

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



Jump TO Article

Seventy years ago: the Desert Air Force in Italy, 1944

In May-June 1944, during the Italian campaign of World War II, the Luftwaffe mounted a desperate effort to counter Allied air superiority, but it would prove to be in vain.

Seventy years ago in May-June 1944, during the Italian campaign of World War II, the Luftwaffe mounted a desperate effort to counter Allied air superiority. This followed the Allies' break-out from the attritional battles at Anzio and Cassino, but it would prove to be in vain.

The night of 11 May 1944 was set for the fourth battle to begin, the hoped for final battle for Cassino and the Monte Cassino Monastery. With the bulk of Eighth Army now added to Fifth Army, the Allies planned to throw overwhelming force at the mountain bastion. In a concentration of numbers, firepower and a massive artillery bombardment, they intended to smash their way through the Gustav Line and north onto Highway 6. It was not just a pincer movement of break-throughs out of Anzio and Cassino. The German Army found in retreat that they were under constant attack from Allied air forces.

In one instance on 14 May, No. 239 Wing Royal Air Force (RAF) of the Desert Air Force (DAF), which included the Kittyhawks of Nos. 3 and 450 Squadrons Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), targeted some 200 or so vehicles trying to withdraw at Subiaco. By the day's end, there were an estimated 120 destroyed or damaged. In the last six days of May, Allied fighters and fighter-bombers claimed 1148 vehicles of all types destroyed and 766 damaged. This may have even been under-stated. Between Cori and Artena on the Adolf Hitler Line, Fifth Army counted 211 vehicles wrecked clearly by air strikes, whereas air force claims had only estimated 173.

The fighter-bombers were only able to go about their destructive work because of the air superiority asserted and sustained day after day and around the clock by Allied fighters, particularly those of DAF, against the Luftwaffe. Australian airmen were prominent throughout RAF squadrons, an example being the night-fighters of No. 600 Squadron RAF. In the early hours of 15 May at 0230, Australian Flying Officer S. F. Rees and Flying Officer D. C. Bartlett of 600 Squadron lifted off their Beaufighter Mk VIF AI (No. V6574) from their base at Marcianise. North of the River Tiber sometime after 0400, they made radar contact with a bogey and gave chase. When close enough they identified a Ju88. At 0441 Rees shot down the German bomber and returned to Marcianise at 0520 h.

On 21 May near Anzio, more than twenty of the Luftwaffe's formidable Focke-Wulf Fw190 fighter-bombers were about to begin their bombing runs on Allied lines. Eight Spitfires of No. 145 Squadron RAF cut

them off. Squadron Leader Neville Duke shot down two, and Flying Officer Joe Ekbury three, in a total of eight Fw190s destroyed, plus one probable and one damaged. Against the strongest air-to-ground operation the Luftwaffe could muster at that time, it was a crushing blow. And so it went on as Allied air power thwarted the Luftwaffe's attempts to get back into the air war. By the beginning of September, those Luftwaffe day fighter units still surviving in northern Italy were forced to transfer to Germany.

DAF was made up of both air force formations and individual airmen from nearly every Allied nation. From the early years, Americans, Australians, British, Canadians, New Zealanders and South Africans were prominent, either in their own national wings or squadrons, or in RAF formations within DAF. Later, DAF embraced airmen from many other Allied nations and gained its strength and *esprit de corps* from its very diversity. A common cause welded them together. Many Australian airmen in both RAF and RAAF squadrons, such as No. 3 and No. 450 Squadrons, DAF, were prominent.

The DAF had first established air superiority over the Luftwaffe during the battles at El Alamein in July–November 1942, and then held it as the Desert campaign continued on through Libya, Tunisia, and Sicily. Later, in Italy from August 1943 to the end of the war, decisive air power was maintained through countless battles, such as at Salerno, Termoli, Anzio, Cassino, the Gothic Line, and the final battle for the Argenta Gap and the River Po, as DAF and Eighth Army fought as one entity.

The pioneering tactics developed by DAF for the close support of ground forces on the battlefield provided a template which was copied by air forces in other theatres during the Second World War. Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder GCB, who was the founder of the DAF and its commander in its early years before he became Deputy to Eisenhower, stated that the DAF played a lead role, and in his view was '... the key to the ultimate victory in Europe'. Certainly, Allied air power, particularly the DAF, was a decisive factor in bringing Allied victory in North Africa and Italy.

Bryn Evans¹

¹Bryn Evans, secretary of the Institute, is a military historian. This note is based on: Bryn Evans (2014), *The decisive campaigns of the Desert Air Force 1942-1945* (Pen and Sword Books: UK). Signed first editions may be purchased from the author [Email: bryn.evans@ozemail.com.au T: 02 9438 1939]. Part of the proceeds will be remitted to the Institute.