

El Agheila to Tripoli

“ON to Tripoli !” was the battle cry as the Western Desert campaign moved toward Christmas on the calendar and Sirte on the map. By the 20th of December Rommel had retreated west of the town of Sirte and the Eighth Army was well on the way towards its immediate goal. The roads of Tripolitania were rapidly being cleared of mines and booby traps to allow the main Allied forces to be brought up more rapidly and more safely.

At this time Rommel was believed to have at his disposal roughly 60,000 troops and about 100 tanks. The German air forces were thought to number 120 aircraft in Tripolitania ; 640 more in Sicily, Italy, Sardinia and Tunisia, plus 205 in Crete. The Italian air forces were believed to be distributed as follows : 300 in Tripolitania, 205 in Sardinia, 355 in Sicily, Pantellaria and Tunisia, 110 in the Dodecanese and 70 in Greece.

In Tripolitania part of the MC-202 fighter force previously in the forward area had been transferred to Castel Benito, outside of Tripoli, presumably to provide defense against the impending raid of our heavy bombers.

To the bleak, windswept landing ground at Gambut in the Western Desert there came on December 19 something new under the African sun in the way of Liberators. Painted a light green instead of the familiar desert brown of their Ninth Air Force brothers, the 93rd Heavy Bombardment Group roared in from England to help out for a while with the business of blasting the Axis out of the Middle East.

For General Pat Timberlake of the bomber command the arrival offered an extremely pleasant reunion. In command of the visitors was Colonel William Timberlake, his brother. With General Brereton, the two brothers sat down briefly to talk business, and during the ensuing two months before they were called back to England, the 93rd dropped a goodly poundage of bombs on Axis targets strewn all the way from Tunis to Naples and south to Palermo.

The visitors operated under what could not be described as exactly ideal conditions. Originally scheduled to perform only a limited number of missions before their return, the weeks dragged by and found them still at it, with no departure date in sight. With them the 93rd had brought only bare necessities, such as could be carried in their aircraft. Ground personnel was nil, or almost so. Clothing, while adequate, did not include many changes. Supplies were the same.

Borrowing what they needed from the Ninth Air Force, and going without a certain number of things which could not be borrowed, such as natty uniforms to wear on leave in Cairo, the 93rd got along admirably. They soon had a reputation in the Western Desert for setting one of the best tables in the business, and for that reason attracted many visitors. When Colonel Timberlake and his men took off for the last time from the landing ground at Gambut, they left behind a lot of goodwill and admiration, and took with them to England plenty of brand new shiny decorations.

The Ninth Air Force was becoming a factor to be reckoned with. By the end of December, the tiny organization which helped out so gallantly at Alamein and along the coastal road to El Agheila, numbered 12,779 officers and enlisted men.

On December 22 another ship had arrived at Port Tewfik. This time it brought several very necessary and long awaited additions to the air force administrative set up, as well as additional service personnel.

On this ship were the rear echelon of Headquarters Squadron, Ninth US Air Force ; Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Ninth Fighter Command ; Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron, Ninth Air Service Command. Of these, the Ninth Fighter promptly trekked out to a patch of desert near Alexandria to await orders. Meanwhile they acclimatized themselves in a particularly rugged fashion.

Desert life was strong diet to this group of headquarters personnel. For lack of facilities tents were crowded and officers stood in mess lines like enlisted men. Mess lines were serpentine and spread out with five yard intervals between men so as to present poor target. With GI rations in hand not more than two men were allowed to sit together on the sand. Here was their first taste of war on its tender edges, still far behind the lines.

The pitching of tents and the digging of slit trenches added touches of realism and blisters to book-keeping hands. No sooner were tents pitched, occupants settled and trenches dug than officers from Cairo flew in ; took a look and ordered wider dispersal. Trenches aren't easily moved.

This was the situation when Christmas came to Landing Ground 91. Services were held in spite of the order against grouping in the open and while the bulk of the camp population raised their voices heavenward in song some of the more practical souls remained in half completed slit trenches and drove their picks and shovels toward hell. Two myths of the desert were exploded for the uninitiated. The night could be bitterly cold in December and January and the sand was only a coating as discovered in digging in the brick-like soil underneath. The warmer British battledress and extra blankets had to be issued to officers and enlisted men alike.

The sand storms began late in January. Clouds of choking, blinding dust whipped along by a high wind descended on the camp. Visibility was reduced to a few feet and it became difficult to find anything but the mess tent and little use to find it.

Sand in the Spinach is an American institution but dust in the water, on the spam, on the bread—that belongs to the Western Desert. With the storm at its height and the atmosphere

Right: Digging a "Lib" out of the mire at an African Aerodrome

Below: Typical desert camp of Tactical Units



