The RAF’s early attempts to provide air support suffered from a lack of a fully developed air support doctrine, and insufficient practical experience in conducting such operations. Initial efforts were weak and inefficient, but against a largely unmotorized and qualitatively inferior Italian army in the desert, they were surprisingly successful, and out of proportion to the effort involved. The constant bombing, both day and night, even of a small number of British aircraft, had a telling effect on the morale of the Italian army, and hastened its collapse. This success was cut short by the entry of the German Afrika Korps into the theatre, which forced Britain to fight a rapid mobile war for which it was unsuited. Its entire approach to air support had to be re-thought, including the introduction of more efficient and rapid procedures for dealing with incoming intelligence so to enable it to direct attacking aircraft. However, these changes mattered little until the British army learned to fight effectively, and to integrate air support into its battle plans. Developing such a system was time consuming, costly, and had to be accomplished at a time of great stress.

These problems stemmed from a loss of an air support doctrine between the wars, but the practical experience of Air Control operations also proved important to its redevelopment. The RAF was able to use a tested template to improve air support, and, largely by coincidence, senior air and army commanders in the theatre during 1940–1942 supported that idea because of personal experiences in imperial policing. None of these conditions held true in Britain, where developments lagged. There was no shortage of difficulties in Egypt, which were not overcome until mid-1942, but then the RAF’s power to conduct air support operations improved dramatically. However, air support is by nature closely connected with the ground campaign, and the RAF alone
could not overcome failures on the ground. This chapter will trace the changes to British C3I systems in response to lessons learned during operations in 1940–1941, the effect of these changes on the RAF’s ability to deliver air support, and the latter’s effect on the ground battle.

On 22 June 1940, with the signing by the Compiègne armistice between France and Germany, the Italian forces near Tunisia joined those facing the British on the Egyptian frontier. The British estimated the total number of enemy troops in Libya at about 80,000, with 120 tanks, with 327,000 Italian troops in Africa as a whole. The British forces in the Western Desert, roughly 31,000 men and 275 tanks, faced a numerically superior enemy, but one that was largely unmotorized, possessed inferior armour, and showed “little enterprise or power of manoeuvre.” Field Marshal Erwin Rommel described the effect of unmotorized infantry as being of “practically no value against a motorized enemy, since the enemy has the chance in almost every position, of making the action fluid by a turning movement round the south.” While this claim does not always hold true, any assessment of the success of the British advance in December 1940, and the role of air support, must note the difference in composition and quality between British and Italian forces. The British were fortunate that this was so, as operations against Italian forces were run with a confused command structure, poor communications, few and generally obsolete aircraft, and very little operational and tactical intelligence. Strategic intelligence, because of its longer life span, was better, but staffs at all levels were lacking in experience.

For years before 1939, the Government Code and Cipher School (GC&CS) at Bletchley Park, England, had broken and was reading the traffic of the Italian colonial and diplomatic services, of the secret service in Spain, as well as the high-grade ciphers used by the Italian army, navy, and air force in the Mediterranean, East Africa, and Libya. That Italian armed forces communicated entirely by radio in ciphers they could not easily change and on frequencies the British were able to monitor, eased the job. Thus, the British noted the transfer of 17,000 troops to Libya in late May 1940, and the move of an additional 122 bombers to Sicily. In the first months of the war, prior to the entry of Rommel’s Afrika Korps, the British had virtually unlimited access to its enemy’s codes and ciphers in what has been described as a “perfect (if rather miniature) example of the cryptographers’ war.”

The impact of this access to the enemy’s secret transmissions was significant. Operationally useful information often was too stale to guide air support operations, but information on the enemy’s order of battle,