

# BIRDS OF BLIDA

TAKING OVER THE AIRFIELD AT BLIDA, THE ROYAL AIR FORCE QUICKLY ESTABLISHED A BASE FOR NOT ONLY ITS COMBAT-READY WARPLANES BUT ALSO A MAJOR OVERHAUL CENTER THAT WOULD RETURN HUNDREDS OF HURRICANES AND SPITFIRES TO THE WAR

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PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY US ARMY SIGNAL CORPS

Covered in grime and caked with layers of desert dust and mud, the advanced elements of the British Army's 11th Infantry Brigade carefully moved into the ancient town of Blida in Algeria. Part of Operation Torch — the Allied invasion of North Africa — one of the primary goals was to take over the airfield built on the edge of the town. The field was occupied by Vichy French, Italians, and, most importantly, Germans. Officers of the 11th were not overly worried about the first two. They had encountered the duplicitous Vichy French and found them, for the most part, relatively quick to surrender. Basically, it was the same with the Italians. The Italian troops seemed just glad to have it all over with and they knew that they would probably have a relatively brief stint as POWs before being sent back home to loved ones. The Germans were entirely a different matter. The average German soldier was motivated, well-armed, and under the command of battle-hardened officers. The British knew that the Germans would fight for every inch of the territory that they had previously invaded and occupied.



Postcard of downtown Blida showing the cosmopolitan French influence.

Blida is an ancient city and was established by the Moors and because of a relatively abundant water supply, agriculture thrived. The name Blida is a diminutive of the Arabic word for city and a wall was built around the main city and accessed by six gates. Since Algeria was a colonial acquisition of the French, it fell under the realm of French politics and during the late 1930s there were constant angry protests about

French brutality towards Algerians and about the poor state of the economy. Several anti-French organizations were created and this led to many Algerians joining the Nazis after the start of WWII. The country was ruled by the pro-Nazi Vichy regime prior to the Battle of France and, to add to the confusion, the communist party was very strong in the region and the



Damaged Hawker Hurricanes are surveyed at Blida prior to a decision being made on whether they will be rebuilt or reduced to parts.