

GIANT KILLERS

The last weeks of the Tunisian campaign saw Allied fighters, including those of the South African Air Force, take a huge toll on Axis transport aircraft and, as Andrew Thomas describes, heralded the end of the war in North Africa.

After heavy fighting through March 1943, with the defences of the Mareth Line effectively turned and the Allies advancing into Tunisia in the north, the enemy was in increasingly desperate straits. The *Afrika Korps*, withdrawing from Libya, joined those Axis units in Tunisia to form a unified bridgehead pending a withdrawal from Africa to Italy. However, in this intent Field Marshal Rommel was overruled by Hitler and the German High Command.

Allied control of the sea routes had also created a massive supply problem

for the enemy, though the German C-in-C Mediterranean, Field Marshal Kesselring, remained optimistic and believed that air transport was the solution. He ordered

BELOW: Operation *Flax* underway on 22 April 1943. By Mark Postlethwaite GAVA, this painting depicts Lieutenant "Robbie" Robinson at the controls of his 1 Squadron SAAF Spitfire Vc, JG959 AX-N, shooting down a Messerschmitt Bf 109 of 6/JG 27 off Cape Bon on 22 April 1943. A pair of Messerschmitt Me 323 *Gigants* try and escape below, though the one is being pursued by another Spitfire. (Courtesy of Mark Postlethwaite; www.posart.com)





ABOVE: On 16 April 1943, Flying Officer Neville Duke, of 92 Squadron, shot down a pair of Savoia-Marchetti SM.82s, two aircraft that represented his last victories over Africa. After the war Duke would be acknowledged as one of the world's foremost test pilots and, in 1953, became holder of the world air speed record. (N.F. Duke)

ABOVE RIGHT: Leading the South African Air Force Kittyhawks on 19 April 1943, in their first big action against the Luftwaffe's and Regia Aeronautica's air bridge, was Lieutenant Colonel Doug Loftus who personally shot down two Junkers Ju 52s to become an Ace. (SAAF)

BELOW: During Operation Flax, the pilots of 92 Squadron were flying some of the first Spitfire IXs delivered to the desert and these were distinguished by having numbers in place of aircraft letters. (N.F. Duke)

the Luftwaffe to organise large streams of transports, under heavy fighter escort, for an airlift across the Mediterranean, often flying at night. This employed considerable numbers of transport aircraft drawn from both the Luftwaffe and the Regia Aeronautica in an effort to sustain Axis forces which, trapped into an ever-shrinking pocket, were in an increasingly parlous state.

To interdict this air bridge, the Allies

began Operation Flax.¹ The result, for the Axis air forces, was carnage as RAF and USAAF fighters, flying off the North African coast, reaped a rich harvest of the vulnerable transports.

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As the German plan swung into action, airfields such as Trapani in Sicily were soon packed with tri-motor Junkers Ju 52s, Savoia SM.82s and Fiat G.12s, along with the huge six-engine Messerschmitt Me 323s which, capable of carrying a ten-ton load, were appropriately named *Gigant* (Giant) by the Luftwaffe.

Operation Flax began on 5 April 1943, when, shortly after 08.00 hours, USAAF P-38 Lightnings of the 82nd Fighter Group (FG), and later others of the 1st FG, encountered an escorted formation of around thirty Ju 52s; eighteen of them were claimed as shot down.

Over Tunisia itself heavy air fighting continued. Amongst those engaged on 7 April were Spitfires of 232 Squadron. The squadron's CO, Squadron Leader Archie Winskill, later recalled: "Our area of course was Bizerte/Tunis, the main routes to Mateur. One evening at the beginning of April we encountered a large formation of Junkers 87s and we managed to down several. I saw one I attacked jettison its bombs before crashing on fire. I remember that

Woodhill and I got another and I think the squadron got four. I am quite sure that the squadron was very effective indeed, particularly when, at the very end, the Germans were trying to evacuate as much as they could by air from Bizerte and Tunis in the Ju 52 and Me 323 transports." Archie Winskill's first victories over North Africa had in fact made him the RAF's latest Ace.

It was the lumbering transports that were the main priority, however, and over the next few days the American units were particularly successful. On 16 April, ten Spitfires from 145 Squadron, with



top cover provided by three Spitfire IXs from 92 Squadron, flew a sweep over the Cape Bon Peninsula. Here they spotted eighteen Savoia-Marchetti SM.82s low over the sea.

The Spitfires dived down to attack. In the minutes that followed seven of the Italian aircraft were destroyed, this in

"A large number of the transport aircraft were undoubtedly carrying a full load of petrol for they caught alight from nose to tail and disintegrated as our pilots opened fire."

spite of an escort of Messerschmitt Bf 109s and Focke-Wulf Fw 190s. Two of these transports fell to the guns of 92 Squadron's Flying Officer Neville Duke.

"When we were over the Cape,"

recalled Duke, "I saw a large number of transport aircraft low down and I called the Wing Co. and went down. They were Savoia 82s, large three-engined jobs – about 18 of them. The first one I attacked was going so fast I couldn't get more than a short burst in. I attacked another after throttling right back and let him have everything, and closing right up, just skimmed over the top of him having seen





of Cap Bon. His body was not found there but it is known that he was buried at Tazoghane.

The following day British and American fighters sweeping over the Sicilian Narrows intercepted about 100 Ju 52s under escort near Cap Bon. Within a few moments the shore below was strewn

with blazing wreckage. By the end of the engagements, the Allied pilots had claimed two dozen Ju 52s and fourteen escorts; many of the transports were carrying fuel and they blew up in spectacular fashion.

ENTER THE SPRINGBOKS

There was further slaughter on Sunday, 18 April 1943, when USAAF Curtiss P-40 Warhawks, with twelve 92 Squadron Spitfires as high cover, claimed fifty-two German machines destroyed. As the Allied fighters began their attacks, the passengers had fired machine-guns out of the Junkers' windows in desperation to fend off the attack. In the air battle that followed, six P-40s and a Spitfire were shot down. Actual German losses were twenty-four Ju 52s along with ten fighters. It is also possible some Italian fighters were shot down as well. Along with the Ju 52s destroyed, another thirty-five were damaged and managed to crash-land. Such was the carnage that it became known as "The Palm Sunday Massacre".

Early the following morning, Monday, 19 April 1943, the leader of 7 (SAAF) Wing, the highly-experienced 25-year-old Lieutenant Colonel Doug Loftus led thirty-six Kittyhawks from 2, 4 and 5 squadrons out over the Mediterranean coast soon after dawn looking for transports.

Despite poor visibility, near the island of Pantelleria they found a group of transports with a fighter escort. Loftus

LEFT: The Kittyhawk pilots of 2 Squadron SAAF did well on 19 April 1943, being credited with seven transports destroyed and another 'probable'. (J.D.R. Rawlings)

BELOW: The Me 323 was a powered variant of the Me 321 military glider and was the largest land-based transport aircraft of the Second World War. Just over 200 are recorded as having been constructed.

BOTTOM: These Spitfire Vcs belong to 1 Squadron SAAF. The nearest one, ER882/AX-F, was flown by Lieutenant J.R. Lanham when he shot down the first Fw 190 over Africa on 20 March 1943. Beyond is ER476/AX-W, the aircraft in which Lieutenant Rose-Christie probably destroyed another Focke-Wulf in the same combat. (SAAF)

my shells explode on him. He flew into the sea with a terrific splash and I had a fleeting vision of pieces of cowling etc. flying up with a sheet of spray.

"I attacked another, scoring hits from astern and he also went into the sea but more or less made a landing on the water. As I was about to attack a third, I was attacked from astern by a Fw 190 and had to turn to dodge him. He was joined by several more 190s and 109s and I really thought this was it, as I chased above the deck, twisting and turning as they attacked. I finally got away with a terrific climb."

These were Duke's last victories over Africa as he was tour-expired shortly afterwards. The most successful Allied ace in the Mediterranean Theatre, Duke was eventually credited with the destruction of twenty-nine enemy aircraft.

Duke was not alone in achieving success on 16 April – his wingmen also claimed a "kill" each. However, the combats were not one-sided, as during the action 244 Wing's leader, Wing Commander Ian "Widge" Gleed, was lost, possibly shot down by *Leutnant Reinert* of JG 77. After being hit, Gleed headed for the Tunisian coast. His Spitfire, AB502, was discovered on sand dunes near the sea on the western coastline



radioed "Tally Ho!" and led 5 Squadron SAAF down, whilst at the head of 2 Squadron was Captain "Hoefie" Hauptfleisch who was flying EV426/DB-H. Hauptfleisch later recalled the occasion: "On 19 April Doug Loftus, OC 7 Wing was leading 5 Squadron. I was leading No.2 as medium cover and Cecil Golding No.4 as top cover when a mixed gaggle of about 20 Ju 52s and SM.79s [they were



in fact SM.82s – author] were seen flying on the deck towards Tunis. They were escorted by six fighters.

"While Cecil and his boys took care of the fighters, Doug and I led our squadrons into the attack and 16 enemy aircraft were shot down, one of them an Italian Re 2001. A large number of the transport aircraft were undoubtedly carrying a full load of petrol for they caught alight from nose to tail and disintegrated as our pilots opened fire. I got one which didn't burn initially but





ABOVE: A formation of five Me 323s, in company with a Savoia-Marchetti SM.82 (top), fly over the Mediterranean towards Tunisia. (SAAF)

BELOW LEFT: Major "Rosy" du Toit and his pilots of 4 Squadron SAAF pose for a group shot on his personal aircraft. His pilots were credited with nine Me 323s destroyed on 22 April 1943. (Colonel S.F. du Toit)

on diving into the ground, it erupted in a huge ball of flame."

The squadron records stated that "that the sky was dotted with flying bonfires. All 18 of the Junkers were destroyed." The jubilant South Africans then returned to base where they repeatedly buzzed the field in triumph. In all fifteen Ju 52s and Savoias were claimed, Loftus himself shooting down two Ju 52s – which gained him Ace status. For his leadership he received an immediate DSO, later describing the action as "a methodical slaughter".

Early in the afternoon the Wing made a further sweep of Cap Bon. During this a Ju 87 of II/StG 3 was spotted towing a glider, probably a Gotha Go 242. The Stuka, flown by *Unteroffizier* Erich Siefert, and its charge were attacked from astern by Captain Joey Joubert of 4 Squadron, as recounted in the unit diary: "Attacking



the '87 from quarter astern, he saw his bullets hit the engine and fuselage. The Stuka caught fire and fell into the sea – followed by the glider."

The Wing was up the next day and during another patrol over Cap Bon the escorting Spitfires of 92 Squadron, once more flying top cover, destroyed five enemy aircraft. Over the same area the next day Lieutenant Eric "Robbie" Robinson of 1 Squadron SAAF, flying Spitfire V ER666/AX-O, claimed a Bf 109 probable and another damaged. He was then attacked and forced down by a USAAF P-40! Fortunately he was uninjured and was able to fly the next day – when SAAF fighters had their most successful day ever.

MASSACRE OF THE GIANTS

At 05.15 hours on the morning of 21 April 1943, the CO of 1 Squadron SAAF, Major D.D. "Snowy" Moodie, led a dozen aircraft off on a patrol over base, waiting for an early morning dive-bomber raid which was expected. However the warning proved spurious and they landed back twenty minutes later.

At 07.00 hours, Moodie led eleven others in escorting three squadrons of P-40s of the USAAF's 79th Pursuit Group

on another hunt for enemy transports. The top cover was provided by six Spitfires from the Polish Flight of 145 Squadron led by Flight Lieutenant Karol Pniak.

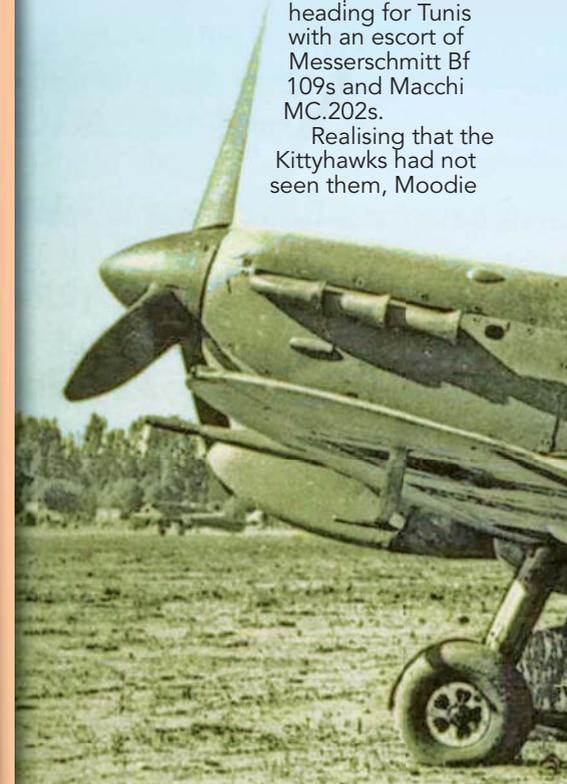
The rendezvous was nominated as the island of Hergla where, shortly before 08.00 hours, a large formation of P-40s was seen. With them the Spitfires headed north-east out over the Gulf of Tunis. However, the Americans had been late and so when a formation of Kittyhawks was seen at the planned time, the Spitfire pilots mistook them for their charges and joined them as escort. Unknowingly the Spitfires had met a sweep by 7 (SAAF) Wing and so it was their countrymen that they were covering.

That morning the *Luftwaffe* had loaded-up a number of the large six-engine Messerschmitt Me 323 *Gigant* transports of I and II *Gruppe* of *Transportgeschwader* 5 (I & II/TG 5), many of which were carrying consignments of fuel. These transports then took off from their bases in Sicily and headed for Tunisia.

At 08.30 hours, whilst flying at 11,000 feet ten miles off the North African coast near the island of Zembra, in a slight mist and poor visibility over a perfectly calm Mediterranean, the formation of *Gigants*

was spotted heading for Tunis with an escort of Messerschmitt Bf 109s and Macchi MC.202s.

Realising that the Kittyhawks had not seen them, Moodie





ordered his Green and Red sections down to attack, though he told his own section and the Poles to remain above as cover. One of his pilots wrote: "The transport a/c were sighted flying just above the water towards Tunis. They were six engine power gliders, Me 323s, each capable of carrying 14 tons, and were flying in a great vic of 15 with a smaller vic of 5 inside it. It is estimated that the transport a/c had a scattered escort of about ten Me 109s and MC 202s. A great slaughter now began."

The Spitfires drew the first blood. Lieutenant Derek Gilson, having dived past some Macchis, shot down two of the six-engine Me 323s in flames.

Diving on the transports at the controls of Spitfire Vc JG959/AX-N was Lieutenant Robinson, though he was attacked by the enemy escort. "Sighted large formation of Me 323s flying south west at 0 feet," he later recalled. "The Kittyhawks appeared not to have seen the E/A [Enemy Aircraft] and, after passing the E/A, the leader of our formation ordered Green and Red sections down to attack, he himself remaining up with his section and the Polish Flight to protect the lower aircraft.

"I peeled off, and only when diving down did I see the escorting 109s behind and above the transports. Two of these pulled up and I followed, giving the No 2 a deflection burst. I out-climbed the No 2 and from time to time opened fire, closing from 100 yards to about 30 yards. The long range tank burst into flames and later fell away. I gave the 109 further bursts although he was alight. When I broke away he was going down in flames."

ABOVE LEFT: Flying Spitfire Vc JG959/AX-N (the same aircraft depicted by Mark Postlethwaite on page 25), and which was named *Cire Cooks VI*, Lieutenant Eric "Robbie" Robinson shot down two Messerschmitt Bf 109s which were escorting a number of Me 323s, on 22 April 1943. In doing so he achieved the status of Ace. (SAAF Museum)

ABOVE RIGHT: A Messerschmitt Me 323 in the air. With a top speed of 177mph, and a cruising speed of 136mph, the type presented an easy target for Allied fighters.

RIGHT: The last Axis transport to be lost on 22 April 1943, fell to two Spitfires of 111 Squadron, one of which was flown by the 324 Wing Leader, Wing Commander "Sheep" Gilroy. (via C.F. Shores)

BELOW: On 2 April 1943, Lieutenant Eric "Robbie" Robinson flew Spitfire Vc ER171/AX-D, named *Maureen*, to shoot down a Bf 109G near Sfax. On 22 April it was flown by his wingman, Lieutenant Don Brebner, who witnessed the demise of the Bf 109s. (SAAF Museum)

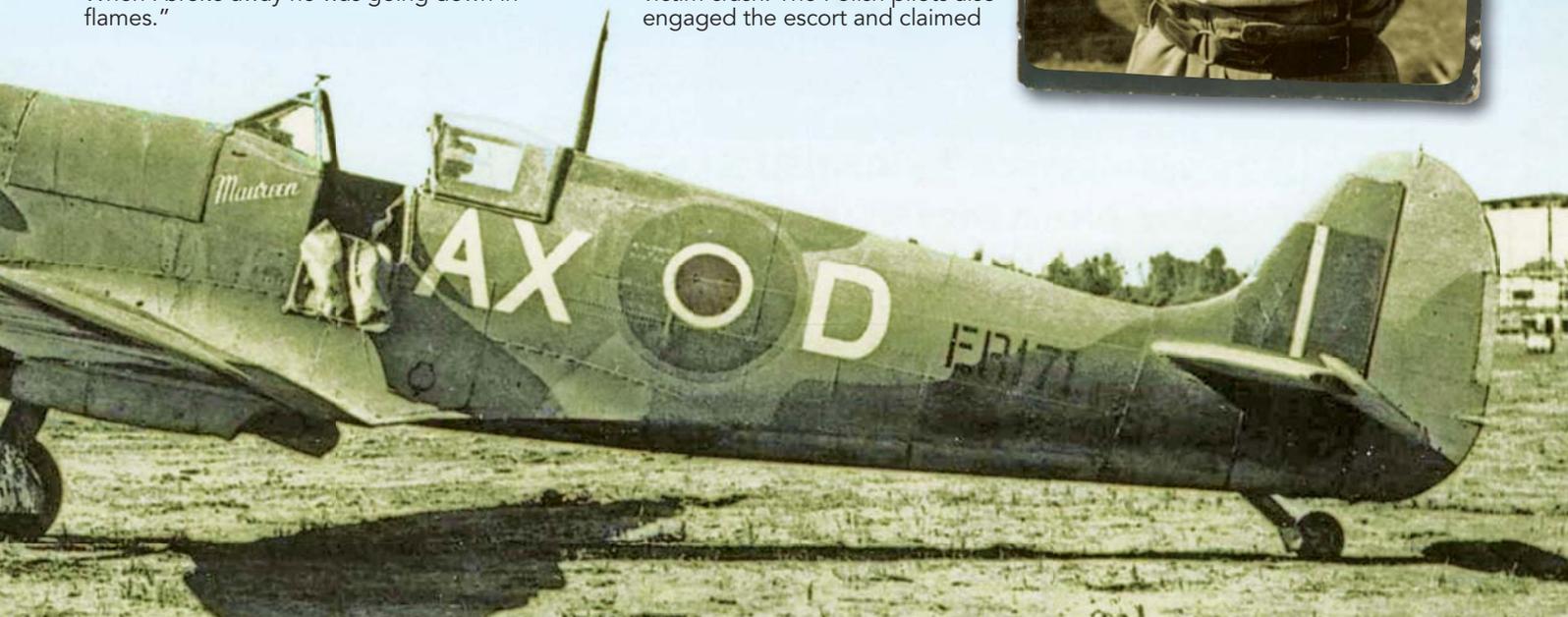
His No.2, Lieutenant Don Brebner, saw this aircraft fall into the sea; Robinson had become the SAAF's latest Ace. He was not finished, however, as he continued:

"I climbed up over the same area and saw more 109s climbing up slightly ahead of me. I gained on the No 2 of a pair and gave four bursts, the first at about 200 yards and the last at 50 yards. I saw strikes all over the 109, pieces flying off the machine, and as it rolled over on its back it was belching a huge column of black smoke and it went straight down." Once again, Brebner saw his leader's victim crash. The Polish pilots also engaged the escort and claimed

five Bf 109s and one MC.202 shot down.

Also in action was Arthur Higgs who made a quarter astern attack on an Me 323 that he damaged before pulling up over the enemy formation and attacking a second. However, the gunner scored several hits on him as he pulled up to avoid a Kittyhawk that was also attacking and sent the *Gigant* down in flames. Higgs then opened fire on a third Me 323 which he shot down in flames.

The 7 Wing Kittyhawks, which were led on this day by Major Jack Parsonson, the CO of 5 Squadron, also now joined the action. "I first ordered a head-on attack to break up their tight formation,"





ABOVE: A number of Junkers Ju 52s pictured crossing the Mediterranean during the Luftwaffe's efforts to supply Axis forces in North Africa. The type suffered badly during Operation Flax. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-545-0614-21/Seeger, Erwin/CC-BY-SA)

BELOW: Allied pilots pictured at Kairouan North, Tunisia, recounting the events of 22 April 1943, when Curtiss Kittyhawks of 7 South African Wing and Supermarine Spitfires of 1 Squadron SAAF intercepted and shot down a large formation of Messerschmitt Me 323s. Left to right, they are: Major J.D.W. Human (sweep leader of No.7 Wing), Major J.E. Parsonson (Officer Commanding 5 Squadron SAAF, credited with shooting down two Me 323s), and Lieutenant R.W. Humphrey and Lieutenant F.A. Weingartz (both 5 Squadron SAAF, each of whom was credited with two Me 323s). Lieutenant Roger Humphrey flew his first combat that day. He later recalled that "it was like a fantastic H.G. Wells story". (Imperial War Museum; CNA764)

he later wrote, "and at once five of them crashed into the sea. Then we went in from all sides and hunted them till we had shot them to bits. We hunted them like wolves."

At the head of 4 Squadron was Major "Rosy" du Toit. "On 22 April Jack was leading 7 Wing when there was horrific carnage as 24 [sic] huge six-engined Me 323 transport aircraft were destroyed. Jack and his pilots sailed into the hapless enemy aircraft which were undoubtedly carrying a full cargo of fuel. They burst into flames on impact with the water, the burning petrol spreading out in all

"A mass of propellers filled the sky. Then it was like potting clay pigeons, only easier."

fired a six-second burst from a range of just fifty-yards. This resulted in the starboard engines bursting into flames, followed immediately afterwards by the lower fuselage. Moments later the whole aircraft, a raging inferno, hit the water and broke up.

Weingartz then heard a radio message that one of the transports was escaping. He gave chase, and having caught up with his prey, made three separate diving attacks, firing a two-second burst on each occasion. Weingartz observed the engines catch light, the fire spread to the fuselage and then some debris fly off before the huge aircraft broke in two just aft of the wing root and crashed into the sea. These were his only air combat victories.³

Also flying with 5 Squadron was Major Johnny Human who also claimed one of the Me 323s and was thus elevated to become an ace. He afterwards described the scene to a reporter: "A mass of propellers filled the sky. Then it was like potting clay pigeons, only easier. Finally, we left a sea of burning wrecks."

As many of the Me 323s were carrying fuel, it was frighteningly easy for the South Africans to set them ablaze as one of them wrote: "One good machine-gun burst was usually all it took to set fire to the wing fuel tanks of one of the transport's six engines, after which the flames inevitably spread to the cargo of metal drums. Whole burning 'planes plunged nose-first into the sea, making enormous

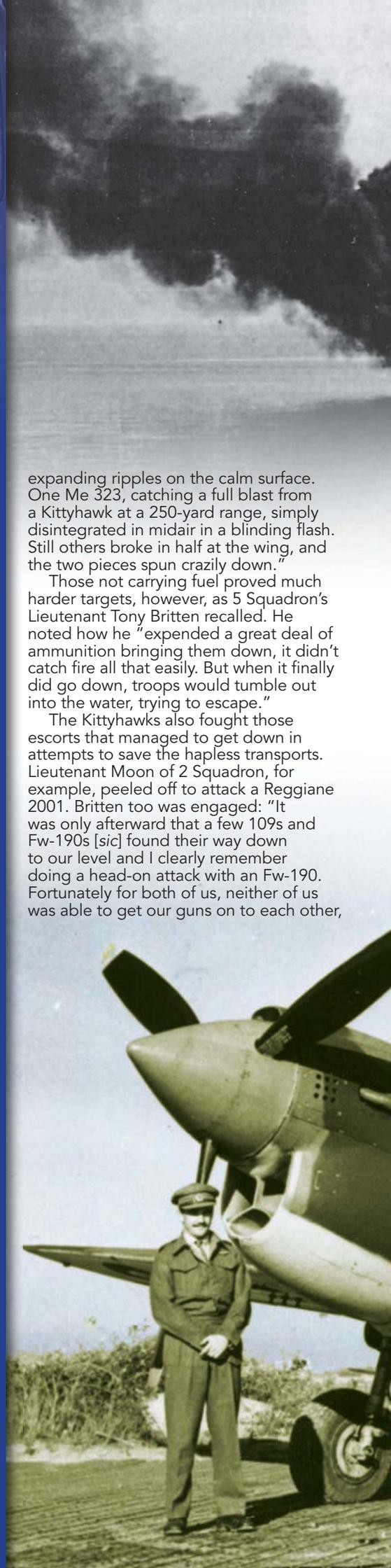
directions giving the impression that the sea was alight." Parsonson received an immediate DSO whilst du Toit received the DFC soon afterwards.

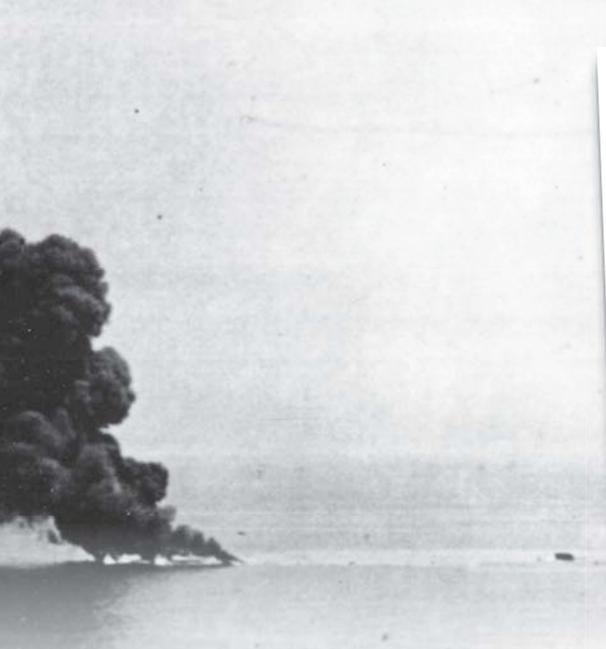
Another of Parsonson's pilots was Lieutenant Felix Weingartz. Weingartz closed in on one of the transports and

expanding ripples on the calm surface. One Me 323, catching a full blast from a Kittyhawk at a 250-yard range, simply disintegrated in midair in a blinding flash. Still others broke in half at the wing, and the two pieces spun crazily down."

Those not carrying fuel proved much harder targets, however, as 5 Squadron's Lieutenant Tony Britten recalled. He noted how he "expended a great deal of ammunition bringing them down, it didn't catch fire all that easily. But when it finally did go down, troops would tumble out into the water, trying to escape."

The Kittyhawks also fought those escorts that managed to get down in attempts to save the hapless transports. Lieutenant Moon of 2 Squadron, for example, peeled off to attack a Reggiane 2001. Britten too was engaged: "It was only afterward that a few 109s and Fw-190s [sic] found their way down to our level and I clearly remember doing a head-on attack with an Fw-190. Fortunately for both of us, neither of us was able to get our guns on to each other,





ABOVE: This billowing column of smoke marks the end of a Me 323 – a fate suffered by most of the *Gigants* of I and II/TG 5 on 22 April 1943. (Group Captain W.S.G. Maydwell)

ABOVE RIGHT: Lieutenant M.E. "Robbie" Robinson, 1 Squadron SAAF, pictured after shooting down a Bf 109. Behind him is Captain Cecil Golding. (via M. Schoemann)

ABOVE FAR RIGHT: Lieutenant Robinson's wingman on 22 April, who witnessed both of his "kills", was Lieutenant Don Brebner. (SAAF)

BELOW RIGHT: Flying top cover to the SAAF Kittyhawks were the Spitfire IXs of the Polish Fighting Team, one of which was EN315/ZX-6. Flying it on 22 April 1943, was Flight Lieutenant "Dziubek" Horbaczewski, who shot down two Bf 109s taking his tally to eight. (via C.F. Shores)

BOTTOM: One of 5 Squadron's Kittyhawk IIIs, FR781 GL-H (named *Rayant*), is prepared for another mission at a Tunisian base. The barrels of the .50-calibre wing guns, which took such a toll on 22 April 1943, during Operation *Flax*, can clearly be seen. (via J.D.R. Rawlings)

destroyed as a functioning unit with the Germans losing 119 airmen. Only nineteen were rescued. For the price of the Kittyhawk of Lieutenant Steele, who was picked up by the Germans, the South African Air Force had achieved a decisive victory.

Of the great slaughter of transports it was later reported that Field Marshal Kesselring was aghast when he learned what had happened that morning. He was forced to order an immediate cessation of the daylight air bridge. According to German records, in less than three weeks well over a hundred transport aircraft had been destroyed which, following the equally prodigious transport losses suffered at Stalingrad, proved to be a grievous blow to any hope of staving off defeat in Tunisia.

The end for the surviving Axis forces finally came on 13 May 1943, when *Maresciallo d'Italia* Giovanni Messe (promoted from General the previous day) surrendered 250,000

troops. It was an act that caused General Alexander to wire to Winston Churchill: "All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shore." ■

NOTES:

1. The parallel Allied naval effort was Operation *Retribution*.
2. Levine, Alan, *The War Against Rommel's Supply Lines, 1942-43* (Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, 2008).
3. Weingartz later rose to the rank of Major and commanded 250 Squadron in Italy in 1945.



but the Fw-190 passed so close above that I heard his engine."

By 08.50 hours the massacre was over. At least fourteen Me 323s had been destroyed, as well as several of the escorts. TG 5 had, to all intents, been

