

FIGHTING ROMMEL

Arriving in Egypt in early April 1941 the group travelled by train from Port Said to RAF Station Heliopolis outside Cairo and held in 'pool' positions. While waiting assignment to units the group contributed to the war effort by erecting eight man tents, and rewarded their efforts by building a bar and forming a mess.



Sergeant Jack Bell Cairo 1941

Some pilots were assigned to 3 Squadron and converted to Tomahawks and then Kittyhawks. Not designed for operations in dusty conditions, several pilots were killed after sand entered the engines and seized them unexpectedly. The intake vents were extended further forward through local modifications in order to overcome the problem.

After several weeks of work parties Jack was assigned to 216 Squadron RAF in June 1941. The Squadron flew Bristol Bombays, a medium sized transport aircraft, and moved stores, spare parts, medical supplies and personnel all over Egypt, Libya

NO. 216 SQUADRON RAF

No. 216 Squadron was formed at Royal Air Force (RAF) Manston by re-numbering No. 16 Squadron Royal Naval Air Service when the RAF was established in 1918. During the Second World War, with a few exceptions, such as the attacks from 17 to 21 June 1940 by single aircraft of No. 216 Squadron on the airfields of El Adem and Tobruk, the unit was principally a transport squadron, operating the Vickers Type 264 Valentia, Bristol Bombay, Vickers Wellington, Lockheed Hudson and Douglas Dakota.



The 216 Squadron Crest

BRISTOL BOMBAY

The Bristol Bombay was a British troop transport aircraft adaptable for use as a medium bomber flown by the Royal Air Force (RAF) during the Second World War. The first production Bombay flew on March 1939, with deliveries to No. 216 Squadron RAF based in Egypt beginning in September that year.

General characteristics:

- Crew: three-four
- Capacity: 24 armed troops or 10 stretchers
- Length: 69 ft 3 in (21.1 m)
- Wingspan: 95 ft 9 in (29.2 m)
- Height: 19 ft 11 in (6.1 m)
- Wing area: 1,340 ft² (124.5 m²)
- Empty weight: 13,800 lb (6,260 kg)
- Loaded weight: 20,180 lb (9,173 kg)
- Power plant: 2 × Bristol Pegasus XXII radial engines, 1,010 hp (755 kW) each

Performance:

- Maximum speed: 167 kn (192 mph, 309 km/h) at 6,500 ft (2,000 m)
- Cruise speed: 139 kn (160 mph, 268 km/h) at 10,000 ft (3,050 m)
- Range: 1,940 nmi (2,230 mi, 3,560 km) with overload fuel
- Service ceiling: 24,850 ft (7,600 m)
- Rate of climb: 750 ft/min (3.8 m/s)
- Wing loading: 14.9 lb/ft² (72.9 kg/m²)
- Power/mass: 0.10 hp/lb (170 W/kg)

Armament:

- Guns: 2 × 0.303 in (7.7 mm) Vickers K machine guns in powered nose and tail turrets
- Bombs: 2,000 lb (907 kg) as 8 × 250 lb (113 kg) bombs on under fuselage racks

Although it was outclassed as a bomber for the European theatre, the Bristol Bombay saw some service with British-based No. 271 Squadron ferrying supplies to the British Expeditionary Force in France in 1940. The Bombay's main service was in the Middle East, particularly with No. 216 Squadron, which operated most of the Bombays built at some stage.

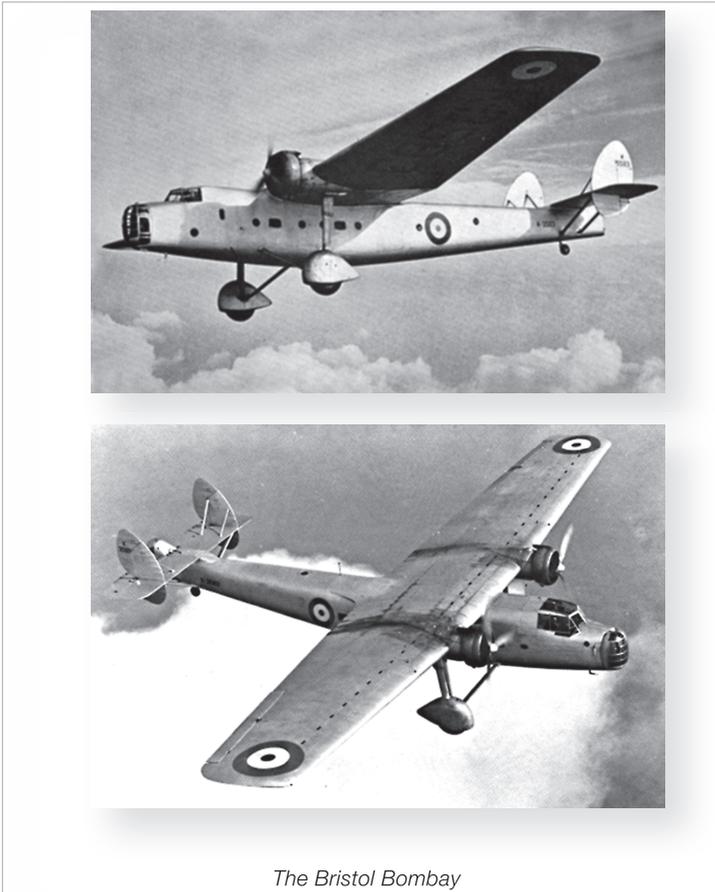
When the war with Italy began in June 1940, in the absence of more modern aircraft, 216 Squadron's Bombays were used as night bombers as well as in their principal role as transport aircraft. The design bombload of 250 lb bombs under the

fuselage was supplemented by improvised bombs thrown out of the cargo door by hand. The aircraft flew bombing sorties against targets in the Western Desert, including Benghazi and Tobruk, and against Italian Somaliland, until the build-up of Vickers Wellington bombers in Egypt allowed the Bombays to concentrate on transport operations.

In the transport role, the Bristol Bombay ferried supplies and evacuated the wounded throughout the North African campaign. The multi-purpose interior looked like a tramcar of the period and could be converted in minutes to carry stretchers suspended in two tiers along the fuselage as soon as the outward cargo had been unloaded. Techniques for in-flight casualty care were developed to incorporate blood transfusion facilities and drips. In four years, thousands of Eight Army casualties were evacuated from battle areas by Bristol Bombays.

Bristol Bombay crews spent much of their lives on detachment. Frequently a lone aircraft, or two or three, would be detached 'up the blue' (as distant reaches of the desert were called) for some days at a time. The aircraft then became a flying caravan, the crew living, sleeping, eating on board, organising their own life support provisioning. Sometimes a day or two task would become a week or two task. A 14 gallon water tank was mounted behind the mid-ships bulkhead and topped up at every opportunity. The crews became adept at self-sufficiency, equipping and supplying themselves for the nomadic lifestyle, which getting on with whatever operational task they had been sent out to do.

On 2 May 1941, Bombays of No. 216 Squadron RAF evacuated the Greek Royal Family from Crete to Egypt. Later that month, Bombays played an important role in ferrying troops during the Anglo-Iraqi War. Five Bombays were used by the fledgling Special Air Service in their first official operation in the Middle East, a raid on five forward German aerodromes on 17 November 1941.



and Somaliland. The Squadron also flew sorties to Lyddia Airport in Tel Aviv, to Cyprus and return. Jack slowly became aware of the 'on the side' transporting that the crews had taken up as an aside during their missions. Trading their service issued cigarettes for oranges in Tel Aviv, these would then be transported to Cyprus and sold or traded for scotch whiskey, which was then brought back to Heliopolis and sold at the officers' and NCO's messes. When sufficient funds had accumulated a 'free night' would be put on. On these occasions, dress uniforms would be donned, wives and nurses would be invited and the joyous mood would usually continue until the duty officer intervened.



Jack setting up yet one more bloody tent

The Squadron also resupplied units from the Long Range Desert Group with fuel, food and ammunition. The landing sites were an area of natural ground often between low-lying hills so as to provide cover from observation. Difficult to locate due to the lack of markers in the terrain, once landed the cargo would have to be unloaded hastily in the event of detection and attack. Typically, the Long Range Desert Group would only come out of hiding to retrieve the stores as the aircraft was leaving. Another task was to help train the Special Air Service soldiers to parachute—sometimes from as low as 500 feet.

On 1 September 1941 Jack was promoted to Flight Sergeant.

On the night of 16 November 1941 General Claude Auchinleck and the allies launched Operation Crusader. Three aircraft from 216 Squadron were tasked to parachute Special Air Service teams behind enemy lines. One aircraft never returned and is believed to have crashed without any survivors. Strong winds caused the aircraft and the parachutists to be dropped well away from their designated landing zones. Some bands managed to form and did as much damage to the Germans as they could. One group infiltrated an airfield and destroyed a number of fighter aircraft with plastic explosives placed on the wings.

LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP

The Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) was a reconnaissance and raiding unit of the British Army during the Second World War.

Originally called the Long Range Patrol (LRP), the unit was founded in Egypt in June 1940 by Major Ralph A. Bagnold, acting under the direction of General Archibald Wavell. Bagnold was assisted by Captain Patrick Clayton and Captain William Shaw. At first the majority of the men were from New Zealand, but they were soon joined by Southern Rhodesian and British volunteers, whereupon new sub-units were formed and the name was changed to the better-known Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). The LRDG never numbered more than 350 men, all of whom were volunteers.

The LRDG was formed specifically to carry out deep penetration, covert reconnaissance patrols and intelligence missions from behind Italian lines, although they sometimes engaged in combat operations. Because the LRDG were experts in desert navigation they were sometimes assigned to guide other units, including the Special Air Service and secret agents across the desert. During the Desert Campaign between December 1940 and April 1943, the vehicles of the LRDG operated constantly behind the Axis lines, missing a total of only 15 days during the entire period. Possibly their most notable offensive action was during Operation Caravan, an attack on the town of Barce and its associated airfield, on the night of 13 September 1942. However, their most vital role was the 'Road Watch', during which they clandestinely monitored traffic on the main road from Tripoli to Benghazi, transmitting the intelligence to British Army Headquarters.

With the surrender of the Axis forces in Tunisia in May 1943, the LRDG changed roles and moved operations

to the eastern Mediterranean, carrying out missions in the Greek islands, Italy and the Balkans. After the end of the war in Europe, the leaders of the LRDG made a request to the War Office for the unit to be transferred to the Far East to conduct operations against the Japanese Empire. The request was declined and the LRDG was disbanded in August 1945.

SPECIAL AIR SERVICE

The Special Air Service (SAS) was a unit of the British Army during the Second World War that was formed in July 1941 by David Stirling and originally called 'L' Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade—the 'L' designation and Air Service name being a tie-in to a British disinformation campaign, trying to deceive the Axis into thinking there was a paratrooper regiment with numerous units operating in the area (the real SAS would 'prove' to the Axis that the fake one existed).

It was conceived as a commando force to operate behind enemy lines in the North African Campaign and initially consisted of five officers and 60 other ranks. Its first mission, in November 1941, was a parachute drop in support of the Operation Crusader offensive. Due to German resistance and adverse weather conditions, the mission was a disaster; 22 men, a third of the unit, were killed or captured. The SAS's second mission was a major success. Transported by the Long Range Desert Group, it attacked three airfields in Libya, destroying 60 aircraft with the loss of two men and three Jeeps. In September 1942, it was renamed 1st SAS, consisting at that time of four British squadrons, one Free French, one Greek, and the Folboat Section.



Passengers bound for various locations in the Western Desert, sitting in a Bristol Bombay of No. 216 Squadron RAF based at Heliopolis, Egypt



RAF officers haul their luggage from a Bristol Bombay of No. 216 Squadron RAF after landing at Maleme, Crete



A Long Range Desert Group Patrol

Another task for the Squadron during Operation Crusader was to land short of the battle area and evacuate wounded soldiers—either to the field hospital or back to Alexandria or Cairo. Jack observed that tank crews were underrepresented amongst the wounded as they were often killed rather than wounded because of the enemy '88's' armour piercing rounds were fired with deadly effect from well outside of the tank's gun range. In order to keep up with the Allied advance the Squadron jumped forward to an air base near Mersa Matruh.



A British Crusader tank passed a burning Panzer IV tank during Operation Crusader

As Rommel's forces were forced back the besieged garrison at Tobruk was relieved on 27 November 1941. 216 Squadron was moved forward again to El Adem—on the escarpment south of Tobruk. From here Jack had the opportunity to visit Tobruk and witness first-hand the destruction those months of fighting over this strategically important port had caused.

Only a few hours after a group from the Long Range Desert Group captured the Quetta Fort in southern Libya, John's aircraft flew in to resupply them. He heard that in order to drive out occupying Italians they had circled the fort with their vehicles firing their .5 inch machine guns

while their only heavy weapon, a Bofors gun, fired a couple of rounds and then moved to a new position. Eventually the Italian captain in command of the fort surrendered explaining later that he feared for the safety of the women in the fort. The allies had to accept a large number of prisoners and Jack's aircraft evacuated wounded Allied and Italian soldiers. Twenty years later Jack would coincidentally meet this Italian captain again, who after seeing out the rest of the war as a prisoner returned to his family business running a silk mill in Como, Italy.



An Indian soldier guards a group of Italian prisoners near El Adem aerodrome, during the pursuit of Axis forces westwards after the relief of Tobruk

While at El Adem Jack and his observer crew mate—Tony Carter—decided that they needed a ‘decent’ vehicle to get around in. Allied vehicles being in short supply, the pair visited the captured vehicles compound and for two pounds purchased an Auto Union (the forerunner to Audi) ‘escape’ wagon. The area around the driver and passenger seats had been fitted with steel plates to protect the occupants. With a double ratio gearbox, five forward and three reverse gears it was highly mobile in the soft sand and had a (verified) top speed of 185 km/hr. Sadly, the four Spandau .5 inch machine guns

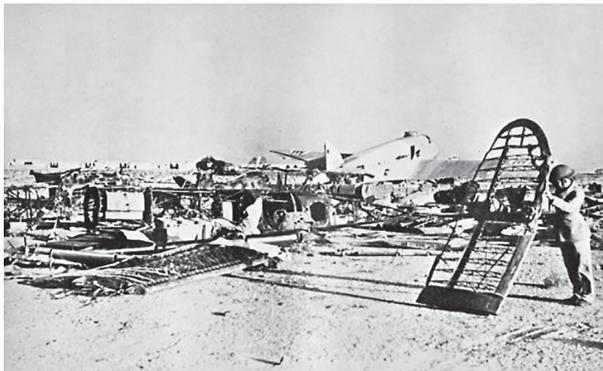
mounted on two posts either side of the vehicle had been removed. The car was later used as the airport duty officers' vehicle.

One night during a sandstorm Jack and his mates heard a Wellington bomber above the air field searching for the landing ground. After a while the motors cut down and the morning revealed that the aircraft had come down at the edge of the airfield. Covered in sand and unable to be recovered it was stripped over the next few days for spare parts.

While picking up some personnel at Landing Ground 130 Jack's aircraft was suddenly set upon by two Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters. While the Bombay Bristol sat vulnerably at the base of a sand hill the crew sought



A pair of Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters over North Africa



Wrecked Italian aircraft at El Adem airfield, Libya

cover by running over the top of the sand hill opposite to the direction of the attacking planes. The Messerschmitt's made two passes before heading off. Miraculously, they had put dozens of rounds through the Bombay but it hadn't started burning and all the crew were uninjured. Jack's crew managed to get the Bombay airborne and returned to base. On landing they blew a tyre and the aircraft skewed and the frame was twisted out of shape.

Not long after this close call Jack was returned to Cairo for a week suffering from suspected dengue fever. When he returned to El Adem Jack was offered the chance to apply for a commission but declined.

Despite achieving a number of tactical successes, Rommel was forced to concede Tobruk and was pushed back to El Agheila by the end of 1941. The battle paused and Rommel had the opportunity to re-group and re-supply.

On 26 November 1941 the Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, replaced the Commander of the Eight Army, Lieutenant General Alan Cunningham with Major General Neil Ritchie, following disagreements between Auchinleck and Cunningham.

A few weeks later on 21 January 1942 Rommel launched a counter-attack with an armoured 'reconnaissance in force'. Finding the Eight Army forward elements dispersed and tired, in his typical manner, he took advantage of the situation. By 23 January 1942 the Axis forces had advanced to recapture Ajedabia and the front line continued to be pushed back East.

