

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.

