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AIR POWER DID IT

By Frank Gervasi

RADIOED FROM CAIRO

Halting Rommel's big push was no miracle. British and American planes averted disaster in Egypt and Mr. Gervasi, returning from a raid on Tobruk, tells what he saw



AIR power saved Egypt when it seemed early in July that Egypt was doomed. Rommel had driven Auchinleck's armies from Gazala approximately three hundred and seventy miles in a straight line to El Alamein in forty-two days. The British were pushed to within seventy miles of Alexandria, where merchants with easy loyalties removed faded photographs of King George and Churchill from their windows to make place for those of Mussolini and Hitler.

In Cairo we read of thousand-bomber raids from England on German towns and we wondered if the brass hats in London and Washington had read newspapers and seen what was happening to Egypt. In Cairo, a certain American who is habitually disinclined to pessimism said, "Pray for a miracle—" while officers who knew how vital to victory the possession of Egypt was, frantically cabled Washington and London to rush weapons which would make that miracle come to pass. It did. It was a very un-metaphysical miracle.

Light, medium and heavy bombers, bound for India for war against Japan, stopped in Egypt. They came from the factories of America and England. They included big British Wellingtons and Halifaxes and huge American Flying Fortresses and B-24s and Bostons and Mitchells and others made in the United States. They dumped thousands of tons of bombs on Rommel's advancing columns. They smashed his supply lines, battered the coast ports through which he received fresh men and new weapons. They struck at enemy convoys in the Mediterranean.

OldMagazineArticles.com

2 **Air Power Did It**



Armorers hauling up bombs for a B-24, or Liberator, wonder ship of the war in Africa. These giant planes finished the job the smaller bombers had begun

Bombers Finish the Job

Yank pilots flew Fortresses until their engines wore out. American and British pilots flew gargantuan B-24s and Liberators without rest. (It is practically the same plane, but in Yank language it is a B-24 and in R.A.F.-ese a Lib.). These four-motored giants took off on new sorties almost before their engines had cooled. They arrived late, those big fellows. They didn't get into action until June 27th but they finished the job which fighters and fighter-bombers and medium bombers had already begun. These smaller pieces of air artillery had made 13,000 raids in less than thirty days.

Rommel was stopped dead. He was stopped for many reasons. Tired Tommies, Indian troops and South Africans were suddenly reinforced, first by New Zealanders and then by an Australian force which was rushed up from base areas. They had time to rest, re-form and dig in on the line from El Alamein south to the edge of the Qattara salt marshes where the Egyptian desert narrows down to fifty miles. The restricted nature of the new battlefield in itself helped halt the Afrika Korps general. Rommel is a military quarterback who likes plenty of room for his razzle-dazzle kind of warfare, for his end sweeps, fake bucks and off-tackle thrusts. He found himself suddenly cramped and unmaneuverable.

For the first time, Rommel was obliged to fight what was straight orthodox warfare against soldiers whose major strength was that very orthodoxy which had been their undoing on broader battlefields farther west. Rommel might have reached his objectives—Alexandria, Cairo and Suez—had he been able to plow through to the Nile

Air Power Did It



Delta where he could resume his favorite kind of military football. He might have reached the flat, broad, green cool plains of the Delta had he been able to bring up water, food, fuel and reinforcements in men and weapons. It was precisely that which air power prevented sufficiently to halt Rommel, and the Axis wave crashed against the El Alamein line and broke. Just when geography forced Rommel to revert to straight football, his opponent took to the air.

That he was halted in July doesn't mean that Rommel is beaten. Egypt was saved, but Egypt and the Middle East won't be safe until Rommel is driven out, and his armies and those of the Italians are destroyed. Air power stopped him in July and air power can help to defeat him. Of all the air weapons employed in halting him, the swell-est is one which may be paramount in an eventual total defeat of the Afrika Korps and its Italian drones. One was outstanding.

Wonder Ship of the War

This was the B-24, wonder ship of this war, despite those R.A.F. enthusiasts who insist that the Wellingtons and Halifaxes are the finest things on wings, in spite of the Yanks who will tell you heatedly that there's nothing in the world to compare with North American's B-25s.

I flew in one of the B-24s the other night on a raid on Tobruk. It was an R.A.F. raid, so we will have to call the ship a Liberator. I watched them dump censorable thousands of pounds of bombs from our ship onto specific targets in what has become the main entry port for reinforcements for the Afrika Korps. It was all as unromantically routine as an overnight airplane ride from New York to Duluth, minus some of its comforts but not many. And because of the flying characteristics of this particular airplane I was just about as safe. Yanks out here call the Tobruk run the milk route. In R.A.F. language, when you bomb Tobruk you call it "Doing TB."

The Liberator's name was Kathleen and I learned about air power from her, as I learned much about flying and human courage and what goes on inside

Air Power Did It

the mind of a bomber pilot from the Irishman who piloted Kathleen that night. His name is Terry and he comes from Armagh. They call him "Terrible Terry" or "Butch" because he has China blue eyes and a frankly handsome face that is completely unconscious of its manly beauty, a face that smiles without smiling. We met in the briefing room at a certain squadron base in the desert.

It was good to be in that briefing room. I had just come from South Africa. The war made plenty of sense where Terry and other pilots, navigators, gunners and radiomen listened with composed excitement to the flight instructions from their wing commander. The skipper diagramed for them their order of take-off, their course, their separate targets, poking a pointer at them on the huge intelligence map chalked on the blackboard. Those R.A.F. men—some of those few who have done so much for so many—seemed to have a collective single-mindedness of purpose which was like a healthy tonic after the political, economic, and ideological arguments I had had in Johannesburg.

Terry fixed me up with a parachute, a Mae West, warm clothing, a helmet and an oxygen mask. "You'll need that one," he said when he handed me the last piece of equipment—a box containing two bars of chocolate, a thermos flask filled with hot tea, a package of dry biscuits and several packets of gum. "We'll be gone a long time," he added.

We loafed in the mess, dozed until dinner, after which we quit stooging about and came awake. Talk subsided gradually to a minimum of strictly essential words. Some of the veterans tried weakly to kid us about where we'd like our mail sent in case we didn't come back, but nobody laughed much.

Then one of the boys, an Aussie, asked seriously, "Why in heaven's name do you want to go on one of these rides?"

I said I was "just curious," but our eyes met, and he seemed to understand okay because nothing further was said.

Trucks carried us to our separate ships. We found Kathleen waiting for us, the dim light from her open belly showing on the ground. Members of the crew and the ground staff were making last-minute checks on armament, equipment and instruments. After what seemed to be an interminable wait, Terry said I'd better get aboard. Everything happened quickly after that. We took our places aboard ship in a blue-black darkness. The only light was a faint glow on the instrument panel and blurred blotches of luminous dials.

Take-off for Tobruk

Terry warmed up Kathleen's big horsepower plant. Four motors at full throttle made the ship vibrate. They sang with power loudly and healthily, and I thought with pride, "We made this

5
Air Power Did It



ship." Terry released the Lib's brake and the ship moved forward, swung into position on the runway and, with a deafening roar we were in the air.

I must have slept for an hour or two. I had been conscious of an indescribable noise, darkness, the faint smell of lubricating oil and gasoline and the definite smell of bakelite and electrical instruments. We had taken off long before moonrise, and the next thing I remember was the sudden impact of noise and the clearly defined silhouettes up forward of Terry and his co-pilot Jack. There was starlight and the moon was an orange disk, hanging low on the horizon. Terry's authoritative voice was saying over the intercommunicating telephone receivers in my helmet, "Will American passenger please put on his oxygen mask. We are at nine thousand feet and climbing. Please reply, Mr. American."

I switched on the mike that lay on my chest and said, "Okay, pal."

Terry said, "Attaboy, Frank. It won't be long now."

It must have been hours later—though they seem like minutes now—flashes of time filled with small, penetrating fears that the ack-ack might get us, that we might be intercepted by a German night fighter, that somehow I might betray these fears to the calm, quiet, efficient men about me—when I heard the navigator's voice over the intercom saying, "Captain—navigator here—we're nearing target, sir—there's flak up ahead."

Terry said, "Okay—Gunner Jones—Gunner Jones," and when the gunner answered with an eager "Yes, sir," Terry ordered him and the others in turn to test their armament. There were short bursts from many points on the ship in turn. I saw several shells from our heavier guns burst brightly against the sky ahead of us above the pilot's hood.

The wireless operator sat across the narrow aisle from me, a Wellsian figure in helmet, parachute harness and Mae West before the dim blue-green light over his apparatus, which by the way was a marvel of simplicity. I sat in a comfortable chair behind the pilot in the flight deck.

By raising myself between Terry and Jack, I could see bright orange bursts of flak ahead over Tobruk—bursts that

Air Power Did It

were like short-lived poppies that bloomed and died in fractions of seconds. I thought I smelled cordite. I thought I felt Kathleen bouncing about in the air roughened by explosions.

Then again, Terry's calm voice: "Will one of the gunners come forward, please, and conduct our American passenger to the bomb bay, where he can observe the effects of bombing. Other ships ahead of us are on target. I can see their bursts—"

Another Wellsian figure grabbed my wrist and led me aft through bomb racks. It was a tight squeeze between the stanchions that held tons of death, with my cumbersome chute and equipment, and suddenly I was in a world filled with more noise than I had believed engines and machinery could make.

Here in the bomb bay, there was only a thin skin of metal between us and the chaos that the engines and the explosions of ack-ack shells made. And there was a roar of air on our hull. I adjusted my oxygen mask and plugged in my intercommunicating phone in time to catch the voice of the navigator, "Shall I open the doors of bomb bay, sir?" And Terry's voice replying, "Okay."

There was a whir of motors, a low angry sort of whir, and then the blast of an air current that tore upward into the big ship's innards. I opened the bulkhead door and watched the bombs leave their racks and saw distant bursts. I counted them but I can't tell you how many I saw. They made thick rings below, that glowed momentarily like huge, hollow-centered blobs of hot coals or incandescent lava. There were other Libs over Tobruk that night, and flights of Halifaxes, and those glowing round blobs with dark centers were many.

I had been in Tobruk, on the receiving end of enemy bombs. I am not ashamed to admit that I watched those bursts with a certain sense of satisfaction.

Planes That Come Back

But what I thought or felt or what that calm, cool little Irishman up forward thought or felt isn't important. What is more important is that Kathleen behaved beautifully. I needn't have worried about flak hitting us. She kept us high and secure above its hot steel. She flew us at such speed that the ack-ack couldn't find us and follow us rapidly enough. She was on her target and off it too quickly despite her 110-foot wing span, her 64 feet of length, her 18 feet of thickness. Her four Pratt-Whitney supercharged engines could howl along at a speed almost too fast for night fighters to catch Kathleen's sixty thousand pounds of utilitarian beauty. Men who go out in ships like Kathleen know they're going to get there and come back.

We were headed eastward—toward home, and the dawn. Now there was

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Air Power Did It

danger only of interception. For this, Kathleen was ready. Enemy interceptors would have received blasts of lead and steel from every conceivable part of the big ship. Everybody relaxed. I slept. I must have slept a long time for when I awakened there was a sharp light. We were flying low, and the Mediterranean was cool below us.

Terry said, "I didn't have the heart to waken you, but you missed a magnificent sunrise."

We poured tea and shouted pleasantries at one another. It was hot. I got out of my chute, harness and Mae West and looked out of the window of the co-pilot's seat. Jack had moved over to Terry's place. He grinned good morning at me and very soon we were flying over other sand that rippled endlessly from the blue rim of sea toward the horizon. Then patches of green and figures looking up from their work to wave at us—Liberators.

Later that morning, we sat around and talked of bombing and bombers and of their role in war. There is an easy, democratic atmosphere in R.A.F. messes which you don't find where old school ties and cast and class too frequently determine officers' aloofness, one from the other. In R.A.F. messes, rank doesn't matter so much and talks are free, easy and natural. They said much about what was in their minds about bombing and here is the gist of it.

The Role of Bombers

I have boiled it all down as comprehensively and compactly as I can. The great value of what these men have to say lies in the fact that it comes from men who have fought three years in the air, who have saved England—who have averted disaster in Egypt. These are the men who might have long ago won this war for us, had they and their machines been on other battlefields in sufficient numbers.

First of all, they've got faith in themselves and their machines. They know the bomber is a good weapon. They disagree with those traditionalists who say that aviation can't win battles. They don't argue that air power is everything; they merely put air power in its proper relation to the war.

They recognize that the bomber is a brand-new weapon. Used with imagination, there is almost no limit to what it can accomplish. None of the airmen with whom I talked were silly enough to say that the bomber alone can win the war. But they did insist that the power of warships at sea is limited unless supported by air power and that the strength of land armies is directly proportionate to the strength of the air force overhead.

So far, the bomber is the only weapon developed by the Allies which overwhelmingly excels anything that the enemy has produced. In bombers, we've

Air Power Did It

got the enemy licked. Our so-called Boston mediums and Liberator heavies outclass anything the enemy has or immediately can put into the air.

One of the lessons the last campaigns taught the Allies was that we've still got a long way to go toward producing a really great fighter plane. Despite all the soft-soap propaganda to the contrary, our Kittyhawks and Tomahawks aren't exactly the world's greatest fighters. Above twenty thousand feet, they're inferior to the enemy's 109s and 110s. The enemy's fighters are good up to thirty-two thousand feet, and it is no longer a secret now that, in that part of the sky between twenty and thirty-two thousand feet, we had few Spitfires in the last campaign.

That brings us to another evil which must be corrected before we can maintain our supremacy in the air over Egypt, and over the Mediterranean, and therefore before the Middle East can be considered secure.

The Middle East desperately needs spare parts, desperately needs mechanics and technicians—mechanics who are willing to work with their hands elbow deep in grime and grease. That's one of the greatest contributions America can make to the Allied war effort in the Middle East—to supply such men. One of the Middle East's great weaknesses has been the fact that, of the total planes available here, all have not been, by any means, in fighting condition.

Recently an American politician came here and told us and the world at large that the war was practically over. But fliers themselves and their officers, high and low, see things as they are. They are the ones who risk their necks doing a job every day. They listen patiently to the traditionalists who still insist battles are won "by cold steel." These same traditionalists point to the fact that the Germans run from cold steel, avoid man-to-man bayonet combat, as proof of the British army's superiority on land. This makes fliers and more imaginative people generally smile or laugh out loud.

"Sure, the Germans don't like cold steel," said an Australian. "Who does? So the Germans keep away from cold steel!"

But if bombing—someone else put in—is hard enough and sustained over long periods, concentrated against the enemy's planes, tanks and other weapons and particularly against his supply system, then traditionalists can talk about cold steel. Once the bombing has reduced the enemy's power in the battlefield, it is purely an exercise in elementary military tactics to overcome him with the bayonets that the traditionalists insist on, although tanks, armored cars and artillery would be better.

Bombings are only a part of air

Air Power Did It

strategy. Even the most sanguine of bomber pilots with whom I talked through that morning and most of the afternoon admitted this. Fighters of various categories, each designed to do a specific job with light bombers and medium bombers, all have their roles to play. Fast reconnaissance planes provide intelligence for successful air attack. We've got some so fast we hear that the enemy can't find them in the air, and that pilots will take years before they can amass a decent number of hours in the air because they are so swift that pilots aren't aloft very long each trip. By the way, the pilots wish somebody would send some of those fancy-pants rekkky planes here where they're badly needed.

The Knockout Wallop

But it's the bomber that represents heavy artillery, the crushing blow, the knockout wallop. Enough bombers in time will crush Rommel as they will crush the enemy on whatever front we fight him. So far we've never had enough bombers—or enough of any other kind of plane in the Middle East—to do the job properly. Maybe you have read somewhere about our air superiority out here. In those desperate days that ended at El Alamein we were outnumbered two to one. My authority for that is the Royal Air Force journal for July 11, 1942. But there are increasing signs that both in Washington and London there is a growing recognition not only of the importance of air power but also of the importance of the Middle East as a battlefield. But the Middle East still needs more bombers like Kathleen, and better ones when they are made. They saved Egypt, those bombers—they can save the world. Our tough, touchy guys in khaki can resent the fact that the R.A.F. calls ships like Kathleen, Liberator instead of B-24, but no ship was ever better named Liberator.



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