

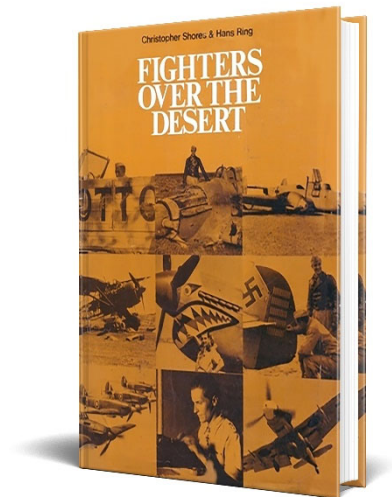
Book – Fighters over the Desert

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Forward

The first Libyan Air Campaign was the earliest British victory in the war. It destroyed the Regia Aeronautica and when British arms arrived in Tripolitania there was nothing to prevent the Italians from being driven out of Africa. At this opportune moment the British Government decided to send British Forces from Egypt to Greece, which led to a military disaster. The consequences were that the Germans moved into Africa, and there was a danger that the whole Middle East might be lost. The first Libyan Air Campaign was an example of how an inferior Air Force can sustain an offensive and finally overcome its adversary. The author's have produced in this book an excellent historic document. It will be a valuable tool to research workers and a memorial to the devoted and valiant air crews who conducted the African Air Campaign.



Raymond Collinshaw

Commander of the Commonwealth

Desert Air Force in the first two years

Preface (edited)

Conditions in the Desert were, as will readily be appreciated, very different to those appertaining to the European area, and therefore it is necessary to give a picture of some of the difficulties that were a common factor to both sides. The main trouble was sand – the fine desert dust being driven in clouds of stinging particles with every breath of wind. Great sandstorms would descend at anytime, obliterating the landscape in a swirling fog which found its way into everything. The sand, if ingested into aircraft engines through unprotected air intakes, could wear out the moving parts of an engine in mere hours while turning the

lubricating oil into an abrasive paste. Fortunately, the allies were able to use the famous **Vokes** Filters for the protection of air intakes, engine lubricating oil and the hydraulic systems. G.S. Vokes of the UK was a developer and inventor of filters for automobiles starting in the 1920s. His first aircraft filter was for the Merlin powered Spitfires. The Vokes company was registered in 1936 as G.S. Vokes of Putney 1936 Public Company. Vokes Ltd. would produce 3000 types of filters during WWII. Currently Vokes is a part of BTR Environmental Ltd. Vokes Ltd. also assisted in the design of new air intakes for Allied Forces aircraft. The redesigned air intakes created more drag and reduced some performance. The process was called Tropicalization. The sand also caused jammed guns, aircraft canopies scored and scratched and food ruined. The allied troops and airmen personally suffered from the sand as it filled the eyes, ears, noses and fingernails and made life at times totally miserable.

Due to the long lines of communications, and lack of natural supply, water was strictly rationed, and that water used for washing or shaving was carefully kept to fill the radiators of motor vehicles. Fresh food was virtually unobtainable, and tinned rations with hard biscuits were the staple diet. The violent heat of the day made most movement impossible during the hours around noon, and the metal parts of aircraft, tanks, etc, became so hot that to touch them was to risk a blistered hand. At night the temperature dropped rapidly, making the use of warm clothing essential. To add to these hardships, the troops were plagued by millions of persistent flies which settled on faces and food continually. These conditions frequently caused "Desert Sores" which, aggravated by heat and sand, festered on for months. Being so lacking in landmarks, the great wastes of undulating sand, rock and scrub were difficult to navigate over; to be forced down in such circumstances was to risk a lingering death from starvation and dehydration.

To set against these deprivations, the Desert was a place of great comradeship, and, due to the extreme of temperatures, germs could not flourish so that there was no infectious disease. Further to this the Desert was virtually uninhabited, so that the civilian population, did not suffer the killing of men, women and children and the destruction of homes. So as far as it was possible to have a "clean war", it was in the Desert where the war was fought.

While every effort has been made to cover as fully as possible the air fighting over the Western Desert, it should be made clear that in certain cases records for various units were at times, non-existent, or incomplete. The details of 33 Squadron's operations in December 1940 for instance, were destroyed a few months later in Greece, and other squadrons were sometimes forced to burn all papers during retreats. While the battles around the Gazala line raged in June 1942, some squadrons were so heavily committed that not all sorties were written up, and on other occasions sections of squadrons were sent to forward landing grounds where there no intelligence officers to write up the logs at the time. Although the Luftwaffe fighter records were very complete for certain periods, they were considerably less so at other times, and full details of all losses of their own aircraft were not available, and it must be stressed that other losses of which details are available relate only to those cases where aircrew were killed, wounded, or captured. Aircraft losses where the crew were unhurt are not known.



Unfortunately, detailed Italian records were not available to the authors, and it is regretted that the Italian authorities did not see fit to cooperate in a spirit of historical accuracy in the preparation of this work. It should therefore be appreciated that in some cases where action was reported by one side, but with confirmation lacking from the other, it may well have in fact taken place, particularly where this is corroborated by witnesses on the ground.

Throughout the campaigns enormous claims were from time to time, made by the Regia Aeronautica, whose admission of losses was frequently very low. It is

suspected that many of these figures were the result of wartime propaganda, and that they have never been corrected. It is particularly noteworthy that during the fighting of the first nine months of the war, the claims of the Italian fighter units equipped with the Fiat CR42 totalled 157, almost exactly the number of CR42s claimed by the RAF in this period, while they admitted 41 losses, virtually the figure of British aircraft known to have been shot down by these fighters. If Italian figures are accepted, it would be seen that by March 1941 they had virtually wiped out the numerically inferior RAF, while keeping their own forces practically intact! Considering that all of this was recorded during a period of heavy reinforcement by the Italians and the diversion of RAF resources for the Greek – campaign, the Regia Aeronautica had almost disappeared from the skies. The RAF did actually have complete control of the Desert skies at this time. Further, whenever the British or German fighters made heavy claims, the names of pilots soon appeared of those who had built up big personal scores, as it seems in every war that about ten percent of the pilots account for fifty to seventy percent of the victories, yet despite vast Italian claims, no notable fighter “aces” were known at that time. Possibly this exception was due to most of the leading Italian pilots were gaining the greater part of their scores when the fighting had moved to the skies over their own homeland.

It was quickly obvious from comparison of records that the aircraft recognition, particularly in the heat of combat, of many pilots, especially in the Luftwaffe, was not all that it might have been. Wishful thinking seems to have played a large part in this, German pilots making claims for Curtiss types rather than Hurricanes, and for Spitfires than either, while Allied pilots seemed to often claim Messerschmitt 109s when their victims were probably Macchi 202s. This is understandable, as in the fury of a dogfight, and in the frequently difficult visual conditions of the North African skies, one conventional low-winged fighter with the pointed nose of an inline engine must have looked much like another from many angles, particularly from the rear. Allied bombers also led to much confusion for the Germans, the Maryland, Boston and Baltimore all having a similar configuration, as did the closely related Blenheim, Beaufort and Beaufighter.

German pilots never attempted to differentiate between Tomahawks, and Kittyhawks, both of which were “Curtiss-fighters to them”, but a new problem of recognition arose in August 1942 with the arrival of the first USAFF fighters, the

Curtiss P-40F Warhawk, being closely related to the RAF's Kittyhawk, which in American service was known as the P-40E. However, the American aircraft had been fitted with a licence-built (Packard Motors) Rolls-Royce Merlin engine similar to that used by the Hurricane and Spitfire, whereas the RAF machine retained the American Allison engine. With the Allison engine, the oil cooler was fed with air from an air scoop mounted above the nose of the aircraft, which from the frontal view proved to be a most important recognition feature. The P-40F did not feature this air scoop, having a smooth line from spinner to cockpit similar to the Hurricane and Spitfire. Coupled with the US camouflage scheme, a coat of pinkish-light brown – known as Desert Pink – over all of the upper surfaces, instead of the familiar British two-tone scheme, and the American star markings, the appearance from certain angles was so different that for some two months, the German pilots were identifying these aircraft as Bell P-39 Airacobras! It was not until November, when it is supposed, crash-landed examples had been examined behind the Axis lines, that claims for “US Curtiss fighters” began to appear.

Since so much of the aerial combat took place over barren areas far from habitation or ground forces, confirmation of claims was always difficult. Due to the extreme difficulty of counting the actual number of wrecks on the ground, it would appear that both sides frequently “double claimed” after heavy fighting. The authors feel that the majority of claims by Allied and German pilots in the Desert were made in good faith.

Finally, a word must be said about the splendid British salvage organization, which on one occasion, in the course of seventeen weeks, recovered over 1,000 aircraft which had crashed or force-landed in the Desert, 800 of these being repairable. This contributed in a marked degree to maintaining the strength of the air effort throughout the campaigns. The vast number of aircraft collected also lends validity to Axis claims. The Axis forces were never able to create a service of comparable efficiency, and therefore every aircraft shot down by the Allied forces was more likely to be a total loss to the Axis than was the case with the Allies.
