

DUEL OVER THE DESERT

In August 1940 two hectic engagements between the Gloster Gladiators of 80 Squadron and aircraft of the *Regia Aeronautica Italiana* in the skies over North Africa saw several future Aces open or increase their scores. One of these pilots was, writes **Andrew Thomas**, Flight Lieutenant Marmaduke Thomas St. John Pattle - possibly the most successful British and Commonwealth pilot of the war.

WHEN ITALY declared war on the United Kingdom on 10 June 1940, the RAF in Egypt had just three single-seat fighter squadrons - Nos. 33, 80 and 112 - all of which were flying the obsolescent Gloster Gladiator. >>

MAIN PICTURE: Late in the afternoon of 4 August 1940, four Gloster Gladiators of 'B' Flight, 80 Squadron, were tasked to escort a Westland Lysander of 208 Squadron on a reconnaissance flight over Italian positions near the Libyan-Egyptian border. The sortie resulted in a series of dogfights with Italian aircraft - one of which is depicted here. By Ian Wyllie, this painting shows Flying Officer Peter Wykeham-Barnes, at the controls of L8009, coded YK-1, having attacked a Breda Ba 65, about to turn and face the imminent threat of *Maresciallo* Romolo Cantelli's Fiat CR.32.

(WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF IAIN WYLLIE)



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Ace Fighter Pilots

RIGHT: Several of 80 Squadron's Gloster Gladiators taxi into a secure enclosure after a sortie. (C.J. CLEMENTS)

BELOW: Pilot Officer Sam Weller. (PETER HOLLOWAY)

Based at Amiriya to the south-west of the great port of Alexandria was 80 Squadron under Squadron Leader R.C. Jonas. It had seen some action on policing duties in Palestine before the outbreak of war and numbered amongst its pilots twelve future



aces, including one who would become possibly the most successful British and Commonwealth pilot of the war. This was the commander of 'B' Flight, Flight Lieutenant Marmaduke Thomas St. John Pattle – universally known as "Pat".

On 5 July 1940, 80 Squadron gained a new CO when 28-year-old Squadron Leader Paddy Dunn (later Air Marshal Sir Patrick) arrived. "I recall my first trip in the Gladiator well," Dunn later commented. "Having been appointed to command 80 Squadron, I had not flown a Gladiator before, though I had of course flown a Gauntlet. On this first trip the engine stopped, and although I had never landed one, I had the whole of the Western Desert to now do so!"

Under him 80 Squadron embarked on an intensive training programme. Dunn remembered his former 'B' Flight commander as being "of medium height, with dark hair and strikingly green-grey eyes and in manner was

modest, reserved and thoughtful. He was a superb pilot whose ability was an inspiration to his colleagues. Indisputably, he was of the bravest; an exceptional fighter leader and brilliant fighter pilot."

TALLY-HO!

At the end of the month it was "Pat" Pattle who led a detachment to Sidi Barrani, some sixty miles east of the Libyan border, to replace 33 Squadron. There the 80 Squadron pilots soon received something of a jolt.

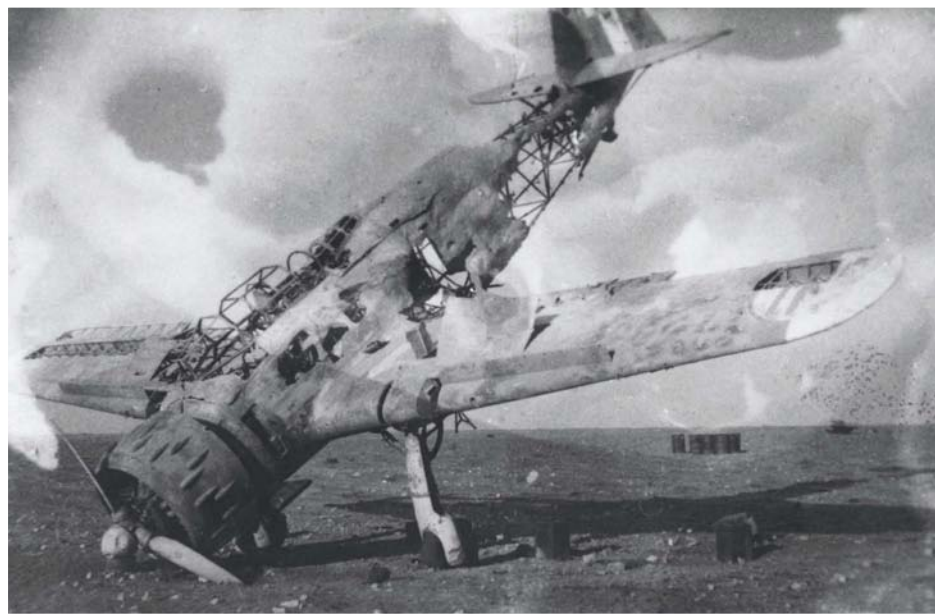
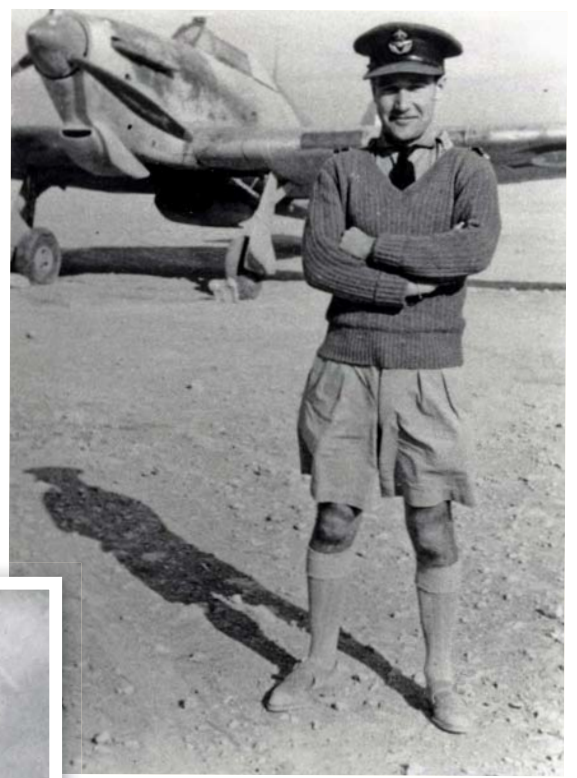
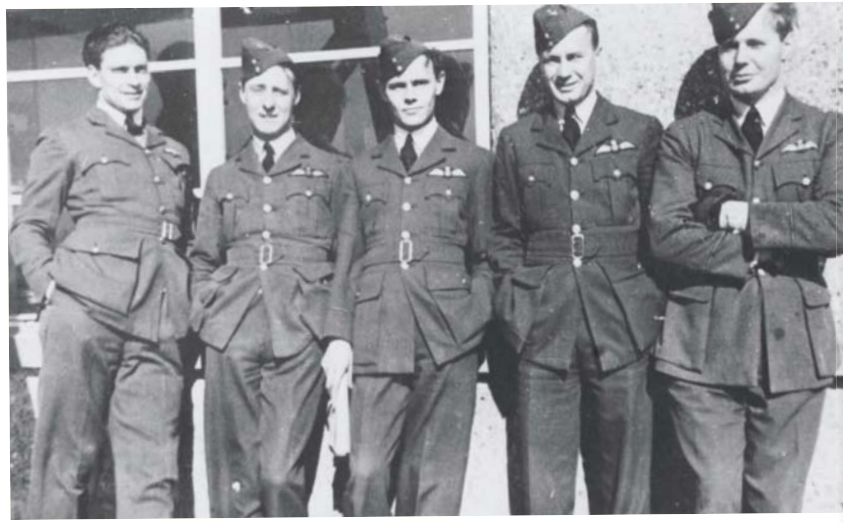
During the late afternoon of 4 August 1940, four of the Gladiators were tasked to escort a Westland Lysander of 208 Squadron on a reconnaissance of Italian positions in the Bir Taieb el Esem area, some thirty miles inside the Libyan border. Pattle, flying K7910, led Flying Officer Johnny Lancaster (K7923) while Peter Wykeham-Barnes (L8009, coded YK-I) and Sergeant Kenneth Rew (K7908) comprised the second section.



THE FIRST ACTION

For 80 Squadron, its first taste of action came on 4 July 1940, when a section from 'B' Flight, comprising Flying Officer Greg Graham, whose diminutive stature resulted in his nickname of "Shorty", and Pilot Officer Sam Weller scrambled after ten Savoia-Marchetti SM.79 bombers of the 34^o Gruppo (such as those seen here) which, operating from Rhodes, had been spotted to the north of Alexandria. Sam Weller noted in his report afterwards that they had commenced firing at fifty yards, but added: "We were unable to hold them for long but the time should have been sufficient to cause successful damage."

To their intense frustration Graham and Weller - seen here - could only claim a "probable", though in fact their fire had been accurate and they had damaged some of the bombers. In one, almost the entire crew was wounded. (A.S. HOLT)



Nearing Bir Taieb el Esem at 18.15 hours, the RAF pilots spotted a formation of seven Breda Ba 65 bombers of the El Adem-based 159 *Squadriglia* which, led by *Capitano* Antonio Dell 'Oro, were flying in two sections. They had been attacking British positions and were accompanied by Fiat CR.32s of 160 *Squadriglia* led by *Capitano* Duilio Fanali.

As the *Lysander* banked away, Wykeham-Barnes called "Tally Ho!" and immediately dived on four of the Bredas. He engaged the left-hand aircraft which went down on fire – 80 Squadron's first *Gladiator* "kill".

Kenneth Rew, meanwhile, had gone for the right-hand Breda, only to be in turn attacked by the Fiats; he was shot down by Duilio Fanali. Peter Wykeham-Barnes too was soon embroiled with the nimble Fiats as he described afterwards: "I gave 'Tally Ho!' and dived on the rear most flight, engaging the left hand man. Sgt Rew dived with me and engaged the right hand man of the same formation. I last saw him diving after his Breda, which had broken formation, and my Breda began to fall away to the left.

"At this moment two CR.32s came at me from above and in front, and at the same

moment I thought I saw the remaining two *Gladiators* attacking. A general dog-fight now took place, and I had shots at 32s from dead ahead and at every type of deflection.

"After about 5 minutes I got a 32 ahead of me and was giving it a long burst when my rudder went slack. I looked around and saw a 32 coming in on my beam, firing hard. A moment later my elevators went slack, and the machine fell onto an even keel, with no control. The 32 fell in behind me, and in a long burst from close range finished my aircraft off.

"The left side of the instrument panel and most of the windscreen went and two bullets came through the back of the seat before I could close the throttle, and the 32 passed underneath me. My machine fell into a dive and I abandoned it, landing by parachute. On the way down the Fiat passed within a few feet of me and fired, but I think not at me." Wykeham-Barnes had fallen victim to *Maresciallo* Romolo Cantelli.

FIRST KILL

At the same time that Wykeham-Barnes found himself in trouble, Pattle had led his section into the *mêlée* to engage

the Italians. He subsequently described the events that followed:

"I was leading the top flight of *Gladiators* and dived down to investigate as I did not see the EA. Whilst in the dive I heard F/O Wykeham-Barnes over the R/T lead his section to the attack and immediately afterwards saw 7 Breda 65's (one flight of four and one of three) flying west just behind the *Lysander*.

"F/O Wykeham-Barnes attacked the formation of four, so I selected the remaining three, and delivered an astern attack. The Bredas turned through 360 degrees and again headed west. This enabled me to get to about 300 yards behind them. I held my fire, hoping to close in still further and at this time noticed that P/O Lancaster who was on my left had broken away.

"The Bredas dropped to about 200 feet and released 2 bombs each, which judging from the burst resembled our own 20 pounders. This was done probably to increase their speed and also to affect my aim. Their speed in fact did increase and I was just about to break away when they turned north for El Adem. Turning inside them I closed to about 150 yards and delivered a quarter attack on the nearest Breda.

"On the first burst both my port guns ceased to fire. The Breda, however, had been hit, for after a few more bursts from dead astern, white smoke poured out of the starboard side of the engine and it force landed satisfactorily on good ground 5 miles further on."

The man destined to be regarded as the RAF's most successful fighter pilot of the war had achieved >>>

TOP LEFT: The two RAF pilots forced to bale out following the dramatic combats on 4 August 1940, were Flight Lieutenant Pat Pattle (in the centre) and Flying Officer Peter Wykeham-Barnes (on the right). (AIR VICE MARSHAL E.G. JONES)

ABOVE: Shortly after its combat debut 80 Squadron gained a new CO when Squadron Leader Paddy Dunn arrived. (AIR MARSHAL SIR PATRICK DUNN)

ABOVE LEFT: The first Italian victim of the engagements on 4 August 1940, was a Breda Ba 65 of the 159° *Squadriglia*. The Breda Ba.65 was an all-metal, single-engine, low-wing monoplane used predominantly in North Africa. When Italy entered the war in June 1940 about 150 examples were reported to be still in service. They suffered heavy losses against Allied fighters and most had either been shot down or were unserviceable by February 1941. (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

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ABOVE: The Fiat CR.32s of 160 Squadriglia which were involved in the aerial combats of 4 August 1940, were led by *Capitano Duilio Fanali*, who is pictured here, in the summer of 1940, in front of a Breda Ba 65. (GIOVANNI MASSIMO)

BELOW: This 160 Squadriglia Fiat CR.32, MM4666, was the usual mount of *Capitano Duilio*. It is pictured here after a forced-landing on 20 October 1940. (GIOVANNI MASSIMO)



Although he claimed two victories on 4 August 1940, Peter Wykeham-Barnes was forced to bale out of L8009 'YK-I' and returned courtesy of the 11th Hussars! (AIR VICE MARSHAL E.G. JONES)

the first of an eventual total of an estimated fifty victories. His report continued:

"I then broke away and attempted without result to clear my port fuselage gun. I was then immediately attacked by 5 Fiat CR.42s who were flying about 2,000 feet above me and coming from the direction of El Adem, which was approx 10 miles to the NW. A dog-fight ensued in which they made repeated attacks, simultaneously from the quarter and beam using the speed they gained in the dive to regain altitude after each attack.

"My own tactics were mainly defensive, turning away from each attack and delivering a short attack on the most suitable target as it dived past. On one occasion a Fiat on completing its attack turned round in front of

my aircraft, presenting an excellent deflection shot at close range. I fired a long burst and the Fiat turned slowly on its back and spun towards the ground. I last saw it spinning at 200 feet.

"Shortly afterwards my starboard wing gun packed up, but the Fiats broke away at the same time. My position was then about 5 miles west and a few miles north of Bir Taieb el Essen."

BALE OUT

Despite the fact that the Fiats had seemingly disengaged, as Pat Pattle was about to discover the action that day was far from over:

"I then turned back for the border but on approaching El Essen was again intercepted by 12 Fiats and 3 Bredas. The Bredas, after a few dives, broke away

but the Fiats carried out exactly the same tactics as the earlier five. On my first burst the remaining gun jammed as the result of an exploded round in the breech so I attempted to make the border by evasive tactics and heading east whenever possible.

"After a running fight lasting approx 15 minutes my rudder controls were shot away. No longer able to use evasive tactics, I baled out after climbing to 400 feet and landed about 4 miles inside the border at about 19.00 hours.

"After nightfall I walked towards the wire and was finally picked up by our own forces on our side of the border at 16.00 hours on 5th August 1940.

During the dog-fight Johnny Lancaster had been hit by Romolo Cantelli and was wounded in the left arm and shoulder. However, he managed to crash land at Sidi Barrani, though his aircraft was written off; his was, however, the only Gladiator to return. Sergeant Kenneth Rew had been killed in the battle, gaining the distinction of being 80 Squadron's first casualty of the Second World War.





Squadron Leader Paddy Dunn also flew in to join up with 'B' Flight, as he later recounted:

"Having lost 4 chaps shot down four days earlier - Wykeham-Barnes, Pattle etc, - we needed to get back right away and stop the 'Eyeties' getting their tails up. And of course, we had to get our own back. It was a planned operation and went frightfully well.

"We saw the 'Eyeties' from a long way out and managed to stay in the sun and closed into around 200 yards before opening fire. My No 2 who was on my right, however, disappeared. I have no idea what happened to him as the sky was full of falling aircraft and parachutes, though I do not believe he went down in flames as has been reported elsewhere."

They had spotted a formation of sixteen Fiat CR.42 of the 9^o and 10^o Gruppi. They had taken off from El Adem near Tobruk to patrol the Egyptian border whilst also providing cover to five Savoia-Marchetti SM.79s from the 44^a Squadriglia that were to attack British ground forces. While still climbing about twenty miles east of El Gobi, and still well inside Italian territory, Tenente Pezzè spotted

ABOVE LEFT: Squadron Leader Paddy Dunn in the cockpit of his Gladiator the day after the successful action he had planned and led on 8 August 1940.

(AIR MARSHAL SIR PATRICK DUNN)

ABOVE RIGHT: With its pilot's parachute resting on the wing this Regia Aeronautica Fiat CR.42 awaits its next sortie at a desert airfield.

(LUCIANO AGOSTI VIA JOHN WEAL)

ABOVE LEFT: On 8 August 1940, Squadron Leader Paddy Dunn was flying Gladiator K8009 which is seen here after a landing mishap before the war.

(A.T. PHILLIPS)

Having successfully baled out, Pattle, like Wykeham-Barnes, was picked up the following day by patrols from the 11th Hussars and safely returned. Wykeham-Barnes later gave this account of his escape:

"When I picked myself up the Fiat was circling overhead at about 500 feet, but took no further action. I ran for about a mile from the machine, thinking I was in enemy territory, and on the way saw another Gladiator spinning down, the pilot baling out [this must have been Pattle - author] at about 500 feet. He landed about 2 miles away and did not see him again.

"I remained hidden until darkness, and then returned to the wreck to look for the water bottle, which was smashed. Retaining only my gun and overalls, I then set out on an easterly course keeping away from the road. I crossed the wire at about 22.30 hours and at dawn altered course north and picked up the track. At 07.30 hours I identified a Hussar convoy, which picked me up and took me back to their HQ. I rejoined my unit at 18.00 hours on 5.8.40."

A PLANNED OPERATION

After this chastening experience, several things became abundantly clear - not least of which was the realisation that if the Italians were to be encountered in such strength then reinforcement of the 80 Squadron detachment was imperative. Consequently, a few days later 'C' Flight moved forward to Gerawla, an airstrip just to the south of Sidi Barrani. Early on 8 August 1940,



Gladiator I K8011 'YK-S' was the mount of Pilot Officer Wanklyn Flower on 8 August 1940. During the combats that day Flower probably destroyed a CR.42. (VIA R.L. WARD)

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ABOVE: An 80 Squadron Gladiator stirs up the dust as it takes off on patrol from a forward strip in the Egyptian desert. (AIR VICE MARSHAL J.H. LAPSLEY)

ABOVE RIGHT: Leading the section providing top cover on 8 August 1940 was Flight Lieutenant Pat Pattle who having dived into the fight was credited with two Fiats destroyed. (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

BELOW: Flying Officer "Shorty" Graham's aircraft on 8 August 1940 was K8008, a Gladiator that had been with 80 Squadron since before the war. It carries the unit's "Bell" insignia which was adopted in honour of its First World War CO - one Major Bell. (G. GRAY)

the Gladiators high above and alerted his commander who tried to get his formation to make a head on attack from below and thus from a most unpropitious position.

Dunn had planned to lure the Italians into attacking a section of Gladiators flying at 8,000 feet while the others lurked above up to 14,000 feet. Typically, he led Wykeham-Barnes and Pilot Officer Vincent "Heimar" Stuckey as the "bait". It was the first time that 80 Squadron had operated at full strength.

TAKING THE BAIT

The bait was the first to be engaged, the Italians not spotting the higher sections. In his combat report, Paddy Dunn described how he downed two of the enemy:

"A CR.42 did a steep diving turn away from his formation and I was easily able to give him a full deflection shot for about 8 seconds, he continued in a dive with smoke issuing from him but as the formation of 18 was approaching around about me with advantage of number and height, it was impossible to pursue him. I claimed it definitely shot down and considered it to be one of the five observed on the ground."

This had been, Dunn noted, his "first combat in a Gladiator". It was not his last.

"Then followed a long period of loose play in which numerous targets offered themselves," he continued. "At the same time large numbers of enemy aircraft attacked me, chiefly from straight ahead and beam but not driving home determinedly. In one of them I throttled back and stall-turned on the attacker's tail before he was quite past me, he then rolled on to his back and dived down in the second half of a loop. I followed and gave this aircraft what I thought was an effective burst with the result that he did not recover and continued down with bluish smoke issuing from him.

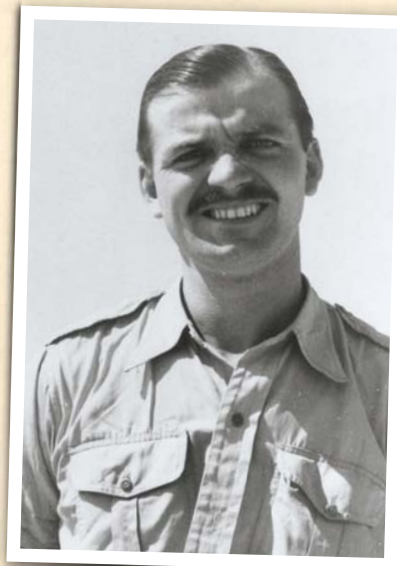
"The other flights had by now entered and attacked their opponents, and the number of enemy aircraft thinned down. Two or three enemy aircraft were still about; I pulled up steeply to avoid one in particular who was dangerously near to my tail, having chased me down in the dive from the port quarter. In the ensuing black-out I have little knowledge of what he did but at the top of what was the first half of something like a rocket loop, I found myself going in the opposite direction with the

aircraft climbing rapidly past me on my left and below. He then appeared ahead of me and did a slow roll, unfortunately, I was too surprised and failed to get him in my sight, whereupon he half rolled and dived out; another stall turn brought me on his tail, but he did a rapid dive, turned to the left and streamed off like a homing rabbit - next stop El Adem!

"I engaged one more enemy aircraft but my guns failed to fire (after 300 rounds approx.). I tried to clear them but was only able to get one more short burst. I left the fight, gained height at 12,000 feet and returned to witness a dog-fight between three aircraft two of which were Gladiators. I then set off home and picked up two other Gladiators."

As for the others from the "bait" trio, Peter Wykeham-Barnes had shot down another Fiat - as had Pilot Officer Stuckey in his first combat.





A DECISIVE DOG-FIGHT

Fully recovered from the trauma of four days earlier, Pat Pattle, at the controls of L8008, was leading 'B' Flight as the top section. His combat report described the subsequent engagement:

"At 1825 hours when approaching Bir El Gobi, a large formation of 27 Fiat CR.42s were sighted at about 6,000 feet on the starboard beam, flying east. Our formation wheeled to attack and approached the enemy formation from the East, the first section approaching within range unobserved.

"Immediately the first section engaged, the enemy formation split up, and a general dog-fight followed. I saw Nos 2 and 3 sections engage and before I brought my section into the fight I saw five crashed aircraft on the ground, three of which were in flames.

"My own section then engaged those EA who were attempting to reach their own base and immediately became engaged in separate combats. I engaged a CR.42 and, after a short skirmish, got into position immediately behind him. On firing two short bursts at about 50 yards range the EA fell into a spin and burst into flames on striking the ground. The pilot did not abandon his aircraft.

"I then attacked 3 EA immediately below me. This action was indecisive as after a few minutes they broke away by diving vertically for the ground and pulling out at a very low altitude.

"Whilst searching for other EA, I saw two more aircraft crash and burst into flames. Owing to the widespread area and the number of aircraft engaged, it was impossible to confirm what types of aircraft

were involved in these crashes or who shot them down. The sky seemed clear of 42s although several Gladiators were still in the vicinity. I was about to turn for our base when a 42 attacked me from below. With the advantage of height I dived astern of him and after a short burst he spun into the ground in flames. As before the pilot did not abandon his aircraft. Flying Officer Graham confirms both my combats which ended decisively."

A PACK OF ACES

In his first action at the head of his squadron, Squadron Leader Dunn had seen his squadron achieve a stunning success and establish the kind of moral ascendancy over the *Regia Aeronautica* that he had planned. As was very much his manner, he had led by example.

On returning to Sidi Barrani his pilots submitted claims for nine Fiat CR.42s destroyed and six probables. On the debit side, however, Flight Sergeant Trevor Vaughan had been lost and Flight Lieutenant Ralph Evers-Swindell, having accounted for two Italians, had himself been forced down but was picked up by

armoured cars from the 11th Hussars – the cavalrymen were rapidly becoming 80 Squadron's personal taxi service!

On the Italian side seven Fiats had indeed gone down – three of the pilots having baled out. The gallantry was not all on one side, either, as *Sergente Lido Poli* of the 73^a *Squadriglia* stayed with his damaged aircraft, despite severe wounds, and was credited with shooting down a Gladiator. Immediately after crash landing he was taken to hospital where his shattered arm was amputated. He was subsequently awarded the *Medaglia d'Oro* – Italy's highest award.

These two actions had seen several future Aces open or increase their scores. Sid Linnard, for example, went on to claim six victories and one more shared, whilst Heimer Stuckey (five and one shared) also achieved Ace status. As for Dunn, he went on to claim nine victories, Wykeham-Barnes seventeen, and Pattle approximately fifty.

Looking back on the events of August 1940, Sir Patrick Dunn once remarked, "we were not heroes, but just got on with the job in hand" 🎯

ABOVE LEFT: Pilot Officer "Keg" Dowding (on the left) made his first combat claim on 8 August 1940, when he was credited with the "probable" destruction of a CR.42. (AIR VICE MARSHAL E.G. JONES)

ABOVE RIGHT: Another of the pilots involved on 8 August 1940 was Sergeant Don Gregory. Though he did not achieve any victories that day he went on to shoot down eight CR.42s after moving with 80 Squadron to Greece. (VIA C.F. SHORES)



LEFT: Pilot Officer Sid Linnard views the artwork on his Gloster Gladiator from the cockpit at Sidi Barrani, Egypt, a few days after taking part in a major engagement with Italian fighters over Bir el Gobi, Libya, on 8 August 1940. Linnard began his path to becoming an Ace by shooting down a brace of Fiats during the brief, but savage, action. (VIA C.F. SHORES)