

AFRICA@WAR 19:

LIBYAN AIR WARS

PART 1: 1973-1985



**Tom Cooper, Albert Grandolini,
Arnaud Delalande**

**AFRICA
@WAR** **SERIES**

Published in 2015 by:

Helion & Company Limited
26 Willow Road
Solihull
West Midlands
B91 1UE
England
Tel. 0121 705 3393
Fax 0121 711 4075
email: info@helion.co.uk
website: www.helion.co.uk
Twitter: @helionbooks
Visit our blog <http://blog.helion.co.uk>

Text © Tom Cooper, Albert Grandolini &
Arnaud Delalande 2014
Colour profiles © Tom Cooper 2014
Maps © Helion & Company Limited 2014
Photographs © as individually credited

Designed & typeset by Farr out Publications,
Wokingham, Berkshire
Cover design by Paul Hewitt, Battlefield
Design (www.battlefield-design.co.uk)

Printed by Henry Ling Ltd., Dorchester,
Dorset

UK ISBN 978-1-909982-39-0
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication
Data. A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

All rights reserved. No part of this
publication may be reproduced, stored,
manipulated in any retrieval system, or
transmitted in any mechanical, electronic
form or by any other means, without the
prior written authority of the publishers,
except for short extracts in media
reviews. Any person who engages in any
unauthorized activity in relation to this
publication shall be liable to criminal
prosecution and claims for civil and criminal
damages.

Cover: The appearance of R-35-armed Su-
22Ms was something of a surprise for USN
fliers: This big and powerful fighter-bomber
was not a very good interceptor and armed
with air-to-air missiles for self-defence
purposes only. (USN)

CONTENTS

1	Background	3
2	Million-Man Army	9
3	Chadian Prequel	26
4	Early Libyan Interventions	34
5	FON over Syrte	40
6	Showdown in Chad	52
	Bibliography	62
	Acknowledgments	64



Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events. Similarly, for ease of use, Arabic names are romanised and transcribed rather than transliterated. For example, the definite article al- before words starting with 'sun letters' is given as pronounced instead of simply as al- (which is the usual practice by non-Arabic speakers in most English-language literature and media).

ABBREVIATIONS

4WD	Four-wheel drive	ELAA	Escadrille Légère d’Appui Aérien (Light Air Support Squadron)
AA	Anti-aircraft	ELINT	Electronic intelligence
AB	Air Base	ENT	Escadrille Nationale Tchadienne (National Chadian Squadron)
AdA	Armée de l’Air (French Air Force)	ERV	Escadron de Ravitaillement en Vol (Air Refuelling Squadron)
AFB	Air Force Base (used for US Air Force bases)	FAN	Forces Armées du Nord (Armed Forces of the North)
AK	Russian for Automat Kalashnikova; general designation for a class of Soviet, or former East Bloc, manufactured class of 7.62mm assault rifles	FANT	Forces Armées Nationales Tchadiennes (National Army of Chad)
ALAT	Aviation Légère de l’Armée de Terre (French Army Aviation)	FNFP	Front National des Forces Progressistes (National Front of Progressive Forces)
AML	Automitrailleuse Légère (class of wheeled armoured cars manufactured by Panhard)	FROLINAT	Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad (National Liberation Front of Chad)
An	Antonov (the design bureau led by Oleg Antonov)	Gen	General (military commissioned officer rank)
ANT	Armée Nationale du Tchad (National Chadian Armed Forces)	GMT	Groupe Mixte de Transport (Mixed Transport Group)
APC	Armoured Personnel Carrier	GUNT	Gouvernement d’Union Nationale de Transition (Transitional National Government of Chad)
ATGM	Anti-tank guided missile	HQ	Headquarters
BAe	British Aerospace	IAP	International Airport
BET	Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti (Prefecture in northern Chad)	IFF	Identification Friend or Foe
Brig Gen	Brigadier General (military commissioned officer rank)	IFR	In-flight refuelling
CAP	Combat Air Patrol	IFV	Infantry fighting vehicle
Capt	Captain (military commissioned officer rank)	IR	Infra-red, electromagnetic radiation longer than deepest red light sensed as heat
CAS	Close Air Support	II	Ilyushin (the design bureau led by Sergey Vladimirovich Ilyushin, also known as OKB-39)
CASA	Construcciones Aeronáuticas SA (Spanish aircraft manufacturer)	KIA	Killed in action
CBU	Cluster bomb unit	Km	Kilometre
CDR	Conseil Démocratique Révolutionnaire (Democratic Revolutionary Council)	LAAF	Libyan Arab Air Force
CG	Cruiser, Guided (hull designation for USN cruisers armed with guided missiles)	Lt	Lieutenant (military commissioned officer rank)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)	Lt Col	Lieutenant-Colonel (military commissioned officer rank)
c/n	Construction number	1st Lt	First Lieutenant (military commissioned officer rank)
CO	Commanding Officer	2nd Lt	Second Lieutenant (lowest military commissioned officer rank)
COIN	Counterinsurgency	Maj	Major (military commissioned officer rank)
Cdte	Commandante (commissioned officer rank, equal to Major)	Maj Gen	Major-General (military commissioned officer rank)
Col	Colonel (military commissioned officer rank)	MANPADS	Man-portable air defence system(s). Light surface-to-air missile system that can be carried and deployed in combat by a single soldier
Col Gen	Colonel-General (top military commissioned officer rank)	MBT	Main Battle Tank
CV	Carrier, Vertical (hull designation for USN aircraft carriers)	MHz	Megahertz, millions of cycles per second
CVN	Carrier, Vertical, Nuclear	Mi	Mil (Soviet/Russian helicopter designer and manufacturer)
CVW	Carrier, Vertical, Wing (composite carrier air wings embarked on board USN carriers)	MiG	Mikoyan i Gurevich (the design bureau led by Artyom Ivanovich Mikoyan and Mikhail Iosifovich Gurevich, also known as OKB-155 or MMZ ‘Zenit’)
DD	Destroyer (hull designation for USN destroyers)	Nav/attack	Used for navigation and to aim weapons against surface target
DDG	Destroyer, Guided (hull designation for USN destroyers armed with guided missiles)	NCO	Non-commissioned officer
DoD	Department of Defence (USA)		
EAA	Escadrille d’Appui Aérien (Air Support Squadron)		
EAF	Egyptian Air Force (official title since 1972)		
EC	Escadre de Chasse (Fighter Squadron)		
ECM	Electronic countermeasures		

OAU	Organisation of African Unity	SA-6 Gainful	ASCC codename for ZRK-SD Kub/Kvadrat, Soviet SAM system
OCU	Operational Conversion Unit	SA-7 Grail	ASCC codename for 9K32 Strela-2, Soviet MANPADS
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries	SAM	Surface-to-air missile
ORBAT	Order of Battle	SDECE	Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre Espionnage (Foreign Intelligence and Counterespionage Service in France)
OTU	Operational Training Unit	SEPECAT	Société Européenne de Production de l'Avion d'École de Combat et d'Appui Tactique (European Company for the Production of a Combat Trainer and Tactical Support Aircraft)
PoW	Prisoner of War	SIGINT	Signals intelligence
RAF	Royal Air Force (of the United Kingdom)	Sqn Ldr	Squadron Leader (military commissioned officer rank, equal to Major)
RAM	Régiment d'Artillerie de Marine (Marine Artillery Regiment)	Su	Sukhoi (the design bureau led by Pavel Ossipowich Sukhoi, also known as OKB-51)
RCC	Revolutionary Command Council (government of Libya in the 1970s)	SyAAF	Syrian Arab Air Force
REC	Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie (Cavalry Regiment of the Foreign Legion)	Technical	Improvised fighting vehicle (typically an open-backed civilian 4WD modified to a gun truck)
REP	Régiment Étranger Parachutistes (Parachute Regiment of the Foreign Legion)	UARAF	United Arab Republic Air Force (official title of the Egyptian Air Force, 1958–1972)
RIAOM	Régiment Interarmes d'Outre-Mer (Overseas Inter-arms Regiment)	USAF	United States Air Force
RICM	Régiment d'Infanterie Chars de Marine (Marine Infantry Tank Regiment)	USD	United States Dollar (also US\$)
RIMa	Régiment d'Infanterie de Marine (Marine Infantry Regiment)	USN	United States Navy
RMS	Royal Mail Ship (prefix used for seagoing vessels that carry mail under contract to the British Royal Mail)	USS	United States Ship
RPG	Rocket Propelled Grenade	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (or 'Soviet Union')
RWR	Radar Warning Receiver	Wg Cdr	Wing Commander (military commissioned officer rank, equal to Lieutenant-Colonel)
RHC	Régiment d'Hélicoptères de Combat (Combat Helicopter Regiment)	WIA	Wounded in Action
SA-2 Guideline	ASCC codename for S-75 Dvina, Soviet SAM system		

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

In this age when the ‘Global War on Terror’, ‘Spread of Islamic extremism’ and many related conflicts around the World, especially in Africa, dominate the headlines, few might recall the times when it was another ‘war of terror’ that was in the news almost every day. Even less so since the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, which reached its first peak with a popular uprising in Libya, in spring 2011, culminated in a lengthy intervention by forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the collapse of the regime of Muammar Muhammad Abu Minyar al-Gaddafi, who ruled the country for no less than 42 years.¹ It is practically forgotten that the first recorded event of air warfare in history took place in the skies over Libya. This happened on 1 November 1911, when Italian military pilot Lt Giulio Gavotti flew the first ‘mass-produced’ military aircraft ever to attack Turkish positions.

Air power was to drop many more bombs upon Libya during the

following 100 years, but quite a few bombs were to be dropped by Libyan aircraft upon other countries too. Between 1973 and 1989, various Western powers and Libya were entangled in a seemingly never-ending exchange of blows launched in retaliation for one action or the other. This confrontation resulted in a number of high-profile, even though low-scale, clashes between the Libyan Arab Air Force (LAAF), the US Navy (USN), and even the French Air Force (Armée de l’Air, AdA). The LAAF, quantitatively one of most potent air forces in North Africa and the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980, also saw intensive deployment in Chad. Initially characterised by small scale insurgency for the control of N’Djamena, the Chadian capital, this conflict eventually turned into a major war when Libya invaded the country outright. The LAAF deployed not only French-made Mirages, but also Soviet-made MiG and Sukoi fighter-bombers, Mil helicopters and even Tupolev bombers, to establish her dominance over the extensive battlefield of the Sahara Desert. Because of the Cold War, but also due to confrontation with Libya over a number of other issues, France, a one-time major arms supplier to Libya, and the USA gradually got dragged into that war. Deployments of their troops and intelligence services in Chad, Egypt and the Sudan never resulted in a full-scale war against Libya,

¹ There are around a dozen different translations of this family name in to the English language, of which the most widespread (in the public realm) is ‘Gaddafi’, even though ‘Qadhafi’ was used more often in the official documentation of various Western countries. Interestingly, ‘Gathafi’ was the spelling used in his passport, when captured by Libyan revolutionaries in Tripoli on 24 Aug. 2011.

but time and again it culminated in small-scale aerial operations that proved crucial to developments on the ground, several of which are still a matter of extensive debate. Often related to issues relevant well away from Libyan borders and airspace, most of the air wars in question were never officially declared and of rather limited duration, primarily consisting of a handful of low-intensity clashes. Some were as a result of covert activities of intelligence agencies, but others resulted in full-scale battles that lasted for days, sometimes even weeks and months.

The authors grew up reading news about this conflict on an almost daily basis during the 1980s. Over the years, the ‘hobby’ of researching related details and the geopolitical backgrounds transpired into a profession of military aviation journalism, which resulted in this book. The story it reveals is not only the story of air wars fought over and by Libya, but also that of the pilots of many other nationalities that participated in them, and about their often rather troublesome equipment.

Our hope is that the results of our work are going to provide a unique insight into this almost forgotten conflict. An air war that raged from the skies over the southern Mediterranean to southern Chad and northern Sudan, represented a formative period of the LAAF, but which also prompted a number of crucial modifications and developments in France and the USA. Indeed, while small in scale, many of the campaigns in question served as testing grounds for modern-day doctrine, tactics and technology of air power.

Simple Geography and a Turbulent History

Libya is the fourth largest country in Africa, and seventeenth largest on the world. Clockwise, it borders Egypt in the east, Sudan, Chad, and Niger in the south, and Algeria and Tunisia in the west. Most of the terrain is characterised by extensive deserts, sand seas, extreme heat and aridity. There are no major rivers and less than 2% of the national territory receives enough rainfall for settled agriculture. The handbook entitled *Der Soldat in Libyen*, distributed to German soldiers deployed in the country with the Deutsches Afrika Korps in February 1941, described the local terrain as follows:

Libya as a whole is a desert plateau, gradually dissolved by steep, rocky terrain and individual high surfaces. Scattered plump mountain massifs up to 1000 metres high are protruding over the completely flat or slightly wavy surfaces ... 50 to 100 kilometres inland the steppe zone ends and a completely dead desert begins, consisting not only of sand, but also stone and gravel.

Indeed, terrain in Libya includes only a few highlands, such as the mountain ranges near the Chadian border, the barren wasteland of the rocky Nafuza Mountains south-west of the capital city of Tripoli, and the Marj Plain with Jebel al-Akhdar (‘Green Mountain’) in Cyrenaica in the east. Vegetation is sparse and usually limited to date palms and olive and orange trees that grow in scattered oases, while wildlife is limited to desert rodents, gazelles, a few wildcats, eagles, hawks and vultures.

Within easy reach of Europe and with links to North Africa and the Middle East, the area has experienced quite a turbulent history over the last 3,000 years. The name of Libya is a derivative from the appellation given to a Berber tribe by the ancient Egyptians. It was very rarely used before the country’s independence. Nowadays it is used by a country that came into being as an independent and unified state only in the second half of the 20th century, consisting of Tripolitania in the northwest (approximately 16% of the country’s area), Cyrenaica in the east (about 51% of the country’s area),



Muhammad Idris as-Senussi and his troops during their raid into Egypt in 1916. (Photo via Mark Lepko)

and Fezzan in the southwest (around 33% of the country’s area). Although known to have been inhabited already some 25,000 years ago, Fezzan was only loosely governed by the Garamantes tribe from about 1,000 years BC. Greeks and Phoenicians began founding colonies on the coast of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania in the 7th and 5th centuries BC, before Carthage took over the region. The Egyptians, the Persians, the army of Alexander the Great and the Ptolemies of Egypt all ruled Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, which flourished during the Roman Empire period and even when the Vandals took over in 455. Cyrenaica and Tripolitania maintained their distinct Carthaginian and Greek cultures until their once prosperous cities were racked by political and religious unrest, and degenerated into bleak military outposts. Similarly, Fezzan developed a unique history and identity. Correspondingly, different parts of what was to become Libya have all maintained their own relations with the outside world ever since, resulting in the latent internal disunity that is characteristic of the country today.

In medieval times, Libya, or the parts thereof, continued changing hands. The Byzantium Empire conquered the area in the 6th century, but lost it to the Arabs under Amr Ibn al-As, who conquered Cyrenaica in 643, Tripolitania in 649, and to Ukba Ibn an-Nafi, who conquered Fezzan in 663. The area was successively ruled by the Umayyads, Fatimids, and a Berber dynasty, before it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire, in the 16th century. Successive waves of Arab armies were followed by settlers that brought Islam, the Arabic language, and Arab culture to the indigenous population along the coast, but the Berbers of the interior resisted for centuries and remained linguistically and culturally separate.

Under Ottoman rule, a pasha (or ‘regent’) ruled the area from Tripoli, the principal city of Tripolitania, but in 1711 Ahmad Qaramanly, a Turkish-Arab cavalry officer, seized power in Tripoli and founded his own dynasty while acknowledging the Ottoman sultan as his suzerain. Following the ending of local piracy by the United States of America (USA) and European powers in the early 19th century, the economy declined and the area slipped into civil war, enabling the Ottomans to re-establish themselves in power in 1835. It was around this time that Muhammad Ibn Ali as-Senussi, a highly respected Islamic scholar from present-day Algeria, won many followers among the Cyrenaican Bedouins, and this area gradually developed into the centre of a new religious order. By the end of the 19th century, virtually all of the Bedouin in the region had pledged their allegiance to the Senussi brotherhood, and Senussis were subsequently to spearhead the nascent Libyan

To the Shores of Tripoli

Outside circles of naval historians, it is often forgotten that the history of the area nowadays within Libyan borders included a period of military conflict with the then still very young United States of America (USA). The conflicts in question, better known as the First and Second Barbary Wars, were a result of a period during which Tripolitania lapsed into military anarchy due to lack of direction from the Ottoman Empire, in the mid-18th century. The area came under the rule of successive pashas that established themselves in power through coup d'états and then continued to pay a nominal tribute to Istanbul, but otherwise ruled the area as an independent country. In order to improve the ruined economy of their states, pashas in Tripoli, Algiers, Tunis and the independent Sultanate of Morocco began to heavily employ corsairs (pirates) against European merchant shipping underway on crucial shipping routes in the Mediterranean. Alternatively, nations with an interest in protecting their shipping were forced to pay a tribute.

After the United States' independence from Great Britain was formalised by the Treaty of Paris in 1783, France ceased protecting US ships underway in the Mediterranean Sea, and a number of these were seized by corsairs. The US government reacted with diplomatic action, but this was only partially successful. While hundreds of American sailors were released from custody in Algiers and Morocco, the USA had to pay a ransom that amounted to nearly one sixth of the entire US federal budget, and was to continue paying an annual tribute to local rulers. Eventually, the US Congress passed naval legislation that, among other things,

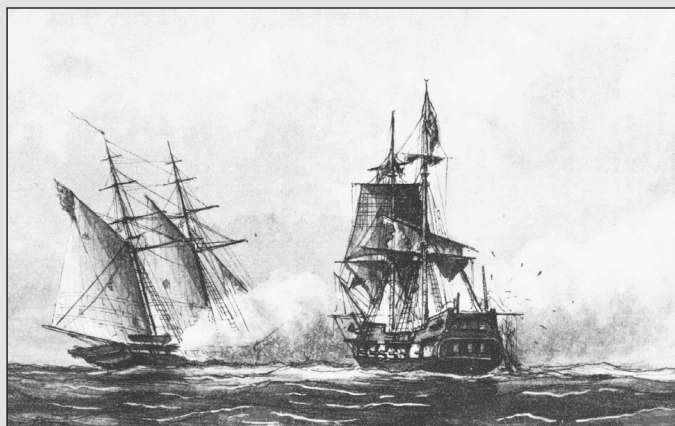
provided for six frigates in 1801, and US President Thomas Jefferson ordered a small naval task force into the Mediterranean. There were several minor clashes in which its ships defeated some of the Tripolitanian corsairs and, in August 1801, the schooner *USS Enterprise* defeated a 14-gun polacca *Tripoli*. However, the frigate *USS Philadelphia* ran aground while patrolling Tripoli harbour in October 1803 and the crew, including Captain William Bainbridge, was captured.

In February 1804, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur led a successful raid into Tripoli, in the course of which the captured frigate was destroyed, thus at least recovering the pride of the nascent US Navy. Subsequent attacks on Tripoli were less successful and eventually the Americans organised a force of US Marines, led by 1st Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon and 500 mercenaries, that marched from Alexandria in Egypt to Derna in Cyrenaica. Concerned about this threat, the pasha in Tripoli rushed to sign a treaty with the USA and release all the Americans 'in his possession', ending this war in June 1805. Despite this success, the American practice of paying tribute to the pirate states in North Africa ended only with the conclusion of the Second Barbary War (also known as Algerine or Algerian War), fought in 1815–16.

These two conflicts and their participants were immortalised not only in the second line of the US Marine Corps' Hymn ('... to the shores of Tripoli'), but also in many of the traditional names of US Navy warships, including Bainbridge, Constellation, Decatur, Enterprise, Intrepid, Somers, and O'Bannon.



Painting 'To the Shores of Tripoli' by Raymond Massey, showing the frigate *USS Constitution* during the second attack on Tripoli on 4 August 1804.



Schooner *USS Enterprise* (right) capturing the Tripolitanian polacca *Tripoli* in August 1801. (Drawing by Capt William Bainbridge Hoff, from circa 1878; US Navy Department)

nationalist movement.

In late 1911, Italy invaded Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, forcing the Ottoman Empire to sue for peace and accept the Treaty of Lausanne the following year. Local tribesmen opposed Italian rule and initially were successful in preventing its spread beyond a few enclaves along the coast of Cyrenaica. During World War I, the Senussi first sided with the Central Powers. Encouraged by the German and Ottoman Empires, they launched the so-called Senussi Campaign, but after a disastrous raid into British-occupied Egypt in 1916, they negotiated a truce with the British and Italians, whereupon Rome accepted Muhammad Idris as-Senussi's hereditary rule in Cyrenaica. Only a few years later, the fascist leader Benito Mussolini opened the Second Italo-Senussi War. The technically superior Italian forces, led by General Badoglio, destroyed Idris' forces in Tripolitania

in 1928 and in Fezzan in 1930. Their campaign in Cyrenaica was concluded only against fierce resistance from Senussi tribesmen, in the course of which the Italians murdered over 24,000 civilians and herded around 100,000 survivors into concentration camps, forcing the others to flee into the desert. In 1934, the area was declared as 'pacified' and formally established as an Italian colony under the classical name 'Libya'. It consisted of four provinces: Tripoli, Misurata, Benghazi and Derna and the Military District of Fezzan. Marshal of the Regia Aeronautica (RA, Royal Italian Air Force), Italo Balbo, Governor of Libya from 1934 until 1940, then called for the colonisation of Libya and started a policy of integration between the Italians and Libyans, that proved quite successful. Laws were passed that allowed Muslims to be permitted to join the National Fascist Party and created Libyan military units within the Italian

Army. The Italians invested considerably in the development of the public sector and the modernisation of agriculture, building nearly 400km of railways and more than 2,000km of roads. With the Italian population increasing to nearly 110,000, Libya was declared a part of metropolitan Italy, on 9 January 1939.²

Origins of Libyan Military

During the second half of the 1930s, planning to enlarge Libya to the Aouzou Strip in northern Chad (then a French colony) and establish a broad land bridge between Libya and Italian East Africa, the Italians established two divisions of Libyan colonial troops and a battalion of paratroopers. These included around 31,000 native Muslim soldiers, some of whom were granted 'special' Italian citizenship and considered 'Moslem Italians'. Initially assigned to the Royal Colonial Corps of Libya, these units participated in the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, where they were highly decorated for their distinguished performance in battle. Later on, the 1st Libyan Infantry Division was incorporated into the reserve of the 10th Italian Army, and the 2nd Libyan Infantry Division into the 13th Corps, and thus they became involved in the Italian invasion of British-occupied Egypt, launched in September 1940. In December of the same year, the British Eighth Army launched a counterattack that not only ended in the conquer of Cyrenaica, but also the destruction of the 10th Italian Army and the capture of most of their Libyan troops. During the following two years, the indigenous population of Libya became pawns in the war, with thousands being killed and most of the scarce infrastructure destroyed by the time Axis troops were forced to retreat into Tunisia in early 1943. Libya finally ended up under British Military Administration, which made use of the former Italian bureaucrats, but also began training the Libyan civil servants and police.

This also included 600 Senussi fighters who had fled to Egypt after the collapse of the resistance in 1934 whom the British organised into five battalions of the Libyan Arab Forces (LAF) which were deployed inside Libya during late 1942. They saw little fighting: instead they were primarily tasked with securing camps for German and Italian Prisoners of War (PoWs). The LAF was dissolved immediately after the war, but most of its members subsequently joined the British-established Libyan Police.

Meanwhile, British interests in Libya came into conflict with those of the French and the Soviet Union. Namely, in 1942, the Free French moved north from Chad (with British approval) and occupied Fezzan, subsequently attaching some parts of it to the French military regions of southern Algeria and southern Tunisia. Moscow, which at the Potsdam Conference in 1945 agreed that the Italian colonies seized during the war should not be returned, subsequently proposed separate provincial trusteeships and began claiming Tripolitania for itself while assigning Fezzan to France and Cyrenaica to Britain. With no end to the discussions in sight, France advocated the return of the territory to Italy, while the USA proposed a trusteeship for the whole country under the control of the United Nations (UN – whose charter had become effective in October 1945). Eventually, the conflicting interests of London and Paris left the Allies with no alternative but to refer the issue to the United Nations. Successfully representing Libya, Sidi Muhammad Idris al-Mahdi as-Senussi, the Emir of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and the leader of the Senussi Muslim Sufi order, advocated independence for his country and on 21 November 1949, the UN



King Idris II of Libya (right), with President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt in 1964. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

General Assembly approved a resolution calling for independence of a sovereign Libya by 1 January 1952. A national assembly, composed of an equal number of delegates from Cyrenaica, Fezzan and Tripolitania, convened at Tripoli in 1950 and designated Emir as-Senussi a king-designate, but also unanimously agreed that Libya would be established as a democratic and federal state, governed by a constitutional monarchy, with a cabinet and a bicameral legislature. It promulgated the Libyan constitution on 7 October 1951, and on 24 December of the same year the emir, as King Idris I, proclaimed the independence of the federal United Kingdom of Libya. Around this time, a large part of the British-established Libyan Police, especially its former LAF elements was re-organised as the Royal Libyan Army (RLA).³

The Senussi King's Air Force

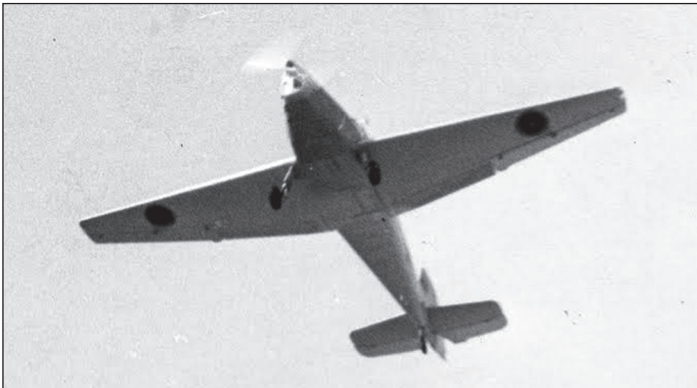
Traditionally, Libya was an agricultural country, but due to lack of water, farming and raising livestock remained restricted to the coastal regions, as it does even today. Following independence, with the infrastructure in tatters, 90% of the population being illiterate and the sale of scrap metal salvaged from battlefields of World War II representing the largest source of revenue, this nascent nation was heavily dependent upon financial aid from Great Britain and the USA. Although King Idris banned the work of all political parties and practically abolished the federal state in 1952, the following year London and Washington began providing development aid in exchange for rights to maintain military installations in the country. The British and Libyan governments signed a 20-year treaty of friendship and alliance, granting the Royal Air Force (RAF) the use of base at el-Adem, south of Tobruk, and the rights for the 25th Armoured Brigade of the British Army to remain based in the country. Furthermore, King Idris' government and the USA signed an agreement that granted the US Air Force (USAF) the use of Wheelus Air Force Base (AFB) outside Tripoli, including a depot

² Vittoria Capresi, *I centri rurali libici di fondazione – architettura e urbanistica (1934–1940)*, Institut für Kunstgeschichte, Bauforschung und Denkmalpflege, Wien, 2010.

³ Philip S Jowett, *The Italian Army, 1940–45: Europe 1940–1943* (Oxford, Osprey, ISBN 978-1-85532-864-8); Kenneth Ciro Paoletti, *A Military History of Italy* (Greenwood, ISBN 0-275-98505-9); Piero Crociani, *Le Uniformi Coloniali Libiche, 1912–42*; Edmund Hall, *The Italian Army in Egypt During World War II* (egyptstudycircle.org.uk); James Burd, *Libyan and National Paratrooper Units, 1940–41* (Comandosupremo.com, Feb. 2010).



Libya's first military pilot, al-Hadi Salem al-Husomi, who graduated from training in Turkey in 1957. (al-Husomi Collection)



President Nasser donated two Helwan-built Gomhouria trainers to the RLAF in 1962. (David Nicolle Collection)

for the storage of nuclear weapons and several practice firing ranges, subject to renewal in 1970.

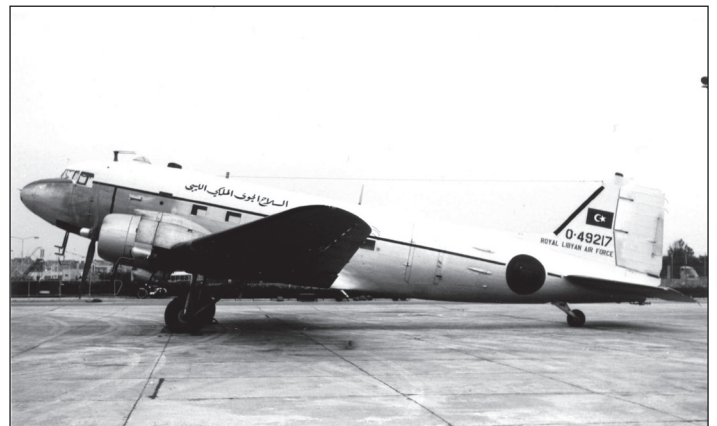
During the 1950s, Libya therefore experienced a period of very slow economic growth largely depending on the provision of foreign aid. The situation changed dramatically in June 1959, when the Esso Corporation (later renamed Exxon) discovered huge reserves of high-quality oil and gas, especially after the exploitation and export of these began in 1962. This effected a profound change in the economy, with gross domestic product increasing nearly tenfold by the end of that decade. However, the oil boom created social and economic problems that the royal government was neither able nor willing to address. Although financing a number of major public works projects, expanding educational and health services, and supporting low-cost housing, small businesses and industries, King Idris was first and foremost a Cyrenaican, with a Cyrenaican's political and economic interests and power base. He was never at ease with Tripolitarians, nor with a military including



Only seven out of sixteen F-5A/Bs, including this example, were delivered to Libya in 1969. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



One of two F-5Bs given to Libya in 1969 at Wheelus AB, with Libyan and USAF pilots preparing to embark for a training flight. (Tom Cooper Collection)



The sole C-47B donated to the RLAF by USAF in the 1960s. Notable are the fin flash and roundel in red, black and green. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

them, especially because many of the RLA officers were openly sympathetic to the ideas of President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, calling for Libya to become involved in the Arab struggle against Israel. The net result was massive mistrust of King Idris by his own military, which was kept very limited in size. Totalling only 6,500 men, the RLA was countered by two rival paramilitary units, the National Security Force and the Cyrenaican Defence Force. Nearly all of the units of these three branches were commanded by loyal,



Members of the RCC, which established itself in power in Tripoli and Benghazi, on 1 September 1969. Gaddafi is standing in the centre. (Gaddafi Collection)



The Libyan population supported the September 1969 Coup and participating military units were cheered by civilians, as can be seen on this photo from the streets of Tripoli. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

but often poorly qualified Cyrenaicans, and equipped with only the bare minimum of necessary armament.

Only after considerable pressure from Washington, which offered aid for the further development of Libya's armed forces, did the Defence Minister, Abd al-Nabi Yunis, issue a decree according to which the first RLA pilot, al-Hadi Salem al-Husomi, quite fresh from training in Turkey, was to establish the Royal Libyan Air Force (RLAF) on 13 September 1962.

Al-Husomi therefore found himself facing a number of almost insurmountable problems. With good roads existing only along the coast, connecting Tripoli with Tunisia and Egypt, through Benghazi and Tobruk, air transport always played an important role. Indeed, more than a dozen minor airfields were constructed by the Italians, Germans and the Allies before and during the WWII. Many more were built during the 1960s, when they served companies involved in oil and gas exploitation. However, King Idris refused to provide the necessary financing for either aircraft or personnel for the RLAF,



September 1969: a youthful Capt al-Gaddafi addresses a crowd in Tripoli, shortly after taking over as the de facto head of state. (Gaddafi Collection)

for fear of a possible coup attempt. Learning about al-Husomi's problems, the Egyptians stepped in and donated two Helwan Gomhouria basic trainers (based on the design of a Bücker Bü.181, manufactured under licence in Egypt), but the Americans and the British swiftly intervened in order to interrupt relations with Cairo. Instead, Washington intensified its involvement and donated two Lockheed T-33A jet trainers, two Bell 47B helicopters, the first of several Douglas C-47B transports and began training about 20 Libyan pilots and ground personnel at Wheelus AFB.

During the following years, the build-up of the RLAF continued at a slow pace. When King Idris negotiated the withdrawal of British and US troops from their bases in Libya in 1966, the USAF instructors working in the country suggested the government lease 16 Northrop F-5A and two F-5B Freedom Fighter jet fighters. A corresponding contract was signed the following year and a group of 20 RLAF pilots and 37 technicians were sent for training in the USA. They returned to Wheelus in 1969, together with the first seven F-5As, and a USAF team that supervised the aircraft's introduction into service with the RLAF.

Despite this important development, and the excellent training it received, the air force remained a very small branch of only 400 officers, NCOs and other ranks, and its future did not appear especially bright. Indeed, even after the introduction of the F-5, fully qualified pilots remained so scarce that many had to fly different aircraft types as required (even the commander of the RLAF, al-Husomi, regularly had to fly T-33As and C-47s). The situation was similar in other branches of the military.⁴

1969 Coup d'État

King Idris' suspicion of his military was no paranoia. Nasser's popularity and the spread of Arab nationalism within the RLA, coupled with resentment over corrupt royals and the families they favoured, prompted several officer cliques to start plotting a take-over. After the king announced his intention to abdicate in favour of the Crown Prince Sayed Hassan ar-Rida al-Mahdi al-Senussi, effective on 2 September 1969, he travelled to Turkey to rest. A group of about 70 young officers from the Signal Corps, mostly captains in their late twenties, organised as the Free Officer's Movement, set their plan in motion.⁵ Surprising almost everyone,

⁴ Dupuy et al., pp. 223–225; Flintham, pp. 93–94; Stanik, pp. 12–20; Cooper et al., *Arab MiGs Vol. 4*, pp. 193–202.

⁵ Dissent within the RLA was so widespread, that at least one other group of officers was planning its own coup attempt to take place a few days later. Their plan was overtaken by subsequent developments.