



TANK-BUSTERS

Above
Hurricane IIs HV663
and HW313 taking off
from Gabès on April
6, 1943. 6 SQUADRON
RECORDS

Bottom right
A shattered Panzer III
- many others met the
same fate during the
desert battles in which
6 Sqn participated
between 1942 and 1943.
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

Having given up its Lysanders, Egyptian-based 6 Squadron was left with just a single Hurricane I in the spring of 1942. Having assumed command, Sqn Ldr Roger Porteous wondered just how much worse it could get.

Further indignity followed for what was one of the RAF's most senior units. Based at Landing Ground (LG) 224 in the Western Desert with detachments at other rudimentary airstrips, the squadron was used as a servicing and overhaul

outfit, with its pilots carrying out test and

ferry flights. Thankfully, the prospects for 6 were about to change.

At this time, Hurricane IIs were being shipped to the Middle East for use in the anti-tank role. The variant was equipped with a pair of 40mm Vickers Type S cannon underwing, each with 15 rounds, plus two 0.303in Browning machine guns within the wings. This armament, low-level operations and the draggy tropical filter under the nose, compromised the Hurricane's speed. This fell by as much as 50mph (80km) to 288mph.

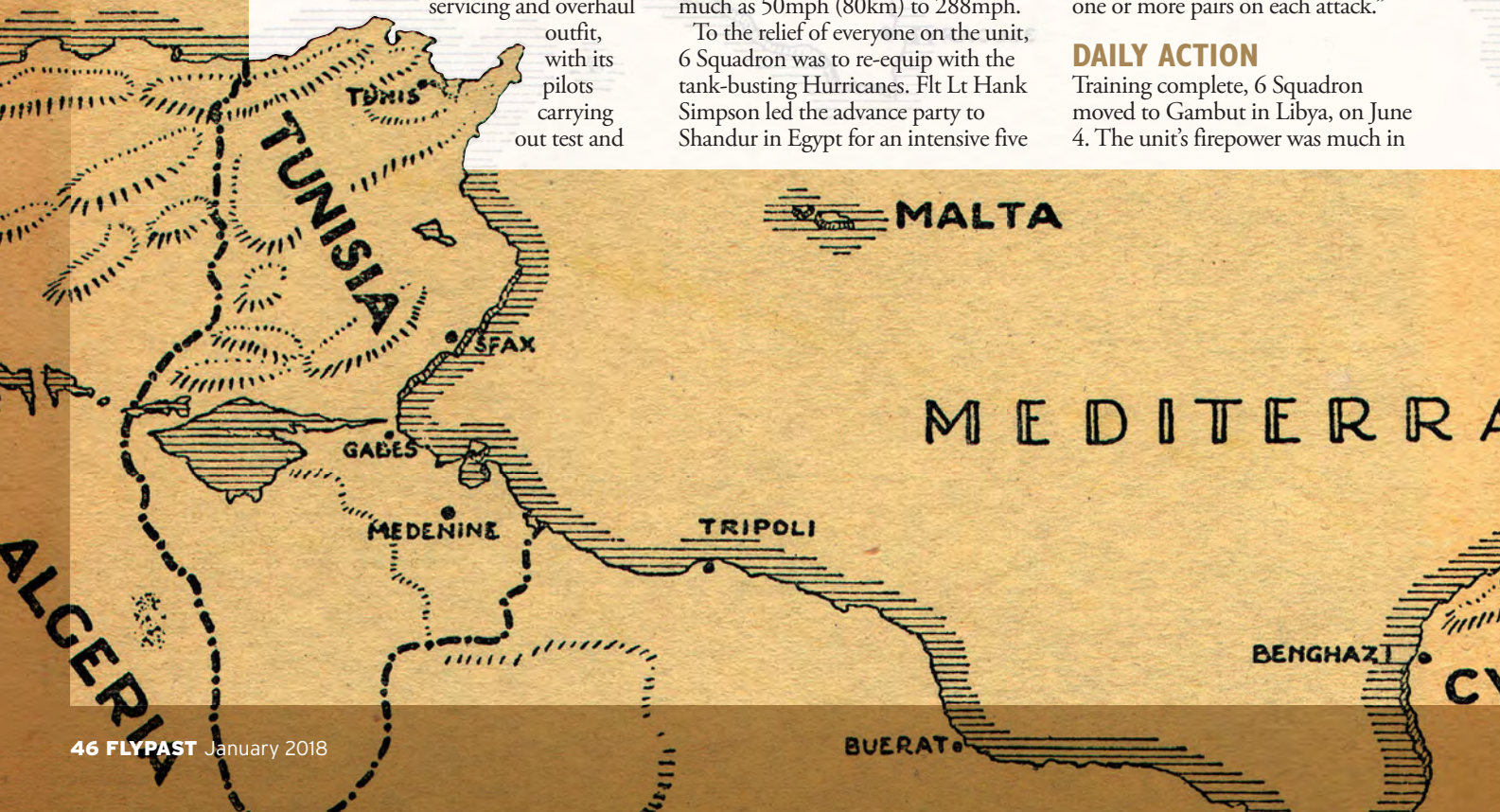
To the relief of everyone on the unit, 6 Squadron was to re-equip with the tank-busting Hurricanes. Flt Lt Hank Simpson led the advance party to Shandur in Egypt for an intensive five

weeks training that included live firing against captured enemy tanks.

The cannon proved to be a viable weapon, but the recoil of the 40mm guns tended to pitch the nose down. The unit's South African second in command, Flt Lt Donald Weston-Burt, recalled: "If the IId fired its first pair of 40mm [shells] at 1,000 yards, two more pairs could be got away accurately before breaking off. It is no exaggeration to say that any good pilot could guarantee to hit his target with one or more pairs on each attack."

DAILY ACTION

Training complete, 6 Squadron moved to Gambut in Libya, on June 4. The unit's firepower was much in





IN THE NORTH AFRICAN CAMPAIGN CANNON-ARMED HURRICANES TOOK A HEAVY TOLL OF ROMMEL'S PANZERS, AS ANDREW THOMAS DESCRIBES

demand as Rommel's assault on the Gazala-Bir Hakeim line had opened on May 26.

With Sqn Ldr Hayter leading in BN860, Flt Lt 'Pip' Hillier in BN797, Plt Off Walter in BN861 and Plt Off Peterson in BN842, the first 'op' took place on June 7, but was aborted. Early the following afternoon Porteous in BN841 led an attack on a road convoy west of Bir Hakeim, leaving two tanks and a couple of trucks destroyed. The CO claimed one tank and a lorry.

Canadian Flt Lt 'Hank' Simpson, in BN861, was wounded in the chest while leading an attack on tanks near Bir Hakeim in support of the Free French Brigade. Simpson continued to

score further hits before his Hurricane was struck again by flak. After flying blind for a short period, he baled out at just 500ft. He was awarded an immediate DFC. On recovering from his injuries, he returned to the fray three months later.

The squadron was in action daily, hitting five tanks, five trucks and an anti-tank gun on June 15 alone, albeit for the loss of Plt Off Lee. Three days later 6's Hurricanes went after a column of enemy armour advancing on Sidi Rezegh and hit 18 tanks and other vehicles.

Strikes were carried out at extremely low level and Hillier's aircraft struck the tank he was attacking, losing his tailwheel and part of his

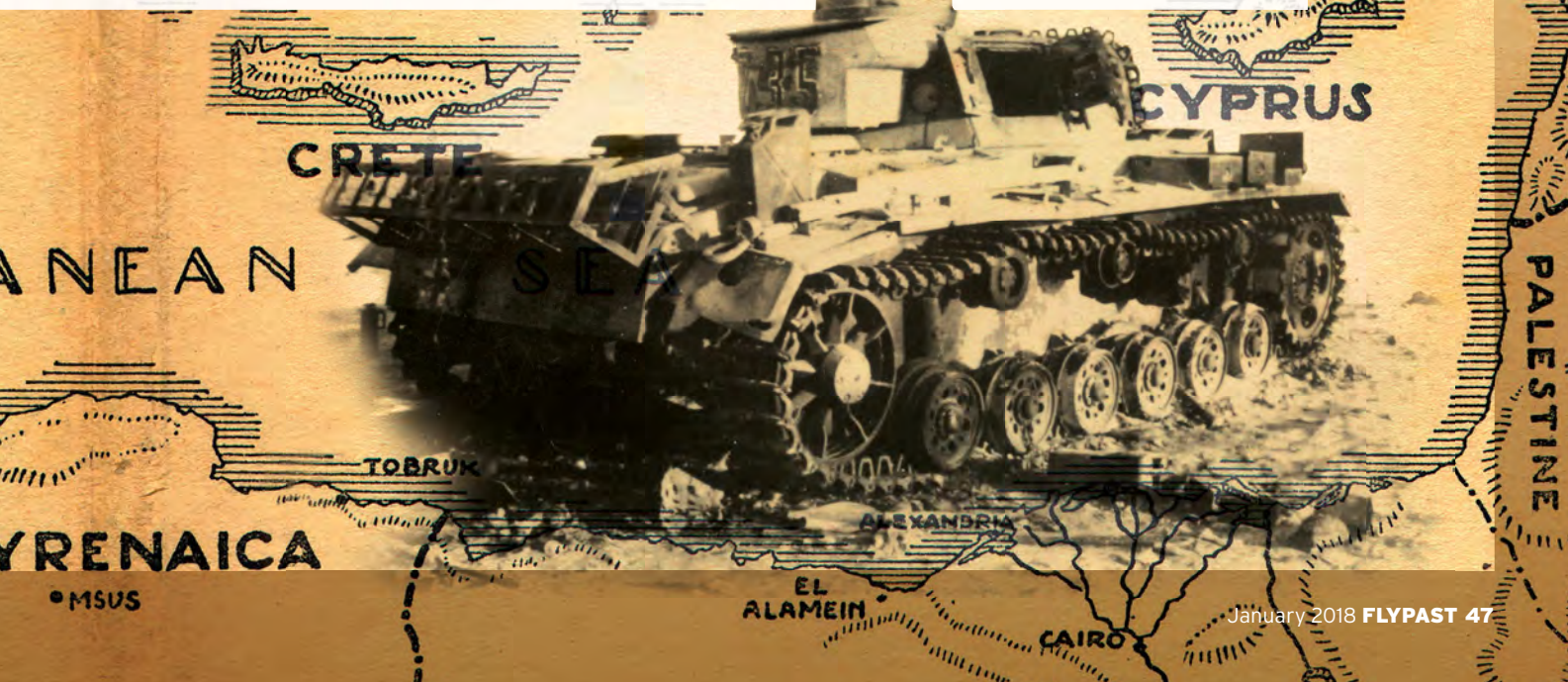
rudder. He returned safely despite the damage. Hillier became the first anti-tank 'ace', ending with at least nine destroyed.

The Allied retreat continued and Tobruk fell on the 21st – a massive blow to British morale.

Six Hurricanes, led by the CO, hit a convoy of 14 trucks and a tank on July 14. The unit diary noting dryly: "It was a pretty poor show as one truck got away. When last seen it was bounding across the desert touching the ground every two or three hundred yards!"

HOLDING THE LINE

The Eighth Army moved back to El Alamein where





Above
Hurricane IId BP188 of
6 Squadron over Egypt
in mid-1942. 6 SQUADRON
RECORDS

Right
Sqn Ldr Donald Weston-
Burt (left) briefing a
group of 6 Squadron
pilots during the Battle
of Alamein. 6 SQUADRON
RECORDS

Right centre
Major 'Johnny' Blaauw
led 7 Squadron SAAF
during their successful
tank-busting period. VIA
M SCHOEMANN

Below right
One of 7 Squadron
SAAF's Hurricane
IIs, used for training
alongside the unit's
Mk.IIIs. AUTHOR'S
COLLECTION



were halted – in the days leading up to it, 6's Hurricanes had attacked at least nine tanks. That day the promoted Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt led a formation of six against enemy armour and he personally hit a trio of Mk.III tanks. F/Sgt Kurt Levine, who later received a DFM, bagged an eight-wheeled armoured car.

Levine recalled life at this time: "We lived rather rough, like the army. The dug-out tent tended to be safer in bombing and strafing attacks. Water was rationed and



"Strikes were carried out at extremely low level and Hillier struck the tank he was attacking, losing his tailwheel and part of his rudder. He returned safely despite the damage"

it turned and stood its ground. The Hurricanes of 6 Squadron continued to stage daily sweeps. Typical was that on July 13 when Hillier's shells struck a Panzer II and three Mk.III's. The following day, several Italian M-13 tanks and armoured cars were hit. Such actions continued in a similar vein throughout the month.

By the end of August, No.6 had claimed 26 tanks, 31 armoured half-track troop carriers and many other types of vehicle destroyed. Rommel's final offensive in Egypt began on the last day of the month in what became the Battle of Alam el Halfa.

By September 3 the Axis forces



the diet was mainly bully beef, tinned potatoes, pickles, hardtack [a hard biscuit], jam and tea. A good evening snack was to fry the hardtack in butter and eat it warm with jam. Washing was a luxury.”

SOUTH AFRICAN COMRADES

The success of 6's operations identified the need for reinforcement. On September 17 part of 7 Squadron South African Air Force (SAAF) arrived at Shandur to begin training on the Hurricane IId. In command was Major J P D 'Johnny' Blaauw who had only taken up the post the day before.

Blaauw reorganised his unit with 'A' Flight under Capt Harold Kirby



Above
Named 'Our John', Hurricane IId BN795 served with 6 Squadron in Tunisia. It had been presented by the family of Wg Cdr John Gillan.
6 SQUADRON RECORDS



Left
Hurricane IId KW704 of 6 Squadron in late 1942. VIA M GOODMAN

panic whenever they appeared.”

Also contributing on the 24th was 7 Squadron SAAF with Major Blaauw and lieutenants Barry Wiggett, 'Spud' Kelly and Aubrey Rosholt each destroying a tank.

On October 26, Wiggett, newly elevated to captain, and lieutenants Alexander and Taylor successfully attacked a group of 25 tanks. Alan Alexander's BN971 was hit by flak and force landed near Lake Maghra. He was eventually picked up by an armoured car unit and returned safely to base.

BREAKOUT

After intense fighting Operation Supercharge – the breakout – began on November 2 with 6 Squadron being particularly successful. For example, on the 3rd Weston-Burt hit two tanks and four transport vehicles and Carswell, attacking though a barrage of fire, shot up a Panzer IV and a brace of armoured cars.

The South Africans were also active when early in the afternoon Major Blaauw led lieutenants George, Turner and Taylor against packed traffic on the coast road near El Daba. Upon their return Wiggett, George, Rosholt and Reyneke took off on a second sortie. On both occasions targets were attacked with great success.

The next day, November 4, Axis resistance broke and the race across the desert began. During the rout the two tank-busting Hurricane squadrons claimed 39 tanks, 42 field guns and numerous other vehicles destroyed.

As a consequence of this spectacular achievement, 6 Squadron was nicknamed the 'Flying Can Openers' and an emblem showing a can-opener with wings was painted on

and 'B' Flight coming under Capt Gray. The South Africans were declared operational on October 21.

Throughout September, 6 Squadron remained busy. On the 28th, Fg Off Jimmy Carswell in BN961 hit two lorries and a gun

position, while the next day Fg Off Morrison-Bell in BP188 led an attack that destroyed three armoured cars atop an escarpment.

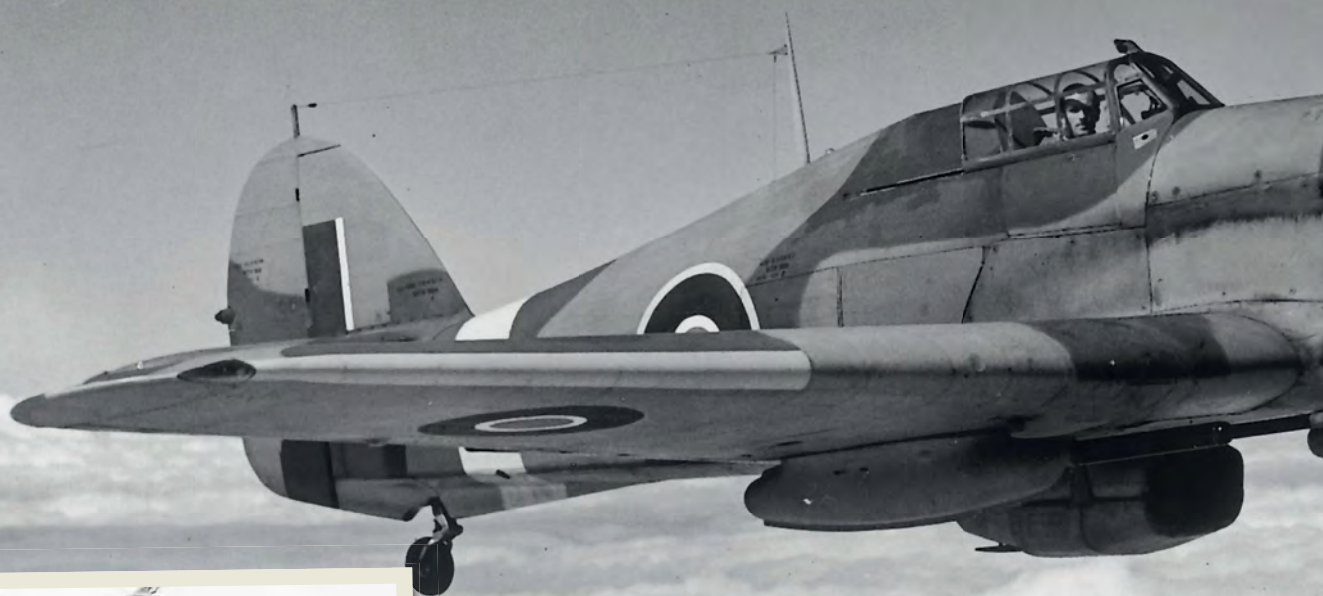
At 21:40 hours on October 23, the crucial Battle of El Alamein began. Joined by the South Africans, the Hurricanes of 6 Squadron flew their first sortie of the battle from LG 89 at 10:30 the following morning.

During that day 16 tanks were destroyed, three being 'brewed' by Weston-Burt alone. This was 6's most successful day in the tank-busting role and the claims were almost all against captured 'Honey' (M3 Stuart) and Crusader tanks.

A German prisoner of war gave an indication of 6's effectiveness reportedly saying that of his company of 12 tanks attacked by the Hurricanes, six were knocked out and left burning and the others were all hit. He concluded: "The appearance of British 'tank-busters' came as a great surprise and caused



“We lived rather rough, like the army. The dug-out tent tended to be safer in bombing and strafing attacks. Water was rationed... Washing was a luxury”



Above
Fg Off D W Jones leaning on the barrel of the 40mm cannon of his Hurricane IIc.
VIA M GOODMAN

Right
Fg Off Howard Clark was killed during the heavy fighting over Tunisia in late March 1943. VIA ALASTAIR GOODRUM

the nose of its aircraft. This tradition continued on to its Eurofighter Typhoons in the present day.

In December the squadrons left Egypt to re-equip with standard Hurricane IIcs for shipping patrols. In January 1943 Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt took command of 6 and at the end of the month he led the unit back into the desert southeast of Tobruk. In late February it enthusiastically began re-equipping with the Mk.IIc once again.

CLOSING THE RING

Enemy forces withdrawing from Libya eventually reached the security of the rugged Tunisian border and the Mareth Line. This was a system of fortifications built by the French before the war against possible attack by the Italians in Libya. With steep 70ft banks, the Mareth was reputed to be the most difficult military defence line to breach in North Africa.



Checked in the north at Kasserine, Rommel turned his armour south and on March 6, 1943, flung it against Montgomery's Eighth Army at Medenine in Tunisia. The assault failed, costing no fewer than 52 tanks.

Meanwhile 6 Squadron had moved to Castel Benito near Tripoli returning to action on the 10th when a dozen Hurricanes were thrown in to support General Philippe Leclerc's Free French force that had crossed the Sahara from French Equatorial Africa and had been attacked by a powerful German armoured force.

In three separate strikes near Zamlet el Hadid 6 Squadron destroyed half a dozen precious tanks and over 20 armoured and soft-skinned vehicles. Flak was fierce and the CO returned with his wing main spar almost severed.

This was Rommel's last throw of the dice and in mid-March the Allied armies began to close the ring. Progress on the northern front was slow at first, but in the south a spectacular victory was achieved by breaching the Mareth Line and here air power played a key part.

Moving forward with the action, 6 Squadron arrived at Senem



the Djebel Tebaga Gap on March 23. Shortly after 10:00 a dozen 6 Squadron Hurricanes engaged tanks in the El Hamma area in the face of fierce ground fire. F/Sgt Frank Harris was shot down and killed while damage forced W/O Mercer into a high-speed crash landing. Flying HV597 Carswell hit two half-tracks and several trucks before he too was badly shot up.

Seven more Hurricanes set out at 17:05, again after tanks in the El Hamma area and encountered fighters and heavy ground fire. Walker and Day were both shot down, each crash-landing safely and returning.

Action around El Hamma continued unabated on the 25th. The pilots of 6 Squadron went out after tanks once more with ten aircraft taking off at 12:45. So intense was the ground fire that just four returned. Flying officers Zillessen and T I Peterson were among those that went down, but by some miracle they both survived unhurt.

Left
A wartime air-to-air view of a cannon-armed Hurricane.



in southern Tunisia by March 17 to support the assault on the formidable defences that began on the 20th. Although highly effective, the Hurricanes continued to be highly vulnerable to enemy ground fire.

In a little over three hours on the 22nd, the Hurricanes of 6 Squadron destroyed nine tanks and a dozen other vehicles. When the enemy attempted a counterattack, despite the heavy rain 13 Hurricanes took off at 13:25 after tanks south of El Hamma and claimed nine destroyed.

Fg Off D W Jones, an American, was shot down by a Messerschmitt Bf 109 and slightly wounded. Fg Off Bluett and Plt Off Freeland were also brought down by the '109s from II Gruppe of Jagdgeschwader 77. In late afternoon six Bf 109s caught Fg Off Morgan who had to force land in the hills northwest of El Hamma where he narrowly escaped capture by Italian troops.

TURNING POINT

The call went up to support the New Zealand Division's thrust on



The turning point came on the 26th when the New Zealanders and the Eighth Armoured Brigade broke through the gap between Djebel Tebaga and Djebel Melab with heavy air support. In mid-afternoon, Curtiss Kittyhawks from 3 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force and 250 Squadron RAF escorted 11 Hurricanes of 6 Squadron while they struck at enemy tanks in the area, bringing the unit's total to 32.

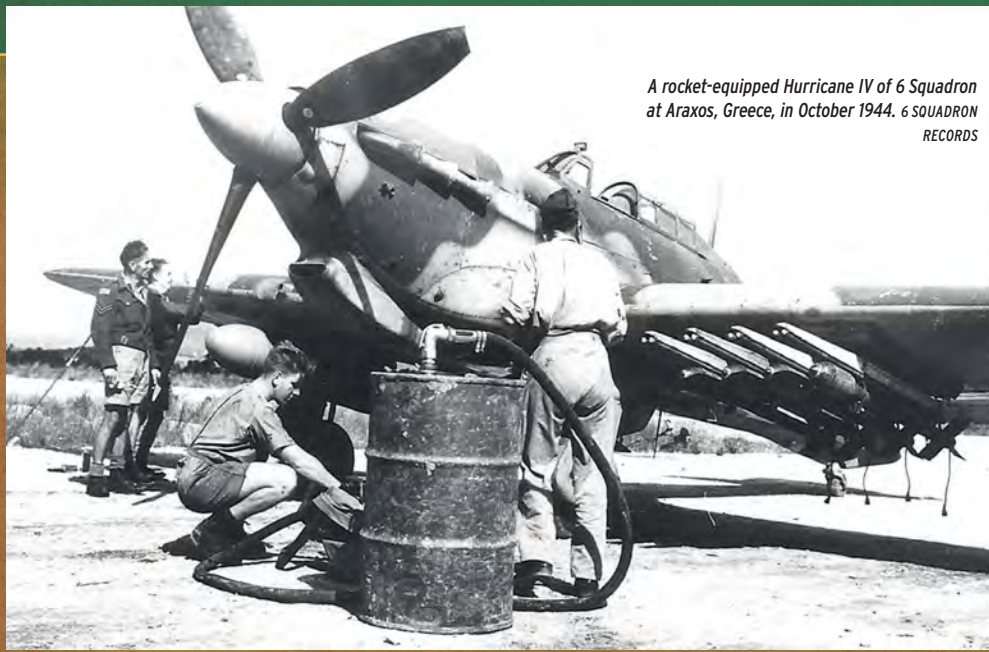
FEWER TARGETS

On April 3, 1943 the unit moved further forward to Gabès, in Tunisia. After a brief rest, 6 Squadron continued operations, but targets were by now noticeably fewer.

During the early hours of the

Above
After its successful tank-busting activities at El Alamein, Egypt, 6 Squadron's Hurricanes were decorated with a winged can opener badge. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

Above left
F/Sgt Frank Harris was buried next to his aircraft in Tunisia. He was later re-buried at Sfax War Cemetery. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



A rocket-equipped Hurricane IV of 6 Squadron at Araxos, Greece, in October 1944. 6 SQUADRON RECORDS

BALKAN REPRISE

The Hurricane IVs of 6 Squadron settled into Grottaglie, near Taranto, Italy, in February 1944. From there it flew anti-shiping sorties over the Adriatic and ground attacks in support of Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia.

In mid-December a detachment of half a dozen Hurricanes was sent to Nikšić in Montenegro from where strikes were made on targets around Danilovgrad and Spuž where they destroyed a vital rail bridge.

On December 18 the Hurricanes reprised the 'Flying Can Opener' role when the unit hit a group of the much-feared Tiger tanks, destroying one and damaging two others. The operation was successfully repeated the following day, but after this Balkan encore, 6 Squadron's tank-busting days were finally over.

"Axis resistance broke and the race across the desert began. During the rout the two tank-busting Hurricane squadrons were able to claim 39 tanks, 42 field guns and numerous other vehicles destroyed"

Below
Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt with his pilots and groundcrew in front of a Hurricane in early 1943. VIA TONY HANCOCK

6th, the Eighth Army opened its assault on the Wadi Akarit line and the 'Flying Can Openers' were out in force at 12:25, when 13 of them took off on a tank hunt. Again, the unit suffered heavily: Fg Off Peterson, F/Sgt Hastings and Fg Off Zillessen were all shot down.

The next day Axis troops began to retreat and the British entered Mezzouna. Eleven of 6's Hurricane IIs took off at 18:00 to engage tanks near Skhira, but the light flak again proved deadly and six were

shot down. Fg Off B L Thornton (BP308), F/Sgt R Veal (BP193) and Plt Off J M Freeland (HW359) all returned to service but Fg Off Howard Clark (KW704), F/Sgt Eric Hastings (HV560) and Fg Off Walter (HW651) were killed.

During the night of April 20 the 'Hermann Göring' and 10th Panzer Divisions moved forward towards Medjez el Bab and eventually surrendered. The much-depleted 6 Squadron had been reinforced by the arrival of six more Mk.IIs flown

by pilots from 134 Squadron.

Claims for 6 Squadron during the Battle of the Mareth Line included 148 tanks hit, of which 47 were destroyed, as were nearly 200 other vehicles. Seven DFCs were awarded to its pilots and Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt received an immediate DSO.

There were a few more tank-busting attacks but the enemy in Tunisia was finished and surrendered on May 13. The Hurricanes of 6 Squadron had helped to play a big part in the victory. ●

