

LEFT: A Vickers Wellesley I of 47 Squadron kicks up the dust at Asmara on May 15, 1941. **BELOW:** The motto of 47 Squadron was 'Nili nomen roboris omen' ('The name of the Nile is an omen of our strength') and the badge was a demoiselle crane's head in front of a fountain. The demoiselle crane is a bird found in Russia and the Sudan, two of 47 Squadron's battlegrounds.

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Harassing the Italians out of East Africa

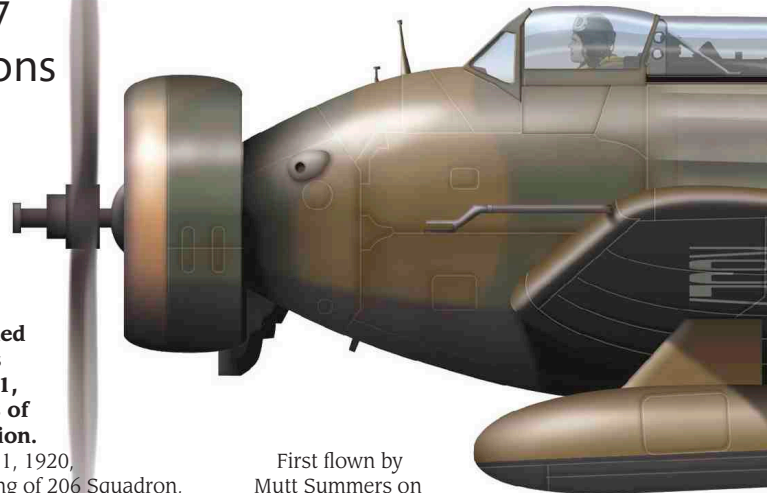


MARTYN CHORLTON investigates 47 Squadron's Vickers Wellesley operations in East Africa in 1940-1941

Formed as a Home Defence squadron at Beverley on March 1, 1916 under the command of Major F G Small, 47 Squadron was destined to leave British shores in September, bound for Salonika, and would not be based at home again until 1946. Settling at Mikra Bay, the unit was tasked with a variety of roles, including reconnaissance, bombing, artillery spotting and aerial fighting using several different types of aircraft which ranged from the BE.12 to the SE.5A. The unit dropped 54 tons of bombs during its tour of duty in Macedonia, which came to an end in April 1919 when the squadron was moved to Novorossisk to support the White Russians who were fighting the Bolsheviks. Equipped with DH.9s and Camels, operations included low level bombing and ground strafing. During this period the squadron was under the command of Lt Col Raymond Collinshaw DSO, OBE, DSC, AFC who added a single victory and an enemy gunboat to his impressive World War One tally. On many occasions over the Western Front, Collinshaw was lucky to escape with his life and in his autobiography

he described the fighting in Russia as more frightening than his experiences in Northern France. On October 20, 1919 the squadron disbanded at Beketovka and was redesignated as the 11, 12, and 13 Squadrons of the Russian 7th Division.

However, on February 1, 1920, following the renumbering of 206 Squadron, 47 Squadron was reformed at Helwan, Egypt, once again with DH.9s and later DH.9As. A detachment of aircraft was immediately sent to Khartoum, Sudan, where on October 21, 1927 the rest of the squadron made its way home and settled in flying operations in support of the Sudan Defence Force. From December 1927 the squadron was progressively re-equipped, beginning with the Fairey III, the Fairey Gordon from January 1933 and the Vickers Vincent in July 1936, although on each occasion the superseded type was never fully replaced, the latter being a prime example. The long-range Vickers Wellesley, which was already obsolete as far as UK-based squadrons were concerned, first arrived on the squadron in June 1939.



First flown by Mutt Summers on June 19, 1935, the Vickers Wellesley was the first of Barnes Wallis' geodetic designs to enter RAF service from April 1937. The Wellesley rode the wave of the RAF's pre-war expansion but with only 177 built, the last delivered in May 1938, this single-engined long-range bomber was never destined to have a long service career, in a European theatre at least. As was the tradition, priority was always given to home-based RAF units with regard to new equipment and as the pre-war technology race gained momentum, the Wellesley quickly found itself superseded by the Hampden, Whitley and Battle. The withdrawal of the type from UK-based squadrons was swift and from late 1937 onwards, 100 aircraft were transferred to

units based in the Middle East, beginning with 45 Squadron at Helwan. The majority of the Wellesleys arrived in the Middle East from mid-1939, by which time 45 Squadron had already moved onto the Blenheim, leaving 14, 47 and 223 Squadrons to re-equip with the single-engine bomber.

These three squadrons became 254 (Bomber) Wing under the overall control of HQ Sudan based at Khartoum from December 1, 1939 along with 1 (Southern Rhodesia Air Force) Squadron and 1 and 2 (Royal Egyptian Air Force) Squadrons.

Protracted conversion

Despite the first Wellesleys arriving with 47 Squadron in June 1939, it was not until September that all pilots in the unit had flown solo on the type. As some were not used to the Wellesley's more complex systems (compared to the Gordon and Vincent), this task did not always go to plan. On September 13, Sgt W R T Shelley paid with his life when he stalled L2702 in the Khartoum circuit.

Under the command of Wg Cdr J G Elton AFC, from October 1939 onwards 47 Squadron settled into a period of wing exercises including formation flying with 14 and 223 Squadrons.

Already plagued by serviceability problems and a shortage of spares, 47 Squadron did well to get nine aircraft into the air for a photographic exercise to Shendi on November 24. The following month one practice

raid to Atbara by nine aircraft saw the squadron successfully attack the local railway workshops at low level with flour bombs – several direct hits were recorded!

The Italian presence in the region was well known and it was

to Erkowit in the Red Sea Hills on May 11, 1940, less than 100 miles from the Eritrean border, a country which, along with Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland, made up Italian East Africa. On May 28, 1940 the air party arrived at Erkowit, later renamed Carthago, unaware that Mussolini was about to make his remarkable decision.

Italy enters the war

At 22:00 on June 10, 1940 Italy declared war on Britain and France, although the latter was literally on the verge of falling to a German invasion which saw the BEF pushed back across the Channel. In Africa the Italian forces were split between Libya and Italian East Africa and despite warnings and protests from senior officers, neither country was ready to enter a full scale war. However, in the east, it was 47 Squadron which opened the account.

RAF operations against the Italian forces began at Carthago when eight Wellesleys (divided into three flights), three armed with 32 x 40lb bombs, two with four 250lb bombs and the remainder with IBs (Incendiary bombs) took off at 05:30 bound for the Eritrean capital, Asmara (Asmera today), 250 miles to the southeast. The target was the Italian aerodrome located 3.5 miles to south-southwest of the

“The officers’ tents in Carthago were destroyed; the main casualty being the officers’ clothes!”

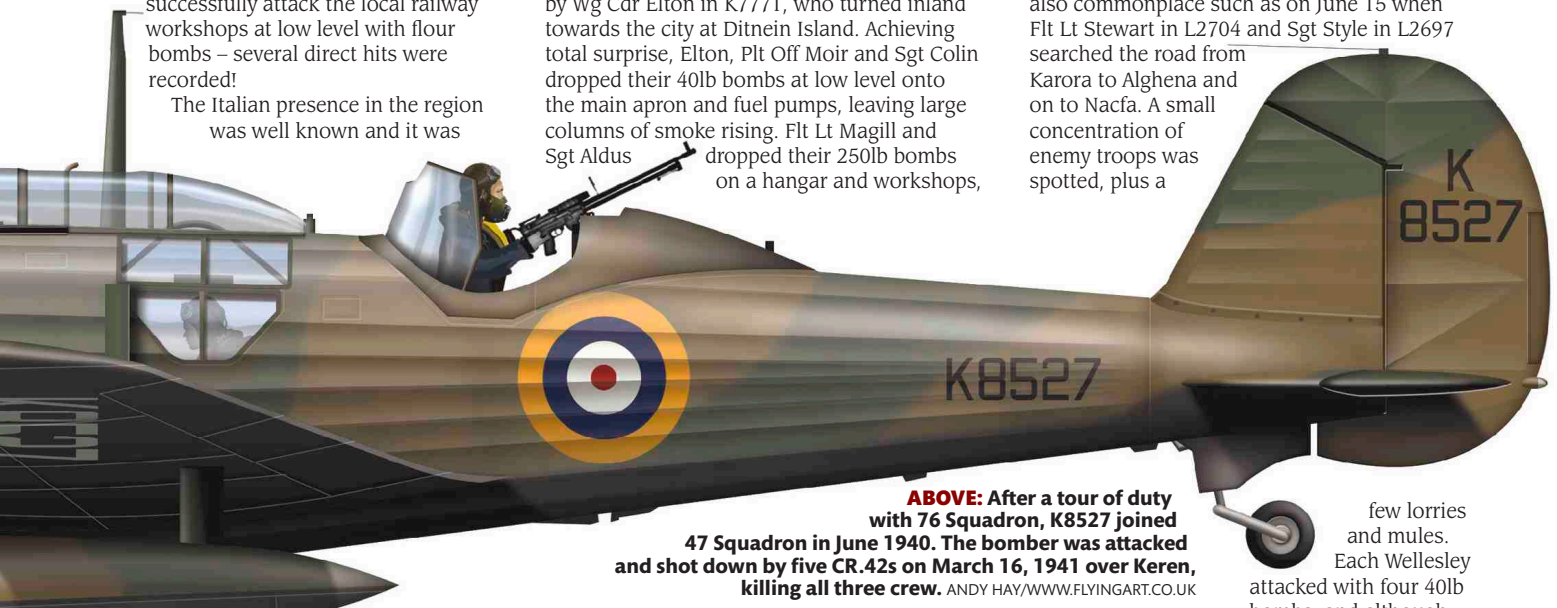
city and the 47 Squadron formation was led by Wg Cdr Elton in K7771, who turned inland towards the city at Ditnein Island. Achieving total surprise, Elton, Plt Off Moir and Sgt Colin dropped their 40lb bombs at low level onto the main apron and fuel pumps, leaving large columns of smoke rising. Flt Lt Magill and Sgt Aldus dropped their 250lb bombs on a hangar and workshops,

prepared for a second attack on Asmara aerodrome. This time all of the aircraft were armed with four 250lb bombs. Divided again into three flights, Flt Lt Ostle (in L2696) led the attack following the previous day's coastal route with Plt Off Mellanson and Sgt Wragg. The remaining two flights, one led by Flt Lt Dally and other by Plt Off Joyce, approached over land. Ostle's flight dropped its 250lb bombs from 15,000ft on to the main runway and just after the bombs were released a single Fiat CR.32 came up to attack but was beaten off by the rear gunner's fire and may have been forced down. Dally's flight, also attacking from 15,000ft saw their first salvo of bombs hit several buildings behind the hangar line, the second run fell within the camp area and the third fell wide. Following Ostle's initial action, the remaining Wellesleys were greeted with very heavy and accurate anti-aircraft fire but luckily sustained no damage. The third flight's bombs fell wide of buildings to the northwest of the aerodrome and by 16:45 all eight 47 Squadron machines were safely back in the ground.

From June 13, 1940, 47 Squadron began the first of many regular reconnaissance operations on the hunt for possible troop movements which were rarely spotted, in daylight at least.

One operation flown over Karora by Plt Joyce and LAC Crossland in L2677, again looking for troop movements, describes the terrain as being very easy to conceal large concentrations. Armed or

offensive reconnaissance operations were also commonplace such as on June 15 when Flt Lt Stewart in L2704 and Sgt Style in L2697 searched the road from Karora to Alghena and on to Nacfa. A small concentration of enemy troops was spotted, plus a



ABOVE: After a tour of duty with 76 Squadron, K8527 joined 47 Squadron in June 1940. The bomber was attacked and shot down by five CR.42s on March 16, 1941 over Keren, killing all three crew. ANDY HAY/WWW.FLYINGART.CO.UK

few lorries and mules. Each Wellesley attacked with four 40lb bombs, and although

not unusual for Italian machines to use the RAF's facilities. It was ironic that the five Italian Air Force Savoia-Marchetti SM.79s, which arrived at Khartoum bound for Eritrea on April 20, would undoubtedly return the favour in a more aggressive manner only a few weeks later. Five more SM.79s passed through Khartoum on May 9, again bound for Eritrea, although one of these crashed at Wadi Halfa. Italy's premature entry into World War Two may have taken the British by surprise as Mussolini's non-belligerent stance, reinforced by an obsolete, small air force, had indicated that they would not be in a serious position to enter the war until late 1942.

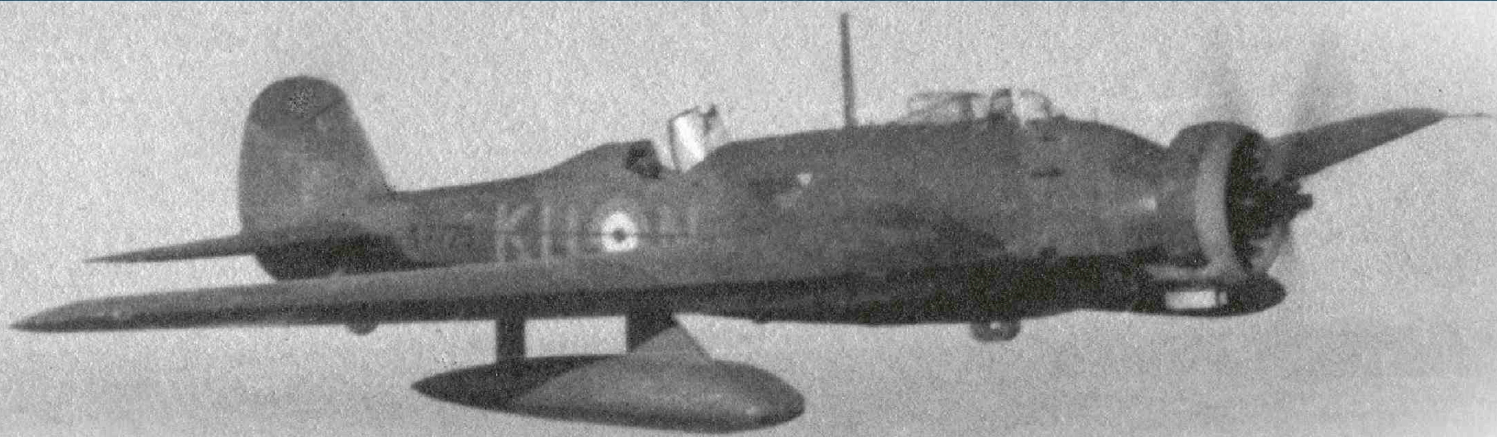
An advance party from the squadron moved

while Flt Lt J Stewart, Sgt Style and Plt Off Fuge planted their IBs across the same buildings. At least some on the aerodrome were awake because Plt Off B K C Fuge's aircraft, K7730, the last to cross the target, was struck by ground fire, damaging the Wellesley enough to cause a forced landing. Fuge and his observer, Flt Sgt S A Eley survived to become POWs and along with the rest of the British and Commonwealth forces captured in East Africa, were released from Adi Ugri Camp in April 1941. While concerned for their colleagues, unaware that they were alive, the remaining seven Wellesleys were back on the ground at Carthago by 10:45, their crews on a high following this successful opening operation.

On June 12 another eight Wellesleys were

one machine was hit by ground fire, both aircraft returned to Carthago safely.

The same day, the Italians began the first of several retaliatory operations when a pair of SM.81s bombed Carthago. L2712 was damaged by bomb splinters, but more importantly the officers' tents were destroyed by a bomb; the main casualty being the officers' clothes! That night Wg Cdr Elton led four Wellesleys, operating as a pair of independent flights on another attack against Asmara aerodrome. Taking off at 18:20 and flying the coastal route again, on arrival, the general area including the aerodrome was under a very effective blackout and it was impossible to find the target in the half moonlight and haze. Rather than bring them home, Elton decided to unleash his four



ABOVE: One of several aircraft inherited from 14 Squadron, K7723 joined 47 Squadron in August 1940. The aircraft was wrecked in a heavy landing at Agordat on February 18, 1941 and was SOC in June.

250lb bombs and eight 25lb IBs on a wireless/transmitter observation post at Difnein Island north of Massawa. The rest of the Wellesleys dropped their bombs in the sea and the last landed back at Carthago at 00:20.

There is no doubting that the Wellesley is a fairly distinctive aircraft from any angle, especially with its large bomb panniers under each wing. However, take these panniers away and suddenly the bomber becomes fair game to a trio of 112 Squadron Gladiator pilots who mistook the aircraft for an enemy machine over Erkwit on June 17. Flt Lt Ostle in K7742 was tasked with a dawn patrol to report any incoming bomber attacks but unbeknown to him, the three Gladiators had been ordered to patrol the same area. The three biplane fighters commenced a stern attack which was not broken off until Sgt Bavin-Smith fired a Very light. The starboard wing had been riddled and the fuel tanks shot through but Ostle managed to land the Wellesley safely and the incident was put down to poor communications between units.

A 'formidable wing'

By late June raids on Asmara were carried out on a regular basis, very often in company with 14 and 223 Squadrons. One particular attack on Asmara on June 24 was described

as a 'formidable wing' as five Wellesleys from 47 Squadron and five more from 14 Squadron joined forces. Successes over enemy fighters were also on the increase, including a pair claimed shot down during a raid on Gura on June 26 – one by 47 and one by 14 Squadron.

From July 1 the focus of operations turned to Abyssinia for those Wellesleys operating from Khartoum. Nine aircraft led by Wg Cdr Elton attacked Gondar aerodrome and the following day five more attacked Metemma Camp with 250lb bombs, 25lb IBs and machine-gun fire.

"L2875 destroyed 16 munition store houses"

This risky operation came at the cost of Plt Off Bush and LAC Davidson in K7777, who were brought down by heavy ground fire. Both crew were thrown clear of the wreckage, Bush being killed instantly and Davidson succumbing to his injuries the following day.

An increased number of operations from Carthago continued during the month and losses for 47 Squadron included K8520, which became one of Capitano Mario Visintini Medaglia's victims on July 12. The Italian ace would eventually claim a total of 17 victories, all in biplanes, before his death in February 1941. Two

aircraft, K7771 and L2641 collided over Massawa on July 16, with K777 surviving to be wrecked on landing at Carthago on July 31.

On another occasion five Wellesleys, led by Flt Lt Magill set out for Gura, arriving over the target at 07:55. As the aircraft began a diving attack, between five and eight CR.32s and CR.42s bounced the formation from all directions. The Wellesley formation was relentlessly fired upon. K7756, flown by Sgt Colvin, had its hydraulic system shot to pieces, causing the undercarriage to drop down. The enemy fighters then switched

focus to her sistership, whose air gunner Sgt Pope and Sqd Ldr Theed of HQ 245 Wing (along for the experience), managed to fend off the attack. Sgt Colvin somehow managed to escape but sadly, Sgt Pope, who was severely wounded, died of his injuries before he could receive medical attention.

Operations at night were carried out in increasing numbers from early September 1940, usually against Massawa, Gura or Asmara. A typical bomb load for night operations with a daylight take-off were three 500lb bombs and four IBs, while night take-offs comprised two 500lb, two 250lb and four IBs. Because of effective blackouts, targets were obviously very difficult to find at night and very often a secondary one would be bombed instead. One



ABOVE: No need for a cosy briefing room in the Middle East; it was much easier to do it outside, complete with a more realistic sand sculpture, compared to a two-dimensional map.

particularly successful night raid took place on September 21 when three Wellesleys led by Flt Lt Ostle in K7779 attacked Mai Edaga, 30 miles south of Asmara. The target was the Caproni works and all three aircraft dropped their HE bombs within the works compound or very close to it, with results that were not 'directly' observed at the time. It was later discovered that Sgt Wimsett and Sgt Bavin-Smith in L2875 had actually destroyed 16 munition store houses.

The Italians strike back

By mid October it was clear the Italian Air Force had had enough of its airfields being indiscriminately bombed by 47 Squadron day and night. The first sign of the enemy's intent came at 07:00 on October 15 when a single SM.79A dropped a stick of bombs on Gedaref but did not cause any damage. At 22:40 on October 15 a single Caproni Ca.133 attacked Gedaref from a height of between 700 and 800ft, dropping 12 HE bombs and 12 IBs. It is possible that the Ca.133 had followed a pair of Vincents which had just been on a bombing raid to Kassala (the first Vincent back landed ten minutes before the Ca.133's arrival, the second during the attack). The following morning at 04:05 a much larger force made up of a single SM.79, four CR.32s and three CR.42s arrived over Gedaref; the SM.79 opened proceedings by dropping a 'stick' of HE with little effect. The CR.32s then broke away from the main formation to begin a relentless few minutes of ground strafing which left eight Wellesleys and two Vincents in flames. Despite a large number of RAF personnel being in residence, not one was even injured during the attack but 47 Squadron's ability to strike a blow back at the enemy was dramatically reduced in one well executed raid. At 08:00 the same morning a pair of SM.79s flew over Gedaref, apparently on a reconnaissance operation and at the same time a decision was made to evacuate the area. By 12:00 the entire air and ground party was on a train back to Khartoum where 47 Squadron's losses were replaced by seven aircraft supplied by 14 Squadron, which was already in the process of converting to the Blenheim IV.

Operations continued unabated from Khartoum and starting on October 28, a detachment of Wellesleys also began operating from Sennar, beginning with a raid by three aircraft on Asosa. Even Gedaref was brought back into use from October 31, although



ABOVE: Although this photo was taken in pre-war Britain, it clearly demonstrates the limited space in the fuselage of a Wellesley. To retain the strength of the geodetic construction, no bomb bay was carved out the fuselage; instead, all bombs were carried in large panniers mounted under the outer wings. AEROPLANE

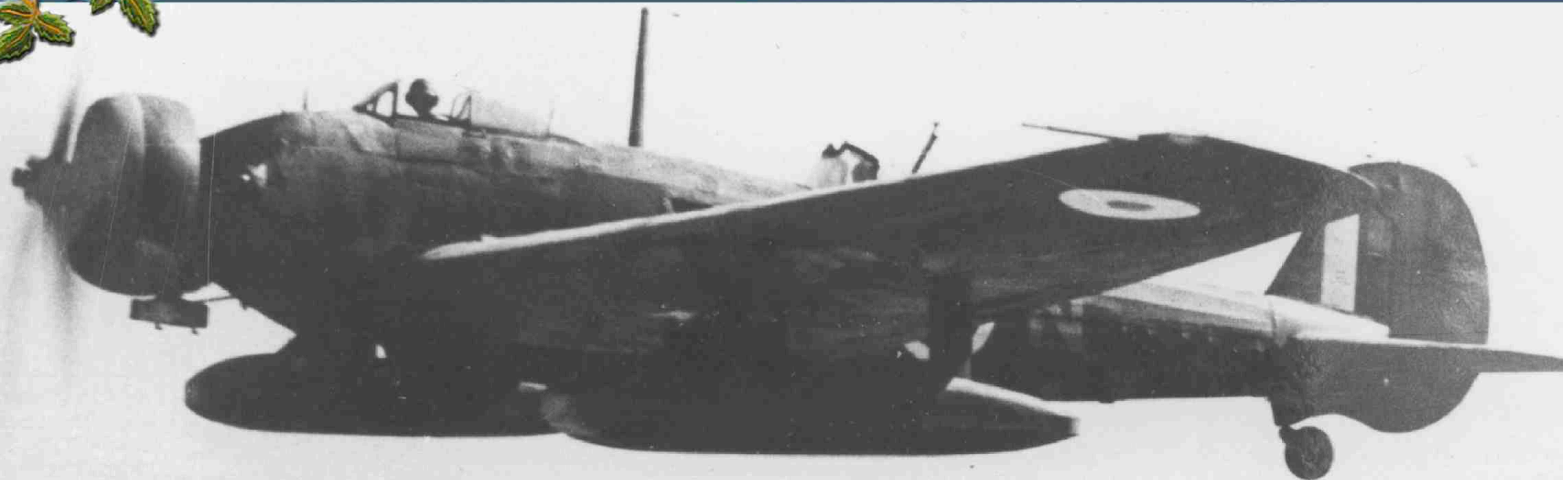
generally only reconnaissance operations were flown from here.

The main thrust of 47 Squadron's attacks during November and December was from Sennar, 150 miles SSE of Khartoum and the same distance again from the Eritrean border. Offensive reconnaissance sorties and raids on various targets achieved indifferent results but operations flown on November 21 were more successful. The day started with two Wellesleys, K7782 flown by Flt Lt Magill and K7713 flown by Flt Sgt Wimsett leaving Sennar at 05:40 bound for Saleaya fort. Both aircraft were over the target just after 07:00; Magill began by dropping

a pair of 20lb Cooper bombs which overshot the target. Magill approached for a second run and descending from 9,500 to 7,500ft, he dropped a stick of bombs into the middle of the enemy camp. On his third run Magill dropped the remainder of his bombs on the western end of the camp while Wimsett prepared for his run at 07:40. While unknowingly Magill had caused a great deal of damage, Wimsett's first run from 3,000ft struck at least one barrack-type building, setting it ablaze with more visible results. Wimsett's second run scored a direct hit on a building between two barrack buildings, setting it alight and causing it to burn for at least

BELOW: L2673 pictured over Eritrea on an operation out of Agordat; the bomber later served with CF Khartoum and was not SOC until October 1943.





ABOVE: K7775, one of 47 Squadron's long-serving and hardworking Wellesleys pictured during an operation to Keren. The bomber forced landed after carrying out a supply drop for a guerilla column near Suroe, Eritrea and was abandoned by its crew.

15 minutes. Wimsett's gunners rounded off the successful operation by firing 500 rounds of ammunition into the barracks. With no opposition from any quarter, the two Wellesleys returned safely back to Sennar.

Sgt Osbourn in K7775 had also taken off from Sennar that morning at 05:40 bound for another enemy barracks at Asosa. Over the target at 07:40, Osbourn's first run from 3,000ft undershot the target, starting a grass fire on the edge of the compound. A second run was considerably more successful as several direct hits were scored on store sheds followed by 500 rounds of ammunition fired into the barracks for good measure. Once again no opposition was encountered and Osbourn landed K7775 safely back at Sennar at 09:45.

The day was already a success for 47 Squadron when two more aircraft, K7775 flown by Flt Sgt Wimsett and Sgt Aldus took off at 12:20 and 12:50, respectively, bound for Gubba aerodrome. Wimsett was over the target at 13:40 and from 3,000ft he singled out the Commandant's house to the southwest of the target. Several bombs burst to within ten yards of residential buildings but it was not clear how much damage had been done because of dust and smoke. On Wimsett's second run he dropped a stick of bombs across a large barrack encampment, which was 200 yards northeast of the Commandant's house. All bombs exploded in the target area and a small fire broke out. Sgt Aldus was over the target at 13:41 and in a straight and level attack from 3,000ft, he dropped a short stick a mere ten yards north of Commandant's house. His second run saw bombs fall to within 25 yards of the house. Once again there was no opposition whatsoever from the ground or in the air.

The Wellesley's last stand

Although the Wellesley had little chance of delivering a devastating blow against the Italian forces, the fact they could virtually attack whichever target they wanted across a vast theatre of operations must have helped to grind the enemy down. However, units in the region were being re-equipped with slightly better aircraft and in December, 14 Squadron relinquished their Wellesleys in favour of the Blenheim IV. All of their old aircraft were transferred to 47 Squadron, who, by late 1941, were struggling with regard to serviceability and the virtual non-existence of spare parts. To date, 47 Squadron had already lost 36 Wellesleys to

mechanical failure, accidents or enemy action and many more would follow.

On November 27, 1940, 47 Squadron moved to Gordon's Tree, Khartoum, whilst still maintaining a detachment at Sennar from where operations continued until mid-December. Combined operations were still flown with 223 Squadron, including an attack on an Italian camp at Dangeila to raise the morale of the Abyssinian patriots. From January 1941 the squadron was under the command of Sqn Ldr G R Magill and detachments broadened to Kassala, Agordat, Asmara and Blackdown. By

squadron moved its main operating station to Asmara as the Italian forces were quickly routed out of Eritrea. The bulk of the Italians capitulated in May but many remained fighting until later in the year. For 47 Squadron the Wellesley was destined to remain but in a less offensive role. Many supply-dropping operations were flown for Allied forces at Debarech right up to the point that the Italians were completely defeated on November 28, 1941. After a brief spell at Massawa, the unit left the region for Kasfarret, Egypt on December 22 and then for Burg el Arab on January 25, 1942. Several more moves

"All remaining serviceable Wellesleys were operated by 47 Squadron"

across Egypt followed from where operational patrols were flown. On April 16, 1942 an 'Operational (Wellesley) echelon' or 'Wellesley Flight' was formed at LG.89. The

flight carried out convoy patrols and anti-submarine patrols off the Delta area and along the coast of Palestine. The Wellesley's long range was exploited to the very end of its operational career with 47 Squadron, which came about in February 1943, with the disbandment of the

echelon at LG.07 on March 3, 1943. A



ABOVE: Plt Off Kennedy of 47 Squadron inspects the damage to K7715 at Agordat on March 25, 1941. The aircraft was attacked by a pair of CR.42s, setting the bomber's wing on fire and mortally wounding the air gunner Sgt German.