



# AFRICAN TANK BUSTERS

This year marks the 80th anniversary of World War Two's pivotal Battle of El Alamein in North Africa. **Andrew Thomas** reflects on the dramatic role played by Hawker Hurricane 'tank busters' from the RAF's 6 Squadron

In the spring of 1942, Hurricane Mk.IIIs were shipped to the Middle East for use in the anti-tank role. The heavily armed fighters were to play an important role. Each carried a pair of 40mm Vickers Type S guns and two wing-mounted 0.303in Browning machine guns. However, with the addition of a tropical dust filter fitted beneath the nose, the top speed fell to just 288mph, not quick for a frontline single-seat aircraft.

On April 20, Flt Lt Hank Simpson led an advance party from 6 Squadron to Shandur on the Suez Canal to begin five weeks of intensive training in the anti-tank role – it included live firing against captured enemy tanks. This demonstrated the guns' viability, though the recoil tended to pitch the aircraft nose down. However, Flt Lt Donald Weston-Burt was positive about their chances: "If the IId fired its first pair of 40mms at 1,000 yards, two more pairs could be got away accurately before breaking off the attack. It is no exaggeration to say that any good pilot could guarantee to hit his target with one or more pairs on each

attack." With training complete on June 4, the unit moved to Gambut in Libya. Axis forces under Gen Erwin Rommel had just begun what turned out to be a significant offensive.

### Rapid reactions

The desert war was frequently fast-moving – Rommel's assault on the Gazala-Bir Hakeim line that opened on May 26 soon forced the Allies into a retreat that ended on the so-called Alamein line, stretching back from the coastal Egyptian town of El Alamein.

The first mission for 6 Squadron with its new 'tankbusting' Hurricanes was at 1255hrs on June 7 when Sqn Ldr Hayter in BN860 led Flt Lt 'Pip' Hillier in BN797, Plt Off John Walter in BN861 and Plt Off Theo Peterson in BN842, to attack a concentration of tanks and motorised transport (MT) west of Bir Hakeim. But, unable to locate them, they returned to base. During the following afternoon the CO, Wg Cdr Roger Porteous flying BN841, led an attack on an enemy convoy west of Bir Hakeim. The strike left two tanks and a couple of trucks destroyed.

The unit's tankbusting record had begun, and the CO had personally claimed a tank and a lorry. A second sortie to the same target during the early afternoon went in at low level in the face of heavy fire. Flt Lt Alan Simpson, a Canadian flying BN861, was awarded an immediate DFC – having been severely

LEFT: Fg Off Dean Jones leans on the barrel of a 40mm cannon on his Hurricane. He flew throughout the El Alamein fighting and had to force-land on October 29 when attacking German half-tracks VIA M GOODMAN

BELOW: Smoke rises from burning enemy tanks after an attack from low level 6 Squadron tankbusters VIA C F SHORES



RIGHT: When flying Hurricane IId BP188 on September 29, Fg Off Anthony Morrison-Bell led an attack that destroyed three armoured cars atop an escarpment  
6 SQN RECORDS



RIGHT: The large underwing gondolas that carried the 40mm cannon and dust filter under the nose greatly reduced the speed of the Hurricane IId  
6 SQN RECORDS



wounded in the chest he continued his attack scoring further hits before his Hurricane was struck again by flak.

He later wrote: "My initial reaction was to cost the enemy as much as possible, and so I continued my attack on a German Mark III tank, then lined up on another, and then a truck." Simpson then flew blind for some time before baling out at just 500ft. He was picked up and returned to the unit three months later after recovering from his injuries. Hurricane IId BN860 was also hit and Fg Off Anthony Morrison-Bell force-landed – he was rescued by an armoured car from the 4th Armoured Brigade. Afterwards the pilots reported to HQ that the target had been tough to hit – the tanks were well dispersed among a lot of MT.

The action was intense. Two strikes were undertaken on the 12th, but two days later Commonwealth ground forces began an increasingly rapid retreat from the Gazala line for fear of being cut off by the Afrika Corps. Desert Air Force units like 6 Squadron had to leapfrog rearwards via a series of landing

grounds, sometimes staying for as little as 48 hours. That these were achieved while continuing operations was a credit to the hardworking groundcrews.

During the afternoon of June 15, the CO led an attack on tanks to the north of El Adem airfield and between them the five Hurricanes hit seven, plus several trucks and an anti-tank gun. Then at 1600hrs, Fg Off Julian Walford led another attack to support the Free French, hitting several tanks and other vehicles, though Plt Off Dennis Lee's aircraft was hit and he force-landed.

The next day the 21st Panzer Division pushed through Sidi Rezegh and at 1120hrs the CO with Flt Lt Pip Hillier and Plt Off Stan McPhee found a column of tanks ideally spread in line abreast – between them they hit three Panzer Mk.III's and a Mk.IV, leaving them and some trucks ablaze. These attacks were carried out from extremely low level. Indeed, Hillier actually struck the tank he was attacking, losing his tailwheel and part of his rudder. He was awarded an immediate DFC and went on to become the first 'anti-tank ace', ending

with at least nine destroyed. Sadly, he was killed in an accident on September 6.

The retreat from the Gazala line continued and the fortress town of Tobruk fell on June 21. By the end of the month the 8th Army had withdrawn to El Alamein where they turned and stood, leading to more heavy fighting.

### North African struggle

Capitalising on his success, on July 1 Rommel began his assault on El Alamein and the rocky depression at Deir el Shein. A few days later, the Afrika Korps probed south in an attempt to turn the British flank. The fighting ebbed and flowed and on July 10 a counterattack by the 9th Australian Division made some gains in the north.

The tankbusting Hurricanes of 6 Squadron returned to action three days later when Sqn Ldr Hayter led an early afternoon anti-tank sweep. Three of the

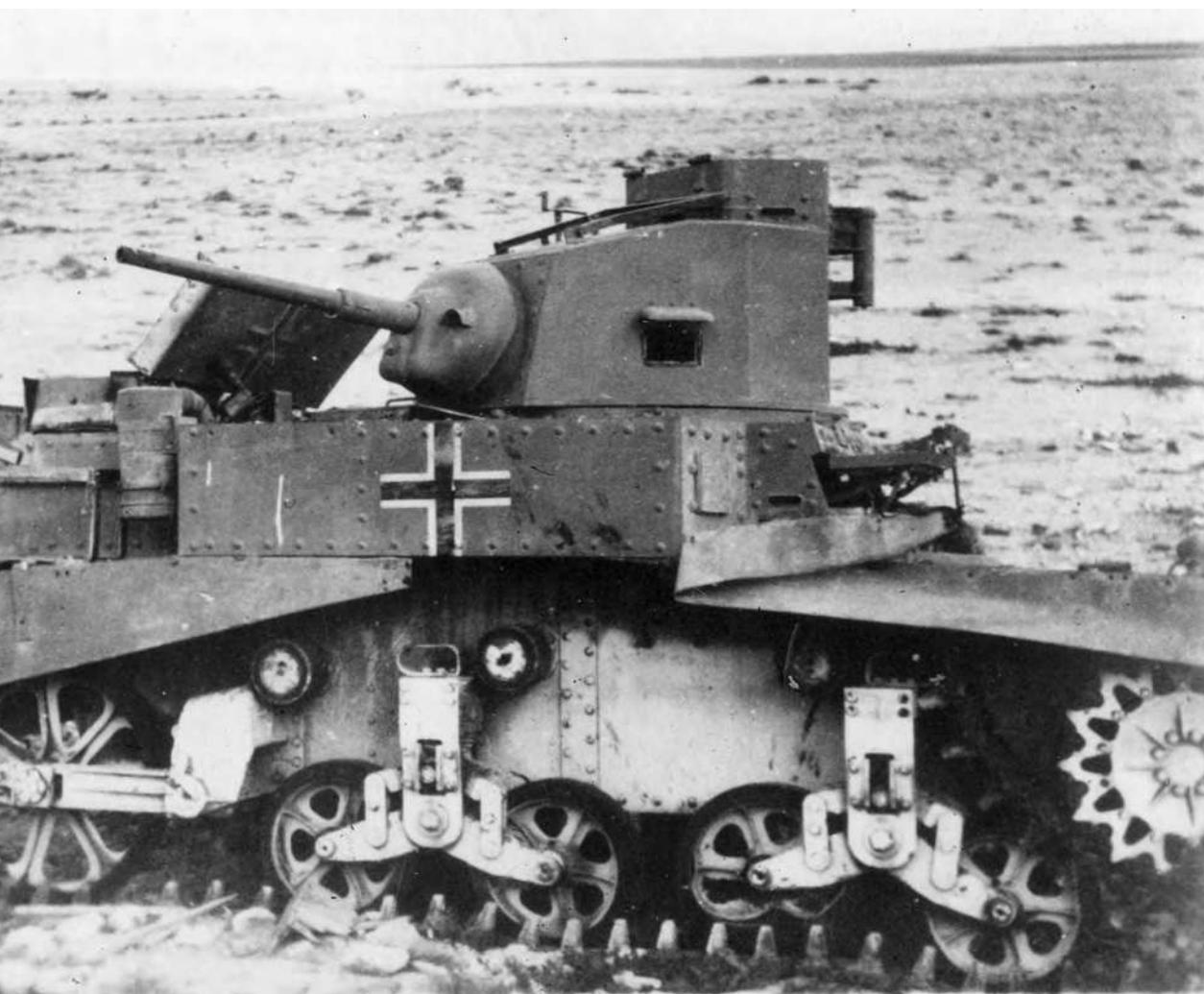


Hawkers found enemy armour and Flt Lt Hillier flying BN795 hit a Panzer Mk.II and three Mk.III's, while Plt Off Morgan's shells hit another Mk.III. However, BN841 flown by Plt Off Petersen was hit by flak and crash-landed over South African lines. The following evening the CO led another sweep, making a devastating attack on an Italian column, 'brewing' 11 lorries, two armoured cars and an M13 tank, leaving just one lorry undamaged. The unit's diarist noted, dryly: "It was a pretty poor show as one truck got away. When last seen it was bounding across the desert touching the ground every two or three hundred yards!" However, Stan McPhee was lost in the attack.

The next day, a sweep was flown north of the Quatara depression where the CO in BN977 hit an Italian M13. Flt Lt Hillier had to force-land BN795, but was picked up by South African armoured cars. Four days later, Italian



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ABOVE: Sqn Ldr Don Weston-Burt (left) briefs a group of 6 Squadron pilots during the period of the Battle of El Alamein  
6 SQN RECORDS

LEFT: During the Battle of El Alamein captured M3 Stuart 'Honey' tanks were used by the Germans. Many fell victim to the Hurricane's guns  
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



tanks were hit again during a mid-morning attack that left six more ablaze. However, this success was the squadron's last operation of the month. A Commonwealth counterattack designed to drive the enemy back to the Egyptian border opened on July 21 but fared badly, suffering heavy tank losses. After another failed attempt against Italian divisions, the action quietened – both sides had fought to exhaustion.

After a number of rapid moves through July, on the 29th the squadron finally settled at LG 89, a site in the desert a dozen miles south of Alexandria. From there,

several sweeps failed to find any enemy armour. Rommel's final offensive in Egypt began at dawn on August 31 with a three-pronged drive along the front in what became the Battle of Alam Halfa. The following day 6 Squadron's Hurricanes were out with a close escort, but failed to make contact, while the next on September 2 could only claim an armoured car.

Axis forces were finally halted the following day and even pushed back a little. Sqn Ldr Don Weston-Burt led a formation of six Hurricanes and personally hit three Mk.III tanks. F/Sgt Kurt Levine, who later received a

DFM, bagged an eight-wheeled armoured car while the others hit two tanks and a truck. Top cover was provided by Hurricanes from 274 Squadron. The Wing HQ commented on this attack: "The operation was a very nicely conducted one, very well led by S/Ldr Weston-Burt, who led the formation straight to the target."

F/Sgt Levine recalled life on a desert strip at this time: "We lived rather rough like the army. The dug-out tent tended to be safer in bombing and strafing attacks. Water was rationed and the diet was mainly bully beef, tinned potatoes, pickles, hardtack, jam and tea. Washing was a luxury."

Having failed to break through, Rommel's forces completed their withdrawal to prepared positions having gained little during the Battle of Alam Halfa, which turned out to be the final Axis offensive of the desert war in Egypt. During the morning, six Hurricanes with top cover left to attack a reported nine tanks but were recalled, and although the formation was attacked by German fighters, it escaped without loss.

Bad weather then interfered with flying until September 29 when 6 Squadron mounted its first operation for several weeks. Led by Flt Lt Morrison-Bell in BP188 the three Hurricanes attacked three armoured cars in a wadi that had been acting as observation points over the positions of the 4th Armoured Brigade – each pilot claimed one. In early October, Plt Off Dennis

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**ABOVE:** Sitting on a desert strip, around October 1942, Hurricane IIc 'JV-R' awaits another sortie  
 VIA M GOODMAN

**BELOW:** Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt with his pilots and groundcrew in front of a Hurricane shortly after the battle  
 VIA TERRY HANCOCK

**"We lived rather rough like the army. The dug-out tent tended to be safer in bombing and strafing attacks"**





LEFT: Operating off rough desert strips required great care. Here, Plt Off Thornton's Hurricane has ended up on its nose. He had destroyed a tank and several trucks during the unit's final action on November 3  
6 SQN RECORDS

Lee led Plt Offs Howard Clark and Johnstone to attack some lorries and half-tracks – they hit several despite intense return fire. Then, on the afternoon of the 12th, a patrol led by Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt failed to locate their tank target but strafed some vehicles and a cook house where German troops had lined up to collect their food. Following this, instructions were issued to limit attacks to armour in future. Three days later the CO flying BP554 and Plt Off Mulcahy-Morgan in BP553 attacked two captured 'Honey' (M3 Stuart) tanks used by the Germans and each pilot claimed one destroyed.



LEFT: Fg Off Howard Clark flew throughout the El Alamein fighting but was later killed over Tunisia  
VIA ALASTAIR GOODRUM

Due to heavy cloud it was the last significant action for some time.

### Battle of El Alamein

At 2140hrs on the night of October 23, a thousand Allied guns opened fire along a narrow front between the Qattara depression and the Mediterranean. The decisive Battle of El Alamein had begun.

From LG 89 at 1035hrs the following morning, Wg Cdr Porteous led six Hurricanes to attack tanks and armoured cars in the southern sector – they claimed six Honey tanks destroyed. Two hours later Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt led six more and returned leaving

eight more Honeys and two captured Crusader tanks ablaze. Weston-Burt personally claimed a pair of Honeys and a Crusader. This was 6 Squadron's most successful day in the tankbusting role and it was just the start of a very busy period for the unit.

Attempts to prevent Axis forces concentrating for a counterattack continued and, mid-morning on the 25th, Fg Off MacDonald, Plt Off Zillessen and Sgt Day participated in a successful attack on enemy armour in the south. Between them they despatched two Honeys, two Crusaders, five armoured cars, a half-track and a lorry. Soon afterwards, HQ provided confirmation from a captured German that the attacks had been effective: "On 26th October, 2 Coy has 12 Stuart tank runners. These were sent forward and were all either damaged or knocked out by a surprise attack by aircraft using shells. Of the 12 tanks, six were knocked out and left burning. The other six were repeatedly hit but still kept going and returned to their lines. One hit had gone right through the turret from rear to front.

"The appearance of British 'Tank Busters' came as a great surprise and caused panic whenever they appeared."



RIGHT: This 88mm Flak.37 gun and its Sd.Kfz 7 tractor vehicle has been wrecked during a Hurricane strike  
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



RIGHT: Flying Hurricane BN795 *Our John* on July 13, Flt Lt 'Pip' Hillier hit four German Panzers with his 40mm guns  
6 SQN RECORDS

The heavy fighting continued – the following day the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions attacked in the north along the Kidney Ridge, but encountered stout resistance including air support. They were eventually repulsed with heavy losses. Although 6 Squadron's tank busters were not able to locate any suitable targets that day, they had better luck on the 28th. Shortly before 1500hrs, Sqn Ldr Weston-Burt led six aircraft against Italian armour. They attacked with some success, hitting two M13 tanks, two half-tracks, seven lorries and a wireless truck; three fires were seen as they departed. The Italian return fire was heavy and F/Sgt Levine's aircraft, BP550, was hit in the engine, but he returned safely.



Off Dean Jones to crash-land. Fortunately, he was soon rescued by the Royal Dragoons.

### Race for victory

After intense fighting the breakout from the Alamein position – dubbed Operation Supercharge – began on November 2.

Despite British armour suffering heavy losses, by the evening the attack had convinced Rommel that he had to withdraw to prevent his forces from being annihilated.

The Hurricane pilots were prepared to move forward but initially continued flying from LG 89. Air attacks hammered the Axis anti-tank screen that was holding up the breakout of X Corps.

In the middle of the afternoon, the CO led the first of several successful attacks against 'targets

RIGHT: Columns of Panzer Mk.II light tanks were regularly encountered by the squadron in the build-up to the Battle of El Alamein  
G MASSIMELO

The following day, October 29, the German 90th Light Division moved to hold an Australian advance as Allied leader Bernard Montgomery moved the thrust of his assault further south against the Italians. 'A' Flight had been alerted to support the Australians and shortly after 0900hrs Flt Lt Tony Bluett flying BP198 took off with five other Hurricanes to attack enemy tanks.

The armour was not located so the Hurricanes instead struck some MT. Intense return fire hit the engine of BN979 forcing Plt



of opportunity'. On the first sortie no armour was found but 15 assorted vehicles and a tank transporter were destroyed. However, return fire remained deadly with BN977 flown by Sgt Paton written off after being hit by flak. Some 90 minutes later, Don Weston-Burt led another formation that also took a heavy toll of trucks and other vehicles. He personally hit six lorries and two M13 tanks while Plt Off Zillerssen hit five lorries and a tank. Fg Off MacDonald and Sgt Day shared a tank, Fg Off Carswell hit a Mk.IV tank and an armoured car while Plt Off Thornton hit a tank and four lorries. These may have been the squadron's final successes during what had been an epic battle, but the drama was not over.

By the time they returned to base, dusk had fallen and night landings were only accomplished with some difficulty after a flare path was laid out.

The next day, Axis resistance finally broke and the race across the desert began.

During the retreat and the two epic battles, the tankbusting Hurricanes of 6 Squadron claimed 26 tanks and 31 armoured vehicles as well as a swathe of field guns, trucks and other vehicles destroyed. One consequence was that 6 Squadron



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 ABOVE: 6 Squadron's Hurricanes and underwing 40mm cannon took a significant toll of enemy armour and vehicles 6 SQN RECORDS

**“The next day Axis resistance finally broke and the race across the desert began”**



became nicknamed 'The Flying Can Openers', an epithet that continues to this day.

On November 6, the unit moved forward to LG 172, situated on the coast behind El Alamein. For the time being, its specialised role was not required.

Thus, in early December, it was re-equipped with Hurricane fighters for convoy protection work. In recognition of their devastating 'tankbusting' work, Wg Cdr Roger Porteous and Sqn Ldr Don Weston-Burt received the DSO while the DFC was awarded to Flt Lts Pip Hillier, Anthony Morrison-Bell, Alan Simpson and Fg Offs Dennis Lee, Theo Petersen and John Walter.

From a gruelling campaign, these awards were hard won and well deserved. **FP**