

FLYING

Cheetahs

Bush-strip lookouts equipped with gongs and gifts of wild cats as mascots – Steve Maclean details the colourful exploits of the South African 2 Squadron.



Right 'Spitfire', one of two cheetahs gifted to 2 Squadron while still cubs. A unit veteran referred to 'Spit' and 'Fire' in his memoirs, however the names 'Vickers' and 'Spitfire' are generally accepted as the cats' names.

The few personnel that constituted the near-dormant 2 Squadron, South African Air Force (SAAF), took their first steps to war as they boarded a trio of Vickers Valentia transport aircraft.

What awaited them was a challenging adventure in East Africa where, for the most part, they would be required to operate ageing biplane fighters.

They were departing Zwartkop Air Station outside Pretoria on May 13, 1940, bound for their first experiences in the bush of Kenya.

As September 1940 drew to a

close, 1 Squadron SAAF, had been operational against the Italian Regia Aeronautica for almost five months. The unit had a score of two confirmed kills against a formidable and well-prepared enemy. The Italians had the upper hand in a number of instances, not least of which was an established infrastructure with modern facilities, servicing aircraft equal to, if not superior, in performance to all bar the SAAF's limited supply of Hurricane Is, from a healthy cache of spares.

Conversely, the SAAF had limited

resources scattered across two fronts in a vast and inhospitable theatre covering a swathe of the continent, often operating from primitive strips carved out of the bush. Elements undergoing training on Gloster Gauntlets in Khartoum, the Sudan (now Sudan), were supplemented by operational detachments in Nairobi, Nanyuki, Archer's Post, Garissa, Ndege's Nest, Wajir and Mombasa in Kenya. The men at Mombasa's Port Reitz airfield were flying patrols over the vital harbour town.

On October 1 these detachments were administratively harnessed



The association with Kenyan cheetahs was first recorded in a badge designed by George Hillary following 2 Squadron's move into North Africa. The concept was submitted for official approval and accepted in a more standardised format. The motto is translated by the unit as 'Upwards and Onwards'.

Left
Elementary facilities at Wajir included a lookout posted in a tree. This was a common occurrence at bush strips where early-warning relied solely on the good eyesight of Kenyan regulars and vigorous banging of a gong!

under the banner of 2 Squadron. The unit was equipped with an eclectic mix of five Hurricane Is, nine Gloster Gladiators and nine Hawker Furies under the command of Capt St Elmo Truter.

THEORY AND REALITY

In theory the SAAF now had two fighter units in East Africa, but in reality the familiar problems remained. Insufficient spares, scattered detachments and too few, tired, aircraft – the latter exacerbated by the loss of Fury 206, which crashed and burnt-

out during a training exercise on October 5, 1940. Further aggravation followed when Lt Leighton Dudley 'pranged' a Gladiator into Port Reitz harbour during a low-level incident on the 13th.

These losses were partially balanced on the evening of the 19th when Lts Hendrik Burger and Japie Wiese scrambled from the strip at Garissa acting on information regarding an incoming raid. Through the light of an African sunset the two South Africans



identified three Caproni Ca 133 tri-motor bombers approaching the airfield.

Burger focused on the third in the formation, while Wiese stalked the second. Managing three firing passes, Burger watched his prey fall away and force-land in the scrub below, all five crew members clambered out as the Caproni ground to a halt in a cloud of dust. Within minutes it was ablaze, torched to prevent it falling into enemy hands. Wiese, meanwhile,



Right
The sombre results of Lt Dudley's efforts following a low-flying incident in Gladiator N5818 over Port Reitz harbour on October 13, 1940.



Above
Frank Meaker, Patrick Rushmere and Walter Stanford formate three 2 Squadron Furies over Hussein.

Below
Hurricane 284, possibly at Nanyuki, shortly after passing from 2 to 3 Squadron.

fired but didn't observe any results before the remaining two aircraft slipped into the safety of the gathering dusk.

Gladiator numbers were further reduced when Lt Alistair McDonald in N5826 crashed during a training flight on October 23. The arrival of 3 Squadron and its Hurricanes the following day from South Africa brought some respite and additional

well as three Savoia-Marchetti S.81 Pipistrello tri-motors of 29° Gruppo, based at Yavello 170 miles (273km) to the northeast, approached Lokitaung the following morning.

Spotting the trio below, Blake and Loftus fell on the bombers, the former raking his target. It caught fire and broke apart during an attempted forced-landing. Loftus singled out 'his' S.81 and fired a number of short

firepower.

Borrowing Hurricanes from the new arrivals, 2 Squadron's Flt Lt Robert Blake and Lt Doug Loftus flew to Lodwar, to the west of Lake Rudolf [now Lake Turkana] the following day – possibly on information of a pending raid on Allied troop positions. By design or coincidence this detachment served the unit

bursts into the fuselage and engines, which disabled the enemy machine. Displaying superb skill, the Italian pilot managed to bring the bomber down on a dry river bed, the crew torching the wreck before setting off north towards the border.

A raid on the strategic Port Reitz complex by S.79 Sparvieros launched from Gobwen the same day met with frustration as Furies scrambled by both 'E' and 'F' Detachments, at Ndege's Nest and Garissa respectively, failed to intercept the Italians on their homeward journey.

PREDATORY INSTINCT

It was during this period that a gift from the renowned settler Raymond Hook was forever woven into aviation lore with the presentation of a pair of Cheetah cubs as mascots to 2 Squadron at Nanyuki.

The two carnivores are known to

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Above
Ill-fated Gladiator N5813 and Lockheed 14 'L1' at Soroti on November 9, 1940 en route to the Sudan.



Left
Gladiator N5856 on standby alongside a makeshift kitchen and accommodation tent in the Northern Frontier District.

have remained 'on strength' for some time until their natural predatory instinct became problematic, forcing their removal. From this impromptu menagerie was born the unit's sobriquet, 'Flying Cheetahs'.

On October 31, 1940 a scramble to intercept unidentified aircraft approaching Archer's Post almost resulted in disaster. The Prime Minister, Gen Jan Smuts, and his Chief of General Staff, Gen Pierre van Ryneveld, along with Maj-Gen Alfred R Godwin-Austen, Maj-Gen Alan Cunningham and Air Cdre William Sowrey, were inbound.

Alerted to the approach of aircraft, and their apparent lack of knowledge regarding identification procedures used by friendly arrivals, two Furies were scrambled and had begun firing on the twin-engined aircraft before they were identified as two SAAF Junkers Ju 86s and accompanying Hurricane escort. Several hits were registered on the twin-engine bombers despite the pilots taking evasive action.

An inquiry into the incident later absolved 2 Squadron of any blame, while standard procedure in approaching outlying airfields housing detachments was strictly enforced. The VIP party was



Left
Fit Lt Hudd examining the results of the CO, Captain Truter, landing a Fury in soft sand at Mogadishu, Somalia.

subsequently split between the two bombers for the remainder of the tour around the Northern Frontier District.

NILE EXPEDITION

The loss of any aircraft was keenly felt in a theatre of sparse resources, which made the shooting down of Gladiator N5813 on November 9, 1940 particularly galling. As the pilot of the accompanying 54 Flight Lockheed 14, Lt Owen Glynn-Davies was well positioned to witness the drama, subsequently recording in his unpublished memoir: "I was sent down to Nairobi

stay the first night at Juba. When we arrived there we were astonished to find the runway cluttered with obstructions such as old tractors and ploughs.

"We circled patiently until a couple of bullets smashed through our left mainplane. Looking down we could see the residents of Juba firing from the streets so we made off smartly, just in time to see one of our Gladiators start to lose height, eventually land on an island in the Nile and turn over on its back.

"Suddenly people swarmed on to the runway and started clearing the obstructions, and it wasn't long





Above
Blake, Loftus and the CO, Captain St Elmo Truter, following the former pair's downing of two S.81s on October 25, 1940.

Above right
The standby room at Nairobi featured comforts of which those on bush-strip detachment could only dream.

Below
Former 2 Squadron Gladiators N5815 and N5851 at Soroti on delivery to 1 Squadron in the Sudan on November 9, 1940.

before we were given a green light and went in to land. All we could think of was getting down to the river to rescue Lt Bert Dimmock.

"The local district commissioner took us down to the river where a paddle steamer was tied up. Once the boiler had brewed up, we moved off. Now we were going downstream which, with our speed of about eight knots plus the Nile's four, had us fairly flashing between the banks.

"Suddenly ahead of us appeared a large dugout canoe in which Dimmock stood up to wave excitedly. Our engine room crew flung the paddles into reverse and opened the throttle fully. Belching smoke and flame from the funnel, we bore down on Dimmock's canoe. Just before we hit and sank it, he flung his parachute aboard and took to the water from which he and his paddlers were rescued once we could turn around and go back for them.

"The following day we went down to where Dimmock had pranged and walked through the towering grass to the wreck. We removed what we could – machine guns, ammunition, radio and instruments.

"A single bullet had severed the push-pull throttle control on Dimmock's plane and he had no



16.	09:35	SELF	200	-	.15	2000
19.	07:25	SELF	200	-	.25	3000
19.	18:05	SELF	200	-	.25	2000

CONFIRMATION OF CR133.
[Handwritten signatures and notes]
 S.A.R.F.

power. The island downstream looked as smooth as a bowling green, so he made for it and when he felt the wheels brushing the surface he pulled back the stick to land, only to have the plane drop through 14ft of grass and turn over on its back.

"The day after, [we] continued to Khartoum where Piggy kindly let me have half-an-hour playing in a Gladiator."

CAUGHT ON THE GROUND

A further four Gladiators were flown to 1 Squadron on November 22, to be followed by two Hurricanes on December 16. On the previous day four Hurricanes

led by Blake flew cover to the successful ground offensive against Italian positions at El Wak on the Kenya-Somalia border. On the 24th Lt John Niblock-Stuart was killed when the Fury he was flying crashed at Archer's Post.

Acting on results of a Martin Maryland reconnaissance sortie on December 28, the four Hurricanes of 'B' Flight departed Ndege's Nest the following day. They went off in search of three observed S.81 bombers and a similar number of Fiat CR.42 Falcos (the latter from 413rd Squadriglia) known to be near Bardera.

Stepped in two pairs, the lower formation of Capt Alf Masson and Lt Adrian Colenbrander dived on to





GARISSA FORMATION D.P. E.
 GARISSA FORMATION D.P.
 GARISSA OFFENSIVE PATROL: (NIGHT).
 Sighted 3 Capronis in formation -
 attacked No.3 which was subsequently
 shot down by self & set to
 alight by the crew - all survived (3).

“Operational strength now stood at 12 Furies and three Gauntlets, the latter in such poor condition one was immediately cannibalised for spares”

the parked Italian bombers while Blake and Lt Jacobus Kok stayed above to provide cover. The first pair succeeded in destroying a parked Savoia and damaging two others.

A pair of CR.42s scrambled from a nearby satellite field and became airborne. Fighters had been dispersed to the strip as a result of the recce flight of the day before. Alerted by the dust raised by the preceding two, a third Fiat was attacked by a Hurricane and despite being hit, the pilot managed to put his aircraft back on the ground. Meanwhile the initial two Fiats, flown by Sottoten (2nd Lt) Bartolozzi and Tenente (Lt) de Micheli, had climbed into an attacking position and fell upon the South African pair flying cover above. During a combat lasting several minutes, both Kok and Blake were shot down and parachuted into captivity.

WINDING DOWN

It was a distressing end to the unit's year; the mood being further darkened the first week in January when its last Hurricanes were ordered north to bolster 1 Squadron's dwindling resources on the northern front.

Operational strength now stood at 12 Furies and three Gauntlets, the latter in such poor condition one was immediately cannibalised for spares. It is indicative of the desperation of the times that the two remaining Gauntlets were used to escort 41 Squadron Hawker Hartebeests covering the approach of ground troops to Moyale – on the border with Kenya and Abyssinia, now Ethiopia – as January drew to a close. (The Hartebeest, or Hartbees, was a version of the Hawker Audax for the SAAF, the majority of the 69

ordered being built under licence in Pretoria.)

Escort work continued when 2 Squadron moved to Garissa East, with detachments at Garissa West and Hussein (in Kenya) to accompany the Fairey Battles of 11 Squadron and Ju 86s of 12 Squadron on bombing raids in February and March. A plan to re-equip 2 Squadron with Curtiss Mohawks was aborted when the type's engines were discovered to be faulty upon arrival in Mombasa in March and were shipped to England for repairs.

The unit's involvement in operations had been on a steady decline as 3 Squadron's Hurricanes assumed the burden of both offence and defence. The Furies were simply not up to the task of providing effective cover to the forces pushing through Abyssinia.

The tide had turned even though victory in East Africa was still some nine months away. Attention was rapidly shifting to requirements elsewhere on the continent where a desperate Gen Archibald Wavell was calling for assistance to shore up a rapidly deteriorating situation in Egypt.

On April 17, 1941, Truter, the CO, and 16 pilots flew to Khartoum from where they travelled to Egypt by flying boat. RAF Headquarters, Middle East, agreed to equip 2 Squadron with Curtiss Tomahawks and Hurricanes as they became available. In the interim the squadron's pilots were urgently required to assist with aircraft deliveries from Takoradi on the Gold Coast to Abu Sueir in Egypt. From the simmering pot of Kenya and Abyssinia, the cauldron of North Africa awaited. ●

Above
 Refuelling a Hurricane I in Kenya. Front-left is believed to be Captain Servaas Theron, who led 2 Squadron in the Korean War a decade later.

Left
 The simple entry in Lt Hendrik Burger's logbook belies the enormity of his achievement in downing a Ca 133 during a 25-minute evening sortie in Fury 200 on October 19, 1940.
 ALL VIA AUTHOR