

*A Stepping Stone to Success: Operation Battleaxe (June 1941) and
the Development of the British Tactical Air Doctrine*

Mike Bechthold

On 16 February 1943 a meeting was held in Tripoli attended by senior American and British officers to discuss the various lessons learned during the Libyan campaign. The focus of the meeting was a presentation by General Bernard Montgomery. This "gospel according to Montgomery," as it was referred to by Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder, set out very clearly Monty's beliefs on how air power should be used to support the army.¹ Among the tenets Montgomery articulated was his conviction of the importance of air power: "Any officer who aspires to hold high command in war must understand clearly certain principles regarding the use of air power." Montgomery also believed that flexibility was the greatest asset of air power. This allowed it to be applied as a "battle-winning factor of the first importance." As well, he fully endorsed the air force view of centralized control: "Nothing could be more fatal to successful results than to dissipate the air resource into small packets placed under the control of army formation commanders, with each packet working on its own plan. The soldier must not expect, or wish, to exercise direct command over air striking forces." Montgomery concluded his discussion by stating that it was of prime importance for the army and air

¹ Arthur Tedder, *With Prejudice: The war memoirs of Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Tedder* (London: Cassell, 1966), p. 396.

force to "work together at the same H.Q. in complete harmony, and with complete mutual understanding and confidence."²

Following Montgomery, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, commander of the Northwest Africa Tactical Air Force (previously the Desert Air Force) made a presentation to the assembled group of generals and other senior officers. Coningham made some very important statements in his speech and his ideas were to become the cornerstone of American and British tactical air doctrine for the rest of the war, and indeed, into the post-war period.³

The Soldier commands the land forces, the Airman commands the air forces; both commanders work together. There are certain fundamental differences between the Army and the Air forces which should be recognized—The Army fights on a front that may be divided into sectors, such as Brigade, Division, Corps or an Army front. The Air front is indivisible.

An Army has one battle to fight, the land battle. The Air has two. It has first of all to beat the enemy air, so that it may go into the land battle against the enemy land forces with the maximum possible hitting power. .

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I cannot accept the possibility that any man, however competent, can do the work of the other services without proportionately neglecting his own. In plain language, no soldier is competent to operate the Air, just as no Airman is competent to operate the Army.⁴

² B.L. Montgomery, "Some Notes on High Command in War," Second Edition. Italy, September 1943. (Directorate of History and Heritage, Department of National Defence, Canada (DHH) Air 8/984). This is a reprint of the original which was first issued in January 1943. The only change is the addition of a new introduction by Montgomery.

³ Richard H. Kohn, and Joseph P. Harahan, eds. *Air Superiority in World War II and Korea: An interview with Gen. James Ferguson, Gen. Robert M. Lee, Gen. William Momyer, and Lt. Gen. Elwood R. Quesada* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), pp. 30-35. A full discussion of this issue can be found in B. Michael Bechthold, "A Question of Success: Tactical Air Doctrine and Practice in North Africa, 1942-43," *Journal of Military History*, 68.3 (2004): pp. 821-57 and Mike Bechthold, "The Development of an Unbeatable Combination: US Close Air Support in Normandy," *Canadian Military History*, 8.1 (1999): pp. 7-20.

⁴ "Talk by Air Vice Marshal Sir A. Coningham to assembled British and American General and Senior Officers." Tripoli, 16 February 1943. DHH Air 8/984.

Coningham sent copies of his speech to every ranking officer in Tunisia to ensure that his views on tactical air doctrine were well known. According to Vincent Orange, Coningham's biographer, the Tripoli speech made a "remarkable impact," especially judging by the large number of copies that survive today.⁵

These statements made by Montgomery and Coningham were to become the basis for Anglo-American tactical air doctrine for the remainder of the war, and indeed, many of the tenets of that doctrine are as relevant today as they were in 1943. This doctrine was largely based on the successful partnership formed by the Eighth Army and the Western Desert Air Force during operations in Egypt and Libya. Coningham and Montgomery were anointed as the creators of a revolutionary system of air-ground cooperation, proven in battle during the Battle of El Alamein and subsequent operations.

Seventy years on, it is clear that operations in the Western Desert had a significant impact on the development of British and American tactical air doctrine in the Second World War and beyond. Coningham worked closely with Tedder and Montgomery to refine the British system of close air support. Perhaps Coningham's most important contribution was his ability to convince his army counterparts that this system of close air support would best meet their needs.⁶ Coningham did not take over the Desert Air Force until July 1941, more than a year after hostilities commenced in the Egypt and Libya. This article will examine army-air force operations at the start of the Western Desert campaign in an effort to discover what sort of an organization Coningham inherited. Did Coningham overhaul and correct an ineffective system, or did he build on the accomplishments of his predecessor, Raymond Collishaw, the famous Canadian fighter ace of the First World War?

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⁵ David Syrett, "The Tunisian Campaign, 1942-1943," contained in *Case Studies in the Development of Close Air Support* (Washington, DC: Air Force History, 1990), p. 173 and Vincent Orange, *Coningham: A Biography of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham* (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 133.

⁶ David Ian Hall, "Learning how to Win: Anglo-American Development of Air Co-operation in North Africa," *Seventy Years On: New Perspectives on the Second World War*.

In June 1940, the world was a very lonely place for the British Empire. The preceding two years had witnessed a string of German victories which had progressively isolated Great Britain. Austria and Czechoslovakia had fallen without a shot being fired. August 1939 saw the signing of a non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin followed almost immediately by the attack on Poland. A brief pause followed. Britain and France used this time to prepare their armies. On paper, the Western armies were at least the equal of the Germans opposite them. The impregnable Maginot Line guarded the Franco-German border. To its north stood the cream of the French Army and a British Expeditionary Force. It seemed unlikely that this force could be quickly defeated. But, the improbable did happen. On the 10th of May 1940 Hitler unleashed his forces against the West. In a matter of days both Holland and Belgium had been conquered. The main blow fell in the Ardennes, a rugged, wooded area thought to be impassable by tanks. The Germans, however, found a way through and succeeded in trapping the bulk of the Anglo-French army in the north. Six short weeks after the start of the campaign, France signed an armistice. The only bright spot was the rescue of the bulk of the BEF from the beaches of Dunkirk, albeit without most of their equipment. With the defeat of France, England now faced the very real possibility of invasion.

Against this backdrop, the plight of Egypt was obviously of secondary concern. The main effort of Britain and the Commonwealth was directed to preventing an invasion of the British Isles. However, the Middle East remained strategically important. The Suez Canal offered the shortest route to India and the Far East. As well, the natural resources of the region (primarily oil) were growing in importance. As such, the British had to make every possible effort to avoid being pushed out of the Middle East.

At the start of hostilities, Air Commodore Raymond Collishaw was the commander of 202 Group RAF. It had a front line strength of 81 aircraft deployed at a number of airfields arrayed around the main headquarters at Mersa Matruh. The Italian 5th *Squadra*, commanded by *Generale Squadra Aerea* Felice Porro, boasted over three times as many aircraft. Another factor that would come into play as time passed was the question of replacement aircraft and spare parts. The RAF squadrons in Egypt were operating at full strength and maintained an aircraft reserve of one hundred percent.

However, with the fall of France, the prospect of reinforcements being sent from England was questionable. Fighter aircraft did not have the range to fly directly to the Middle East, and it was slow and dangerous to send a convoy through the Mediterranean. At best, it would take two weeks for a convoy to make this voyage and it would surely suffer losses to German U-boats, the Italian Fleet and Axis land-based air power operating from France, North Africa, Italy and Sicily. It was safer to send a convoy around the Horn of Africa but that journey would take even longer. As a result, the British had to rely on the Takoradi route. This expedient saw aircraft being shipped to the West African port of Takoradi (in present day Ghana) from where they would fly across the width of Africa to Sudan and then follow the Nile River valley up to Egypt. This was the surest way to get fighter aircraft to Egypt but it took a tremendous toll on the men and aircraft making the journey. The supply of bomber aircraft was somewhat easier as they had the range to fly directly from England, refueling at Gibraltar and Malta. From a supply point of view, the Italians had it better, and worse. Their proximity to home meant that replacement aircraft and spare parts could be supplied in a matter of hours. However, the *Regia Aeronautica's* maintenance system was far inferior to that of the British. At the start of the campaign, Italian squadrons could claim only 60 percent of their aircraft as serviceable, and this number was to decline substantially.⁷

At the beginning of June, it became apparent to the British that hostilities with Italy were about to begin. Air Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, ordered Collishaw to be ready for war. Upon commencement of hostilities, the first priority of 202 Group was to conduct reconnaissance to keep the British command informed concerning Italian deployments. The second priority was to attack Italian targets.⁸

Late on the evening of June 10th Collishaw was ordered to “come to immediate readiness for war with Italy, but await (repeat await) further instructions before initiating hostile acts.”⁹ At midnight it was confirmed that a state of war existed between Italy and Great Britain. Nine minutes after that Longmore sent a signal to Collishaw, “A state of war with Italy exists. Carry out reconnaissance as arranged.

⁷ Richard Townshend Bickers, *The Desert Air War, 1939-1945* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991), pp. 17-18.

⁸ Roderic Owen, *The Desert Air Force* (London: Hutchinson and Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 1948), p. 30.

⁹ Owen, p. 30.

Bomber formations as available should accompany reconnaissance in northern areas. Favourable targets observed, especially concentrations of aircraft.”¹⁰ This last comment was to prove highly accurate.

At first light on the 11th, Collishaw attacked. He sent Blenheims of Nos. 45, 55 and 113 Squadrons against the harbour at Tobruk. When no visible signs of the enemy could be found, the aircraft diverted to a secondary target—the airfield at El Adem. Attacking at low-level they encountered no flak or defending fighters. Instead, the aircraft were all parked neatly in rows, ideal for peacetime convenience, but disastrous in time of war. As well, crews claimed that their attack found the men of the base lined up on parade astride the main runway. As the bombs began to fall, the men ran in all directions trying to find cover. It was later surmised that the base commander had ordered his troops out so he could read them Mussolini’s official announcement of war against England.¹¹ Whether this was apocryphal is unknown, but the Italian forces in Libya were not ready for action, even though it was the Italian government which had declared war. As late as June 12th, British air raids on Italian airfields met little resistance and often found aircraft on the ground undispersed. The first small Italian raid was not launched until nearly 36 hours after the start of hostilities and it was not until June 21st that they mounted their first major attack. Their target was the port facilities at Alexandria and the RAF maintenance depot at Aboukir. The Gladiators launched in defence were too slow to catch the S.79 bombers but they managed to disrupt the Italian aircraft so the bombing was scattered and ineffective.¹²

With the preliminary phase of the war over, Collishaw had to decide on his next move. He had two options open to him. First, he could sit back and conserve his forces until such time as the Italians launched their attack, or second, he could take the initiative and continue to take the war to the Italians. A fighter pilot at heart, he chose the latter. Collishaw hoped to achieve the illusion of superiority by keeping the enemy off balance. Described as “Collie’s War,” operations were conducted on the basis of “hit

¹⁰ Bickers, p. 21.

¹¹ Raymond Collishaw with R.V. Dodds, *Air Command: A Fighter Pilot’s Story* (London: William Kimber, 1973), p. 241; Bickers, p. 22; Owen, p. 31.

¹² Collishaw, *Air Command*, p. 242.

'em hard, then hit 'em again. But don't let 'em know where you're going to hit."¹³ In general, the RAF attacks were small in scale, but large in scope. Small groups of aircraft were sent to attack as many targets as possible. Overall, the raids caused limited physical destruction, but the damage to Italian morale was much greater. The constant attacks compelled the Italians to mount standing patrols over their military bases, ports and airfields. Army commanders demanded that an air umbrella cover their troops in the field. This policy was to have a number of long-reaching effects. It was terribly wasteful of resources. Aircraft employed in standing patrols could not be used offensively. As well, the wear and tear on the aircraft and aircrew was cumulative. Italian serviceability rates, never high to begin with, plummeted due to the strain of maintaining the patrols. A good indication of the success of Collishaw's attacks can be seen in the period leading up to the Italian offensive in mid-September. At a time when the *Regia Aeronautica* should have been launching numerous attacks against the British to prepare for their main attack, they made very few offensive raids because almost their entire strength was devoted to defensive patrols.¹⁴

The numerical inferiority of the RAF forced Collishaw to adopt a number of measures to level the odds. Decoys were used to give a false impression of the number of aircraft available. These were built by a Jewish volunteer unit from Palestine.¹⁵ In June 1940, Collishaw's 202 Group had one Hurricane available.¹⁶ At the time, this aircraft outperformed everything else in the North African sky, but obviously one aircraft could not make much of a difference. Collishaw tried to get as much as possible from this aircraft. He shifted it frequently from one landing ground to another to try and bluff the Italians into believing there were more of these high performance aircraft available. "Collie's Battleship," as this aircraft was christened, was used to great effect. The most skilled pilots in the Group were tasked to fly this Hurricane. They were ordered to be very aggressive in their attacks, primarily to frighten the enemy. The

¹³ Philip Guedalla, *Middle East, 1940-1942: A Study in Air Power* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1943), p. 85.

¹⁴ Owen, p. 33; Bickers, p. 36.

¹⁵ Collishaw, *Air Command*, p. 242.

¹⁶ There was a total of four Hurricanes in the Middle East, but three were assigned to No.80 Squadron, tasked with defending the Suez Canal zone. Bickers, pp. 25-26.

order issued by Collishaw stated, "Success will adversely affect Italian morale and he will be fearful that Hurricane fighters may attack at any moment."¹⁷

Collishaw's offensive spirit during this period was not without its costs. The difficulty in obtaining replacements and spares from the United Kingdom meant that the equipment in theatre was a finite resource. Longmore was acutely aware of this fact, and on July 5th, after an observer was killed and a pilot wounded during an attack on an Italian motor convoy, he sent a message to Collishaw which stated, "I consider such operations unjustified having regard to our limited resources." This message was followed two weeks later by an even sharper rebuke, "We are rapidly consuming available resources of all types of aircraft in the Command, and must in consequence exercise still greater economy in their employment." In response, the number and type of missions were severely curtailed. The fear of casualties became so great that on August 13th the Army was told not to request air support unless the need was dire. As a result, only two attacks were made against Italian field targets over the next two weeks. In spite of these restrictions, Collishaw was able to keep the Italians on the defensive through the use of offensive fighter patrols, attacks on airfields and bluff.¹⁸

Despite a mediocre start to the war, Italian morale remained high. Timidity had not been the sole cause for the delay in launching an attack on Egypt. The Italians had always assumed the greatest threat to Libya came from the French to the west in Tunisia. The British were correctly seen to be a very small threat offensively. The fall of France in June 1940 removed the threat in Tunisia and it took the Italians time to reorient their forces to the east to deal with the British. As well, they saw no need to hurry. They greatly outnumbered the British both in the air and on the ground, and it was seen as just a matter of time until the British were completely thrown out of Egypt. By September, Marshal Graziani had completed his preparations, and was ready to go on the offensive.

The signs had been pointing to an Italian offensive for weeks. In response to reports that Italian formations were massing, Collishaw ordered his bomber squadrons, Nos. 55, 113 and 211, to step up their attacks. On 9 September, raids were made on

¹⁷ Quoted in Bickers, p. 26.

¹⁸ Denis Richards and Hilary St. George Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-1945, Vol.1. The Fight at Odds* (London: HMSO, 1974 (1953)), pp. 246-247.

enemy airfields, concentrations of transportation and supply dumps. The largest attack, composed of 21 aircraft, was made on the aerodrome at El Adem outside of Tobruk. The Italian offensive was finally launched on 13 September following a spectacular artillery barrage at the Libyan-Egyptian frontier. Graziani moved five divisions into Egypt. His forces sustained moderately heavy casualties from mines and harassing artillery fire as they advanced along a predictable route. The British held the frontier with weak forces and made way as the Italians advanced. Inexplicably, Graziani halted his offensive at Sidi Barrani, a mere 50 miles from the Libyan border. They proceeded to build large fortified camps. It appeared that they intended to use this position as a jumping off point for their final assault on Egypt. The British had no intention of letting the Italians maintain the initiative. The British army commander in the Western Desert, Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connor, made plans to retake some of the lost ground. Though planned as a limited counterattack, Operation "Compass" loomed large as the first British offensive of the war. The immediate objectives were the Italian fortified camps south of Sidi Barrani, along with the town itself. O'Connor had at his disposal only two divisions—4th Indian and 7th Armoured—along with some other assorted units. Also available were the resources of Collishaw's No.202 Group and some other assorted squadrons. Theoretically, this gave the RAF a strength of 220 aircraft. This compared to an estimated 250 bombers and 250 fighters available to the Italians.

The initial phase of "Compass" was completely successful. The 4th Indian Division captured the Italian fortified camps along with the town of Sidi Barrani. By December 11th, only three days into the operation, the British had captured over 38,000 prisoners, 1,000 vehicles, 237 guns, and 73 tanks along with mountains of supplies. The RAF had been very active in this victory. Collishaw's policy was to make the most of his meagre resources. Fighter pilots flew as many as four sorties a day during the first week of operations. The Hurricanes were used to fly deep interdiction missions while the Gladiators maintained closer offensive patrols. Additionally, aircraft were tasked to carry out reconnaissance, raids on enemy airfields and attacks on enemy formations. By 15 December, the intensity of the operations was beginning to have an effect on

serviceability rates. The Italians used this opportunity to conduct more attacks of their own. However, it was recorded that “surprisingly little damage” was caused.¹⁹

At this point, O'Connor could have ended “Compass” and been entirely satisfied with the results. However, he decided to press on. The objective of phase two of “Compass” was the capture of the fortified towns of Bardia, Tobruk and Derna. These ports, needed for the shipment of supplies, were essential for any further advance. As they were captured one-by-one, it became apparent that the Italian military was crumbling. The British advance was turning into a rout. In order to cut off the retreat of the Italian army, O'Connor took a great risk on February 3rd by sending units of the 7th Armoured Division across the “bulge” of Cyrenaica. His units were worn out and badly in need of rest and repair, but if they could make it cross-country to the Gulf of Sirte before the Italians, who were retreating along the coast, they had the opportunity to trap the entire Italian Tenth Army. The gamble paid off. The British made it to the coast mere hours before enemy units appeared. After a brief battle, the Italians surrendered. By any standard, Operation “Compass” was a huge success. A British force that never totalled more than two divisions had advanced 500 miles and destroyed an army of 14 divisions. Over 130,000 prisoners were captured, along with nearly 500 tanks and over 800 guns. All this had come at a cost of only 2,000 casualties of which 500 were killed.²⁰ As well, the *Regia Aeronautica* in Libya virtually ceased to exist as an effective force.

By all accounts, the role played by Collishaw's 202 Group was crucial to the success of Operation “Compass.” As a first attempt at harnessing the joint efforts of the land and air forces, “Compass” was a model operation. From the outset, Collishaw and O'Connor worked closely together to plan operations. Collishaw even went so far as to collocate his headquarters with that of O'Connor and to continually advance his HQ as necessary. After the initial phase of “Compass” was over, the chief enemy of the RAF became distance, not the Italians. As British forces advanced across the desert, the RAF had to continually leapfrog forward to new landing grounds to keep their aircraft within striking distance of the enemy. This was a type of operation for which plans had not been made in the prewar period. Squadrons were seen to be largely static

¹⁹ I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Volume 1, p. 272.

²⁰ David Fraser, *And We Shall Shock Them: The British Army in the Second World War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), pp. 121-124.

organizations not designed for quick advances into unprepared areas. However, Collishaw realized that war in the desert was a war of mobility and the air forces must be able to keep up. *Ad hoc* solutions were devised during the course of operations which, while not ideal, allowed air support to continue. For instance, it was found that insufficient motor transport was available to move equipment, supplies and personnel forwards. Luckily, the Italians were very accommodating on this matter supplying a large number of trucks and vehicles, tons of supplies and even stocks of petrol and bombs.²¹ As well, the old “station” basis of organizing squadrons was too cumbersome for the conduct of mobile operations. Instead, it was more efficient to split squadrons into two parts: An advanced HQ which operated with the aircraft at a forward landing ground while the more bulky administrative HQ and repair facilities remained behind at a rear landing ground.²²

Against this can be compared the plight of the *Regia Aeronautica*. During the entire course of Operation “Compass” it was never able to do more than react to British initiatives. Italian commanders, worried about constant attacks by the RAF demanded that Italian aircraft provide an air umbrella to protect their forces. This was the worst possible employment of resources. The air umbrella rarely deterred attacks on troops or facilities, and it caused an enormous strain on pilots and aircraft. This was made all the worse by the fact that the Italian maintenance and repair organization in the desert was second-rate. Serviceability rates for Italian aircraft were very poor. As the British advanced and captured Italian landing grounds, they found large numbers of aircraft abandoned. It was estimated that as many as 1,100 aircraft were left behind by the Italians as they retreated because they could not be repaired. The Italians also lost 58 aircraft in combat and a further 91 were abandoned intact. This compares with the loss of only 26 aircraft by the British.²³

The success obtained in Operation “Compass” was fleeting. Shortly after the victory, British troops and RAF units were pulled out of Africa to support the ill-fated

²¹ Guedalla, p. 98; Playfair, Vol.1, p. 281.

²² Bickers, p. 43.

²³ John Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The Royal Air Force in the European War, 1939-1945* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), pp. 317-318. There were, of course, additional British aircraft damaged during the course of operations, most of which were eventually returned to service.

Greek expedition. Collishaw was vehemently opposed to this diversion. Not only did he see it as misguided, he regretted the missed opportunity to maintain the momentum of "Compass" and push the Italians out of Africa once and for all.²⁴ The timing of these events coincided with the arrival of the German *Africa Korps* in Libya. At the end of March General Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox," launched his attack. In less than a month the British were pushed all the way back to the Egyptian frontier. Only Tobruk held out. One of the greatest misfortunes suffered by the British during this period was the capture of General O'Connor. His loss was to have serious implications for future operations in the Western Desert. As Collishaw presided over the retreat, he took solace in the fact that his squadrons left behind few aircraft.²⁵ A period of reorganization followed the retreat during which Collishaw was given command of a new group, No.204.

Starting in April, the British began to look for ways to recapture the lost territory. The first attempt was Operation "Brevity," a small offensive designed to capture the area around Sollum as a jump-off point for future operations. The attack, launched on 15 May 1941, was met with fierce German resistance and the only accomplishment was the capture of the pass at Halfaya. Even these minor gains were lost over the next two weeks as the Germans counterattacked to regain the lost territory.²⁶ The following month the British launched a second attack. Operation "Battleaxe" was designed to relieve the besieged garrison at Tobruk by driving all enemy forces out of the Frontier area. It was conceived as a three-phase operation. The first phase would see the destruction of Axis forces in the vicinity of Bardia - Sollum, essentially a replay of Operation Brevity but on a larger scale. The second phase would then see British forces exploit the initial gains of phase one, advancing to Tobruk to relieve the trapped garrison, while the third phase envisioned a further westward advance of some 60-70 miles to provide security for the approaches to Tobruk.²⁷ This operation was considered essential by the British Chiefs of Staff in order to alter the balance of power in the Middle East. German forces in North Africa were being maintained by sealines to Cyrenaica via the west coast of Greece and via shipments to Tripoli. Due to the range

²⁴ Raymond Collishaw Papers, Library and Archives Canada, MG 30 E280 Volume 1 (6).

²⁵ Collishaw, *Air Command*, pp. 250-251.

²⁶ I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Volume 2, pp. 160-162.

²⁷ The National Archives (Public Record Office) (TNA PRO) WO 201/2482, Western Desert Force Operation Instruction No.11 [op order for "Battleaxe"], 12 June 1941, p. 3.

limitations of British aircraft, secure air bases were required between Sollum and Derna from which the RAF could interdict Axis shipping in the Mediterranean.²⁸ These strategic imperatives led the British to risk all their available strength, both ground and air, to ensure the success of "Battleaxe". Churchill strongly supported the concept of "Battleaxe". He understood the need to secure ground, but he also believed that ultimately the main goal of General Sir Archibald Wavell's army was to destroy enemy units, wherever they may be found. This, combined with a longer and more tenuous Axis supply line, would lead to British ascendancy in the Western Desert.²⁹ The importance placed on the success of "Battleaxe" was clearly stated in a telegram from Air Marshal Sir Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff, to Tedder:

The outcome of this battle must be of supreme and possibly decisive strategic importance to the Middle East and the whole war. Its political effect will be profound and worldwide. The importance of seizing and maintaining the initiative cannot be overrated....Every nerve must be strained and no effort ought to be spared to bring the maximum possible force to bear on the enemy....I urge you to throw in everything you can at the outset, regardless of the future, and I will do my best to make good your losses.³⁰

Tedder made the maximum number of aircraft available for "Battleaxe," augmenting Collishaw's 204 Group by transferring additional squadrons from East Africa, and by transferring pilots and aircraft from squadrons re-forming in Egypt following the tough campaigns in Greece and Crete.³¹

Churchill's commitment to the success of "Battleaxe" was clearly demonstrated on 21 April when he authorized the reinforcement of British forces in the Middle East. A Tiger convoy was duly dispatched carrying a precious cargo of tanks and aircraft. This was a case of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' as it required the British to strip their home forces, at a time when a German invasion of the British Isles was a distinct possibility.

²⁸ I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Volume II (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 163.

²⁹ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, Prime Minister to General Wavell, 9 June 1941.

³⁰ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, Tedder from C.A.S., 9 June 1941.

³¹ I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Volume II (London: HMSO, 1956), p. 166.

Despite these preparations, and the importance placed on the success of the operation, the commanders responsible for its success had significant misgivings. Wavell wrote to General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, stating that he was doubtful about the prospects of success. He did not have confidence that his forces could rout the Germans the same way they had the Italians. As well, he listed problems with reconnaissance by armoured cars and the suitability of British infantry and cruiser tanks against German armour and anti-tank guns.³² Wavell was under pressure from London to launch "Battleaxe" at the earliest possible date, but he was forced to delay the start of the operation by two weeks. The principal reason for the delay was the time needed to integrate the new tanks into 7th Armoured Division. This unit had to be virtually reconstituted following its losses earlier in the year. Its men needed to be trained on the new tanks that had arrived on the Tiger convoy and a variety of maintenance tasks had to be performed to get the tanks ready for desert battle. Another problem that complicated the launch of "Battleaxe" was the need to devise tactics which allowed infantry and cruiser tanks, with their vastly different speeds, to be employed in the same formation.³³

Wavell recognized the risks inherent in the "Battleaxe" plan. He assessed that the first stage of the plan, consolidation of the area around Sollum - Capuzzo, could be successfully accomplished with the available forces, but that this result would be in doubt if the Germans were able to reinforce their forward troops with some of the forces opposite Tobruk.³⁴ German reinforcement of the frontier area could be prevented in two ways: first, by the Tobruk garrison presenting a significant threat to German forces in the area that would prevent their redeployment. This possibility was discounted as Wavell did not want to compromise the defence of the Tobruk perimeter should the first phase of "Battleaxe" fail.³⁵ The second possibility was to use the RAF to interdict German movements towards the frontier. Unfortunately, the decision to use RAF fighters in a defensive role providing an air umbrella for the British forces interfered with the effectiveness of this option.

³² TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, C.I.G.S. from General Wavell, 28 May 1941.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, C.I.G.S. from General Wavell, 7 June 1941.

³⁵ Ibid.

The air plan for "Battleaxe" started before the ground attack was launched. Five days prior to the operation, RAF sorties were concentrated on attacking German lines of communication in the rear. Three days later the emphasis was switched to attacks on the lines of communication in forward areas. These attacks would be continued during the course of the operation by the bomber force, but starting just before the commencement of the operation, the majority of the fighter force was withdrawn from offensive operations and used to provide a defensive screen, or air umbrella, for the ground forces.³⁶ By this point in the war, the RAF, and Collishaw in particular, were well aware that the use of an air umbrella was an unprofitable use of air resources. Collishaw's success during the early part of the war was derived from an aggressive, offensive use of his meagre air resources. His constant sorties against enemy airdromes, port facilities and lines of communications forced the Italians to mount standing air patrols in an effort to counter the attacks. The ineffectiveness of these defensive patrols was recognized by Collishaw, and clearly stated in his after-action report on the first British offensive:

The failure of the Italian air force to strike at our aircraft on their aerodromes while the R.A.F. continued their sustained attacks on the Italian aerodromes brought about the destruction of the Italian air force at Cyrenaica. Our attacks on the enemy's bases, lines of communication and his aerodromes forces the Italian air force on the defensive and the policy of maintaining standing fighter patrols over many bases wore out the fighter units...The [army] generals also contributed to the failure of the Italian air force by insisting on having fighter patrols flying over roads to prevent our air force from attacking the M.T. columns...³⁷

An Army report written about the same time as Collishaw's report also came to the conclusion that the air umbrella was relatively ineffective, but was still needed to protect ground forces.³⁸

³⁶ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, C.A.S. from Tedder, 10 June 1941.

³⁷ TNA PRO Air 23/6475, R. Collishaw, "Brief Report on Royal Air Force Operations in the Western Desert from the Outbreak of War with Italy - the Capture of Cyrenaica to the Time of the Enemy Counter Offensive," 19 April 1941, pp. 11-12.

³⁸ TNA PRO Air 2/7447, "Report on Air Co-Operation with the Army During Operations in the Western Desert and Libya, December 1940 - February 1941," May 1941.

This army belief in the efficacy of the umbrella was incorporated into the “Battleaxe” plan. Lieutenant-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse, commander of the Western Desert Force, insisted that RAF fighters provide an umbrella during the approach march to the battlefield and during the operation itself. Collishaw was very much against this plan, preferring to use his fighters in an offensive manner.³⁹ However, Tedder, the overall RAF commander in the Middle East, stepped in and supported the army’s request for air cover. He believed that the policy was justified in the short term, though he recognized that the continuation of such a policy over a longer term would cause the RAF fighter strength to be “gradually frittered away.”⁴⁰ As a result, Collishaw was required to task the majority of his fighter force with air cover duties for the duration of Operation “Battleaxe.”

For the purposes of this article a brief summary of “Battleaxe” will suffice. In short, the operation was a complete failure. Initial attacks by the British on 15 June met with mixed success. The 7th Armoured Division was able to capture Fort Capuzzo after a tough fight, but was unable to dislodge the Germans for the defended localities of Points 206 and 208. The 4th Indian Division also met with dogged resistance as it tried to secure Halfaya Pass. The British continued to press their attacks the next day, but German reinforcements were starting to arrive and by the third day of the operation it was clear that no further advances were possible. In fact, the British force faced the distinct possibility of being encircled and trapped by the Germans. General Wavell had no option other than to order his force to disengage and withdraw.⁴¹

The failure of “Battleaxe” led to much recrimination and finger-pointing as the commanders tried to understand what went wrong. In a telegram sent to London on 18 June, the day after “Battleaxe” was cancelled, General Wavell listed three reasons for the failure of the operation:

1. Greater German tank strength than expected.
2. Germans were prepared for attack and counterattacked immediately.

³⁹ TNA PRO Air 23/6474, R. Collishaw, “Brief Report on the Royal Air Force Operations from the Time of our Retreat through Cyrenaica - including the Operation “Battleaxe,” 12 August 1941, p. 7.

⁴⁰ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, C.A.S. from Tedder, 21 June 1941.

⁴¹ Playfair, Vol. II, pp. 167-170.

3. 7th Armoured Division had been hastily reformed and did not have sufficient time to train.⁴²

It is clear the Germans were able to take advantage of poor signals discipline by the British before and during Operation "Battleaxe." Intercepted radio broadcasts had alerted General Erwin Rommel, commander of the *Afrika Corps*, to the imminent launch of a British operation. He responded by placing his units on alert. During the course of the battle, further signals intelligence allowed Rommel to understand British intentions. As a result, he was able to rapidly redeploy his forces to halt the British advance. These countermoves proved to be the decisive element of the battle.

Wavell also placed some of the blame on the RAF. He stated,

Our air forces protected our troops effectively from enemy bombing except on certain occasions when their protection had been temporarily withdrawn...We never had sufficient superiority to afford entire protection to our troops or to stop enemy's movements. We are not organized or trained for the type of close support the enemy employs and cannot expect it.⁴³

As might be expected, this accusation brought storms of protest from the RAF. Upon seeing Wavell's signal, Tedder cabled London to express his displeasure. He pointed out the "utter inaccuracy" of Wavell's statements and believed that "further argument in the face of such apparent inability to understand principles of air warfare appeared valueless." Tedder believed that Wavell's discussion of air power in his signal was "naive and meaningless."⁴⁴

This disagreement clearly illustrates the large gulf that existed between the army and the air force in their attempts to create an effective system of close air support. At the heart of the debate was the question of who should control the air resource. The army believed that they knew best what their needs were and, as such, ultimate responsibility for air taskings should lie with them. Conversely, the air force argued that air power was capable of much more than simply acting in intimate support of the

⁴² TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram C.I.G.S. from General Wavell, 18 June 1941.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, C.A.S. from Tedder, 21 June 1941.

army, and as such they should be able to act independently. In Operation "Battleaxe" the air commanders went against their best judgement and provided the army with what it requested - attacks on the lines of communications by bombers and air cover of the army by the fighters. Unfortunately, this mis-allocation of air resources likely cost them victory in this battle. Both the army and air force reported insignificant German air attacks on the battlefield. Most German fighters were retained to provide defence to rear areas in the face of RAF attacks. Those few air raids launched by the Germans were ineffective. The attacks may have caused consternation among the ground troops targeted, but little damage was caused. RAF bombers proved quite effective at hitting enemy targets during the course of the battle, but they were not able to stop the flow of German units to the front. Ironically, the most effective aircraft for this task were the cannon-armed Hurricanes that were engaged in the defensive patrols. Though not effective against armoured vehicles, the fighters were devastating in attacks on soft-skinned vehicles, especially those in moving convoys where anti-aircraft defences were apt to be much weaker. The destruction of the supply vehicles and fuel trucks would quickly render German armour unable to conduct operations. It was the timely arrival of German reinforcements on the battlefield that turned the tide of the battle. Any delay or weakening of those reinforcements would have had a significant effect on British fortunes. It is interesting to note that the Germans reported that RAF attacks on their rear communications and supply columns had been very successful and that movements during the battle had been severely hampered.⁴⁵ The ramifications of these attacks would have been even more serious for the Germans had the fighter force been released for offensive actions.

Another problem that was exposed during "Battleaxe" was the lack of close cooperation between the army and air force. The two services worked together to form the initial plan for "Battleaxe," but limited provisions were made to sustain this teamwork in combat. Beresford-Peirse and Collishaw worked well together, but they did not have the time to form the same close relationship enjoyed by Collishaw and O'Connor. At all levels, there were serious communications difficulties between the army and air once the battle began. British forces in the desert did not acknowledge

⁴⁵ Gerhard Schreiber, Bernd Stegemann and Detlef Vogel, *Germany and the Second World War, Vol.III: The Mediterranean, South-east Europe, and North Africa, 1939-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 703.

calls from the air to display recognition signals, nor did Army headquarters provide regular bomblines information to the air force. This made it difficult, if not impossible, for the air force to provide close support due to the risk of hitting friendly forces.⁴⁶ There were also problems with the transmission of information. Reconnaissance reports made by RAF aircraft discovered the advancing German columns, but this information was not promptly acted upon. As well, the lack of communications between the ground and air units made it difficult for the reconnaissance aircraft to tell if they were viewing advancing German columns or retreating British units. The RAF held a Bomber striking force in reserve to attack targets of opportunity as designated by the army, but these aircraft were not called into action until too late in the battle.⁴⁷

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Operation "Battleaxe" ended in a stalemate. The British inability to secure their objectives resulted in the failure of the operation. However, the Germans were content to maintain the status quo and did not press on towards Egypt as the British feared might happen. The most immediate consequence of the battle was Churchill's decision to replace Wavell. Collishaw was also caught up in the failure of "Battleaxe." Since Tedder had arrived in the Middle East he had expressed misgivings about Collishaw. The earliest evidence of this came in late 1940 when Longmore appointed Tedder to command 202 Group for a week to allow Collishaw to go on sick leave. Tedder came away from the experience believing that Collishaw acted like a "bull in a china shop" and lacked administrative ability.⁴⁸ However, Tedder was not in a position to act on his observations. Following his appointment as AOC-in-C Middle East, Tedder again expressed reservations about Collishaw. In a letter to Air Chief Marshal Freeman at the end of May, Tedder believed that Collishaw was wasting air resources through unnecessary and reckless operations. He stated, "I feel I am to blame in not having kept a tighter rein on Collishaw but it is not easy to control detailed operations up there."⁴⁹ Tedder's dissatisfaction with Collishaw finally reached a zenith in the weeks following

⁴⁶ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram, C.A.S. from Tedder, 21 June 1941.

⁴⁷ TNA PRO Air 8/582, Telegram AOC 33, C.A.S. from Tedder, 21 June 1941 and TNA PRO Air 23/6474, R. Collishaw, "Brief Report on the Royal Air Force Operations from the Time of our Retreat through Cyrenaica - including the Operation "Battleaxe," 12 August 1941, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁸ Tedder, *With Prejudice*, p. 55.

⁴⁹ TNA PRO Air 20/2792, Letter, ACM Sir W.R. Freeman from Tedder, 29 May 1941.

“Battleaxe.” In a typewritten letter to Freeman dated 7 July 1941, Tedder scrawled a postscript:

I am rather worried about the command situation in the W. Desert. Collishaw has had enough (5 years out here) and in any case I don't think he is the right man to tackle the Hun and the Army. He is the village blacksmith slogger, which is grand for village cricket but we are in for first class cricket.⁵⁰

Collishaw was relieved of command three days later. It is clear that it was Tedder's intention from the start to replace Collishaw with a deputy of his own choosing. This proved impossible early in Tedder's tenure as AOC-in-C. Collishaw had performed magnificently during operations against the Italians. However, the failure of “Battleaxe,” though no fault of Collishaw's, was the necessary pretext that Tedder required to ease Collishaw out. Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham was subsequently brought in to serve as Tedder's deputy.

Reflecting on his accomplishments years after the war, Collishaw stated, “I feel that my days of command in North Africa, when we had to outwit and outfight a numerically superior enemy by a combination of deception, superior tactics and fighting spirit, represent by far my best effort.”⁵¹ This is quite remarkable considering all that he did during his career, especially during the First World War.⁵² During the period that Collishaw was in command of the RAF in the Western Desert he accomplished a great deal. He recognized the difficulty in coordinating fighter and bomber forces and tried to improve their ability to work with each other and with the ground forces. He worked to improve communications and establish effective bomblines that could be identified from the air. The idea of target priority would later become an established part of Allied tactical air doctrine, but Collishaw took the first steps to rank targets and establish an hierarchy of missions. Collishaw's years of command in Egypt made it clear that the use of standing fighter patrols was a waste of air resources. It was more efficient, and beneficial to the ground forces, to use air

⁵⁰ TNA PRO Air 20/2792, Letter, ACM Sir W.R. Freeman from Tedder, 7 July 1941.

⁵¹ Collishaw, *Air Command*, p. 255.

⁵² Collishaw was one of the leading aces of the First World War. Serving with the Royal Naval Air Service and then the Royal Air Force, his 60 confirmed kills places him near the top of the list of Allied aces in the First World War.

resources in an offensive manner to establish air superiority. Once that task was accomplished close air support for the army could follow. Collishaw also recognized the importance of a close relationship with the army, and especially with the army commander. Despite having meagre and often second-rate equipment at his disposal during Western Desert campaign, Collishaw was able to wage an effective and successful campaign against the Axis powers. All the principles of a successful air-ground organization detailed by Montgomery and Coningham in Tripoli in February 1943 were, to a greater or lesser degree, apparent in Collishaw's organisation. Though the role of the Montgomery-Coningham partnership in defeating Rommel cannot be overlooked, neither should the ground work laid by Collishaw be forgotten.