, 4 inches. Maximum speed for the Kitty I was 350 mph while the Kitty II and III varied between 360 and 370 mph at 15,000 to 20,000 feet. Normal cruise speed was about the same for all types at between 290 mph and 300 mph. Normal range for the Mk.I (P-40D) was 800 miles; for the Mk.IA (P-40 E and El), 700 miles and for the Mk.II (P-40F) 575 miles. The Mk.II (P-401) range was 275 miles and the Mk.III was 700 miles.

The service ceiling for the Kittyhawk I (P-40D) was 30,600 feet; for the Kitty IA (P-40E and El) it was 29,000 feet and for the Kittyhawk II (P-40F) it was 34,400 feet. The Kittyhawk II (P-401) could fly 36,000 feet high and the Kittyhawk III (P-40K) could reach 28,000 feet. The service ceiling for the Kittyhawk III (P-40M) was 30,000 feet. The initial climb for the Kitty I was 2,850 feet per minute (fpm); for the Kitty IA it was 2,050 fpm; for the Kitty II it reached between 3,250 and 3,300 fpm. The Kitty III's initial climb was between 2,000 and 2,050 fpm.

During the fourteen months Jim Edwards would serve with 94 Squadron and 260 Squadron in the Western Desert and Tunisia, he would fly all three types of Kittyhawks and come to know them well in combat. His logbook would record 195 operational sorties in North Africa; sixty-nine of them in Kittyhawk I's, fifty-one in Kittyhawk II's and seventy-five in Kittyhawk III's.

"In my estimation," Jim Edwards wrote after the war, "the Kittyhawk Mk.I was not an easy aircraft to fly properly and, as a result, we lost a good number of pilots while training. Some Hurricane pilots just flatly refused to fly it, preferring to go back to the Hurricane squadrons. In the first few months after conversion to Kittyhawks, all the squadrons lost heavily to the 109's. It didn't seem to matter whether they were sprogs, sergeant pilots or Battle of Britain veterans. The 109's still hacked them down.

"Our pilots seemed to be at a great disadvantage trying to learn how to fly the aircraft while carrying out operational sorties. I'm certain that's the reason why many of our experienced pilots were shot down. This was coupled with the rapid turnover of CO's and Flight Commanders. The changes left little stability within the squadrons, and the rapid changing of faces in the mess tent made most feel like

strangers to one another. There were few exceptions. There appeared to be no shortage of Kittyhawk replacements or pilots to fill the holes. Most were Canadians from the Commonwealth Training Plan.

As each of the 260 pilots gained experience, they learned their own method of handling the new machines as they arrived. "I found that one had to have a very strong right arm to control the Kittyhawk I during most manoeuvres," Eddie said. Citing an example, he wrote, "in dive-bombing, the aircraft would pick up speed very quickly in the dive, but it had a great tendency to roll to the right. One could trim this out reasonably well with the left hand, but even then, when one pulled up, it wanted to roll to the left quite violently. So I learned to trim out about half-way in a dive and hold the control stick central by bracing my arm against my leg and the cockpit wall. I found out I had more control this way and didn't have to take off so much trim when pulling out and the speed was reduced. It was also distracting to have one's left hand on the trim all the time, when it should be on the throttle."

With the instability of the Kittyhawk I in the lateral plane at changing speeds, Jim remembers, "in a dog-fight with violent changes of speed, it was all one could do to fly the aircraft. To avoid being shot down, one needed their head on a swivel—to look down into the cockpit, even for a split second, with the 109's in the air, was sure death. Since the Kittyhawk would fish-tail and skid violently if not flown smoothly, there was little chance of hitting anything, so I had the mercury ball portion of a needle and bank instrument placed right below my gun-sight. That way I could see it all the time without staring at it — it took all the guesswork out of flying smoothly. In Stanford Tuck's Fly for Your Life , he says he always looked down in the cockpit at this instrument to insure the ball was centered before firing. In every aircraft I flew on operations to the end of the war, I had my groundcrew install this instrument below the gunsight.

"The Kittyhawk Mk.II (F series) with Packard-Merlin engine was a definite improvement in lateral stability over the Kitty I," Jim said. While the Americans called the machine the `Warhawk' the men on 260 Squadron named it the 'Goshawk'. "260 Squadron flew the Kitty II's from 1 September, '42 to 17 December, '42 when the squadron received Kitty III's. There were many models and a series of improvements and we flew them to the end of the Tunisian campaign. Eventually, with the Mk.III's, the Kittyhawk became a good, stable fighting aircraft although it never did have enough power or climbing ability compared to the Me-109's or Spitfires.

"All Kittyhawks I flew had 6 x .50 guns, excellent for strafing or blowing up a target. However, one very annoying feature was the gun stoppages in the desert. In ground strafing one could count on firing all the ammo without problems, but when it came to dog-fighting and excessive 'G' forces came into play, the guns most always packed up after a few bursts, leaving the fighter in a most perilous position. The 109's never appeared to have any problems with the nose cannon - that big gaping hole in the centre of a white spinner with black puffs of smoke emitting from it.

"The cruising speed of the Kittyhawk II was reasonably fast and equal to the Spit.V and the Mk.III was comparable to the Spitfire IX. However, the Kittyhawk didn't jump when the throttle was advanced to full power and it didn't climb worth a damn like the Spitfire. It would turn inside the 109 but not as easily as the Spitfire." Jim remembers, "when the squadron's '*Tame'* Me-109 flew with the Kittyhawk, we found it was necessary to throttle back to approximately seventy-two per cent power to stay in formation. The Me-109's definitely flew at higher cruising speeds when operating with two or four aircraft."

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 7: 260 SQUADRON

THROUGH SGT. CARTWRIGHT'S DIARY

In the Desert, 260 Squadron began operations in November 1941, with strafing attacks on enemy armour and enemy positions. In December, they added 'rhubarb' sorties and sweeps to their ground attack sorties. They had attained some victories in the air, and they had lost a few pilots. In January 1942, there had been more sweeps and escort duties and in February the squadron withdrew to convert to Kittyhawks.

Originally formed toward the end of World War I, 260 Squadron of the Royal Air Force was initiated from a coastal reconnaissance flight at Westward Ho in August 1918. When hostilities ended in February 1919, the squadron was disbanded and left dormant until 22 November 1940 when it was reformed as a fighter squadron at Castletown, Scotland after the Battle of Britain.

Under the leadership of Squadron Leader W.B. Royce, D.F.C., the pilots had received Hurricanes the following month. They had flown convoy patrols in the first months of 1941 although they found no action against the enemy, and in May they set off overseas. The unit had arrived at Haifa in August where it was amalgamated with 450 Squadron, RAAF to fly ground attack sorties in the Syrian campaign. But even there, action had been limited and in August, the two units were separated.

Squadron 260 moved to the Western Desert, just in time to participate in Operation 'Crusader'. When they arrived in the sandy wasteland, they were under the command of Squadron Leader D.R. Walker.

In March they had renewed operations, flying escort trips to enemy dromes with others who formed the Wing. Included was Jim's first unit, 94 Squadron, 2 SAAF and 4 SAAF Squadrons. They had done their jobs well, but like others, suffered when encountering the 109's. They had lost six Kittyhawks and two pilots and had confirmed three victories.

In April there had been signs of improvement. Squadron Leader O.V. Hanbury, commanding officer, led 260 to nine victories, losing seven planes and four pilots. When F/Sgt. Edwards arrived at the unit in the middle of May 1942, the score was about twenty enemy aircraft claimed as destroyed in exchange for eight or nine pilots killed in action. Although he was frustrated because he could not do more, it appeared in May that Hanbury's 260 Squadron was beginning to take shape. It was the first turnabout in a long run of bad luck, the end of which Jim witnessed first-hand when he arrived at 260.

"Since we were from 94, I'm sure we were looked upon with some suspicion," Jim remembers. "They definitely saw us as sprogs (new to operations). But, at least 260 had a commanding officer who made a point of meeting us the next day. The meeting was informal and I remember he had a jaundiced eye at the time."

Jim and Bill Stewart made new acquaintances and viewed their situation. "260 seemed the same as 94. It seemed that flight commanders came and went. No sooner would one be promoted and take over, than he would be shot down."

Little more can describe squadron operations than one shambles after another. "Sometimes the squadron was lucky and sometimes it wasn't," Jim remembers. "260 still flew the stupid old Hurricane formation with six aircraft in a flight. There were three section leaders and three weavers flying behind. Everyone looked after their own tails and no one coordinated anything when the 109's showed up. It seemed that everyone was for himself and the weavers had a hell of a time trying to keep up with their leader while weaving and watching behind."

The Hurricane formation was a reasonably manoeuverable formation until the 109's appeared. "As a defensive formation, it was a confused glob of aircraft that could be turned into a confused shambles by a small number of 109's attacking from above, out of the sun," Jim said. "No wonder the

109's shot down so many! With their superior speed and height, the Messerschmitts had the superior initiative to engage or disengage at will."

As the men of 94 Squadron had, the pilots of 260 held a steadfast loyalty. The mission and its completion was paramount and Jim never stopped admiring that characteristic. "On the other hand, no tactics were discussed to combat the 109's or avoid being shot down. It always seemed, particularly on bomber escort, we were easy pickings for the 109's. We were there to divert attention from the bombers, and in order not to become victim to the enemy, we were on our own. We had to turn sharply into the attacker, but to do so was to be alone, jumping from the frying pan into the fire.

"The hornets would be coming in from all directions. When it was time to head for home after bombing the target, it was every man for himself. There was almost complete disregard for the attacking 109's which usually went after the trailers first."

Jim longed for the day he might find himself in a position to improve squadron tactics. He yearned for the time his squadron might better defend itself and give the 109's some of their own medicine. But he was new to 260. When he arrived at his new squadron, the young Canadian had completed sixteen operational sorties. He had recorded about thirty-eight hours in the Kittyhawk for a grand total of almost three hundred hours in the air.

The first days at 260 Squadron frustrated Jim Edwards. The boy from Battleford had always excelled; he had put everything into his ventures and had been able to control his own results. Now, in the African Desert, life and death depended on others, some who had seen more combat and sandstorms than Jim could know.

But as time took its toll, the young Canadian was to experience a full year with, 260 Squadron. His association with the squadron is as close as its association with him. By the time the war ended, Jim was to become the top scoring pilot of his unit. From May 1942, after trudging over the fields to join the squadron, to May 1943, he would fly some 170 operational sorties. He arrived as a Flight Sergeant and when he left, he would carry the rank of Flight Lieutenant, having led the squadron on operations on numerous occasions.

Jim's introduction to 260 Squadron was not unique. Others over months and years had experienced its trials. Among them was Sergeant Bill Cartwright, a Canadian fitter and rigger on groundcrew with the unit. With the squadron when it was formed in 1940 until the end of the war, Cartwright's days in the Desert were divided between his duties and his diary. The personal account leading to Jim's arrival date is, perhaps, one of the few documentations of 260's scanty and often inaccurate or missing records. His brief notes, from 21 May 1941 to May 1942, explain why Jim's observations were not more pleasant ones. Seeing the war in the desert through the eyes of a groundcrew member, Cartwright's notations reveal more about desert sandstorms, the teething troubles with the new Kittyhawks and the chaos and confusion brought by the latest retreat. Living in the desert as a member of an operational squadron on the front line was, at times, like living in hell.

SGT. CARTWRIGHT'S DIARY

1941:

21 May: Left England. Touch at Freetown.

2 August: Disembark to acclimatization camp.

9 August: Leave Egypt

11 August: Reach Haifa, then El Bassa.

12 August: We go to Beirut. 'A' Flight stays. Have a very good time at Beirut — swell airport.

3 Sept: Go back to El Bassa. Live in an olive grove — bags of big tree lizards and snakes.

20 Oct: Leave for desert. Everyone panics.

26 Oct: Reach LG-115 near Bagush after going through Cairo at night. Everyone windy about the desert. Burning sand — dust storms, etc.

30 Oct: Terribly hot — training pilots in desert tactics. 'A' Flight go up to front. Leave me 24 Hurri's flying 40 hours a day. Beer rationed and water.

14 Nov: Leave 115 . Throw all excess kit away. No tents — sleep in open — very heavy dew. Sew blankets together to make sleeping bag. Reach LG-109. Me-109's strafe drome.

15 Nov: "A" Flight go forward again. Can't find kites in the dark. Four o'clock. Late getting in air.

16 Nov: Terrific dust storm. All kites land safely in blue.

18 Nov: Rejoin "A" Flight across the wire at Fort Maddelana, LG-124. Horrible flat place, drome, a salt bed. Water brought up in petrol barrels, almost impossible to drink. Bully beef all the time and biscuits.

2 Dec: Big scare. Rush kites off. Enemy tank column breaks through 30 miles away heading for us. Sleep in lorries all packed up. Terribly cold. Wakened up at 3 a.m. for pep talk. Tanks — eight miles off. Albacores dropping flares trying to locate and bomb them. Bags of panic. Got drunk.

3 Dec: Danger over. Tanks passed. One column mopped up 12 miles away. Our kites come back and strafe them. Heavy gunfire. Another panic — move 12 miles down wire to fool them.

4 Dec: Return. April fool.

6 Dec: Canteen wagon in. No pipes. Get bags of tinned fruits and cream biscuits and beer. Wing/Cmdr's kite overturns as he brings in daily newspapers.

8 Dec: Wiley shot down inflames by 109's when strafing. He led the last section in.

11 Dec: "A" Flight move off.

12 Dec: Fib Bandinell disappears.

13 Dec: Move to Sidigh Rezegh.

14 Dec: Scores of tanks, wagons, motorbikes, shells, rifles, potato mashers and dead — mostly NZ. Two of our chaps have fingers blown off from picking up explosives.

16 Dec: 18 Fiat G 50's lined up on drome with tails crushed by tank. Get some 20mm cannon shells for souvenirs— too dangerous.

17 Dec: Pilots shoot down two 109's, one 88 and several probables.

18 Dec: "A" Flight leave for Gazala.

19 Dec: We follow. Pass Gazala.

20 Dec: Pass Tmimi. Reach Mechili. Army advance too fast, so carry on.

22 Dec: Terrible going over broken rock. Reach Msus. Have to scrounge for food.

24 Dec: "A" Flight join us.

25 Dec: Fairly good Christmas dinner, bags of fresh meat. We got a new CO, S/Ldr T.B. de la Pour Beresford.

26 Dec: Recce kite over every day. Shrapnel dangerous.

28 Dec: Sgt. McKay shot down when strafing armoured column. W/C Lands and picks him up.

30 Dec: McKay out for blood. Shoots down 88 in flames.

1942:

1 Jan: Go on trip to Benghazi 90 miles. To get furniture for mess. Pass two Iti dromes on way. Huge bombs and lots of CR-42's in good condition.

4 Jan: Back to Msus. Aircraft from base with chocolate, etc. that we ordered.

6 Jan: Canteen wagon from Alex gets in. Bags of everything.

8 Jan: Dust storms. Dig makeshift tent into the ground.

9 Jan: Bombers arrive but no target, so go back.

10 Jan: Leave for Antelat.

11 Jan: "A" Flight arrive with Blitz (Sgt. Cartwright's Dog).

13 Jan: A/A (*Anti-aircraft*) guns open up suddenly. Two 109's and one Hurricane. Hurri goes straight up inflames. W/C dead. 109's get away.

14 Jan: Squadron to Benina. Put up tents among wrecks of Jerry and Iti kites. Bombs everywhere up to 2,000 pounds.

15-16 Jan: Rain pouring down. Everything bogged.

17 Jan: Practically carry lorry out and go into billets. Very comfortable.

18 Jan: Take over four SAAF's Tommys and give them our Hurri's. Put 2 up on noses.

20 Jan: Jerry's break through. We draw lots. I lose and stay behind with six airmen, six armourers and a bowser.

21-28 Jan: Operate 12 Hurri's and eight Tommy's with no equipment. Very hard graft — 05:30 hours till after dark every day. Borrow small charging plant and recharge starter trollies all night. Keep kites going. Send a crew to Burka five miles away to fix up strange S/Ldr's kite. 109's over but get away. Demolition squad blowing up all Jerry engines and equipment. W/C Cmdr. says I'm doing amazing job. Deserve V.C. Armoured column reported 30 miles away. Send kites off. Enemy — so they strafe. Send them again but they only fire 100 per gun instead of 300. Windy. Relief party from squadron arrives. Go to Burka. Two columns closing in. Army say they can't hold them. Eighteen German bombers with 109 escort fly over but don't see our kites under trees so turn back. Pilots won't go up. Have to leave. One small lorry and bowser stay to send off kites that are coming back to refuel.

29 Jan: Drive all night like madmen. Road keeps coming up at me. Am so tired, keep boot down — road crowded. Get over the pass O.K. Go off road once — am pulled out. Overturned lorries full of kit everywhere.

30 Jan: Still driving. Go through Derna to Martuba and join squadron. Terrible dust storm.

31 Jan: Live in cave. Lower CO's piano and have festive evening with pilots. Bags of beer.

1 Feb: Terrible cold wind.

2 Feb: Send kites back. Leave for rear as Jerries are 30m. away and coming fast.

3 Feb: Our last three lorries at Burka were cut off by Jerries. Reach Tmimi.

4 Feb: Gazala. Dust storm. Rear party fail to start kites at Tmimi, send back party with starter trolleys.

5 Feb: Gambut — Bug Bug to LG-109 Base. Pass through Tobruk.

6 Feb: Take it easy. CO has a parade. Commends everyone and is sorry he can't have everyone decorated.

8 Feb: Send Hurri's to Tobruk. Go to LG-101.

19 Feb: Back at LG-115 where we started. Get Kittyhawks and bags of trouble.

20 Feb: Bad dust storms. Kitty's hard to handle. Pilot forgets to put wheels down — crashes and another runs into him in dust storm.

21 Feb: Go on Kitty course to Kasfereet 107 M.U. Pleasant time for 10 days. See the new Baltimores but don't learn much about Kitty's.

2 Mar: Four of our chaps that were cut off by the Jerries on the retreat turn up. They walked 300 miles in 16 days. Pretty grim time. All sick one way or another. They were only 40 minutes behind us.

10 Mar: Move up as squadron. Lots of action. Gasr El Arid.

13 Mar: First patrol lost two kites pilots safe and had two shot up — one badly. We got two and several probables.

15 Mar: 1 Kitty shot up. Pilot lucky to be unhit. 109's drop bombs, one 100 yards one side and one 50 yards the other. Nearly died of fright. Had my head down in a cockpit but was out in 0 flat.

18 Mar: One of "A" Flight crashes — no oil pressure.

19-20 Mar: Terrific dust storm.

21 Mar: Big fight again protecting Bostons. Get one 109 and two probables.

23 Mar: Two more probables — one of ours shot-up badly.

24 Mar: Two aircraft come back — valves burned out. No spare engines.

25 Mar: Sandy Saunders, great pal of mine, picked off by a 109. On the edge of the formation.

26 Mar: Terrific dust storm again.

27 Mar: Another valve burns out. We sent it back with two of "A" Flight for the same reason.

28 Mar: Aircraft pancakes on drome. Tommy cuts taking off and lands on tent, killing one poor guy.

29-30 Mar: Dust storms. Enemy aircraft overhead at night.

31 Mar: Enemy aircraft over again at night — flares and bombs. Heavy barrage. Very cold in slit trench.

1 Apr: 'S' caught fire in air on test. Joe Bernier crash-landed and got out O.K. I was definitely shaken when I saw a great column of black smoke on horizon and Joe overdue. Great friend of mine. Like a furnace when I got there.

2 Apr: Tommy and Kitty both pancake on drome. Busy day for crane. Kites landed at dusk. Our flight shot down one 87 and damaged three 109's badly. "A" Flight lost one.

3 Apr: Kites off again. Only one from our flight. Came back with two victories. One 109 pilot bails out. One Macchi on fire. Tom Hindle. They made six head-on attacks and put one cannon shell through his leading edge. We fix it. A/A warns him as he comes in to land and he just gets out of a 109's way. It goes straight home.

4 Apr: Two more kites cracked up on drome.

5 Apr: Lost one Kitty in action, got one probable and one damaged. F/Sgt. Buskill, Canadian — wounded but safe.

6 Apr: Kite back from dawn show badly shot up; shot 109 into the sea and two more damaged. Gambut bombed heavily last night. Eight aircraft burned out. Heavy barrage lit up sky. This morning two 109's bombed us, very close — one of our guys wounded. Getting too hot here in more ways than one.

7 Apr: Kites waiting at 04:30 hours for Jerries. No Jerries.

9 Apr: In action. Only one gun fired out of six. Faulty ammunition. Consequently Hindle (our ace) only damaged one 109 while getting shot up by three others. A Kitty from "A" Flight left him. He got away by diving across the Bofors guns.

11 Apr: 'M' our oldest kite crash lands — 95 hours a record for the desert. Engine just packed in.

12 Apr: Dust storms. Kites on stand-by at El Adem. Bombed by 109's. S burned out. McKay injured. "A" Flight has one shot up.

13 Apr: Kites to El Adem. Nothing doing. Dust storms.

17 Apr: Get up at 05:30 hours. Warm up nine kites. Lovely cool morning. Then dust storm all day with a furnace wind about 97 degrees. Tommy crash-landing, stalled, blew up — pilot killed.

25 Apr: We got five and three probables.

27 Apr: One of "A" Flight's new pilots —first trip, went straight in — dead of course.

1 May: One of the new pilots was lucky. Overshot, opened up again too late, banked to miss a 109 wreck, pulled up his nose and hit the deck. Unhurt — kite finished.

2-3-4 May: Dust storms — day and night.

When Jim Edwards was posted to the unit, 260 Squadron was no different than other fighter squadrons of the Desert Air Force. They had lost a number of planes and pilots to the 109's, but their

ratio of pilot losses to victories claimed was considered reasonable. Their gains were, for the most part, due to the new squadron leader who had arrived not long before the young Canadian.

The new commanding officer, S/L O.V. Hanbury had taken charge in March 1942, and from that time on, 260 Squadron became one of the best outfits in the desert. Nicknamed 'Pedro', the CO had a knack for dealing with his pilots. Steely-gray and an ex-Battle of Britain character, he was reserved, cool and quiet. In action his experience taught younger comrades a great deal. Disciplined flying became paramount in the air; Hanbury would not tolerate line shooting among his boys so when victories were made against enemy aircraft, they were easy to corroborate against enemy records. The squadron became the most stable and deadliest to fly operations in desert warfare. It remained on the front line throughout its time in the Desert, from October 1941 to May 1943 when the campaign in North Africa ended.

Squadron Leader Osgood Villiers "Pedro" Hanbury was already a fighter ace when Jim Edwards first met him at 260 Squadron. The Englishman had entered the RAF in 1939 and, in 1940, he joined 602 Auxiliary Squadron as a Pilot Officer during the Battle of Britain. He shared the victory of a Ju 88 of I/LG 1 with other pilots and on 30 September 1940 he scored again. A month later he added another claim to his record by hitting an Me-109, probably belonging to JG-26.

Joining 260 Squadron in May 1941 when the unit had set out for their Middle East destination, it took Hanbury little time to add three and one-half more confirmed victories to his list. On 14 December 1941, he connected with a Ju 88 of III/ICLG-1; on 3 April 1942, he shared a hit on an Me-109 of I/JG-27 and a Ju 87 of I/St.G-3 and on 25 April the same year, he was credited with a victory over an MC-202 of 1st Stormo. He proved to be an excellent squadron commander, both in the air and on the ground. Jim would soon realize he was serving under one of the best leaders in the Desert.

Flight Lieutenants J.M. Wylie and Tom Hindle served as flight commanders for 260 Squadron at that time. Both men were British and both were shot down shortly after Jim arrived. Wylie was an outgoing character with a happy disposition, considered to be a fine pilot. Hindle mirrored those qualities, but was even more aggressive and had been promoted from Flight Sergeant to Flight Lieutenant very quickly. Called "our ace" by Sergeant Bill Cartwright, Hindle had recorded two confirmed kills over Me-109's of JG-27, two probables and two damaged. He added further success to his tally before he, like Wylie, was shot down and killed over the African Desert.

`Sparky' Black from England joined the ranks of Flight Commander with Flight Lieutenant McKay from Scotland who was considered a steady pilot, and filled the mould of the dour Scotsman. He was a married man and, at times, his men could accuse him of worrying a bit too much, if that was possible. Black, on the other hand, had an enlightening quality of wit. According to Ron Cundy, another pilot of the squadron, Black was an old hand in the unit. Already he had been shot down a couple of times, once during the Battle of Knightsbridge in the middle of a tank battle. He had been rescued by a British Army Captain who had taken him to a British Major's tent. "Major," said the Captain, "I just found Black here, dangling from a piece of silk."

The other pilots at 260 Squadron in the middle of May 1942 included P/O Miller, P/O Glew, P/O Hale, F/Sgt. Willmott, F/Sgt. Cundy and WO Bernier. They were considered experienced pilots and were flanked by men newer to the war operations in the desert: Flight Sergeants Parrott, Viesey, Coppings, Matthews, Carlisle, Burill, Kempsey, Clark, Wrigley, and Stebbings and Pilot Officers Dunbar and MacLean and Warrant Officer Bowerman.

Willmott, Miller, Kempsey, Wrigley, Glew, Parrott, Carlisle, Bowerman, Ody and Stebbings were all Britishers; MacLean was a Scots; Cundy was an Aussie and Bernier, Hale and Dunbar were Canadians. Among them, Flight Sergeant Willy Willmott served as Deputy Flight Commander. He was easy to follow; his fighter pilot abilities gave him a couple of confirmed and eventually, he was

commissioned and, shortly after, posted as a Flight Commander to a Hurricane unit. F/Sgt. Tom 'Poly' Parrott and P/O Dick Dunbar both flew as No. 2 to Squadron Leader Hanbury. Both were quiet men. Parrott was aggressive while Dunbar, always smiling, was unassuming. P/O Glew, known to his buddies as 'Sticky' was a fellow who would have made a good Flight Commander and 'Jimmy' Wrigley maintained a quiet and reserved attitude. F/Sgt. Burill, a good steady pilot, joined WO J.S. Bernier, known to some as Stan and, to others, Joe. A French Canadian who was quiet yet full of spirit, Bernier was liked by everyone and became one of Jim Edwards' fast friends. F/Sgt. N.D. Stebbings was a keen young fellow with a quiet nature and a strong character while F/Sgt. Ody carried out his responsibilities in a slow methodical manner. Bowerman and MacLean, older than the others and blessed with admirable characteristics, were not suited to the fighter pilot business. Trying to make it work, MacLean, a Scotsman, showed spirit and became popular with the men.

Of the men in the squadron, it was Ron Cundy, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired Australian who became another of Jim's closest friends. In the desert with the squadron since November 1941, Ron had seen a great deal of action and had never been hit by enemy aircraft fire. Happy and cheerful on the ground, in the air he was sharp, a good shot and an excellent leader, able to get the upper hand on a 109. When his tour expired and he left the squadron, he would be sadly missed.

Of the pilots who came to the unit from 94 Squadron with F/Sgt. Jim Edwards were F/L Williams, F/Sgt. Stewart and Sgt. Meredith. Flight Lieutenant John E.A. Williams was the most experienced. He had joined the Royal Air Force in 1938 arriving in England from Australia where he lived for some years. The Wellington, New Zealand native had served with 601 Auxiliary Squadron, both before and during early World War II. He had then been posted to the Middle East, serving for short periods in 112 and 94 Squadrons. The men in 260 Squadron had little time to know Williams because by June he was posted to 450 RAAF Squadron as a Flight Commander.

Meredith, a Sergeant Pilot, was an Irishman. A good pilot, he was happy-go-lucky and became popular with the NCOs and airmen. He loved the good life, a life not always lived by men in the Desert Air Force.

It was Sergeant Pilot Bill Stewart who gave strength to the squadron pilots of 260. The young Canadian from Sherbrooke, Quebec, was among the most cool, unassuming people Jim would meet. Intelligent and a strong leader in the air, he seemed always able to accomplish whatever he attempted with ease and finesse. He had no aspirations to become a hero but as time went on, his capabilities became obvious to his comrades. As a member of 94 Squadron, he had taken part in numerous dogfights and was to participate in many more as a member of 260. When his hits connected, they did so with the least amount of excitement and, on the ground, Stewart cared little about making his claims. With their arrival at 260 Squadron, Jim and Bill Stewart became close friends.

Flying, in most cases, opposite flights, there were still times they would find themselves together in the air.

In the months that followed their arrival to the squadron, the young Canadian from Battleford was to become known as 'Eddie', a nickname which would stick until the end of World War II. Reserved, modest and a loner, Eddie was always his own person sporting supreme confidence in his abilities. Although he did not make friends easily, his loyalty and integrity was both unquestioned and highly valued when he did.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 8: 109's ABOVE

The arrival of Flight Sergeant James 'Eddie' Edwards to 260 Squadron coincided, almost to the day, with the opening of the Gazala battles. In May 1942, Gazala was the key to the desert war. Men on the ground were stationed along a line that ran from the cliffs of Gazala on the coastal roads into the desert. Surrounded by a series of mined and wired 'boxes', they found themselves in the walled fortress that contained water, guns and ammunition. They were ready to discourage German attackers, coordinating their efforts between boxes, preparing to sally forth and take the enemy in an exposed flank. Between the boxes, three fresh tank brigades which included the new American Grant tank and the British six-pounder anti-tank gun, were mobile. General Auchinleek hoped to smash the German armour in attacks against the line and, once having weakened it, take the offensive. But, he warned London, the re-taking of Cyrenaica would not be easy or quick. By mid-May there was no doubt the Germans and Italians would be the first to attack.

The battle began on 26 May and, four weeks later, ended in the fall of Tobruk. During those four grueling weeks, the men saw Rommel's attempt and failure to crack open the British positions from the rear (26 to 29 May); they witnessed Rommel's pause in the 'Cauldron' area when he took time to recover and re-establish communications (30 May to 10 June); and they watched his counter-strike which led to the defeat of the British (11 to 13 June).

Just after dark 25 May 1942 the battles began. Enemy air forces swept over Gasr El Arid where 260 Squadron was based. Trying to destroy as many RAF fighters on the ground as possible, the Axis bombers flew over the base, creating havoc below. According to Sgt. Cartwright's diary, the men tore off light cables and sought refuge in trenches: "Fires on north of drome. At least four bombers overhead. One with navigation lights on — think it's a Beau till it dives — bombs far side of drome, then strafes top escarpment. Three rear-gunners strafing at once. Salvos of bombs all around. Finally leave and A/A and searchlights go after them ten miles away. Five fires burning. Go to bed. Wake at four, bomber overhead, refuse to get out; bang, hugging the floor, salvo close — in trench, strafing again, nearly light — leaves at 05:15 hours. Get to sleep. A/A opens up all around, on floor— in trench, four 109's dive by 20 feet up. In bed, in trench in two seconds. Four twin-engined jobs with two 109 escort 6,000 feet, broad daylight. A/A all around them. They dive-bomb camp three miles away. 1000 hours — shufti kite. Three 88's and one 109 shot down and one Kitty and two airmen damaged. Big fight over sea. One probable 109 for us."

In the daylight hours of 26 May the offensive against the Gazala-Bir Hacheim line began to move on the ground. Four Italian Divisions started a diversionary attack on the strongest part of the line to the north. The German 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, making their way for Acroma and 90 Light Division, heading for El Adem, bypassed Bir Hacheim to the south. During the first days of the battles the Desert Air Force concentrated on ground attack sorties against the enemy columns that were slowly making their way into Allied territory. Back at Gasr El Arid, the nightmares continued. Out of the darkness, enemy bombers tormented the men on the ground. In sketchy detail, Sgt. Cartwright recorded the nights that followed the first attack:

26 May: Flares — bombing and strafing till 12:30. Getting jumpy. Johnny and Taff sleep in slit trench. Believe half the camp did. Sleep very well afterwards but the slightest noise wakens me. Get out of bed once to see if flares are too close and step on one.

27 May: Tank column approaching. Big battle. Kites go off to attack anything in that area. Strafe our own Indian lorries by mistake. Big panic — tanks approaching — send kites off. New "gen" every minute finally load up wagons — all but tents and blankets. Bombers over at night — same again.

28 May: Same again. Blitz chasing lady friend round the parapet — knocking sand in. Sleep in trench now.

29 May: Big day. 57 hours in flight. Bags of strafing and bomber escorts. Tom Hindle gets a probable. F/S sitting in tent all day doing nothing as usual. Some again at night.

The next day, Flight Sergeant Eddie Edwards was to fly, for the first time, into intense air combat. Although he had joined other Kittyhawks of the unit on 14 May to rendezvous at El Adem for a Boston escort, they had been forced to return twenty minutes later because of heavy dust storms. Now, he would experience first hand, what others had told stories about.

At 14:45 hours, eight aircraft from the unit took off with two more from 2 SAAF Squadron to cover a group of Boston bombers raiding the enemy positions in the 'Cauldron' area. Eddie's was the only squadron assigned to escort duty. With two fighters on each side of the bombers and the rest stepped up in fours behind them, Eddie's Kitty, HS 0, took No. 2 position on the starboard side of the trailing bombers. They were on their way to the Rotunda Waleb Gap where, according to their briefing, they were to look out for vehicles moving west.

Once over the Gap, the formation saw only two large groups of vehicles. They were stationary and, when fired upon, they lay dormant. With no return fire, the bomber leader decided the men must be friendly. The South African Bostons from 12 SAAF and 24 SAAF Squadrons, flew on for another nine miles in order to bomb a group of fast-moving vehicles that could be seen from the air. The target was four miles north of the northern gap and as Eddie and the others approached, light ack-ack (*slang for anti-aircraft guns*) was coming up around them. The target below was beautifully concentrated and as the young Canadian provided escort cover, he could see the bombs hitting the convoy below. The South African Bostons banked steeply to port and put their noses down to gain speed for a hasty withdrawal from the target area. Following suit, Eddie, on the outside of the turn, swung out to stay in line with his number one front.

The formation was turning down sun when the enemy came from above. Eight Me-109's of I/JG-27 and III/JG-53 and some aggressive MC-202's of the Regia Aeronautica were upon them. Reacting quickly, Eddie banked slightly to the right and fired a long burst from between forty-five and thirty degrees, about 150 yards away. He saw pieces fly from the Me-109's fuselage while it continued its dive. Well below its regular flying manoeuvre, the enemy aircraft turned and probably headed straight for home.

Meanwhile, Joe Bernier was holding his own. The French Canadian was attacking a Messerschmitt which probably landed later, crippled, on the combat floor. Most of the other Desert Air Force pilots were being challenged by Macchi pilots and some were not as lucky as Eddie or Joe Bernier. Flight Lieutenant Wylie had been shot down on the way to the target and Pilot Officer Hale suffered the same fate on the formation's return. His comrades saw Hale bail out of his aircraft and watched as Macchi pilots strafed from overhead. Neither he nor Wylie came home. Flight Sergeant Copping managed to bring his aircraft back to base where he made a successful crash-landing. Although the bombers had been well protected and the enemy had not found its way through the fighter screen, the cost had been high. Two pilots, including a flight commander, had died in exchange for one probable hit and one damaged aircraft. The score was not one that would change the course of the war.

The raids didn't stop. Another blow was waiting for 260 the next day. On the ground, 150th Brigade found itself assaulted on all sides by Axis forces attempting to open and clear the supply route to the west. Fierce combats raged overhead and the action continued for S/L Hanbury's boys.

Twice 260 Squadron met pilots of III/JG-53, a Gruppe of the 'Pik-As' Jagdgeschwader which, on 20 May had returned from action over Sicily, Crete and Malta to meet the challenges of the Desert Air Force. Although not as highly publicized as its counterpart, Jagdgeschwader 27, its pilots were as well

trained and experienced as their victories were many. Their new Kommandeur was Major Eric Gerlitz, an ex-JG-27's ace who well knew the hazards and triumphs of desert fighting. The Staffelkapitane was Oberleutnant Franz Gotz who arrived in Africa with thirty-three victories under his belt. The Gruppe carried a full compliment of pilots and many were excellent marksmen.

As the boys of 260 Squadron flew a bomber escort mission attacking Italian troops in the Segnali area on 31 May they had their first encounter with the `Pik-As'. Four Me-109's kept up a continuous attack while the unit made their way both to and from their target. The enemy claimed three of the Kittyhawks and went home untouched. F/Sgt. Viesey didn't return. Sgt. Sheppard crash-landed at home base and Flight Lieutenant Tom Hindle landed a badly shot-up Kittyhawk.

The same evening, six Kittyhawks of the unit met four more 109's from III/JG-53 during an interception patrol.

Again the 'Pik-As' boys had the upper hand as they mauled S/L Hanbury's pilots and aircraft. F/L Hindle was shot down and didn't return. F/Sgt. 'Cork' Carlisle's kite was shot to ribbons before it was able to crash-land back at base. According to Sgt. Cartwright's diary, "three Kittys crash-landed on (the) drome" during the course of the day. The boys of 260 Squadron mourned the death of Tom Hindle, the unit's ace. He had brought his personal score of confirmed to four during the lull in May taking a 109 of JG-27 flown by a Feldwebel Gromotka on 21 May and an Me-110 from III/ZG-26 the following day while it was leaving the Martuba airfield. In addition to his four confirmed, Hindle had three probables and three damaged. He stood second to CO 'Pedro' Hanbury in victories at the time of his death.

As the month of June 1942 rolled around, activities increased. Ground and air crews on both sides became tense with the stress of continuous action. For 260 Squadron, it was a period primarily of bomber escort duties over enemy concentrations. On numerous occasions, as they flew escort, the Kittys carried 500 pound bombs. Most times they would take to strafing after their bombs were dropped.

During June as in the months before, the pilots of 260 Squadron continued to suffer under the attacks of the high-flying Messerschmitts. Encounters became more complicated when the P-40's began experiencing gun stoppages. Good for ground firing and target shooting, the six .50 were experiencing bad luck when G forces were exerted. The flyers were trying to cope with critical situations when, after one or two short bursts, their guns jammed, leaving them at the mercy of the enemy.

The entire battle area became engulfed in dust, and haze reached almost 12,000 feet. The sun shone through the haze with full intensity, glaring off the Kittys' canopy tops. Always, there were 109's above, ready to attack. Co-operation with the 8th Army was more evident than ever. The entire Desert Air Force flew flat-out in an attempt to disrupt and stop the enemy columns.

For Eddie Edwards, the month of June 1942 became a time to take stock of the situation. Realizing now the expanse of the desert war, he developed his own philosophy - "To fly and do my job, and to live and fly again." Determined to conquer the enemy, he studied the tactics of the Me-109's and discovered ways to fly his Kittyhawk in combat, despite the poor organization in his own unit where frantic turning and firing were still part of the battle plan. During the month of June Eddie learned what flying in desert conditions was really about and that mobility and rapid departure were life-saving tactics.

It was a time when S/L Hanbury leaned on his men to make only the claims that were justified. A particular pilot in 260 Squadron had been practising a good deal of line shooting where claims were, for the most part, his own, with no witnesses to substantiate the event. Because of the stern manner in which S/L Hanbury handled the case, few pilots from the squadron came forward with claims unless there was evidence of obvious hits. Most pilots would rather have flown dangerous sorties than make a claim before the CO with scanty details. It was the reason Eddie Edwards' record shows only one confirmed victory during the month of June. Officially, his record should have read one destroyed, three probables and one damaged.

It was also a time when official records of 260 lacked the attention of an Intelligence Officer (IO). The IO had been dismissed by S/L Hanbury who questioned the character of the man responsible for maintaining the squadron's historical accounting. Until F/L Johnny Walker appeared as Intelligence Officer in August, record-keeping was minimal and, perhaps, inaccurate at times.

Under trying conditions and in the depths of heavy dust storms, the British 150th Brigade was surrounded by the enemy 1 June. Early in the day, the Stukas, enemy dive-bombers, began heavy attacks in the Rotunda Waleb Gap. Flying from the green belt airfields at the coast, the Stukas were not affected by the dust storms that forced the Desert Air Force to remain on the ground for the better part of the day. With air assistance impossible, the Allied Brigade was lost to Rommel's forces early in the afternoon. With its loss, the 'Cauldron' area between Sidi Matruh was threatened as the initiative passed to the enemy. When the day ended, 1,500 sorties had been flown and fifty out of 250 serviceable aircraft had been lost. The losses made it necessary to conserve the fighter-bombers. Low altitude attacks were curtailed for the moment.

The dust storms continued; they were a constant frustration to the Desert Air Force's efforts. On 2 June they had to forfeit an inviting attack on a concentration of 2,000 vehicles at Got el Waleb. 260 Squadron aircraft were able to reach Sidi Barrani during the day on their way to Gambut 2, their new base, but were forced by the storm to stay on the ground. While sand cut across on desert winds, temperatures soared to overpowering levels. The Khamseen advanced on the landing grounds in a great bank of red dust that appeared like a wall of raging smoke several hundred feet high. One fighter squadron swore the dust rose to 12,000 feet turning the sunlit sky blacker than night for about fifteen minutes.

Meanwhile, on the ground, the Germans were moving decisively ahead and the next day, the fighter force turned to the defence of Bir Hacheim. Fighter-bombers from the Desert Air Force destroyed sixty vehicles in the area and the boys of 260 Squadron were permitted to land at Gambut 2. Later in the day, Eddie joined other squadron pilots as part of an escort for Tomahawks who were to make a sweep over and west of Gazala. Although Stuka bombers were active in the area, they had no encounters.

On the 4th, Allied squadrons concentrated their sweeps over Bir Hacheim and its Free French Garrison. Men lying in slit trenches, battered by continuous shellfire, lifted their dust-streaked faces to watch the aerial battles overhead. One of the battles was fought by 260 Squadron. The Kittyhawks had been scrambled over the garrison when they met four CR-42's, escorted by MC-202's. Flying Officer John Waddy, an Australian ace, claimed one of the biplanes. Corroborating the claim, Italian records show the downed CR-42 was flown by S. Magg. Bartolozzi or S. Magg. Marcoti. At the end of the day, the French commander of the Bir Hacheim garrison sent a signal: "Bravo, Merci a la RAF." Quickly, the RAF replied, "Bravo a vous. Merci pour le sport."

In the darkness of the following morning, flashes of artillery fire lit the rim of the 'Cauldron'. Guns were laying in wait, ready to provide a barrage for the British. 30 Corps centered their attention on smashing the Axis forces in the Knightsbridge area. By then, they were well dug-in and covered by anti-tank guns. The RAF flew cover most of the day. F/Sgt. Edwards became part of one sortie to escort Bostons over enemy troops and on the trip, four snappers appeared overhead, but did not attack. At 18:15 hours, six more Kittyhawks of 260 and eight Tomahawks of 5 SAAF Squadron took off on an interception patrol over the same area. They ran right into the 109's of JG-27 and III/JG-53 and some MC-202's escorting Ju 88's. While the South African squadron suffered losses, 260 was luckier. Only two Kittys had been damaged, in exchange for a claim of four Me-109's and one MC-202 damaged.

On the ground, 5 June had been fatal. The 32nd Army Tank Brigade lost fifty of its seventy tanks and 22nd Armoured Brigade lost sixty more. By the end of the day, communication and control were

gone and confusion reigned in the 8th Army. Regardless of the effort, the battle on the ground had been lost by the end of the following day.

It was not until 14:00 hours on 6 June that the Bostons were able to attack Axis troops seven miles northwest of Knightsbridge. During one air engagement, Eddie Edwards saw the Allied planes attacked by the ever-aggressive 109's. One Kittyhawk and two Tomahawks were shot down. One Messerschmitt was destroyed.

In the dangerous hours of 6 June the South African Air Force units began moving back from Gambut and the exposed forward areas that were about to be overrun. Working with their South African comrades, the boys from 260 began moving to Bir El Baheira in Egypt on the 7th; 'A' Flight was the first to leave.

On the ground, Rommel turned back to eliminate Bir Hacheim. He had cleared his way to Tobruk. Pressure on the French garrison intensified and before long, additional support from both sides joined the battle. German machine-gunners crept closer and 88 raked the ridge with vicious airbursts. The garrison was surrounded; bombardment mounted in intensity. Air-Vice Marshall Coningham, Commander-in-Chief of the Desert Air Force, committed his men to full support of the garrison and pilots knew 8 June would be a day of heavy combat. The plight of Bir Hacheim was desperate. The enemy, 90 Light Division, had joined the attack and the fortress was under siege by infantry, tanks, artillery and Stukas. It was over this battlefield that Eddie claimed his first confirmed victory with 260 Squadron.

In an unusual mission the large formation of Kittyhawks and Tomahawks of 233 Wing sent on an offensive sweep over Bir Hacheim that morning provided no escort to bombers, nor were they ordered to strafe ground targets. Their task was paramount; they were to 'seek and destroy'. Ten Kittys from 260 Squadron were joined by six more from 2 SAAF. Tommys joined the mission from 4 and 5 SAAF Squadrons and no less than thirty-six P-40's took off to take care of any enemy aircraft they could find in the area.

On his twenty-third operational sortie of the war piloting Kittyhawk HS M, Eddie was sure the 109's would respond to the challenge. He was sure they would find the enemy above and ready to pounce. He was right.

Once the Allied formation was over enemy territory, a flock of 109's and 202's took action. Striking from high above, they pulled up quickly and steeply after each attack. As in other battles, tension rose, but this time, the boys from 233 Wing concentrated on better defence, protecting each other from enemy fire. Only one Tomahawk was lost when its pilot was forced to bail out after his controls were blown away by cannon fire. Although the South African pilots weren't able to claim any kills, they eventually damaged five Messerschmitts and one Macchi.

As Eddie Edwards flew top cover in his Kittyhawk I, 109's attacked from astern. Committing themselves to their attack pattern, the 109 pilots dared to come face to face with their Kittyhawk opponents before pulling skyward to repeat their routine. Eddie watched two of the Jagdfliegern come, as anticipated, from behind the formation and start the expected dive. Eddie heard his leader call the turnabout and together they changed direction. The lead Messerschmitt pulled up steeply at the unexpected move but his follower pursued the course just a little too long on Eddie's side. Quickly, the Canadian fired in front of him as far as he could. Within seconds, the well-aimed burst hit the spinner and propeller of the 109 almost head on and Eddie watched as fragments splintered from the enemy aircraft right under the formation. Trailing clouds of black smoke, it fell toward the earth. Eddie and many of his comrades saw the plane blow to bits on the ground. The 109 had landed on a mine; the pilot was killed instantly.

Eddie's hit had taken down an Me-109 flown by Feldwebel Johann Walchhofer, an NCO pilot of 6 Staffel, II Gruppe, JG-27 who, on 3 April had claimed victories over aircraft flown by P/O Moon and Sgt. Musker of 94 Squadron. The German pilot had four confirmed victories to his credit at the time of his death. In 1941 he had taken a Russian aircraft and on 24 January 1942 he had brought down a recce Hurricane belonging to 207 Squadron. Considered a valuable member of his team, the death of Walchhofer came as a blow to his comrades.

Bir Hacheim hadn't seen the last of air battles in the area. The next day, the Luftwaffe continued numerous large Stuka attacks against the garrison. During an interception patrol that afternoon, Sgt. Clark was lost to the enemy.

Sensing its critical position 10 June the enemy increased its efforts. The Luftwaffe units made close to four hundred sorties against Bir Hacheim that day. German Air Commander General von Waldeau, employing simple but effective methods to deal with British interference, attempted to keep patrols over the fortress and parry the British sorties by using a screen over the El Adem area. It worked. On the ground, it was all over by the end of the day. The surviving defenders of the Bir Hacheim garrison managed to find their way out of the fortress. In the darkness of night, 2,700 of the garrison's 3,600, including two hundred wounded were carried away in a convoy of lorries and ambulances which had been sent to retrieve the men. By dawn of 11 June the French Brigade had completed its withdrawal under fighter cover. By the time the Luftwaffe appeared again, they were well on their way.

During the last eight days spent supporting the new offensive, the Desert Air Force had flown almost 1,500 sorties and lost nineteen fighters; German losses numbered fifteen fighters from 1,400 sorties. The Italian Air Force claimed its pilots had shot down fifty-three enemy aircraft over Bir Hacheim and counted another twenty-four as possibles. They admitted to having lost seventeen aircraft in fourteen days since the offensive began.

Both sides added to their total the next day as battles in the air moved in the direction of El Adem. Eddie Edwards flew his twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth operational sorties that day and well remembers the dismay he felt.

Serving as part of an escort team for Boston bombers, Eddie saw the Bostons show their true bombardment potential. Supporting a deteriorating military position, they made six separate attacks. For their bomber friends, it was a good day; for the boys of 260 it could have been better. Haze and dusk covered the battlefield and 109's came out of the sun to attack on both escort sorties. Only frantic turning and firing, with no real defensive formation, allowed most to return to base.

On the first trip up about nine o'clock 12 June, the Kittys had been attacked over the target, El Adem. Six Me-109's and MC-202's met their opponents and claimed one Kittyhawk in the battle, leaving the pilot wounded. The second trip had been worse than frantic. It was a Battle of Britain-style dog-fight in which one hundred Axis aircraft appeared in the evening sky to match wits with six RAF squadrons. At 20:00 hours, Ju 87's, Ju 88's, Me-109's and MC-202's met the RAF over El Adem in what was the largest engagement of the battle so far.

Before the skirmish was over, the Desert Air Force had lost five fighters and claimed eleven. Returning from their escort mission west of El Adem, the Kittyhawks of 260 Squadron ran into the fight and lost two planes. Sgt. Jimmy Wrigley's No. 1 broke away when the 109's attacked. He was shot down by FW Gunther Steinhausen of JG-27. It was the German ace's nineteenth kill. Even though Eddie and other Kitty pilots had turned to his defence and Jimmy was seen bailing out, he never returned home.

Back at El Baheira, Eddie's section leader landed first. When the rest of the pilots were on the ground, the men met for serious debriefing. It had been a bad day for the unit — for the boys who, lacking effective defence training, were to work as a team — and Eddie didn't like it. Frustrated with the day's events he couldn't bring himself to make notes in his log-book, as he habitually did after almost

every eventful operational flight. The Desert Air Force had lost eleven aircraft and flown 538 sorties. They were the most severe losses since 11 June. On the ground, it was even worse. By nightfall, the remnants of 2, 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades were at Bir Bellefaa, east of Knightsbridge. They had lost no less than 138 tanks in the day's battles.

13 June was a decisive day, both for Rommel and his 90 Light Division and for General Ritchie and the Desert Air Force. Attacking El Adem again, Rommel's forces captured their target. While the British armour in the Knightsbridge area was suffering heavy losses and being driven back toward the coast, weather conditions deteriorated making it impossible for the Desert Air Force to operate most of the day. As the day progressed, General Ritchie was forced to decide whether to have his men stay and fight it out where they stood, or make a difficult withdrawal to Egypt. By nightfall, he ordered the abandonment of the Gazala line. "Get out, and get out before it's too late!" his command came down.

The Commonwealth forces began retreating from the Gazala area the following day while the RAF concentrated its efforts over a convoy bound for Malta. It had become the hour of crisis and priorities were put in place. Supplies were imperative for Malta and the convoy which had departed from Alexandria was entering 'Bomb Alley' between Crete and the African mainland. Air-Vice Marshall Coningham dispatched most of his Kittyhawks and Tomahawks on 14 June to protect the merchant ships, or to escort bombers. They were briefed to attack German airfields, timed to interfere with German air attacks on the Malta convoy.

During one of the latter missions, Eddie's squadron was sent on a sweep ahead of the Boston bomber formation raiding the Acroma area. While other fighter squadrons were serving as actual escorts, 260 joined them in the target area. As they made their turn for home, about twenty Ju 88's and Me-109's were spotted. Hanbury's pilots took their Kittys to intercept while fighting off 109's that appeared from out of the sun.

From Eddie's position in the formation, he could see what was beginning to look like a three-ring circus performing right before his eyes. As he straightened out from the turn, heading east down sun, no less than five aircraft went by him in a steep dive and again in a steep climbing turn like a cat and mouse chase. He watched as a 109 sought refuge from a Tomahawk that followed, chased by another 109. Within seconds he saw a Kittyhawk hot on its trail and behind it, another 109 in close pursuit. Each was firing at the other.

Eddie can't recall how the squadrons were broken up but, somehow, 260 was sitting in the middle of the fracas untouched.

In another area of the battle zone, Me-109's were diving down on another Allied Squadron about 1,500 feet below, then pulling back up to strike again. Eddie realized the enemy aircraft would be pulling up close to his altitude. Opening the throttle, he positioned himself. Two Messerschmitts climbed skyward and attempted a wing-over, one after the other, in front of his Kittyhawk, HS T. He fired just as the first 109 stalled about 150 yards in front of him. It appeared to disintegrate. He took aim on the second German fighter, stall-turned about one hundred yards away. He pressed the trigger again and saw his aim was good. He had hit the engine and tail section of the second 109 and watched it join the first in a spin to the ground. There was little time to witness more. The downed Me-109 pilots had friends who were retaliating from above and behind and Eddie had to concentrate on his own defence.

When the battle-ridden sky cleared and 260 was back on the ground at El Baheira, the pilots counted their good fortune. Three probables were added to a tally of many damaged. Eddie had chalked up one probable and one damaged for his own record. With spirits lifted, the boys rejoiced when they learned no pilots and no aircraft were lost to the enemy fighters. Even after another bomber escort later the same day, 260 Squadron had survived unscathed. The mission, as recorded in Eddie's log-book

reveals "Me-109's pounced the top cover. One Me. shot down, two Kittyhawks missing." The missing aircraft were from another squadron.

Although the Allied records for 14 June are confused and facts appear to be missing, 5 SAAF Squadron claimed one Me-109 destroyed and two damaged; 260 RAF Squadron claimed three probables and many damaged. On the German side, records reveal that in the morning, Lt. Hicke of III/JG-53 was wounded during a dog-fight while his unit was escorting Ju 87's on an attack of the convoy. At midday, Lt. Karl-Heinz Quaritsch from the same unit failed to return from another escort trip after dog-fighting with Allied planes. At about 17:00 hours, Lt. Hesse, also from III/JG-53, was lost over the sea during a Stuka escort, and Lt. Hein of I Gruppe, JG-27 went down in combat at an unknown time. Uffz. Helmut Gierster of 5 Staffel was hit during a strafing mission and presumably brought down by flak about 20:00 hours. Having reported that his first victim seemed to have disintegrated after bullets hit, it is likely Flight Sergeant Edwards shot down one of the German pilots reported as missing, although it is impossible to tell for sure.

On the ground, the Malta convoy reported bad news. Although AVM Tedder recorded "successful interception when the convoy was at its most dangerous position produced a marked effect," the mission had been a failure. Later in the day, an Italian naval force, including capital ships, was found to be making for the convoy and it had been forced to turn back, re-entering Alexandria on 16 June.

The convoy had failed to reach Malta, but the affair had been a boon for the South African I Division which was able to get away from the Gazala trap almost without interference by enemy air forces. The Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica had been so busy cutting off the convoy they had practically no time to spare. The South African soldiers manoeuvred thousands of vehicles down the escarpment passes, by-passing Tobruk in the lee of the enemy-occupied heights.

As the convoy was retreating to Alexandria, the boys of 260 Squadron were preparing for an exercise that would be a first. On 7 June the unit had received its first kites with bomb-racks fitted to carry a 500-pound bomb. Although Squadron 112 had been the first to employ the Kittyhawk as a dive-bomber carrying 250-pound bombs, Eddie and his comrades would be the first to carry double the weight. On 15 and 16 June the pilots began their new role, carrying bombs that hung under the Kittyhawk bellies.

As Rommel's 21 Panzer Division moved east on the Trish Capuzzo to attack the El Adem box, they were attacked by Bostons and the Kitty-bombers of 260 Squadron who, after 14:00 hours, switched their attention to vehicles situated south of El Duda, ten miles east of El Adem. Maintaining a three-way objective, the Kitty-bombers escorted the Bostons to their target and continued to dive-bomb, ridding themselves of their 500-pound loads. The Kittyhawk pilots completed their missions by strafing the target.

Remembering the missions, Eddie recorded it like this:

15 June: "First show. 260 Squadron carrying a 500-pound bomb slung on bomb racks between the undercarriage, provided close cover to Bostons bombing Panzer Division east of Acroma. No enemy aircraft were encountered on this mission. After seeing the bombers safely on their way home, 260 returned to the target area. Concentrations of vehicles were selected from approximately 7,000 feet and peeling off in sections of four aircraft, the Kittyhawks dove down at approximately 60 degrees to 1,500 feet and commenced a slight pullout, releasing the bomb at the same time at a target just above the nose of the aircraft. By then, the ground fire and ack-ack would open up so it was best to continue right down to deck level, strafing targets before turning for home."

15 June: "Second trip. Took off on bomber escort carrying 500-pound bomb. Squadron formed up over base, then we were informed that the bombers were delayed. Squadron landed with bombs on — another first — seemed safe enough, but everyone attempted an extra soft landing."

15 June: "Third trip. 260 Squadron again close cover to Bostons over Panzer Division. 109's attacked over the target area but 5 SAAF Squadron flying as top cover engaged them — 260 turned back, dive-bombed and strafed enemy concentrations, returning home on the deck."

16 June: "Two trips. Bomber escort and dive bombing. Flying close escort. Distance from base LG. (Bir El Baheira) to target area was now getting shorter every day. Dive-bombing considered good and the ack-ack and ground fire was intense. A number of our aircraft would get hit by ground fire on every flight — from slight to severe damage — however, I never had so much as a scratch on my aircraft from ground fire in the desert campaign.

The work of the Bostons and the Kitty-bombers was efficient. During the two days of attacks, the Panzer Divisions recorded "violent enemy bombing" and "hourly attacks." Two ground attacks by the enemy divisions were repulsed and Allied bombing prevented the development of a sundown attack on 15 June.

But while the air attacks were proving successful, home base for 260 Squadron became a place of tension. Stationed at El Baheira, the airfield was protected by a screen of four infantry battalions and three and one-half A/A batteries ready to engage their tanks. As the enemy crept closer, Air-Vice Marshall Coningham prepared for withdrawal despite the confidence of the British Generalship, who believed El Adem would be held and no immediate threat to the airfields existed. Coningham was determined to fight as long as possible from the Baheiras but, in the event of retreat, his men were prepared. All equipment was to be moved and aircraft that could not be flown out were to be immobilized, but not destroyed.

At Baheira, air crews and mechanics ate and slept next to the aircraft and vehicles stood ready to evacuate them. No one took their clothing off; only hard rations and little water were on hand. Exhausting hours were spent preparing the bombers and fighters which came in and went out again as soon as they could be serviced. During the last bombing raid on 16 June the Bostons observed twenty enemy tanks close to Sidi Rezegh, not far from their landing grounds. Anxiety grew.

In the late night hours and under the cover of darkness on 16 and 17 June General Norrie gave orders to evacuate El Adem, leaving the airfields exposed. Stealing away in the small hours, their escape was so quiet that not even Air Headquarters heard word of the move. Without the protection of the ground forces, the airfield lay open to enemy attack until 15:00 hours on 17 June. Unknown to men at El Bahaeira, they spent fourteen hours as sitting ducks to any columns of the enemy who might have by-passed the last remaining defence positions at Sidi Rezegh and Bellamed.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 9: EDDIE EDWARDS, OTTO SCHULZ AND WALLY CONRAD

As the sun rose on the Western Desert the morning of 17 June 1942, it was business as usual. Flight Lieutenant Walter G. Conrad, a young fighter pilot from Melrose, Ontario, stood on readiness with the rest of his squadron stationed at the Gambut complex. The Hurricane unit had come to know Wally as an aggressive pilot who had come to the Desert in September 1941 as part of Operation Scarlet. Posted to 274 Squadron of the RAF on the 18th, he had been flying operations with that unit ever since.

As Wally Conrad waited for his orders that morning, he could reflect on 112 operational sorties in the desert. An experienced pilot and efficient leader, he had six and one-half enemy aircraft destroyed to his credit and could count more probables and damaged. He had registered his first successes during Operation Crusader, destroying a Me-109 on 1 December, and sharing a Stuka dive-bomber on the 13th. In 1942, he had claimed another Ju 87 on 12 February and an MC-202 on 27 March. Although he claimed an Me-109 as damaged on 31 May enemy records revealed the aircraft was destroyed. During the week before, he had claimed another Me-109F brought down on 12 June and an unconfirmed CR-42 on 15 June.

Ready for another routine day, Wally received his orders at 11 o'clock. There was need for an immediate delousing sweep east of Tobruk for Boston bombers. The bombers were headed for El Duda and eleven Hurricanes soon took off to catch them. With Squadron Leader Dean serving as CO, the Hurri's climbed as fast as they could, but when the Bostons were spotted, they were too high to catch. There had been a `cock-up' in orders, and before long, Squadron Leader Dean gave the command to turn back and return to base.

Headed home, Wally was quick to spot four Me-109's above. He called a break and took off in a climbing turn toward the leader of the enemy formation. As the rest of the Hurricanes continued on their course, Wally realized his R/T (radio/transmitter) must be unserviceable and his call had not been heard. Too late, he found himself alone; facing four Messerschmitts who meant business. Unknown to Wally, their leader was one of Germany's top pilots, Oberfeldwebel Otto Schulz, a 31-year-old daredevil with fifty confirmed victories, a record second only to the famous Hans-Joachim Marseille.

Schulz, an NCO pilot from Treptow (Pommern), Germany, belonged to 11/JG-27 which had arrived in the Western as reinforcement. Since April 1941, I Gruppen of that Geschwader, along with Gruppos of the Regia Aeronautica had borne the brunt of the fighting in the air over the sand dunes of Africa. Previously, the unit had served in the Campaign of France and the Battle of Britain. It had also served over Greece where Schulz had registered two victories in April of 1941, and over Russia where he quickly added another seven to his record.

His success had continued over the desert floor. On 6 October, Schulz claimed a victory over a P-40 Tomahawk belonging to 2 SAAF Squadron and two Hurricanes, probably from a Navy fighter squadron. On the 30th of the same month, he scored another triple, bringing down aircraft of 250 and 238 Squadrons in the Bardia-Sallum Sidi Omar area. Things had been quiet until the advent of Operation Crusader and on the day prior to the opening of that battle, 17 November, the German ace caught a Bristol Bombay flown by a F/Sgt. West, shooting it down near Gazala. A Wellington bomber from 109 Squadron had followed on the 21st and the next day, a Tomahawk was destroyed over Bir Hacheim.

As he flew over the Tobruk fortress at midday three days later, on 25 November, Schulz added a Hurricane of 238 Squadron to a score that would total nineteen Allied aircraft during the period of Operation Crusader. Three days later, he added another triple to his tally. In quick succession he had shot down P/O Muhart, F/O Voss and Lt. Palm of 94 Squadron. A couple of days later, his line of fire destroyed the aircraft of two Allied aces. Sgt. 'Tiny' Cameron of 3 RAAF Squadron was able to bail out

of his Tomahawk to be picked up safely, and P/O Neville Duke of 112 Squadron managed to leap clear of his Tomahawk when it crash-landed. Making sure of his kill, Schulz had dived down on Duke's aircraft, filling it full of holes and setting it ablaze before he turned skyward. This final flourish became the trademark of the German daredevil.

His twenty-fifth victory was registered on 4 December when he hit a P-40 of 2 SAAF Squadron, flown by either Lt. Dodson or Lt. Liplawski. In the next few days he added a Hurricane and three bombers to his score. On 6 December 1941, another Hurricane went down, belonging to either 229 or 238 Squadron. He claimed a Blenheim of the Lorraine Squadron over El Gubi the day after downing a Boston of 24 SAAF Squadron. Yet another Boston went down on the 8th.

Confusion reigned the following day when Ju 52's had been about to land at Tmimi. An Italian fighter pilot, gone wild, had come over and shot two of the Junkers down in flames. Schulz, by that time an Unteroffizier, had quickly taken off and shot the offender down. Ten days later, Schulz found himself in trouble. An Italian fighter narrowed in on his Me-109 and blasted it to the ground. The German ace was unharmed.

On 15 December, Schulz registered his thirtieth kill. A Tomahawk, apparently flown by P/O G.H. Ranger of 250 Squadron, was his victim. Ranger was a veteran of the Campaign of France who had six victories to his credit. He died just a few days before the award of his Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) had been announced.

Schulz's victories continued to mount. Five days later, two more Tomahawks went down south of Barce, as well as a Blenheim of the French Lorraine Squadron which had not been confirmed. The year 1942 was just beginning when Schulz recorded his last kill of Operation Crusader on 11 January. It had been the German ace's first Kittyhawk. Its pilot, Flying Officer ‘Nicky' Barr of 3 RAAF Squadron, an Australian ace, had managed to bring down Schulz's wingman before crash-landing. Schulz, in typical style, had dived and thoroughly strafed the Kittyhawk. Barr was wounded in the process.

Three doubles followed. On 25 January two P-40's of 250 Squadron went down; on 8 February Lt. Finny and Lt. Powell of 1 SAAF Squadron were hit; and, on the 13th, F/O Eilby of 73 Squadron and, probably, P/O Moriarty of 274 squadron were added to Schulz's list of confirmed.

In the German camp, victory claims were beginning to resemble contest scores and competition between aces ran high. The `Experten', as the German aces were known, vied for the championship. By 8 January the great ace Hans-Joachim Marseille had tallied forty victories; his Staffelkapitan, Obit. Gerhard Homuth, had thirty-nine; and Uffz. Schulz was third with thirty-seven. Five days later, Marseille had forty-six, Homuth forty and Schulz thirty-nine. In another two days, Marseille's tally had been brought up to forty-eight and Schulz was at forty-four confirmed kills. His five most recent victories had been registered in a single mission on 15 February. The Allied aircraft had been Kittyhawks of 94 Squadron. Eddie Edwards ex-unit had lost aircraft flown by S/L Mason, Sgt. Belcher, Sgt. Weightman, P/O Marshall and Sgt. McQueen. McQueen was able to get back to base in a badly damaged Kitty. Twenty minutes after takeoff that day, Schulz was back over his own base at Martuba, waggling his wingtips five times.

By then, the German ace had become known as "Ein-Zwei-Drei-Otto.” Swift scrambling and shooting and his ability to survive had earned him the playful title. Only days later, Unteroffizier Schulz was awarded the coveted Knights' Cross by Field Marshall Kesselring. Among the Allied victims, Eddie's ex-Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Ernest 'Imshi' Mason, killed 15 February 1942, was a particularly great loss for the RAF. The British pilot had destroyed over seventeen enemy aircraft in the Mediterranean area since the start of the war.

As the scores were tallied and the days went by, Schulz continued to add to his list of confirmed victories. He claimed a Kittyhawk flown by Sgt. Rozanski, a Polish pilot of 112 Squadron, and another

Kitty belonging to 450 Squadron. In the middle of March 1942, the German Experte had been sent on leave to Germany and had returned to the Desert in May with the rank of Oberleutnant (Flying Officer). By then, the ace Marseille had had time to raise his score to sixty-four for Otto's forty-six.

Back to business, Schulz gained two victories on 28 May and recorded another double three days later. Although he was unaware of the calibre of pilots he had scored against, the Allied forces recognized their losses. On his first mission of the day 28 May Schulz shot down Sergeant Ovenston of 250 Squadron, whose Kittyhawk went down in flames. Later in the day, while escorting a recce machine with a comrade, the German ace attacked the Tomahawk of Lt. Robin Pare of 5 SAAF Squadron. It too was engulfed in fire but the South African pilot, an ace with six confirmed victories, was able to bail out and walked back to his squadron.

During the evening of 31 May the 109's of IIMG-27 jumped the P-40 Tomahawks of 2 SAAF Squadron and 5 SAAF Squadron southwest of El Adem. The German Experte claimed the aircraft of Major A. Duncan, DFC, the new commanding officer of 5 Squadron, and Captain Copeland of 2 Squadron. Major Duncan, an ace with five and one-half victories, was killed.

So it was that fateful morning of 17 June 1942 that Oberleutnant Otto Schulz, with fifty victories to his credit, led his formation of four Messerschmitts through the air in hopes of making another claim. The single Hurricane, flown by Wally Conrad, looked like easy pickings. Not knowing the four 109F's were from II/JG-27, Conrad found himself cornered by the enemy which was actually on a 'Treie Jagd' over the front lines. It didn't take long for the Canadian pilot to realize that the German leader who led the attackers knew his business.

Schulz and his mates kept bouncing the lone Hurri on the tangent of his evasive turn until they had forced him down to deck level. Wally had no place to go but home, but the big question was how to get there. When he saw Schulz turning outside of him and out of sight, Wally seized what appeared to be a chance to escape and reversed his own turn. But the cunning German ace lay in wait when Wally set a course for home, right through the sights of Schulz's Messerschmitt. Cannon shells and bullets bombarded the Hurricane, and Wally braced himself as a cannon shell exploded in the cockpit below the throttle quadrant. Shrapnel pierced Wally's left hand and wrist, and he could feel it tear into both legs. The engine bucked and the Canadian knew his only hope was to drop flaps and ride it in from about 50 feet. As soon as the Hurricane stopped, Wally went over the side.

Shaken, but fully awake, he looked up to see his attacker diving at him from astern with all guns blazing. With only one alternative, he crouched in front of his aircraft and hoped for the best. Schulz made his first pass, then climbed away, turning for another dive to strafe the Hurricane. Convinced the German wanted him dead, Wally was unaware of the tradition Schulz had established in making sure his opponent's aircraft was aflame before he returned home. This time, however, it was to prove his undoing.

As Wally waited for the second dive, he saw the answer to his prayers. From out of nowhere, a Kittyhawk had come to his rescue.

Flight Sergeant Eddie Edwards, airborne with 260 Squadron which had earlier been sent to escort Bostons over enemy ground concentrations southeast of Tobruk, was on his thirty-third operational sortie of the war. Eddie and his comrades had been approaching the target area when the Canadian saw Me-109's attacking a large formation of Hurricanes two to three miles north. He could see a pitiful dog-fight in which most of the Hurricanes appeared to be flying in a defensive circle. Soon the top section escorts of his own formation were under attack by 109's and the squadron received orders to turn starboard down sun. Making the turn, Eddie saw more 109's coming down on the mid-section where he flew. They were Messerschmitts from HI/JG-53 carrying out a `Freie Jagd' and they were causing confusion for the Kittyhawks.

Not being organized for defensive action, the Kittyhawks of 260 Squadron had quickly been split up. Like the other pilots, Eddie found himself turning madly to avoid attacks by the `Pik-As' Jagdfliegern. Big white spinners with great gaping holes in their centers were everywhere. As he fought off the menacing Messerschmitts, Eddie also had to fight off the horrible feeling of being outclassed. Stark, naked reality forced him to keep his composure, and when one of the attackers had overshot him and pulled up on his starboard side, Eddie let him have it. He had turned on it and fired a good burst into the 109 from close range. Before he lost sight of the aircraft, he had seen an explosion in the engine area of the enemy machine. While Leutnant Wolf Schaller of III/JG-53 was forced-landing in the desert a few miles away, the young Canadian was keeping his turns sharp to evade another pursuer.

Finally, Eddie had found himself heading west alone at approximately 1,500 feet. Turning southeast, he had dived for the deck with his throttle wide open. Flying alone in that corner of Hell was unsafe and he planned to get out and home as fast as he could.

It was minutes later that the Kittyhawk pilot, flying at ground level, spotted more 109's ahead. Taking stock of the situation, he saw two or three above and one near the ground, turning toward him. He guessed they were approximately half a mile away. Unwittingly, he had come upon the last stages of Otto Schulz's flamboyant finale in his victory over Wally Conrad.

Pulling up slightly and maintaining his 300-mile per hour speed, he saw the Messerschmitt straighten out of its diving turn at approximately 300 yards on his starboard quarter. Eddie dropped the nose of his Kittyhawk, banked slightly to port and fired from about 60 degrees at close range. The deflection shot was good. The Me-109 was hit broadside and sped to the ground.

Unceremoniously, Eddie had ended the career of Otto Schulz in time to unknowingly save the life of Wally Conrad. The fatal burst came on the tail of the German ace's fifty-first and last victory over his Allied opponents.

From the ground below, Wally watched the performance. Alone and unnoticed on the desert floor with his Hurricane, BN 706, he squinted against the brightness of the sky to read the letters on the fuselage of the Kitty above before it disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Eddie had lost visual contact with the other 109's above and wasted no time in heading his Kittyhawk toward home base. He hadn't given in to wondering why the 109 had been on the deck, and he never saw the crash-landed Hurri on the ground. He thought only of the two or three more 109's somewhere up above and the excitement he had been through. He'd had enough for one trip; it was time to go home.

As he headed for the base, the boy from Battleford was elated at having clobbered a couple of Me-109's. Intoxicated by his fortune, he found it difficult to contain his excitement until, with more sober thoughts, he realized his guardian angel had been working overtime. He also realized that once he returned to base, he would be called upon again to meet superior 109's. He didn't know how long he would be able to carry on. But for now it didn't much matter. As long as he returned safely from one trip, he would be prepared to fly another.

As he flew alone through the desert sky, Eddie considered the claims he would make when he returned to base. His fellow pilots would be happy to hear two enemy fighters had been shot down; 260 Squadron, like most of the desert fighter squadrons, had been losing many valuable pilots to the enemy. But he doubted that a claim based solely on the word of a young pilot, would be accepted as credible. Since he hadn't seen Wally Conrad's Hurricane on the ground, he didn't know there had been a witness to the shot that had knocked Otto Schulz to the desert floor and the first had been made amid a melee which left pilots little time to determine if any others had made good their shots. A claim of two Messerschmitts destroyed in one day, he reasoned, would be thought "too bravado." So he decided that when he landed at home base, he would claim only "one 109 probable at low level." Even a probable

from a young upstart pilot with the squadron for only a month would cause raised eyebrows among older, more experienced pilots at Gambut No. 2, he thought.

Claims with no witnesses were dangerous. An example is found in the ease of Hap Kennedy, one of the best fighter aces of the Second World War. Late in the morning of 13 October 1943 over Italy, Hap got two Me-109's. The first was witnessed by the members of his section; but the second was made while flying alone over the German base at Ceprano after stalking an entire Staffel of Messerschmitts by himself. Back at his own base, Hap filed an official combat report claiming two 109's as destroyed. In time, Group Headquarters reported that Hap's escapade over the enemy base was a "likely story." He never received credit for the second Me-109. In fact, the German fighter pilot shot down by Hap Kennedy had bailed out in full view of his own base personnel. Ironically, an entire enemy base had served as witnesses to what Hap had been unable to convince his superiors had taken place.

But worse, Flight Lieutenant Kennedy had been recommended for a Bar to his DFC and because of his "likely story" it was turned down.

Similar repercussions might have resulted had Eddie Edwards officially claimed the two Me-109's he had brought down on 17 June 1942. Although his non-claims would lead to confusion when comparing reports and information, it was not in Eddie's nature to worry about his personal scorecard. He had no desire to cause any suspicion among his squadron comrades.

When Wally Conrad was returned to his own base after being picked up in the desert by an ambulance of the 5th Indian Division, he went to Wing Intelligence to confirm the destruction of the Me-109. In addition, he wanted to buy a case of whiskey for the Kittyhawk pilot who had saved his life.

As it often did, confusion was ruling in the desert that fateful month of June. A week went by before Wally heard more. The Wing Intelligence Officer made a special trip to tell him the news. According to the records, no one had claimed a 109 on the morning of 17 June 1942, he said. In fact, he added, there were no Kittyhawk squadrons in the air around noon that day and the lettering Wally had given identified a Kittyhawk squadron which had been at the rear refitting. That made it nonoperational, said the Wing Intelligence Officer. To top it off, he said, the aircraft that had been identified had been shot down the week before. It was not yet replaced on the squadron complement.

With his questions unanswered, Flight Lieutenant Conrad returned to his squadron, 274, until mid-July when he was posted to 145 Squadron, the first Spitfire unit to serve over the desert. He completed his first operational tour the following month and began his second in England in April of 1943, flying for a brief period with 402 RCAF Squadron. In the middle of May 1943, he was sent to 403 RCAF Squadron, the 'Wolf' unit, where he stayed until 17 August 1943. That day, he was brought down over France after a collision with his wingman during combat. He had been appointed Commanding Officer of the unit the same day. Wally had succeeded in bailing out of his damaged Spit and, a few months later, returned home through Spain. He had evaded the Germans with the help of the French Resistance.

In January 1944, Squadron Leader Wally Conrad started a third tour of operations at the head of 421 RCAF Squadron, the 'Red Indian' unit. He flew with them over Occupied Europe until the end of July when he was grounded. He spent the rest of the war on staff duty and retired from the Air Force in October of 1945 with the rank of Wing Commander. He had done 309 war missions in the course of World War II and had shot down nine enemy aircraft unofficially. He was a first class fighter pilot.

Throughout this time, he never found out that it was Eddie Edwards who had saved his life that day in the desert. He never knew that he had been shot down by the famed German ace Otto Schulz. In fact, the mystery wasn't solved for Wally Conrad until the late 1970's when the research being done for this book finally put all the pieces together.

Oberleutnant Schulz had been killed instantly when his aircraft crashed to the ground. His death was a severe blow to the Jagdgeschwader 27.

Leutnant Wolfe Schaller, the other Jagdfliegern brought down by Eddie on 17 June 1942, made a forced-landing in Allied territory and was made a prisoner of war, interned in the fortress of Tobruk. Four days later, Tobruk fell to German hands and Schaller was liberated with the surrender, returning to his unit. Three weeks later, Leutnant Schaller took off as one of four Me-109's escorting two Me-109F reconnaissance aircraft. They were met by a number of P-40 fighters. Immediately after bringing down one of the P-40's near El Alamein, he was shot down and killed. Strangely enough, there were no details of the combat available through British records. It may have been yet another case of an Allied fighter pilot who cared little about his own score.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 10: RETREAT

In an effort to reinforce the Gazala line, the garrison at Tobruk had been weakened. Unlike the previous year when attacks by Rommel's Afrika Korps had been thrown back, June 1942 saw General Auchinleck prepare to leave the fortress unprotected rather than defend it to the last man of his 8th Army.

With some thirty-five thousand troops under his command, Major-General Klopper was new to the post. The South African took charge of troops as new to the desert as himself. Many, also South African, as well as British and Indian were experiencing their first bout with war.

As the German and Italian forces advanced passed the line at Gazala, the garrison at Tobruk prepared itself as best it could to resist the incoming offensive. Prime Minister Winston Churchill charged General Auchinleck not to let Tobruk fall into the hands of the enemy, but it was to no avail. The troops at Tobruk couldn't resist the ferocious attacks of the Afrika Korps and the 20th Italian Corps which was supported by the Luftwaffe. Determined not to become engaged in a long battle that would inevitably lead to defeat, the General issued orders to surrender the fortress at nine o'clock on the evening of 21 June. The loss spread despondency among the Allies and, in particular, caused Prime Minister Churchill additional concern.

Discouraged and exhausted, General Ritchie gave up direct command of the 8th Army to General Auchinleck on 24 June. Despite the loss of some sixty thousand men, the Army had remained a whole, cohesive unit. Its success was due, for the most part, to the comprehensive air cover and support it had received from fighters, fighter-bombers and bombers of the Desert Air Force.

Under General Auchinleck, the 8th Army began forming a line at El Alamein, where some defences had already had been prepared. El Alamein was the narrowest point in the desert between the coast and the impassable Quatarra Depression.

Just hours after F/Sgt. Edwards returned from his clash with the Jagdfliegern's Schultz and Schaller on the evening of 17 June he was flying again. This time he was among eleven Kittyhawk pilots from 260 Squadron who were scrambled on an interception patrol. The top section was inevitably attacked by two Me-109's over El Adem. Canadian F/Sgt. Bernier was badly shot-up in the combat and overturned on landing. He came home alive.

Back on the ground, Eddie learned 260 Squadron, like the other fighter squadrons in the area, was ordered to withdraw to airfields in the Sidi Aziez area.

Pulling back with their Army counterparts, Eddie Edwards remembers the "RAF Squadrons carried out an organized retreat." They began "leap-frogging back, so there was always a number of squadrons in position to strafe and dive-bomb the advancing forces as well as protect our retreating Army. In most cases," F/Sgt. Edwards said, "squadrons would operate from an airfield with skeleton crews until the enemy came into sight and began to shell the field. Then we'd evacuate. The battle front was rapidly moving east and communications with the Army were broken - everybody was in retreat."

260 Squadron began its move on 18 June 1942. Panic was high as the pilots crawled out of their beds at 4 a.m. The Germans were advancing at rapid speed as the boys from 260 Squadron took off at dawn from their base at Bir El Baheira, one of the Bir Hacheim LG's. Seventy-five minutes later, they landed their aircraft at LG-76, south of Sidi Barrani.

Settled at the new landing ground temporarily, before long the boys were up in an offensive sweep. The flight over the Sidi Aziez-El Baheira area that evening was a trip Flying Officer John Waddy would never forget.

Waddy, an Australian ace who had been with 260 Squadron for the past few weeks, and his No. 2, Sgt. Carlisle, were on their way home when they were jumped by three Me-109's. Carlisle was hit and shot down. As his aircraft fell to the ground, the Jagdfliegern circled the flaming Kitty in close

formation. Waddy assessed his position. With about nine enemy aircraft to his credit already, plus several probables, the Australian's experience was extensive.

Seeing his chance, he closed in to about 100 yards behind the second Me-109. It seemed neither of the enemy planes were aware of his presence. As he opened fire, he saw his bullets hit the wing root of the first 109. Then, something happened; his guns quit working.

Alerted, the Jagdfliegern broke formation and turned on Waddy's Kittyhawk. On his way to ground level with the throttle wide open, using the evasive action he had often used in similar predicaments, the Australian couldn't help notice one of the enemy pilots was not very experienced. As he flew close to the escarpment on his right side, he was thankful his attackers were unable to get themselves coordinated. Chased by the 109's, Waddy could not get away and he believed the enemy machines couldn't catch him at ground level. The leader kept up a steady series of bursts and it was easy for the Aussie to see the tracer shells coming from the propeller boss. Forcing a little rudder, Waddy's aircraft gave a small skid. Shells hit the wings while others ripped past him. The windshield of his Kitty disappeared and holes were pounded into the wings. Trying to find his way out of the mess, he could feel his heart thud as a shell ripped into his flying suit to stop between his arm and his chest. Another nicked the earpiece on his helmet. Miraculously, he was still in one piece; no bullets had found their way into his body.

Flying abreast of its leader on Waddy's starboard side on the top of the escarpment, the second Me-109 was unable to take his turn at the Kitty. But the Australian's luck was running out. Suddenly, the escarpment came to an end. It was time for drastic action.

Pulling the stick back hard, Waddy soared to 1,200 feet. As he watched both 109's break away, he dived straight back to ground level and made another 100 yards.

On the ground, Eddie Edwards had just finished stowing his bedroll and some other small gear in the back of his Kittyhawk, dispersed in the Bundoo, and had started walking away when sounds of aircraft to the west drew his eyes skyward. Three 109's were on the tail of the Kittyhawk and the sounds of machine gun fire was heard. He watched as the 109 about 100 yards behind the Kitty continued to fire while the other two flew on either side to keep it from turning. The Kittyhawk's engine cut out and the pilot put the aircraft down on its belly. It slid across the field in a cloud of dust. Eight or ten pilots stood watching the spectacle.

The Kittyhawk was shot to ribbons. The tail was gone and cannon shells had torn holes in the fuselage and wings. Even the cockpit was riddled and the windscreen had been shot away. Before the Kittyhawk could come to a grinding halt about 100 feet in front of the makeshift operations tent, Waddy was over the side and making a run for cover. Bathed in oil and dust, he was shaken, but intact and unhurt.

The men on the ground watched as the 109's, flying in Vic formation, banked over the Eastern edge of the field and made their way back at less than 30 feet. As Eddie and his friends stood struck with awe at the German performance, they saw the leader roll over on its back, still in tight formation, and fly across the field upside down, firing at tents on the other side. The 109's, so low to the ground they kicked up dust on the field, were cool and arrogant. As quickly as they had begun their performance over the field, they sped away. Righting itself, the leader led the other 109's into the sky to the west.

The witnesses were unable to discover who had been flying the German machines which had riddled Waddy's aircraft and forced Carlisle to bail out, but it is likely they were the same pilots who had attacked Bernier the day before. They were probably pilots of III Gruppe, Jagdgeschwader 53. The only other Me-109 unit in the desert at the time was JG-27 whose pilots took care to record their activities and made no claims for the Kittyhawks of 260 Squadron.

Waddy's sojourn with 260 Squadron was short-lived. Although involved in several dog-fights with his friend Eddie Edwards who came to realize Waddy's ability as a good shot and pilot, the Australian did not see eye-to-eye with his Squadron Leader, Hanbury. Transferred to 4 SAAF Squadron, he remained with that unit for a short period before being posted to 92 Spitfire Squadron where he stayed until after the Battle of El Alamein in November. Waddy was later posted back to Australia where he spent several months training on Spitfires at an OTU before returning to operations in the Islands of the South Pacific. He never saw a Japanese aircraft in the sky and spent most of his time dive-bombing and strafing in Kittyhawks. At the end of the war, he carried the rank of Wing Commander and wore a Distinguished Flying Cross.

Retreat! Retreat!

As the orders came down for retreat, the men of 260 Squadron joined other squadrons of the Wing and those on the ground in a grueling ten-day trial. Ordered to leave their temporary base on 19 June the squadron, with 2 and 4 SAAF, spent the day moving from LG-76 south of Barrani to LG-115 at Sidi Haneish. The skies were calm as men and equipment moved into position.

By 20 June the Axis forces completed the encirclement of Tobruk forcing Allied units to pass on supplies by sea or air only. The fortress was dying a rapid death.

As half of the pilots from 260 Squadron along with other fighter pilots from 233 Wing and half of the ground staffs were re-equipping and training at LG-115, bombers were making a last-ditch attempt at saving Tobruk. Bostons from 3 SAAF Wing were being escorted by long-range Kittyhawks to make a farewell salute to the beleaguered garrison in the fortress.

Inside Tobruk, demolition had already begun and, flying overhead, the South African airmen could see huge fires and dense columns of smoke below. They could see a Stuka Party, little black dots, diving almost vertically downwards releasing their bombs into the inferno below while their fighter escorts buzzed overhead keeping watch. To the east, they saw thousands upon thousands of vehicles belonging to the 8th Army rumble past on the main coastal road. Weary soldiers, crammed into troop-carriers, rested their heads, heavy with fatigue and despair, on their chests. Covered with dirt and yearning for food, they sat despondent as the retreat was made from the hell hole Tobruk had become.

Even though the official surrender of the fortress came 21 June Allied bombers, escorted by fighters, stayed to hammer away at the enemy spearhead. In the time that followed, they flew day and night in order to divert attention from the retreating army. In his memoirs, General Rommel acknowledged the force of the Allied bombers: "My formations were continually subjected to heavy bombing attacks by the RAF while our Luftwaffe was unable to give us fighter protection as they were busy regrouping."

But the bombs weren't enough. Eventually, encouraged by the success of his advance and the early capture of Tobruk, the Desert Fox dropped his original plan. Instead of stopping on the Egyptian frontier until Malta had been invaded, Rommel decided to push into Egypt. On 24 June his armoured columns crossed the frontier and the next day, he moved all Luftwaffe fighter units to airfields at Sidi Barrani. Two days later, combat in the air rose to a climax. The RAF was making a series of heavy attacks on the Axis columns.

"The salutary effect this service was having on the enemy was indicated by the German Air Force's effort to disorganize the Bostons," records from the main Middle East narrative for 26 June 1942 state. "On six of the thirteen raids, enemy fighters intercepted our formations but did not prevent them from bombing."

Rommel set out that day to sever the main road to Alexandria by destroying Mersa Matruh's defences. Already General Auchinleck had decided Matruh was not to be protected, but action over the area was heavy. Desert Air Force bombers flew 118 sorties, fighter-bombers 178 and fighters left the

ground 310 times that day. Back on operations, 233 Wing did its best. 260 Squadron served as escorts in the Sidi-Barrani and Mersa Matruh areas.

In the evening it was Eddie Edwards' turn. At 18:15 hours, he took off with seven other Kittyhawks to serve as top cover to Boston bombers, flying No. 2 to the leader in the top section. Their mission was to drop bombs on enemy troops south of Sidi Barrani. As they turned over their target two Me-109's attacked. As always, they came from nowhere. As F/Sgt. Edwards looked above to Sergeant Carlisle's aircraft, he saw an enemy aircraft close behind, firing. The 109 made a hit seconds before Eddie was forced to turn for his chance at a second 109 about 150 yards away. The young Canadian fired a long burst and watched as the enemy aircraft shuddered. Pieces flew in every direction as it headed to the ground leaving behind it a stream of black smoke. Twisting and weaving, Eddie had just enough time to dodge two other attackers.

As the escorts headed home, Eddie had no idea 'Cork' Carlisle was not with them. It had been Carlisle's first operational flight since being brought down on the 18th when he flew as John Waddy's wingman. He never returned to base.

As they tallied their score at the end of the day, they found no Bostons were lost and Eddie had been able to claim an Me-109 as probably destroyed. Back at LG-115, they could only guess who was responsible for the death of Sergeant Carlisle. It was likely the work of III/JG-53 although, even after the war, it is questionable. German records for that period are missing or inaccurate.

With the success of the Boston bombers and their escorts, Rommel's armoured columns and traffic on the railway had come to a halt forty-five miles from Mersa Matruh. Although the escorting fighters had paid dearly, their efforts had stopped the enemy advancement for the moment. That evening as they considered the day's activities, they received a cheering signal from A.O.C., AHQ, Western Desert. Congratulations were addressed to all the squadrons, fighters and bombers who had participated. The message was just what the boys needed to brighten their spirits and bolster their enthusiasm. Encouraged, they were ready for more.

By the close of the day, the Germans had passed Mersa Matruh to the south and were on the line of the Mersa Matruh-Bir Khalda track. Stationed at the airfields closest to Matruh, Sidi Haneish, their move posed an immediate threat to 260 Squadron and the other units of 233 Wing. While aircraft were being flown out that night 260 and other squadrons evacuated only their forward parties. Waiting on the ground, huddled in their cockpits, Eddie and his comrades listened for the rumble of German tanks. Ground defences were alerted and ready to engage at any moment. They tried desperately to hear news of action but phone lines had, once again, been severed by enemy bombs.

It was dawn, 27 June 1942 before 260 Squadron was forced off the ground in panic. The Germans had broken through around Matruh when the Allied pilots landed at LG-05. Within minutes they discovered their mistake.

They had landed at the wrong LG and were off again, heading for LG-09, nearer Matruh. They arrived just in time to witness the last bombing raid of the day. The enemy had noted a diminished scale of air force attacks due to their moves to the rear. Still some thirty sorties against vehicles in the 'Charing Cross' area, the crossroads to Matruh-Sidi Barrani, were flown that morning. At 13:35 hours on 27 June eight Kittyhawks of 260 Squadron had taken off to escort nine Bostons of 12 SAAF Squadron in an attack on LG-121 between Sidi-Barrani and Matruh where the Luftwaffe had just moved.

Before six Me-109's of NG-27 attacked the Kittyhawk formation, four fires had been started in the German camp. When the tally was made, 260's Commanding Officer, S/L Hanbury had claimed one Me-109 as destroyed and another probable, and Sgt. Parrott had destroyed another enemy Messerschmitt. Although 260 suffered no losses, JG-27 had claimed one of the escorting Kittys. A Boston bomber had been chased but had been able to escape unharmed.

The same day F/Sgt. Cundy of 260 was sent on a recce mission southwest of LG-09 with his eyes open for an unidentified armoured column. He returned to base to report the column was British. Spirits rose with the news and, once again, the fighter pilots allowed their fears to calm. Back to combat on a limited scale 18 June most bomber and fighter squadrons, including the men of 260, did not take part in offensive operations. The only action they saw was that of a few Kittyhawks who travelled to LG-100 to pick up an ambulance plane. The aircraft would be used to carry General Fryburg, wounded in action, back to LG-09.

In the meantime, Axis ground forces had been advancing rapidly. By nightfall panic poured through the base of 233 Wing. Twenty-one Panzer Division was on the escarpment in control of Fuka landing grounds only seventeen miles from LG-09. A large concentration of vehicles was already preparing for the night only miles short of that base.

"The order was given to evacuate immediately," Eddie wrote. "All serviceable aircraft were flown off by the light of a few drums set on fire. They landed under similar conditions at LG-106." The Kittyhawks landed at their new base about thirty miles east of LG-09 in the dark. It was about nine o'clock and the day had been long for most, but not long enough for F/Sgt. Copping. He didn't make it over the ground convoys who fumbled their way to LG-106 in the dark, pushing their trucks through the heavy sand.

Fear gripped the fighter pilots when they heard their orders on 29 June. "Retreat again," was the command that came down. The-German spearhead had advanced confidently all day as the Desert Air Force moved further east. By nightfall, the Afrika Korps had reached an area twenty-five miles south of El Daba, providing the Luftwaffe with operational landing grounds close to the scene of the next battle. 260 Squadron of the RAF and the South African fighter squadrons were ordered back from LG-105 and LG-106 to LG-85 at Amriya during the day. Instead of setting up camp, they received orders to remain on standby. It was essential, the orders said, they remain in an entirely mobile state. Ready to move again, Eddie and others selected to make a recce-sweep over enemy territory during the day returned to report no enemy aircraft were encountered. According to Sergeant Cartwright's diary, "Three Kittys flew too low over an armoured column — (they were) all shot-up."

Prepared to make his breakthrough at El Alamein, Field Marshall Rommel, the Desert Fox, ordered the 90th Light Division to take up position immediately west of Tell El Eisa on 30 June. They were to prepare for an attack in the early hours of 1 July. The German Afrika Korps, deeper in the Desert, was ordered to feign in the direction of Nazb Abu Dweis, the southern portion of the El Alamein line. At dusk they would move to an assembly area south of 90th Light Division.

The day was hot. Wind and dust storms blew over sections of the enemy approach and the Axis forces were almost free from attack by the Desert Air Force which could hardly operate during the day. At LG-85 where 260 Squadron stood on standby, Sergeant Cartwright continued to make notes in his diary: "Terribly dusty drome. Blazing hot. Tents taken away from us. Battle rations only 30 miles from Alex. but can't get in. Roads too crowded."

In their book, Fighters Over the Desert, historians Chris Shores and Hans Ring wrote, "The Commonwealth forces were now firmly entrenched on the Alamein line and the Axis forces seriously weakened after their long advance and both sides were extremely weary. During the month, the South African Curtiss squadrons and 260 Squadron of 233 Wing, led by W/C T. B. de la P. Beresford, DSO, DFC, had specialized on bomber escort duties and during the first 23 days of the offensive, not one bomber had been lost to Axis fighters. The RAF had made a very successful retreat to the Alamein area, retaining their organization undamaged and leaving the minimum of aircraft and equipment to be captured.

"The pendulum had now swung as far down for the Commonwealth forces in the Middle East as it was ever to do and with greater shortened lines of communication, 8th Army and Western Desert Air Force began building up their strength once more, first to hold the Axis on the Alamein line and then to start the long road back across Cyrenaica."

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 11: BOMBER ESCORT

Enemy advances were causing chaos behind Allied lines. Cairo, Alexandria and the Delta were in a pandemonium of preparation for the defence of the area and the possible evacuation behind the slim El Alamein hold. While fresh troops came forward to the front lines and civilians jammed railway stations clutching tickets for Palestine, Egyptian Prime Minister Mustapha Nahas Pasha appealed for calm. Over the airwaves, he assured his people that defence plans would prevent Rommel from breaking through. He was confident. But in the streets students demonstrated, tearing British propaganda posters down, and press correspondents encouraged disruption by expounding on the "inefficiency of British High Command." Everywhere people were wailing "the Germans are coming!"

Plans were prepared for the evacuation of the Royal Air Force and the South African Air Force. In case of infiltration the RAF Headquarters would withdraw into Palestine and the fighting forces would remain in Africa, withdrawing southwards. On 30 June RAF Headquarters instructed all ranks to be ready to move at twelve hours' notice. Instructions were issued to every section to destroy all papers and maps they could not take with them. Staff officers in Cairo had taken to wearing their revolvers.

As tension grew, the atmosphere in Cairo became electric. Wild rumors embellished factual reports and people began to believe them all. One staff officer had his own opinion. "I feel that the next forty-eight hours will decide the fate of Egypt," he recorded. He was right.

While staff officers still managed to dine at Groppi's in Cairo and hear the latest tales from the front, the real war was taking place on the El Alamein line. With three positions in readiness, the El Alamein box itself was the largest and most prepared for the enemy. The positions of Naqb Abu Dwe overlooked the eastern tip of the Quattara Depression some thirty-five miles to the southwest of the railway station and the Babel Quattara box lay between Naqb Abu Dwe and the El Alamein box. The 30th Corps took over the defence of the El Alamein line while 10th Corps went back to organize the defence of the Delta.

Across the wire, the German 90th Light Division and Italian Trieste Divisions moved to attack in the early hours of 1 July. Their intention was to pass to the south of the main El Alamein box and then strike northward to the coast. In the meantime, the Afrika Korps directed their attack on the 30th Corps positions at the southern end of the line. The Battle for Egypt had begun.

By nightfall on 1 July the enemy had made little progress. They were running short of fuel and ammunition and, at one point, the Afrika Korps, trapped by the combined artillery of the South African brigades, had experienced something close to panic and dug in. Rommel complained that his forces were subjected to incessant attacks by the Allied bombers and fighters. German forces reported they were seeing little of the Luftwaffe.

During the day the Bostons of 3 Wing, under the cover of 260 Squadron and three South African fighter squadrons of 233 Wing, were busy. Promoted that day, Air Chief Marshall Tedder was proud of his boys and boasted a "really magnificent show.... simply incredible."

During one of the day's performances Flight Sergeant Edwards led his first flight into action. On his thirty-ninth operational sortie of the war, thrilled with the trust his commanding officer had shown in his skills, Eddie guided his pilots into enemy territory, flying medium cover to bombers. Without coming across any 109's, they achieved their objective, holding their formation there and back. After a 90-minute trip, Eddie landed safely in his Kitty ET 240.

But other trips were not so uneventful. If German soldiers complained they saw little of the Luftwaffe, the boys of 260 saw more than they wanted. In his diary Sgt. Cartwright noted, "X catches fire in air. Jerry A/A shoots one-half m/p off B at 1,200 feet. M disappears. We get two 109's and damaged several."

Although quieter in the air, 2 July saw ground action that frustrated the enemy. During the night the main road between Fuka and Daba had been under continuous attack and the Germans woke to another day of attempted break-through. The 90th Light Division was halted by the fire of the South African brigades and when Rommel sent Africa Korps tanks to help, it clashed with British armour, making no headway. The 90th Light Division was exhausted and demoralized over its inability to take "this last fortress of the English in front of the Nile Delta." They complained of being attacked "every twenty or thirty minutes" by groups of up to twenty bombers with strong fighter escort and they prayed for German fighter protection. But the Luftwaffe couldn't advance quickly enough, grounded by fuel shortages and sandstorms. Their circumstance was complicated by their position which did not allow them to attack such heavy bomber formations.

The Allied forces were trying a new technique that day and it appeared to be working. 260 Squadron had been pattern-bombing alongside the bombers while escorting. Flying east of Daba on a pattern-bombing operation, Eddie was among the fighter pilots who carried 500-pound bombs while serving as close and medium cover.

Dropping their loads at the same time as the bombers dropped theirs extended the attack area. "This method was different than dive-bombing separately after seeing the bombers safely on the way home," Eddie explained. "The top cover normally didn't carry bombs as they usually took the brunt of the 109's attacks."

Their new tactic was continued the next day. Eddie took part in two missions. While the 109's and 202's brought down a large number of Allied aircraft, the Kittyhawk pilots of 260 Squadron saw few 109's that day. According to Eddie's logbook, his formation was attacked on only one occasion and the top cover, provided by other squadrons, drove them away.

On the ground 3 July Rommel gave his orders. Forcing a decision, the Afrika Korps pushed eastwards; the Italian 20th Corps advanced on its southern flank and 10th Corps was ordered to hold Ed Mreir. Drenched with sweat and covered with dust, the Panzer Divisions were down to twenty-six tanks; the infantry divisions were at less than 1,500 men each and they were being attacked from the air in ceaseless bombing raids by day and night.

The Desert Air Force made an unprecedented 770 sorties of which the bombers of 3 Wing and the fighters of 260 flew 155 against a concentration of over three thousand vehicles, tanks and armoured cars of the 90th Light and 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions. Twenty-five squadrons were committed to battle 3 July and the well-timed attacks on tanks and vehicles contributed greatly to the enemy's failure. The British armour sat in wait south of the Ruweisat Ridge and was ready when the enemy tanks ran into it. In ninety minutes enemy troops were too exhausted to respond to the urgings of their commanders. Forfeiting their last opportunity to force a breakthrough to the Delta, Rommel's men went on the defensive while they waited for a build-up of supplies. The roads supplying the army by night were almost completely blocked by British air activity.

All of Cairo heaved a sigh of relief. With news that there would be no evacuation from Egypt, panic was replaced by optimism and front staff officers were heard to talk of "preparations to advance." The Battle for Egypt had turned on 3 July 1942.

Allied bombing was becoming a fine art. The formation of nine to twelve bombers, which had helped turn the tide in June and early July were now increased to eighteen Bostons or Baltimores. They were usually escorted by three squadrons of Kittyhawks which frequently carried bombs to their targets as the boys of 260 did. Having begun operating in the Desert at the beginning of June, Spitfires often served as an extra-high cover. Previously, 233 Kittyhawk Wing had specialized in escort duty while the Kittyhawk squadrons of 239 Wing maintained independent fighter-bomber attacks. Now as more bombers became available, both Wings flew escorts. Generally 233 supported the Bostons and 239

looked after the Baltimores. The new system worked and it was employed throughout the remainder of the Western Desert campaign. Kittyhawks provided escort and maintained their fighter-bombing responsibilities while the Hurricanes joined fighter bombers, all the while ready to intercept the Stuka formations.

"There was no traffic control in the desert," Eddie Edwards recalled almost forty years later. "That is remarkable when one contemplates a situation where four squadrons, and sometimes more, operated from the same field with few mishaps on waiting for takeoff or landing. Usually, the squadrons operated together but, on occasion, they conducted separate missions. Except for the original airfields that were built along the coast, all others were simply graded out of the desert sand. They were about one-half mile by one-half mile, with a squadron widely dispersed on each side of the square. Group Headquarters normally situated a good, safe distance behind the line, would lay on the operational duties. On a bomber escort mission, for example, Group Headquarters would notify the squadrons in order — close, medium or top cover, or whatever — in relation to the bombers. The bombers would form up over their own field and then fly over the escort at two to three thousand feet.

"When the bombers were seen approaching, all engines of the escort squadrons were started. As the bombers made a wide circle of the field, the top cover escort took off first. Usually that included twelve aircraft almost line abreast across the field from their dispersal area. On takeoff there was no lagging because one would be completely blinded by the dust kicked up from the forward aircraft's prop wash. It all worked well, provided the leader was lined up directly across the field allowing ample room for the aircraft on the extremes.

"There were occasions when the pilots who were not fully aware of all the hazards found themselves charging through dispersal areas amongst tents and slit trenches while attempting to become airborne.

"Second, the medium cover took off across the field from their dispersal and finally the close escort cover squadron would follow from their side. By the time the bomber formation had completed a wide circuit of the field, all escort squadrons were in position around and above the bombers and the lot set course.

"On return to base, the squadrons would land in reverse order to takeoff. There was very little waiting to land. The 109's had come into the circuit on occasion and caught aircraft with their wheels down. As a result, all pilots learned to approach the field and land in the shortest time possible. The squadrons might arrange landing priorities in the air over the R/T when necessary, but there was no air traffic control from the ground. Unless otherwise impractical," Eddie recalled, "all my circuits to land were conducted in steep gliding turns, straightening out in the last few seconds to touch the wheels down."

When Rommel ordered his troops to the defensive on 4 July, Eddie Edwards was quickly chalking up operational sorties. By the end of August 1942 he would have made thirty-four escort trips — fourteen were made in June and sixteen in July. One of the trips was made 4 July as Eddie and his comrades served top cover to Bostons bombing enemy troops west of El Daba. Bostons, Baltimores and Kitty-bombers harassed the enemy troops in 'ding-dong' bombing activity. The next day, the Bostons of 3 Wing made no less than fifty-one sorties with escorting fighters clashing with interfering fighters. As part of the top section on one of the sorties, Eddie's squadron was jumped by six Me-109's east of Daba. A fierce battle ensued. It seemed everyone fired a burst of ammunition but none could claim any destroyed aircraft. While Eddie shot at a 109F and watched it break away from the others, leaving a trail of black smoke as it headed for the deck, F/Sgt. Cundy was making a head-on quarter attack at another. Cundy performed a stern attack on yet another 109 damaging it before all his guns jammed. Sgt. Sheppard was also able to damage an enemy aircraft before his Kitty was badly shot up. Sgt. England's

Kitty was hit on the starboard wing by heavy A/A fire in the course of the mission. All the boys returned home safely.

On the ground, fighting was bitter as Rommel's 13th Corps counter-attacked in the south and the 9th Australian Division brought fresh strength to the southern sector. Losing twenty tanks and initiative that day, the Desert Fox was determined not to budge. He regrouped his forces on 5 July when his first reinforcement arrived. Despite renewed British optimism, an attack by the 13th Corps failed to carry out General Auchinleck's intention of striking westward. Each side began wearing down the other.

In the air, action on 6 July brought better results for 260 Squadron but sharpened Eddie Edwards' nerve ends. During the first sortie of the day, Eddie met the man who was probably the best German fighter pilot he would ever encounter during his fighting career.

In number three position of the top four in his Kittyhawk ET 623, Eddie was on his forty-fifth sortie of the war. With 2 and 5 SAAF Squadron, they had crossed the front lines when they saw Me-109's coming from the west and above. At almost the same instant, Eddie heard his No. 2 report engine trouble over the R/T. As the disabled pilot turned to head back to base, two 109's spotted him and began their attack. Realizing his No. 2 didn't have a chance without help, Eddie turned back to give him support. By then, the Messerschmitts had made their initial attack one behind the other and instead of pulling up, they circled to come in again. The turn brought the second German aircraft close to Eddie. As he made a steep bank, the pilot's sights were not on the Kittyhawk coming at top speed to the rescue of its comrade. As the 109 straightened out about 200 yards in front of him, Eddie closed slightly and fired two long shots from astern. The 109 wobbled and shuddered as Eddie placed himself directly over it making ready for another shot. But it was no use! His guns had packed up!

Watching his No. 2 disappear into the distance, the young Canadian's anger flashed. "Here I go again; I'm fighting with no weapons!" Gun stoppages weren't new to the Kittyhawk pilot but he had little time to reflect on how they could be avoided. He would have to use every trick he could remember just to get home alive.

Anticipating his enemy's actions, Eddie banked steeply to port to give the utmost deflection and continued all the way around, heading east again. Instead of beginning its attack, then pulling up to repeat, the 109 tried to turn with Eddie. But the Jagdflieger knew he would lose speed if he completed the turn. Pulling up, he gave it another try. As Eddie turned and dodged, he realized the German pilot was holding his fire, waiting for a proper deflection. Eddie knew only an experienced pilot would consider those tactics.

Frustrated after two full turnabouts, Eddie decided it was time for a showdown. As the 109 began the next attack, the boy from Battleford cut the throttle, dropped 22 degree of flap and turned as steeply and in as short a radius as possible. When he levelled out, the Kittyhawk was face-to-face with the Me-109. At 300 yards there were only seconds in which to react before the aircraft passed one another. He struggled to stay head-on and pass the Messerschmitt as close as possible. Eddie's surprise manoeuvre had forced the German pilot to hold his fire while he concentrated on avoiding a collision with the Kitty. Seconds later the planes passed within feet of each other. Eddie turned again for home and, looking back, he saw the German pilot doing the same. Both were shaken and needed time for their nerves to stop jumping.

For Eddie Edwards there was to be little recovery time. At 15:00 hours the same day, his squadron was up again, providing top cover to Bostons while one of the South African squadrons stayed close. Again in No. 3 position in the top four flying the same machine, ET 623, Eddie was over the target area east of Daba when five or more Me-109's attacked the lower formation. The commanding officer and his section became involved and the SAAF fighter unit joined the battle. More 109's dived on Eddie's section, forcing them to weave and turn, firing only a few short bursts at passing enemy

aircraft. Messerschmitts made their way among the Kittyhawks, splitting up the formations and causing one big melee. The boys had little time to take a bead on a target before they were forced to turn to avoid an attacker. During the fracas, in a tight turn to port, Eddie saw a 109 come up, 90 degrees to his aircraft and level off. Continuing the turn, reaching about 15 degrees at 175 yards, the young Canadian fired and watched the 109 explode in clouds of white and black smoke from a hit on its front end. As it started toward the ground, Eddie judged he had time for another burst. He pressed the trigger again. Nothing! The unbelievable had happened; his guns had packed up for the second time in one day. As he continued his turn and closed in on two more 109's, Eddie's frustration grew. In a position to fire, his guns let him down. He turned away and left the battle area.

Once back to base he made his report. He claimed one Messerschmitt 109 probably destroyed. Later, SAAF bombers reported they had seen his victim going down on fire and he was afforded another confirmed victory. In addition, Squadron Leader Hanbury and P/O Dick Dunbar claimed one 109 apiece. The enemy records reported five Me-109's of WG-27 were part of the dog-fight and one, flown by Feldwebel Wuschinger force-landed after his aircraft was hit in the cooling system. His fighter was a complete write-off. It had been a good day for 260 Squadron, although it might have been better had Eddie's guns not let him down.

The days had been long and tension had grown during the past weeks for the fighter pilots under S/L Hanbury, and on 10 July they were rewarded for their trials. Often forced to go unshaven and living in slit trenches without comforts or tents in expectation of a rapid move forward, they were transferred to LG-97 at Amriya South. Taken off a state of full-mobility, they were ordered to remain at LG-97 for the next three months. During the period of operational stress following the retreat to Egypt in June and up to 10 July the fighter squadrons of 233 Wing had been living a spartan existence. In his book, *Eagles Strike*, James E. Brown describes the conditions:

"The fighter squadrons (under 233 Wing, RAF) were kept in a state of constant expectation of a move forward. All tentage and every piece of excess equipment connected with comfort was taken to the rear; all ranks were ordered to carry no more than two blankets and a toothbrush; beds, washing kits, extra clothing, even razors, were to be excluded. Everyone slept in slit trenches and messes consisted of two trucks with a tarpaulin drawn over the space between them. The whole fighter wing lived this kind of life which was also aimed, in part, at toughening up the men, an aspect of the order which the South Africans found particularly pointless. The idea behind the order had been to save all transport to carry forward fuel and supplies in the expected advance. But as the battles for El Alamein dragged on, the bearded airmen were told to take the no-razor aspect of the order less seriously. Other squadrons complained of the rations: "the nearer it came to the bases the worse the rations became." Why, it asked, was it possible to feed the army fresh bread and meat daily when airmen got these only once a week? However, meager rations were augmented with fresh vegetables bought with mess funds. "

"Fortunately, the period of stalemate that had now developed made possible a period of leave to the Egyptian cities and to Palestine. This had to be organized on a basis that kept the air force operational for, in fact, the air war was never allowed to slacken and though fewer army support and tactical sorties were flown, there was an increased effort to prevent supplies getting across the Mediterranean to Rommel. Unlike the Army the air forces had scant opportunity for refitting, re-organizing and training. Its battle was continuous."

At Amriya South it was less dusty and the boys were better positioned for their operational sorties, especially to escort bombers. Having made a sweep before moving to their new home, the boys were up again just hours after they arrived. While they patrolled over the front lines three 109's appeared and attacked when the squadron was in a turn. One Kittyhawk was damaged but the others turned and

hit the lead 109. It was enough for the enemy aircraft. Immediately they retreated from the area. Eddie, leading the section below, did not take part.

The move to Amriya South was the beginning of a three-week period during which the pilots of 260 saw few enemy aircraft and witnessed little of the 109's aggressiveness. Eddie made thirteen operational sorties from 11 July until the end of the month, but encountered the 109's on only four occasions. On 15 July during an escort southwest of El Alamein, the enemy aircraft attacked over the target, picking away at the top cover. One Kittyhawk was damaged but the Jagdfliegern made a rapid departure after a few bursts were fired back. Six days later, about half a dozen Me-109's bounced the squadron over the target area. No attacks were made on Eddie's section and only two Kittys were damaged by the cannon shells of the 109's before they departed. The next day they were even less aggressive. Eddie saw a few 109's appear in the distance but they did not attack. On 23 July the young Canadian saw the 109's for the last time during the month. They were flying close escort over Daba, the main enemy fighter base, and the Messerschmitts came up in strength. 4 SAAF Squadron was providing top cover and they took the brunt of the enemy attacks. One of the Kittys fell to the guns of the Jagdfliegern. Eddie managed to fire a few bursts at two of the 109's that came within range, but did not observe any hits.

"Enemy air activity appeared to drop off considerably," Eddie Edwards recalled. "Attacks on our aircraft by small numbers of 109's were almost half-hearted. Maybe their pilots were exhausted after the long push or maybe they were on leave in Sicily or maybe they were short of fuel again because of the long supply lines. All three probabilities existed. In any case, our squadrons were fatigued and in disarray from the hectic activity and moving during the retreat."

Although the weeks at Amriya South were less hectic than the days that had gone before, 260 Squadron continued to feel the pain of war. On 14 July 1942 the squadron was providing top cover to Bostons when one of the flight commanders, F/L McKay, was shot down by the pilots of JG-27. He did not return. Sgt. Cartwright's notes record the incident: "Lose F/L McKay, our best pilot. Very bad day."

Ten days later another pilot was shot down. This time a Macchi had been the attacker, allowing the pilot to return to base with slight injuries. On 1 August, F/Sgt. McKee, one of the new Canadian pilots in the squadron, returned to base after having been brought down by a 109. McKee's aircraft was hit during a sweep in the evening and the shot caused his Kitty to spin. Although it recovered, on the return flight his aircraft was seen dropping behind. McKee had been forced to crash-land in the desert. No enemy aircraft were claimed by the pilots of 260 during that time.

Continuing to maintain support for the men on the ground, 260 turned its efforts to providing air cover over the ground forces. Carrying 500-pound bombs, they flew attacks on forward positions so that the Allied forces could dig in and fortify their lines against Rommel's build-up and final drive into Egypt. The 9th Australian Division had already overrun strong points of the line when, on 13 July Eddie received orders to dive-bomb enemy transports located just over the front lines. Just two days before Flight Lieutenant Strawson led the squadron on its mission, the 9th Australian Division had occupied the Tell el Eisa. Now, the Kitty-bombers were giving their support.

Flight Lieutenant Strawson selected a line of MT (Mechanized Transport) moving east towards the front and ordered the squadron to dive in sections of four from eight thousand feet, each pilot picking his own target. Like the others, F/Sgt. Edwards, flying Kitty ET 574, aimed at a target below. Keeping it in front of the nose of the aircraft in the dive, he dropped to 1,500 feet before releasing his bomb and easing upwards. At 400 mph he lost 600 to 800 feet in the pullout. Below, he could feel the light ack-ack ground fire he knew was effective up to 8,000 feet. Undaunted, he and his comrades invaded the bullet-ridden sky, pushing downward to the deck, knowing it was safer than pulling up after the dive. Checking their results, Eddie was satisfied to see bombs landing alongside a group of MT,

knocking trucks over in the chaos. Before heading home, the Kittys returned to the deck and strafed the enemy.

For Eddie and his comrades flying during the month of July 1942, there were many trials. Although the skies were less active, gun stoppages and engine failures kept the pilots on edge. "The light sandy soil in the area, easily raised by the aircraft running up or taking off, or by continuous hot breezes in the daytime, caused considerable problems with the engines," Eddie recalled years later. "Covers had to be put over the aircraft engines and special dust plugs made for air scoops. If the aircraft were not run up and tested after a dust storm, some were certain to cut out in some degree on takeoff. Sometimes there would be complete engine failures." It was that way on the 11th and 21st of July for F/Sgt. Edwards. On the first occasion, he took off to patrol over the front lines. Leading a section, his engine began to lose power shortly after takeoff. Returning immediately to base he was able to land safely with a dead engine. The second time, he was on bomber escort and, while forming up with the bombers over the field, his aircraft engine began running rough and finally cut out. The young Canadian lowered the undercarriage and glided back to the field. "This was the second engine bearing failure for me in ten days," he said, "and I force-landed safely on both occasions."

Now acquainted with desert flying, Eddie's thoughts were almost always on improving both his own and his comrades' skills against the German enemy. In July '42 he began flying more and more in the top cover section of the squadron. Leading the top cover section for the first time on 19 July meant he had finally made it! "On bomber escort, the only place to fly as far as I was concerned was in the top four in the top cover. Everywhere else was confusing. Dog-fighting would be going on above and behind and it was most difficult to tell what was happening. Consequently, from July '42 on, F/L Cundy and I always asked for the top cover and most always got it. Here we had room to manoeuvre; we could fly faster and climb as high as possible above the other formations, even without oxygen. A number of times the 109's came in below us, seeing the large gaggle of aircraft below. In that position, we had the opportunity to jump them."

On an escort mission on 4 August, F/Sgt. Edwards flew with F/O Nelson Gilboe, one of the new Canadian pilots of the unit and Sgt. Cundy in the top three. With Cundy leading and Gilboe No. 3, the formation crossed into enemy territory southwest of El Alamein. The Kittyhawks flew ahead of the bombers and a few miles south of the target. As section leader, Cundy planned to approach the target area from the south, hoping to see Me-109's below going for the main formation. Soon they spotted three of the German Messerschmitts, aircraft of III/JG-27. They were coming in fast from the west and high above. Eddie knew his trio had been spotted as the German aircraft turned, flew over their port side and started down to attack from astern.

Calling the turnabouts and flying rigid combat formation, the Australian leader brought them around to face the attacking Me-109's. The Messerschmitts pulled up, one after the other, for three complete turnabouts. On the next attack, one 109 stayed up and hung back while the others came in close, line astern and head-on.

As the lead 109 pulled in a little slower and closer to F/O Gilboe, the new Canadian saw the opportunity to fire on his opponent. It had been a ploy by the Germans and within minutes, the lead aircraft had slipped back up for altitude leaving Gilboe hanging on his prop. Having run out of speed, Gilboe's Kittyhawk had flipped over on its back and found itself in a flat inverted spin. Then the fireworks started.

Two Me-109's were down on Gilboe in seconds. The first overshot and the second tried to slow up to position. But Cundy was on him. He fired and the 109 split to pieces. Allowing little time to think, the third 109 was on its way to attack Cundy's Kittyhawk as it pulled up from the hit. But Eddie was quick to react. He cut inside the 109's turn and fired at 30 degrees and about 200 yards away. He saw he

had hit his mark on the port side of the engine and fuselage. As the Messerschmitt pulled away in a steep dive, Eddie was anticipating its next move. Hoping to catch the 109 in the dive, he took off on the chase but over the radio Cundy was reporting the first 109 was still after Gilboe. Eddie turned back and as he searched below, he saw the blue belly of a Kittyhawk just before it hit the ground. His fears were quickly calmed when he spotted a parachute gliding to earth while Cundy's Kittyhawk circled it. Scanning the skies, he knew the 109 was gone. Cundy confirmed Gilboe had bailed out successfully so they waved cheers and headed for base.

After analysis of the combat, F/Sgt. Cundy was afforded an Me-109 confirmed as destroyed. It was his first. F/Sgt. Edwards tallied a probable. The enemy post-war records show that the 109 brought down by Ron Cundy was flown by Feldwebel Wilhelm Stegman, a pilot of 9 Staffel, III/ JG-27, who succeeded in bailing out of his flaming machine and was made a POW.

For Eddie it was his only combat involvement during the month of August. He made only six operational sorties in the month—two escort trips, three patrols and one dive-bombing mission. By the end of August his log-book showed he had made sixty-nine operational sorties since his arrival in the Desert.

On the ground, activity continued during the month of July '42. The Axis forces repeatedly counter-attacked Tell el Eisa, held by the fresh and well-trained 9th Australian Division. But the stand on the Alamein line saw the Panzerarmee Afrika become exhausted with almost two months of uninterrupted and hard campaigning. Even with the collapse of the Italian troops, they were unable to progress and turned to the defensive in the captured position. On 14 July General Auchinleck tried to break through the enemy's center and destroy his forces east of the El Alamein-Abu Dweis track and north of Ruweisat Ridge. Heavy fighting followed in the Ruweisat Ridge and after three days, the 9th Australian Division had suffered three hundred casualties and the 4th New Zealand Brigade had 1,405 officers and men killed, wounded or missing.

Both Germans and Italians had also suffered severe loses. Their equipment and strength in men was reduced to one-third.

But General Auchinleck was determined to attack again. It was fixed for the 21st. Hoping it would prove to be the break-through at El Alamein, the battle — the second of Ruweisat — was to prove General Auchinleck's last throw. Fighting that followed was savage, especially in the crucial El Mreir and at the Miteirya Ridge, but by the end of July no progress had been made.

Meanwhile, in the air, between 5 and 28 July Allied fighters had carried out a total of 9,460 sorties; eighty-seven percent were over the battlefields and forward area. 2,174 sorties were made on low-flying attacks and 1,470 on bomber and fighter-bomber escort duties. The bomber operations were so successful that only one bomber was lost in combat during that period.

On 4 August 1942, Sir Winston Churchill arrived in the desert. Egypt had become Britain's priority front and Churchill wanted decisive victory over Rommel in August or September. Changes in command occurred. General Sir Claude Auchinleck was relieved as Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Forces by General Sir Harold Alexander. Lt. General B.L. Montgomery took over command of the 8th Army and Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder remained in command of the Desert Air Force. The coming of Lt. General Bernard Montgomery to the command of 8th Army on 13 August sent a tremor through the troops. With a reputation as an ardent believer in training, he began at once to whip the 8th Army into a tough fighting formation. The Air Force looked forward to an improved attitude wherein the exercise of air power and ground forces could become an increasingly effective team.

The climate of impending attack during August 1942 brought down the order that the Air Force would harass the enemy by day and night. Throughout the month preparations by the German and Italian armies for a final break-through to the Delta were harried endlessly. The nights were sleepless and the

roads became a deathtrap. Enemy airfields which could be used to support the Axis attack were under constant bombardment by the Desert Air Force. By 20 August, it was clear the enemy had begun to move toward the southern sector. From that point on, the entire Desert Air Force turned its attention to battlefield targets twenty-four hours a day.

The final great offensive by the enemy was set for the last day of August. Although they were dangerously low on fuel, the move could not be postponed.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 12: NEW PILOTS

Throughout the months leading up to the deciding battles of the desert war, 260 Squadron had been giving its utmost in support of ground forces despite personnel changes and little opportunity for the training of new pilots. If there was a lull in flying operations, the boys were saying goodbye to buddies and hello to newcomers. Experienced pilots were posted elsewhere while new pilots arrived in the desert to take their places.

On 19 July the unit had seen Squadron Leader O.V. Hanbury, DFC awarded a Bar to his decorations and posted off operations. Although he would later return to command, his position was to have been filled by Squadron Leader G.D.L. Haysom, DFC. An ex-Battle of Britain pilot with five victories to his credit, Haysom never met the boys at 260. Wing Commander Mayers, leader of 239 Wing was shot down 20 July probably by JG-53's Jagdfliegern, and newly promoted Wing Commander Haysom took his place.

Instead, 260 Squadron saw the arrival of Squadron Leader P.P. Devenish from 127 Squadron. An ex-Hurricane pilot who had no desire to fly Kittys, Squadron Leader Devenish spent several weeks being checked out on the new aircraft before he flew with the squadron. Mixing well with other pilots, the Rhodesian kept a sharp eye on what was taking place at his new post. Instead of relegating experienced pilots to minor roles, Devenish encouraged men like F/Sgt. Cundy and F/Sgt. Edwards to use their leadership qualities.

The hot summer months had seen others come and go. Flight Lieutenant Black was posted off the squadron for a rest and Flying Officer Waddy, the Australian ace, stayed in the same Wing but became a part of 4 SAAF Squadron. On 14 July Flight Lieutenant McKay was shot down by the 109's and Flight Lieutenant Strawson, an experienced Hurricane pilot, replaced him as OC 'A' Flight. Strawson, a strong leader and loyal to his comrades took charge of the squadron in the air while Devenish became ready for operations. Although slow and methodical, Strawson was respected by his fellow pilots. Everyone who knew him mourned his death when his jeep hit a mine. He had completed his tour of operations and was working as ground controller at the time.

Besides Strawson and Devenish, the only experienced fighter pilots left in the squadron in July of 1942 were Flight Sergeants Cundy, Meredith, Stewart and Edwards, P/O Dunbar and WO Bernier. Even then, the 'experienced' pilots were just beginning to get the feel of desert combat.

By the end of August, 260 Squadron was back to a full contingent. New pilots had been arriving throughout the months of June, July, and August. Flying Officer G.E. 'Jeff' Fallows, a quiet and unassuming New Zealander became known as a reliable pilot and later became Deputy Flight Commander. Flight Sergeant W.L. ‘Shep’ Sheppard, who would also become a Deputy Flight Commander, "was probably the bravest of the lot," according to Eddie Edwards. The Englishman joined the squadron in July and flew in 'A' Flight. "He was shot down and crash-landed twice on our side of the lines. He was shot up a few times before he asked to be moved to 'B' Flight to change his luck. He flew with me on many missions," Eddie recalls. "He was shot up on two occasions with me, however, he never missed his turn to fly and face the enemy. Eventually, he succeeded in shooting down the 109's. His courage and determination was admired by all of us."

Flight Sergeant D.W. 'Doug' England had already been introduced to combat by early July. Eddie remembers the pilot with the ready smile as a "nice, quiet, intelligent person. He flew No. 2 to me on quiet shows." Labeled by Eddie as a good pilot, England "had the hardest time of any pilot I ever knew to fly on ops. At first he didn't appear to have the fortitude to continue flying, but he didn't quit or even suggest it," Eddie said. "I always felt sorry for him. I tried to give him special attention and gradually he

came along— succeeding in shooting two or three enemy aircraft. He became one of the stalwarts at the end."

A Canadian from Windsor, Ontario, Flying Officer N.E. Gilboe wasn't in the desert long before he experienced his first bail-out. He was "always happy and never without a smile," Ron Cundy remembers. "He didn't seem to worry too much about anything. He had to be persuaded not to make head-on attacks on 109's." Eddie Edwards remembers, "he bailed out twice, both times from an inverted flat spin." Gilboe loved music. Jive was his favourite. On his off-hours, he would pull out his old wind-up gramophone and put on some Hep records that were full of sand. "He would drive me crazy playing those things," Eddie said. "Some songs I will never forget. I always remember him when I hear such songs as Green Eyes, Begin the Beguine, and Elmer's Tune."

Sergeants R.N. 'Tommy' Thomas, G.G. Rattle and F/O Kent flew as No. 2 wingmen to Eddie. Thomas, the New Zealander, solid and sincere, and a fine fighter pilot shot down three or four Me-109's but was never shot down or severely damaged. He was with the squadron at the end of the Tunisian campaign.

Rattle, also with it until the end, was a "real tough Canadian," Eddie Edwards remembers. He was "happy-go-lucky but determined and aggressive. He flew as my No. 2 through many dog-fights and strafing missions."

Thinking back, Eddie says, "I guess I gave him a hard time on a number of occasions. He was shot up a couple of times — once badly wounded, but he made it back to base. He was a good fighter pilot; he bagged a couple of 109's and was there until the end."

Tall, good looking, smart and a good pilot, F/O R.S. Kent was somewhat overzealous. The new Canadian was one who had to be tamed and once Eddie Edwards had him fly No. 2 while strafing enemy airfields, his hotshot manner was cured completely.

Flying Officers E. Grant ‘Aitch’ or ‘H’ Aitchison and Vic J. Thagard arrived at 260 Squadron together. Buddies from the beginning, they were both quick and alert. Aitchison's energetic, nervous character was offset by Thagard's reserve. Early in the battle, Thagard was shot down and lost. 'Aitch' showed leadership qualities with a happy disposition. He loved a dog-fight but didn't have the aggressive spirit that makes a fighter pilot. He was shot down a few times and later left 260 to join 450 Squadron as a Flight Commander. He was killed in action in March 1945.

Flight Sergeant McKee was another newcomer to 260 in July 1942. Introduced to combat early, he was shot down by the 109's on one of his first operations at the end of July. McKee had crash-landed in the desert and returned to the unit with slight injuries. With a cheerful, likeable personality, "he was famous for his jokes and storytelling," Eddie recalled. "He was never known to repeat himself and he told jokes for hours on end for five months. He was shot down 15 December, '42."

Other Canadians were more fortunate. Sergeant W.D. 'Don' Barber, a skillful dive-bomber, Sergeant L.H. Nicholls and Sgt. 'Willy' Williams were steady in the air. Each were able to claim they had been neither shot down nor damaged all the time they flew with 260 Squadron.

Before the end of the war two other Canadians serving with 260 would find themselves prisoners of war. Flight Sergeants Alan Hill and Mel Arklie were captured by the enemy. Eddie Edwards remembers Hill as being a good pilot on his way to becoming a skillful leader. Arklie was a big cowboy, Eddie recalls. "Sgt. Mel Arklie was faithful and loyal and he carried out his duties with determination. He was shot down while flying with me over that Hun drome on 2 January 1943 against overwhelming odds." Now living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, Arklie remembered his young Canadian counterpart. "The fact that Eddie knocked down seven aircraft while I was there flying the Kittyhawk against the Me-109 was evidence of his skill," he said.

Other new Canadians didn't last long and some never had a chance to gain experience. WO E. Tomlinson, a nice fellow; F/Sgt. Hartung, a keen pilot; F/Sgt. McLive, a clean-cut young man and F/Sgt. Takvor, tall, gentle and unassuming, displayed plenty of courage and determination.

Of the new British pilots posted to 260 Squadron, Flight Lieutenant C.H. Davis was the only one with experience. He had already flown operations in the United Kingdom on Hurricanes and Spitfires. He replaced F/L Black who was posted off operations for a rest.

Flight Sergeant J.C. Colley was a responsible pilot, quiet and reserved. One of the best looking fellows who ever served on the squadron, he flew many operations before he was hit by flak and died of his wounds.

P/O 'Thorny' Thornhill, an intelligent officer, was shot down once and shot up on a couple of occasions, but was still going strong at the end of the Tunisian campaign.

Others who joined the squadron didn't have a chance. American F/O L.P. Mink was shot down in November and Mockeridge and Cairns, both British pilots, were killed in October.

The new pilots to 260 Squadron had been checked out at the OTU near Abu Sueir in the Canal Zone and each would be introduced to combat operations and conditions in the desert. Inadequacies in the British method of training fighter pilots caused concern for Cundy, Edwards, Bernier and Stewart, experienced in desert warfare.

"As I look back on it now, the methods were inadequate," Ron Cundy said after the war was over. "Far too much time was spent in flying straight and level and doing rate one turns. In my opinion, once we reached OTU, we should have been encouraged — in fact it should have been mandatory— to throw our aircraft around and really get confidence in their handling capabilities. More emphasis should have been placed on practise combat flying. It could have been done by continually engaging in line astern chases, trying to follow competent instructors.

"The other aspect which was sadly lacking was practice deflection shooting. I recall that prior to joining the squadron in the Middle East, I had done practically no air-to-air gunnery. From memory I only fired at a drogue on about two occasions. I was inadequately trained and it was some considerable time after I joined the Squadron, and having missed several 109's that I should have hit, that I became in any way competent.

"When one thinks of the total lack of combat training, it is little wonder that we lost so many new pilots when they first came to the squadron. With no training in those skills, they were sitting ducks for the experienced 109 pilots. Unless the new pilots were lucky enough to survive to fly sufficient operations to gain the necessary confidence and experience, they were like lambs to the slaughter. Pilots like Eddie who had experienced deflection shooting during boyhood on the Prairies in Canada were exceptionally fortunate.

"It was also little wonder that our success rate was low, relative to that of the Germans. The aircraft we flew were inferior to the 109's. They had the heat on us all the time. They could attack us at any time and we had to do the best we could. It was only when they made a fundamental error or we were lucky enough to find ourselves positioned above them that we had an opportunity to shoot them down. And that didn't happen very often.

"I can't understand why arrangements weren't made for experienced fighter pilots to lecture us at OTU on fighter tactics — particularly how to react to attacks by enemy aircraft and how to manoeuvre to place ourselves in an advantageous position to attack them. Flying inferior aircraft did detract from our ability to attack but we were not taught how to take full advantage of those occasions when we were in a superior strategic position. Hence too many valuable opportunities and pilots were lost."

Now that 260 had settled on a new base back on the Alexandria-Cairo road, the experienced pilots had a chance to train the new pilots. If full training could not be complete, at least newcomers

were introduced to combat operations and conditions. The fundamentals that had not been learned at the Operational Training Unit could be pointed out. In addition to specific training flights, each operational sortie now became an occasion to train the new arrivals so they could weather their first operational trips and avoid being easy targets for the Me-109's and the MC-202's. Edwards, Cundy, Bernier, Stewart, Meredith and a few others, also contributed to the training by talking to the new pilots. As they relaxed in the mess in the evening, experienced pilots told stories of their own encounters and briefed them on the pitfalls of combat in the air.

"All the pilots who came to the squadron at this period had been checked out on the Kittyhawk at a conversion unit cum OTU near Aby Sueir in the Canal Zone. They were familiar with the aircraft in circuits and formation flying. Of course, they all had to be introduced to squadron living and combat operations," Eddie Edwards remembers.

"Initially, we instructed them in battle formation, the finger-four formation, normally four aircraft to a section and three sections for a squadron. A section of four could easily break up in two sections of two aircraft each — thus it was reasonably manoeuvreable. We encouraged the pilots to remain together, or at least in pairs, at all times.

"Since we didn't go looking for the 109's during bomber escorts, or while we were carrying bombs, the main thing was to teach the new pilots some measure of defence against the 109 attacks. In the Kittyhawk, the only manoeuvre that truly thwarted the 109 attack was the steep turn. Naturally, it was important when one started the turn and how steep one should make it. Of course all conditions and circumstances are different, but the 109's had the upper hand and, as a rule, attacked from above and behind. To do this the 109's had to commit themselves to the attack, close to firing range, approximately 350 yards or closer. It was when the 109 started its dive that the steep turn was carried out — always into the attacker.

"In the four formation, the leader would call the turnabout over the R/T or by dipping one wing two times, turning on the second dip. The leader would gauge his turn to meet the circumstances and the others would turn to maintain formation. The formation turned as a viable unit and carried out cross-over turns in the same manoeuvre when necessary. We taught the pilots the turns and had them carry them out in pairs and alone, right on the deck. But there were very few pilots who could do a really steep turn properly at deck level while watching behind and above."

The finger-four formation and the turns were the basic instruction with strict flying discipline stressed at all times to maintain the unit. The basics were very necessary during the first operational trips so they wouldn't be easy targets for the 109's. Then they were introduced to the rudiments of bomber escort, dive-bombing and strafing. They were told they had to learn to fly their aircraft to its utmost limits and capabilities. If they could do all these things properly and always saw the enemy first, had quick reflexes, some shooting ability, aggressiveness and luck, they might survive to become good fighter pilots after they had learned to lead others.

"Some pilots required more training than others, but none really got enough before being committed to operations. Every flight, even on operations, was a training flight and eventually this method began to improve the squadron combat strength. Many good pilots were lost during the following campaign that took the squadron through to Tunisia but very few went down because of poor training or bad flying discipline," Eddie said.

It wasn't long before the new pilots of 260 Squadron knew exactly what their instructors meant. 14 August 1942 was the day many will remember. It was their first clash with the enemy.

Early that day, twelve Kittyhawks of 260 Squadron joined six Warhawks of the 57th Fighter Group to provide top cover to twelve South African Bostons on their way to bomb Fuka Station. It was one of the first times the boys of 260 flew with the Americans of the USAAF. Although their American

friends had chalked up a number of flying hours on their P-40F's and were regarded as very fine pilots, they held no combat experience.

Two American P-40F's flew in the top four with F/Sgt. Cundy as section leader and S/L Devenish, on one of his first operational sorties in a Kittyhawk, as squadron leader. Before taking off, the Americans had been briefed to stay with the formation. They were warned against chasing 109's on their own.

As the formation crossed the front line at El Alamein, they were jumped by 109's. Dog-fighting began. Ten of the attacking 109's were from II/JG-27 and four came from III/JG-53. Amid the chaos in the air, one of the American pilots spotted a Messerschmitt below and to the right. Taking after the 109, he felt sure he would be able to rejoice at the results of his first hit. Cundy, his section leader, tried to recall the American pilot over the R/T, but Lt. William O'Neill took no notice. Fighting off his own attackers, Cundy lost sight of O'Neill but learned later the young pilot fought like a lion against five 109's, two of which he claimed as destroyed. O'Neill had eventually been shot down himself and bailed out into the sea. Injured, he was lucky to land not far from the coast. Able to get into his dinghy, he paddled ashore on the Allied side of the line.

After the initial 109 attacks, control was lost. The top section was no longer with the main formation and, over Daba, the next flight was again attacked by more 109's. They lost the bombers and after evading those 109's, turned to patrol the area. Soon another formation of Baltimore bombers was spotted. The bombers had bombed an Axis airfield in the same area and were being engaged by 109's. The Kittyhawks joined the combat.

Meanwhile, the only four aircraft of the unit to reach the target with the Bostons were also engaged by three Me-109's. One of the Kittys was forced to land; two others returned to base and the fourth, fighting in lone combat was able to damage one 109 but was later attacked at 50 to 100 feet altitude near its home base. It was forced to land some ten miles north of LG-97.

No less than four pilots were shot down that day. Lt. O'Neill, WO Bowerman, S/L Devenish and P/O Aitchison all safely returned to base. Aitchison, on his first encounter with the 109's, put survival first on his list of priorities and experienced something unique. During the combat, his aircraft had been damaged and it suffered a considerable loss of power. Still behind the enemy lines, Aitch decided to attempt making it to Allied territory. Dodging enemy ack-ack as best he could, he counted his blessings when he reached the friendly side of the line under the protection of one of his squadron comrades. Since his aircraft was still holding together, he headed for home. All went well until a four-cannon Hurricane came from the front quarter and shot him down. His guardian angel was flying cover this time. His Kittyhawk failed to catch fire and Aitch was able to belly-land in the middle of an army camp!

The Kittyhawk pilots of 4 SAAF, on an escort trip about the same time, were not so lucky. Attacked by German pilots, they lost three Kittys and two pilots. The claims of the German fighter pilots for that combat were extremely accurate. They claimed six confirmed and one unconfirmed over 260 Squadron and four SAAF Kittyhawks. The two Allied squadrons had, in fact, lost six planes and another was badly shot-up. The German victors included Oberleutnant Rudolf Sinner with one confirmed and one unconfirmed. His score was now at twenty-four. Oberfeldwebel Erwin Sawallish claimed two, bringing his score to thirty-five kills. Oberfeldwebel Herbert Krenz claimed one making it his eleventh kill. All three pilots were from II/JG-27 while Oberfeldwebel Kronschnabel and Unteroffizier Klopper, who each claimed one, were from III/JG-53. For Kronschnabel, it was his third victory over Kittyhawks in the Desert.

Four days later the boys from 260 again faced the Jagdfliegern. Again luck was not with them. Carrying out a recce of the coast between 10:00 and 11:00 hours on 18 August, they were intercepted by six Me-109's of I/JG-27, led by Kommandeur Hauptmann Gerhard Homuth, a Battle of Britain ace and

veteran desert pilot. As usual, the 109's attacked from above at 12,000 feet, coming out of the sun. Homuth shot down P/O MacLean's Kittyhawk. It hit the ground and exploded. The pilot was killed. For Homuth it was victory number fifty-five.

The death of MacLean was a sad loss to the unit. With typical Scots courage, he was popular despite the fact he didn't drink or smoke and he was older than the others. He did not have the swift reflexes required to be positioned as a fighter pilot.

Also slow and methodical, F/Sgt. Ody came close to death 29 August during a patrol over Navy destroyers. Eight Kittyhawks were patrolling over the convoy when they were jumped by three Me-109's of II/JG-27. Ody was shot down thirty miles northeast of Daba and wounded in the leg. He was later picked up and brought safely to base. F/Sgt. Cundy, who was part of that battle, recorded in his log-book later that night that they diced with the Jagdfliegern for fifteen minutes but couldn't get a squirt at them. Cundy had also recorded a trip four days before when his unit had been jumped by two Me-109's. On that trip F/O Fallows, one of the newcomers, had his Kittyhawk shot up by enemy cannon shells.

During the month of August 1942, 260 Squadron recorded four confirmed kills, two probables and a couple damaged. Seven Kittyhawks had been lost and a couple were badly shot-up. One pilot had been killed and two more were slightly injured. Considering that more than half of the squadron pilots were newcomers, the record was not that bad.

.". . if they could follow strict flying discipline. .. could do a really steep turn properly. ... could learn to fly their aircraft to its utmost limits and capabilities ... always see the enemy first, have quick reflexes, some shooting ability, aggressiveness and luck . . ." recalled Eddie, "they might survive to become good fighter pilots."

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 13: THE BATTLE FOR EGYPT

While the boys of 260 Squadron were seeing less activity in the air during the month of August 1942, the Axis forces were preparing to launch attacks against the El Alamein line in the north, centre and south of the front. By the end of the month, the build-up of forces was in its final stages. At dusk, the night of 30-31 August, Rommel's forces began moving in their last offensive in the North African theatre of war.

General Montgomery's 8th Army lay in readiness for the attack. The 9th Australian Division covered the northern end of the Alamein line and the 1st South African Division positioned themselves just south of them. The 5th Indian Division were stationed about the Ruweisat Ridge while the 2nd New Zealand Division lay south of the Ruweisat Ridge. The 7th Armoured Division watched the minefields just south of the New Zealand Division and the 44th Division maintained a strong hold on the Alam el Haifa Ridge. The 22nd Armoured Division dug in at the western end of Alam el Haifa.

Rommel planned to go through the minefields and allowed seven hours for the troops to penetrate them. His troops would move thirty miles and then be in a position to attack on the north. Perhaps optimistic, it seemed he had no other choice. 13 Corps had some three hundred medium and eighty light tanks and another one hundred in reserve to do the job.

But Montgomery had anticipated the move and had the area well prepared. His forces had been strengthened and the Desert Air Force was ready to provide their utmost support. In his book Eagle Strikes, James A. Brown records what happened on the ground over the next few days:

31 August: "By midnight (30-31) the Germans had found that the minefield belt extended in much greater depth than anticipated. Flares lit the scene for 30 Wellingtons and New Zealand artillery... At dawn, far from being 25-30 miles east of the start line as planned, the Panzer Divisions were eight to ten miles east of the German front line and being harassed by 7th Armoured Division... Rommel, in view of slow progress, had, between 07:00 and 08:00 hours, ordered the attack to be discontinued... At about 09:00 hours, Rommel arrived forward to see for himself… He was inclined to discontinue the attack but decided to at least attempt the capture of Alam el Haifa… it was early afternoon before the Panzers moved. They ran into heavy tank and artillery position.., were low on fuel and short of their objectives when the wind fell, the air cleared and once more the bombers became active... By nightfall the D.A.K. attack had been called off. All night the British bombers attacked."

1 September: "With light came the order to thrust forward into the jaws of the trap through minefields and over terrain in which deep sand devoured fuel resources. It was Rommel's intention to work 15 Panzer round the east flank of the 22nd Armoured Brigade. The move brought some tactical success and the Germans dug in their anti-tank guns in a formidable screen but 21 Panzer lay without fuel, having been unable to replenish during the night. Behind both formations strung out for miles like the tail of a comet stood their support vehicles… the whole Army, Germans and Italians alike... Panzer Army Africa war diary for 1 September recorded strong enemy aircraft formations made incessant attacks on motorized formations... heavy losses were sustained in the open... The day of 1 September had been decisive. Rommel announced that he was going over to the defensive where he stood until fuel supplies could get forward to his stranded Panzers. The prepared positions at Alam el Haifa could not be taken by frontal attack; there was insufficient fuel for outflanking manoeuvres... Victory was, in fact, assured."

2 September: "Early on 2 September, Rommel ordered his troops to begin a withdrawal, spread over several days, to positions just west of the British minefields, the move being towards Deir el Agram. The movement began at first light. But before first light the operation gongs were sounding in airfields... It was the start of an incredible day in which the South African Wing made ten raids and dropped 115

tons of bombs. Early in the day, Rommel had received word that the fuel ship Picci Fassio had been bombed and sunk; two other vessels were not expected to dock before 7 September. Mines and incessant air attack had put a finish to his venture."

3 September: "Day saw a noticeable thinning out of the Germans and Italians as the formations began to send battle groups back to their former areas of occupation; the withdrawal to a line from Deir el Ragil to Deir el Muhafid had begun.... German Afrika Korps and the Italian 20th had taken all they could... and the worst was still to come... Field Marshall Kesselring issued a special order exhorting Luftwaffe pilots to give dusk to dawn cover. He considered that Rommel had lost his battle when, influenced by the heavy scale of bombing, he had shown indecision about continuing the breakthrough attempt. Now all that could be done was for the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica to cover the retreat and, in particular, to ward off the deadly blows of the South African Wing... All day of 3 September Rommel's forces disengaged while 8th Army prepared the cork, the same old 8th Army... ponderous, incapable of the quick stroke... By nightfall, as airmen went to a well-earned rest, the 5th New Zealand Brigade and the 132nd Infantry Brigade began to move forward. Again it was a shambles. An enemy thoroughly aroused caught the infantry... The attempt cost the 8th Army nearly a thousand casualties."

5 September: "The Panzer Divisions disengaged and withdrawal continued."

6 September: "The Axis forces completed their withdrawal to the westernmost of the three British minefields."

With action heavy on the ground, the days had been frantic for the men in the air. Bombing and dog-fighting was intense. Well-rested and better trained, the fighters and bomber boys of the Desert Air Force were in a high state of morale. They had a full complement of pilots and were prepared to operate at maximum intensity. Aircraft, too, were readily available. The Desert Air Force had about 450 aircraft at their disposal while the Luftwaffe held about 170 with some for the Regia Aeronautica. In the last battle, the part played by the Desert Air Force had been decisive and because the AOC, Sir Arthur Tedder considered the next engagement "the vital battle of the war," he called every airman for his supreme effort.

Still a part of 233 Wing, 260 Squadron continued its role in escort duty with an occasional sweep over the enemy territory. It continued to work with 2 SAAF, 4 SAAF and 5 SAAF Squadrons under 233 Wing.

On the first day of the new Axis offensive, 31 August, the Wing was hampered by severe sandstorms. The desert men said the slicing sand in high winds was "the worst in weeks" and waited hours before pilots could get off the ground.

As the storms let up, 233 Wing was first over the enemy troops. Its squadrons escorted eighteen Baltimores led by W/C Horgan. Setting off at 06:53 hours, they headed for their target some ten miles north of Maghra. On their return they reported "a monster target" of some three thousand vehicles pointing eastwards! And they were stationary! For the escorting fighters, the trip remained uneventful. On his sixty-ninth operational sortie, Eddie Edwards wrote in his log-book, "three 109's appeared but did not attack."

In the air, 1 September was hectic. The Axis troops were constantly undergoing attacks from above. They suffered considerable loss of both men and material and their morale was low. Although 260 was not part of the day's fighting, the Luftwaffe was able to make claims. `Experte' Oberleutnant Hans-Joachim Marseille of III/ JG-27 claimed no less than seventeen for himself. But not one Allied bomber was given to the enemy fighters.

The next day, 2 September, saw 260 in action during an escort trip in the morning. Having given their Kittyhawk Mk.I's to the South African units the same morning, they were flying operations in their new Mk.II's, the 'Goshawks' or Warhawks' for the first time. Seven Kittyhawk II's of 260 Squadron, five

Kitty I's of 2 SAAF Squadron and seven Warhawks of 64th USAAF Squadron joined some Tomahawks to escort Bostons and three B-25's over enemy troop concentrations. On their way to the target, the formation was attacked by 109's but without result. Returning home, a lone Messerschmitt made an attack on 260 but was disposed of when French Canadian Warrant Officer Stan Bernier, flying in the top cover, turned on it and shot it down. It was the first confirmed victory for the squadron in weeks and the first registered by the unit's Kitty II's. It is possible Bernier's bullets brought down Oberleutnant Wilhelm Scheiter of 8 Staffel, Jagdgeschwader 27. Scheiter was reported shot down in combat and made a prisoner of war after recording four confirmed victories.

Bomber escorts were up again on 3 September. That morning they were on their way to Mirbat Aza-Deir-Ragil-Deir el Risw, a point four miles northeast of Quaret el Himeimat and between the southern edge of Deir el Muhafid. In the afternoon, they were headed to a line six miles south.

At 08:00 hours that day, Eddie Edwards was in the air with pilots from 4 SAAF and four Kittys from 2 SAAF. The Warhawks of 64th USAAF Squadron were also part of the escort. With 4 SAAF flying top cover, eight Spitfires from 145 Squadron provided a roving high cover to the entire formation. Eddie, in his new Kittyhawk II, FL-233 was leading a section of four Kittys while WO Bernier was in front of the top four with F/Sgt. England, F/Sgt. Meredith and another pilot.

As the formation turned from the target over Hamman, eight Me-109's bounced 4 SAAF Squadron. They were aircraft of I/JG-27 on a "Freie Jagd" and one of them was piloted by Hans-Joachim Marseille, now credited with 126 aerial victories. Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt, who had already claimed fifty-one was in the cockpit of another. They were two of the best German shots in the Desert at that moment.

During the dog-fight that followed, the 109's came down on Bernier's section and some tried to turn with the Kittyhawks. Caught between the squadrons, the 109's and Kittys raced after each other in a game of cat and mouse. To the side and above, Eddie could see the enemy trying to break away from the Kittys; they were diving down and pulling up quickly in an attempt to gain altitude. As Eddie watched, he saw two Messerschmitts dive past his section to attack 2 SAAF Squadron below. Turning like madmen, the Kittyhawk pilots were able to try every ounce of energy of German pilots Marseille and Stahlschmidt. Kittys were on their tails time after time while the enemy aces fought like lions, covering each other as best they could. They flew for their lives, turning and twisting and hitting the Kittys with well-aimed bursts. At one moment during the fracas, either Marseille or Stahlschmidt came down within firing range of Eddie's guns. As the 109 pulled up, Eddie turned after him and fired a burst with his aircraft in a steep climb. As he leveled out and put his nose down to prevent stalling, he could only witness his hit on the wing and fuselage of the 109. His action had been taken without warning to the others, but before long, Eddie's four re-formed and continued their escort. Only the two German 'Experten' were left to continue the battle. They departed, their Messerschmitts full of bullet holes.

Once back to base, the escort had time to assess their losses. Warrant Officer Bernier was missing; no doubt he was a victim of Marseille or Stahlschmidt who each claimed three victories in the combat. Besides Bernier, they had hit a Spit of 145 Squadron before coming into the fray and brought down Lt. D.D. Stuart's Kittyhawk as he flew with 4 SAAF. Lt. Reynecke of 2 SAAF Squadron was forced to land after his aircraft was hit in the engine. The losses of 64th USAAF Squadron are not known, but the other two victories of the German aces in the battle might have been Warhawks of that unit.

On the other side, P/O Scudday of 4 SAAF claimed two 109's destroyed; F/Sgt. England of 260 Squadron added another to the score. F/Sgt. Meredith claimed a probable and F/Sgt. Edwards recorded one damaged. The Spitfire pilots added one destroyed and two probables to the tally.

Upon taking his Kittyhawk II into combat for the first time, Eddie discovered the machine was an improvement over the Kitty I. He was pleased with its handling and trimming and delighted that it was not inclined to yaw so much when the speed was changed. After flying the new aircraft, the flaws in the Kitty I became even more obvious. "It made the Kitty I a real 'B' when dog-fighting," Eddie remembers.

Even though the Kitty pilots of 260 Squadron chalked up some successes in the combat and had given the German pilots a bit of their own medicine, the loss of Warrant Officer Stan Bernier, the French Canadian element of the squadron, was a severe loss to the unit. Stan or 'Joe', as he was often called by his comrades, was an• experienced pilot, well-liked by everyone and a boy with a bundle of spirit. In his diary dated 4 September, Bill Cartwright noted, "Warhawk with dead pilot found by Army. Must be Joe. He lasted a long time and was a good guy"

At that time 260 was not the only squadron to lose pilots in action. The Desert Air Force was climaxing their efforts and meeting deadly opposition. In his book Eagles Strike, James A. Brown notes it was "the North African campaign's peak period of fighting activity on both sides." The effort by the entire Desert Air Force was considerable. The day Bernier was lost, they had flown 902 sorties; the previous day, 806 and the day before, 674.

On 3 September, General Montgomery sent a message to Air Marshall Coningham which, in part, said, ."..we know quite well that the results so far attained could not have been achieved unless the RAF had put forth so great and sustained an effort ... it is quite clear to me that such magnificent co-operation can produce only one result a victorious end to the campaign in North Africa. Let nothing divide us." Rommel himself attributed "great superiority" to the Allied air forces after they had dropped 750 bomb loads on his troops and those of the Italians during the last seventy-two hours. The Desert Air Force, never failing to its task, had been acting in support of the 8th Army.

The following day, 4 September 1942, the Axis troops on the ground continued their withdrawal while in the air, the pilots of 260 were unable to forget the loss of WO Bernier. They and their companion SAAF units were the first off the ground that morning. At 07:30 hours, they were serving as escorts to Bostons and B-25's over the enemy concentration. 260 Squadron was flying top cover with 5 SAAF and 2 SAAF as close and medium cover to the bombers.

"As the formation approached the target area," Eddie remembers, "two 109's and two or three MC-202's were seen to come in from the north below the lead section of 260 and turn to attack the medium cover. Two Kittys attacked the nearest aircraft at once, shooting down an MC-202 and hitting a 109. The enemy aircraft must have realized their mistake because the remainder departed as quickly as they had come. It is likely, in this instance, they didn't see the aircraft above because, from their approach, they were flying directly into the rising sun. I did not make contact and the remainder of the flight was uneventful." It had been a shot by F/Sgt. N.D. Stebbings of 260 Squadron, a keen young Englishman, which had sent the MC-202 to the ground.

Two days later Eddie and his comrades went into what was probably the toughest fight of their entire operational career. It was late in the afternoon of 6 September at 17:30 hours when the Germans mounted a mission for their dive-bombers, the Stuka Ju 87's. Protecting the bombers, nine Messerschmitt 109's of I/JG-27 left from Sanjet Quotaifiya as indirect escorts. Eight more from III/JG-53, the 'Pik-As' Geshwader, took off from Haggag Quasaba to do a `Freie Jagd' ahead of the formation. Among the men strapped into the cockpits of the Me-109's was Oberleutnant Hans-Joachim Marseille, dubbed the 'ace' of the elite JG-27, the Wustengeschwader'. He had already tallied more than 130 confirmed victories. Flying alongside was his friend, Leutnant Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt, who had over fifty victories to his credit, and Oberleutnant Rudolf Sinner of II Gruppe who had thirty-one. In those

late afternoon hours, Werner Stumpf, an Oberfeldwebel (NCO) pilot of JG-53 had also left the ground with approximately forty victories to his claim.

To the east, the Allied fighters were scrambling to meet the enemy threat. Twelve Curtiss Tomahawks of 5 SAAF Squadron were soon in the air, accompanied by eleven American Curtiss P-40's from the 64th Fighter Squadron, 57th Fighter Group. At Idku, east of Alexandria, where the new Kittyhawk II's were temporarily stationed until dust storms settled 'at home', LG-97, 260 Squadron was scrambling. Doing the same were American members of 233 Wing, new to the desert and gaining combat experience.

They were scrambling to head off disaster, frantically preparing to meet the enemy formation. The Kittyhawk II's were to act as top cover to the Tomahawks of the South African Squadron and the Warhawks of the American unit. Eddie was leading the top section in a four aircraft formation of Kittyhawks, and in front of another section of four was Ron Cundy.

About thirty minutes after takeoff, the Allied P-40's spotted the raiding Stukas and the Messerschmitt escort over the front lines near El Alamein. Flying at about 6,000 feet, the top section of 260 Squadron was soon covered by swarms of Me-109's. Above, more German fighters were making themselves known. It was 260 Squadron which took the brunt of the initial assault of the Jagdfliegern. Eddie saw Pilot Officer Dick Dunbar, a Canadian in Cundy's section, shot down by an Me-109 almost immediately after the fracas opened. In flames, his plane raced to the ground after the first hit of the battle. It is likely Dunbar's aircraft was struck by German ace Marseille.

From his Kittyhawk, FL 233, Eddie saw things were happening fast. In almost no time, eight Me-109's were flying about 2,000 feet overhead and before too many more minutes passed, they were joined by eight or more others. Eddie watched as two of the Messersehmitts peeled off to make their attack on him. He turned his section 180 degrees to face their attackers who quickly pulled up in a steep climb to rejoin their own again. Two more 109's attacked from behind and the Kittyhawks repeated their turnabouts, flying finger-four formation with rigid discipline, each watching their speed and guarding against too sweeping a turn. Each followed Eddie's leading Kitty.

It was then the 109's switched tactics and began to attack in pairs, from both ends at once. It was life or death for the Kittyhawk pilots who followed Eddie in 360 degree turns, staying tight and maintaining precision battle formation. Eyes in every direction, Eddie made sure his section didn't fly in the range of fire from behind or find themselves caught off guard by attackers from below. Flying in circles, they were at the mercy of the 109's.

Meanwhile, the Tomahawks were also finding themselves in difficulty. When they had spotted the formation on their arrival near Alamein, Captain Colman, leader of 5 SAAF Squadron, had climbed with his section of eight aircraft to combat the Messerschmitts while the last section had dived down into the fray below. The action left the 109's of I/JG-27 free to attack them at will. It cost them the life of the South African Commanding Officer. A few minutes later, Captain Colman's Tomahawk, and another, flown by Lieutenant W.F. Turnbull, just disappeared. Unseen by their comrades, they were shot down in quick succession by the formidable Marseille in his high-flying Messerschmitt.

A few miles away, Eddie was moving his section of aircraft in a north-south direction so the 109s above him wouldn't turn down sun. The manoeuvre made it easier to keep track of them at all times without looking directly into the sinking ball of daylight. Keeping a careful eye on the enemy formation, Eddie saw them maintain a tight group with pairs of Messerschmitts peeling off to make attacks. The young Canadian led his section to a position directly beneath them, forcing the 109's to dip their wings in order to see the Kittyhawks.

Gradually moving eastward, the Me-109 pilots were finding themselves farther behind their own lines than ever before. At that moment, they weren't far west of the Alex-Cairo line. As the Jagdfliegern

continued their attacks in pairs, one Me-109 pressed his efforts home, firing at close range, severely damaging Sergeant `Shep' Sheppard's P-40. Eddie quickly pulled back on the enemy machine and fired a short burst from below and about 30 degrees astern. The shot hit the 109 square-on and Eddie watched as black and white puffs of smoke billowed from its engine as it made its way for home.

Over twenty minutes had gone by and Eddie's section had completed dozens of turnabouts. They were long past the point of exhaustion. It would be only a matter of time before his formation would break up in disaster.

But the 109's appeared frustrated with the deadly game. There were too many of them and they couldn't organize their attacks to advantage. Finally the enemy turned their planes to the west and headed for home.

A short while later, the Me-109's let down at Turbiya, Quasaba and Quotaifiya while the Kittys of Eddie's section were landing at Idku after a one-hour, twenty-minute trip. The boys of 260 Squadron, "walked slowly to the Ops tent — no one said a word," Eddie remembers. "All of us were completely wrung out and exhausted. At last, Sgt. Sheppard broke in tears; it had been too much. We had been overwhelmed, beaten up and humiliated past description. True, we had thwarted the Me-109's and all had returned safely together. It was a show we would long remember but never talk about."

The combat had been triumphant for the German warriors even though the Stukas had suffered losses at the hands of 5 SAAF Squadron, whose pilots claimed three as destroyed, two as probables and another as damaged. A few hours before Dunbar's loss, the Luftwaffe lost Oberfeldwebel Gunther Steinhausen to the Hurricanes of 127 Squadron. The pilot of 1 Staffel, JG-27 had just made his fortieth victory a few minutes earlier.

In the Allied camp, SAAF Tomahawks, like the American Warhawks or RAF Kittyhawks, were also undergoing an inventory account. The terrific Marseille had landed with four confirmed; the last he claimed as a Spitfire but it was probably a P-40F belonging to the 64th USAAF Fighter Squadron. Germany's Stahlschmidt recorded one; Sinner of II Gruppe came back with one to his credit and Werner Stumpf of III/JG-53 claimed another. It was probably an aircraft from IIIJJG-53 unit that was responsible for the damage to Sheppard's machine, which, in turn, was hit by Eddie's deflection shot. Although the 109 Eddie had fired at and the hit would never be officially claimed, it is likely the aircraft never reached the safety of its own lines. It had been flying at too low an altitude to cover the distance.

While the Allied Desert Air Force was considering its losses that day, the Luftwaffe was also reviewing its problems. During the days of intense aerial activity, fuel supplies had been depleted. The Jagdfliegern were forced to patrol in very small formations and each time were overwhelmed by ever-increasing numbers of Kittys, Spits and Hurris. Feldmarshall Kesselring exhorted them to give dawn-to-dusk cover to Rommel's withdrawing troops. They were ordered to make an even greater effort to get, through the screen of enemy fighters and shoot down the Bostons, Baltimores and new B-25's that constantly harassed the German and Italian soldiers. Despite their individual capabilities, the enemy pilots were overwhelmed by Allied numbers, often caught between escorting squadrons where they found themselves at a complete disadvantage. The Allied Air Force had learned that turning techniques meant greater safety from the 109's and used the method to the utmost. Soon strain and exhaustion for the German pilots became too great.

On 6 September, the Luftwaffe had lost Oberfeldwebel Steinhausen to the Hurricanes and the following day, two other German aces went down. Leutnant Karl von Lieresund Wilkau of 3 Staffel, JG-27, a fighter ace of Marseille's unit with over twenty confirmed kills, force-landed safely. Leutnant Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt of 2 Staffel, a close friend of Marseille and third-ranking Luftwaffe ace of the Desert, didn't return to base. He had tallied fifty-nine victories and made over four hundred sorties

over the desert. It was the largest number of missions flown in that theatre of war by any German pilot at the time of his death.

Three weeks later, Stahlschmidt's friend, Hans-Joachim Marseille, did not return from a mission. Experiencing a severe glycol leak in the engine of his new Me-109G, he was able to return to the Axis line before bailing out. He hit the tailplane on his jump and fell to his death when his parachute failed to open. He had been credited with no less than 158 aerial victories by then — 150 of them in the desert. At Marseille's funeral service two days later, the Kommodore of JG-27, Eduard Neumann said, "A restless heart is now resting, but we can fly. May the fighting spirit of Marseille inspire all men of JG-27."

But the spirit of the German flying ace was not instilled in his comrades. They had lost three outstanding pilots in just over three weeks in I Gruppe, Jagdgeschwader 27 and morale fell to its lowest depths. Finally, the entire Gruppe had to be withdrawn from operations for a rest and although they returned to the desert later the same month, their enthusiasm and achievements were never the same.

In the meantime, on the Allied side, the Desert Air Force was changing its tactics. After the battles of 6 September, day-bomber raids were discussed. It was decided operations would be limited only to occasional raids by day. High losses of fighters during the first days of September had decreased their numbers and it was decided escort duty would be cancelled, at least until the end of the month. They were replaced by fighter sweeps.

It was on one of the sweeps on 14 September that F/Sgt. Eddie Edwards led the squadron on operations for the first time. A few American pilots on attachment to 260 Squadron were part of the trip and, despite the fact the flight was not especially eventful, it was a thrill for the young Canadian Sergeant who reported on his seventy-fifth operational sortie:

"On 14 September 1942, I was leading the squadron for the first time, flying as top cover on a wing sweep over enemy airfields in the vicinity of Daba and Fuka. 2 SAAF Squadron was leading with 4 SAAF Squadron in the middle position. There were six USAAF pilots flying with 260 to gain experience."

In August 1942, the USAAF 57th Fighter Group had arrived in the desert. Made up of 64, 65 and 66 Squadrons, they were commanded by L/Col. Salisbury. About a dozen pilots, including their flight commanders and commanding officer, were seconded to 260 Squadron to gain operations experience. With hundreds of hours flying time in their P-40 Warhawks, "they were a great bunch."

"On this occasion, L/Col. Salisbury, the Group Commander was flying as my No. 2," Eddie said. "I was thrilled to lead the squadron, however, there were some anxious moments. First of all, we were supposed to show the Americans how it was done and introduce them to ops, but I didn't really want to get mixed up in a big dog-fight and lose half my charges. South of the Daba airfields, four 109's appeared above, coming from the northwest. They turned and came down on the top sections, which also turned into them. The 109's pulled up and after a few more abortive attacks, they departed for home. The Americans had seen the 109's but hadn't felt their sting. Other bandits were reported in the area and for the first time, I found myself not wanting to see them. We had flown a good distance behind the lines and were airborne one hour, forty-five minutes. We were able to return to base without further incident. The mission had been accomplished."

The next day, Eddie was in the air again, leading the squadron. This time there was more excitement. The boy from Battleford shot down a Messerschmitt for which he was never credited.

At 12:20 hours, fifteen 109's of JG-27 had taken off from their home base to escort Ju 87 Stukas on a raid in the Alamein area. At 12:35 hours, 5 SAAF Tomahawks and seven Kittyhawk II's from 260 Squadron were scrambled to intercept the Stuka party. 260 was flying top cover to the South African squadron. Just as the unit got into position and was still climbing, 109's were spotted approaching from

the west. At least twelve Messerschmitts, spread over a wide area, flew in pairs. Four of them turned and attacked the top section while four others dove head-on through Eddie's section. The remaining four went for the South Africans below. Staying together, Eddie's section was making a controlled turn when a 109 was seen coming from below in a steep climbing turn. Banking his FL 223, Eddie fired a burst from about 200 yards at 30 degrees deflection and watched as the enemy aircraft exploded from the back of the engine and above the starboard wing root. He saw it turn over on its back and spin out of control before the squadron reformed. 260 returned to base together, with no losses, but 5 SAAF was not as lucky. After they had been split up, they lost many aircraft to the 109's. Leutnant Werner Schroer of III Gruppe claimed three victories within fifteen minutes of combat.

By 13:20 hours, exactly one hour and five minutes after takeoff, Eddie and his Kittys were back at LG-97 where AOC, AVM Coningham was making his visit. Filing their reports, Eddie claimed an Me-109 destroyed. The hit had been witnessed by both his No. 2 and 3. Both had seen the enemy aircraft spinning to earth completely out of control. As the AOC talked with the men, he learned Eddie had just come home from leading the squadron in action. He discovered F/Sgt. Cundy was also taking the squadron up. In fact, Cundy had led the entire wing on operations the same day.

"This sort of thing isn't done, Old Boy! Sergeant pilots just don't lead RAF squadrons," Coningham told them. Although it might not have been in the rule book, there were many unorthodox practices carried out in the desert; they were necessary in order to get the job done.

In his diary, Sgt. Cartwright wrote, "Eddie got a 109. `Cobber' Cundy his P/O. We all go to celebrate it." But it wasn't long before Eddie learned his 109 was not confirmed and in his log-book he noted, "Led squadron. Ran into Me-109's and I claim an Me-109 destroyed." No one will ever know if the young Sergeant Pilot's leadership of the squadron into battle that day had anything to do with the re-evaluation of Eddie's claim.

It wasn't long after Coningham's visit to the unit, Eddie was interviewed for his commission by Wing Commander Haysorn. Sgt. Cundy was commissioned and promoted to Flight Lieutenant. He replaced F/L Strawson whose tour had expired as 'A' Flight Commander. Although it would be back-dated, Eddie would have to wait until December to hear officially his commission had gone through.

Three days after Eddie's interview, 18 September 1942, 260 Squadron saw a new flight commander arrive to take over 'B' Flight. It was a short appointment that ended when the new commander refused to fly on a Friday, the 13th. Only weeks after he had joined the unit, the fateful day was upon them. On a past Friday the 13th, the new arrival to the desert had been shot down over the English Channel. He had no intention of repeating the experience. "This sort of thing isn't done, Old Boy!" S/L Hanbury said. The new officer was ordered into the air but refused to obey the command. Although a good leader and officer, he soon left the squadron and Eddie continued to lead 'B' Flight into action. Although still an NCO who couldn't officially be given the responsibility, Eddie continued to fill the position until he was commissioned several weeks later. All the while, everyone knew, "This sort of thing isn't done!"

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 14: AERIAL VICTORIES

There was a lull over the front lines as the Desert Air Force began, once again, building up fighter strength for the upcoming battle. On 24 September 1942 a special transport aircraft was laid on to take about a dozen pilots and officers of 260 Squadron to Tel Aviv for a few days leave. From that day until 30 September, 233 Fighter Wing flew no fighter sorties. The entire desert floor was relatively calm while both sides took time to build up forces and re-evaluate strategy.

Once back from leave, the pilots of 260 Squadron started an intense period of training, followed by a week of alternating training and operations. The days in early October were filled with tests conducted for the Kittyhawks with long-range fuel tanks. For the first time, they were getting better than three hours in the air. Eddie remembers the tests were performed in anticipation of their advance "in order to carry out longer sorties after the enemy when he would be forced to evacuate the Alamein line."

The squadron was also testing the dropping of forty pound bombs in salvo. They were designed as antipersonnel bombs but could severely damage a vehicle or an aircraft on the ground with a near-miss. The boys also spent time training new pilots and adding to the skills of others more experienced.

Four new Canadian pilots, F/O Flury and Flight Sergeants Parlee, McParland and Tuck were among those who were undergoing their first tour with desert squadrons. Sergeant Jim McParland and Bill Parlee were both good pilots who flew for the most part in 'A' Flight. F/O Hank Flury, reserved and pleasant, was a leader who was to finish the African Campaign with 260 Squadron. F/Sgt. George Tuck, a clean-cut young fellow, often flew No. 2 to Eddie. F/Sgt. R.S. 'Brownie' Brown, a Scot who also joined the squadron at that time, was also Eddie's No. 2 on many occasionand "Brownie," Eddie recalls, "was finally commissioned and ended the African Campaign with the squadron. He shot down a couple of enemy aircraft, but as far as I can remember, he was never shot down or even severely damaged. He was a good pilot." From the United States, F/O 'Perky' Perkins was another to arrive at 260 Squadron. Quiet, he was a capable pilot and a most unassuming person.

Although intensive training was among the priorities during the first days of October, the boys of 260 Squadron were also making operational trips. They continued to meet the enemy 109's and 202's, but something was different. Eddie and his friends noticed the enemy pilots were not as well trained as their predecessors. They weren't fighting with the same determination. "While they still shot down our pilots, their aggressiveness seemed to be missing - except over their own airfields," Eddie said. "I thought they were becoming a little more cautious, or tired, or both. Maybe," he hoped, "they were gaining a little more respect for us."

Eddie was right. Even though the RAF fighter squadrons were flying with inferior equipment, they were becoming better fighting units. They were better trained and they had developed tactics of real challenge to the 109's. The lack of enthusiasm by the enemy and their reduced aggressiveness helped result in even greater losses to the Jagdfliegern.

Although none of the boys from 260 could know why at the time, the Jagd-Gruppen were beginning to suffer. Since the beginning of the Alamein battles, 31 August, they had lost Marseille, Stahlschmidt and Steinhausen, three valuable pilots all from I Gruppe, JG-27. The staffel of Marseille, 3/JG-27, had been badly mauled by RAF fighters. Along with the famous Stafflekapitan, Leutnant Friedrick Hoffmann, an ace with eleven victories to his credit, had been killed. Feldwebel Karlheinz Berben had also been killed during the heavy battles of 1 September and Unteroffizier Karl Konig who was shot down twice during that period and had died in the second crash. From I Gruppe, Obergefreite Hans Benthin was made a prisoner of war and another pilot, a thirty-one victory ace, was also brought down by Allied fighters.

Every other Gruppe of Me-109's in the desert also suffered severe losses. 11 Gruppe of JG-27 lost six pilots. Among them was Oberfeldwebel Herbert Krenz of 6 Staffel, with eleven victories, who had been shot down by Spitfires on 1 September. Oberleutnant Wolfgang Burger and Unteroffizier Heinrich Prein of 5 Staffel were both killed in action. Feldwebel Alfred Krummlauf of 4 Staffel was shot down twice and finally made a POW. Leutnant Pay Carstensen and Oberfeldwebel Hans Wurschinger both disappeared in combat.

Others were luckier. Gruppenkommandeur Hauptmann Gustav Rodel, a pilot with a solid fifty-five victories, was shot down on 15 September but managed to successfully crash-land in Axis territory. Feldwebel Holzbauer was also shot down and only wounded.

The Kittyhawks, Hurricanes and Spitfires of the Allied Forces caught others and shot them down. III Gruppe of JG-27 lost nine pilots; five went to POW camps and a few others were wounded. Leutnant Eric Schofbock, a twelve-victory ace of 7/JG-27 was killed 13 October and Oberfeldwebel Heinrich Rosenberg, another German pilot with twelve victories to his credit, was shot down the next day by Kittyhawks. The 9 Staffel pilot managed to bail out but hit the tailplane in his jump and broke both legs. Feldwebel Fritz Gahr, Oberleutnant Wilhelm Scheiter with four victories, Feldwebel Walter Fink with three, Unteroffizier Hermann Flendt and Feldwebel Werner Fingerhuth were all made prisoners of war.

Oberleutnant Hermann Tingerding of 7/JG-27, with eleven victories, was killed by A/A fire. Unteroffizier Kuhn didn't return from a recce mission and Unteroffizier Bernhard von Arnswald was killed by Spits 21 September. Feldwebel Heinrich Muller of JG-27 was posted missing the following day. Feldwebel Hans Niederhofer of 8 Staffel was shot down but crash-landed behind his own lines. He had twelve victories to his credit when his aircraft went down.

III Gruppe of JG-53, the 'Pik-As' Geschwader was also unable to escape the damage being wrought by the RAF. Oberfeldwebel Werner Stumpf, one of the great fighters with forty-seven victories on all fronts, was killed 13 October. Oberfeldwebel Seidel, a pilot with at least ten victories to his credit, was also killed in combat by Spitfires and Hurricanes. Oberfeldwebel Kronschnabel, another who had been able to record numerous kills, was made a POW on 31 August. Unteroffizier Angst, shot down twice, also found himself in the Allied war camps.

The new Me-109 fighter bomber unit, III/ZG-I faced trouble from the beginning. On one of its first sorties in the desert 1 September, they lost their Gruppenkommandeur, Major Roland Bohrt.

The Luftwaffe had never before lost so heavily in the desert in such a short period of time. It had been overwhelmed by the Desert Air Force which had become, in a number of ways, master of the sky. Along with the loss of pilots, the enemy was forced to operate in small numbers. Lack of supplies, aircraft, fuel and engines resulted in the half-hearted attacks. Less efficient than before, they allowed Allied bomber raids to go through. Their reduced number of aircraft could no longer ward off the swarms of Allied escorting fighters who constantly mauled them when they made their attempts. Instead, they stayed above the Desert Air Force fighters and satisfied themselves with the few they were able to shoot down from that position. Their survival was paramount. Except for their superior equipment, it is almost certain the enemy fighters could have been totally wiped out.

Although not on the offensive as Allied aircraft flew to their targets, the German pilots were ready to fight as the RAF approached enemy airfields. The events of 9 October proved that.

Heavy rains had fallen on the desert floor and photographic reconnaissance showed the front-line enemy airfields were under water. No less than 138 aircraft were counted and recorded as immobilized; dug-in, it appeared, in a row of lakes. Upon word, AVM Coningham took little time to decide the opportunity for attack was too good to pass up. He ordered attacks on the LG's 20, 21 and 104 at Daba and Fuka and involved about five hundred fighters and bombers. 260 Squadron carried out at least two escort trips that day and Eddie was part of one.

Eddie and his boys were flying medium cover to Baltimores and Mitchells when they arrived over the Daba landing grounds. The pilots who had flown over the previous day had reported lakes covering the enemy base. But Eddie and his comrades looked down to see the waterholes had vanished; they knew they could expect interference before long. In the time it took to drop the bombs, five MC-202's and three Me-109's were on their tails.

Most of the attackers engaged the top cover squadron but Eddie was quickly aware of several Macchis coming through to pounce on 260's medium cover. In his Kittyhawk, FL 238, leading the top section of four, he turned into the 202's as they pressed home their attacks. The Italian fighters were travelling too fast to follow the Kittys in the turn, and as they broke off to climb away, Eddie saw his chance. He turned back sharply on the last 202 and fired from about 30 degrees at 150 yards to 350 yards astern. Round after round went into the fuselage and wings of the enemy plane before black smoke poured into the air. The MC-202 continued to climb as Eddie broke off to avoid another attacker and rejoin his section around the bombers.

He hadn't seen conclusive results of his hit and Eddie made no claim back on the ground. Although the Macchi probably never got back to base, he knew enough not to make claims he couldn't be sure of. His buddies in the Wing claimed two Me-109's destroyed for one Kitty destroyed and another two badly damaged. In his log-book Eddie wrote, "On the 9th, the Wing destroyed over 20 enemy aircraft, both in the air and on the ground, plus many probables and damaged, to say nothing of the vehicles, tents and men put out of action."

Other RAF squadrons were not as lucky. They were subjected to more aggressive attacks by the 109's and 202's which claimed no less than twenty Allied aircraft in the course of the day. Ten of the claims were made by Italians. The RAF recorded ten enemy fighters down but, it appears, numbers on both sides were inflated. Records show the RAF lost seventeen aircraft with a few more badly damaged. The Luftwaffe lost four. The losses of the Regia Aeronautica are not known.

The success of the raids is questionable. The Desert Air Force claimed to have destroyed at least sixty aircraft on the ground and in the air, but the Luftwaffe reported only fourteen aircraft destroyed and twenty damaged. Although the numbers are not known, the Regia Aeronautica losses would be added. Of the twenty-eight victories claimed by the German Jagdfliegern that day, twenty-one were made by nine of their experienced aces. The statistics show that when only a handful of Me-109's were serviceable, the Luftwaffe scrambled their best pilots. Unlike the newcomers to their units, they were still aggressive and efficient, especially over their own airfields.

Perhaps the most remarkable statistics show that the Spitfires lost only one aircraft and claimed four. There is little question an earlier arrival of the Spits in the desert would have made a vast difference in air fighting.

While the boys in the air were making gains, administration on the ground was making plans. The entire Middle East Air Force had some 1,500 aircraft; 1,200 were based in Egypt and Palestine. Of the total, 605 were fighters, 254 light and medium bombers and sixty-one were heavy bombers. All were ready to give support to the 8th Army for the next major offensive.

On the other side, Rommel's forces could count on the support of about 350 serviceable aircraft, more than half Italian. Their numbers included eighty Ju 87 dive bombers, but no bombers. With their superior Messerschmitts and Macchis, the German and Italian fighter forces still out-classed the Desert Air Force squadrons who continued to fly Hurricane II's and Kittyhawk I and II's. But more Spitfires were being added to the inventory and Allied personnel knew that their superior numbers would compensate for their inferior quality machines.

Anticipating the upcoming battles, the Desert Air Force would continue to assist and protect General Montgomery's 8th Army. The pilots would be given specific tasks in support of the land

operations. Their goal during October and November 1942 would be to maintain air superiority over the front lines while the fighter-bombers and light bombers would attack targets in the battle areas and on supply lines. The Desert Air Force would support the Army on a scale never imagined despite stiff opposition expected from the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica. AVM Tedder's boys would do everything they could for victory.

To that end, reorganization inside the Desert Air Force was taking place. J.A. Brown, in his book, Eagles Strike, wrote:

"There was considerable reorganization of the Desert Air Force to form a fighting spearhead with the finest material and a supplementary group to maintain the strength of the former. They were called force 'A' and 'B'.

Administrative arrangements were elaborate; each fighter squadron was to have thirty pilots, each wing a reserve often. Every unit was to carry seven days' supply of spare parts, rations, water and vehicle fuel and to carry one complete re-arm of ammunition and bombs for every squadron, and twenty-four long-range tanks for all Hurricane, Kittyhawk and Spitfire squadrons. Squadrons were to practise movements called for in a rapid advance."

Across the wire, the Luftwaffe was also preparing for what was to come. They had moved a number of fighters from Crete to the desert and on 20 October when the Desert Air Force opened their air offensive, prior to the pending offensive on the ground, almost every German and Italian unit was within reach of El Alamein.

As airfields around Daba were heavily attacked by bombers and fighter-bombers on 20 October, Me-109's and MC-202's scrambled to counter-attack. Dog-fighting was tough and each side was determined not to give an inch on their goals. Both air forces were now based close to each other and a desperate effort was made by the Axis fighters as the Desert squadrons went out to clean up the airfields located close to the scene of the coming battle. Both the RAF and Axis fighters lost eleven planes that day, but the Allied forces were able to claim two more destroyed and fifteen damaged on the ground.

During the morning's battles, 260 Squadron in their Kittyhawks hit two 109's and lost one Kitty with two more badly damaged. One of the enemy planes was shot down into the sea by Sergeant Meredith and the other went down under the guns of F/L Davis. It is likely Meredith's shot hit a 109 flown by Leutnant Feldkotter of III/JG-53. The pilot hit by Davis was seen bailing out. Kittys flown by P/O Thagard and F/L Davis were both badly damaged by enemy fighters and Sgt. Stebbings, a mild mannered but determined Englishman, was shot down and didn't get back. In his diary, Sgt. Cartwright wrote, "Feel bad about this as I put him in this Kittyhawk when another went unserviceable. Brand new kite."

Although Eddie wasn't a part of the 20 October fracas, his turn came the following day. At 13:20 hours, twelve Kittyhawks from 260 Squadron flew top cover to six Bostons and twelve Baltimores over the enemy airfields. They would approach their target from over the sea, turning and crossing the coast between Fuka and Daba. Now serving as 'A' Flight Commander, F/L Cundy led the squadron and Eddie, in Kittyhawk FL 322, was in front of the top four in the formation. On his eighty-first operational sortie, Eddie climbed to 15,000 feet putting his section above and behind the formations. When the bombers turned to cross the coast, he let down to 13,500 feet, sweeping ahead at high cruise speed. It wasn't long before the inevitable happened. A large formation of enemy fighters appeared from the starboard quarter and slightly above them.

Five Me-109's and ten MC-202's had been scrambled to meet the oncoming raid. The Macchis were from 9 Gruppo and 10 Gruppo and had taken off from Fuka South at 12:40 hours. They were flown by Cap. Annoni, Ten. Moretto, S. Ten. Milella, S.M. Caregnato, S.M. Maggini and Serg. Perdoni of 9 Gruppo and Cap. Lucchini, Ten. Bevilacqua, Ten. Giannella and S.M. Ugazio of 10 Gruppo. When

Eddie saw the large gaggle approaching, he wondered how organized they might be. Still out of range, most of the leading group of enemy fighters began diving for the formation below while the others stayed up. As he pulled up a bit, Eddie found himself passing almost head-on under a 109. The Messerschmitts were flying like the clappers as they began their dive. Turning fast, they were gone and Eddie could see both enemy and Allied aircraft below, mixed together in chaos.

As enemy fighters pulled up from their initial attack, Eddie turned hard starboard to get into position while an opponent leveled off from his vertical climb. At just the right moment, the young Canadian fired from 30 degrees at 200 yards and watched as black smoke poured from the engine and flames darted from the fuselage. Before the aircraft banked to the left and the pilot bailed out, Eddie could see he had shot down a Macchi 202. Enemy aircraft continued to come up, do wing-overs and go down again and, each time, they were caught between the Kittyhawk sections. Like the leaders of the sections below, Eddie led his boys into the enemy and closed in for the kill. He saw Spitfires join the battle and dive from above and before too long, the 109's and 202's were heading for home. The Kittys reformed and completed their mission, landing at LG-97 one hour and thirty-five minutes after takeoff.

In the meantime, Tenente Ezio Bevilacqua of 84a Squadriglia, 10 Gruppo was near Daba, floating under his parachute toward ground. The Macchi 202 pilot, shot down by the young Canadian, landed on German lines and before too long, was discovered by soldiers. Both legs had been hit by machine-gun bullets; one was completely smashed and the other was broken. Blood poured from the wounds and although the soldiers did their best to stop it, Tenente Bevilacqua died a few minutes later.

"Since there were Macchi 202's and Me-109's amongst the attackers," Eddie remembers, "I could appreciate the mix-up and confusion. From the start it appeared a race with no leader — a shambles." The only casualties for 260 Squadron were two Kittyhawks slightly damaged during the combat. Apart from the Macchi shot down by Eddie, F/O Fallows recorded a probable 109 and four other aircraft were damaged by F/Sgt. Stewart, Sgt. Thomas, Sgt. Hill and Sgt. Mockeridge.

There was little time for rest with action so intense. The next day, 260 Squadron took off at noon with twelve Kittys from the unit and twelve more from 2 SAAF. On most of the sweeps, the Kitty pilots were told to expect Spitfires flying high cover in the target area, but Eddie and his boys seldom encountered them. The Spits did not set course with the other squadrons but operated on their own in the general area. As the boys from 260 took off with their comrades from 2 SAAF that noon hour, nine Spitfires of 92 Squadron were preparing to leave. Their mission was to cover the Kittys but they were never seen by the pilots of 260.

Making their offensive sweep over the Daba landing grounds, Eddie led the top four in his FL 233, climbing some 2,000 to 3,000 feet above the next section. His plan was to find a better position to cover the other Kittys and to have the advantage of height in case of an attack. As the formation approached the Daba LG's, dust trails could be seen coming off the airfields. There was little doubt the 109's and 202's were scrambling to intercept. Keeping a sharp look-out above as well as below, Eddie was aware the sun was high and it gleamed on the cockpit perspex.

A few minutes later, the young Canadian section leader saw two 109's climb, then level off, heading for the main formation. It was evident they hadn't seen the four Kittyhawks flying top cover. Eddie waited until the two Messerschmitts were about to pass under the nose of his aircraft about 2,000 feet below. With a quick wing-over to keep them in sight, he started down, keeping his eye on the enemy leader. The 109's had begun banking left, preparing to go down on the Kittyhawks below. At about 150 yards, Eddie pressed the trigger, then pulled back hard on the stick in a climbing turn starboard. He could see his victim, hit up front in the engine and along the port wing root and fuselage, heading straight toward earth, trailing fire and black streams of smoke.

In the meantime, Sgt. Rick Rattle, his No. 2, was on the tail of the other 109 when two more enemy aircraft were seen diving to attack. Eddie immediately called a break on the R/T while he continued his turn to provide his own attack on the new intruders. Rattle broke off his attack but was hit by the lead 109. Without hesitating Eddie fired at long range, and along with his mate, the Messerschmitt fled to the west. Rattle's aircraft had been damaged and he reported oil leaking into the cockpit. Eddie decided it was time to head his formation home.

On the ground the boys counted their victories. F/Sgt. Edwards had destroyed one Me-109; Sgt. Rattle had a probable and Sgt. Colley recorded one damaged. At the same time, 92 Squadron Spits were claiming two Messerschmitts destroyed. Both Rattle and Colley's Kittyhawks were slightly damaged in the combat.

Intensive research into enemy records showed Unteroffizier Tacke from an Me-109 fighter-bomber unit was lost about this time, apparently to ack-ack fire. Maresciallo Sacci, an MC-202 pilot of 4 Stormo Caccia, was shot down, bailed out and returned to his unit later. Other casualties are unknown.

The victories of the past couple of days were evidence of the leadership skills of both Eddie and his friend, Ron Cundy. They had led squadrons into combat and came home with only a few aircraft damaged. At the same time, victories were adding up.

The following day, 23 October, the last day before the major Allied offensive, enemy fighters put forth a particularly fine effort. 260 pilots were involved in heavy dogfights and Sgt. Cartwright recorded: "Pilots racing to go after recent victories. 1st show: 109's shoot up Mink in N. Crash-lands. 2nd show: 109's get going again and shoot down B and C — one pilot safe. 3rd show: they shoot down Sheppard (comes back O.K.) and damaged X and O badly. We only get one damaged and Shep got a Macchi." Pilot Officer Mink, the American, was shot down in the first show by one of the German aces of Jagdgeschwader 27. Warrant Officer E. Tomlinson, one of the new Canadians with 260, was killed and Sergeant Colley was shot down in the second show. In the third show, Sergeant Sheppard was shot down and Kittys flown by P/O Thornhill and F/O Aitchison were badly shot up. It had been a good day for the Macchi pilots. No German claims were recorded for Tomlinson, Colley, Sheppard, Thornhill or Aitchison.

"The big push at Alamein started tonight when tanks advanced," Sgt. Cartwright wrote in his diary on 23 October 1942. The final battle for El Alamein had opened.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 15: THE BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

Allied and Axis armies faced each other on a forty-mile front line extending from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the impassable Quattara Depression in the south. Rommel's forces were entrenched and Montgomery's were ready to advance. For the British General, air and army co-operation was essential. With Allied superiority shown in the air in the past few days, the German General was forced to change his tactics.

Well prepared to meet the enemy, the 8th Army's 230,000 men were ready to face 27,000 Germans and another 80,000 Italians Rommel had at his command. British tanks numbered six to every German tank but Montgomery knew the days ahead would not be easy. AVM Tedder knew it too. Bombing and strafing entrenched enemy soldiers at strong points was far different from attacking a mobile army. To make his gains, Montgomery wanted to use the elements of surprise, but that was tough with enemy reconnaissance planes constantly flying overhead.

By nightfall 23 October 1942 the troops had been positioned and by sundown the British General had been assured Rommel did not expect the first attack that night. In his book, Eagles Strike, author J.A. Brown tells of General Montgomery's plan: "'Operation Lightfoot' was to break through in the north in a four-mile stretch between the Tell el Elsa and Miteiriya Ridges; a secondary attack, purporting to be the main attack, would be made in the south. Three simultaneous thrusts would be made; those by 30th Corps and 13th Corps with the object of allowing the armour to break through. 10th Corps in the north was to engage the armour, having burst out through two corridors cleared by sappers and infantry. Montgomery anticipated 'a dog fight' lasting at least a week. The great question was whether the armour could break through into open ground without being destroyed on minefields and by anti-tank guns. Previous battles had shown that it could not."

In the darkness of 23 October 1942, British guns opened up in the greatest barrage since World War I. Divisions of the 8th Army were crawling from slit trenches and moving through the minefields. Before long, three enemy battalions were put out of action and a fourth surrendered. But the enemy defence was stubborn and by dawn, a German counter-attack had regained some of its lost ground. As the 30th Corps continued to try to clear the northern corridor, battles were fierce. The New Zealand Division worked southwards from Miteiriya Ridge during the following day and in the afternoon, the 1st Armoured Division and 51st Division broke beyond the western minefield. Throughout the day fighter bombers and light bombers attacked the enemy 15th Panzer and Littorio Divisions with all they had to support the 8th Army. The Kittys escorted bombers on every mission but few enemy aircraft were there to interfere. Eddie's squadron flew some of the escort trips which, for 260, were uneventful. By the end of the day, no appreciable ground had been gained.

After dark on 24 October, the 10th Armoured attacked the enemy and throughout the following day the troops fought to break through. 4th and 7th Armoured Divisions were heavy in battle too, but all three were forced to abandon their attempt; the losses were too heavy. In the meantime, 1st Armoured Division had pushed its way to the Kidney Ridge area and, in the north, the 9th Australian had achieved a little success.

Above, the Desert Air Force was making an all-out effort in its support of the 8th Army. As on the ground, fighting was heavy in the air as 260 Squadron Kittyhawks from LG-97 escorted Bostons and Baltimores in midmorning. During the trip, Sergeant `Shep' Sheppard shot down a Macchi 202 and P/O Doug England damaged another. No losses were sustained on the Allied side.

The battles raged again 26 October. On the ground, Rommel's counter-attack on Kidney Ridge failed. Montgomery took time to re-group his forces and no real breakthroughs were made.

In the air, the light bombers, Bostons and Baltimores made nine raids during the day against the airfields and enemy concentrations west of the 8th Army's positions. The Kittyhawks of 260 Squadron were among those who provided escort on two of the raids that day. At 10:00 hours they left the ground, flying top cover to twelve Bostons and six Baltimores, raiding Fuka main airfield. On the way to their target and on the return flight, the Kittys met 109's and 202's. They fought for their lives in fierce dog-fights which ended in destruction on both sides. F/O Aitchison and F/O Meredith were both able to claim a Macchi 202 destroyed but both suffered at the hands of the enemy. 'Merry' Meredith was shot down by a Macchi and Aitchison's aircraft was badly damaged by flak. F/Sgt. Ody failed to return from the mission. The Kittys flown by F/Sgt. Barber and Sgt. Cairns were both damaged by the 202's.

The boys were up again in the late afternoon with twenty-four Kittys as they escorted twelve Bostons and six Baltimores. A dozen Kittyhawks from 260 Squadron and another twelve from 4 SAAF took off to escort the bombers to LG-21. Leading the top four, Eddie Edwards was on his second sortie of the day. Earlier, he and his comrades had carried out a successful dive-bombing mission in the southern sector, bombing and strafing tents, vehicles and personnel. Now, flying high over the entire formation with three others of his section, the Canadian leader spotted at least eight Me-109's. He saw four go after 4 SAAF Squadron below, and went down on them. Heading for the enemy leader, Eddie came to firing range just when the German pilot was pulling up from an attack. The young Canadian closed the angle and, at about 150 yards, eased his Kitty, FL 221, inside. He fired. Easing off his climb, he had only seconds to see the 109 flip over and head toward the ground in a dark stream of smoke. In the next moment, he was heading for another Messerschmitt which was firing from close range at Eddie's No. 2, Sgt. Rattle. As he saw pieces flying from Rattle's Kitty, he didn't have to think about what to do next. Firing two bursts at the 109 from 45 degrees and under 200 yards, he had the Jagdfliegern on the run, but Rattle's plane had been badly hit. The Kittyhawk pilots turned away from the battle and nursed their comrade home. Rattle's entire instrument panel had been shot away, the windscreen had been shattered and he had been wounded in the leg and neck. It was one of Rattle's longest rides. Fighting unconsciousness, he managed to make it to base where he put his aircraft down on its belly at 250 mph and slid across the field. He was lucky. He suffered no further injuries from the crash-landing and after six weeks of recovery, the young Canadian pilot would be back with the squadron.

Although it had been touch-and-go for Rattle, the trip netted Sgt. Thomas, the New Zealander and F/L Cundy an Me-109 each. Eddie and F/O Gilboe each claimed a probable and Rick 'Snake' Rattle had been able to chalk up a damaged before being hit. Enemy records show that an Me-109 of III/JG-27 was shot down and belly-landed. A couple of Macchis are recorded badly damaged in combat that day; it is likely the planes were flown by Italians of 4 Stormo or 23 Gruppo. The three downed pilots from 260 had apparently been victims of enemy aces. It is likely Rattle was shot up by Hpt. Gustav Rodel of II/JG-27, making it his sixty-fifth confirmed kill. Ody was probably the victim of Lt. Jurgen Harder of III/JG-53, a German pilot with twenty-six victories to his credit, and 'Merry' Meredith was taken down by Tenente Bordoni Bisleri, an Italian ace from 18 Gruppo. Meredith was made a prisoner by the Italians, Ody was killed and Rattle was wounded, but the boys had added four destroyed, two probables and one damaged to their own tally.

Bostons and Baltimores concentrated their efforts on enemy Panzers on 27 October. Rommel had moved his 15th Panzer Division to join 21st Panzer Division in the north and assaulted 1st Armoured Division and the Rifle Brigade at Kidney Ridge. His attempts had failed and his Panzers were repulsed with heavy losses. In his log-book Eddie had written, "Bombing Panzers. Big battle on the ground."

By nightfall, Rommel was ordering his troops to hold their positions. His counter-attack was at a standstill. On 28 October, the 9th Australian Division attacked in the north along the coast and made some solid gains. In the meantime, the Afrika Korps' Panzers were trying again to form up for another

sound attack but the Desert Air Force Bostons and Baltimores wouldn't leave them alone. They constantly harassed the enemy and finally the attack was cancelled.

During the daylight hours of 28 October, Montgomery withdrew 1st and 24th Armoured Division and ordered 7th Armoured Division to move north. Rommel had ordered all his troops to the north, leaving the more quiet sectors in the south to the Italian forces. But, as it had been at Alam el Haifa, so it was at El Alamein. Rommel was dangerously low on fuel; he was about to lose the critical battle of El Alamein because the tankers carrying their supplies were being sunk, one after another. Already, the Desert Fox was thinking in terms of withdrawal.

In the air that day, the RAF continued its fight for victory. The first trip was uneventful. Up early, Eddie and his comrades joined pilots from 4 SAAF on a dive-bombing mission but no enemy aircraft were met. At 14:10 hours, they left the ground again. Ten Kittyhawks of the unit escorted bombers. This time they ran into four Me-109's and the boys had the upper hand. F/O Thagard and Sgt. Sheppard scored one probable between them.

It was during the third time in the air that day that excitement reigned. Eleven aircraft from the unit took off at 16:40 hours on a north to south dive-bombing and strafing mission over Panzer divisions. They were escorted by 2 SAAF Squadron Kittyhawks. During the dive to the target, someone reported Messerschmitts but Eddie couldn't see them. The young Canadian and men of his section levelled off at about 100 feet amid the dust and haze of the battle below. Then, through the dust ahead, he spotted a number of the enemy aircraft crossing in front of him at low level. Within seconds he realized they belonged to Hauptman Gerhard Homuth's I Gruppe, JG-27. He had returned to the desert from Sicily the day before.

It was too good to be true! They had stumbled across a vulnerably small group of Messerschmitts, at the same level and only a few hundred yards away; not above and ready to bounce them, but right there in front of their guns. Taking advantage of the speed from their dive, the Kittyhawks closed the gap in seconds. Taking over a pair on the port side, Eddie left his section on the right to come in behind the other 109's. He closed in and at 150 yards, he fired at the first 109. It hit the ground beneath him and was engulfed by flames. Within seconds he was on to the second 109, firing from about 100 yards. He likened the explosion to a shred-filled waste paper basket being turned upside down and shaken. Still moving fast, amid dust and smoke from the ground, Eddie couldn't stop to confirm his second 109's destiny.

Once back at base, the pilots filed their reports. Eddie claimed an Me-109 destroyed and another probable. F/O Gilboe recorded a probable and Sgt. Hill a damaged. The Canadian pilots had made their mark. In addition, the South African pilots reported an Me-109 and MC-202 destroyed. The Allied squadrons had excelled; with no losses.

"To me," Eddie Edwards wrote after the war, "there wasn't any doubt the second 109 went down right there, amongst the tanks." He was right. German records corroborate his belief. No less than four Me-109's were shot down in the skirmish. Leutnant Albert Mayer of III/JG-27 was killed and three others successfully crash-landed in Axis territory. Among those to come out alive was Oberleutnant Jost Schlang of III/JG-27 who, at one time, had been Hans-Joachim Marseille's personal No. 2. Not until after the war was it discovered that, although the pilots of 260 had only claimed one destroyed, three enemy aircraft went to their end. The third was probably the victim of F/O Gilboe. There was little doubt the wheel of fortune had changed direction. The sky over the Western Desert was no longer ruled by I/JG-27.

On the ground, Feldmarshall Rommel had been moving his 90th Light Division north in an attempt to stop the successful Australian troops. 29 October saw Montgomery planning new strategy.

While keeping the pressure on in the north, he prepared for 'Operation Supercharge'. The plan called for an opening in the centre now defended by Italian troops for his own armour.

Above, the Desert Air Force continued their sorties against a number of targets. With activity heavy, there was relatively little excitement for the boys of 260 that day. Although twelve of their Kittys went on a dive-bombing mission against the El Daba Station, escorted by the aircraft of 2 SAAF, they all returned safely. 2 SAAF reported the only casualty, losing one aircraft to enemy fighters. 29 October, activity continued but 260 Squadron saw no combat. Eddie had flown two missions that day; first, dive-bombing Italians in the southern sector of Alamein and, second, flying top cover for other Kittys who were dive-bombing Germans in the north.

For eight days, the battle on the ground had been raging. London was worried about another failure in the Western Desert but Rommel already knew he was beaten. Although there seemed to be no progress in London's eyes, the Desert Air Force and Rommel's lack of fuel, added to the efforts of the 8th Army, were driving Rommel's advantages into the ground. On 1 November, he let Berlin know the Campaign in Africa had been lost.

On the last day of October, while Rommel's troops were making counter-attacks against 9th Australian Division and failing to make progress, Desert Air Force fighters were getting the upper hand. They claimed twelve enemy aircraft while the Luftwaffe took five. It is possible there were more, made by the Regia Aeronautica. Two of the Allied victories went to 260 Squadron in combat that morning.

At 10:25 hours, the Kittyhawks from 260 had joined more from 5 SAAF on an offensive sweep that took them behind the front line over El Daba and Fuka aerodromes. Once over their target, Cundy spotted 109's below and not far from the aerodromes. He and his No. 2, Sgt. Thomas, peeled off and made an attack on two of them. Cundy managed to shoot one down almost immediately while the other dived westwards. Using full boost, Cundy and Thomas caught the Jagdflieger at deck level. Between them, they aimed their guns and watched as he hit the dirt. Turning homeward, they flew low to the ground and swung out to sea, flying at ground level to their own side of the line and back to base. They had flown far behind enemy lines and did not want to be detected by more German planes.

Although Cundy and Thomas were successful, Sgt. Mockeridge was shot down and didn't return home. 260 Squadron hits were made on Oberfeldwebel Rudolf Moycis of III/JG-27 and Leutnant Heinrich Steiss of II/ JG-27. The pilots hit by Cundy and Thomas both survived uninjured and returned to their units the same day. Both German pilots later became known for their fighting ability before being killed in action. Steiss died in 1943 and Moycis in 1944.

The next day, 1 November 1942, Unteroffizier Hans Jurgens of II/JG-27 was shot down by Eddie's guns. He too would survive only to be killed in action later. Jurgens began his operational career in the desert in the summer of 1942 and claimed his first enemy aircraft on September 16. The claim was never confirmed; no one had been there to witness the kill. On 20 October, he claimed a second before he was shot down, crash-landing at Daba. Two days later, the young German made another confirmed hit, but the day after, he was once again forced to land after being struck down by Allied fighters. An uneventful week followed and on November 1, he fell in the line of Eddie's Kitty, once more crash-landing near Daba. He had been downed three times in two weeks.

His encounter with Eddie was brief. At 16:00 hours that day, Eddie had taken off in his Kitty, FL 305, as one of sixteen Kittyhawks on a dive-bombing mission. Four Kitty-bombers from 4 SAAF and four from 260 Squadron were accompanied by another eight from 260 who flew escort. Leading the top section of four escorts, Eddie had taken his boys to 14,000 feet, well above the other formation. As they crossed the bomb line, he saw at least four Me-109's coming from the west, well below them but coming closer in a steep climb. Biding his time, Eddie let them pass beneath before he turned to attack out of the sun. But someone in the enemy camp had warned his opponents. Except for the aircraft Eddie had

singled out, the 109's dived for the deck. Instead of going down, Unteroffizier Jurgens pulled up sharply in a steep, climbing turn. Eddie followed, closing the gap quickly. When the German pilot realized he couldn't climb away, he pushed the stick forward and headed down again. Eddie caught the 109 with a short burst of gunfire as it went over the top and started down. As the young Canadian passed over and looked down, he could see smoke and fire in the fuselage and engine area of the Messerschmitt. Unknown to Eddie, Jurgens crash-landed his flaming machine a few minutes later somewhere to the south of Daba. Having probably learned a lesson from his encounter with the formidable opponent he had taken on in Eddie Edwards, Jurgens returned to his unit and later became a fighter ace with eleven victories to his credit before his death 19 April 1944. By that time he would become a Feldwebel, a pilot of 5 Staffel, Jagdgeschweder 27 and his victory list would include three Kittyhawks, one Spitfire, one Beaufighter and six American four-engined bombers, B-17's or B-24's.

The hit on Jurgens' aircraft had given Eddie his fifth aerial victory in two weeks. It was a score which would not be matched by any other Desert Air Force pilot during that time.

On the ground, 'Operation Supercharge' was in full effect 2 November 1942. General Montgomery's 8th Army was making gains. Although 1st Armoured Division was held by enemy anti-tank guns, the New Zealand troops made a break-through. Armoured cars were getting through south of Kidney Ridge and by the end of the day had reached the Sidi Abd el Rahman track. The Desert Air Force was active over the battlefields and fighters from 260 Squadron served as part of an escort to eighteen bombers over the northern sector.

During the afternoon, Feldmarshall Rommel issued orders to his troops, withdrawing to positions near El Daba. By nightfall, the German General had made his move in the hopes of effectively taking up positions at Fuka. But when the sun came up on the morning of 3 November, the Allied forces saw the enemy giving way. The air forces on both sides were up in full force and battles in the air were many. South African bombers were intensely involved, escorted by Kittyhawks of 233 Wing. But 260's activity was little more than routine, with one exception.

Returning from his second escort trip of the day, F/L Cundy spotted an Me-110 coming from behind the formation. The twin-engine enemy did a sweeping turn above the fighter cover and Cundy pulled up the nose of his Kittyhawk and gave a quick burst from a fairly wide deflection angle of probably 60 degrees. The German pilot increased his rate of turn and, unable to follow, Cundy watched as the enemy flew out of sight. Once back at base, Cundy wrote in his log-book, "I had a squirt at an Me-110 but did not get it." From post-war records, it appears Cundy was wrong. An Me-110 of III/ZG-26 was forced to land in a minefield that day. The crew was killed. No other claims on an Me-110 were made and it is likely Cundy's shot hit its mark.

The day of reckoning had come. For the Allied ground forces in Africa, 4 November 1942 was a day to remember. Rommel ordered a general withdrawal of his troops to Fuka; 1st Armoured Division went in after 51st Division and 4th Indian Division had cleared the anti-tank screen. Further south, the New Zealand troops and 7th Armoured Division broke through while, in the far south near the Quattara Depression, 13th Corps took care of the Italian Divisions.

In the air, activity was heavy and the boys from 260 Squadron found themselves in the thick of it. In the morning hours, they flew top cover to Bostons bombing the retreating enemy columns between Daba and Fuka. No enemy aircraft were encountered over the target. After escorting the bombers back to the Alamein line, the 260 Squadron Kittys carrying 250-pound bombs, turned out to sea and flew west again crossing the coast near Fuka.

"After crossing back inland, we turned down sun," Eddie remembers. "We spent anxious minutes hoping the leader would find a target soon and not dive-bomb with the sun above and behind the formation. We were flying in the close proximity of a number of enemy aerodromes and we were certain

there would be enemy aircraft in the area. At last, a target was selected and the squadron started downward — directly down sun. My flight had just committed itself to the dive when I saw a big white spinner coming in at 30 degrees, 200 yards astern. I called a warning break and started up in a steep climbing turn. F/O Gilboe, my No. 2 who was about a hundred yards behind, broke sharply starboard as well and collided with the aircraft. The enemy aircraft broke up and Gilboe's Kittyhawk was seen going down in an inverted flat spin with its blue belly showing. One parachute was seen. It had looked as if that aircraft had me labelled when Gilboe collided with it. The other enemy aircraft departed and we carried out our dive-bombing and strafing. Later we heard Gilboe was a POW."

On the same day, during the afternoon, twelve Kittyhawks from 260 Squadron flew top cover to a dozen more Kittys of 2 SAAF, attacking the enemy MT near Galal, west of El Daba. After the Kittybombers had hit their target and turned for home, F/L Cundy spotted a Ju 88 flying low in a westerly direction and out to sea. Cundy dived on it and his section followed. Within minutes, he watched it careen toward the sea; Cundy's shot had hit the 88 in a vital spot. Sprays of water leapt high into the air as it crashed into the sea.

During the Battle of El Alamein, the Desert Air Force had claimed about 150 enemy aircraft destroyed; eighteen of them going to 260 RAF Squadron. Eddie and his comrades recorded five more probably destroyed and eight more damaged. At the same time, eight of their Kittyhawks had been shot down and six more were badly damaged. Although six pilots had been lost to combat and another was wounded, their record was better than at any previous time.

In the enemy camp, the Luftwaffe pilots claimed just over one hundred Allied aircraft from 20 October to 4 November 1942. Although the numbers are not known, the Regia Aeronautica pilots had also been active, claiming victories.

Slowly the Desert Air Force fighter pilots were getting the upper hand. The Battle of El Alamein had become the turning point.

The Battle of El Alamein had also seen Eddie Edwards quietly, and without seeking applause, making a name for himself. In the past two weeks his aerial victories had numbered five. He had become the DAF's most successful pilot in air-to-air combat in the battles that extended from 20 October to 5 November when the British started their pursuit of the retreating Axis forces. Eddie's pal, Ron Cundy, now 'B' Flight Commander, was second in scoring. During that period of time, Cundy had scored four and a half; three and a half were confirmed. Others in the squadron claimed three and four hits: F/L Anthony Watson, an ex-farmer from Oakwood Hill, Surrey had scored four in the air and two on the ground flying long-range Beaufighters. Captain Lyman Middleditch, an American from the 57th USAAF Fighter Group was another Allied pilot with four victories to his credit. Middleditch was among the Americans who had flown the previous summer with Eddie and his comrades on attachment to 233 Wing for operational experience. The boys of 260 had taught him well. Three other pilots tallied three kills each during the same air-to-air combat period. S/L Billy Drake, the CO of 112 'Shark' Squadron and a veteran of the Campaign of France and the Battle of Britain, was one of the three. F/O John L. Waddy, an ex-member of 260, now flying Spitfires with 92 Squadron was another and F/L John H. Curry, an ex-barnstorming pilot from Dallas, Texas who had joined the RCAF in 1940 and was now with 601 Spitfire Squadron, was the third.

With Eddie's high performance in air combat during the past few days, his personal score was up to ten destroyed, of which seven were confirmed. He had also tallied seven probables and five damaged.

His success was attributed to exceptional shooting ability. Eddie had been fortunate to have previous experience, unlike other pilots in the desert war. His days as a boy on the Canadian Prairies spent with 12-gauge pumpguns had given him insight into deflection shooting. Instead of aiming at

pheasants, partridges, ducks and geese on the wing near Battleford, Eddie was using these same skills as a fighter pilot over the desert.

Although most aircraft on both sides were shot down from astern, deflection shooting in the desert became a valuable skill. Eddie could make his aim in the path of a moving Messerschmitt and intercept the target. For most pilots the technique took practise and experience. Even though Ron Cundy had begun flying operations in November of 1941, it was not until August 4, 1942 that he was able to achieve results and register a confirmed victory with a deflection shot. Once able to judge how much deflection to allow in an angle shot at a specific range, Cundy became an ace in short order. But his skill came only at the end of his first operational tour, once he had mastered deflection shooting. It took most pilots practise and experience before results were recorded.

"That Eddie was a first-class shot goes without saying," Cundy was to say later. "I recall one occasion when he was flying top cover to my section on a bomber escort when we were attacked by Me-109's. Eddie's section was the first to be jumped and I remember seeing him calmly evade the enemy attack and then quickly position himself for a wide, climbing deflection shot which was successful. I doubt if the German pilot knew what hit him or how it happened."

Wally Conrad of 274 Squadron had been another witness to Eddie's exceptional shooting ability. Conrad had seen Eddie shoot down German ace Otto Schulz of IV JG-27 with a fancy deflection shot on 17 June 1942.

Eddie's ability to remain cool and calm and his aggressive nature gave him the opportunity to use his deflection skills. Mediterranean theatre sharpshooters such as Eddie, Beurling and Marseille had the ability to make up their minds quickly about the action they would take in the middle of combat; in the midst of a hectic dog-fight, they could take in the entire show, rather than concentrate on only one event. They would act almost automatically to position themselves, making use of the weapons and equipment available to them. Eddie's inferior Kittyhawks made it even more necessary to act quickly. His deflection shot might be the only chance he had at his better-equipped opponent.

Personal initiative was also on Eddie's side. Unwilling to accept things just because they were already in place, the young Canadian made adjustments that were geared toward staying alive. He had always advocated more practical and efficient formations in the air and inside the cockpit of his own planes, at least one item was different.

"Reflector and gyro gunsights were used in our aircraft," Eddie said, "but they were a complete nuisance in a dog-fight. First of all, one had to look at the sight to use it, and this was taboo. One had to have all of his concentration on the target and the sky around and behind. Except for a mark on the windshield which could be seen without having to look at it directly, everything else was confusing." Although the Kitty provided a stable platform to fire from when flying on a straight level at a given speed, it became a monster in rapid diving and climbing. In dog-fights when the speeds changed rapidly, the aircraft had a tendency to slip and skid. By checking a primary needle and ball instrument, situated beside the airspeed indicator and other primary instruments in the cockpit, the slipping could be eliminated. But it was fatal to look down, even for a split second. Eddie's initiative had groundcrew staff move the spirit ball part of the instrument to eye level below the gunsight. When he lined up his target, he could see that his aircraft was stable.

Already experienced in deflection shooting, Eddie took little time in the desert to perfect his skills in the Kittyhawks. As early as 8 June 1942 he had mastered one of the most difficult shots. During head-on attacks, the desert pilots had only a split second to fire at the maximum distance and hit their target. Everything else was too late. For Eddie, the downing of Feldwebel Johann Walchofer of VI/JG-27, was a spectacular hit. The Me-109 went down after Eddie's deflection hit its mark.

Although Eddie's successes had put him first on the list of fighter aces flying in the desert, the young Canadian from the Prairies remained the same. Reserved and modest, he never discussed the evaluation of a claim. He had learned line shooting was not in the favor of the Desert Air Force and did not alter the rules. He appeared more relaxed than most of his comrades who often showed varying degrees of nervousness, irritability or high spirits.

"He was so quiet," one of his comrades recalled, "that you would rarely notice him except for the fact that he had the best results by far with the least noise."

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 16: STRAFING THE AIRFIELDS

As Rommel's forces turned back, the Desert Air Force maintained momentum to ensure the Allied victory in the El Alamein area. 260 Squadron's co-operation with the 8th Army on the ground was constant. Their objective was to aid in the destruction of ground forces. In most cases awards were given out in the form of a Distinguished Flying Cross to a pilot who had shot down five aircraft in air-to-air combat, a Bar after ten and so on; but the pilots who destroyed innumerable ground vehicles and performed dependably on all operations received few awards or other public recognition for their conscientious efforts.

Loyal to the long-range goals and uncaring of rewards not forthcoming, both Kittyhawk and Hurricane squadrons fulfilled their missions with dedication. Seldom did the pilots of 260 go looking for enemy fighters; their mandate was co-operation with the Army in the destruction of ground forces. When enemy fighters hampered or thwarted them, the Desert Air Force rose to the occasion, but it did not weaken their resolve or tempt them to forsake their obligations in favor of more personal glory. In the fall of 1942, their strength had become evident. In the end, working hand in hand with the 8th Army, their dedication paid off in the complete destruction of enemy ground forces.

In contrast, Me-109 pilots carried out as few dive-bombing and strafing missions as possible. They apparently disliked the job of close army support and complied to such orders with only half-hearted efforts. The German pilots lived in fear of being shot down by flak or caught on the deck by Allied fighters. They were content to fly `Freie Jagd' or sweeps, climbing above the Kittys and the Hurricane formations, attacking at will. Diving down on their victims and then pulling up sharply to regain altitude was less dangerous. Rarely did the Messerschmitts have to search for their targets; the Desert Air Force, for the most part, flew in large gaggles made up of several squadrons and could always be seen miles away. Even so, the Allied pilots pursued their primary goals and continued to destroy enemy ground forces despite heavy losses to their fighters.

"Until the Spitfires arrived — and there was only a handful of them — the 109's completely controlled the upper layer of sky," Eddie said later. "They knew it and they used their capabilities well. They shot down so many of our pilots with their super nose cannons while someone guarded their tail. There was no doubt in my mind they were doing their own thing and negligently avoided any real support for their ground forces. As proof, the DAF bombed and strafed enemy ground forces for hundreds of miles during the retreat with little or no air opposition. They may have had their problems of supply, etc., but the Desert Air Force ensured protection during its retreat."

Rommel's forces were in retreat in November 1942. Since the beginning of the new offensive, the Kittyhawk pilots had been flying escort to the medium bombers, Bostons, Baltimores and Mitchells which harassed the enemy landing grounds. "The squadrons were moving forward at such a rapid rate during the Axis retreat," Eddie remembers, "that the bomber squadrons couldn't keep up. Until they were able to move up or make special refueling bases, the Kittyhawks became the main bombing force."

The pilots of 260 Squadron had also served as escorts to South African fighter squadrons on strafing missions, but on 5 November they took on another new role. They began doing their own strafing for the first time. Just days before, the squadron had moved forward to LG-75 and that day S/L 'Pedro' Hanbury returned to head the unit as commanding officer.

5 November 1942 saw eight of the unit's long-range Kittys fly top cover to Bostons bombing retreating MT between Fuka and Mersa Matruh. After the bombs had been dropped, and 260's leading section had driven off four marauding 109's, the Kittyhawks were off to strafe the MT.

According to Eddie, "Strafing missions were flown right on the deck where surprise and accuracy in locating targets depended solely upon the leadership of the experienced desert pilots.

Experience could only be gained by actual close contact with the environment in hours flown, time in the area and combat."

On the way home, the boys passed over one of the enemy airfields in the Fuka area and again went down. Eddie's keen eyes had seen an Me-110 and an Me-109 taxiing for takeoff. He attacked and set fire to both before setting course for home.

In finding their way back to LG-97, the pilots relied on the sun. It was the only dependable navigational aid in the desert. Eddie recalls, "Sometimes annoying, sometimes a hindrance, it was helpful when attacking or navigating. The desert was the sun. It was common practise to go down on the deck sixty to eighty miles from home base and, with the aid of a compass or directional gyro aligned with position in the sun, set course and arrive over our field. The sun was an important factor in all navigation and operational flying in the desert."

After a long two-and-a-half-hour trip, all but Sgt. Hartung, a Canadian, had returned home safely. Hartung had been flying in the lead four and Eddie suspected he had been hit by flak, although he was unsure.

The same day, 'Operation Buster', the reoccupation of the Cyrenaican airfields, began. Squadrons of the Desert Air Force were reclaiming territory and fighter units were the first to move. It meant having to leave their well-established base at LG-97 where they had been stationed since July. It was the beginning of a long series of moves.

233 Wing was designated to support the thrust against Tobruk and they were ordered to LG-75, one of the aerodromes south-east of Sidi Barrani, a hundred miles away. For the pilots the move was a minor affair, taking off from LG-97, carrying out a mission and landing on LG-75 an hour and forty minutes later. But for the staff and groundcrews, it was major. It took more than three days to cover the distance between the two landing grounds. In his diary, Sergeant Cartwright recorded the trip:

5 Nov: "Waiting to move. 'A' Party move out."

6 Nov: "Move off two hours before dark. I drive a brand new Dodge 3-tonner — 6 wheels. Make 26 miles and sleep in blue."

7 Nov: "130 miles in 9 hours — good going 90 before tiffin — small rations. Dodge running fine. Stop near an abandoned Jerry stores wagon — full of kit and loot it. Passed scores of burned-out tanks, wagons, guns, etc. thousands of prisoners and dead blokes. Jerry going back fast and there's loot all over the place."

8 Nov: "43 miles in 8 hours. Crawling along nose to tail. Road packed. Terrible going. Meet 'A' Party. Give them 2 days rations and off they go again. Forget Blitz (his dog) at petrol filling point and go back three miles for him."

9 Nov: "On again. 100 miles and reach LG-75 before dark and take over kites."

While the Desert Air Force was moving up, Rommel's retreating troops were escaping annihilation despite the confusion on the jam-packed coastal road. Bad weather restricted the Desert Air Force 5 and 6 November. Had better conditions existed, they could have destroyed the entire Panzer Army which, at the time, was immobilized on the coastal road from Mersa Matruh to Halfaya Pass.

Slow reaction on the part of British commanders gave the retreating forces another reprieve. By November 9, Rommel's army had extricated itself from the dangerous Sollum and Halfaya Passes even though the Desert Air Force's light bomber wings had been within range of the entire volume of trapped enemy troops. As Feldmarshall Kesselring wrote, "It was fortunate for us that the RAF was not sufficiently trained to bomb a retreating enemy out of existence." It would be another six months before the German ground forces were destroyed.

While the British were sparing Rommel, news came to the desert that on 8 November an invasion force of British and Americans had landed on the beaches of French North Africa about two

thousand miles away. Rommel's forces were now hard-pressed from both sides. The news provided even more incentive for the advancement of the 8th Army in the Desert.

Early in the morning of 10 November, the Kittyhawks of 260 Squadron landed on LG-75. It wasn't long before they were in the air again. Immediately after refuelling they were detailed for a sweep over Tobruk led by F/L Lee. 2 SAAF Squadron was flying top cover and on the road approaching Tobruk, they spotted enemy vehicles in numbers. The 260 Squadron Kittys dived in fours toward the target but before they reached their objective, they received word from the top cover that 109's were attacking. A few seconds later, one of the enemy aircraft flew directly in front of the lead section. Lee fired and watched as it headed straight down. The boys completed their strafing mission and returned safely to base. After tallying their scores they learned Captain Laubscher, who was flying in the top cover squadron, had made a claim on a 109 which dived straight into the ground. There is little doubt Laubscher fired first at the Messerschmitt flown by Leutnant Konrad Fels of I/JG-77 and as the 109 dived in front of Lee, the squadron leader fired a second shot. Double claims were easily made.

The following day, while the New Zealand troops occupied Sollum, Capuzzo and Bardia, and other units of the 8th Army reached Halfaya, 233 Wing's Kittyhawks took care of the Gambut airfields. By clearing the airfields, it would be possible for fighter-bombers to move to the Cyrenaican landing grounds. At the same time, Tobruk, the main terminal for Axis air transports, would be exposed.

At 09:15 hours 11 November, four squadrons of 233 Wing conducted a fighter-bomber attack on Gambut 2 and Tobruk. 260 Squadron and 4 SAAF Squadron served as bombing units and 5 and 2 SAAF Squadrons went along as escorts. S/L Hanbury was leading 260 Squadron with F/L Cundy taking the mid-four and F/Sgt. Edwards heading the top four. Spread out in formation, the forty-three aircraft followed as Hanbury chose Garnbut 2 as his target. They could see a number of aircraft in the dispersal areas as they looked down. From his position, Eddie picked two Junkers 88's which were refuelling on the north end of the field. Going down for the attack, he waited for the right moment and released the bomb under the belly of his Kittyhawk. He looked back as his bomb blew up between the two 88's. Both aircraft were on fire as he led his section to the deck to strafe transport vehicles east of Gambut.

In the meantime, F/L, Cundy, in the mid-section, was pulling out of a dive when he saw a Fisieler Storch Fi.156 below and heading toward him. All he had to do was push the nose of his Kittyhawk down and fire. As he pulled away in a climbing turn he saw the Storch crash into the ground and burst into flames. As the Wing set course for home it was Cundy who spotted a Ju 88 of I(F)/121, a recce unit, flying at ground level toward Axis territory. Cundy first attacked the enemy from the port quarter and silenced the rear gunner. Other pilots on the flight followed and fired a few bursts before the Australian was on the 88's tail, shooting out the port engine and then the starboard while his buddies provided cover. It went down somewhere between Gambut and Tobruk.

The trip had been another good showing. Four enemy aircraft had been destroyed in exchange for two Kittyhawks lost. Sgt. 'Willy' Williams, one of the Canadian newcomers had force-landed safely at LG-08 at Mersa Matruh and F/Sgt. Alan 'Al' Hill, another Canadian, was shot down and made a prisoner of war.

Back at the base, the pilots went to the Intelligence Officer's quarters and made their reports. When it came Cundy's turn to file, the IO suggested six pilots should receive credit for the destroyed Ju 88. Johnny Walker stated, "It would be good for the moral of the other young, inexperienced pilots if they were credited with a share in the kill." Ron Cundy agreed and was credited with one-sixth of an enemy aircraft even though his aim had made the mark on the enemy. Although many pilots disagreed with the IO's suggestion, it proved there was no place in 260 Squadron for line shooting.

The Germans began their evacuation of Tobruk 12 November and that day 260 Squadron, led by S/L Hanbury, was off early over the area. They dive-bombed the harbour from 8,000 feet, picking

barges as their targets before they carried on to strafe transports along the coastal road. After the mission, they moved again, this time to LG-148 at Sidi Aziez where Wing Headquarters had arrived the day before. They were among the first squadrons to return to Cyrenaica in Libya.

Things were happening quickly. The next day, the 260 Squadron Kittyhawks moved to Gambut Main airfield while on the ground the 8th Army reached Tobruk. Before its move, 260 had made sweeps and strafing missions over the Tmimi-Gazala area. First the boys had discovered a few small groups of vehicles in the Tmimi area and then they crossed the main road east along the coast. A few Me-109's were seen above flying west, but they hadn't made any attempt to make 260 pilots their victims. As the enemy aircraft disappeared, Eddie's squadron was flying deck level, spread out in a wide line abreast with a gap between each of the three sections. Each aircraft flew about eighty yards apart. Eddie and his comrades came upon one of the Gazala airfields where he spotted two 109's parked near the end of the runway, immediately in front of him. It took just a few seconds for the young Canadian to drop the nose of his plane and fire two well-aimed shots. Both 109's exploded in flames. Once again his shooting ability was evident. Eddie was the only member of the squadron to knock out enemy aircraft on his first pass.

The next day was more of the same for the Hurricanes and Kittyhawks. The Hurricanes headed for the area around Agedabia and the Kittys took off for the region around Mechili, again led by S/L Hanbury. They spotted a convoy west of Mechili. Attacking from east to west and out of the sun, they released their bombs to land amongst the transports. Leading the way to the deck, Hanbury and his boys turned and flew back across the enemy vehicles from south to north, their guns blazing. The trip had been successful; the men had at least four direct hits on the MT's.

The Kittys turned northwest. Only a few miles passed before Eddie spotted another enemy aerodrome close to Marawa. This time, as they approached, he saw two Messerschmitts being refueled on the airfield. They were juicy targets for the sharpshooter; their tanks were full of petrol and on impact of the first bullets, they were bound to explode. Eddie and his section went down and, within minutes, both 109's were left burning fiercely.

The cleanup of enemy airfields continued. The next day 238 Squadron Hurricanes were back attacking Agedabia airfield again and 213 Squadron was on its way to the Gialo landing ground. 260 Squadron was headed back to the Marawa airfield for a second time in two days. This time, their aircraft were equipped with long-range tanks and as they passed near the Marawa airfield, Eddie spotted three Me-109's being refueled or repaired near the west end of the field. His section continued in a wide circuit and flew back across the field from the southeast.

Grouped together, perhaps for a quick turn-around, the enemy aircraft were sitting ducks for the Canadian sharpshooter. When Eddie fired, all three collapsed in a heap of flames. Three enemy aircraft had been destroyed in a single burst.

The hit was the last Eddie would make as part of the campaign to clean up the enemy airfields. Since the beginning of November, he had strafed or bombed enemy landing grounds on five occasions and had destroyed no less than eleven German planes. He had become one of the most successful pilots of the entire Desert Air Force in the month of November 1942. But Eddie's victories were his own. Without bragging or boasting, and with only a few notes in his log-book, he made only a few official claims. Members of his section had witnessed each of his hits and applauded his talents.

As November wore on, air activity decreased rapidly. From the middle of the month to the end, few operations were notable. On 17 November, the boys took off on a sweep and strafing mission in the Benghazi area where they found a number of MT's heading south. During the mission, Eddie's guns aimed at a truck and trailer, setting them on fire. His shots damaged several other vehicles.

The next day at noon, the boys of 260 Squadron were off again, headed for enemy transport aircraft over Berea and Magrun aerodromes. As they arrived at the landing grounds, two Ju 52's of III/KGzb V-I took off. Immediately, the Kittyhawk pilots were after them. F/L Davis and Sgt. Curno hit one of the enemy aircraft and forced it back to the ground. F/Sgt. Barber watched as his hit took the other to the ground in flames. But Me-109's from II/JG-27 had joined the combat and P/O Mink, an American pilot from 260 Squadron was shot down.

The unit lost another pilot the following day, but this time enemy fighters were not to blame. As four aircraft patrolled in mid-morning F/L Davis' Kittyhawk caught fire for no apparent reason. Although he successfully bailed out over the Mediterranean and a day-long search took place, he was never seen again. He was an experienced pilot, well liked by his comrades and the loss was a sad one for 260.

Eddie's squadron added to their score the next day. In the late afternoon a few of the pilots caught a Junkers 88 of 10/LG-I. It was damaged by two Kittys of 4 SAAF Squadron and shot down over Derna. Among those killed in the Junkers was the Kommandeur of the bomber Gruppe, IV/LG-I, Major Schulz.

On his 107th sortie of the war and the nineteenth made in November, F/Sgt. Edwards came close to making his last. It was 19 November and Eddie was flying No. 3 in a section of four led by F/L Cundy. They were on a sweep over enemy airfields in the Benghazi area while rain poured from the clouds. Eddie's No. 2 reported mechanical trouble and returned to base shortly after takeoff. Tucked in on Cundy's starboard wing surrounded by heavy rain and dark clouds, Eddie found himself trying to hold the position with his throttle wide open. On the outside of a climbing turn, his Kittyhawk gradually fell out of formation and as he tried to recover, it went into a violent spin to port. Fighting against the heavy rain, he pulled out of the spin only two hundred feet above ground. Luckily he was able to tell which way was up, but to continue to safety, he was forced to climb back into the clouds. Alone and floundering in the vicious storm, he spent thirty minutes in the folds of the angry clouds. After three long hours fighting nature, Eddie returned to base. His many battles with enemy aces had never been as terrifying an experience.

The Allied forces were pleased with their advancements. Now operating from the complex of airfields at Martuba, the Kittyhawk squadrons were amazed the Cyrenaican airfields had been seized in so short a time. One of the Allied objectives had been to hit Martuba by mid-November to be in position to provide air cover to a convoy en route to Malta. Incredibly, they made it. They had covered the 450 mile stretch between Alamein and Martuba in record time. "So fast had the Desert Air Force moved," J.A. Brown wrote, "that at times, squadrons had been operating well in advance of land forces."

"One of the amazing things to me," Eddie recalled, "was the fantastic advances and withdrawals on both sides." Between 10 November and 20 November 1942, "we would strafe and dive-bomb a field one day, then land and operate from it the next."

After the swift retreat, the Luftwaffe had been stationed as far back as Marble Arch and Nofila. At each stop Allied forces saw evidence of a hurried withdrawal. On 17 November, when the Kittyhawks landed on Gazala airfield to refuel just after its evacuation, Eddie reported there were "lots of enemy aircraft left on the field in all states of repair— from almost brand new to burned out. "

The ground parties who had moved along the coastal road during the days of retreat saw more of the enemy's hasty move. Sergeant Bill Cartwright wrote in his diary:

13 November: "Find abandoned Italian Officers Mess. Crockery — brand new boots, radio and a couple of cases of tinned veal (supper)."

14 November: "Pass Capuzzo and a couple of Army wagons with wheels blown off by mines."

16 November: "Go to Tobruk. Loot everywhere. Try to fix up a Henshel but it's too long a job. Plenty of special overhaul tools left in hangars and tents still standing and full of Jerry camp beds. Boxes of brand new machine-guns. Crashed Heinkels all over the drome with their instruments and guns intact. Found 1500 rounds for my Luger, a box of lemons and a Renault. Brought back new 5000 litre Bowser."

19 November: "Reach Martuba in dark. Jerries left 12 109's here. 4 serviceable."

While Allied troops searched through the abandoned airfields they discovered more than small items that could be turned to their advantage. A German He-111 had been found on Derna airfield and looked in good condition. 260's Squadron Leader Hanbury issued orders for the unit's Engineering Officer and some groundcrew to check it out. One He-111 was found in excellent condition and a few days later, Sgt. Sheppard brought the Heinkel to 260's drome. First the boys painted the RAF roundels on it with the squadron letters HS?. Next, Shep and a co-pilot climbed into the cockpit and headed for Alexandria. The mission was for messing supplies. As the He-111 approached on the return trip with vegetables and beer, at least one full squadron of Kittys was in the air, escorting it 150 miles back to base. Cundy, whose tour was about to expire, was made chief He-111 pilot and made trips to the delta area on a few occasions. 260 managed to keep their mascot for some time before being forced to give it up. While the He-111 was on base, the squadron's popularity grew. Other unit personnel were frequently dropping in to share a cold beer.

On 22 November 1942, Eddie and his squadron were introduced to a new Wing. S/L Hanbury led the squadron on Martuba airfield where they joined 239 Wing of the RAF. It was the end of a long association with the South Africans who had grown close to Eddie and his comrades. They would soon be withdrawn into reserve. 2 SAAF, 4 SAAF and 5 SAAF Squadrons would join the light bombers of 3 Wing on the sidelines. 260 Squadron, which had so often flown with the SAAF squadrons, said goodbye.

To date, it had been the South African Air Force which had made the largest contribution to the air war in the desert. They had provided five fighter, two recce, three light bomber squadrons and one patrol bomber squadron. Half of the light bomber force and a large part of the fighter force in the Desert Air Force had come from the SAAF.

Under 239 Wing, Eddie and the rest of the 260 Squadron joined 3 and 450 Squadrons, both Australian units, and 250 of the RAF. 3 RAAF, now led by S/L R.A.M. Gibbes, DFC, was the most experienced, having been in desert operations since the summer of 1940. 450 Squadron of the RAAF was headed by S/L J.E.A. Williams, DFC, an ex-member of 260, and 250 Squadron was under the command of S/L N.P.W. Hancock. The boys from 260 were pleased to join the others who had already come to know each other. Eddie's squadron replaced 112 'Shark' Squadron which had left the Wing to join the 57th USAAF Fighter Group who would work together as a tactical unit for the first time.

In the meantime, the 8th Army and the Desert Air Force were given the task of bringing supplies forward for continuing operations. The first supplies to be brought by sea reached Tobruk on 19 November. By rail, they were carried as far as Mersa Matruh. The DAF was short of fuel and perhaps neglected in favour of the army.

At El Agheila, where Rommel's army stood, salt marshes and mines stretched from the Mediterranean to Marada, about fifty miles inland. It was a second El Alamein and General Montgomery, after having brought his troops eight hundred miles from the last battle, expected the next encounter there. Little did he know that Rommel had no intention of maintaining his hold at El Agheila. He would withdraw at the first sign of pressure.

Chapter 17: JAGDGESCHWADER 77

Toward the end of October 1942, the Luftwaffe had made plans to regroup its fighter units. It had begun on 27 October when I Gruppe of Jagdgeschwader 77 had arrived in the Desert to replace III/JG-53. The new Gruppe had fought in Russia until June 1942, then over Malta out of Sicilian bases. Led by the famous Hauptmann Heinz `Pritzl' Bar, one of Germany's greatest fighter pilots, the unit had an amazing score of over nine hundred victories. Their leader was highly decorated, holding Swords and Oak Leaves to the Knights' Cross. Two of the Staffelkapitans, Hauptmann Fritz Geisshardt and Oberleutnant Siegfried Freytag, were also aces with many victories gained mostly in Russia. On their arrival in the desert, their 109's were first looked after by the groundcrews from JG-27. The next day, the new Gruppe began their work in the sky, flying initially with I/JG-27.

On 28 October, III Gruppe of JG-77 began arriving in the Desert. They were under the command of Hauptmann Kurt ‘Kuddel’ Ubben, another `Experten' with many victories and decorations. The Staffelkapitans of the Gruppe were Hauptmann Wolf-Dietrich Huy, Oberleutnant Emil Omert and Oberleutnant Helmut Godert. The Chief of Jagdgeschwader 77 was Major Joachim Muncheberg, another highly decorated pilot and efficient leader. He was a veteran who had fought over England, Russia and Malta and, in the summer of 1941, over the desert. He had been awarded the Swords and Oak Leaves to the Knights' Cross and had over one hundred victories to his name.

On November 12, Gruppen of the famous Jagdgeschwader 27, the 'Wustengeschwader' or Desert Wing, began leaving the desert. Low on morale after the death of some of their best pilots, including Marseille, I Gruppe was ordered to Germany and III Gruppe to Crete and Greece. Before they left, they had handed all of their 109's over to II/JG-27 and JG-77.

Three weeks later, II Gruppe of Jagdgeschwader 77 arrived in the Desert, bringing the German Wing to its full complement. The last to arrive, it was another experienced unit of Messerschmitt pilots who had claimed no less than 1,300 victories over Russia in 1941 and 1942. The Gruppe was commanded by Hauptmann Anton Mader and two of the Staffelkapitans were Oberleutnant Lutz-Wilhelm Burkhardt and Joachim Diecke. With their arrival, the last Gruppe of JG-27 began leaving Africa, also handing their aircraft over to JG-77. During their stay in the Desert from April 1941 to December 1942, JG-27 had claimed a total of 1,166 victories for a loss of ninety of their pilots.

Now alone in the Desert, Jagdgeschwader 77 had come intending to show JG-27 how things were done. But soon, they too found themselves in a hopeless position. Lack of supplies and fuel and the unserviceability of their aircraft were the same problems JG-27 had experienced. In addition, the conditions in Africa were entirely different than those in Russia where the pilots had built up impressive scores. Here, the Allied squadrons were extremely well-disciplined compared to the Russian units which flew in gaggles.

The Jagdfliegern of JG-77 were facing tough and seasoned RAF formations, led in combat by experienced pilots and before long the Germans found they were a tough bunch to deal with.

But the Germans weren't the only ones with problems. By the end of November, it was clear the Allied Hurricanes were even less of a match for the 109's than the Kittyhawks or Spitfires. Less able to cope with the enemy attackers, the Hurricane Squadrons remained to protect rear areas while the boys of JG-77 faced the Spit and Kitty Squadrons; the Kittyhawks flying ground support duty to a large extent.

And compared to the obsolete fighter aircraft the 109's had faced in Russia, their opposition was strong. Although they would continue to shoot down Allied aircraft, sometimes catching them unaware, their scores would never rise to previous levels. The victories that were made came from a handful of experienced and aggressive sharpshooters on the German side. The danger came from pilots like Joachim Muncheberg, `Pritzl' Bar, 'Tony' Hackl and ‘Kuddel’ Ubben who were Battle of Britain

veterans or from Siegfried Freytag, the 'star of Malta'. Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert and Heinz-Edgar Berres, veterans of Russia were also capable of creating havoc among the Allied aircraft. Most others were average pilots, content to fly one or two quick, half-hearted passes at the Allied aircraft.

"My brushes with the 109's certainly seemed different from that time on," Eddie recalled. "I really didn't see them that often and when I did they were, in most instances, some distance away. Apart from a dog-fight out to sea with two 109's after a dive-bombing mission over the airfield at Marble Arch on 16 December 1942 and the memorable dog-fight over Churgia airfield on 2 January 1943, I was personally attacked only once before the end of the Campaign in Tunisia. 109's came and observed high above or in the distance, but seemed reluctant to come down in many instances. I didn't know it at the time, but the 109's appeared to me to be a different group than we fought previously." During their stay in North Africa, between October 1942 and May 1943, Jagdgeschwader 77 claimed about 450 victories for the loss of about eighty of their pilots. In the same period, the unit produced eighteen aces with five or more victories, while the Desert Air Force produced thirteen.

Based at Marble Arch for the defence of El Agheila, the German fighters had about eighty-five aircraft of which a little more than half were serviceable. The Regia Aeronautica had moved to more distant airfields within Tripolitania and Eddie and his comrades did not see them for a while. Both German and Italian air forces had reacted to the landings of British and American troops in Algeria and had moved fighters and dive-bombers to Tunisia.

In the Desert, the DAF moved forward to Antelat, El Hasseiat and Bellandah during the first days of December. They were preparing to drive the Luftwaffe from their most advanced landing grounds at Marble Arch. But weather conditions became their worst enemy and activity was on a reduced scale until wind, rain and clouds disappeared. In his diary, Sgt. Cartwright told of "raining cats and dogs with occasional thunder ... downpours ... everything flooded ... drainage system round the tent is full up ...."

On the ground, everything was quiet while the 8th Army advanced. The Marada Oasis was found deserted by German troops on 6 December and by the 13th, they began withdrawing from Mersa Brega. Before long, Montgomery realized AVM Coningham was right in believing Rommel would not hold the El Agheila positions. When his troops reached Agheila on the 15th, action was renewed with the enemy targets, but not for long. They had met with the enemy's rear-guard while Rommel's troops continued their retreat. On 16 December, the 8th Army reached the Nofila area and ten days later they occupied Sirte. On the 28th, they had reached Wadi Tamet.

In the air, 260 Squadron pilots had their first skirmish of the month 13 December and met the new Jagdgeschwader 77 for the first time. The pilots, led by F/Sgt. Edwards, were after an enemy motor transport concentrated along the coastal road. The six Kittyhawks picked their targets and dive-bombed from south to north crossing out to sea. Still at deck level, they turned back to strafe the transport when eight Me-109's appeared from above and behind. Only one of the enemy aircraft made an attack on the outside of Eddie's formation which flew abreast, spread out over several hundred yards. As the Kittys turned into the attack, the German pilot fired at long range and hit F/O Kent's aircraft in the tail section. Before they could do any more damage, Eddie watched them take off for the west.

The encounter was the first of many during the next few days and, unfortunately, 260 Squadron would find themselves unlucky.

On 14 December, ten Kittys took off on a bombing sortie and were intercepted over Mersa Brega by eight 109's. Out of the ten that left the base at midday, two Kittyhawks were hit and another was badly shot-up by the Germans. One of them, flown by P/O Flury, force-landed at Magrun. It is likely he was the victim of Leutnant Berres, one of the sharpshooters of I/JG-77.

The next day, the Germans raised their score during another bombing sortie made by the Kittys. Leading the squadron, Eddie and his boys were in the midst of dive-bombing enemy MT when the young Canadian looked back and saw 109's diving on the last section of four. He was just about to release his bomb when he called for a break. Letting the explosive go, he and his section pulled back up in a steep climb. But the last section had committed themselves to the dive. When the break was called, they lost valuable time releasing their bombs before pulling up. The 109 pilots took advantage, closed in and made only one firing pass before regaining altitude and taking off. Eddie and his men failed to get one shot at the attacking enemy who had hit every aircraft in the section. F/Sgt. McKee and Sgt. Takvor were both shot down. Another pranged his Kitty back on the airfield at Bellandah while the fourth went up on its nose. F/Sgt. McKee was the only pilot not to return safely to base. Later it was learned he had been made a POW. McKee's loss from the unit was sad. He had become popular with jokes and stories, told for hours on end for the past five months.

Refueled and ready to go 16 December, the boys from 260 Squadron began their raids on Marble Arch. The airfield belonged to JG-77 and there was little surprise in the German attack on the Kittyhawks. They were bounced by JG-77 Messerschmitts, but only after they had completed their dive-bombing mission. With the Kittys each carrying their own bombs and aiming for their own targets, it was easy for the enemy 109's to split the formations and Eddie found himself alone facing two of the Jagdfliegern just out to sea. With crafty manoeuvres, Eddie was able to pull his trigger on the lead aircraft. He saw wreckage fly and watched as both planes took off for the clouds along the coast. Eddie flew the other way to land safely at Bellandah.

Two uneventful patrols with long range tanks were flown during the next two days and after the second trip, they were moving their base to Marble Arch, now evacuated by the retreating German troops. Just two days before, they had dive-bombed and strafed the airfield; now they were using it as their own base. It was covered with mines, and a number of men had been injured during the take-over. Before allowing the Kittyhawks to land, groundcrews rolled petrol drums into position so pilots were able to land and disperse without being blown to bits. The Kittys were refueled immediately by semi-rotary hand pumps and took off again, harassing the retreating enemy. Groundcrews worked long into the night to refill the tanks left empty from refueling the aircraft. Even though the Allied forces were making gains, there was little time to relax.

In the past few days, 260 Squadron had been provided with new aircraft. Eddie had turned in his Kitty II, FL 305 for a Kitty III, FR 350. The new kite was an improvement over the old; it was more stable and faster. But it would not keep Sergeant Takvor on the squadron lineup. On one of the first operations on Kitty III's, Eddie led the squadron on ground attacks against enemy transport when Takvor was hit by flak. The Canadian pilot managed to bail out over the sea at about 100 feet and Eddie and his comrades saw him get into his dinghy about half a mile off shore. They flew patrols over the area until darkness fell but in the morning `Tak' could not be found. He was never seen again. He was behind enemy lines when he went down and could have been taken prisoner of war.

With one pilot gone, the next day proved even more disastrous. No less than three pilots went down at the hands of the 109's of JG-77 when they attacked the Kittyhawks by surprise.

At 07:25 hours, twelve aircraft were dispersed to strafe west of Tamet. About twenty or thirty miles west of Sirte, they were jumped by four 109's while strafing down sun. Concentrating on their ground targets, they were caught by surprise and had little opportunity to return the fire that ended the lives of three of Eddie's buddies. F/O Thagard, a Canadian, was seen being shot down in flames; F/Sgt. 'Red' McClive, another Canadian, and Sgt. Adams failed to return. Sgt. Sheppard and Sgt. Colley both crash-landed back at base after they too, had been badly shot-up. Only one Me-109 was claimed damaged in retaliation. Eddie Edwards did not take part in the show.

It was the last time 260 Squadron would encounter the enemy for weeks. The Luftwaffe had drawn back, out of range, to its main supply base at Tripoli. In the next few days, Eddie and his comrades flew many patrols and escort trips in the forward area but none were eventful.

In the meantime, the advance party moved ahead preparing a new airfield at Alem el Gzina, or El Chel and others began preparing for Christmas. On the 24 December, the squadron's Heinkel, HS?, returned from a resupply flight to Alexandria with all the Christmas goodies and the boys blessed the German aircraft. When it arrived home, it was loaded with pork, turkey, cauliflower, potatoes, pudding, cakes and other nutritious food for the Christmas table. "Without this aircraft," Eddie said, "it would have been plain bully beef and whatever."

The Christmas celebrations were happy, but among the happiest pilots at the festivities was Eddie Edwards. On Christmas Eve he had been officially promoted to Flight Lieutenant and given command of 'B' Flight. It was a promotion he had awaited since his interview in August. Although he had been promoted from Flight Sergeant to Warrant Officer 23 November, he had finally received his commission 6 December. It was back-dated to 10 August, 1942.

Since September the young Canadian had been leading the flight and the squadron in the air as a Sergeant Pilot, but just days before the official announcement he learned his commanding officer was considering another pilot for Flight Commander. His commission was taking too long to come through, S/L Hanbury told Eddie. The CO had been having no luck at getting Eddie's commission and needed a Flight Lieutenant to lead the men. It was probably the only time Eddie and Hanbury came close to having words. Eddie had more than 120 operational sorties over the Western Desert and was well qualified to do the job he had done since September. The young Canadian decided if he didn't get the commission and if Hanbury gave the flight to another pilot, he would ask for a posting to a Spitfire squadron. But his threat was unnecessary. Only days after the discussion with Hanbury, Eddie's wish came true.

Now the leader of 'B' Flight, Eddie officially took over from F/L Lee who had left the squadron in the middle of November. 'A' Flight was being placed under the command of F/L Black who had returned to the squadron for a second tour of operations. Black was taking the place of Eddie's blonde-haired friend, F/L Ron Cundy who was returning to Australia; his tour had expired. Though Black was an experienced Flight Commander, Eddie would miss the friendship and abilities of Cundy. He gave Cundy the credit for teaching him much of what he knew. Eddie believed his friend was the best pilot 260 Squadron had, knowing just how to handle the dangerous 109's.

For five days after the Christmas celebrations Eddie and his boys had time to train and practice bombing with six and eight 40-pound bombs before they were meeting the enemy again. The bombs would be a nuisance to camps and enemy vehicle concentrations when 260 Squadron began their ground support missions.

They returned to operations on 30 December and for the first time, Eddie led his men as a Commissioned Flight Commander. After a long and uneventful morning patrol over the forward area, they were in the air again at midday. This time Eddie led eight Kittyhawks on an interception patrol. F/Sgt. 'Brownie' Brown, a pilot new to the Desert, flew as his No. 2. With them were F/O Fallows, F/O Thornhill, P/O England and P/O Sheppard who had also received his commission recently. Flying his personal kite, FR 350, Eddie was on his 126th operational sortie of the war.

Over the front lines, patrolling and discouraging enemy aircraft from strafing Allied troops, they found themselves over Bir el Zidan near the battle area when Eddie spotted light ack-ack bursts ahead a few miles. As they approached, he could see about six 109G's diving and pulling up below 500 feet. Covering above to the north of the action and staying clear of the flak were four more. They were Me-

109's flown by I Gruppe, Schlachgeschwader 2, a fighter-bomber unit, covered by Me-109's of II Gruppe, Jagdgeschwader 77.

High above the Messerschmitts, Eddie ordered Jeff Fallows to take care of the top 109's with his section while he prepared himself for an attack on the fighter-bombers. Fallows confirmed and positioned himself for the kill. Ignoring the anti-aircraft fire, Eddie and his boys dived in a surprise attack on the enemy. Within minutes, both Allied and Axis cannons and machine guns below joined blasts from enemy and friendly aircraft. Shells and bullets from the ground whizzed by as clouds of dust filled the air. Eddie was heading straight for the 109 furthest to the west and the others in his formation were able to open fire at targets directly in front of them when they banked to port. At about 100 yards from his target, Eddie opened fire with a deflection shot. His aim was good. The 109 flipped on its back, the pilot bailed out and the aircraft burst into flames. Too low for his parachute to open, Leutnant Edgar Cerne of USG-2 went straight to his death below.

Turning on the next 109, Eddie fired from approximately 150 yards at 30 degrees astern, seeing his bullet tear through the wing and fuselage of the enemy aircraft. Then his guns packed up. Quickly Eddie got out of the way, giving Sgt. Brown a chance at their opponent. He too was able to hit the Messerschmitt. In the meantime, Thornhill and Sheppard were concentrating on the fighter-bombers. They hit two; the first after two attacks and the second with only a short burst from their guns. Both targets exploded and crashed to the ground in flames. Above, Fallows had led his four Kittyhawks into successful attacks. Fallows had hit one of the machines of JG-77 and watched it break into four pieces and crash while England hit a fifth.

At deck level, Eddie moved out of the flak and climbed for altitude. He called for the squadron to reform and return to base. Filing their reports, they counted five confirmed destroyed and another damaged. Later an army report told of six enemy aircraft destroyed. 260 Squadron's record was upgraded and the damaged aircraft first reported was changed to read "destroyed." Although Eddie hadn't bothered to change the amendment in his log-book, the combat would become the most successful in the history of 260 Squadron. All Eddie's Kittys had returned home safely with "not a mark," according to Sgt. Cartwright's diary. Eddie's official score was now at twelve and one-half while Sheppard had been able to claim his third and England his second.

"Most things happened as they should," Eddie recalled after the war. "Jeff Fallows' section bounced the covering 109's and my section bounced the 109's near the ground." It was the first time Eddie had led the squadron in his official rank and it was a memorable way to begin his new job.

The next day the pilots flew to Alem el Gzina, the new airfield prepared by the advance party. There they celebrated New Year's Eve.

It took only one day for 1943 to become as hectic for the boys of 260 Squadron as the year before had been. On New Year's Day, no operations were flown, but 2 January 1943 would be a day Eddie Edwards would never forget. 'Y' service reported that a large number of Me-109G's had just landed at the Churgia landing ground. With little trouble, they said, the enemy aircraft could be caught on the ground by a surprise low-level attack.

At 10:25 hours, eleven Kittyhawks took off from Gzina with S/L Hanbury in the lead. Eddie was leading the top cover in his Kitty FR 350, flying a pre-arranged flight plan that took them south-west from their base to well behind the lines and then north to the Churgia landing ground at deck level. Everything went well until they came to about eight miles from the airfield. The formation started to gain altitude so as to reach a few hundred feet and be able to view the enemy aircraft on the ground before it attacked. As luck would have it a huge army Panzer camp was on the ground below and although 260 Squadron may have surprised them, it took little time for enemy guns to open up. Shells tore past Eddie and his comrades and Kittyhawks rocked and rolled with the explosions. Somehow no

one was hit, but the airfield had been alerted. Eddie saw dust streamers ahead and knew the 109's were scrambling.

As they had been approaching the field from the southeast corner, Eddie's section had levelled off at approximately 1,200 feet, about 500 feet above the Commanding Officer's section. They were flying a good cruise speed when Eddie noticed two Messerschmitts taking off to the south. The CO turned his section quickly and dived, shooting one of them down and damaging the other just as they had become airborne. In the meantime, Eddie was turning to the left over the field to cover the lead section and was waiting for the opportunity to go down on yet another aircraft just ready for takeoff. But from above and behind, he spotted more 109's coming in for the kill. They were everywhere — both in front and behind him. It was too late! He realized enemy planes had been alerted and were waiting for them to fly over their airfield.

Eddie remembered the squadron's pre-flight briefing. The pilots were warned not to turn or hesitate over the enemy airfield. The surprise attack was to be completed in one pass, but now, as the young Canadian took stock of his situation, he abandoned the warnings. The 109's were attacking from above, in front and behind and Eddie resolved to take his Kittyhawks into combat.

As he gave the order to tighten up the turn, he banked steeply to port. He could see 109's climbing through the formation from takeoff and stall-turning above before corning down again. Eddie's immediate concern was for his section, especially the No. 2's. The 109's were making every effort to keep up with the Kittyhawk's turns, staying on their tails. Around him, he saw a number of Messerschmitts, all diving and attacking from different angles. "They're spoiling each other's attacks," he thought. The young Canadian fired a short burst of gunfire at a 109 diving on him from the front quarter and saw pieces flying off as it passed within 50 feet of his wing tip. Not bothering to see if he'd made a 'kill' or just damaged the plane, he was on the tail of a 109 behind his No. 2, pressing the trigger from approximately 100 yards at a 30 degree angle. He saw the 109 engine give up in flames and smoke as it headed downward on the left of his formation.

The enemy was still turning in circles and attacking from all directions. Eddie wheeled around to see another 109 trying desperately to turn inside a Kittyhawk. The enemy aircraft was already firing, making hits on the Kitty when Eddie closed in. He was 75 yards away from his target when he pushed the trigger, and began to sweat. His guns wouldn't fire. Unknowing, the German pilot broke violently to starboard, stalled out of control and went down. They had been flying at about 500 feet, directly over and just south-west of the airfield when Eddie realized, once again, his guns had packed up.

To make sure, he lined up for another shot at an enemy aircraft, but the attempt was futile. Quickly, he spoke to his section on the R/T and told them his guns had jammed. But the other Kittys were nowhere in sight. There was no sound on the R/T. He formulated his own plan and hit the deck travelling west a few miles. He knew he had no hope of leaving the area without being seen and pursued. When he did turn port approximately 120 degrees, he thought, he would be able to see what was chasing him. As he half-rolled over the south-west corner of the aerodrome, he saw two columns of smoke to the south of the field. They were coming from two aircraft which had been forced to crash-land.

Leveling out, Eddie headed west with the throttle wide open. Twisting and turning above the deck, he hoped to lose whoever might be after him. Breaking hard to the left, he headed south for about ten minutes. Away from the action, he could see no pursuers and relaxed, keeping a keen eye on the skies in front and behind. He had flown in a southerly direction about twenty miles from the fighting area and started a gradual turn to port, heading for home. But suddenly, almost from nowhere, a 109 was in hot pursuit about 600 yards behind him. The Messerschmitt was closing in and Eddie knew that instead of continuing his turn, he had to straighten out to lengthen the distance between himself and the enemy. The enemy fighter closed the gap to approximately 350 yards and in short order, began firing at

long range. Eddie could see bullets hitting the sand behind and to the left of his Kitty. Some of the bullets ricocheted up into the underside of his port wing. He had no other choice but to turn port side hard and continue in 360 degrees. The Me-109 following on the outside; pulled up and started his attack again. Avoiding the near hits, Eddie waited again until the 109 closed in to firing range before turning his Kittyhawk sharply, well inside the Messerschmitt and straightening out again. Each time he made the turn, Eddie's direction was more easterly and each time, the Jagdflieger would close the gap again and press for the attack.

On the fourth turn, Eddie found himself flying through a burst fired at long range. His starboard wing had been hit. The enemy had found the right deflection but Eddie continued his turn. This time, he wheeled around until he was on the tail of the enemy aircraft. He pulled up, putting himself just inside the Me-109 at very close range and gave the trigger another try. It was no use. His guns were still jammed. By now, Eddie thought, his trouble must be obvious to his opponent.

But the German pilot had fired a number of shots and his ammunition supply was being expended. He must have been aware, too, that he was being lured further and further into no man's land — his fuel getting low. As Eddie quickly rolled to starboard for the deck, the 109 made a last half-hearted attack before he turned homeward.

It didn't take long for Eddie to straighten out and head in the direction of his own home base using the sun for guidance. He knew he was low on fuel. For more than thirty-five minutes his throttle had been pushed against the stops. Just short of his own airfield, his engine cut out. He landed safely and rolled to a stop beside the operations tent. His Kitty FR 350 looked worse for wear, but he had been able to fly it home.

It had been a savage fight. The pilots of II Gruppe, Jagdgeschwader 17 had claimed two Kittyhawks destroyed and another damaged. 260 Squadron pilots recorded two Me-109's destroyed and two more damaged. The battle was even more evidence that the 109's were more than aggressive when it came to protecting their own airfields.

Sgt. C.D. Tuck and F/Sgt. A. Mel Arklie, two Canadians, had been shot down by Leutnant Badum and Oberfeldwebel Preinfalk of II/JG-77. Tuck had crash-landed and was able to make his way back to the Allied lines. Arklie became a prisoner of war. Squadron Leader Hanbury was credited with one Me-109 destroyed and Eddie Edwards had destroyed one and damaged another. Flying Officer Perkins was awarded one damaged.

In the German camp, they learned Unteroffizier Heinz Winter of 4 Staffel, II/JG-77 had been killed in the combat twelve miles south-west of El Hescia. There's little doubt he was the pilot shot down by Eddie. The 109 destroyed by Hanbury's guns had crash-landed on the edge of Churgia airfield just after being airborne. Hanbury's victim probably survived the crash.

Although the Allied score matched their opponents', Eddie determined the combat as one of the most unhappy results of his fighting career. His aircraft had been damaged by a 109 and he had lost his No. 2. It was the first and only time Eddie lost a wingman to enemy guns during the course of World War II. Although he led his men into some of the toughest dog-fights over the Western Desert, very few pilots were shot clown by enemy aircraft while he was in the lead. From 1 July 1942 when he led his first section in combat to 4 November 1942 when F/O Gilboe bailed out after colliding with a 109, no pilot of 260 Squadron was shot down. Even Gilboe's misfortune could not be attributed to that. On 15 December 1942, Sgt. McKee and Sgt. Takvor were shot down while dive-bombing and on 2 January 1943, Tuck and Arklie were brought down. Of the five pilots, two returned safely to base and the other three were made prisoners of war. Eddie's leadership was showing.

The battle of 2 January 1943 was the only time Eddie's aircraft would be hit by enemy fighters during World War II

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 18: PRAISE TO THE GROUND STAFF AND CREWS

Aerial combats and pilot victories have been heralded in post-war stories, but it should not be forgotten the ground crew and staff on the floor in the theatre of war worked hard to keep the action alive. Though neglected or mentioned as also-ran members of the war, without them, battles above would have been few. Eddie Edwards remembers their efforts and support:

"The squadron takes its honors from efficient ground staff and crews," Eddie said after the war was over. "Without them and their know-how and equipment, there could be no squadron. On only a few occasions did 260 Squadron get airborne without a full complement of twelve serviceable aircraft. And on those occasions, it was likely those that did not fly were being repaired after being damaged by flak or shot-up on the trip before.

"260 Squadron always had food of some kind to eat; there was always water. Sometimes it was in short supply, but there was always enough for meals and a face-wash. There was always fuel for the aircraft and ammunition and the other vital necessities to get the aircraft airborne and in operation. A lot of hard working, efficient tradesmen did all these things in the proper order and at the right time under primitive and even adverse conditions. It's remarkable how they accomplished it all.

"The staff and groundcrew on 260 Squadron joined the unit when it first arrived in the desert and remained with it until the end of the war. The CO's and pilots would come and go, but the groundcrew stayed through it all, day after day, dawn to dusk, always giving their best with no rewards but the satisfaction of their achievements.

"It's difficult to imagine, even if you were there," Eddie said. "It's difficult to imagine the groundcrew giving their whole physical effort to keep the aircraft flying. They worked and slept within sight of their aircraft, existing under primitive conditions without fail to their unit and service.

"The remarkable ability of the Royal Air Force to leapfrog its squadrons in the retreat as well as in the advance to ensure full ground support to troops seemed, at all times, to be incredible. From the end of November 1942 when the unit joined 239 Wing until the end of the Campaign in North Africa in May 1943, we moved to thirteen different landing grounds. All were temporary airfields lasting sometimes only a few days as our forces made an exceptional effort to keep in touch with the retreating German Army. It's remarkable to note that most of these landing grounds were bulldozed out of the desert in virgin country because of the shortage of landing fields in new battle areas. The entire airfields were graded out of the desert some fifteen to thirty miles inland from the coast. Bellandah. Gzina or El Chel, Hamriet, Sedada, Bir Dugan, El Assa, Neffatia, Medinine, El Hamma Kairivan and El Djem were such airfields. The others were already in place and were used by the German Air Force, but they were found to be heavily mined and cluttered and it was easier and quicker, and safer, to bulldoze a new LG. However, the personnel responsible for constructing a new LG had to be right forward all the time — perhaps that was another reason for being a good, safe distance inland from the one main road along the coast.

"Advanced troops, including all squadron ground personnel who could be spared, such as accounts, supply, etc. would, at times, pitch in with shovels and prepare a runway. Squadron procedure in a move was to send forward an 'Advance Party' the day before or whatever time was necessary to cover the distance in order to be there in position to accept the operation of the aircraft. The ground staff and crews never failed. While the desert was really a healthy place to live and operate, with only minor ailments throughout the year, the groundcrew suffered severe privation. With no let-up from dawn to dusk, day after day, they were slaves to the flying operation. No words good enough can be expressed to praise the ground crews' outstanding achievements in keeping our aircraft flying in the desert war."

Remembering a trip in January 1943, Eddie gave credit to both his guardian angel and the crews on the ground:

The Squadron was making a move to a newly bulldozed landing ground. Eddie recalled, "The squadron could strike camp at a new LG within two hours and be ready to roll. The aircraft either flew directly to the new LG or carried out a mission and then returned to the new LG. The Kittyhawk had a good-sized compartment in the left side of the fuselage between the cockpit and tail plane where the pilots' bed roll and small necessities could be stored. Sometimes, in mid December 1942, DC-3 and Lockheed transport planes were used to transport needed supplies to forward bases. On 17 January 1943, the Lockheeds were utilized to transport the groundcrews for the first time from Hamriet LG to Sedada LG.

"The squadron took off in the morning to escort the Lockheeds to Sedada, a distance of approximately twenty minutes total by Kittyhawk," Eddie remembers. "The weather was a bit hazy and after wandering around for more than an hour, the Lockheeds couldn't find Sedada. We had no R/T communication with them so we couldn't help direct them. The pilots and crews of the aircraft were not able to discern one patch of desert from the next and we returned to Hamriet almost out of fuel. The Kittyhawks weren't carrying long range tanks on that occasion.

"Just before dusk, the squadron was ordered to carry out a dive-bombing and strafing mission just west of Sedada against an armoured column and then land at Sedada. I must admit," Eddie said, "these orders were received with some consternation. Having previously escorted the Lockheeds who couldn't find the LG in the daytime, now we had to conduct a ground support mission and land in the near dark at a landing ground we hadn't seen.

"The enemy column was only 10 to 15 miles west of Sedada, and had to be forced to retreat before nightfall. At least it had to be rendered unfit for any thought of attack.

"I was leading the squadron and we carried out a good dive-bombing mission. Then we strafed, shooting up and setting fire to motor transports. On completion of the ground attacks, I set course by the last light for Sedada, or at least to where it was supposed to be located. I had visions of possibly force-landing the squadron in the desert. Most of my anticipation was pure anxiety. Up to then, the operation had gone quite smooth. We continued south-east with the hidden hand of my guardian angel pointing the way. The squadron closed in, flying tighter formation with the sections stepped up and behind not a peep was said by anyone.

"There was still some light at 2,000 feet, but I knew it would be quite dark near the ground.

"All of a sudden, a voice came over the R/T. "Lights on the ground," was all we heard. We were approaching a field head-on. There were six to eight oil drums set afire lighting up a flare path. In the light of the drums I could see other Kittyhawks taxiing and more parked nearby. We had located Sedada. We let down and landed without incident, but I made a mental note that this kind of operation should best be avoided whenever possible ..."

When the Kittyhawks landed, other squadron groundcrews were already there. They had been flown to the new landing ground during the day and knowing the predicament the Kittyhawk pilots would find themselves in, had set to work.

Upon landing, the Kittyhawks were refueled by the groundcrews with hand pumps from the barrels of petrol they had brought with them. The next morning, the squadron was up again. They caught the enemy transport vehicles at a road block and bombed and strafed for fifteen minutes with no opposition. They spent 18,000 rounds and 321 bombs in four sorties despite the shortage of fuel.

It was men like Sgt. Bill Cartwright, who had joined 260 Squadron when it was formed in 1941 who made advancements possible. The Squadron diarist remained with the unit until 1943 when it

advanced to northern Italy. His diary, a valuable record of groundcrew support, reveals the struggles all groundcrew were forced to face.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 19: DIVE-BOMBING AND STRAFING THROUGH TRIPOLITANIA TO TUNISIA

As the Afrika Korps continued its retreat, the 8th Army approached the strategic port of Tripoli, capital of the Libyan province of Tripolitania. Montgomery's troops would soon cross the Libyan frontier and enter Tunisia where both Germans and Italians intended to hold at Mareth where old frontier defences had been prepared by the French in the 1930's.

The forward fighting forces of the Desert Air Force were made up of one fighter and two fighter-bomber wings, keeping a third fighter-bomber wing in reserve. 244 Spitfire Wing, 239 Kittyhawk Wing, and 57th USAAF Warhawk Fighter Group were active while 7 SAAF Kittyhawk Wing stood in reserve. 112 RAF Kittyhawk Squadron operated as part of the Warhawk Group. Now a part of 239 Wing, 260 Squadron had once been part of the 7 SAAF Wing that waited for call-out. The Hurricane units had been left behind, ready to defend coastline ports and patrol Allied convoys. The RAF bomber wings, equipped with Bostons and Baltimores, and USAAF bomber wings, using Mitchells and Liberators, were stationed in the south, too far from the front lines to operate efficiently. Again, the Kittyhawk pilots would bomb and strafe the enemy.

"260 Squadron and 239 Wing, had settled into a routine of almost pure ground support," Eddie wrote. "There were enemy fighters around during this period but my flights did not engage in any serious combat. Our task was primarily to locate the ground targets and go after them. It took a great deal of concentration — providing any safety margin of survival chances at all. It was most necessary to strike with minimal warning. Everything had to be coordinated and organized.

"The squadron would operate in fours, together or spread out as need be, to meet the situation. A section of four was permitted total independence if it was necessary to accomplish the task at hand. We preferred to dive-bomb and strafe out of the sun when we were certain the 109's weren't around. We would carry on down to the deck when we knew we were safe. Otherwise, we dive-bombed and pulled back up into the sun to escape the A/A gunners. On the ground attack missions, this was our main objective. We weren't to go looking for enemy aircraft. So, unless the enemy aircraft made an effort to prevent our attacks, we carried on in spite of them," Eddie said.

There was little activity during the first days of 1943. The fighter-bombers of 239 Wing were held down by severe storms, but enemy attacks continued. Bomb-carrying Me-109's strafed the Gzina airfield, the home of 260 Squadron, on 5 and 7 January. They were trying hard to prevent the advance of the DAF fighters, but could not stop AVM Coningham who had always established his fighters and fighter-bombers forward as fast as the enemy was driven back.

On 11 January the fighter-bombers of 260 Squadron moved from Gzina to Hamriet LG to prepare for the fight at Buerat. Two days later, the preliminary phase of the attack against the enemy Buerat line began. Old friends of 260 Squadron temporarily operating from forward LG's, the SAAF medium bombers reappeared over the front to assist in the battle.

Called on to make a rare sweep over the Tauorga LG, the boys from 260 Squadron joined pilots from 250. On the way home, about 15 miles from base, the aircraft were attacked by four Me-109's from JG-77. P/O Thornhill's Kitty was badly damaged but he succeeded in bringing the shot-up machine back for repairs. Little did he know that once back at base, the groundcrews would tell him all the repairs in the world could not fix the wreck. It is likely Thornhill was the victim of Hauptmann Anton 'Tony' Hackl, Kommandeur of II/JG-77, who claimed a Spitfire that day. It is possible that Hackl, one of Germany's finest pilots, could have misidentified his victim.

At 11:20 hours the following day, Eddie and his comrades were in the air again. But the journey was short for more than half the squadron. The escort for Bostons of the South African Air Force were ordered to return to base because of various problems. F/L Edwards was among those who flew home

while four others continued with the escort. The four from 260 Squadron were attacked twice by a pair of 109's who managed to damage two of the Kittyhawks in exchange for one 109. But the other Kittys of the Wing weren't as lucky. No less than eleven Kittyhawks were shot down, cut to pieces by the pilots of JG-77.

On the ground the next day, 7th Armoured and 51st Highland Divisions made their assault on the Buerat line. Rommel's troops gave them little trouble, withdrawing at the first signs of pressure. One day later, 16 January the 8th Army and the Desert Air Force joined in hot pursuit, following the retreating Afrika Korps as it made its dash for the Tunisian frontier. Eddie and his friends made their second fighter-bomber sortie of the year and later the young Canadian had time to record in his logbook: "Dive-bombing enemy MT. Bombing quite good." The Buerat affair was over.

At dusk, 17 January F/L Edwards led the boys of 260 to a new drome, Sedada LG and the next day, the Kittys were out on two missions against the retreating enemy armies. Although 260 Squadron was not attacked and did not engage in the combat, the morning mission saw 109's interfering with other Kitty squadrons as they continued to strafe after dive-bombing. 260 Squadron made two good runs damaging vehicles and returned to base before heading skyward again in the afternoon hours. On the second sortie, Eddie set four enemy transports on fire and watched as three others, struck by his bullets, blew to pieces. His aim was good and his shooting was topnotch as he saw other transport vehicles rendered damaged that day.

The next day, the squadron moved again to Bir Dufan, staying on the trail of the fleeing enemy MT's. From Bir Dufan, the squadron made another notable dive-bombing trip, this time south of Tarhuna. All four squadrons of 239 Wing were in the air but enemy aircraft were nowhere in sight. Only Sergeant Tuck was hit by heavy flak and forced to land. It was the second time for Tuck in January 1943 and for the second time, he returned to base after a two-day hike.

The Highland Division had reached a point about 50 miles east of Tripoli on 21 January. The push brought action for 239 Wing as they headed toward Castel Benito, a large enemy aerodrome just south of Tripoli. Before noon, Wing Commander Burton was leading his men through the sky when enemy aircraft showed up to interfere with their mission. F/O Bill Stewart, an experienced Canadian of 'A' Flight and a member of 260 Squadron, scored his first confirmed solo combat victory against an MC-202. The Regia Aeronautica records show the Macchi was flown either by S. Ten. Sagramoso or Serg. Battista.

Late in the afternoon, 260 Squadron made another attack on Castel Benito. Leading the squadron, Eddie and his boys bombed from north to south then made the first strafing pass from east to west toward the hangar line. There were several annoying ack-ack guns in the area and the squadron made it their business to knock them out. As Eddie flew by, he could see there were a number of aircraft of different types on the field but each appeared to be either damaged or destroyed. A tractor was pulling a large plough through the field doing its best to make it unfit for aircraft landing or takeoff. When Eddie saw what the tractor was doing, he realized it had been ploughing during their entire attack. With a well-aimed burst, the young Canadian Flight Lieutenant forced the tractor to stop in its tracks.

As the last enemy troops were evacuating Tripoli the next day, 260 Squadron fighter-bombers were off to various targets. Seeing an airfield with at least forty aircraft on the ground, the boys attacked. F/Sgt. Thomas claimed an He-111.

In the afternoon, they repeated their mission and headed toward Zuara harbour and town. With damage results extensive, they returned to Zuara the next day to continue their attacks. This time, Eddie's machine became unserviceable soon after takeoff. He was forced to return to base and he was angry. It was the second time in three days he had been unable to continue his mission. Two days before, he had discovered an oil leak in his aircraft on takeoff. He had been lucky to make it back to the field.

The moves were rapid for 260 Squadron. On 24 January the boys found themselves at Castel Benito, just evacuated by German troops. From there, they immediately set course for Ben Gardane LG on the first attack by Kittyhawks against a target in Tunisia. Castel Benito had just been taken over by Allied troops and shortly after the Kittyhawks had landed, the Wing groundcrew advance party was being flown to their new base by Lockheed Lodestar aircraft. The field was not yet properly deloused and one of the transport aircraft ran over a mine when landing. Its tail section blew off and a number of troops rolled onto the field as it slithered to a halt. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured.

There was no respite. The day after their arrival at Castel Benito, the fighter-bombers were in business again. F/L Edwards led the squadron on an attack against Medenine West airfield bombing a mixture of dispersed aircraft along the west side of the field from 8,000 feet. Continuing down to deck level, they turned and flew back over the field at low level, shooting and damaging several aircraft. Eddie added two damaged Macchi 202's to his score and set fire to an SM-79, which was either in the process of landing, or was just taking off. On the way home, they riddled a number of MT's along the main route.

After two days with little activity, fighter-bomber sorties were flown, 28 January and again on the last day of the month. Their targets were the ships in Aziza Harbour and both missions were as successful as the ones before. There's little doubt 260 Squadron had become proficient at dive-bombing and strafing their enemy targets and they were, at long last, being recognized for their achievements.

Honors began to pour in. At the beginning of February 1943, Eddie received word that a long-delayed Distinguished Flying Medal had been approved. Sometime before, he had been recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross by the Allied Army Commander of troops Eddie fought over on 30 December 1942. In the London Gazette on 16 February 1943, the announcement was made. He had been awarded the DFC. His citation read he had destroyed "eight enemy aircraft" and had "invariably displayed outstanding gallantry and devotion to duty." Although he was among very few to receive both medals at once during World War II, his citation inaccurately recorded the number of enemy aircraft he had destroyed to then.

Eddie's rewards came at the same time others received their decorations. On 12 February Flying Officer Bill Stewart, recently promoted, was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) and Pilot Officer Sheppard, a courageous little Englishman, received the DFC. It was time the pilots of 260 Squadron received their due.

In the meantime, General Montgomery's 8th Army had entered Tripoli 23 January. They had covered 1,400 miles between El Alamein and Tripoli in exactly three months. Their advances were swift and by the time they reached their goal they were exhausted with few supplies. With the port of Tripoli out of action for at least two weeks, they were forced to wait for the convoys to enter with more supplies. Chasing Rommel's troops would have to be done later. During the next two weeks both the 8th Army and the Desert Air Force rested and savoured their new victories.

In a celebration of the progress which had been made, the streets of Tripoli were lined 4 February as selected units marched along the Via Balbo to be saluted by Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Overhead Desert Air Force pilots passed in ceremonial formation while people on the ground cheered their accomplishments. Each soldier and airman watched with pride as the Allied men in the march and in the air beamed with satisfaction.

For their part, S/L Hanbury's boys had settled at the big aerodrome of Castel Benito, just south of Tripoli. They were about to taste a couple of weeks of comfort. Sgt. Cartwright wrote:

23 January: "Tripoli entered at 9 o'clock ...cartridges going up everywhere. 'A' party leave for Castel Benito due south of Tripoli 12 miles — once Jerries' biggest repair base.

24 January: "Forty-five minutes by air to Benito. See white buildings of Tripoli as we circle to land. Nice place — partly ploughed up. Six hangars in ruins, some filled with Fiat G-50s. Trees and unserviceable Italian aircraft all round drome."

25 January: "Move to billets a mile away. Very comfortable. Pick up a spring bed. Electric light working."

26 January: "Pouring with rain. Lucky to be in such good billets. Well, just round the corner so haul water, heat it and had a hot bath. Glorious, you don't miss one till you have one."

27 January: "Send a party to Tripoli — nothing to eat or drink. Fetch 8 gallons of red wine from brewery half mile away. You can smell it from here. Drunks everywhere."

28 January: "Pick up tools from Itie tool store. Bags of aircraft spares and gear left in stores."

29 January: "Fix up two 1,135 litre water tanks on roof for bath. Have a stove and cistern in bathroom. Have hot baths nightly now after work. Swell."

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 20: THE TUNISIAN CAMPAIGN

At the beginning of February 1943, the Tripoli port had again become active. Allied merchant ships began unloading supplies in the harbour and the 8th Army started to prepare for its trek across the Tunisian frontier. For the battle-tried 8th Army and the Desert Air Force, the combats to come would only be a continuation of the battles waged over the years in North Africa. But the advance in Tunisia opened as a new campaign; their goal was a foothold on Europe.

The Campaign marked the beginning of combined Anglo-American operations. Already the American landings in French North Africa between 8 and 13 November 1942 had given the men some ground. The next step had been to occupy Tunisia.

But problems had soon arisen. The terrain of Morocco, Algeria and northern and western Tunisia was different from the desert where they had plenty of room to manoeuvre. The Air Forces on both sides had been able to move quickly. In the northern sector, the country was mountainous; roads were poor and unfit for military traffic and heavy rains had soon turned the airfields into unmanageable pits. Even though the Axis forces had been taken by surprise when the Americans landed, their reaction had been swift and by 10 November, the German Air Force had gained operational strength. They had 445 aircraft and 673 transport aircraft. The Allied forces in the north had had a tough start against the experienced Axis forces under the command of General von Arnhim. The first few weeks with the ineffective support of the RAF and USAAF from airfields too far from the front lines and the inexperience of new ground troops looked like the worst period of desert fighting. What had been learned the hard way in the Middle East had now to be applied. Sir Arthur Tedder, the AOC, Mediterranean, went to work to create a unified air command.

In mid-February Allied commands were reorganized. A new headquarters was created for the Air Force. They were to work on equal footing with the new army group under General Alexander. Named the Northwest African Tactical Air Force, it was under the command of Air-Vice Marshall Coningham. The Desert Air Force would be controlled operationally by this air headquarters from then on, although it would be administered by Headquarters (HQ), RAF, Middle East.

At the same time, the Axis camp was being reorganized. Rommel was named Chief of all Axis ground forces in North Africa. The forces at the Mareth line were renamed I Italian Army under the command of General Messe.

During the first week in February the fighter-bombers of the Desert Air Force had become active again. 260 Squadron made its first sortie on the 6th but for most of the month bad weather hampered their plans. In his diary, Sgt. Cartwright made these notations:

8 February: "Kites go on patrol in pouring rain."

9 February: "Drome is waterlogged."

10 February: "Rainy season has really set in."

18 February: "Dust storm blowing all afternoon and evening — makes everyone loggy and ill-natured."

19 February: "Dust still hanging around."

Eddie's log-book was more of the same:

6 February: "Dive-bombing with 3 Squadron. Top cover. 10/10 cloud from 10,000 feet — 500 feet. Visibility poor and we did not bomb."

7 February: "Set out to bomb and recce Panzers. Ordered to Pancake. Cloud very low."

In fact, Eddie Edwards made only two successful fighter-bomber sorties during the month of February. On the 8th, they took troops by surprise west of Ben Gardane and completed a successful bombing mission. On the 11th, they bombed amid MT's in the same area while light flak peppered

around them. The first sorties of the month by 260 Squadron were made from Sorman, a LG some 30 miles west of Tripoli before they moved and settled at El Assa on the 15th.

Hampered by the storms, most of the action took place in northern and central Tunisia during February 1943. And while action was heavy there, the 8th Army moved forward and entered Ben Gardane and Medenine on the 16th. Eight days later, General Montgomery's troops closed in to the Mareth line and began building up supplies, preparing for their next offensive — the attack on the Mareth line.

Two days later, 26 February the Desert Air Force began its pre-offensive and attacked the Axis airfields with fighter-bombers throughout the day. At 09:00 hours the boys from 260 Squadron were in the air dive-bombing Gabes West airfield. They destroyed a Ju 88 taxiing on the ground but lost an Allied pilot to the victory. Sgt. N.E. Cundy, a new pilot to the unit did not return. Two other Kittys were badly shot up by heavy A/A fire.

At least three other pilots met disaster the following day when 260 Squadron made two sorties on Medenine West and El Hamma. During the first, F/O R.S. Kent, an experienced Canadian, was hit by flak. His Kitty burst into flames and crashed. Just a week before he had been married in Alexandria. On the second trip, Sgt. Jim McParland was wounded in combat with the Jagdfliegern of JG-77 and Sgt. Stohr, one of the new Englishmen, pranged his kite on the drome after the mission was through. Another Kitty was badly damaged. The Allied pilots made no claims.

Eddie Edwards had been on a four-day leave at Cairo when the casualties were listed. When he returned, another page from the calendar had been torn away. He made his first trip following his leave 6 March; his last operational sortie had been taken 20 February. During the break in ground battles, Eddie's log-book also showed he took part in bombing and strafing demonstrations for Army commanders as well as making communication flights to El Assa. But the big event was his first flight in the squadron's tame Messerschmitt 109F, marked HS!. He made three more flights in it and was checked out on the squadron's Heinkel IIIK, named by the squadron HS?, before going on leave via Lockheed aircraft.

7 March 1943, Eddie led the squadron on another dive-bombing sortie. They were looking for targets west of the Mareth line. From the air, they spotted a concentration of enemy vehicles near a cross-road in an open plain surrounded by hilly country. The squadron dive-bombed from north to south from 8,500 feet and continued down to strafe. As they turned to fly over their target for the second run, they saw Messershmitt 109's above. Two of them were heading down on the tails of the starboard section. Eddie called a break and his boys turned into their enemy attackers. The 109's didn't persist; they broke off their attack and climbed steeply away to the west. Before long other Kittys flying top cover were seen engaging 109's.

Eddie and his comrades were reluctant to fire all their ammo on ground targets in case of other matches with the Messerschmitts. Instead, they returned to El Assa without further incident.

8 March 1943 saw the squadron moving again. This time their base would be Neffatia LG in Tunisia. Only twenty miles ahead, the Axis troops were in the mountains, holding the Mareth line.

The month of March for the ground troops was hectic. Battles were outstanding. First, the German Army counter-attacked at Medenine using their 10th, 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions. The defence of the 'F' French Forces were attacked at Ksar Rhilane and the defence of the Mareth line was made against the New Zealand forces as they tried to outflank the Germans from the south. Then came the ultimate attack on the Mareth line as the New Zealanders went through the Tebaga Gap. The battles called on the Desert Air Force to play a new role in Army co-operation. "Previously," Eddie Edwards said, "the Air Force supported the ground pounders by hitting supply routes, concentrations and bombing and strafing movements behind the lines. As the 8th Army fought to push the German Army

out of Tripolitania and advance in Tunisia, the Air Force was called upon to seek out individual targets, such as tanks and guns, which were obstructing army movement. We were to attack and destroy enemy armour and vehicles right on the battle front."

Their new role had begun early in the month and showed its merit when the Desert Air Force turned its efforts in support of the 'F' French Forces at Ksar Rhilane on 10 March. General Leclerc and his Free French Forces, whose base was deep in the interior of West Africa, had just completed an arduous crossing of the Sahara Desert. They had positioned themselves in the line at Ksar Rhilane on the right flank of I Italian Army. Rommel's health had become worse and he was forced to leave Africa for Europe. Taking over, it was General von Arnim, now Commander of the Army Group Africa, who quickly ordered a column to head off the Free French soldiers. On the 10th, General von Arnim's troops were surrounding the Frenchmen on three sides with tanks and armoured vehicles when the Desert Air Force was called to assist in full force.

Hurricane tank busters, three Kittyhawk wings and several Spitfire squadrons took little time to react. Furious attacks sent the enemy withdrawing into the hills with what was left of their force.

Leading 260 Squadron, Eddie was on the second trip of the day against the enemy force of tanks, armoured vehicles and guns attacking General Leclerc's troops. Approaching the battle area from 8,500 feet with 250 Squadron behind and a little above, they were covered by 112 Squadron who flew about 10,000 feet. It was easy to find the battle area. As they approached, clouds of dust and smoke filled the air. The Hurricane tank busters were going in low, ahead of their formation and Eddie and his boys watched as tanks and vehicles were hit, exploded and caught fire. Through ack-ack fire from below and the hills around, Eddie moved his squadron over a number of vehicles along a ridge into the battle area from the northwest. They dove in sections of four from south to north, releasing their bombs at about 1,500 feet before continuing to low level. They circled 180 degrees, watching 250 Squadron bomb before they took off after the big guns that could be seen firing from the hills.

In the meantime, Me-109's had come into the combat. Flying above, they were dicing with Eddie's top cover, 112 Squadron. Four of the enemy Messerschmitts dropped down on Eddie's section. The young Canadian turned his section into the 109's firing as they pulled up. All but one of the enemy aircraft climbed away. Eddie had taken his shot on a 109 and as the others retreated, this one appeared to waver in its dive. As the young Canadian watched he thought he might see it head straight down. Instead, it levelled out and headed in a north-west direction, disappearing into the low-level haze. Above a fierce dog-fight was taking place, but almost out of ammo, 260 Squadron was forced to return home.

Although the unit lost no aircraft to the 109's, one of their Kittyhawks had been hit by ground Breda fire. F/S Colley, its pilot, had been badly wounded in his side and lungs. He was able to make the flight back and successfully belly-landed at Neffatia South, the unit's next drome. He later died from his wounds.

But their objective had been met. The Axis attacks on the ground were beaten off and the Free French Forces took their place on the far left side of the 8th Army. The French were jubilant and General Leclerc signaled, "All praise, Magnificent effort RAF!"

The next day, 11 March the 2nd New Zealand Division began their secret move up to Ben Gardane. They were also preparing for the next offensive of the 8th Army. On 21 March they planned to outflank their opponent to the Mareth line from the south and the Desert Air Force was called out again to give another full-scale effort.

From 11 to 20 March 260 Squadron had seen no action, but their call to support the New Zealand Division had them up again under Eddie Edwards' leadership. From the air that morning they destroyed and damaged a large number of MT's and guns. Later in the day they served as top cover for Baltimores bombing south-east of Gabes. No enemy aircraft attacked the squadron in the course of the mission but

the disappearance of Sgt. Orr remains a mystery to this day. The Englishman was new to the squadron and when the rest of the boys landed back at base, Orr was not with them. He was never seen again.

Four days later Eddie and his comrades were flying another ground support mission. Travelling at low-level over the Gafsa road area, they damaged or destroyed at least twenty-two vehicles. Eddie blew one to bits while Bill Stewart's bullets set another aflame. Sgt. Carver, a new pilot to the unit, ran into a Fieseler Storch 156 and probably destroyed it. As Eddie took his aircraft over a small knoll, he spotted an entire line of MT's and personnel gathered around a mobile cook-house. Dropping the nose of his Kitty, FR 436, he fired, leaving behind a complete shambles; pots and pans flew in every direction as he headed for home.

The offensive for the Mareth line had begun. For the attack, the WDAF fighter and fighter-bomber squadrons and one light bomber wing had been concentrated in the Medenine-Neffatia-Ben Gardane area. The AOC, Desert Air Force, intended to deploy five fighter wings, three light bomber wings, one recce wing, one anti-tank squadron and two medium bomber wings for the day-to-day requirements of the military below. The first step was to achieve air mastery so Allied aircraft could operate freely during the battle.

Bad weather, with low clouds and rain alternating with high winds and dust storms, hampered air operations on both sides in the south between 12 and 20 March. But on the 20th they could wait no longer. Full scale air operations began with strategic forces attacking the airfields at Tebaga and Gabes. Enemy fighters were occupied and the way was left clear for the South African light bombers to strike at Mareth. Inspite of bad weather and low clouds all DAF squadrons were out in force bombing, strafing, tank-busting and dog-fighting over the battle area. For five days the boys flew their missions and on 26 March General Montgomery's troops were in position at the entrance of the funnel-shaped gap between the Djebels Tabaga and Melab. They were ready to attack and break through.

It was 26 March 1943. All the pilots from 260 Squadron were briefed on the show that would take place on the ground later in the day. They received their orders and waited, anxious for the time to arrive when they could go ahead with the plan. The Spitfires would leave at 15:00 hours and fly continuous air cover from then on over the battle area. At 15:30 hours the light bombers would drop their bombs in the forward battle area. They had three boxes of eighteen each and they were to cause as much confusion and disruption as possible. In addition, they were to destroy all they could. The artillery barrage would then be laid down. Kitty-bombers would fly over in waves of thirty-six aircraft, dive-bombing the target areas marked by coloured smoke shell bursts. Their prime targets were 88mm anti-tank guns in the hillsides overlooking the Tebaga Valley. When their bombs had been dropped they would strafe targets behind the front line.

Wind and dust storms raged over the airfields and battle areas during the morning hours. Tense and eager for the show to begin, the pilots watched the sky for a break in the weather. Just when it looked like their plan would have to be abandoned for another time the wind and dust began to let up. By 12:15 hours they knew the show was on and all systems were go.

The men from 260 Squadron would take off at 15:30 hours and join two USAAF squadrons that would take off from their own airfield meeting over Medenine West, 260's new LG, at 15:35 hours.

As the tension grew, the pilots filed into the Ops tent for their final briefings and preparations. It was 15:00 hours and fifteen minutes later, they were nervously checking their aircraft and talking with groundcrews who were also anxious for takeoff. Hanbury's boys would have the field to themselves this time. Other squadrons were scheduled to start up twenty minutes later. The groundcrew personnel had checked each engine, radio, controls, ammo, bombs and run-up the aircraft to clear the dust. Each aircraft had been refueled as the pilots climbed into their seats.

A quick check from their cockpits to ensure everything was in order and the pilots accepted the assistance of the groundcrews who secured the strap and locked in the harness. Words of encouragement were short but meaningful. Only a nod, a smile and the thumbs-up sign told pilots everything was ready to go.

It was 15:29 hours when the leader raised his right arm above the cockpit and gave a circular motion. Each pressed the starter button and watched as the big three-blade propeller kicked over, rotated and spurted black puffs of smoke from the exhaust. Their engines roared to life. Inside, their radios were on; their compasses had been set and their engine instruments checked. The pilots gave the signal to the groundcrews and taxied for takeoff.

As the planes lined up on the south side of the landing ground, clouds of dust raised by whirling propellers forced the groundcrews to scramble. Slightly staggered but almost line abreast to starboard of the leader, in three sections of four, the Kittyhawks were ready to leave the field from the south to the north. The pilots sat ready, props slowly ticking over, waiting for their power to be unleashed. The leader completed his final checks on the formation, the field, the weather and the rendezvous with the USAAF P-40's, approaching the airfield from the east about 4,000 feet. Two squadrons flew in close formation.

Raising his right arm and dropping it forward, the leader and his men slowly opened the throttles to full power. The aircraft rolled forward together, gathering speed and becoming airborne almost as one. The wheels came up and the pilots eased back on the throttles for climbing power. Turning into position in front of the American squadrons, each pilot took a last look around as the three sections of 260 Squadron stepped up into formation slightly back of the lead section.

The Wing set course for the bomb line. It was almost 16:00 hours when 260 Squadron levelled out at 10,000 feet with the other squadrons. Although no enemy aircraft could be seen, it was easy to spot the battle area. Even from their distance, Eddie and his comrades could see columns of churning smoke and dust rising from the ground. They could see Kittyhawks dive-bombing and they watched the bombs dropping over the area. They could tell flak, both heavy and light, was intense. As they flew, they saw one Kittyhawk from another formation go down in flames. A parachute told them the pilot had bailed out.

Six minutes later 260 Squadron and their USAAF comrades were almost over the battle area. Flashes from enemy guns and red smoke from Allied bombs marked their target. Over their radios, the pilots heard the order, "switches on" to arm the two 250-pound bombs each carried. With another quick check, the pilots reviewed the battle area, their own cockpits, the formation and searched the skies for enemy aircraft. With everything in order, they saw the arm signal and the lead section started down, followed at ten second intervals by the sections behind.

Heading down at a 60 degree angle, Eddie and his friends could see the flashes from the 88mm guns just off the nose of their aircraft. As they dropped to 5,000, then 3,000 feet, their speed had reached 450 mph and was still increasing. Over their target, the pilots eased back on the stick and, like clockwork, released the 250-pound bombs in a single motion. Each took a hard turn to port and continued down as they watched the other aircraft carry out their bombing. They saw two big explosions with three great columns of smoke billowing skyward and judged the bombs had been well in the target area. As they glanced a few hundred yards away, they saw two Kitty-bombers, one from each American squadron, receive direct hits and go straight down on fire. They hadn't seen parachutes.

Flying below the 300-feet hills over the Allied troops, 260 Squadron saw tanks and vehicles moving forward. In sections of four, the boys turned 180 degrees back to the battle area amid the smoke and dust and the aftermath of bombing. Two or three enemy guns were still firing. The experienced fighter-bombers turned left, and at 300 yards, opened up on the gun posts. As they flew just above the

guns the firing stopped, replaced by explosions everywhere. The Kittyhawk pilots turned right and flew up the valley at deck level strafing vehicles, guns and tents on their way.

In the distance they could see Hurricane tank-busters on the job. They watched as the Hurricane's fired their 40 MM canons at the Panzers from 50 to 100 feet altitude. The German tanks were using their 88 MM guns as flak-guns. Two Hurricanes were seen crash-landing amid the tanks and another was scattered over the ground. The battle area had been heated to boiling but the boys of 260 continued their mission. They crossed the road to El Hamma and shot-up a group of vehicles while they turned to port for another pass behind the battle front.

More Kittyhawks began dive-bombing and the entire area became filled with aircraft diving, turning and firing. 260 Squadron completed another run, shooting up guns and MT's and everything in sight until they ran out of ammunition. As they cleared the battle area, they had only to look back at smoke, dust and flak bursts to realize they hadn't just imagined the intensity of the battle they had just come through.

Over the R/T, the group ground controller was advising the squadron to land at Causeway LG for a quick turnaround of fuel and ammo. Two aircraft had been badly damaged and returned to Medenine West and another landed with a big hole through the mainplane. Still another had part of its rudder shot away. The pilots of 260 Squadron mourned the loss of F/L Jeff Fallows who had been seen force-landing after he had strafed a truck that had blown up under him. Although his comrades believed he had survived the landing, he had been put down on the wrong side of the line.

The American squadrons were hit hard in the attacks. Four pilots had not returned and three others had crash-landed near the front lines; the day was not over. All the aircraft able to fly were turned around and airborne again by 17:35 hours. They would complete another attack before returning home to Medenine West.

At 18:00 hours, the 1st Armoured Division poured through a space in the Tebaga Gap torn by the fighter-bombers. The New Zealand infantry and the tanks passed through unhindered. The Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica had been unable to interfere throughout the day; continuous raids by the USAAF Strategic Air Forces had made it impossible. The Allied mission had been accomplished.

260 Squadron had played a part in the ultimate battle in the Campaign in Tunisia. The new Army co-operation role by the Desert Air Force had attained its height. In two and a half hours, the Desert Air Force had flown 412 sorties which cost them eleven pilots with many more wounded. At one time twenty-one squadrons had been airborne. They claimed eighty-five vehicles destroyed and another 210 damaged. Guns and tanks had been put out of action. When the dust died down, General Montgomery signaled the AOC: "Such intimate and close support has never been achieved before and it has been an inspiration to all the troops," he said.

The enemy Panzer regiments and tanks had been forced to give up the Mareth line. The next day, 27 March 1943, recce aircraft reported at least 250 vehicles nose to tail east of El Hamma. While the enemy concentrated on their retreat, 260 Squadron joined all fighter-bomber Kittyhawks in the air to strafe and bomb the El Hamma Gabes road. Two days later, Eddie led the squadron against armoured concentrations in the Gabes-Sfax area. Again Allied bombs landed among armoured vehicles and trucks and the boys from 260 Squadron watched enemy targets go up in flames. On the Gabes road, the young Canadian and his comrades put at least twenty-five MT's out of action in their last fighter-bomber sortie of March.

Proud of his top-notch unit, Eddie Edwards, at the age of 21, had become known as one of the best fighter-bomber pilots of World War II. His personal record included about two hundred vehicles and twelve aircraft destroyed on the ground.

On 29 March 1943, the remains of I Italian Army began digging in along the Wadi Akarit position for the final battles in Africa. For them, it would be the beginning of the end.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 21: LAST COMBATS OVER AFRICA

As their strength declined, the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica had been forced further and further into the defensive. Overwhelmed, the German and Italian pilots were powerless against the RAF and USAAF formations which filled the sky over Tunisia both day and night. With no other choice, they endured the continuous raids on their airfields and watched their ground forces being driven further into retreat

Oberleutnant Adolf Dickfeld's II/JG-2 ‘Richtofen', which had ruled the skies over Northern Tunisia in its FW-190A's after being transferred from the Channel Front in November 1942, had been returned to France. Jagdgeschwader 53, the 'Pik-As' 109 unit of Kommodore Gunther Fr. von Maltzan, part of which had been stationed in Tunisia at various times, had gone home for good, operating from its base in Sicily. II/JG-27109's, once a part of the famous 'Desert Wing' spent only a few days in Tunisia in April before it too returned to Sicily. Those who remained, JG-77 109's and II/JG-51 109's and their ground support units II/5KG-10 FW190's, 7/SG-2 FW190's, III/ZG-2 190's and I/SG-2 109's did their best but their losses mounted rapidly. The Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica had been outnumbered by the RAF and USAAF. As inexperienced Allied units in the north were given leave for rest, others were coming to the front for their second tour of duty, determined not to make the same mistakes twice. As the Desert Air Force pressed closer to the northern front they would mix with other RAF and USAAF segments and soon become a cohesive unit, operating in support of each other.

After a few quiet weeks 260 Squadron would, once again, be meeting enemy Air Forces in air combat. While 239 Wing continued to be used in a ground support role, S/L Hanbury's pilots would spend their time in escort for other squadrons on fighter-bomber sorties or in sweeps and interception missions. For them, ground support would be limited to the end of the Campaign in North Africa. Most worthy of note, Bill Stewart would find himself promoted to Flight Lieutenant in command of 'A' Flight while F/L Black left operations for a well-deserved rest. As 260 Squadron prepared themselves for upcoming battles they were being led by two Canadian flight commanders.

The first serious encounter with the Luftwaffe since 2 January 1943 came 29 March for Eddie Edwards, 'B' Flight Commander. On one of the last bombing and strafing sorties made by the unit in Africa, Eddie was returning with his unit when four Messerschmitts were spotted attacking the squadron's top cover. As the Kittyhawks turned into them the 109's pulled up and continued northward, but Eddie's keen eye saw an aircraft slightly below and to the side. Over the radio the young Flight Commander gave orders to his Deputy Flight Commander to continue with the squadron. He was breaking away with his No. 2, Sgt. Rick Rattle, to deal with the enemy aircraft. Eddie headed toward what he thought was a Macchi 202 but before he could catch it the enemy headed for cloud cover. At 250 yards Eddie pulled the nose of his Kittyhawk, FR 436, through the enemy's line of flight for a 60 degree deflection and fired a short burst of his six .50 in. machine guns. His aim had been good. Eddie watched as pieces flew off the fuselage and a big puff of smoke came from the engine as the aircraft appeared to roll and disappeared in the cloud. As the Kittys broke hard to starboard, avoiding the cloud and on their way to rejoin the squadron, another aircraft was spotted heading for cloud cover. Eddie gave a repeat performance and a second enemy plane escaped into the clouds after being the victim of his well-aimed burst.

"On return to base," Eddie said, "our debriefing with the Intelligence Officer satisfied us that the enemy aircraft were not Messerschmitt 109's or Macchi 202's but likely the first FW-190's we'd seen. We also determined the 109's which had attacked were most likely flying top cover to the FW-190's which had completed their dive-bombing mission when we attacked. In any case, no definite results from the attacks were observed because of the cloud cover, so no claims were made."

It's almost certain the two FW-190's damaged by Eddie's fire were members of III/SKG-10, III Gruppe, Schlacht Kampfgeschwader No. 10, a ground support unit which was especially active in Tunisia. The unit operating, for the most part, in the northern section since the Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa in 1942, had been stationed at Gabes LG for some time. Its pilots were now flying missions in the south as well as in the north and had been more evident since the Allied breakthrough at Mareth.

There is little doubt that Eddie's hits should have been recorded as claims once on the ground. But records of the Luftwaffe and Regia Aeronautica had been unwritten, lost or burned for the period. While the exact number of aircraft lost in action or those who safely crash-landed is not known, the RAF and USAAF claimed sixteen destroyed in the air 29 March. In their records, the Luftwaffe recorded four pilots killed and the Regia Aeronautica filed one aircraft as lost in action.

After two uneventful bomber escort sorties on 31 March and 2 April 260 Squadron was moved to a new drome 3 April. It didn't take long to discover the new landing ground at El Hamma, just taken over by the Allied troops, was too close to the front lines. 'A' Flight had barely landed when enemy fighter-bombers were overhead dropping their bombs. Although their first attack did little damage, they were back the next morning. This time, one airman was killed and three others were wounded — two with serious injuries to the legs. One petrol wagon was hit on the road and three men were killed and burned. The enemy fighter-bombers didn't let up. In the afternoon they were back again. At the same time the Allied drome was being shelled by guns located in the mountains some twelve miles away. While enemy bombers came over at night, Allied men worked to dig deep slit trenches. By morning, Operations had decided to maintain patrols over the drome to try to catch the Me-109's and FW-190 fighter bombers. Eddie and his squadron were ready before dawn the following morning but the enemy didn't show. They waited until the afternoon hours and nightfall to continue their raids on the Allied drome.

Shelling had caused extensive damage. One Kittyhawk received a direct hit and one lorry was blown to bits. Two airmen were killed. Shells hit the ridge pole of the Wing HQ's dug-in tent and 450 Squadron's dispersal. Four Australians were killed and many more were wounded.

450 and 112 Squadrons had seen enough. They moved their aircraft and base back to Medenine West. But S/L Hanbury refused to move back. His squadron was dispersed on the south side of the aerodrome, furthest from the shelling. The shells that were intended for the area were falling short by a few hundred yards. Only one of their Kittys had been damaged. Eddie remembers, "there was an ack-ack battery within 100 yards of our Mess tent and when the battery opened up, the racket was something else. Of course everyone would run out and watch."

On the ground, the 8th Army began another offensive 6 April. They attacked General Messe's I Italian Army, dug-in on the Wadi Akarit line. Before the day was over they had broken through. The next day they joined segments of US II Corps. The Axis abandoned their positions and withdrew to the north with the 8th Army hot on their trail. General Montgomery's troops took the entire flat coastal belt of central Tunisia almost unopposed.

The ground battles drew support from the air, and on 7 and 8 April Eddie renewed combat. Flying top cover to 250 and 450 Squadrons on the 7th, Eddie and his comrades watched the dive-bombing mission in the Sfax area. As they approached the target, six Me-109's came from above and stalked their formation out of the sun. For some reason, the enemy did not close in for the attack but shadowed the Kittyhawks. When 250 Squadron started its dive-bombing, the lead Messerschmitt dropped down a bit above them and in the sun. Eddie spotted the 109 and pulled the nose of his Kitty up sharply. He fired a short burst allowing for deflection. The young Canadian Flight Commander watched as the enemy pulled up quickly and left with the others. Puffs of smoke were coming from the engine

and Eddie knew the pilot's machine was cutting out. "The 109's were no longer diving in at reckless abandon to attack 239 Wing," Eddie recalled. "In this case, they might have been waiting for us to go down; they may have thought we had not seen them in the sun. No claim was made."

It was the third time in less than two weeks Eddie had severely damaged enemy aircraft but had not made a claim. On 29 March he had hit two and his most recent hit, 7 April made it three. On each occasion, he and his No. 2 and other members of the squadron had witnessed puffs of black and white smoke pouring from enemy engines; it was an indication they were badly damaged and possibly would not make it back to their base. Although there is no doubt he would have been afforded 'damaged' or even 'probable' recognition, Eddie just hadn't bothered to put in his claims when he returned to home. To him, the recognition did not seem important. He saw no point in filing his hits.

As Montgomery's troops advanced toward the Sfax area 8 April pilots were again in the air. Out of three sorties made that day they met the enemy on two. In each 260 Squadron flew top cover to other squadrons involved in dive-bombing enemy MT's.

On the first excursion, Eddie and his comrades escorted 112 'Shark' Squadron which was once again a part of 239 Wing. No enemy planes interfered with the mission, but by 05:50 hours as they took off for a second time that day, Me-109's were in the air. Once over the target area at least six 109's began their dive on 112 Squadron below. Eddie called the attack but the Messerschmitts saw them and split, spreading in every direction. The 109's had gained speed in their dive and Eddie and his No. 2, P/O Thomas, were able to take a shot. Turning inside the 109, Eddie closed in to approximately 300 yards. He fired and watched fragments from the enemy aircraft fall to the ground. Thomas was ready and let go with another hit. More bits flew off but the 109 continued to pull away. The boys from 260 broke off their attack as their quarry disappeared in the haze and low lying clouds. In the meantime boys from other sections were able to fire on other enemy aircraft F/Sgt. 'Limey' Harvey claimed a probable.

In the desert slicing sand had blown on racing winds, but along the coastlines the pilots competed with broken clouds that drifted at both high and low altitudes. During the days of March and April 1943, the obscuring clouds deprived the Allied Air Force from seeing the final results of their hits. As it had been on one of Eddie's last missions, so it would be 8 April. The boys were off the ground at 11:15 hours, flying top cover to fighter-bombers from 250 Squadron. Over their target, an enemy concentration in the Sfax area, four Me-109's and six FW-190's were spotted flying southward passing by a formation of B-25's. They were getting into position to attack 250 Squadron as Eddie's section dived in to head them off. Again, the enemy had seen them coming and split. But Eddie had already singled out a Focke-Wulf 190 and closed in for the kill. At 350 yards, 20 degrees off, he fired. Pieces flew from the enemy aircraft. At 300 feet, he fired again. More wreckage came away. At 250 feet, he managed another burst and this time black smoke poured from the engine as the 190 rolled over and vanished into low clouds below. In the meantime, his faithful No. 2, Sgt. Rattle, fired at an Me-109 which had come on Eddie's tail. Eddie saw Rattle's shot had been good before it, too, disappeared into the clouds.

Below, while the northern Anglo-American forces converged on Kairouan, the 8th Army was rapidly advancing toward the city of Sfax. They reached their goal on 10 April and two days later Montgomery's troops entered Sousse.

Now the Axis forces were faced by a single united front from the north coast to the east. From Cap Serrat Sedjanane in the north through Bou Arada and to Sousse, the Allied forces began driving their opponents into the northeastern corner of Tunisia, toward the Mediterranean Sea. On 13 April the battle-tried troops reached Enfidaville at the foot of the Atlas Mountains where General Messe's I Italian Army had dug in. Unfamiliar with war in the mountains, the 8th Army would be held there for most of the remainder of the campaign.

On 14 April 260 Squadron moved to another aerodrome at El Djem and the following day, F/L Edwards took off from the new landing ground to his next aerial combat. By 10:15 hours Eddie was leading twelve Kittyhawks on a reconnaissance sortie over the sea to the south of Malidia. Flying north at 8,500 feet, about two miles out to sea from Hammamet, he spotted some twelve Me-109's and MC-202's southbound about three-quarters of a mile inland. Well camouflaged against the hazy countryside, they flew at about 7,000 feet and were spread in three sections, line abreast, similar to formations used by the RAF. Gifted with exceptional eyesight Eddie had been trained to observe. His were hunter's eyes and his search for wild birds during his boyhood years in Saskatchewan proved valuable now.

After spotting the enemy formation, Eddie signalled a turn to port. Quickly and smoothly, the squadron carried out the order and were about to execute the perfect interception. With the sun behind them Eddie quietly reported the enemy fighters at two o'clock and slightly below. He had assumed his section had already seen the enemy formation, but they hadn't. 260 Squadron had become used to looking up to see the enemy against the sky. But now, below and between two and three miles away, they flew quickly, blending with the green and brown countryside in the distance.

Enemy aircraft were passing just under the nose of Eddie's Kitty as he banked to port. He watched as one, then two, then three and finally four Me-109's flew by before he turned on the fifth, letting his boys take part in the attack. The enemy formation was completely stalked and Eddie's pilots would have an opportunity to shoot.

The Kittyhawk pilots were now right behind the Axis fighters. Enemy pilots hadn't spotted the Allied aircraft and Eddie was certain his section leaders would be able to attack with relative ease. On the fifth Messerschmitt in the formation, the boy from Battleford went in for the kill. At 250 yards and a 30 degree angle, he fired. As usual his eye was on the engine, aiming to render the aircraft helpless. Bullets flew to his target and within seconds Eddie knew his aim had been on. He watched the enemy aircraft, smoking and on fire, head for the hills below. Quickly he turned onto the sixth 109 and let go another shot from 200 yards and at 30 degrees. Again it was a short burst, but again it was enough to send his victim down.

The short bursts were best in Eddie's opinion. It was easier to see results; they saved on ammo and unlike the noisy, distracting long bursts of fire, they did not set his Kittyhawk vibrating or cause it to lose speed. Other sharpshooters had used the technique and had claimed victories. Beurling, when flying over Malta, and Marseille, the German Desert ace, as well as 'Hawkeye' Wells, the New Zealander who made record victories over the Channel Front, were satisfied that short bursts of fire worked best. But unlike Beurling, Marseille or Wells who flew Spitfires or 109's equipped with machine guns and cannons, Eddie had to be satisfied with the Kitty which, equipped with machine guns, did not have quite the same firepower. Long bursts of fire also aggravated the perpetual problem of jamming when 'G' forces were pulled. Eddie already knew the panic of being caught in the clutches of the German enemy with no guns to fight back.

On his third attack that day, they would fail him again. With the fifth and sixth Messerschmitts gone, black smoke pouring from the engine of his second victim, Eddie had turned quickly onto another 109. At almost point-blank range, about 75 yards away, he had fired again. It was another short burst from about 30 degrees deflection and it ripped through enemy fuselage and tore the cannon off the underside of the 109's port wing.

Then it happened. His guns jammed, arousing the young Flight Commander's anger. He didn't like missing. Moreover, it riled him to find his guns had quit when there was still a chance to shoot.

As the damaged 109 went down, Eddie pulled up and turned steeply back. He looked around and he saw aircraft from both sides in a panic, flying every direction. Downward, he saw his first victim hit the ground and the second go into the sea. In the area where the third should have crashed, Eddie saw an

explosion but attributed it to another pilot's hit. Seeing his Kittyhawks attacking and breaking away, he called to re-form. They returned to base with no further incident.

To add to Eddie's frustration, something told him all was not right. Once back at base he was the only pilot to make a claim. During the debriefing he learned that not one of his section leaders had seen the enemy fighters when they were reported. None had uttered a word thinking, in time, they would come upon them. But it was too late. They had let the enemy escape when they had them in their grip. Eddie had wanted to take the enemy aircraft by complete surprise and turn the squadron into a single unit for attack but he was the only pilot who could make a claim. On the ground he was credited with two destroyed and one damaged during the combat. With no enemy records it is impossible to determine whether Eddie's claims should have read three destroyed. The enemy unit involved in the battle is not known.

While Eddie and his comrades were meeting the enemy in the air, administration geared up for 'Operation Flax'. The North West African Tactical Air Force had become fully involved in the new operation which was intended to disrupt and destroy the gigantic Axis airlift that had been established between Tunis and Sicily. Large formations of transport aircraft flew over the Mediterranean daily and on 5 April, the Allied Air Forces began ceaseless patrols over the area. Formation after formation of Ju 52's, SM.82's and Me.323's were intercepted and severe losses were inflicted. To the Allied forces it appeared the escorting enemy fighters were unable to afford adequate protection to transports and were, themselves, badly mauled on many occasions. On the first day of the operation twenty-six Axis aircraft were claimed; eighteen were transport aircraft. Five days later, the butchery continued. Thirty-nine aircraft were claimed; twenty-nine were transport planes. By 11 April the score had reached thirty-one transport aircraft.

After moving to aerodromes further north in the middle of April Desert Air Force pilots were in a good position to take part in 'Operation Flax'. On 17 April 260 Squadron made its first interception sweeps over Cape Bon and although Eddie's trip that day was uneventful, his Commanding Officer's sweep was labelled successful. At 08:05 hours, S/L Hanbury led twelve Kittys equipped with long-range tanks on a patrol over the Cap Bon-Tunis area. Between Cap Bon and Sicily, Hanbury spotted four twin-engined Me-110's flying about 1,000 feet above them. Flying lower than usual as they sought to destroy transports the Kittys attacked and watched as each one of the enemy aircraft went down. Hanbury claimed one after a thirty-mile chase over the sea, and Bill Stewart's bullets hit another. Both crew members were able to bail out. Rick Rattle shot down a third and watched it dive into the sea while Bill Parlee claimed the fourth Me-110 after it too crashed into the Mediterranean with its starboard engine in flames.

Over the same area, the massacre of enemy transports continued the next day. 18 April saw a record fifty-nine transports and sixteen escorting fighters claimed by the American pilots. The day became known as the Palm Sunday Massacre.

The same day, the Kittyhawks of 260 were, once again, moved. This time they made the aerodrome at Kairouan their landing grounds. The following day, Eddie was among the pilots in the sky, moving to intercept. In his log-book, the young Canadian wrote, "Sweep in hope to intercept Ju 52's coming from Sicily." That day the Kittyhawks of 7 SAAF Wing, old friends of Eddie and his squadron, intercepted the transports. They claimed fifteen destroyed. The following day Eddie was off again with his squadron comrades patrolling the Cap Bon area. They saw nothing but the waves below.

Two days later the Canadian Flight Lieutenant was luckier. At 07:10 hours on the morning of 22 April 1943, Kittyhawks from 7 SAAF Wing took off with other escorting squadrons. They set their course for the Gulf of Tunis. Fifteen minutes later, Eddie and his comrades left for the same area.

Because of the last minute unserviceability of W/C Burtan's aircraft Eddie had been called upon to lead the four squadrons of 239 Wing as Wing Commander.

Sometime earlier in Sicily Gruppen of transport aircraft, Ju 52's and Me.323's, had set off for Tunis, escorted by MC-202's and II/JG-27 Me-109's. By the time Eddie was on his way to the area, the Junkers had reached Tunis safely. But the huge six-engined Messerschmitt 323's had taken a different course and were intercepted by South Africans as they passed Zembra Island on their approach to Tunis. The Kittyhawk pilots reported seeing twenty 323's with the escort fighters stepped up to 8,000 feet. Representing the entire strength of a new unit, Transport Geschwader 5, the Me.323's had joined the remains of another unit, KGzb.V.323.

The South African pilots dived for the kill and within minutes it was over. At the head of 239 Wing, Eddie arrived over the battle area just in time to witness the results: "When 239 Wing reached the Bay of Tunis," he wrote, "the Bay seemed to be on fire with burning aircraft on the water."

As they approached a few enemy fighters dived on the Kittys but, within minutes, 250 Squadron, flying top cover, had taken care of them. In the meantime Eddie looked at the scene below and watched his surroundings. "Flying through the smoke at approximately 500 feet," Eddie said, "I saw a large aircraft directly in front. At approximately 250 yards, I fired a long burst and the Me.323 folded up like a stack of cards and fell into the sea. The SAAF Wing ahead of our formation had shot down twenty-three of the transports. Twenty-plus Me-109's were patrolling high above but did not attack— it looked like they lost heart."

Back at the Intelligence Officer's headquarters at Kairouan, the pilots made their reports. During his attack on the Me.323, Eddie had been flanked by both his No. 2 and No. 3, F/O Flury and Sgt. Lorry. Although recorded that they had assisted in the destruction of the enemy aircraft, it is likely they never fired their guns. As usual the Intelligence Officer, Johnny Walker, proposed the victory be shared between three. Eddie agreed. It would be good for the morale of the young pilots.

Transport Geschwader 5 had been wiped out as a unit that day. It was the last great slaughter of enemy transports. Since the beginning of 'Operation Flax' more than four hundred transport planes had been claimed by the Allied pilots for a loss of about thirty-five fighters. F/L Edwards claimed the last of the enemy transports and recorded the last confirmed victory for 260 Squadron in North Africa. Now the enemy was being forced to airlift by night.

On the ground, while the northern Anglo-American forces were battling in the Sedjanane Valley around the Djounine and Tine Rivers at Haidous and south of Medjerda, the French Forces were attacking south of Bou Arada and General Montgomery's 8th Army was attacking near Enfidaville. His attacks were designed to prevent Axis units from withdrawing to provide reinforcements elsewhere. On the last day of April Montgomery transferred part of his forces for the reinforcement of 1st Army for the final offensive. A few days later the Americans would enter Tunis and Bizerta and a week later the Commander-in-Chief, Axis Forces, General Messe, would surrender the last German and Italian troops in Africa.

"By this time," Eddie remembers, "it appeared the Axis would soon surrender or lose everything completely. However, the squadrons did not ease up. We would believe it when we saw it. Sorties over enemy territory proved one hundred per cent. They were as hostile as ever and one could be shot down just as easily at this time as before because of the flak guns concentrated in the small area. Everybody knew the war was not over in Europe, even though the Germans would be pushed out of Tunisia."

Anticipating the end, Eddie maintained his log-book as they continued their missions over North Africa. His last entries in the month of May 1943 show they did not relax while they waited:

1 May: "Anti-shipping patrol around Cap Bon. No ships seen — We bombed jetties scoring a few direct hits. — No enemy aircraft seen."

2 May: "Top cover to 3 Squadron bombing. Sweep around Cap Bon and over Gulf of Tunis. — Visibility very bad. No ships sighted and no enemy aircraft seen."

4 May: "Top cover to 3 Squadron on shipping sweep. Uneventful show. — Visibility very bad. Had to fly on instruments."

5 May: "Top cover to 250 Squadron on shipping recce. No shipping seen. 6 Macchi 202's came head-on 500 feet below and immediately half-rolled for the deck — no one engaged."

7 May: "Dawn sweep bombing MT and tanks. Recced the road between El Hammamet and Tunis — Around Tunis out to sea, crossed coast flying west toward Mateur, then south. Bombed cross-roads and small fort, scoring 3 direct hits and some near misses. Heavy ack-ack."

7 May: "Top cover to 250 and 3 Squadrons on shipping patrol. Nothing seen. Crossed Tunis Bay at 15,000 feet. No enemy aircraft seen."

8 May: "Top cover to 3 Squadron. Dive-bombing. 3 Squadron bombed the jetty off Cap Bon and then made three strafing runs across the peninsula — One very large fire seen as a result."

10 May: "Dive-bombing MT on peninsula. Bombing very good. — One column of smoke seen afterwards."

11 May: "Dive-bombing MT on peninsula. Bombing also very accurate. Many fires seen over the area. Shelling by our 8th Army Troops concentrated on the enemy."

As the Allied forces watched their enemy defeated they knew the end was near. In his diary, Sgt. Bill Cartwright told of the triumphant atmosphere at Kairouan aerodrome during the last days of the campaign. On 11 May he wrote that all the pilots were jubilant and had a party on French beer and wine. The next day his diary reveals, "Jerries give up. Campaign is over. Just like a war outside. Machine guns, Bofors and Very cartridges going off all around, fired by our troops."

On 13 May 1943, the Axis troops surrendered.

In his log-book, Eddie Edwards wrote, "War over in North Africa Desert. **FINITO**!"

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 22: CONCLUSION TO THE CAMPAIGN IN NORTH AFRICA

Riding high on the crest of achievements the end of the North African Campaign in Tunisia came quickly and, for Eddie, it was an anti-climax to a story in which there should have been more. "The squadron had worked and flown as a highly capable fighting unit; it had managed to cut its losses of pilots as compared to other squadrons. In fact, there were more than a dozen pilots who had survived the lot from August 1942 when they stood on the Cairo-Alex line. It had achieved it all while dive-bombing and ground-strafing amid enemy bullets and dog-fights. 260 Squadron had become a viable fighting machine with superb leadership, flying discipline and bags of luck. And then it was over."

A week after calm had descended, 260 Squadron was moved back to Zuara where pilots rested on beaches in a quiet spot on the Mediterranean. As they waited for transfer to Sicily, they revelled in their surroundings and counted their blessings. As a reward for their achievements Wing Commander Burton, leader of 239 Wing, and his four squadron commanders were flown to England for a few days' leave. Among the squadron commanders was Pedro Hanbury.

On their return to North Africa the aircraft in which they were flying was shot down by a Ju 88 off the Bay of Biscay, near Spain. All the leaders of 239 Wing were lost. "After all S/L Hanbury had done," Eddie said, "he was clobbered by a Ju 88. He was probably one of the best all-around leaders in the desert."

Not only did 260 Squadron mourn the loss of their own leader, but each airman who waited in North Africa realized the meaning of the enemy's hit. Squadron and Wing continuity had been broken. The experience of the Commanding Officers had been lost forever. The achievements of the squadron and wing personnel over the past six months would also be forgotten. Awards and promotions for the airmen died with their leaders.

Instead, complete strangers from headquarter's Cairo Staff were left to decide their fate. Most men were dispersed at random. With no one to demand their due, 260 and 250 Squadrons received little recognition for their job in air-to-air combat and on ground support duty in Africa. The units were almost unknown and often in post war years, historians treated them as though they had never existed.

Eddie Edwards was posted to the Middle East Central Gunnery School (MECGS) as an instructor at El Ballah on the Suez Canal. He was back where he started and he was less than happy. He lived for the day Wing Commander 'Corky' Dundas' promise would come true and he would be returned to operations.

His tour with 260 had ended. His log-book showed he had made 186 operational sorties in North Africa for a total flying time of 245 hours and five minutes. After reviewing his own record with supervision, it appeared Eddie had forgotten to make various entries and the figures were updated. In fact, F/L Edwards had flown 195 sorties in Africa and chalked up a total flying time of 261 hours and five minutes. He had led the Squadron on forty-two occasions over enemy territory and had led the Wing on another few.

During his first tour of operations, he had personally engaged the enemy aircraft on thirty-nine occasions and his score in battle had reached fifteen and one-half destroyed; six and one-half probables and thirteen damaged. Only twelve and one-half of his destroyed claims were officially confirmed. In addition, he had destroyed twelve aircraft on the ground and damaged another two. They counted approximately two hundred MT of various types destroyed during more than fifty dive-bombing and strafing sorties. It was an impressive tally and when it was compared to the rest of 260 Squadron's victories there was no doubt Eddie Edwards had become an ace.

Between August 1941 and May 1943, the Squadron's record included about eighty enemy aircraft destroyed and hundreds of probables and damaged for thirty-nine pilots killed, missing or in POW camps. Eddie's victories totaled almost one-fifth of those of the unit.

While Eddie might have been having the time of his life in the North African desert, the work was tough and times could be exhausting. Others may have found life more than trying at times, but Eddie's performance was a bright spot in the long tunnel of war. His comrades remember his abilities and many thank God for his presence. In post-war years ex-F/O Nelson E. Gilboe, a pilot with 260 Squadron from June to November 1942 who shared Eddie's experiences and remembers his performance and personality, wrote this:

"I met this fine young pilot when I joined 260 Squadron in June of 1942 and I became a regular member of his flight section. We flew often together and I was always impressed with his dogged determination and especially with his uncanny ability at deflection shooting. I can remember one occasion when I was on the tail of a 109 and firing for all I was worth with no apparent success. Eddie came out nowhere and I saw him, out of the corner of my eye, fire a short burst from a full 90 degree angle and the 109 literally exploded in front of me. There was no question as to who shot that one down.

"On another occasion, in September, I was flying in a section with Edwards, Sgt. Cundy of the RAAF and Jeff Fallows of the RNZAF. We were attacked and badly outnumbered by a group of fifteen or more 109's. Eddie led us into a defensive manoeuvre and for a period of fifteen minutes, we fought a successful defensive battle incurring no casualties to ourselves or the aircraft. I must give the credit for this successful defense to Eddie's fine leadership and cool head in the midst of what could have otherwise been a tragic result.

"Eddie was also the athletic leader of our squadron community. I can still remember him trying to get the less energetic members of our group to come out and play touch football or take other exercises to keep themselves in good physical shape. We often talked of the need to increase the squadron's shooting ability and he would try to explain the theory of deflection shooting to us. Eddie used to explain that although we had to make full use of the reflector sight on the aircraft, we also had to learn to aim the aircraft much as a hunter aims a shotgun at a flying duck. He told us that we had to develop an instinct to shoot rather than to concentrate deliberately on using the sights provided with the aircraft.

"Eddie was certainly one of the finest leaders I had the privilege to meet and fly with. He was well respected by everyone who flew with him. He always regarded his flight as a team and lead it in that manner. Many of us owe our lives and any success we might have achieved on the squadron to his superior guidance and leadership."

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 23: FIGHTING OVER ITALY

Stationed at El Ballah as instructor of the Middle East Central Gunnery School, Eddie was to bide his time flying Spitfires, Harvards and an occasional Hurricane until 22 November when he would make his last flight before being posted to operations again. From June to November 1943, the young Canadian demonstrated his shooting skills in the Spitfire, whose portside wing cannon was often loaded with nine rounds. Demonstrating the need for a sharp eye and cool wits, Eddie would often attack the drogue on an upside-down overhead pass, fire and blow the parachute to shreds with only two or three hits from the 20mm cannon. Within months his reputation as a sharpshooter was evident to both old and new pilots at the gunnery school.

Wing Commander Dundas had given his word Eddie would be back on operations within six months and he kept his promise. In early December 1943, F/L Edwards was posted to 417 Squadron, RCAF, as supernumerary. The squadron had been formed at Charmy Down, a satellite airfield for Colerne, England in November 1941 but it had seen no action on the Channel Front. In June 1942 it had been posted to the Middle East and served in the Mediterranean area to the end of the Second World War.

When Eddie arrived with the unit, it was under the leadership of S/L Albert U. 'Bert' Houle, an ex-desert pilot and a capable leader. As a part of 244 Wing, the squadron joined 145 RAF Squadron, led by S/L O.C. Kallio, a Canadian; 92 RAF Squadron, under S/L E.D. Mackie from New Zealand and 601 RAF Squadron under Major M.S. Osier, a South African. The Wing was commanded by Wing Commander P.S. 'Stan' Turner, a tough Canadian who had begun his fighting career in 1940 during the Campaign of France and the Battle of Britain.

"I flew ten sorties with 417 Squadron," Eddie recalled. "The squadrons of the Wing operated off a strip or single runway made of perforated steel planking (PSP) that was interlocked in sections. The base was referred to as Canne, near Termoli, approximately eighty miles north of Foggia, on the east side of Italy on the Adriatic coast. This was a complete change from the desert. It was the winter season and weather conditions were normal for the area — wet and damp with mud everywhere."

Over green fields and trees and surrounded by high mountains in the central regions, the squadron flew Spitfire VIII's. "They were all brand new, and what a beautiful aircraft to fly." Eddie remembers. "Normal cruising speed wasn't much faster than the Kittyhawk III's but you could open the throttle and feel and immediate and positive response. The Spitfire was as fast as the 109 and it could catch the enemy in a climb or dive. My experience flying the 109F was that, as the speed increased, the stick forces increased, indicating very heavy wing loading. The Spitfire was light on the elevators at all speeds. Indeed, it was fast and smooth, making it a real joy to fly. In order to fully appreciate the outstanding qualities of a Spitfire, pilots should have first been required to do a tour of ops on Kittyhawks."

On 19 December 1943, Flight Lieutenant Edwards was posted to 92 East India Squadron as a Flight Commander. The RAF unit was under the leadership of Squadron Leader Evan D. 'Rosie' Mackie, a New Zealander from Otorohanga. He had become known as a fine fighter pilot who served on the Channel Front and in the northern sector of North Africa after 'Operation Torch'.

"92 Squadron," Eddie said, "was a fine squadron with a proud record of three hundred destroyed. It had gained much of these successes in the Battle of Britain and throughout the North African Campaign.

"In January 1944, the squadron moved to the west side of Italy, north of Naples to a strip called Marcionize to cover the Allied landings at the Anzio beachhead. The squadron's daily ops were to patrol the Anzio beachhead providing air cover and/or air superiority over the battle area. There was no more

ground strafing or dive-bombing, just patrolling at 20,000 plus on the look-out for hostiles — they were very scarce. There were no more incidents of being jumped by 109's. When we did meet the Luftwaffe, we had to chase them to catch them," Eddie remembers.

His first encounter with enemy aircraft over Italy took place 11 January 1944. He was on his twenty-seventh sortie over the continent and on his seventeenth patrol with 92 Squadron. As Eddie flew, he spotted two Me-109's and intercepted from head-on. He fired at one and shot the long-range tank away. The 109 half-rolled and dived steeply from 23,000 feet. Eddie couldn't see the final results, but the enemy aircraft kept diving until it disappeared in the smoke and haze along the mountain chaparral.

It was not until his forty-third sortie over Italy on 29 January Eddie ran into more excitement. 92 Squadron was flying over Anzio at 18,000 feet when the young Canadian spotted four FW-190's making vapor trails at 25,000 feet. The boy from Battleford led his flight to 30,000 feet and attacked when the 190's half-rolled and dived. He chased them to deck level over Rome but was forced to break off because flak was especially fierce in the area. On a second patrol flown the same day, the 190's were seen again. Out of range, he watched as other Allied aircraft shot two of the enemy to the ground.

February 1944 opened as a busy month which would prove successful for Eddie. He claimed four enemy aircraft destroyed in the air, three of them confirmed. His hits would be made in the course of twenty-six operational sorties over the Anzio beachhead area.

Patrols had remained uneventful for Eddie and his squadron until 16 February when he spotted a formation of at least twenty FW-190's with a top cover of Me-109's at 25,000 feet. As the enemy aircraft left the Rome area and flew down the coast, Eddie and his pilots flew at 21,000 feet. Before they could get into position, the enemy aircraft dived for the deck. Eddie and his No. 2, Lt. Johnny Gasson, intercepted them in the dive and blasted two out of the air. Gasson blew the tail off one while Eddie claimed his from 500 yards. The FW-190 burst into flames, hit the ground and exploded.

Three days later Eddie would find himself in another successful combat. This time, he was leading the squadron off the Anzio beachhead at 14,000 feet. His Spitfires had been waiting to escort B-26 Marauders over their target when Eddie was alerted to enemy presence. They were reported at 15,000 feet, and while flying north Eddie spotted a mixed formation of about twenty FW-190's and Me-109's. The enemy was coming through the clouds at two o'clock and about 500 feet above, flying in close formation. Eddie saw them manoeuver into the sun and he guessed they were positioning themselves for an attack on some Kittys below. The young Canadian gave orders to open the throttle one hundred per cent and instructed the section on his port side to go echelon starboard so all aircraft could turn port and engage the enemy aircraft. Surprisingly, the enemy pilots had not seen them and as the Spits turned and pulled up to engage, Eddie marveled at the set-up. It happened once in a blue moon — and today, it appeared, a blue moon was shining.

But things went wrong. The section leader on the port section chose to ignore Eddie's instructions to go echelon starboard. Instead, he pulled up into the formation where he disrupted the planned attack and alerted the enemy aircraft. In seconds, one of the 109's was on his tail, ready to fire. Eddie, who was already zeroing in on another target, switched his aim and fired from 30 degrees astern at 150 yards. Pieces of the Messerschmitt had gone flying but Eddie couldn't observe further results. The enemy aircraft had broken away directly under his Spitfire and gone straight down.

Within minutes the combat had become a fast and furious race from 15,000 feet to deck level. Followed by his No. 2, Lt. Johnny Gasson, Eddie turned his attention on a Focke Wulf 190. It half-rolled and the young Canadian fired from about 300 yards dead astern until his cannons jammed; they were probably frozen. But, again, scraps flew from the enemy aircraft which dived toward the ground. Ignoring the fate of his last hit, he pulled up again. Gasson was still behind him. He had not fired his guns; it was all he could do to stay with his leader.

The dog-fight continued with vicious confrontation. At one point Eddie noticed a FW-190 which had dived toward ground to escape the battle. He turned and the chase was on. As his speed began building, he slowly gained on the 190. At deck level over the coast, just before crossing the Allied lines, Eddie had closed to a distance of about 300 yards. Trying everything he knew, the enemy pilot couldn't escape. At 250 yards with about 20 degrees deflection, Eddie fired two short bursts from his .303 machine guns and hit the 190 dead-on. Dark smoke poured from the machine as it burst into flames. Eddie watched as the enemy pilot tried to side-slip the flames away from the cockpit before he crashed to the deck.

Breaking hard away to port, Eddie glanced up in time to see another FW-190 at approximately 100 yards on a steep angle, attempting a quarter head-on attack with all its guns flashing. He saw the shiny black rivets on the belly of the enemy aircraft as it passed over within feet of his cockpit. Flying below 100 feet, Eddie and Johnny watched the 190 go straight into the ground and blow up. The two Spits had completed their turn to the Allied side of the line when Eddie heard a noise he didn't like.

It was a loud explosion and Eddie felt his own aircraft buck and shudder before his cockpit began to fill with smoke. Checking his instruments and controls, he saw everything there was in order. Over the R/T he called his No. 2 who had already looked for damage on the outside. There was a large hole about twelve inches in diameter right through the fuselage just back of the cockpit, Johnny reported.

Quickly, they agreed it was caused by the shell of a 88mm. fired from a German tank. Flak bursts were heavy in the area and fortunately the shell had passed straight through Eddie's aircraft without exploding inside.

Eddie re-formed some of the squadron over the Anzio beachhead and they returned to base without further incident.

Back at the Intelligence Officer's quarters, the combat was discussed and reports were filled out. On the ground, Eddie's disappointment turned to disgust as he listened to comments by the section leader who had disobeyed orders. With no apologies he criticized the show and disputed the claims. His complaints caused confusion and the Intelligence Officer was about to give all the claims to the squadron, with the exception of the FW-190 Eddie had shot down on the deck, when CO S/L Mackie stepped in. The squadron would get two destroyed and two damaged; Eddie's share would include one destroyed and one damaged. Later the Army reported six enemy aircraft had been shot down in the engagement and Eddie's damaged claim was officially upgraded to a destroyed. Because 92 Squadron was the only unit to engage in enemy combat over Anzio at the time, there is no doubt the six enemy aircraft were theirs. It proved that two FW-190's and an Me-109 hit by F/L Edwards and others claimed damaged by F/O Sissons and F/O Henderson had all gone down. The FW-190 seen crashing after Eddie's last attack was another aircraft confirmed out of action. Throughout the discussion, Eddie refused to argue and nothing more was said. His sixty-third operational sortie over Italy had ended in embarrassment.

Eddie's kite, QJ-F, a Spitfire VIII with serial number JF-502 in which he had gained all his successes over Italy, was flown away to be patched up and he was assigned a new QJ-F on 24 February. One day later the Canadian Flight Lieutenant saw his last action with 92 Squadron over Italy.

As Eddie arrived over Anzio on patrol he spotted a pair of Me-109's. While his No. 3 and 4 took after one, he and his No. 2 chased the other to the River Tiber, but their long-range tanks wouldn't jettison and they couldn't close in. In despair, they fired at long range but did not observe any results. It was Eddie's last encounter with enemy aircraft over Italy. Two weeks later, promoted to Squadron Leader, he would take over command of 274 Squadron.

Remembering his days with 92 Squadron, Eddie said, "To carry out patrols over the Anzio beachhead, the squadrons would fly out to sea and climb over the water to operating altitude, usually

20,000 feet, taking approximately 20 to 25 minutes to reach the beachhead. During the month of February 1944, it was almost a daily occurrence for one of the aircraft of the two Spitfire Wings to experience engine trouble; the pilot would be forced to bail out or if he was close enough to Anzio, to land."

With only a fuel light as a warning, the pilots learned engine failure would come next. They had become "a little twitchy" and pressure was applied to the engineering officers. Finally, one of the engineers who had a little flying time prior to the war on bi-planes, confiscated a Spitfire and flew to the beachhead. Somehow, after numerous attempts, he landed safely on a short emergency landing strip. The Group Captain heard about it and was fit to be tied; a court-martial was in the offing.

"But soon after the fledgling engineer arrived at the beachhead another of our Spitfires force-landed on the same emergency strip. He immediately carried out an inspection of the aircraft and found the fuel line frozen. Fuel starvation had been the cause of the engine failure. Further investigation indicated the Spitfire VIII had an extra, very small radiator with its opening near the port wing root to necessarily cool the fuel when the aircraft operated in a very warm climate. It was necessary particularly for taxiing. Apparently," Eddie Edwards recalled, "the Spitfire VIII's were programmed for India. Anyway, a small three-inch patch over the opening completely solved the problem.

"The poor engineering officer now became a hero and suggestions of a medal were being made when I heard last. But I'm sure he was subjected to some type of punishment for unauthorized flying," Eddie said.

On 7 March 1944, Eddie was promoted to Squadron Leader and given command of 274 Squadron of the RAF. He replaced S/L J.M. Morgan, DFC, AM. In the past the desert squadron had been led by such famous pilots as Pat Dunn, John Lapsley, Dudley Honor and Sid Linnard. Many Canadians had distinguished themselves in the Middle East with the unit. Thomas Patterson from Toronto, George Keefer from Prince Edward Island, Wally Conrad from Melrose, Ontario and John Neil were only a few. It had become an exclusively Middle East Squadron, formed at Amriya in Egypt in August 1940 and it had seen action in every major phase of desert fighting, from the beginning of activities in the summer of 1940 to the Axis retreat from Alamein in November 1942. From that time on the unit had been kept in the rear area with other Hurricane squadrons flying patrols and shipping sorties on the defence of the Delta.

Excited about his new posting, Eddie said, "274 Squadron was a famous Hurricane squadron from the Desert Air Force and had many high scoring pilots attached to it over the years. Needless to say, I was very happy to take command of such a grand group of desert warriors.

"To join 274 was to go back to Canne again on the east coast — and back to Spit V's. I had flown the Spit V's at the gunnery school at El Ballah and, after eighty hours, I felt I knew it well. 274's Spits were old desert warriors as well, handed down from 244 Wing which was now flying new Spit VIII's. Air operations were back to bomber escorts, dive-bombing and strafing. However, I had only flown a few operations with the squadron and, while on the way to a routine strafing mission over Frosinone, my aircraft developed an internal glycol leak over the mountains and I was forced to land on a mountain top. I was able to return to my squadron seven days later."

In his story, published in Wings, December 1975, Bob Grinsell wrote about Eddie's eighty-second sortie over the Continent:

"His last mission in Italy took place at 15:30 hours. The squadron had taken off for a strafing mission in the Frosinone and Rome areas. Edwards had been airborne about 25 minutes, climbing northwest over the central mountain range when his aircraft developed an internal glycol leak. The cockpit filled with acid white smoke and Edwards opened the canopy, undid the seat harness and prepared to bail out, then realized he was too low over the rugged peaks. As a last resort, he attempted to

set his Spitfire down in a small clearing on the mountain top. Everything seemed to be normal under the circumstances, a slight bank to the left with a little skid to keep the smoke away, air speed controlled just above the stall, he was all set to pancake at the very edge of the small, flat-looking spot when the engine blew up. He doesn't remember anything after that until about 2 a.m. the next morning when a beautiful nurse bent over him and wiped his face.

"The Squadron pilots had circled the wreckage and seen no movement. One flight carried out its mission and the other returned to base. It was learned later that a Gurkha gun battery located high in the mountains had witnessed the incident and picked Edwards up when he was thrown clear of his Spitfire as it crashed. He was taken down the mountainside and delivered to a field hospital south of Termoli. Some doctor, unknown to him, had put 13 stitches in the back of his head, 11 over his right eye, and there were bruises on his left arm, knee and back. When he hitch-hiked back to the squadron seven days later, with his head swathed like a Gurkha, the pilots were stunned. They thought they were seeing a ghost. Incidentally, he had the biggest black eye (actually, all colors) for the next four months."

A few days after Eddie had arrived back at Cannes, the squadron was ordered back to England to bolster forces for D-Day, the invasion of Europe from the western side. The entire squadron joined two other RAF units, 80 and 229 Squadrons as they were stowed aboard a ship bound for the United Kingdom. They began their journey 10 April 1944.

During the time Eddie had been in Italy, he had made eighty-two operational sorties; ten of them with 417 Squadron, sixty-seven with 92 Squadron as a Flight Commander and five as Commanding Officer of 274 Squadron. Eddie's total number of sorties had risen to 278. Over Italy, he had added four destroyed and a couple of damaged to his impressive tally. His record for enemy aircraft destroyed in the air had passed the 'twenty' mark.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 24: FROM D-DAY TO VE-DAY

Once back in England, and after a seven-day leave, Eddie and his comrades reported to Hornchurch Station in Essex where they would fly the famous Spitfire IX's. He was assigned his brand new aircraft with serial number BS-227 and letters JJ-Q painted on the fuselage. Eddie had mixed feelings about joining the RAF on the Channel Front, having been for so long a member of a front line squadron.

"Most ground personnel had forgotten that anything as nice as returning home could happen to them. All personnel were certainly deserving of a rest. Flying back in England was such a change. Everything seemed so civilized, much more at home — really simpler and easier — able to eat and sleep — proper RAF messes and have the laundry done..."

And the action for his squadron was less hectic. Despite the sweeps and bomber escorts they would make over occupied Europe, they would see no enemy aircraft. He would fly over the Channel Front from bases in England, but, as in the past four months as Commanding Officer in Italy, would not be opposed in the air.

At Hornchurch, 274 Squadron joined 80 and 229 Squadrons to form a Wing of Spit IX's under the command of Hawkeye' Wells from New Zealand. 14 May 1944 the new Wing made its first operational sortie off the French coast. As the RAF prepared for the invasion of Europe, Eddie was part of about ten sweeps and bomber escorts over France. He flew with Boston, Marauder, Fortress and Liberator bombers, travelling to varied targets — from marshaling yards and bridges to enemy aerodromes. They went to Douai, St. Malo, Chevres and even Paris. On a few occasions, Eddie and the other pilots of the Wing swept ahead to intercept any enemy aircraft which might be a threat to the Allied bombers, but no German planes came their, way. Me-109's and FW-190's were nowhere to be seen. Serving as Wing Commander on one trip, Eddie led his boys over Boulogne-Lille Cambrai-Montdidier-Cayeux areas but again saw no sign of the Luftwaffe. For Hawkeye Wells' pilots, the German Air Force seemed not to exist.

Late in the evening of 5 June 1944, his twenty-third birthday, Eddie and his comrades were summoned to a briefing. They were informed the Invasion of Normandy was underway. Long before dawn on 6 June the pilots had finished a hurried breakfast and were ready for their part in the operation designed to overwhelm the enemy. All day long steady streams of bombers, transports, gliders, fighters, fighter-bombers, recce and communication aircraft flew back and forth across the Channel.

For Eddie, the first mission would be a shipping patrol. "When we arrived over the assigned area, the scene below was beyond description. There were landing craft stretching as far as the eye could see; ships of all sizes and shapes. Destroyers off shore were shelling ahead of the landing troops and answering fire came from enemy batteries on shore. Aircraft swarmed in the sky above."

On his second trip of the day, things were different for Eddie and his squadron. While a large part of the Second Tactical Air Force provided an air umbrella over the invasion fleet, 274 Squadron joined others providing escort for the long rows of gliders and glider tugs which took airborne troops inland where they jumped and landed on Axis territory.

"We were one squadron of dozens of Spitfire squadrons escorting the Albemarle and Dakotas towing dozens of Horsa gliders loaded with assault troops. The formations stretched from shore to shore across the Channel. The landing was successful, but many aircraft were shot down by flak and many gliders went down amongst the enemy guns."

As they kept a watchful eye on the boys on the ground, the absence of the Luftwaffe became a disappointment to the pilots. Over the next few days, Eddie and his comrades flew numerous patrols over the Normandy beaches, but German planes were never encountered. On one trip, a large formation

of forty or more was reported above, but the 10/10 clouds at 1,500 feet were too heavy for the boys to get to the enemy planes.

If enemy aircraft wouldn't come to them, it was decided the Allied pilots would try to catch them over their own airfields. On 12 June Eddie led 274 Squadron on a sweep over Evreux, Dreux, Chartres and Argentan. After searching for enemy aircraft, they landed near Bayeux on the beachhead with nothing to report; the 109's and 190's were still nowhere to be seen. During the few hours spent at the small French airstrip, Eddie wished his boys could conduct their operations from there. But conditions were overcrowded; one complete Canadian Wing was already stationed on the strip. Ordered to return to Detling, their new base in England, they continued uneventful patrols over the beaches. They also flew bomber escorts for Lancasters, Halifaxes, and Mitchells. On a few occasions the unit was ordered to patrol over its base to intercept V-1 buzz-bombs. On 16 June Eddie saw two of them shot down by Tempest aircraft during a patrol. Later the unit was moved to Tangmere and then Manston. Still, their uneventful patrols continued.

On 28 June Eddie and his pilots flew high cover to a hundred Lancaster bombers over northeast France. The trip would prove to be a break in the monotony.

On their way in, they sighted, for the first time in daylight over France, a Messerschmitt 163 `Komet' rocket-propelled fighter. "It whizzed and zipped around the sky like a bumble-bee in a small room," Eddie remembered. Amazed that it paid no attention to the formation, the boys guessed it had been on a flight test.

On the way back to base, just as the squadron crossed the south coast of England near the famous white cliffs of Dover, Eddie spotted a flying object on the port side at the same altitude, just about to make a perfect interception from about 60 degrees. The squadron had been flying in close formation, and without a word, Eddie eased the stick forward as the V-1 passed over the top of the formation. It had been a close call.

The next day, the squadron moved to Gatwick and Eddie made his last sorties of June over the Evreux Dreux area. On one occasion, the boys spotted two large enemy lorries under low clouds and left them to burn.

Although they met few enemy aircraft during the month of June 274 Squadron had flown over a thousand operational hours. Eddie had flown thirty operational sorties during the month and was ready for more.

As it was in June so it would be in July 1944. The young Canadian Squadron Leader would fly twenty-three sorties from West Malling, their new station, and cope with the same weather conditions that had plagued the pilots the previous month. Fog, haze, low cloud and rain hampered their operations on many July days.

Although no enemy aircraft would be encountered, flak was "heavy around target areas and over the Continent with so many Allied aircraft flying over. Flak was intense everywhere along the coast and along all approaches from cross-country," Eddie recalled.

Sweeps and bomber escorts continued with a few 'anti-diver' and strafing sorties. Eddie and his squadron provided escort to RAF Lancasters to Evreux, Dreux and Argentan again. They went to Caen, Amiens, Rouen, Laval, Dieppe, Lille and Paris and gradually the number of aircraft increased. On 28 June the Spits escorted one hundred Lancasters; three days later, there were over three hundred and 7 July more than four hundred Lancasters dropped bombs on enemy troops near Caen. On the 18th, the force consisted of no less than 450. The only mention of enemy aircraft came in Eddie's log book dated 30 July when the squadron made a sweep of the Evreux-Dreux area: "Huns reported — but we saw only friends. Tough luck."

In the meantime, the Spitfire Wings based in Normandy destroyed no less than 122 enemy aircraft in an eight-day period above Caen where Canadian ground forces were fighting a hard battle.

On 24 July and 5 August, Eddie led his pilots on two successful strafing missions. During the first, the squadron shot up five MT's and set fire to a petrol dump north of Laval in France. On the second, they destroyed three lorries, one staff car and one motorbike with side-car in the Evreux-Dreux area. It was the last mission with 274 Squadron on which Eddie would fly a Spitfire.

Two days later they were re-equipped with the famous Tempest fighter aircraft. "When the squadron converted to Tempests there was, as usual, some anxiety among the pilots in having to give up their Spitfire IX's. None of us had been very close to a Tempest before. It looked bigger, higher off the ground, sturdier and it was much faster; but not so genteel. The Tempests were delivered to the squadron by the Air Transport Auxiliary, a group of women pilots. After landing and shutting down the engines, they removed their helmets and before doing anything else, took out their compacts to powder their noses and apply lipstick. It was too much for my boys and they immediately decided there was nothing to flying the new aircraft. The Tempest took off and landed very similar to the old Hurricane, but much faster. It was a fine aircraft to fly and fight. It also had tremendous acceleration for the time period."

The objective behind issuing the new Tempests was to have a substantial number of squadrons able to match the V-1's, which were increasing considerably. With its superior speed, the Tempest proved to be just what the Allied Forces needed to avenge themselves against Hitler's 'buzz-bombs' or 'doodle-bugs' which had begun raiding England during the summer of 1944. In that year, the Tempest squadrons would destroy at least 632 German V-1's.

The German 'buzz-bomb' was propelled by a pulse-jet engine mounted on top of a two-foot long fuselage. Its wing span was only sixteen feet and its speed between 340 and 370 miles per hour. The flying bombs were launched from sites in France code-named Noball by the Allies, and each one carried one ton of high explosives. All the enemy had to do was direct them toward England; when the fuel was consumed, they simply nosed down, hit the ground and exploded. In 1944, the devil-robot killed 211 people and injured almost two thousand in the south and southeast corner of Great Britain. A great number fell on London.

Eddie and his squadron flew ten 'anti-diver' or 'doodlebug' patrols but they failed to spot one. The young Canadian had flown three of the missions on Spitfires before the unit had been converted to Tempests.

Just days after the squadron had been issued the new aircraft, S/L Eddie Edwards had completed his second operational tour of duty. Unofficially, he had finished his third. The young Canadian was rested off operations and sent home to Canada. His log-book showed 155 entries for the current tour; half as Commanding Officer of 274 Squadron. In total, he had made 350 operational sorties. In October 1944, he was rewarded for the work he had done. He received a Bar to his Distinguished Flying Cross.

Back in Canada in the fall of the year, Eddie was sent to tour the country. Spending time in his home province of Saskatchewan, he made Victory Bond speeches, encouraging hope for those at home.

With his performances over, Eddie's 'seniors' thought he should acquire twin-engine time and posted him to 3 SFTS at Calgary in January 1945 where he flew Ansons and Cranes. He was not particularly impressed with his new task, however the boy from Battleford was able to relive some of his favorite childhood pastimes during his short time home. He managed to get in shape enough to play hockey for a few weeks. He played with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers and switched to the Calgary Stampeders for two weeks before returning to the Blue Bomber camp.

But before long, Eddie found himself on his way back to England. In February 1945, he had been called and would replace 'Johnnie' Johnson as Commander of 127 Wing, RCAF. Promoted to Wing Commander at age 23, it was the moment Eddie had waited for; he was back on operations and he had

been awarded a new rank. With 'Johnnie' Johnson posted as Station Commander to another Wing, Eddie had been appointed by Air-Vice Marshall Broadhurst who had been Senior Air Officer in the Desert Air Force at the end of the Campaign. Broadhurst had since become the Air Officer in Charge of the Second Tactical Air Force in Europe.

When Eddie returned to England, the AOC was looking for Wing leaders for 126 and 127 Wings. Eddie's friend, and later his brother-in-law, Jeff Northcott, was recalled to command 126 in March. Northcott, another great fighter pilot of WW II, had promised he would have Eddie back in two weeks. He kept his promise and Eddie was posted to 127 Wing as Wing Commander (WingCo) Flying on 5 April 1945. The Wing was under the command of Group Captain Stan Turner, a Canadian fighter leader Eddie had known as WingCo Flying on 244 Wing in Italy.

Eddie's new Wing was made up of four squadrons; 443 'Hornet' Squadron; 421 'Red Indian' Squadron; 416 'City of Oshawa' Squadron and 403 'Wolf' Squadron. 403, the oldest of the four, had been the first Royal Canadian Air Force squadron formed overseas. It had been commanded by such famous Canucks as Syd Ford, Charlie Magwood, Hugh Godefroy, Wally Conrad, Norm Follow and Buck Buckham. Now it was under the leadership of S/L Henry P.M. Zary, a young fighter pilot who had been posted to the United Kingdom in 1943 and was already an ace with the DFM. When Eddie took command of the Wing, 403 Squadron had a respectable tally of about 115 air victories.

416 Squadron, the 'City of Oshawa' unit, had a score of seventy-four. It had been under the leadership of commanding officers such as Lloyd Chadburn, Foss Boulton, Buck McNair and John McElroy. Now, S/L John D. Mitchner, DFC and Bar, a double-ace pilot from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan who had joined the RCAF in 1940, led the unit.

The 'Red Indian' Squadron was led by S/L J. 'Danny' Browne, a DFC fighter pilot with excellent leadership capabilities. His unit had already been led by the likes of NcNair, Magwood, Conrad and a few other notable pilots. Its score was a few points higher than that of 416.

The fourth squadron of the Wing, 443, was the last RCAF fighter unit to begin operations in the Second World War. Despite its late entry into the war in the spring of 1944, its score had already reached forty air victories. Since operations began they had been led by Wally McLeod, the famous Malta ace, and Art Sager, a pilot from Vancouver with a fine record. Now it was under the leadership of F.J. De Courcy, DFC.

Since D-Day, 127 Wing had a record of 171 enemy aircraft destroyed in air-to-air combat and before the war was over, they would add thirteen more while serving under Wing Commander James F. 'Eddie' Edwards.

The situation in Europe had changed since Eddie's last operations in August 1944. Now, just one month before the end of hostilities, the Wehrmacht, German ground forces, were hard pressed by the American and Commonwealth Forces on the Western side, and by Russians from the east. By the middle of April the Western Allies had already conquered more than half of pre-war Germany and a bridgehead had been established across the Elbe, only fifty-five miles from Berlin.

It was the same for the Luftwaffe, which no longer had a place to go. The RAF and USAAF in Europe were already operating from airfields in Holland and would soon cross the border and operate from Germany itself. They gave the Luftwaffe no rest. For its part, the Wing of WingCo Edwards was stationed at B.78, Eindhoven, in the Netherlands. The squadrons were equipped with Spitfire XVI's.

When Eddie took charge of the Wing, he spent little time on frivolity. Instead, the day he took command, 5 April 1945, railroad targets, cross-roads and a marshaling yard at Haselumme were bombed and strafed, suffering a great deal of damage. The next day, the Wing sustained its first casualty under Eddie's command. F/O S.E. Mussum of 443 Squadron had been hit by flak during a weather recce in the Rhine area and did not return to base.

On 7 April 1945 Eddie, for the first time as Wing Commander, led his boys into the air. It was a dive-bombing sortie in the Quackenburg area but not much happened. One day later, the boys destroyed two staff cars, a house which was suspected to be a German headquarters, a horse-drawn transport and some motor vehicles and damaged four house trailers in some woods. They also bombed marshaling yards at Cloppenburg. The fighter pilots fired at everything that crossed their sights.

On 11 April the four squadrons of 127 Wing moved into Germany at Goch airfield, code-named B.100. The boys had a day to get settled under canvas before they headed on a foray that would have the AOC sending congratulations. That day, they destroyed or damaged an impressive amount of mechanical transports, armoured vehicles, locomotives and freight cars. Led by Eddie, 416 strafed a thousand-ton tramp steamer on a sortie over the Kiel Canal. Many Spits were hit by flak during the dangerous trip and F/O Dollery was killed. While he was riddling gun boats with bullets, Eddie's own Spit was hit by a 30mm. flak shell. It went straight through the aircraft, leaving a large, gaping hole in the port mainplane, but the WingCo was able to return to base.

The next day, 13 April they were on the move again. This time they settled at B.114, Diepholz, about thirty-five miles north of Osnabruck, where the pilots occupied German barracks. They were not unhappy about leaving their life under canvas.

On 15 April the boys encountered enemy aircraft for the first time since Eddie had taken over command of the Wing. FW-190's, were spotted and chased by the Canadians, but the enemy fighters were able to escape into cloud before Eddie's boys could make good their attack. Only one was damaged. But 15 and 16 April were successful days for ground targets and a number of MT's, trains, field guns, tanks and staff cars were destroyed in the Cuxhaven-Stade-Luneburg-Saltwesel area. No less than 176 sorties were flown by the Wing on the 16th.

The boys met enemy aircraft again the following day but, once more, couldn't obtain definite results. F/L Lindsay, DFC, who would find himself meeting MiG jets in Korea in the 1950's, damaged an FW-190 that day, but the enemy pilot escaped in the smoke and flak over Hamburg. Four days later, the Jagdfliegern put in another rare appearance and two Me-109's were caught over the Elbe River. S/L Zary and his No. 3, F/O Leslie, had been part of an armed recce of the Hagenow aerodrome when they aimed their guns and fired.

But the missions did not go without losses to the Canadian squadrons. On 17 April F/O Burdis of 403 was lost to flak and two days later, F/L Harten and F/O Scott of 416 were shot down. The first to be lost to enemy aircraft was F/O Hanscom of the 'Hornet' unit. He failed to return from an armed recce in the Parchim-Schwerin area. He is believed to have been shot down by one of four 109's which bounced the squadron. Two days later the Wolves of 403 sought revenge for their loss and claimed two long-nosed FW-190's during an early morning patrol of the Bremen-Hamburg area.

On 25 April the boys from 403 and 443 Squadrons turned their fury toward the Hun aerodromes at Hagenow, Schwerin and Neustadt. They destroyed or damaged no less than thirty-seven enemy aircraft on the ground; the Wolves claimed twenty and the Hornets scored seventeen. Their attack had seen aircraft of all types go up in smoke: Me-109's, FW-190's, Ju 87's, Ju 88's Me.262's, He-111's, a FW-189, a Do.26 and a few unidentified single-engined and twin-engined aircraft. During their raid on Schwerin, 403 Squadron strafed twelve Me-109's parked close together on the south-west corner of the airfield. As the pilots pulled up after the attack, they could see a large explosion folding the 109's inside a cloud of dust. That day the Wing lost one pilot; F/O Dilworth failed to return. S/L De Courcy later received a DFC for his part in the day's operations.

On 28 April the squadrons moved for the last time before the end of hostilities. From B.114 at Diepholz, they moved to B.150 at Reinsehlen about thirty miles south of Hamburg. There, Eddie and his boys found an almost undamaged airfield. It had been hidden by excellent camouflage and the RAF and

USAAF bombers, it seemed, had never discovered it. Although the Germans had made an attempt at ploughing it up before they evacuated, it was evident their time had run out. Only hours after their arrival at the new base, the Spitfires took off on operations. F/L Foster of the Wolves unit brought home an aerial success. He had claimed a Do.217 which had burst into flames and crashed into the ground. 403 Squadron had, once again, been in the right place at the right time.

Until then, Wing Commander Edwards had flown thirteen operational sorties since taking command of the Wing but he had seen nothing of the Luftwaffe. A bomber escort to Odenburg, patrols around Bremen and Hamburg and over enemy aerodromes, sweeps over the Lubeck area and the Elbe bridgehead had failed to bring enemy planes in front of his guns. On 29 April the monotony was broken.

On his second trip of the day, Eddie took off in his personal Spitfire XVI carrying his own initials on the fuselage. Flying with one Wingman for extra manoeuvreability in the clouds, he was conducting a patrol to the west and south of Hamburg. The Huns had taken advantage of large cumulus cloud conditions and were sending out small formations to dive-bomb Army troops along the Elbe River south of Hamburg. As they flew their patrol, Eddie sighted a single 190 emerging from a cloud about 500 yards away. He closed to about 350 yards and was able to give a short burst from his cannons at 20 degrees. The 290 was hit but immediately disappeared into the clouds. About fifteen minutes later, an Me.262 jet-propelled aircraft appeared from another cloud. He was about 500 yards away and travelling fast. The two Spitfire pilots attacked quickly and Eddie fired a good burst. Strikes were registered on the jet aircraft but it, too, disappeared into the clouds before Eddie could see the results. After one hour and twenty minutes in the air, they returned to base, making no claims.

The next day, Eddie met another 262 while leading three squadrons on a sweep around Lubeck. After patrolling for some time and seeing nothing, the Canadian Wing Commander had broken off with one section of 443 Squadron to patrol over the bridges south of Hamburg. Within minutes, he spotted the Messerschmitt 262 about a thousand feet below, climbing up about 500 yards away. He dived with the throttle wide open but the enemy pilot had seen them coming and pulled away as Eddie fired at extreme range. Luckier the following day, the pilots of 403 returned to base with a score of two destroyed, two probables and seven damaged.

During the next few days Eddie's Wing mixed their duties. They flew patrols, armed recces, scrambles, anti-shipping patrols, sweeps, strafings, loco-busting missions and even VIP escorts. Again they were able to damage enemy road transports, aerodromes, ships and rails and four German planes. The honors went to the Hornet unit which claimed twelve MT's destroyed and another dozen damaged. They destroyed two enemy aircraft on the ground, damaged two more and shot down a Ju 88. The claims were made 2 May the same day a German wireless mechanic landed an He 126 communication aircraft on the Wing's aerodrome. He surrendered to the Canadians. Although the Canadian squadrons often patrolled over the Lubeck aerodrome, it would only be after hostilities were over that they would discover it had been a prime base for the Me.163 rocket-fighter operations.

On 3 May 1945, Wing Commander Edwards flew his 373rd and last combat sortie of the Second World War. His career against the enemy ended as it had begun in the Desert 23 March 1942; with a successful aerial combat.

Eddie was leading 443 Squadron on an armed recce north of Kiel when a Ju 88 was reported ahead some 800 feet below. The Canadian Wing Co couldn't see it for the broken cloud below but he dispatched one section of four to give it a try. They peeled off, spotted the intruder and attacked, diving on the 88 from astern. Eddie finally saw the Junkers and watched the enemy aircraft being filled with holes with each Spitfire's pass. But the 88 refused to go down. Eddie took his section to complete a firing pass and when he pulled up, he looked over his shoulder. Both the enemy's engines had been set on fire and Eddie watched it head straight for the ground and crash. Eddie called for the squadron to

reform and the pilots returned to base. Eddie, S/L De Courcy, F/L Sim and F/O Marshall of 443 Squadron didn't know they had just recorded the last aerial success of 127 RCAF Wing, but as they landed in sections of four and taxied to the dispersals, the boys sensed it would soon be over.

"The war seemed worn out by then," Eddie recalled. "Every mission in the last two months visibly indicated the Jerries were finished, but they wouldn't give up. Now they had nowhere to go — they were bottled up, but like us, they had been fighting so long they couldn't visualize it being over — not having to get airborne and fire the guns in anger and dodge the flak anymore. The whole dismal war effort had become our lives and careers for so long, we just couldn't appreciate any other way of peaceful co-existence."

Two days later, the war was over.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Chapter 25: POST-WAR

When hostilities ended, James F. Edwards decided to remain in the Post-World War II Royal Canadian Air Force. From January 1946 to March 1947, he was Officer Commanding, RCAF Station, Centralia, Ontario. He then attended KTS in Toronto on administration courses before going to Trenton, Ontario on an instructor's course.

Eddie took an assignment as OC Vampire Flight, the first RCAF of Canada's jet aircraft age. Although no regular fighter squadrons existed at the time, the Vampire Flight instructors trained pilots who were attached to Auxiliary squadrons equipped with the aircraft. The Auxiliary squadrons could be found in Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver.

He was posted to St. Hubert, Quebec in the fall of 1948 and made OC Flying on the station and OC in charge of the Regular Force Staff, training and administering to 401 and 438 Reserve Squadrons in Montreal. In October 1949 he went to the RCAF Station at Sea Island to the Search and Rescue Unit and was checked out on Lancasters and Canso Flying Boats. He later became OC of a Recruiting Unit in Vancouver for six months before being posted back to St. Hubert and then North Bay in November 1951. In North Bay, he formed and was given command of 430 Sabre Squadron, the first RCAF F-86 unit.

In October 1952, Eddie was promoted to Wing Commander again and posted to France to lead 2 RCAF Wing of Sabres. The Wing, made up of 430, 416 and 421 Squadrons, the same squadrons he commanded at the end of World War II, was the first Canadian Wing to go overseas via Goose Bay; Bluie West, Sonderstorm; Keflavik, Iceland; Prestwick, Scotland and finally to Grostenquin, France.

In September 1955, he returned to Canada to attend Staff College. He was later posted to USAF Air Defense Headquarters, Colorado Springs, Colorado, U.S.A. for four years. When he returned to Canada in the summer of 1959, he took a refresher flying course and OTU on CF-100's at Cold Lake.

In January 1962, he was assigned to another staff job as Deputy Sector Commander at Ottawa Sector, Lac St. Denis, Quebec. When Semi-Automatic Ground Radar Equipment (SAGE) was introduced and developed down the hole at North Bay in September 1962, Eddie was transferred there as Deputy Operations Officer at 41st Air Division.

In July 1966, he was back at Colorado Springs in the United States as Plans Officer Staff position at NORAD Headquarters. His last posting was in British Columbia as Commanding Officer, CFS Badly Hughes, a radar unit in North Central B.C. about twenty-eight miles south-southwest of Prince George.

Eddie remained in the post-war Air Force long enough to have his rank and his name changed. In the peacetime service, he remained Wing Commander from 1952 to 1972, the year he retired. He was later made Lieutenant Colonel.

After the war, young Jimmy Edwards, the boy from Battleford who had been known to his fighting comrades as Eddie, the Hawk of Martuba, was given yet another name. Today, his friends call him 'Stocky'. 'Stocky', a name born of a casual remark.

While still in training during the first few months following enlistment, he was playing table tennis with one of his classmates. His opponent was a much larger man with a "short fuse." When he couldn't score points in the Ping-Pong game, he decided he'd use his fists.

One of Jimmy Edwards' older comrades was almost ready to step in and "save" the smaller man from what seemed disaster, but he saw before he could move it wouldn't be necessary.

After the short tussle was over, Edwards had proven his ability to handle himself, no matter what the sport — boxing included.

The older man stepped out, put his arm around Jimmy Edwards' shoulders and remarked with a grin — "You are a stocky young chap — aren't you?"

The nickname — Stocky stuck. Stocky he was; Stocky he is; and Stocky he always will be not a description of his physical stature, but of his courage and determination and his will to "Play-up, Play-up and Play the Game!"

Now that you have finished this ebook, won't you please take a moment rate it and to write your review on the website of the retailer where you downloaded it? Reviews help other readers such as yourself make more informed decisions. Thank you.

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Appendix 1: KITTYHAWKS FLOWN BY WING COMMANDER J.F. EDWARDS IN WW II
Kittyhawk I: ET 942, ET 822, ET 240, ET 857, ET 623, ET 1021, ET 575, ET 574, ET 908, ET 861, ET 788, ET 844, AL 140, ET 859, ET 800, ET 1012, EV 324
Kittyhawk II: FL 233, FL 223, FL 224, FL 238, FL 234, FL 322, FL 221, FL 305, FL 278, FL 279, FL 261
Kittyhawk III: FR 350, FR 312, FR 421, FR 311, FR 424, FR 436, FR 446

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Appendix 2: DECORATIONS RECEIVED BY WING COMMANDER J.F. EDWARDS

Distinguished Flying Medal: February 1943
Distinguished Flying Cross: February 1943
Bar to Distinguished Flying Cross: October 1944
Mentioned in Dispatches after end of war (AVM Broadhurst had recommended Eddie for the DSO but the RCAF HQ in London saw fit to downgrade this to MID.)
1939 - 45 Star
Africa Star with 1942 - 43 clasp
Italy Star
France and Germany Star
Defence Medal 1939-45 and Canadian Forces Decoration and Clasp
Operational Wings and Bar
Pilots Flying Badge

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Appendix 3: COMBAT RECORD OF WING COMMANDER JAMES F. EDWARDS

Air-to-air Victories

Date Type Area Remarks

March 23, 1942: 1 ME-109F Destroyed, Martuba airfield, Libya (In combat against III/JG 27. Pilot apparently survived.)

May 30, 1942: 1 ME-109F Damaged, North of Rotunda Waleb Gap, Libya (In combat with aircraft of I/1G 27 or III/ JO 53.)

June 8, 1942: 1 ME-109F Destroyed, Bir Hacheim area, Libya (Aircraft flown by Feldwebel Johann Walchhofer, 6/JO 27. Killed.)

June, 14, 1942: 1 ME-109F Probable, 1 ME-109F Damaged, Acroma Area, Libya (German records show Lt. Hicke (III/JG 53), Lt. Quaritsch (Ill/JO 53), Lt. Hesse (HI/JO 53), Lt. Hein (I/1G 27) and Uffz Gierster (H/JO 27) shot down that day. One of them was almost cetainly a victim of Eddie Edwards.)

June 17, 1942: 1 ME-109F Destroyed, Near El Duda, Libya (Aircraft flown by Leutnant Wolf Schaller of Ill/JO 53.)

June 17, 1942: 1 ME-109F Destroyed (Aircraft flown by Oberleutnant Otto Schulz of II/JO 27.)

June 26, 1942: 1 ME-109F Probable, South of Mersa Matruh, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of III/JG 53 or III/JG 27.)

July 5, 1942: 1 ME-109F Damaged, East of El Daba, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of JG 27 or III/ JG 53.)

July 6, 1942: 1 ME-109F Damaged, East of El Daba, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of III/JG 27.) (An aircraft of I/JG 27.)

July 6, 1942: 1 ME-109F Destroyed, East of El Daba, Egypt (An aircraft of I/JG 27)

August 4, 1942: 1 ME-109F Probable, Southwest of El Alamein, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of III/JG 27.)

September 3, 1942: 1 ME-109F Damaged, Over Hammann, Egypt (An aircraft flown by Oblt. Hans-Joachim Marseille or Lt. Hans-Arnold Stahlshmidt of I/JG 27)

September 6, 1942: 1 ME-109F Probable, Near El Alamein, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of I and II/JG 27 and III/JG 53))

September 15, 1942: 1 ME-109F Probable, El Alamein area, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of I and II/JG 27)

October 9, 1942: 1 ME-109F Damaged, Near El Daba, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of 3rd or 4th Storm° CT, Regia Aeronautica.)

October 21, 1942: 1 MC-202 Destroyed, Over El Daba, Egypt (An aircraft flown by Tenente Ezio Bevilacqua of Ma Squadriglia, 10th Gruppo, Regia Aeronautica.)

October 22, 1942: 1 ME-109F Destroyed, Over El Daba, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of JG 27 and possibly Macchi 202's of 4th Stormo)

October 26, 1942: 1 ME-109F Probable, L.G. 21 Area, Egypt (In combat with aircraft of 111/JG 27 and probably MC-202's of 4th Storm° and 23rd Gruppo.)

October 28, 1942: 2 ME-109 F Destroyed, East of El Daba, Egypt (Two aircraft flown by pilots of I/JG 27)

November 1, 1942: 1 ME-109F Destroyed, south of El Daba, Egypt (An aircraft flown by Unteroffizier Hans Jurgens of IL/JO 27)

December 16, 1942: 1 ME-109G Damaged, Marble Arch Area, Libya (In combat with aircraft of JO 77)

December 30, 1942: 1 ME-109G Destroyed, Over Bir el Zidan, Libya (An aircraft flown by Leutnant Edgar Cerne of USG 2)

December 30, 1942: ½ ME-109G Destroyed, Over Bir el Zidan, Libya (Also an aircraft of USG 2)
January 2, 1943: 1 ME-109G Damaged, Churgia airfield, Libya (An aircraft of II/JG 77.)
January 2, 1943: 1 ME-109G Destroyed, South-west of El Hescia, Libya (An aircraft flown by Unteroffizier Heinz Winter of 4/JO 77)
March 29, 1943: 1 ME-109G Damaged, Gabes-Sfax area, Tunisia (Probably in combat with aircraft of III/SKG 10.)
April 7, 1943: 1 ME-109G Damaged, Gabes-Sfax area, Tunisia (Probably in combat with aircraft of III/ SKG 10.)
April 8, 1943: 1/2 ME-109G Probable, Over Sfax, Tunisia
April 15, 1943: 2 ME-109G Damaged, South of Hammamet, Tunisia (Probably in combat with aircraft of III/SKG 10)
April 15, 1943: 1 ME-109G Damaged, South of Hammamet, Tunisia (Probably in combat with aircraft of III/SKG 10)
April 22, 1943: 1 ME 323 Destroyed, Zembra Island, Tunisia (An aircraft of Transport Geschwader No. 5)
January 11, 1944: 1 ME-1090 Damaged, Foggia area, Italy. (In combat with aircraft of Ill/JO 53 or II/JO 77 or II/JO 51.)
January 29, 1944: 1 FW 190 Damaged, Anzio Beachhead, Italy (An aircraft of I or II/SG 4.)
February 16, 1944: 1 FW 190 Destroyed, Anzio Beachhead, Italy (An aircraft of I or II/SG 4.)
February 19, 1944: 1 ME-1090 Destroyed, Anzio Beachhead, Italy (In combat with FW 190's of SG 4 escorted by ME-109's of 111/3053 or II/JG 77 or II/JO 51.)
April 29, 1945: 1 FW 190 Damaged South of Hamburg, Germany (Unidentified unit)
April 29, 1945: 1 ME 262 Damaged South of Hamburg, Germany (An aircraft of Nachtjagdgeschwader No. 11.)
May 3, 1945: 1/4 JU 88 Destroyed, North of Kiel, Germany (Unidentified unit)

Aircraft Destroyed on the Ground
5 Nov 42: 1 ME 110 Destroyed, Fuka airfield
5 Nov 42: 1 ME-109 Destroyed, Fuka airfield
11 Nov 42: 2 JU 88's Destroyed, Gambut No. 2
13 Nov 42: 2 ME-109's Destroyed, Gazala airfield
14 Nov 42: 2 ME-109's Destroyed, Marawa airfield
15 Nov 42: 3 ME-109's Destroyed, Marawa airfield
25 Jan 43: 2 MC-202's Damaged, Medenine West
25 Jan 43: 1 SM 79 Destroyed, Medenine West

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Appendix 4: PILOTS OF 260 SQUADRON

North Africa August 1941 - May 1943

Squadron Commanders

Squadron Leader DR. Walker (Englishman) August 1941 - December 1941
Squadron Leader P. de la P. Beresford (Eng) December 1941 — March 1942
Squadron Leader O.V. Hanbury (Englishman) March 1942 — July 1942
Squadron Leader G.D.L. Haysom (South African) 1942 — July 1942
Squadron Leader P.P. Devenish (Rhodesian) July 1942 — November 1942
Squadron Leader O.V. Hanbury (Englishman) July November 1942 — May 1943

Flight Commanders

F/L AR. Hall (Englishman)
F/L J.H. Blandinell (Englishman)
F/L, O.V. Hanbury (Englishman)
F/L J.M. Wylie (Englishman)
F/L T. Hindle (Englishman)
F/L J.E.A. Williams (New Zealander)
F/L G. Black (Englishman)
F/L V.J. Thagard (Canadian)
F/L McKay (Scotsman)
F/L J.M. Strawson (Englishman)
F/L C.H. Davis (Englishman)
F/L W.R. Cundy (Australian)
F/L K.N.T. Lee (Englishman)
F/L J.F. Edwards (Canadian)
F/L W.E. Stewart (Canadian)

Flying Officers

F/O Aitchison (Canadian)
F/O Fallows (New Zealander)
F/O Flurry (Canadian)
F/O Gilboe (Canadian)
F/O Kent (Canadian)
F/O Mink (American)
F/O Perkins (American)
F/O Waddy (Australian)

Warrant Officers

W/O Bernier (Canadian)
W/O Bowerman (Englishman) W/O Tomlinson (Canadian)

Pilot Officers

P/O Blanfield (Englishman)
P/O Dunbar (Canadian)
P/O England (Englishman)

P/O Gioman (Englishman)
P/O Glew (Englishman)
P/O Hale (Englishman)
P/O Hopkinson (Englishman)
P/O MacLean (Scotsman)
P/O Miller (Englishman)
P/O Sheppard (Englishman)
P/O Thornhill (Englishman)

Flight Sergeants
F/Sgt. Arklie (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Brown (Scotsman)
F/Sgt. Burill (Englishman)
F/Sgt. Burkill (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Colley (Englishman)
F/Sgt. Copping (Englishman)
F/Sgt. Hartung (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Harvey (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Hill (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Kempsey (Englishman)
F/Sgt. McLive (American)
F/Sgt. McKee (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Ody (Englishman)
F/Sgt. Parlee (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Stauble (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Takvor (Canadian)
F/Sgt. Thomas (New Zealander)
F/Sgt. Willmott (Englishman)

Sergeants
Sgt. Adams (Rhodesian)
Sgt. Alexander (Englishman)
Sgt. Barber (Canadian)
Sgt. Cairns (Englishman)
Sgt. Carlisle (Englishman)
Sgt. Carno (Englishman)
Sgt. Carver (Englishman)
Sgt. Clark (Englishman)
Sgt. Cundy (New Zealander)
Sgt. Lorry (New Zealander)
Sgt. Marsden (Englishman)
Sgt. McLaughlin (Englishman)
Sgt. McParland (Canadian)
Sgt. Meredith (Englishman)
Sgt. Mills (Englishman)
Sgt. Mockeridge (Englishman)

Sgt. Morley (Englishman)
Sgt. Nicholls (Canadian)
Sgt. Orr (New Zealander)
Sgt. Parrott (Englishman)
Sgt. Rattle (Canadian)
Sgt. Saunders (Englishman)
Sgt. Stebbings (Englishman)
Sgt. Steel (Scotsman)
Sgt. Stohr (South African)
Sgt. Tregear (Australian)
Sgt. Tuck (Canadian)
Sgt. Wareham (South African)
Sgt. White (Englishman)
Sgt. Williams (Canadian)
Sgt. Wrigley (Englishman)
Sgt. Weightman (Englishman)

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Appendix 5: PILOTS OF 260 SQUADRON LOST ON OPERATIONS IN NORTH AFRICA

Flight Lieutenant Blandinell, 14 December 1941, Missing
Pilot Officer Cidman, 18 December 1941, Missing
Sergeant Saunders, 23 March 1942, Missing
Sergeant Morley, 2 April 1942, Killed
Sergeant Alexander, 7 April 1942, Killed
Sergeant Tregear, 24 April 1942, Missing
Sergeant Wareham, 25 April 1942, Killed
Flight Lieutenant Wylie, 30 May 1942, P.O.W.
Flight Sergeant Viesey, 31 May 1942, Missing
Flight Lieutenant Hindle, 31 May 1942, Missing
Sergeant Clark, 9 June 1942, Missing
Sergeant Wrigley, 12 June 1942, Missing
Sergeant Carlisle, 26 June 1942, Missing
Flight Sergeant Copping, 28 June 1942, Missing
Flight Lieutenant McKay, 14 July 1942, Missing
Pilot Officer MacLean, 18 August 1942, Killed
Warrant Officer Bernier, 3 September 1942, Killed
Pilot Officer Dunbar, 6 September 1942, Killed
Sergeant Stebbings, 20 October 1942, Missing
Warrant Officer Tomlinson, 23 October 1942, Killed
Flight Sergeant Ody, 26 October 1942, Missing
Flying Officer Meredith, 26 October 1942, P.O.W.
Sergeant Mockeridge, 31 October 1942, Missing
Flying Officer Gilboe, 4 November 1942, P.O.W.
Sergeant Hartung, 5 November 1942, Missing
Flight Sergeant Hill, 11 November 1942, P.O.W.
Pilot Officer Mink, 18 November 1942, Missing
Flight Lieutenant Davis, 20 November 1942, Missing
Flight Sergeant McKee, 15 December 1942, Missing
Sergeant Takvor, 19 December 1942, Missing
Pilot Officer Thagard, 20 December 1942, Killed
Flight Sergeant McLive, 20 December 1942, Missing
Sergeant Adams, 20 December 1942, Missing
Flight Sergeant Arklie, 2 January 1943, P.O.W.
Sergeant Cundy, 26 February 1943, Missing
Flying Officer Kent, 27 February 1943, Killed
Flight Sergeant Colley, 10 March 1943, Killed
Sergeant Orr, 21 March 1943, Missing
Flight Lieutenant Fallows, 26 March 1943, P.O.W.
Flight Sergeant Stauble, 29 March 1943, Killed

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Appendix 6: LANDING GROUNDS USED BY 260 SQUADRON OF THE RAF IN NORTH AFRICA

En route to Palestine: 21 May 41 - 11 August 41
Haifa, (Palestine): 11 August 41 - 26 October 41
(Detachments at Beirut and El Bassa, Libania)
L.G. 115, (Sidi Haneish, Egypt): 26 October 41 — 14 November 41
L.G. 109, (South of Ban-ani, Egypt): 14 November 41 — 9 December 41
(Detachment at L.G. 124 at Fort Maddalena, Egypt)
Sidi Rezegh, (Libya): 9 December 41 — 19 December 41
Gazala No. 2, (Libya): 19 December 41 — 22 December 41
Tmimi, (Libya): 22 December 41 — 23 December 41
IVIsus, (Libya): 23 December 41 — 10 January 42
Antelat, (Libya): 10 January 42 — 14 January 42
Benina, (Libya): 14 January 42 — 28 January 42
Birka Satellite, (Libya): 28 January 42 - 28 January 42
Martuba, (Libya): 28 January 42 — 30 January 42
El Adem, (Libya): 30 January 42 — 4 February 42
L.G. 109, (South of Ban-ani, Egypt): 5 February 42 — 15 February 42
L.G. 115, (Sidi Haneish, Egypt): 15 February 42 — 10 March 42
Gasr el Arid, (Libya): 10 March 42 — 23 May 42
(Detachments to El Adem L.G. in April 42)
Gambut Main, (Libya): 23 May 42 — 2 June 42
Gambut No. 2, (Libya): 2 June 42 — 10 June 42
Bir el Baheira, (Libya): 10 June 42 — 18 June 42
L.G. 76, (South of Barrani, Egypt): 18 June 42 — 19 June 42
L.G. 115, (Sidi Haneish, Egypt): 19 June 42 — 27 June 42
L.G. 105, (El Daba, Egypt): 27 June 42 — 27 June 42
L.G. 09, (Mersa Matruh, Egypt): 27 June 42 — 28 June 42
L.G. 106, (30 m. east of Daba, Egypt): 28 June 42 — 29 June 42
L.G. 85, (Amriya, Egypt): 29 June 42 — 10 July 42
L.G. 97, (Amriya, Egypt): 10 July 42 — 10 November 42
L.G. 75, (Sidi Haneish, Egypt): 10 November 42 — 12 November 42
L.G. 148, (Sidi Aziez, Egypt): 12 November 42 — 13 November 42
Gambut Main, (Libya): 13 November 42 — 17 November 42
Gazala No. 3, (Libya): 17 November 42 — 23 November 42
Martuba No. 4, (Libya): 23 November 42 — 8 December 42
Bellandah, (Libya): 8 December 42 — 18 December 42
Marble Arch, (Libya): 18 December 42 — 31 December 42
Gzina, (Libya): 31 December 42 — 14 January 43
El Harnraeit, (Libya): 14 January 43 — 17 January 43
Sedada, (Libya): 17 January 43 — 19 January 43
Bir Dufan, (Libya): 19 January 43 — 24 January 43
Castel Benito, (Libya): 24 January 43— 7 February 43
Sorman, (Libya): 7 February 43— 19 February 43
El Assa, (Libya): 19 February 43 — 8 March 43
Neffatia, (Libya): 8 March 43 — 25 March 43

Medenine West, (Tunisia): 25 March 43— 3 April 43
El Hamma, (Tunisia): 3 April 43— 14 April 43
El Djem, (Tunisia): 14 April 43 — 18 April 43
Kairouan, (Tunisia): 18 April 43 — 20 May 43

END OF NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN, May 13, 1943

~ ~ * * ~ ~

Appendix 7: BIBLIOGRAPHY

English Books

Beurling, G.F. and Roberts, L. "MALTA SPITFIRE" (Farrar and Rhinehart, NY, 1943)
Bown, RA. "THE HISTORY OF NO. 112 (SHARK) SQUADRON, RAF, 1917 - I957 (Privately Printed, 1959) Brown, JA. "EAGLES STRIKE" (Purnell, Cap Town, SA., 1974)
Green, W. "WARPLANES OF THE THIRD REICH" (Doubleday and Co, NY, USA, 1970)
Green W. "AUGSBURG EAGLE" (Doubleday and Co, NY, 1971)
Halliday, H. "THE TUMBLING SKY" (Canada's Wings, Stittsville)
Henn, P. "THE LAST BATTLE" (William Kimber Ltd, London, 1954)
Johnson, 'Johnnie' "WING LEADER" (Chatto and Windus, London, 1956)
Kostenuk S. and Griffin, J. "RCAF SQUADRONS AND AIRCRAFT" (Samuel Stevens, Toronto, Canada, 1977) McDowell, E.R. "'THE P-40 KITTYHAWK" (Arco Pub. Co, NY, 1968)
Price, A. "FOCKE WULF 190 AT WAR" (Ian Allan Ltd, London, 1977)
Rawlings, J.D. "FIGHTER SQUADRONS OF THE RAF AND THEIR AIRCRAFT" (MacDonald, London, 1969) "THE RCAF OVERSEAS" 3 volumes. (Oxford University Press, Toronto, Canada, 1945-46)
Shamburger, P. and Christy, J. "THE CURTISS HAWK" (Wolverine Press, Kalamazoo, Mich, USA, 1972) Shores, C.F. "2ND TACTICAL AIR FORCE" (Osprey, Reading, Erg, 1970)
Shores, C.F. "PICTORAL HISTORY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AIR WAR" 3 volumes. (Ian Allan Ltd, London, 1972-73-74)
Shores, C.F. and Ring, H. "FIGHTERS OVER THE DESERT' (Neville Spearman, London, 1969)
Shores, C.F., Ring, H. and Hess, W. "FIGHTERS OVER TUNISIA" (Neville Spearman, 1975)
Shores, C.F and Williams, C. "ACES HIGH" (Neville Spearman, London, 1966)
Shores, C.F. and Ward, R. "CURTISS P-400-N WARHAWK IN USAAF —FRENCH AND FOREIGN SERVICE" (Aircam Aviation Series) (Osprey Pub, Canterbury, Eng.)
Smith, JR. and Gallaspy, JD. "LUFTWAFFE CAMOUFLAGE and MARKINGS, 1935-1945" 3 volumes (Kookaburra, Melbourne, Australia, 1973-1976 - 1977)
Watson, I and Jones, L. "3 SQUADRON AT WAR" (Halstead Press, Sydney, Australia, 1959)
Woerpei, D. "A HOSTILE SKY" (Andon Press, Marshall, Wise, USA, 1977)

Magazine:

WINGS, Volume 5, No. 6

Unpublished Documents:

W/C Edwards' Log-book
S/L Cartwright's Diary

German Books:

Dierich, W. "DIE VERBANDE DER LUFTWAFFE, 1935 -1945" (Motorbuch Verlag, Stuttgart, 1976) Girbig, W. "START IM MORGENGRAUEN" (Motorbuch Verlag, Stuttgart, 1973)
Held, W. "DIE DEUTSCHE TAGJAGD" (Motorbuch Verlag, Stuttgart, 1977)
Oberrnaier, E. "DIE RTITF_RICREUZIRAGER DER LUFTWAFFE, 1939-1945" 2 volumes. (Verlag Dieter Hoffmann, Mainz, 1966-1976)
Ries, K. "MARKIERUNG UND TARNANSTRICHE DER LUFTWAFFE IN 2 WELTKRIEG" 2 volumes. (Verla.g Dieter Hoffmann, Mainz, 1965 - 1966)
Ries, K. "LUFTWAFFE EMBLEME — PHOTO COLLECTION, 1935-1945" (Verlag Dieter Hoffmann, Mainz, 1976) Ries, K. "DORA KURFURST UND ROTE 13" 3 volumes. (Verlag Dieter Hoffmann, Mainz, 1964 - 1965) Ring, H. and Girbig, W. "JAGDGESCHWADER 27" (Motorbuch Verlag, Stuttgart, 1971)

Magazine:
"JAGERBLATT" (1963 to 1976) Official organ of the German Fighter Pilots' Association.
Italian Books:
Arena, N. "L'AERONAUTICA NAZIONALE REPUBBLICANA, 1943-1945" 2 volumes. (S.T.E.M. Mucchi, Modena, Italy, 1974)
Borgiotti, A. and Goti, C. "LA GUERRA AEREA IN AFRICA SETTEN TRIONALE, 1942-43" 2 volumes. (STEM. Mucchi, Modena, Italy, 1973)

~ ~ * * ~ ~

The St. Thomas College Flyers of the Inter-Collegiate League. The above picture was taken in 1939 behind the college. The building was once the seat of government of the Northwest Territories, when Battleford was capital. Eddie excelled at skating and playing hockey. While he played with the Flyers, the team played 72 league games in 3 years, won 70, tied 2, no losses. When he joined the RCAF, Eddie had an opportunity to try out with the Chicago Black Hawks. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Beginning of training. Eddie enlisted in the RCAF in October 1940, and before boarding a plane he was at Manning Depot for a few weeks, then on guard duty at MacDonald Bombing and Gunnery School in Manitoba. The photo shows him with his fellows at MacDonald. Eddie is second from the right, in front, with the rifle. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

After a few weeks at Initial Training School in Regina. Saskatchewan, young Edwards finally arrived at No. 16 E.F.T.S. Edmonton, Alberta, to begin his flying career on Tiger Moths. Course lasted January 1941, to March 1941. Some of the boys at 16 EFTS — (L to R) "Sally," McLaughlin, McDonald, Taylor, "Shadow," Magwood, Keith, Marlat, "Si" Blair, Moody and J. F. Edwards. (Photo: Mrs. June Armstrong's collection).

July 1941 — Eddie with his sister, Dorothy, at Battleford, Sask. He was then a Sergeant Pilot. This was just at the end of his training period at No. 11 S.F.T.S. at Ycrrkton, Saskatchewan. The course, which was the next step in training, lasted from April 1941 to June 1941. On Harvards. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

LAC Edwards at the end of training in Edmonton with his brother, Bernie, at Battleford, Saskatchewan. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Smiling Eddie is seen here in February 1941, after his first solo flight on a Tiger Moth at No. 16 EFTS, Edmonton. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Pupil Eddie Edwards in flight in a Tiger Moth at No. 16 EFTS, Edmonton. A fine snap. (Photo: Mrs. June Armstrong's collection).

Next step in training for Eddie was CT. U. In September 1941, he went to Ivo. 5,5 OTU at Usworth, Durham, England, near Newcastle, to fly Hurricanes. The course ended October, 20, 1941, with approx. 40 hours on Hurris. Eddie is second from right, back row. (Photo: J. F. Edwards collection).

In January 1941, F/Sgt. Edwards was posted to an operational squadron, No. 94, in the Western ,Desert. Be is seen here at Mechili in one of the Squadron's Hurricanes. Soon after, the unit converted to P-40 Kittyhawk I's. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Kittyhawk I, FZ-K, on which Flight Sergeant Edwards flew in March 1942, flying out of LG 11,5. At that moment, the unit was on a period of training. (Photo: J. F. Edwards collection).

Summer, 1942:
Typical scenes of life in the Desert in a front line squadron. No. 260 Squadron.

Young Eddie, Lately posted to the squadron, is seen here with the pilots' sleeping quarters in the background. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

F/Sgt. Edwards' washing-up in June 1942, during the long retreat back to the El Alamein line. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

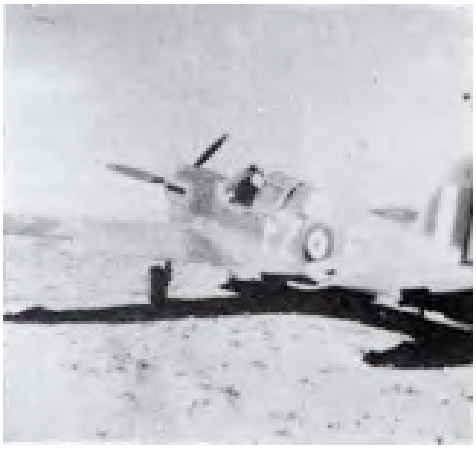
Washing-up time. Flight Sergeant Stebbings (British) and Flight Sergeant William E. 'Bill' Stewart (Sherbrooke, P.Q., Canada). Bill survived the war and became an architect in Montreal. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Bathing time. Sergeant F. Shepperd (British) is being bathed by Flight Sergeant Bernier (Canadian) and another pilot while Sergeant McKay (Scotsman) is watching the whole thing. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

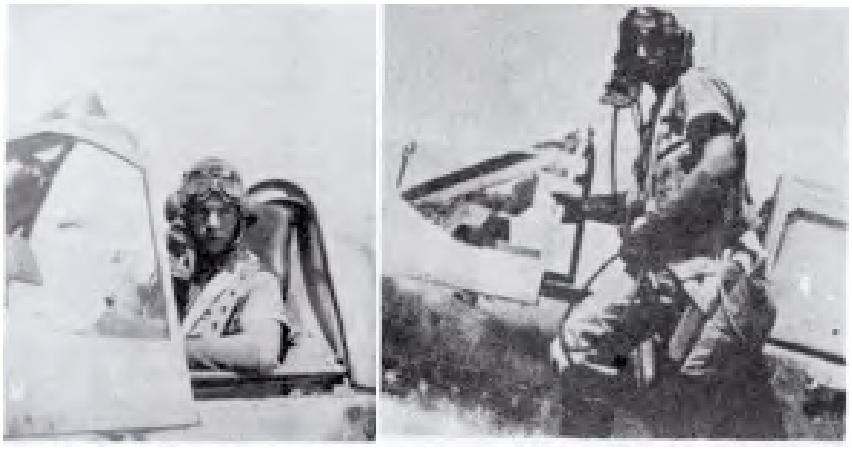
Bathing time again. This time, Sergeant Mockeridge is being bathed by Flight Sergeant Bernier (the official bather of 260 Squadron it seemed) and another pilot. Flight Sergeant Stan or `Joe' Bernier was a French Canadian from Quebec City, P.Q.. Canada, and an experienced pilot of the squadron. He was shot down and killed on 3 September, '42, over Hamman in Egypt, either by Hpt. Hans-Joachim Marseille or Lt. Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt, both great JG-27 aces, during a fierce dogfight. In the same combat, Eddie Edwards damaged one of the attackers. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Another typical scene. Toilet in a slit trench, bomb proof. Flight Sergeant Bernier and WO Bowerman (British). (Photo: J. F. Edwards collection).

"Desert-liby.” Privy of 260 Squadron, summer, 1942. Sgt. Curdy, Sgt. Meredith (British), unknown. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).



A Kittyhawk flown by Eddie on ops with the squadron. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).



Eddie on the wing and in the cockpit of his Kittyhawk in February 1942, just prior to flying ops. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

April 1942. Mediterranean, seaside near Gambut.) 4 Squadron. (left to right): F/S Phillips, F/S Edwards, unknown, Padre and P/O Usher. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Pilots getting the 'gen talk' from the unit's C.O., S/L MacDougall. March '42. I.O, F/S Woods, S. Stone, S. Musker, S. Maxwell and S. Lawrence. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

March 1942. F/Sgt. Edwards in flying suit at Gambut, SE of Tobruk. On March 23, Eddie took off with the squadron for his first operational sortie and got back to base with a confirmed Me-109. He proved to be first class at first start, and also to be an exceptional shot. (Photo: J. F. Edwards collection).

DESERT SCENES

More typical scenes of the Desert at a front line squadron with No. 260 Squadron.

November 1942, at a new LG. The Squadron. camp: the mess tents in background and, in foreground, the personal things of the unit's Intelligence Officer, F/L Johnny Walker. He didn't have time to erect his tent yet. During that fateful month when Rommel's troops retreated from Alamein, the unit moved no less than six times. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Air Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder briefing the Wing's C.O.'s near El Chet. Tripotitania, in December 1942. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Another typical Desert scene. Groundcrew making a runway with shovels. Christmas, 1942, west of Marble Arch in Tripolitania. That was one of the numerous landing grounds graded out of bulldozed earth directly from the desert floor in those months as the Allies pushed the Axis toward Southern Tunisia. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Eddie Edwards at Gaza at No. 3 on 17 November, '42, examining Me-109 cannon shells. (Photo: J. F Edwards' collection).

MORE TYPICAL SCENES OF THE DESERT. SUMMER 1942.

Flight Sergeant Eddie Edwards' `Bevee' or living quarters in August, '42 at LG 97. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

A very good shot of Flight Sergeant Eddie Edwards. At that time, Eddie was already one of the best, if not the best, Kittyhawk pilots in the western desert. Within a month in November-October 1942, he got five enemy aircraft destroyed in the air and destroyed 11 more on the ground during strafings and dive-bombings of enemy aerodromes. He was the most successful Allied pilot for that period in the Desert. He was then a double-ace but received no great recognition for his exploits. In December 1942, he was made a flight commander in the squadron, though he had led the unit in action for a long time. (Photo: Bill Stewart's personal collection).

Pilots of the squadron on readiness at LG 97 (Amriya) in July 1942. Outside of the mess tent. Among the pilots, Sgt. Shepperd (1st on left), F/O Follows (New Zealander, seated on petrol can), next is FIL McKay (Scotsman), Sgt. Cundy (Australian, lying on ground). Also P/O Thornhill and Sgt. England (Britishers) are in the photo. (Photo: J. F. Edwards collection).

Another typical scene of the desert. The cooks and cookhouse of 260 Squadron in the summer of 1942. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

F/L Edwards and the pilots of 260 Squadron who took part in the successful combat of 30, December, '42. On that day, Eddie led his flight on a combat against Me-109 fighter-bombers of SG-2 escorted by 109's of JG-77. A few minutes later, six 109's had been destroyed without losses. Flying the aircraft shown above, HS-B (FR-350), Eddie shot down the Me-109 flown by Lt. Edgar Cerne of IISG-2 and got another of these with his No. 2, F/Sgt. Brown (Scotsman). Three days later, on January 2, 1943, Eddie shot down yet another Me-109, this time over Churgia airfield. The aircraft was flown by a Feldwebel Heinz Winter of 41X-77. In the photo (L to R): F/L Edwards, F/O Follows, P/O England, P/O Shepperd, F/O Thornhill and F/Sgt. Brown. (Photo: Imperial War Museum).

Two fine snaps of "B" Flight, 260 Squadron, September to October 1942. Above — Sgt. Shepperd (RAF), F/L Cundy (RAAF), F/Sgt. Edwards (RCAF), F/O Fallows (NZ), F/O Gilboe (RCAF).

Shepperd, Fallows, Gilboe; front row — Edwards, Cundy and F/L Walker, IO (Photo: W. E. Cundy's collection).

The two next two aircraft pictures were taken by Public Relations (PRO) at Ginza in January 1943. Line-up of 260's Kitty Ill's.

F/L Edwards is seen in the cockpit of his HS-B (FR-350), the Kitty in the foreground. Note the aircraft which were just about to be bombed-up for a ground support mission. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

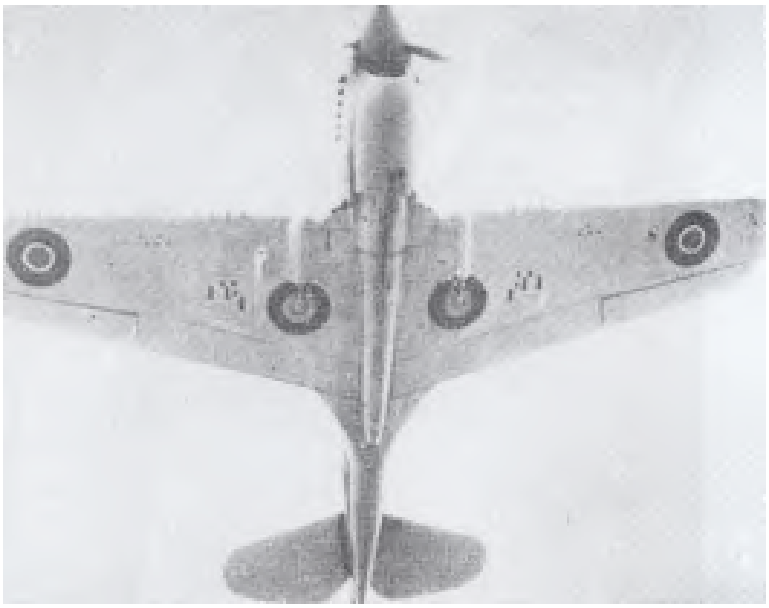
The same mount, HS-B, could be seen while in foreground is, X-HS, which was the personal aircraft of 260 Squadron's C.O., Squadron Leader O. V. 'Pedro' Hanbury (British). (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Two heroes of the Desert fighting. S/L O. V. 'Pedro' Hanbury and F/L W. R. ‘Ron’ Cundy. Pedro was the CO of 260 Squadron from March to July 1942, then again from November, '42 to May '43. He was one of the best CO's in the Desert, also an ace and a Battle of Britain veteran. He destroyed some 8 enemy aircraft, for sure. He was lost in May '43, when a transport aircraft in which he was a passenger was shot down in the Bay of Biscay (near Spain) by a JU-88. (Photo: W. R. Cundy's collection).

Cundy, Australian. "B" Flight Commander in the fall of 1942. Fighter ace with 6 enemy aircraft destroyed. (Photo: W. R. Cundy's collection).

Pre-flight briefing, summer '42. (L to R) — F/O Grant Aitchison (Canadian), Sgt. Jack Takvor (Canadian), F/O Jeff Fallows (New Zealander), P/O Black (British), Sgt. Ron Cundy (Australian), F/Sgt. `Shep' Shepperd (British), F/Sgt. Stan Bernier (Canadian) and F/Sgt. Colley (British). (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

The next two photographs appeared in the Aircam Aviation Series, No. G, "Curtiss (P-40) Kittyhawk Mk. 17V1 C. F. Shores and R. Ward.



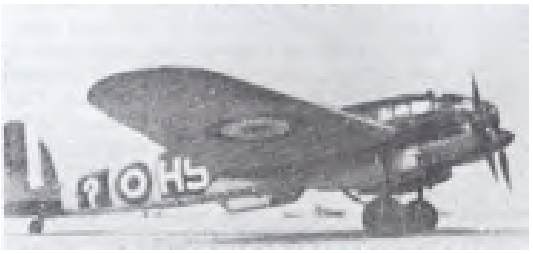
Fine plan view detail shot. The belly of a Kittyhawk. Note camera housing on starboard wing.

Another typical Desert scene. Here are the Kittyhawks of 233 Wing, R.A.F., awaiting orders to take off for a mission at LG 97 in the late summer of 1942. Nearest to camera are the aircraft of 260 Squadron (HS), then the Kittyhawks of 5 Squadron, SAAF., (GL). A fine snap. (Photos: Imperial War Museum).

FRIEND AND FOE

A very good official RCAF snap of Flight Lieutenant James F. 'Eddie' Edwards, taken in 1943 in North Africa. A phenomenal shot, Eddie was one of the top scoring pilots in North Africa and the leading pilot of 260 Squadron in WWII with more than one fifth of the squadron's claims. His score for WWII is 20 destroyed, 6 1/2 probables and 16 damaged, along with 12 enemy aircraft destroyed and 2 damaged on the ground. To add to this tally are 200 MT's destroyed in strafing and dive-bombing missions. Quite an impressive tally.

THE ANTAGONISTS PLANES AND PILOTS



A German He-111 bomber captured on Derna by 260 Squadron, November 1942, during the great Axis retreat from El Alamein. The enemy aircraft was brought to 260's landing ground, had the RAF roundels painted on it with the squadron letters HS-? and the squadron utilized it as a support aircraft to get missing supplies such as fresh vegetables and beer from Alexandria and Cairo. Needless to say the squadron became very popular after this and was well visited by other units to share in a cold beer. When F/L Ron Cundy's tour expired about that time he was made chief He-111 pilot and made a few trips to the Delta area. This photo appeared in. the magazine WINGS, Vol 5, No. 6, and in THE CANADIAN, April 23, 1966.

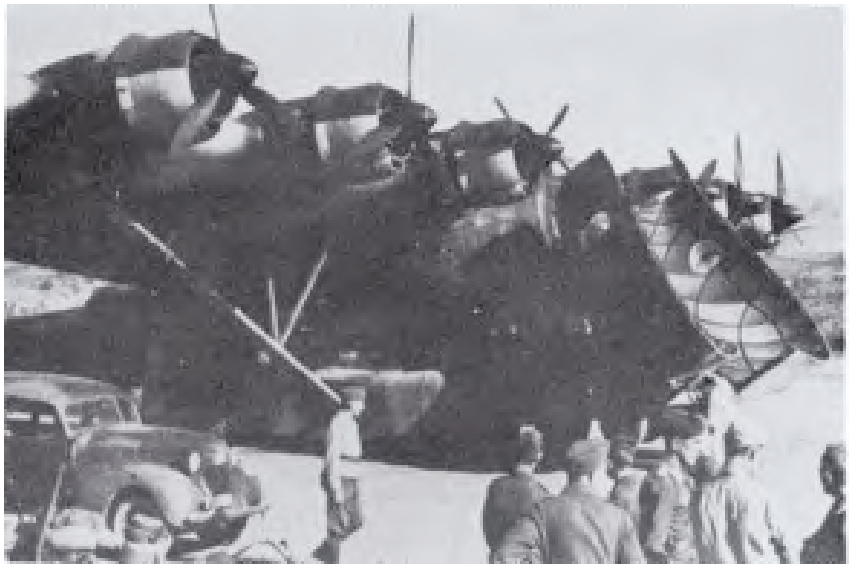
F/L Edwards getting out of another aircraft acquired by 260 Squadron. It was an Me-109F which was coded HS-! This photo appeared in THE CANADIAN, April 23, 1966, in which the author, David Carmichael, wrote a short article on W/C Edwards.

The same Me-109F. Eddie flew it a couple of times in early 1943 and could compare its flying and fighting capabilities to the Kittyhawk This photo appeared in the magazine WINGS, Vol 5, No. 6. (Photos: J. F. Edwards' collection).

The deciphering of enemy records along with descriptions of Eddie's engagements allowed me to corroborate most of Eddie's claims, and even find out the names of a few pilots he shot down. The most prominent enemy pilot to fall under Eddie's guns was certainly Oberleutnant Otto Schulz of HI JG-27 who was shot down and killed on 17 June '42, in a mid-day battle near Sidi Rezegh in Libya. On that occasion, Schulz had just brought down a Hurricane 01 274 Squadron flown by F/L Walter `Wally' Conrad, another Canadian, and in his usual manner, Otto dived to strafe and make sure of the definite destruction of the Hurricane Wally had successfully crash-landed. This time, it proved his undoing because, as he was doing one of his passes, he was caught by Eddie who shot his 109 down with a full deflection burst. The Me-109 crashed right there and Schulz was killed. Conrad had been his 51st and last victory. Schulz was then a Knight's Cross holder and the second scoring pilot of the Desert. In the same combat on 17 June '42, Eddie shot down another Me-109, this one being flown by Leutnant Wolf Schaller of III/JG-53. Schaller was luckier than Schulz and baled out, being made a P.O.W. (Photo: From the Bundesarchiv).

An official photo of S. Tennente Ezio Bevilacqua of 84a Squadriglia (Regia Aeronautica), whose Macchi 202 was brought down by F/Sgt. Edwards on 22 October, '42, during a fierce combat near El Daba, Egypt. Bevilacqua succeeded in baling out of his flaming machine, but he was seriously wounded in both legs and died a few minutes later. He had some flying experience in the Desert. (Photo: Nino Arena's collection via Giorgio Pini).

These are two of the numerous pictures taken by Public Relations reporters (PRO) of 260 Squadron's Kittyhawk ill's at El Chel (Gzina), Tripolitania, Libya, in January 1943. Above — Line-up of the unit's Kittys. At that time, 260 was part of 239 Wing, RAF, and were almost exclusively used for ground support duties, doing strafing and dive-bombing. The boys of 260 became quite prominent in that task, getting fine results with no severe losses. In the foreground is the big nose of F/L Edwards' personal Kitty III, B-HS, serial number FR-350. Below — From the same series. Aircraft in foreground is the B-HS of Flight Lieutenant Edwards. The pilot near the tail is Flying Officer Jeff Fallows, a fine New Zealand pilot. Fallows got a couple of Me-109's with 260 Squadron, but was lost and made P.O.W. on 26 March '43, at Mareth (Tunisia) during a ground support mission. He fired at a truck which blew-up, damaging his aircraft, and, then, he had to force-land. (Photos: Imperial War Museum and appeared in No. 6 Book in Aircam Aviation Series).



Above — F/L Edwards last victories over North Africa in April 1943 were two Me-109's on the 15th and an Me 323 six-engined aircraft of Transport Geschwader 5 on the 22nd. The photo shows one of the giant cargo Me 323's the Germans tried to reinforce their troops in Tunisia with from Sicily, in 1943.

A line-up of 260 Squadron's Kittyhawks being bombed-up preparatory to a ground support sortie. It was probably another photo taken by PRO at El Chel (Gzina) in January 1943. (Photos: 5. E. Edwards' collection and appeared in Mag Wings, Vol 5, No. 6).

After the Desert odyssey, F/L Edwards was posted to MEC GS as an instructor for six months. Then, he flew in Italy on Spits from December '43, to April '44, with 417 Squadron (10 sorties), then as CO of 274 Squadron (5 sorties). After that he led 274 on the Channel Front from May '44 to August '44, flying Spit IX's, then Tempests. On April 5, 1945, he was promoted to Wing Commander and led 127 RCAF Wing during the last month of the war. He is shown above in the cockpit of his Spitfire XVI, coded JF-E, his own initials painted on the fuselage of his aircraft was one reserved exclusively by the WingCo's in Fighter Command. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Wing Commander Edwards in his cockpit a few days after WWII at Schwiverdingen (Germany) in May 1945. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

Wing Commander Edwards, 127 Wing, RCAF, beside his Spitfire XVI in May 1945. (Photo: J. F. Edwards' collection).

July 1945. "Tame" Wing Commander Edwards' personal Focke Wulf 190 after the war. Note his initials JF-E, In the background is W/C Stan Turner's Me 408 with his initials PS-T. (Photo: J. F.. Edwards' collection).