

Chapter 2

Lend-Lease and Project 19

Let us say to the democracies: «We Americans are vitally concerned in your defense of freedom. We are putting forth our energies, our resources and our organizing powers to give you the strength to regain and maintain a free world. We shall send you in ever-increasing numbers, ships, planes, tanks, guns. That is our purpose and our pledge.»

Franklin D. Roosevelt
January 6, 1941

In the wake of World War I, the frustrations of the «war to end all wars» were manifest in a climate of isolationism. George Washington's admonition to avoid entangling alliances in Europe had taken on a new poignancy as a result of the war. Many Americans felt that the United States had been tricked into entering the war and that Europe's seemingly irreconcilable differences should be settled without any further U.S. interference. So, for the interbellum period, America preferred to bury her head in home soil:

Those two decades of introversion were not wholly uneventful, however. There was Scott Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age, prohibition, Sacco and Vanzetti, the jitterburg, Shirley Temple, the Great Depression and *Gone with the Wind*. But in general, the *status quo* held away, threatened only by concern over the intentions of the Third Reich.

American concern kept pace with Hitler's rise to power, but the alarm was never wholesale. American opinion was sharply divided between those advocating isolation and those in favor of at least token intervention.

The isolationists held steadfastly to the conviction that the United States was not actually threatened and that an Allied victory on the continent was an eventuality. Some of the more radical proponents of isolationism favored the Nazis, but the majority wanted little more than straightforward neutrality legislation.

The interventionists, on the other hand, looked upon the war as an Armageddon pitting democracy and authoritarianism against each other on a global scale. They argued that the U.S. had become too much a part of the world community to remain on the peripheries of any large-scale war. Besides that, they were convinced that America would eventually have to deal with the Nazis and that active support of the European Allies was a good place to start. The weight of isolationist opinion, however, favored support short of actual engagement. The basic premise of the interventionist argument was that the best defense for America lay in the armament which could be provided to the Allies.

As Hitler grew bolder and more aggressive, isolationist-interventionist differences waxed. America found herself on the horns of an unpleasant dilemma—either retreat into complete isolation and allow the European countries to fend for themselves or render all possible aid forthwith.

Roosevelt's administration was generally sympathetic to the plight of Britain and France from the outset, but national policy was slow to follow. Above all, the U.S. held doggedly to the belief that the Atlantic was an impenetrable barrier that would shield America from the Nazi menace. Shortly after England and France declared war, Roosevelt reasserted America's neutrality with a proclamation that carried with it an embargo on shipment of war matériel to all belligerents. The measure was modified within a matter of months as it proved most damaging to Britain's defense:

«From a practical point of view the British were hit hardest of all. Controlling the seas, they could prevent the Germans from access to American goods, but at the same time they themselves were denied desperately needed war matériel. American neutrality legislation, they charged, was equivalent to presenting the Germans with an Atlantic fleet.

«As in World War I, the British, in order to prevent war cargoes from reaching the enemy, introduced the navicert system requiring the search of merchant ships in American ports before they sailed for Europe. This practice, in addition to stoppage and search of American vessels on the high seas, resulted, again as in World War I, in a sharp exchange of notes between Washington and London.»

The embargo provision of the Neutrality Act was repealed November 4, 1939, and cash-and-carry export of arms and munitions was substituted.

The sudden capitulation of France caused a reappraisal of U.S. neutrality. With Britain beleaguered by the *Luftwaffe*, there was speculation that the vaunted Royal Navy would lose control of the Atlantic. Spurred by the prospect of vulnerability, Congress responded with the Selective Service Training and Service Act, multi-billion dollar war appropriations and authorization for «the greatest naval expansion in history.» Neutrality was still implicit in these preparations' however. The Selective Service Act prescribed that no conscriptees could serve outside the Western Hemisphere.

On September 30, F.D.R., in a bold executive *quid pro quo*, traded 50 American destroyers for rent-free rights to build bases in Newfoundland, Jamaica and other British Caribbean holdings. The British desperately needed the destroyers to bolster their fleet which had been crippled at Dunkirk. While Congress debated the deal and isolationists protested in front of the White House, the destroyers were delivered and the new bases hastily fortified.

After two months of heated debate, Congress acquiesced to Roosevelt's interventionist leanings and passed a lend-lease act which «empowered the

President to manufacture, sell, lend, transfer, lease, or exchange any war matériel to 'the government of any country whose defense the President deems vital for the defense of the United States.' The President was given complete discretion, even to the extent of not requiring any repayment if he did not wish it.»

«To Winston Churchill, Lend-Lease was 'an inspiring act of faith,' 'a monument of generous and far-reaching statesmanship,' and 'the most unsordid act in history.' The British prime minister had good reason for his generous praise. Lend-Lease was probably the most important single innovation of the war with the possible exception of the atomic bomb. The flow of American guns, tanks, shells, and planes to the Allies became heavy enough to turn the scales against the Axis.»

Limited American intervention into the Middle East Theater, or more specifically, into Eritrea, was begun under the aegis of this lend-lease measure. Eritrea was to become the focal point of an effort to blanket the Middle East with airfields, ordnance depots and support bases. The immediate concern, of course, was Rommel.

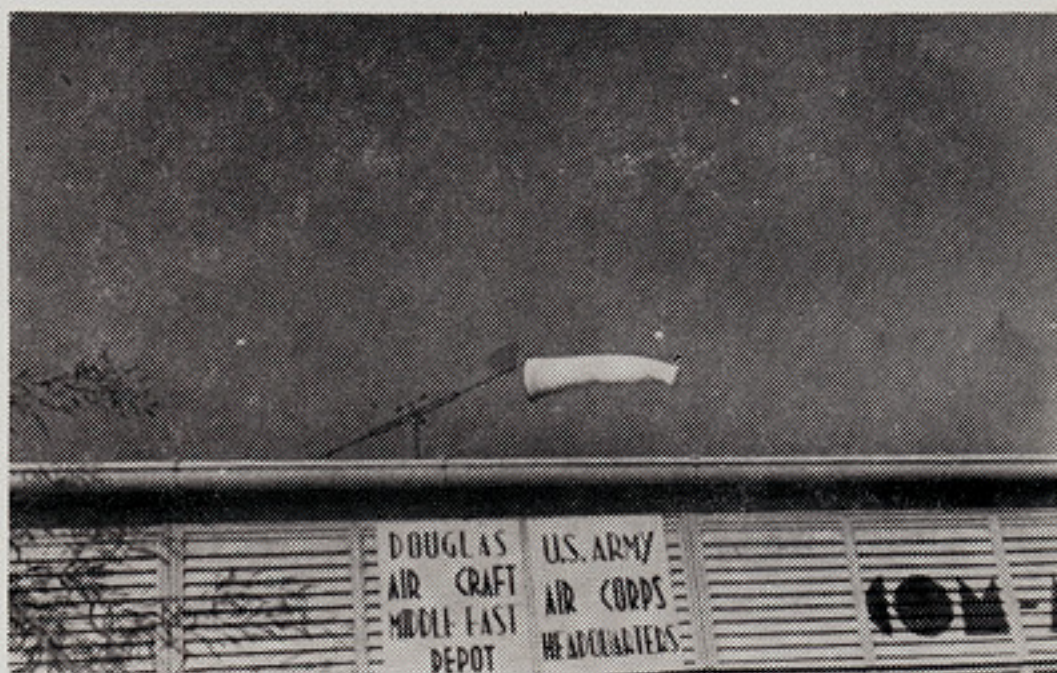
In an attempt to isolate Russia on her southern borders, the German-Italian *Afrika Korps* intended to blitz across North Africa, capture the Suez Canal, and continue overland to India and the Far East. If the plan succeeded, the Allies stood to lose the last viable supply routes to China and Russia, as well as the valuable oil fields of Iraq and Iran. In short, if the British resistance buckled and the Middle East were lost, an Axis victory was virtually assured.

The Royal Air Force (RAF) support base at Gura, the naval base at Massawa and various other projects in Asmara, Ghinda and Dongollo were established under lend-lease and were to exist only to support the British forces fighting in Egypt and Libya.

At a secret meeting held at the War Department November 19, 1941, it was decided that the United States would establish an air base at Gura, Eritrea to support the Royal Air Force in the on-going battle with Rommel's *Afrika Korps* in Libya. Being outmanned and outgunned, the RAF was taking heavy casualties while Rommel pushed ever closer to Egypt. Five days after the inception of the Gura project, Rommel's armor plunged into Egypt and it was only the persistence of the RAF which forced a retreat. But the price of temporary victory was paid in damaged aircraft. A repair depot was urgently needed to keep the RAF flying. The location in Eritrea was sufficiently removed from the combat zone to be safe from ground attack, yet close enough that damaged aircraft could be shipped down the Red Sea, repaired and returned to the fighting with minimal

An Italian building became Project 19 headquarters in 1942.

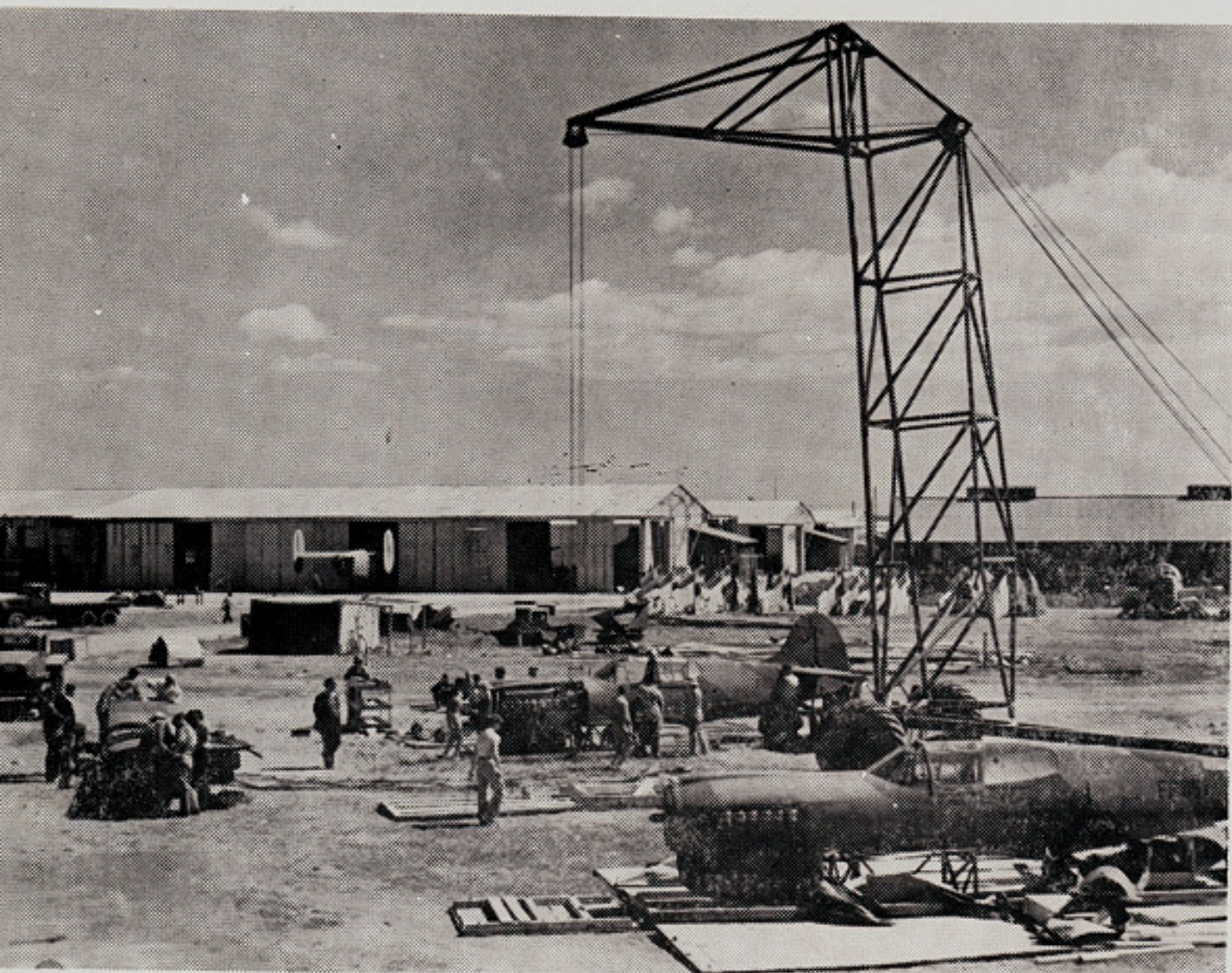
Photo: Robert Hicks



delay. Since the United States was still nominally neutral, the base was to be staffed by civilians and managed by Douglas Aircraft Corporation. Its highly-classified designation was Project 19.

Douglas began immediately to recruit aircraft engineers from commercial firms all over the country. Prospective employees were enticed with promises of well-equipped shops, high salaries, recreational facilities (golf course, tennis courts and swimming pool) and a contract that provided that no one would be employed in active combat zones.

The 120 engineers recruited to staff the Gura base were assembled in New York in December, 1941. Each of them had been thoroughly screened by the F.B.I., yet the project was so highly classified that very few knew the group's destination. Douglas also marshalled an impressive house-keeping staff: 20 American doctors, including neuro-surgeons and a psychiatrist, 24 nurses, two chaplains, three dentists, two lens grinders, seven chefs, 20 cooks and bakers, eight barbers, two shoemakers, five dry cleaners, three tailors, ten laundrymen and a bevy of welfare personnel which included athletic directors. There is little doubt as to the ebullience of those engineers upon learning the extent to which Douglas had gone to create what one wartime journalist called «an African Shangri La.»



Douglas employees begin uncrating bullet-riddled RAF aircraft which had been shipped down the Red Sea from Alexandria. Around-the-clock operations expedited the necessary repairs and the planes were returned to combat in North Africa.

Photo: McDonnell Douglas Corporation

Due to submarine activity and related perils, the embarkation was delayed for a time, but Project 19 finally got underway in a 20-ship convoy. Although no Douglas employees were lost, two of the ships were torpedoed and sunk off the Cuban coast, and at least eight men were plucked from floating rafts. At a refueling stop in Cape Town, those that didn't already know learned the details of the project from Lord Haw Haw, who ranked with Axis Sally in the vanguard of German radio propagandists. His broadcast identified them with unsettling accuracy, elaborated on the folly of the Eritrean venture and assured them that their remaining vessels would be torpedoed at the first opportunity. In the end, his predictions were only partially true, yet fully half of the specialized equipment was lost to U-boats enroute to Massawa.

Gura proved to be a great disappointment. In place of the swimming pool and air-conditioned billets they expected, the new arrivals found only the remnants of an Italian base, which had been decimated by RAF bombers, and crate upon crate of RAF P-40's riddled with bullet holes and spattered with dried blood. Mr. Harold W. Jensen arrived in Gura with the first Douglas contingent. The following is his own description of the Gura base:

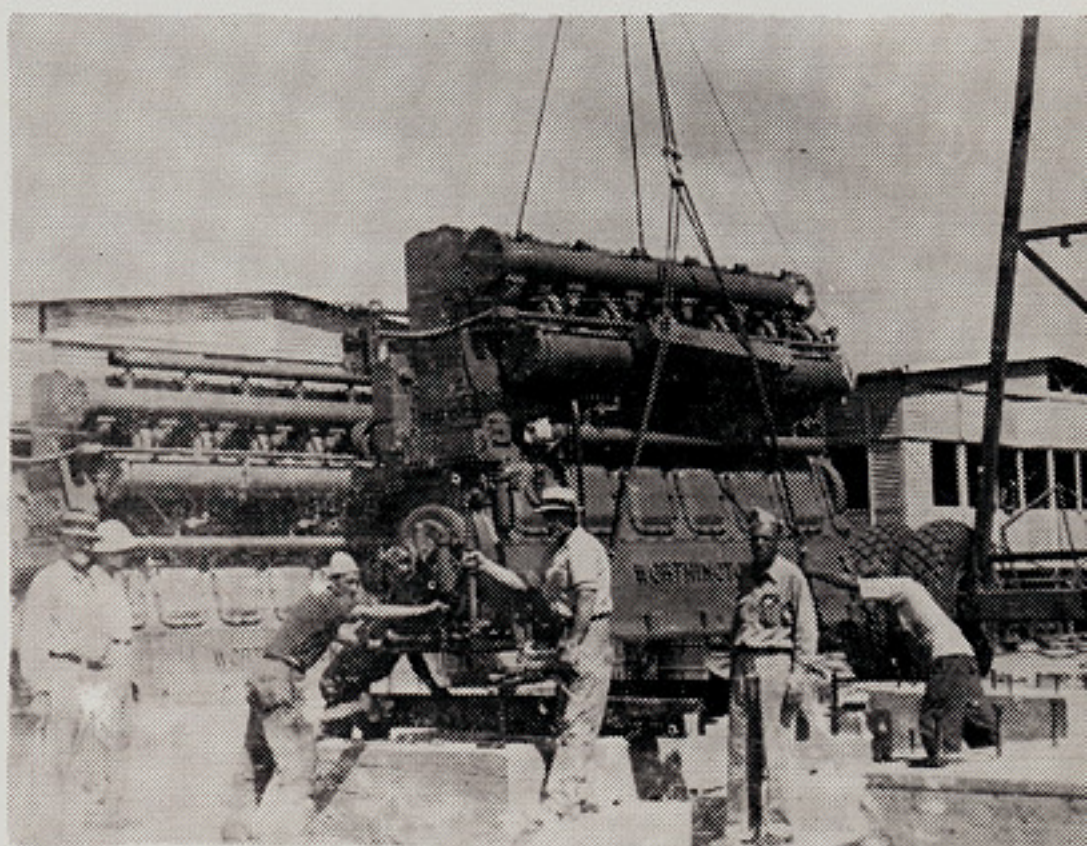
«Arriving there late one afternoon, we found the base in rather bad shape; by that I mean not fully cleaned up after the fighting to take possession of the area. Even the water wells were contaminated with bodies. It was several days before one could relish eating. At night the hyenas roamed the camp laughing and screaming as they tried to break into the cook house. It required a week or so to polish them off, along with the baboons.

«One interesting episode probably not known was the method employed to remove the countless mines, touch-down type, planted under the airfield surface. They were rigged to explode under heavy plane and truck tires and would not detonate when stepped upon by personnel. Removal was started by a team of South African sappers who employed a lightweight road grader with front wheels light enough to pass over the mines without detonating them. The blade was set in full cocked position and driving slowly, it scraped off about three or four inches of the surface, just enough to flip over the mines. Several Italian prisoners walked alongside the grader snatching the mines before the heavy rear wheels reached them. The work went on for about a month with the sappers drawing lots each day to see who would drive.»

Skilled aircraft engineers became perforce carpenters and bomb-crater-fillers. Shovels, hammers and screwdrivers were fashioned out of scrap metal to begin the process of reclaiming the devastated base. Ad-

Since most of the heavy machinery was sunk in the Atlantic, work in Gura got underway with salvaged Italian equipment.

Photo: Harold Jensen



vance teams were dispatched to Tobruk and Bengasi to begin repairs in the war zone until the time that the Gura base would be fully operational. Although they carried no weapons and wore no uniforms, eight men of Project 19 were killed performing their duties.

Gradually, the requisite equipment arrived and around-the-clock operations began. Apart from servicing damaged aircraft, they developed new techniques to bolster the RAF effort against the Axis. They engineered a way of ferrying damaged P-40's by slinging the wings under the bellies of C-47's. Their ingenuity, however, was not entirely limited to the war. Technicians in the parachute rigging shop devised a supremely effective mousetrap to stem the tide of rodents gnawing on their silk.

Along with the equipment, the promised athletic gear begin to trickle in (most of which had been sunk in the Atlantic along with Gura's library books), and the zeal which characterized the war effort was channeled into recreation. Among the first undertakings was a nine-hole golf course with the following ground rules:

1. Balls may be lifted from bomb craters and trenches without penalty.
2. Do not touch bombs or craters, notify authorities.
3. In case of air raid the trenches are located in back of 5th and 7th greens.
4. Out of bounds to right of 1st, 5th and 9th holes.
5. If baboon steals ball drop another ball no nearer hole-no penalty.
6. If ball hits an animal play ball as it lies.



New arrivals in Gura found a bombed-out base in place of the well-appointed facilities they expected. In addition to salvage of sabotaged machine shops and repair of British planes, they constructed billets, hangers and a chapel. The chapel graveyard was used by Kagnew Station until 1945 when the bodies were exhumed and transferred to Egypt.

Photo: Harold Jensen

Life at Gura was hardly unbearable. The men of Project 19 ate square meals in four mess halls and enjoyed ice cream regularly. In fact, the Gura Ice Cream Bar earned an instant reputation throughout the Middle East Theater. They published a daily newspaper, had their own first-run movie theater and attended church in a chapel they constructed. There was some rationing, however. Special ration cards entitled the bearer to two ice cream sodas a day and two quarts of beer per week.

By November 4, 1942, Rommel was retreating from El Alamein, where the Royal Air Force had figured prominently in his defeat. No tanker with fuel for Rommel's armor had succeeded in reaching Africa for six weeks. Rommel's departure from Africa in March, 1943 presaged the end of Project 19. The job was over.

For a time, there were plans to re-locate the men and equipment of the Gura base to North Africa, but nothing materialized. Late in 1943, a clutch of shutter hangers — the last of the 3,000 men that had staffed Project 19 at the peak of operations — boarded the last outgoing C-47, leaving Gura as deserted as they had found it 23 months before.



An overview of the Gura base: The buildings were dismantled in 1944 leaving only the foundations and runways as concrete blemishes on the Gura landscape.

Photo: Harold Jensen