

7 SQUADRON IN WORLD WAR II

(Part 1: 1942)

On 12 January 1942, a new squadron entered service with the SAAF, No 7 Squadron. Capt D. H. Loftus, DFC was placed in command and given the task of training the new fighter squadron for service in the Middle East. Temporary headquarters were established at MAF (Mobile Air Force) Roberts Heights, and as officers and details reported daily the squadron gradually increased its strength and settled down. The teething troubles and problems, common in the formation of any new squadron, were quickly remedied and did not prevent the rapid transfer of Squadron headquarters to ZAS (Swartkop Air Station). By 15 January 1942 No 7 Squadron was located under canvas at ZAS, a fully operational unit of the SAAF.

All the pilots had previously trained on Harvards, to familiarize them with advanced low-wing monoplanes, and now began to train with Mohawks. The arrival of two Central Flying School instructors added to the enthusiasm of the Squadron's pilots.

Certain modifications of flying technique were necessitated by the change of equipment. Three-point landings were discarded and operational wheel-landings were introduced as more suitable for the American fighters. The OC, recently promoted to Major, re-emphasized the basic importance of safety-consciousness and teamwork. The ideal to be aimed at was a combination of individualism and initiative with co-operative teamwork.

In addition to training in R/T procedures and aircraft identification the pilots were required to practise for air to air combat, and straffing exercises were carried out under the keen eye of the instructors. In the latter exercises the importance of a low approach using natural terrain for cover was stressed, as well as a low level departure from the target.

On 29 January the entire Squadron was ordered to stand-by; all leave was cancelled and preparations were made for a rapid move. An air of bustle surrounded the Squadron, and all personnel assisted throughout the night, with the aid of motor transport headlights, in loading 504 000 rounds of ammunition into the belts. By 0600 hours on the 30th, Maj Loftus was able to report that 7

Squadron had 10 aircraft fully armed and fuelled. No further information was received from DGAF however and in order to maintain the high morale, lectures on aircraft recognition, defensive tactics, gas and chemical warfare were introduced. In the practical exercises of scrambling under conditions of chemical warfare all aircraft were off the ground in four minutes. The gas officer complimented the Squadron on this achievement and acknowledged the fact that this demonstration was the finest yet encountered by him.

By 15 January the Squadron had experienced its first month of living and working under operational conditions. This had no adverse effect on the members; on the contrary the men found this type of living rather exhilarating. Recreation facilities and a magnificent bar were erected, while indoor and outdoor games gave the men ample opportunity to blow off steam after their strenuous daily routine.

Flying training continued and progressed into formation flying including finger four and battle formation with a new approach to offensive and defensive tactics, taking the form of an "Offensive Circle", or "Luffberry". In this intricate manoeuvre, the leader takes his Squadron into a circle of approximately a 45 degree angle of bank with the aircraft about 200 yards apart. While circling they jink and attack in short bursts while keeping their formation. These and other tactics were persevered with to a point of perfection.



Mohawk aircraft at Swartkop Air Station during the formation period of 7 Squadron

New members to the Squadron were now being trained by experienced flight and section leaders. A vast improvement in the use of R/T was reported after the pilots had complained about their wireless sets. The sets were found to be defective but the ground crew traced the faults and rectified them immediately. Pilots were bound to a tight programme and in between flying, they attended lectures on various subjects such as aircraft identification, fighter directive signals, morse code, R/T codes and first aid.

On 17 February air to ground firing practice was held at the Hartebeespoort Dam range. This continued all day with pilots taking off in flight sections of two aircraft but moving to the target individually. Late in the afternoon Maj Loftus, Lt Whelehan and Lt Stanford gave a demonstration of straffing and displayed excellent airmanship by taking all the pilots, who were to some extent expecting them, completely by surprise.

The following day the same procedure, air to ground practice, was continued. Two aircraft piloted by Lt Basson and Lt Kelly had to force land because of engine trouble shortly after takeoff. Lt Kelly managed to reach the airfield but Lt Basson landed on a field west of the drome, badly damaged the landing gear of his aircraft. On the 19th Lt Alexander crashed when the propeller of his aircraft hit the water at Hartebeespoort Dam. He was very fortunate to survive the crash but sustained facial injuries and severe shock. The aircraft was salvaged and brought in by the engineering section after practically an all night struggle.

The fifth forced landing was executed by Lt Engelbrecht who brought his aircraft down near the Iscor factory. Debriefing by the OC was carried out daily after all practices and training sessions, faults were pointed out to the pilots concerned and correct methods of attack thoroughly explained and illustrated. All aircraft were grounded after these mishaps and this proved rather a great pity as a distinct mark of improvement was visible. The grounding of the aircraft provided the men with more leisure time than usual. Most of their time was spent on routine aircraft tests and lectures of general interest comprising subjects such as map reading, airframes and engines, and information concerning the German and Italian air forces.

On 5 March 1942 Col Melville visited the Squadron and issued the following verbal instructions. "Ten flying officers to stand by for immediate duty and be prepared to fly Mohawks to Cape Town". Only eight aircraft were available and the following pilots were selected for the operation: Maj Loftus, Lts Engelbrecht, Kirby, Wiggett, Carr, 2/Lts Prescott, Kitchin and Meike. The following morning a Ju 52 left with a ground crew to await the arrival of the Mohawks in Cape Town. Departure of the Mohawks was delayed due to unfavourable weather reports.

Finally at 1300 hours the eight Mohawks took off for Cape Town, via Kimberley and Beaufort West for refuelling. At 1225 hours Lts Wiggett and Carr returned to ZAS after losing the formation in 8/8 cloud. Bad weather made flying virtually impossible. Lt Kirby and his flight lost the formation near Potchefstroom. After descending through 7 000 feet of cloud they continued at a low altitude right up to Hoopstad and then on to Kimberley where they arrived at 1215 hours. Meanwhile Loftus and his flight having failed to climb out of cloud eventually descended and flew on to Kimberley via Ventershoop at 600 feet, arriving there at approximately the same time as Lt Kirby's flight. This event was marred by the death of Lt Engelbrecht who, flying No 2 to Maj Loftus, lost formation north of Potchefstroom and crashed about 10 miles from Randfontein.

The five Mohawks left Kimberley at 1430 hours and arrived at Beaufort West at 1600 hours. Due to the late arrival of the Ju 52 the trip to Cape Town was postponed until the next day. The Squadron took off at 0800 hours and arrived at Wingfield, Cape Town at 1005 hours on 7 March 1942. Meanwhile the signals and "I" officer together with mechanics, signals details and "T" stores staff left Pretoria by train and upon their arrival at Cape Town, Maj Loftus was able to report that the Cape Town section of 7 Squadron was standing by with five Mohawks, and an efficient crew.

In the meantime, an additional operations order from DGAF to 7 Squadron headquarters ZAS was issued to the effect that the remaining six Mohawks were to be flown to Wingfield. On March 9 a further order was received cancelling the flight to Cape Town

and advising Maj Loftus and his entire Wing-field based crew to return to ZAS.

The five Mohawks arrived at ZAS at 1400 hours on 11 March 1942. Capt Morphew acted as OC in the absence of Maj Loftus. The Squadron settled down to training once again. Maj. Loftus and section leaders met in conference to allocate transport for conveyance of sections and equipment should any urgency arise. The organising of the mobility of the Squadron was performed with such zeal that it was capable of moving to any place in South Africa for active service at three hours notice.

On March 13, 7 Squadron's flights were reorganised on a three flight basis: (1) Stand-by flight. (2) Auxiliary flight. (3) Reserve flight. Stand-by flights consisted of six aircraft 100% serviceable and gunned up with pilots allocated ready to take off at a moment's notice on any fighter operational task. Auxiliary flight consisted of four aircraft 100% serviceable, loaded up with ammunition but not gunned up, to be used for flying training. Reserve flight was three aircraft to be loaned to the neighbouring squadron, for flying exercises, but to be on stand-by for 7 Squadron should the necessity arise.

The pilots now started preparing themselves for possible sea patrols. A Director Grid system was formulated based on dead reckoning and dependent on constant speed, maintenance of height and direction. In this manner the Ops Officer could pinpoint the exact position of each aircraft. Lt Kirby tested this system on March 16. He was directed to six points and in four instances arrived overhead within five seconds of the allocated time, a very fine performance indeed.

On March 26 1942 Lt Col Wilmot, DFC, CFI, issued instructions that the Squadron was to move to the Grand Central Aerodrome. After all preparations and arrangements were completed the order was withdrawn. At 1800 hours the same day a new order was received instructing 7 Squadron to break camp and prepare themselves for a departure in convoy to an unknown destination by day-break. The Squadron was to travel by road except for the pilots assigned to fly the aircraft to this unknown destination. A hard night's work ensured that the Squadron was ready at dawn waiting for the order to proceed. Finally at 1555 hours, after the Squadron had

spent the entire day waiting in anxiety and frustration, the DDAO (Deputy Director Air Operations) authorised the Squadron to move to the secret destination, Durban. Sixty-eight fully laden trucks started the journey accompanied by the men who were by now, after three months arduous training, eager to show their mettle. Unfortunately, a big disappointment awaited the convoy at the first night stop, a camping site, approximately five miles outside Heidelberg. After a fine dinner and a hilarious evening, the adjutant was awoken in the early hours of the morning by Capt Morphew (Flight Commander) with new instructions from the DDAO that the convoy was to return to ZAS immediately. The Squadron was dispirited and they arrived back in a dejected mood at ZAS at 1130 hours. Even the granting of week-end leave did not compensate for this let down. A minimum number of tents was pitched and the Squadron remained on stand-by. Members became divided, some sleeping in hotels, some staying at private homes and some just camped. Meanwhile all Mohawks including those which had returned from Durban were handed over to 6 Squadron. The men were adapting themselves well considering the amount of let downs experienced by them. Alas! more was to come. Friday 4 April 1942 sparked new optimism into the Squadron. Orders were received that the Squadron was to prepare to move once more to Durban for embarkation. All leave was cancelled and everyone was bustling with excitement. Monday April 6, the day scheduled for departure, came and went, and by now Maj Loftus was aware that his men were absolutely demoralised. On Wednesday the 8th a parade was held at 1000 hours and the OC addressed the Squadron promising that he would personally look into matters. At 1430 hours, true to his word, he returned and gave the Squadron the assurance that they were to proceed to Durban on Sunday April 12. Leave was granted to all ranks until April, 11.

At 0700 hours on the 12th a parade was held and by 1015 hours all officers and details were conveyed to Pretoria station for the trip to Durban. A march past was held in Pretoria at 1130 hours. The salute being taken by Air Commodore Frew.

The train departed at 1200 hours arriving in Durban at 1710 hours on the 13th. The men

embarked immediately and settled aboard the troopship, "Empire Trooper".

On 14 April 1942 the "Empire Trooper" streamed out of Durban harbour, escorted by a light cruiser, bound for the Middle East. The men of 7 Squadron finally accepted the fact that this was not another pipe dream. High spirits prevailed, all past grudges and disappointments were quickly cast aside and a policy of, "Beware You Huns, Here we come", was adopted.

Conditions aboard the ship were as only as good could be expected aboard any troopship, but this did not deter the men from quickly organising all forms of recreation. So popular were the Officers and men from 7 Squadron that they dominated all the posts allocated aboard ship by the Captain to ensure that all troops were kept happy and busy. The ship arrived at Mombasa on 21 April at 0800 hours and all ranks were allowed ashore for the day. At 1300 hours, the next day, the "Empire Trooper", put to sea again. Ship life was resumed and the new national game of South Africa, "Bok-Bok", featured predominantly.

Test matches between South Africa and the rest of the Empire were held and needless to say the "Boks" made a clean sweep of the rubber.

For those not so keen on such strenuous activities, the usual quiet game of "Poker" was to be found in practically every hidden corner. The ship docked at Port Aden on April 28.

Much needed fresh water was taken on and this was appreciated tremendously by all, as water had been rationed since the ship left Mombasa. Leave was granted from 1900 to 2359 hours to all Officers and WASSIES.

At 0600 hours on the 29th the, "Empire Trooper", steamed out of Aden setting course from the Red Sea. The voyage to Port Taufig took five days and the squadron was very pleased when they disembarked at 1430 hours on 4 May, 1942. After waiting on the quayside in intense heat for nearly five hours the men entrained for Amiriya, a base depot. The uncomfortable train journey lasted fifteen hours. The squadron finally settled down under canvas and everything possible was done to see that the men were happy. Maj Loftus had in the meantime gone direct

to Cairo from Port Taufig to liaise with Maj McBlain, DSAOA regarding the duties of 7 Squadron in the Middle East. The OC arrived at Amiriya on 7 May 1942 and outlined the policy laid down for the squadron. 7 Squadron was to be a specialist squadron equipped with Hurri-Bombers and used for close support. The entire squadron then travelled to Cairo to visit AHQ, SAAF and AHQ, RAF. The purpose of the visit was mainly for the men to familiarise themselves with conditions and procedures applicable to the Middle East. After spending the two days in Cairo the squadron returned to Amiriya. As no flying was scheduled for approximately a week, leave was granted to some members of the squadron. Those not privileged in obtaining leave were detailed to go to Port Seuz and to supervise the off-loading of the squadron's stores and equipment.

Between May 11 and June 7 members of the squadron did everything possible to gather as much knowledge in their respective fields and become fully conversant with operational duties. Pilots were given the opportunity of converting to Hurricanes, under the supervision of their Flight Commanders. Only three aircraft were made available for this task and occasionally another three Hurricanes were borrowed by the squadron from a neighbouring aerodrome (Wadi Natrum), twenty miles away. Under these adverse conditions, flying was limited to approximately two hours per pilot. Captains Bayly and Morphew were posted to No 2 Squadron and Captains Whelehan and Wells were appointed as the new Flight Commanders in their stead.

Training continued and the twenty seven pilots attached to 7 Squadron made excellent progress although handicapped by the shortage of aircraft. Only one accident occurred, due to carelessness. Lt Botha attempted to take-off while three mechanics sat on the tail-plane. He was not aware of their presence and they were under the impression that he was carrying out the normal procedure of warming up his engine prior to taxiing out for take-off.

On 8 June 1942 orders were received that the squadron was to proceed to Palestine to continue training with the possibility of being given operational tasks. The advance party arrived at St Jean, near Haifa, on June 12. The pilots went on "Standby", taking over

the defence commitments from 127 Squadron RAF and incorporating a section of 451 Squadron RAF for operational purposes. The rest of the squadron arrived at St. Jean at 1200 hours on June 14. Maj Loftus had selected El Bassa aerodrome, a few miles from St Jean, for the squadron to operate from. By nightfall on June 15 all tents had been pitched and the Squadron settled down to dinner in their newly erected mess tent, knowing that they were ready for operational commitments.

Shortage of aircraft once again hampered all forms of training and flying was limited. With only four aircraft (Hurricanes Mk 1) available it was very difficult to satisfy all pilots. Thanks to a magnificent effort by the engineering crew, ten aircraft were made available to the squadron. These aircraft were allocated to 7 Squadron and although badly damaged upon their arrival at St Jean, the men toiled day and night to fulfil their obligations to their flying comrades.

On June 18 Lt's Geere, Kelly and Wigget did a sea patrol, searching for reported submarines. Lt Geere had to land with the aid of an inadequate flare path made from hurricane lamps. Lt Basson did a convoy patrol on June 21 and the following day Lts Kitchin and Pearce carried out a patrol search for a "Bogey" Bomber. They were unsuccessful in their mission. The same day the squadron received orders to break camp and return to LG 98 (Inyoni) in the Western Desert. This was done within four days. This move was only tentative and at 2130 hours on June 29 they were told to proceed to El Firdan, near Ismailia. Maj Loftus pointed out the fact to Air Headquarters Ismailia that El Firdan was totally unsuitable for operations. Permission was then granted to the squadron to make use of the aerodrome at El Balla. By 1750 hours all personnel had settled down.

The OC was then instructed to send a flight to LG 154 for operations and on July 1 Captains Whelehan and Stamford, Lts Theron, Kirby, Wigget, Botha, Boyer, Roshelt, Meikle, Carr and Haire left El Balla with ten Hurricanes. Upon the arrival of the advance party under the supervision of Maj Loftus at LG 154 the squadron moved to LG 89 and settled down to a well-deserved dinner after erecting their new camp.

Meanwhile at El Balla a signal was received on July 2 from HQ, RAF Middle East for the Squadron (base party) to take possession of twelve Hurricanes and four Gladiators which had arrived from Aboukir. These Hurricanes known as "Specials" were ferried by Lts Pearce, Ground and Rosholt. Training on the "Specials" commenced immediately under the guidance of Group Captain Pendrell. The "Specials" were Hurricanes Mk1 fitted with bomb racks and planned for "Tank Busting" by dropping "Sticky" bombs — twenty four in number. By 10 July 1942 the base party was fully conversant with the "Specials" and the dropping of the "Sticky" (Jeffrey) bombs.

The advance party at LG 89 was on stand-by and on July 4 at 0645 hours Maj Loftus DFC, Capt Stanford, Lts Burl and Boyer set out on the squadron's first operation in the Western Desert. The operation of patrolling the road from Burg-el-Arab to Amiryia was carried out without incident. It had been reported that CR. 42's had been strafing allied transport to and from Alexandria. These patrols were carried out on a shuttlecock principle until 1300 hours without encountering any enemy aircraft. At 1415 hours the squadron set out

on its first Fighter Sweep over enemy lines. Top cover was provided by 33 and 73 RAF Squadrons. The sweep covered the area from the coast of El Alamein to the Quattara Depression. No incidents involving any hostile activities were reported on the sweep, but 7 Squadron emerged with "Flying Colours" considering the fact that the MK 1 Hurricanes had difficulty in keeping up with faster aircraft used as top cover. The men were doing everything possible to keep the aircraft serviceable and pilots were begging for missions so that they could prove their mettle although their aircraft were virtually dilapidated.

A justifiable reward for all their patience and magnanimity was received at 1235 hours on July 5 in the form of a message from AHQ (LG 90) that the squadron was to collect five Hurricanes MK II from LG 98. This instruction was carried out with alacrity. Maj Loftus Capt Whelehan, Lts Theron and Kirby were the first members of the squadron to carry out an operation with the newly acquired Hurricanes. This operation consisted of a Fighter Sweep in conjunction with 33 and 73 RAF Squadrons.



Hurricane MK II

The squadron continued carrying out these operations and on July 11th the first enemy aircraft were encountered. A Me 109 F was shot down by a pilot of 73 Squadron acting as top cover.

At 1630 hours another kill was chalked up, this time by 145 Squadron, acting in the same capacity, as top cover. These sweeps provided 7 Squadron with valuable experience and pilots were given the opportunity of being "blooded" to actual fighting.

Experienced pilots were accompanied by Maj Loftus and Capt Whelehan who had Lts Wigget and Haire as their respective No 2's. Under these tenacious Flight Commanders and their No 2's the men were fortunate to witness air to air combat and they now realised what was expected of them.

On 14 July at 1505 hours four Hurricanes scrambled to intercept four Me 109 F's. This sweep was described as futile as the superior speed of the enemy aircraft proved far too great for our own Hurricanes.

The next day the squadron suffered a severe setback when Lt Carr, while out on a training flight, decided to investigate a crash involving a Wellington bomber. Apparently, he flew too low and his aircraft's left wing struck the ground. The Hurricane crashed and Lt Carr was killed instantly. He was buried at the spot where his aircraft crashed, by the Capt of the crashed Wellington.

The following day, six Me 109's attacked four Hurricanes flown by Maj Loftus. Lts Kirby, Meikle, and Botha while on patro

over El Alamein. Evasive action was taken by successfully employing a defensive circle. Pilots, on all patrols, were continually bringing useful information regarding enemy army movements, and this was relayed immediately to Army Headquarters.

On July 24 the squadron (Advance Party) moved to LG 173, Lt Rosholt was posted from the Base Party to replace Lt Carr. As usual, the squadron had to return to LG 89 and being accustomed to orders relating to moving by now, they re-established themselves by 1200 hours on the 29th at LG 89.

The Squadron was instructed to fly with 6 Squadron RAF which co-operated with the army as "Tank Busters". Maj Gen Venter and Col Hingeston paid the squadron a visit on July 30 to watch training. Capt Wells and Lt Basson attained an unexpected cruising speed of 165 mph with a full load on these "Sticky Bombers" training flights, which was quite an achievement. Meanwhile the Base Party had also moved over to LG 89 re-joining the Advance Party. 7 Squadron was once more complete and it was anticipated that they would fall under 243 Wing.

Training continued daily and the squadron was given lectures on "Tank Recognition" by the AIL officer of 6 Squadron RAF. Capt Taylor Young of the same squadron briefed the men on "The Front Line War".

On August 6 twelve Hurricanes acted as medium cover to 6 Squadron RAF who were doing an anti-Tank sweep along the Southern edge of the El Laga Plateau. 273 Squadron RAF acted as top cover. On the second mission at 1251 hours light Ack-Ack fire was experienced and the Hurricane piloted by Lt C. Theron was hit. He crash landed and it was presumed that he was taken prisoner.

The squadron continued with these missions and the pilots were by now fully conversant with enemy tactics. Lts Small, Wilkson and 2/Lt Turner were posted to the squadron on August 11. The following day at 1340 hours Lt Kitchin, flying back from a patrol with Capt Wells and Lt Kelly, dived to identify some tanks. When it was discovered that the tanks were "friendly" his aircraft did not respond to his attempts to pull out of the dive. He crashed and his aircraft burst into flames, killing him instantly.

On 7 July Maj Loftus received the news that he was promoted to the rank of Lt Col and was to take command of the new No 7 SAAF Wing. Capt Whelehan was appointed acting OC of 7 Squadron.

Experiments were made with "Sticky Bombing". Aircraft were to dive at about 70° from a height of 4 000 feet and to release the bombs at approximately 1 500 to 1 000 feet without the use of a Selection Box. This method was found to give a fairly consistent pattern although spread over a wide area. After lengthy deliberations it was decided to continue with the existing system of low level bombing with the use of the Selection Box.

On August 19 Capt Whelehan was promoted to the rank of Major and his appointment as the new OC was confirmed. 7 Squadron became a full Bomber Squadron as from August 21; all Hurricane MK II B's were converted to "Hurri-bombers". The Squadron did not carry out any operational sorties for the next few days but spent most of the time practising and developing new tactics. Lectures on tank recognition were given every afternoon by Capt Dean, the AIL Officer of 6 Squadron RAF.

On September 1 three aircraft under the leadership of Maj Whelehan were scrambled to attack a target of three tanks in the Samaket Caballa area. There was no sign of the tanks and the sortie was then diverted to an armoured car. The OC destroyed it with a direct hit. Lt Rorvick straddled a large transport truck (MT 10 Tons). Enemy aircraft carried out an air-raid over LG 89 that night but no real damage was reported.

On September 3 eight Hurricanes MK II B acted as medium cover to 274 Squadron RAF who were to attack a large concentration of MT near the Taga Plateau. After a successful mission, three Me 109's attacked the cover aircraft from a height of 10 000 feet, opening fire at long range. Three of the squadron's aircraft were shot down. Lt Kirby managed a successful crash landing while Lts Pearce and Small had to parachute from their Hurricanes. Lt Botha fired on one of the Me 109's but no confirmation of a "kill" could be obtained.

The following day another successful tank busting mission was carried out by six Hurricanes each carrying twenty-four 9 lb

Jeffrey Bombs. Lt Kirby rejoined the squadron after being picked up by an officer of 142 GT Company, Lt Meikle who had previously force-landed his aircraft made his way back after being assisted by local Bedouins. He confirmed that Lt Small had baled out close to enemy territory and that he was most probably taken prisoner.

On September 6 at 0830 hours six Hurricanes acted as medium cover for 274 Squadron. From this sortie only one aircraft, piloted by Lt Botha, returned to base. Both the top and medium cover were attacked by Me 109F's. The total number was not ascertained but Lt Botha saw one formation consisting of six flying in line system. After a fierce air battle, five of 7 Squadron's aircraft failed to return to base. Lt Burl crash landed his Hurricane and was picked up by a New Zealand regiment. The other pilots, Maj Whelehan, Lts Haire, Turner and Capt Stanford radioed no information as to their positions. On September 7 the tragic news was received that Maj Whelehan had been killed in the encounter. It was also reported that Capt Stanford has been taken to a hospital in Alexandria with serious injuries and severe burns. Confirmation of the death of Lt Haire was received later in the month.

The squadron received orders from 7 SAAF Wing that it was to move to Kilio 8 to refit and to enable all ranks to enjoy seven days service leave. This order was carried out on September 9 and by 1900 hours the squadron had pitched camp. A new OC had to be appointed and Capt Stanford was initially chosen for the post. Unfortunately, in view of the fact that his injuries were of a very severe nature, it was decided to withdraw the appointment in favour of Capt Kirby who now became acting OC. Capt Gray joined the squadron as "A" Flight Commander.

The following officers were also welcomed to the squadron: Lt Kedian as "T" Officer and 2/Lt Edmondson as "I" Officer. The following is a text from a signal sent by AOC dated 6 September 1942 to the OC 7 Squadron.

"I am distressed at your heavy losses today and particularly at the death of Maj Whelehan. If it will comfort you, the squadron's good name stands very high after this

flight. Forget heavy odds, you will get even." On September 12 the AOC Air Commodore McLachlan visited the squadron. Another new acquisition Lt Hollins was welcomed to the squadron on the 15th. Maj J. P. Blaauw arrived at Kilio 8 the next day assuming responsibilities as the new OC, having been transferred from 40 Squadron.

On September 17 a section of the squadron under the leadership to Maj Blaauw flew to Shandur to commence training on Hurricane II D's. Lt Lendrum, the stores officer, was transferred from the squadron.

On the 18th the following signal was received from HQ, ME "Honours and Awards. On the recommendations of the A.O.C.-in-C. His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award the D.F.C. to P 103511 Captain J. P. Blaauw formerly of 10 Squadron SAAF for courage, determination and devotion to duty."

The following day the squadron moved to Sandur. Maj Blaauw reorganised the flight as follows:—

"H. Q. Flight" Maj Blaauw "A Flight", Capt Kirby, Lts Geere, Basson, Botha, Boyer, Burl Hartley, Hollins, Prestcott, Taylor, J. W. Wilkinson.

"B. Flight" Capt Gray, Lts Wiggett, Alexander, Fisher, Hills, Kelly, Lovemore, Rorvik, Rosholt, Seel, Taylor (I.N.). Six new pilots Lt Kingma, 2/Lts Prinsloo, Donnelly, Reyneke, Hynd and Smith joined the squadron on September 24. New postings arriving on the 29th were Lts Turner, Meikle and George.

The rest of the month was spent flying-training on Hurricane 11 D's. Every important type of armoured vehicle was inspected. The tanks were demonstrated to the squadron and many officers had the opportunity of driving these themselves. At Tel el Kebir the squadron received a variety of captured enemy vehicles including the German Mk III tanks.

On October 3 a practise gas attack was organised and all conceivable means of gas decontamination were explained and practised. Flying training continued whilst these exercises took place. Capt Rocher, MO, rejoined the squadron after a successful course and 2/Lt Todd joined as defence officer. A de-

monstration was given to visiting Tank Corps officers by Hurricane II D's on the 10th.

Lt Harding relinquished the post of Ground Defence Officer and left on the 12 October. Since the squadron had been equipped with Hurricane II D's and had no longer any fighter aircraft at their disposal it was decided to place the squadron under the direct control of RAFHQWD (Royal Air Force Headquarters in the Western Desert). The severing of ties with No 7 SAAF Wing took place on 13 October 1942.

A signal was received confirming that Lt Small had been taken prisoner and was held at Dulagluft POW camp. On the 20th "B" Flight moved to LG 89. "A" Flight remained at Shandur and a maintenance party set off for LG 203.

7 Squadron was now to operate in conjunction with 6 Squadron on tank busting operations, in order to gain experience. It was decided that eventually 7 Squadron would take over all North African "tank busting" operations. The squadron became operational on 21 October 1942. A successful mission was carried out three days later. Maj Blaauw, Lts Wiggett, Kelly and Rosholt, each destroyed a tank.

On October 26 Capt Wiggett, Lts Alexander and Taylor were detailed to attack a target consisting of twenty-five tanks. The mission was regarded as successful but Lt Alexander's aircraft was hit by light A.A. and he was compelled to force land north east of Lake Maghra. He was eventually aided by members of an armoured car and returned to base slightly injured.

Maj Blaauw introduced a new method of formation flying on operations. Aircraft were to fly in pairs replacing the VIC formation of three aircraft. The object of this new system was to obtain greater fluidity in the air and to avoid a distinctive formation which would betray the identity of the "Tank Busters".

At 1300 hours on November 3 information was received that the road on the coast near Daba was packed with enemy transport, apparently moving out. Permission was obtained from AAHQ to do a "sweep" over the enemy convoy. The first sortie consisted of Maj Blaauw, Lts George, Turner and Taylor. Upon their return Capt Wiggett, Lts

George, Rosholt and Reyneke took off to do the second sortie. On both occasions the target was attacked with great success. It was dusk after the second sortie had accomplished their mission and the aircraft were diverted to other landing grounds, due to the fact that lighting facilities were inadequate. New members to the squadron were posted to Shandur to undergo further training. They were Lt Moolman, 2/Lts Weitz, Van Deventer, Brydone and King.

On November 6 the squadron moved to LG 172. The fate of the squadron was undecided and it was rumoured that the entire squadron was to move back to Shandur. This suggestion did not appeal to members of the squadron as Shandur was not in the operational zone. The signal ordering the move of 7 Squadron to Shandur was received on the 11th. By November 21 the squadron once again settled down at Shandur and training was immediately begun. Lt George was posted to 2 Squadron. At this stage the

squadron was equipped with twenty-four Hurricanes Mk II D's and two Mk I's; the latter were used to train pilots for night flying. A relatively undamaged Me 109F which had been abandoned at LG 12 was repaired by the ground crew of 7 Squadron and Maj Blaauw flew the aircraft to Shandur causing great excitement and concern en route.

On December 2 the OC and Lt Wilkinson flew to Benina to interview the AOC with regard to the future of the squadron. On his return to Shandur he informed his men that AOC had suggested that 7 Squadron be converted to a fighter squadron equipped with Spitfires; this was very hard to believe. Lt Crowhurst joined the squadron as defence officer. The rest of December 1942 was spent on training and taking delivery of new aircraft. Christmas Dinner was served by officers of the squadron to the air-mechanics, thus establishing a tradition which lasted for the remainder of the war.