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OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM AUGUST, 1939 TO
NOVEMBER, 1940.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 10th December, 1940, by GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, K.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief, in the Middle East.

1. This despatch covers the period from the formation of the Middle East Command in August, 1939, to the middle of November, 1940, when the war with Italy had lasted approximately 5 months.

2. The Middle East Command, with a staff of five officers, was formed at the beginning of August, 1939, as a planning staff for the Middle East. Its original Charter is given as Appendix A. General Headquarters Middle East now comprises over 225 graded staff officers, exclusive of attached officers and non-graded officers.

September, 1939, to April, 1940.

3. On the outbreak of war with Germany on 3rd September, 1939, the Middle East Command assumed operational control over the troops in Egypt, Palestine, Sudan and Cyprus. It was responsible for military plans in British Somaliland, but did not assume full operational control of this theatre till 13th January, 1940. The garrison of these countries at the outbreak of war consisted of the following:—

A. Egypt.

- (i) 7th Armoured Division—
Two Armoured Brigades (each of two regts. only).
One Armoured Car Regiment.
One Motor Battalion.
- (ii) 4th Indian Division—
One Regiment of Artillery.
One Infantry Brigade.
- (iii) R.A. Group—
7th Medium Regiment.
3rd Regiment R.H.A. (A.T.).
4th Regiment R.H.A.
31st Field Regiment R.A.
- (iv) Eight British Infantry Battalions.

B. Palestine.

- (i) 8th Division—
Two Brigades—each of three British Battalions.
No artillery.
- (ii) Two British Cavalry Regiments.
- (iii) Four additional British Battalions (less one Company of one Battalion in Cyprus).

C. Sudan.

- (i) Three British Battalions.
- (ii) Sudan Defence Force consisting of 20 Companies in all, of which the greater part were employed on internal security over the vast area of the Sudan.

D. Cyprus.

One Company British Battalion.

E. British Somaliland.

H.Q. and three Companies of Camel Corps.

The fighting forces in the Middle East thus included no complete formation of any kind. There were in all twenty-one battalions of infantry, but only 64 field guns. There were only 48 A/T guns and 8 A.A. guns.

4. The Egyptian Army comprised:

- One Light Tank Regiment,
- One Light Car Regiment,
- One Horsed Cavalry Regiment,
- One 2-pdr. Anti-Tank Battery,
- Two Fortress Anti-Tank Batteries,
- Two Anti-Aircraft Regiments,
- One Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment,
- Two Searchlight Regiments,
- Four Heavy Coast Defence Batteries,
- Nine Regular Battalions,
- Nine Reserve Battalions,
- Two Machine Gun Battalions,
- Eight Light Car Squadrons (Frontier Force),

and was in many respects much better equipped than most of the British forces. But Egypt did not declare war on Germany and

the amount of support to be counted on from the Egyptian Army was problematical.

5. Since Italy did not enter the war with her ally Germany, the Middle East was not immediately engaged in operations. During the first months of the war I was concerned largely with establishing relations with the neighbouring French Commanders in Syria, in North Africa and in French Somaliland, and later with the military authorities in Turkey after that country signed the Treaty of Alliance on 19th October, 1939. I also visited Aden, Iraq, the Sudan and British Somaliland.

The winter of 1939/1940 was mainly occupied with three-cornered discussions between the French in Syria, the Turks and ourselves on the means of implementing the military clauses of the Treaty with Turkey. Conferences took place at Ankara in October, 1939, in Cairo in February, 1940, at Aleppo in March, and at Beirut and Haifa in May. A plan was drawn up for assistance to the Turks in Thrace if attacked by Germany. This plan was, however, conditional on Italy remaining neutral.

6. In December I paid a short visit to England to discuss the problems of the Middle East with the C.I.G.S. General Weygand from Syria was in Paris at the same time and an inter-allied conference on Middle East problems was held in Paris.

7. A conference was also held in March with the Chief of the General Staff India and other representatives on a plan for the landing of a force at Basra in case of necessity.

8. Preparations against the eventuality of Italy's joining in the war were impeded by the desire of His Majesty's Government to do nothing which might impair the existing relations with that country. I was not even permitted to set up a proper Intelligence service in Italian territory, or to get in touch with patriot chiefs in Abyssinia.

9. During this time the responsibilities of the Middle East Command were growing rapidly. It soon became obvious that operational control could not be exercised without at least some control over administration, and the Command gradually began to assume a considerable measure of administrative responsibility. Complete administrative responsibility was assumed in June, 1940. The Command also had to watch closely the political situation in Egypt, Palestine, Iraq and the neighbouring countries, and the work of the Middle East Intelligence Centre was considerably enlarged. It was also necessary to form a number of Training Establishments.

10. The only reinforcements received in the Middle East between September, 1939, and March, 1940, were:

5th Indian Infantry Brigade, which arrived in Egypt on 4th October, 1939;

2nd Battalion Durham Light Infantry, which arrived in Egypt from China on 31st January, 1940;

1st Cavalry Division (Horsed), which completed arrival in Palestine on 24th March, 1940. It was incomplete in training and equipment.

16th Australian Infantry Brigade and a portion of divisional troops of 6th Australian Division, who arrived in Palestine in the middle of February.

4th New Zealand Infantry Brigade with some divisional troops of the New Zealand Division arrived in Egypt at the same time.

These Dominion contingents were magnificent material, but were only partially trained and equipped.

The Secretary of State for War, Mr. Anthony Eden, paid a special visit to Egypt to greet the arrival of these contingents.

11. On 3rd February, 1940, the East African Command, which had previously been directly under the War Office, was placed under Middle East for operational control, though administration remained under the War Office.

In March I visited the East African Command and then went on to South Africa and Southern Rhodesia for discussions with the Governments and Military Authorities of those countries. The Union Government decided to send a Brigade and an Air Force contingent to Kenya. These actually reached Kenya during June. Their quality was extremely high, and they are proving themselves excellent troops.

12. At the end of April a valuable reinforcement of 24 officers and 666 men had been received from Southern Rhodesia. These were posted to various arms and units in which they formed, as far as possible, separate sub-units. The quality of the personnel was high and a considerable number have since received commissions. Southern Rhodesia had already, in September, 1939, sent a number of officers and N.C.Os. to reinforce the Camel Corps in British Somaliland. These were of great value.

13. Other British Colonies are also represented in the Middle East. Malta has supplied an efficient A.A. battery which forms part of the defences of Alexandria, and many Maltese are serving in the R.A.S.C. and technical units.

Cyprus has made a very considerable military effort. A Cyprus Regiment has been formed which includes an infantry battalion, Pioneer companies and Pack Transport companies. Some of these, which served with distinction in France, have now returned to the Middle East. A number of Cypriots have also enlisted as drivers in the R.A.S.C. and are doing good service.

Mauritius has sent a valuable draft of 100 tradesmen for the R.A.O.C.

The British Mandated Territory of Palestine has also contributed a large number of men, both Arabs and Jews, for service with the British forces, either as combatant companies or in various Services. A Palestinian Pioneer Company served in France, where its work earned high praise, and has now returned to the Middle East.

May to June, 1940

14. Meanwhile our relations with Italy were deteriorating, and during May, as a result of the success of the German attack on France, it became obvious that Italy was likely to enter the war. On 10th June Italy declared war.

The military situation at the time of the entry of Italy into the war was as follows: There were estimated to be over 215,000 Italian troops in Libya and over 200,000 in Italian East Africa. Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland, which had frontiers with these countries, became at once liable to attack. Their garrisons at the time of Italy's entry into the war were as follows:—

Egypt.

(a) 7th Armoured Division—comprising:

4th Armoured Brigade	} each of two regiments, only partly equipped.
7th Armoured Brigade	

- Support Group (two Battalions).
3rd R.H.A. (Anti-tank regiment), and
4th R.H.A.
- (b) 4th Indian Division—comprising:
Two Regiments of Artillery.
Two mixed Infantry Brigades (5th and
11th).
- (c) Part of New Zealand Division—com-
prising:
One Cavalry Regiment (less one
squadron).
One Field Regiment New Zealand Artil-
lery.
Three Infantry Battalions.
One Machine Gun Battalion (incomplete
in training and equipment).
- (d) Fourteen British Infantry Battalions.
7th Medium Regiment R.A.
31st Field Regiment R.A.
Total about 36,000.
- Sudan (with 1,000 miles of frontier with
Italian East Africa).
Three British Battalions and
Sudan Defence Force.
Total about 9,000.
- Kenya (with over 700 miles of frontier with
Italian East Africa).
Two East African Brigades.
Two Light Batteries.
Total about 8,500.
- (Two Brigades from West Africa had been
ordered to Kenya and arrived during July.)
British Somaliland.
H.Q. and five Companies Somaliland
Camel Corps.
One King's African Rifles Battalion.
Total about 1,475.
- Palestine, Aden Protectorate and Cyprus
were also liable to attack. Their garrisons
were:
- Palestine.
1st Cavalry Division (incomplete in train-
ing and equipment).
Two British Cavalry Regiments.
One Brigade of three British Infantry Bat-
talions.
Two British Battalions.
6th Australian Division—comprising:
Two Brigades.
Two Artillery Regiments.
Divisional Recce Unit (incomplete in
training and equipment).
Total about 27,500.
- Aden.
Two Indian Battalions.
Total about 2,500.
- Cyprus.
One British Battalion.
Total about 800.
15. Very little equipment had been sent to
the Middle East and no single unit or formation
was fully equipped. There was a dangerous
lack of A.A. guns, A.Tk. guns and other
artillery.
16. The enemy also had a very considerable
numerical advantage in the air. This was
countered by the superior technical qualities of
our machines and by the higher training and
morale of the pilots of the R.A.F. and
S.A.A.F., who quickly established an ascend-
ancy over the Italians which they have main-
tained ever since.
17. The shortest route by which the Middle
East could be reinforced, through the Mediter-
ranean, now became too precarious; over 7,000
badly needed reinforcements which were ready

for despatch in May, and of whom some were
actually waiting at Marseilles, were held up and
did not reach the Middle East till the end of
August. It was even uncertain whether the
long sea route via the Cape might not also
be rendered unsafe by the action of the enemy
air forces and naval forces in Italian East Africa
operating in the narrow waters of the Red Sea.
Alternative routes via Basra, Baghdad, Haifa
and via Mombasa and the Nile Valley were
reconnoitred. Up to date, however, convoys
have used the Red Sea route without loss,
in spite of enemy attacks.

18. The position on the Western Frontier of
Egypt was that our foremost defended positions
were at Mersa Matruh, over 200 miles west of
Alexandria and about 120 miles from the
Egyptian frontier with Libya. There was a
railway and road as far as Matruh and a good
metalled road from Matruh to Sidi Barrani,
about 50 miles from the frontier. Between
Sidi Barrani and the frontier there was no
good road. The small harbour of Sollum on
the frontier offered no facilities for the supply
of a force and had no water supply. It was
therefore impossible to maintain any large num-
ber of troops on the frontier, even had they
been available, and our policy had always
been to allow the enemy to advance on our
defences at Matruh before meeting him in any
force.

It was decided, however, to place a small
covering force on the frontier; and I ordered
that this force should, as soon as possible after
the outbreak of war, attack the Italian frontier
posts.

19. In the Sudan it was obviously impos-
sible, with the very small force available, to
cover the long and vulnerable frontier, but I
directed that small mobile forces should occupy
the principal places on the frontier until attacked
by superior forces. Although these small forces
could obviously not resist any attack which the
greatly superior Italian forces could make, I
considered it desirable that they should fight
a delaying action against the enemy rather than
abandon the frontier posts without any fighting
at all, as had been the previous policy.

The small mobile forces of the Sudan Defence
Force made several most successful raids on the
Italian frontier posts in the earlier days of the
war, and when finally attacked at Kassala on
4th July and at Gallabat on 6th July by greatly
superior Italian forces fought successful delay-
ing actions and inflicted heavy loss on the
enemy, who did not follow up his success in
spite of the great disparity in numbers.

20. In Kenya a similar policy of holding the
frontier posts for as long as possible was fol-
lowed. The principal engagement took place
at Moyale, where a company of the King's
African Rifles held the small fort on the British
side of the frontier for several weeks against
an Italian force which amounted to about a
brigade. It was not until a second Italian
brigade was brought up that it was decided to
withdraw the Company, which was successfully
done on 15th July, although the enemy had by
this time practically surrounded the post.

21. Enemy propaganda exaggerated these
small successes, obtained by sheer force of num-
bers, so loudly that they succeeded in causing
them to be accepted in some quarters as British
defeats.

22. Such preparations as possible had been
made with a view to assisting the patriot leaders

in Abyssinia on the outbreak of war with Italy. For the reasons stated in paragraph 8 above, our preparations had been considerably hampered, but a number of arms had been collected and a Mission had been formed to get in touch with the patriots as soon as possible. The Emperor, His Majesty Haile Selassie, arrived in the Sudan, with the object of providing a focus for the rising. Arrangements were made for him to be accommodated at Khartoum until it should be possible for him to enter Abyssinia.

23. Meanwhile, on 17th June, the French Government had asked for armistice terms, which they accepted on 22nd June. It was at first hoped that the French Colonies and Oversea territories would continue the struggle; but General Nogues in North Africa, after a little hesitation, decided to obey the orders to capitulate, and his example was followed shortly afterwards by General Mittelhauser in Syria, who only a few days earlier had declared to me at Beirut his unalterable determination to continue the struggle. General Legentilhomme at Jibuti held out for nearly a month longer.

The collapse of the French in North Africa meant that the Italians could employ the whole weight of their large ground and air forces in Libya against the Western frontier of Egypt. The defection of Syria meant that Palestine no longer had a secure and friendly northern flank and that the French force of three divisions which had constituted the general reserve of the Middle East for assistance to Turkey or Greece, or for the defence of Egypt if required, could no longer be counted on.

A certain number of officers and men from Syria, including the greater part of a Colonial battalion which had, at the request of the French, been stationed at Cyprus, joined the British forces and were formed into a mobile battalion which is now engaged on the Western Frontier of Egypt.

A Polish force of some 4,000 men, which had been formed and was under training by the French in Syria, came to Palestine and joined the British Forces.

A note on the foreign contingents which have joined the Forces in the Middle East is given in Appendix B.

24. Thus before the end of July it became obvious that unless reinforcements in men and material were sent to the Middle East forthwith, there was grave danger of our being unable to withstand the enemy's attacks. I received orders to visit England to discuss the situation with the military authorities and the War Cabinet. As a result of the discussions reinforcements were despatched to the Middle East. The greater part of the forces available who were sufficiently equipped and trained were moved to the Western Desert. This included a New Zealand Brigade Group and later an Australian Brigade Group.

Italian Attack on Somaliland

25. Meanwhile in French Somaliland General Legentilhomme had found himself unable, in spite of his gallant efforts, to induce the Colony to continue to fight. The Italians were thus enabled to concentrate the whole weight of their very numerous forces in the East of Italian East Africa against British Somaliland, which they invaded early in August. The operations, which resulted in the temporary loss of British Somaliland, have already been described in a despatch dated 12th September, 1940.

Operations on Western Frontier of Egypt. June-November, 1940.

26. The force sent to the Western frontier of Egypt was the 7th Armoured Division less one armoured brigade. Actually the troops to proceed to the frontier were the 7th Hussars, a light tank regiment of the 4th Armoured Brigade; the 11th Hussars, armoured car regiment; the 1st King's Royal Rifle Corps and 2nd Rifle Brigade, motor battalions; and two regiments of Royal Horse Artillery, one of which was an anti-tank regiment with 37 mm. Bofors guns for which only a limited supply of ammunition was available. The 6th Royal Tank Regiment, the second regiment of the 4th Armoured Brigade, was kept in divisional reserve. The 4th Armoured Brigade had no third regiment, and all its units were much below establishment.

27. Just east of the Egyptian frontier an escarpment several hundred feet high runs from Sollum south-eastwards for about 30 miles, and is passable to mechanised vehicles only at a few places. At Sollum itself the road up the escarpment is steep with a number of hairpin bends. South and west of the escarpment the ground is generally easily passable by all types of mechanised vehicles. Between the escarpment and the sea the going is more difficult and movement is generally confined to certain tracks.

Our force on the frontier was operating at a distance of 120 miles from the railhead at Matruh which made the administrative problem an extremely difficult one and limited the number of troops that could be employed.

28. On the night of 11/12th June the 11th Hussars crossed the frontier and captured a detachment of two Italian officers and 50 other ranks. On 14th June the enemy's two frontier forts at Capuzzo and Maddalena were attacked and captured by the 7th Hussars, 11th Hussars and a company of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, about 220 prisoners being captured.

29. On 16th June a most successful action was fought by the 7th Hussars and 11th Hussars supported by a troop of "J" Battery R.H.A. nine miles north of Sidi Omar. Twelve enemy tanks were destroyed, and a considerable number of the enemy killed and about 160 prisoners taken. Three guns and a number of lorries were also captured or destroyed. On the same day a troop of the 11th Hussars intercepted a convoy on the Tobruk-Bardia road, destroyed 30 lorries and captured a number of prisoners, including a general officer.

Several other successful patrol actions were fought during the next few weeks. An operation to capture the Jerabub Oasis was planned for the beginning of July, but abandoned owing to great heat. Meanwhile large enemy forces, amounting to at least two divisions, had advanced towards the frontier. An enemy brigade reoccupied the ruins of Fort Capuzzo, which had been destroyed, and advanced towards Sollum, but was repulsed. The enemy's position at Fort Capuzzo was made extremely uncomfortable for him. His force was continually shelled by our artillery, and transport bringing up supplies from Bardia was constantly attacked or shelled, with the result that the enemy undoubtedly suffered extremely heavy casualties both in men and in vehicles.

By the middle of July the enemy had two divisions, and elements of two more, on the

Egyptian frontier; but our small force continued to dominate the situation and to inflict considerable casualties.

30. During the remainder of July operations continued on the same lines. The enemy continued to suffer heavy casualties but gradually moved forward his camps and established a force of at least four divisions within easy reach of the Egyptian frontier. During this period the 8th Hussars relieved the 7th Hussars, who went back for a rest, and H.Q. of the 7th Armoured Brigade relieved H.Q. 4th Armoured Brigade. All vehicles were beginning to show considerable signs of wear, and replacement was difficult owing to the distance from railhead and the almost entire absence of spares in Egypt for the armoured fighting vehicles. For this reason about the end of July I gave instructions that track vehicles should be withdrawn from the frontier for overhaul and refit, as I was afraid that otherwise when the enemy advanced our armoured fighting vehicles would be very largely out of action. Of 306 tanks on the War Establishment 200 were normally available with units, the remainder being under repair in workshops. There was no reserve of tanks to meet war wastage.

31. After the withdrawal of the Armoured Brigade the frontier was held by a force under the command of the Support Group of the Armoured Division, consisting of the 3rd Coldstream Guards from the Matruh garrison, the 1st K.R.R.C., 2nd Rifle Brigade, 11th Hussars, one squadron 1st Royal Tank Regiment and two batteries of Royal Horse Artillery (one of anti-tank guns, one of 18-25 pdrs.). A section of the 7th Medium Regiment was also brought forward to harass the enemy. This small force was distributed over a front of some 60 miles from Sollum to Fort Maddalena. The troops continued the same policy of active patrolling, but the enemy's numbers were now very much increased, his artillery was numerous and active and the opportunities for effective action were fewer. Nevertheless this small force continued to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy with practically no loss to itself, and to hold in check a force of four or five divisions for a further six weeks. A skilful use was made of dummy tanks to deceive the enemy.

32. By 10th September it became obvious that an enemy advance across the frontier was imminent. All preparations had already been made for the withdrawal of our frontier force and the first stage of this was now put into execution. On 13th September the enemy advance began, a large force being deployed under heavy artillery preparation against the escarpment above Sollum, which had for some time past been held only by a platoon and had by now been evacuated. At the same time another enemy column advanced on the Halfaya Pass down the escarpment towards Sollum. Both these columns were engaged by our artillery, which inflicted considerable losses on them.

It had been uncertain whether the enemy would make his main advance along the coast road, or would attempt a wide movement south of the escarpment. There is some reason to believe that the latter may have been the enemy's original intention, but in the event his advance was made on a narrow front along

the coast road with two divisions in the front line and two in support, and one more and a Mobile Force (Maletti Group) in close reserve. He was supported by a numerous artillery and by about 200 light and medium tanks.

The part of our covering force which was north of the escarpment and on which this attack fell consisted of the 3rd Coldstream Guards, one battery 3rd Royal Horse Artillery and one section of the 7th Medium Regiment. It was subsequently supported by a detachment of the 1st K.R.R.C. and a company of the French battalion.* The remainder of our covering force was south of the escarpment to provide against an enemy movement from that flank. The 1st Royal Tank Regiment, which was south of the escarpment, was moved to the northern flank when the direction of the enemy advance became evident, but for various reasons arrived too late to take any part in the actions during the withdrawal.

33. For four days, from 13th September to 16th September, our small force withdrew along the coast road from Sollum to the east of Sidi Barrani. The enemy reached Sidi Barrani, which is merely a collection of a few houses and a landing ground, on 16th September and there halted.

Although the enemy had large numbers of medium and light tanks with his forward troops and the leading infantry was in M.T., his advance was slow and unenterprising. He made little attempt to use his immensely superior numbers or his mobility to outflank and overwhelm our small force. His artillery was boldly used, even in front of the leading infantry, but their fire, though reasonably accurate, was ineffective. His tanks were mainly used for the protection of the infantry columns, and only on one occasion, on 16th September, was any attempt made to use them to outflank our troops; and even on this occasion their timidity and hesitation lost them an opportunity.

34. The withdrawal of our small force was effected with admirable skill, and there is no doubt whatever that very serious losses were inflicted on the enemy, both by the artillery, which was boldly and effectively handled, and, whenever opportunity offered, by machine gun and small arms fire. Our own losses were under 50 men and a small number of vehicles.

The greatest possible credit is due to Brigadier W. H. E. Gott, M.C., commanding the Support Group, and to Lieut.-Colonel J. C. Campbell, M.C., commanding the Artillery, for the cool and efficient way in which this withdrawal was carried out, also to the troops for their endurance and tactical skill.

Since their advance to Sidi Barrani the enemy has remained practically stationary for the last two months. Small mobile columns formed from the 7th Armoured Division have continually engaged and harassed the enemy in the same manner as on the frontier and with similar success. The enemy has, in the same way as on the frontier, placed his troops in a number of defended camps with all round perimeters, from Maktala on the coast, 10 to 15 miles east of Sidi Barrani, to Sofafi on the escarpment southwest of Sidi Barrani. He is undoubtedly suffering considerable administrative difficulties and it is at present uncertain whether he will continue his advance.

* See Appendix B.

35. I wish to draw special attention to the work of the small covering force on the Western Frontier of Egypt during the period from the outbreak of war with Italy in June to the middle of September, when the Italian advance halted at Sidi Barrani. For over three months in hard and difficult climatic conditions this force not only held in check an Italian force many times its superior in numbers, but established a definite ascendancy over it, penetrating well into enemy territory, taking the offensive whenever the least opportunity offered, and inflicting very heavy losses at trifling cost to itself. The published Italian casualties in Libya for the period were approximately 3,500, while our total casualties were just over 150. Over 700 prisoners were taken, and a considerable number of guns, tanks and lorries were captured or destroyed.

Major-General M. O'Moore Creagh, M.C., Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, directed these operations with admirable skill and initiative, and was ably seconded by his brigade and regimental commanders. Of the units which took part, the 11th Hussars, the Armoured Car Regiment, was continuously in the front line, and usually behind that of the enemy, during the whole period; its tireless and daring search for information and constant harassing of the enemy showed a spirit and efficiency worthy of the best traditions of this fine regiment. The light tank regiments, first the 7th Hussars, later relieved by the 8th Hussars, showed a similar eagerness to take opportunities and skill to make the most of them, while the 1st and 6th Royal Tank Regiments backed up the light tank regiments most efficiently when required. The batteries of the R.H.A. were handled with great dash and most effectively; they unquestionably made themselves feared by the enemy and inflicted heavy losses on them. The engineer work of the Force was effectively carried out by 2nd Cheshire Field Squadron, which had been borrowed from the 1st Cavalry Division. Finally, the infantry battalions in or attached to the Support Group, the 3rd Coldstream Guards, 1st Battalion K.R.R.C. and the 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade, provided a solid backing of fire power when required, were readily mobile, and gained a complete mastery of the debateable area between themselves and the enemy by active night patrolling.

Operations in the Sudan. October-November, 1940.

36. Soon after the arrival of Indian reinforcements in the Sudan I instructed Major-General W. Platt, C.B., D.S.O., to make plans for minor offensive operations as soon as he could do so, and indicated the recapture of the frontier post of Gallabat as a suitable objective. A plan was accordingly prepared by Major-General L. M. Heath, C.B., C.I.E., D.S.O., M.C., commanding the 5th Indian Division, for an operation against the Italian troops in the Gallabat-Metemma area, to be carried out by the 10th Indian Brigade and a squadron of the 6th Royal Tank Regiment, which had been sent to the Sudan early in September when an enemy advance from the Kassala area with armoured fighting vehicles appeared possible.

37. The two frontier posts of Gallabat and Metemma, the former in the Sudan and the latter in Italian East Africa, face one another across a *khôr* (ravine) in a valley about two miles wide. Both posts are on forward slopes

and have behind them higher features. Gallabat had, as already related in para. 19, been occupied by the Italians since July. The Italian troops in the Gallabat-Metemma area consisted, at the time that the attack was planned, of five Colonial Battalions with a battery, a machine-gun battalion, an anti-tank platoon, and a number of irregulars, totalling about 5,300 men.

38. The operation was originally intended to take place on 8th November, but at the end of October information was received of a large convoy from Gondar approaching the Metemma area. Air action was taken to delay the march of this column but was only partially successful. It was therefore decided to advance the date of the attack to 6th November in the hope of forestalling the arrival of the reinforcements.

39. The operation, although it resulted in our retaking Gallabat and inflicting very heavy losses on the enemy, was not as successful as had been hoped owing to certain factors which could not be foreseen.

The first of these was the breakdown, mainly from mechanical causes, of all the tanks except one light tank during the capture of Gallabat. The chief causes of the breakdown were damage to the tracks by the rough ground or by enemy mines. The second factor was a temporary loss of command of the air due to six of our fighter aircraft being shot down in a combat with the enemy.

40. Gallabat was captured early on 6th November by the 3rd Garhwal Rifles and the squadron of the Royal Tank Regiment with few casualties, one enemy colonial battalion being practically destroyed. The further advance on Metemma had, however, to be postponed owing to the breakdown of the tanks. The enemy positions at Metemma were very heavily wired and defended by a large number of machine guns, and without tank support it was considered inadvisable to attempt their capture. The further advance was therefore postponed till the afternoon when it was hoped that some of the tanks would be repaired.

41. During the morning, however, the enemy gained control of the air and developed an extremely heavy bombing attack on our forward troops, the Garhwal Rifles who had captured Gallabat and the 1st Essex Regiment who were in process of relieving them. There was little cover and the ground was too rocky to dig shelter trenches. Both battalions suffered heavy casualties and their morale was temporarily affected. Also the workshop lorry of the Tank squadron was destroyed by a bomb and three fitters were wounded, which greatly hampered the task of repairing the tanks.

42. The Brigade Commander therefore decided that he must cancel the attack on Metemma, and that in view of the enemy's continued command of the air and the target offered by Gallabat it would be necessary to withdraw the somewhat shaken troops from that area.

A withdrawal was therefore made to the high ground west of Gallabat on the evening of 7th November.

43. Gallabat has since been reoccupied as an outpost position, the main position being established on the high ground to the west of it. The enemy fort at Metemma has been practically destroyed and rendered untenable by artillery fire and he has also withdrawn

his troops to the high ground to the east. Minor actions still continue between the main positions.

44. I should like to call special attention to the behaviour of the personnel of "B" Squadron of the 6th Royal Tank Regiment in this action. The attack on Gallabat was made with great dash and the way in which the men of the squadron stuck to their task of trying to get their tanks which were broken down into action again under extremely heavy bombing was admirable.

45. Our losses on 6th and 7th November in killed, wounded and missing were 86 British and 88 Indian, of which only about 20 were incurred in the original attack and most of the remainder were due to air bombing. The action showed again how necessary protection against air attack is for all forward troops. Owing to the general shortage of anti-aircraft guns in the Middle East, none were available for the support of the 10th Brigade, and after our fighter aircraft had been put out of action the enemy bombers were unopposed.

46. It is known that casualties of well over 600 were inflicted on the enemy. Two guns and much material were captured in Gallabat Fort.

47. During the month of October and the first half of November our mobile troops in the Kassala sector fought many successful patrol actions and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy at small cost to themselves. The largest of these small engagements was in the area north of Kassala, in which over 300 of the enemy were taken prisoner.

Occupation of Crete—November, 1940.

48. On 28th October, Italy made an unprovoked attack on Greece. To enable more effective control of the Aegean to be exercised by the Navy, it was decided to establish a naval base at Suda Bay at the north-western end of Crete. With the full approval of the Greek Government, the British forces in the Middle East assumed responsibility for the defence of Crete. The 1st battalion York and Lancaster Regiment, some A.A. artillery and a Field Company were despatched on 31st October to Suda Bay. On 17th November another battalion, 2nd The Black Watch, was sent.

Visit of Secretary of State.

49. At the end of October the Secretary of State for War, Mr. Anthony Eden, paid a visit to the Middle East, in the course of which he went to the Western Desert, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and the Sudan, and saw many of the troops. His visit was of the greatest value for the discussion of future plans and was a source of much encouragement to the troops. At Khartoum he met General Smuts who had flown up from South Africa to visit the East African front.

Summary.

50. From the above brief account of events it can be seen that the Middle East Command has passed through three stages during the period of some 15 months under review. The first period, from the outbreak of war with Germany till Italy entered the war in June, 1940, was one of comparative inactivity. Plans in the Middle East were directed mainly towards the support of Turkey against a German advance in S.E. Europe. Italy was assumed

to be neutral and if she did enter the war could be neutralised by the French forces. Little equipment of any kind was received during this period and the reinforcements sent (1st Cavalry Division and the Australian and New Zealand contingents) were not equipped for modern war and were only partially trained.

Therefore the second stage, after the entry of Italy into the war and the collapse of France, was one of considerable danger, during which the frontiers of Egypt, the Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland were threatened by vastly superior forces, and the communications between the United Kingdom and the Middle East were long and doubtful. That the Italians failed to take advantage of their opportunities was due firstly to our Air Force, who in spite of inferior numbers everywhere took and kept the initiative; and to the stout action of the small covering forces in Egypt, Sudan and East Africa; and finally to the enemy's lack of preparation or desire for hard fighting. We thus escaped these dangerous months with the loss only of British Somaliland—where our small garrison of a few battalions was driven to withdraw, after a short but gallant resistance, by an Italian force of seven brigade groups—and a few unimportant frontier posts in the Sudan and Kenya. During this period all available equipment and troops were being retained in the United Kingdom against the threat of invasion; and it was not until the second half of September that reinforcements in men and material began to reach the Middle East in any quantity.

The third stage has now begun, when the defence of our positions in the Middle East is reasonably assured and offensive operations are being planned and undertaken.

51. The Middle East Command has to keep in close touch with the political situation in the countries included in the Command, particularly in Egypt, Palestine and Iraq. The work of the Middle East Intelligence Centre, under the able direction of Colonel W. J. Cawthorn, has been of the greatest value in this respect. The situation in Egypt has often been difficult, since it is the main base of operations for the Middle East, yet the country is not at war, and has still large numbers of enemy subjects at large. Close touch with the Embassy is maintained by weekly meetings of the Ambassador and the Commander-in-Chief, while the Embassy staff, the staff of Headquarters British Troops in Egypt, and my staff are in daily consultation on matters of common interest. There has been no serious difference of opinion on any matter of importance.

Co-operation of other Services.

52. I desire to acknowledge the indebtedness of the Middle East Command to the work of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, K.C.B., D.S.O., has always afforded the Army the closest support both in planning and in actual operations.

The work of H.M. ships in the East Indies Command under Vice-Admiral R. Leatham, C.B., in bringing the convoys for the Middle East across the Indian Ocean and through the Red Sea without the loss of a ship has earned the gratitude and admiration of the large numbers from all parts of the Empire who have

thus appreciated the power and efficiency of the Royal Navy. I have already spoken of the work of the Royal Navy in the operations in Somaliland in the despatch dealing with that campaign.

53. It would be difficult to speak too highly of the work of the Royal Air Force in the Middle East and of their support of the Army to the limit of their capacity. Both the original A.O.C.-in-C., Air Chief Marshal Sir William Mitchell, K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., M.C., A.F.C., and his successor, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, K.C.B., D.S.O., have co-operated wholeheartedly in combining the operations of the Army and the Air Force to the best advantage; and the relations between the two Services, at G.H.Q. and in the various Commands, have been always close and cordial.

It has become more obvious with every phase of the war in the Middle East both that the development and reinforcement of the R.A.F. must keep pace with the growth of the ground forces, which it has not done up to date, and that co-operation between the ground and air forces in all stages of any operation need the closest study.

54. Co-operation in planning between the three Services is maintained by the Joint Planning Staff, whose work has been uniformly excellent. They have never failed to produce an agreed solution of any problem put to them.

55. I desire to express my gratitude to the Commander-in-Chief in India, General Sir Robert Cassels, G.C.B., C.S.I., D.S.O., and to the Army in India for the manner in which requests for assistance in units, officers or material have invariably been met to the limit of India's capacity. The Indian troops sent to the Middle East are well maintaining their high reputation in the camp and in the field.

56. The co-operation of the Egyptian Army in the defence of Egypt has been hampered by the lack of a definite policy by the Egyptian Government, who have never quite decided the point at which resistance to the enemy by the Egyptian Army should begin. For some time Egyptian units formed part of the garrison of Matruh, and an Egyptian A.A. unit did excellent work in defending Matruh against air attack though frequently subjected to heavy bombing.

At present part of the Egyptian Frontier Force is defending the Siwa Oasis, and an Egyptian Mobile Force, under Prince Ismail Daoud, is in readiness to support the garrison of Siwa. Egyptian A.A. and C.D. units are assisting in the defence of the Fleet Base at Alexandria; the Egyptian Army provides a force for the defence of Wadi Halfa against possible enemy raids, and guards vulnerable points in the Delta.

Appreciation of Services.

57. I should like to call particular attention to the services of Lieutenant-General Sir H. M. Wilson, K.C.B., D.S.O., G.O.C.-in-C. British Troops in Egypt. He has had a very onerous task in providing for the defence of Egypt with inadequate resources, in fitting for war the troops sent to his Command, in organising the expansion of the base in Egypt, in securing the co-operation of the Egyptian Army, and in dealing with many difficult and delicate problems in the relations between the forces in Egypt and the Egyptian Government and

people. His sound knowledge and imperturbable common sense have enabled him to deal effectively with all these problems and he has obtained the confidence and liking of the Egyptians with whom he has had to work. It is largely due to his direction that the small British force in the Western Desert has so effectively delayed and checked the Italian advance.

58. Major-General W. Platt, C.B., D.S.O., has commanded the troops in the Sudan throughout the period with marked efficiency. He kept his head during the dangerous period when the Sudan was exposed to the attack of greatly superior Italian forces and used his slender resources to the best effect to meet the danger. With the arrival of reinforcements he has initiated offensive action against the enemy whenever possible, though still inferior in numbers.

59. Lieutenant-Generals M. G. H. Barker, K.C.B., D.S.O., G. J. Giffard, C.B., D.S.O., and P. Neame, V.C., C.B., D.S.O., have in succession held the command in Palestine. I consider that all three have shown ability and tact in dealing with the military and political problems of the country.

60. Major-General D. P. Dickinson, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., did most valuable work in the early part of the war in organising our war effort in East Africa under difficult conditions.

61. I have been fortunate in my staff and desire to place on record my appreciation of their work, their willingness and their efficiency. In particular, I owe a deep debt of thanks to Major-General A. F. Smith, D.S.O., M.C., Deputy Chief of the General Staff, who has been the chief General Staff Officer of the Middle East Command since its beginning. He has shown himself an admirable staff officer in every way, and his personality and unfailing cheerfulness has made its influence felt throughout the staff and has impressed the many foreign officers with whom he has had to deal.

Major-General B. O. Hutchison, C.B.E., Deputy Quarter-Master General, joined Middle East in October, 1939, as principal administrative officer and has directed the expansion of its administrative responsibilities ever since. His capacity for hard work, organizing ability and foresight have been most marked. He is an outstanding administrative staff officer.

APPENDIX A.

Army Council Instructions to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief in the Middle East.

1. You are appointed General Officer Commanding-in-Chief in the Middle East.

2. The area over which your command extends in peace comprises:—

Egypt.
The Sudan.
Palestine and Trans-Jordan.
Cyprus.

3. In these areas you will exercise general control over all British land forces in matters of high policy in peace and will, in particular, be responsible for the review and co-ordination of war plans for reinforcements in emergency, including the distribution of available land forces and material between these areas.

4. In addition you will be responsible for the preparation of all war plans, in co-operation with the local military or air force commanders, for the employment of land forces in British Somaliland, Aden, Iraq, and the shores of the Persian Gulf.

5. In carrying out these tasks you will where appropriate consult and co-operate with the Naval Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the Naval Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station, the Commander-in-Chief in India, the Inspector General, African Colonial Forces, and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief in the Middle East.

6. You will maintain close touch with His Majesty's Ambassador in Egypt; His Majesty's Ambassador in Iraq; the Governor General in the Sudan; the High Commissioner for Palestine and Trans-Jordan; the Governors of Cyprus, Aden and British Somaliland; and the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf.

7. The policy of His Majesty's Government with regard to the Egyptian Forces is that they shall be developed into efficient modern forces capable of co-operating with the British forces in the defence of Egypt. You will maintain close touch with His Majesty's Ambassador in Egypt, the Head of the British Military Mission, and the Egyptian General Staff in all matters of high policy affecting the development and employment in war of the Egyptian Army, with due regard to the existing responsibilities of the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Egypt in such matters as local defence, co-operation between British and Egyptian troops, and training. You will delegate to the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, The British Troops in Egypt, such matters as are, in your opinion, best arranged by him direct with the appropriate Egyptian authorities and, subject to the agreement of the Egyptian Government at the time, command of the Egyptian Army in war.

The agreement of the Egyptian Government to place the Egyptian Army under the command of the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief in Egypt will be obtained by His Majesty's Ambassador through whose intermediation all requests to the Egyptian Government will be made.

8. You should bear in mind that His Majesty's Ambassador must retain in all circumstances his existing position *vis-à-vis* the Egyptian Government. This does not exclude direct communication between the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, British Troops in Egypt, and the Egyptian authorities on routine matters agreed by His Majesty's Ambassador.

The same considerations will apply as regards your relations with His Majesty's Diplomatic Representatives in the other countries included in the area over which your command will extend in war. In the case of Iraq, this will not preclude direct communication with the Inspector General of the Iraq Army on such matters as may be agreed by His Majesty's Ambassador to Iraq.

9. You will visit all areas which are included in war in your Command (vide paragraph 14 below) to study local situations and inform yourself of local problems.

10. Subject to the direction of the Chiefs of Staff, and of the War Office in respect of the land forces, you are responsible, in conjunction

with the Naval Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the Naval Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station, and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, for co-ordinating the British war plans with the war plans of Allies of His Majesty's Government in the Near and Middle East and North Africa.

This will involve at present co-ordination with the French military authorities in North Africa, Syria and French Somaliland; the Turkish General Staff; and possibly ultimately the Greek and Roumanian General Staffs.

You will arrange to exchange visits with these authorities as may be required.

11. To assist you in these tasks you will be provided with a staff for your own use. Of this Staff, the Senior General Staff Officer will also be a member of the Joint Planning Staff for the Middle East, which will include the Chief Staff Officers of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East.

The Joint Planning Staff will be responsible for the inter-service co-operation of all war plans as may be directed by the Commanders concerned, namely, the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East and yourself.

12. Your requirements as regards intelligence will be provided by the Middle East Intelligence Centre, which is being established in Cairo.

13. Your headquarters will be located at Cairo.

14. Should war break out the area of your Command will be extended to include all military forces in British Somaliland, Aden, Iraq and the shores of the Persian Gulf, with the exception of those which are normally under the control of the Royal Air Force.

15. Your tasks *in war* are to co-ordinate (in consultation with the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, for matters affecting Iraq and Aden) the action of the land forces in the areas under your command and the distribution of available resources between them. You will be guided by the policy for the conduct of operations which will be communicated to you from time to time.

You will co-ordinate the operations of the forces under your command with the operations of the various allied forces in the areas mentioned in paragraph 10.

For this purpose you will work in direct co-operation with allied military commanders concerned.

By Command of the Army Council.
H. J. Creedy.

The War Office,
24th July, 1939.

APPENDIX " B. " *Co-operation of Allies.*

On 28th June, 1940, General Mittelhauser, the Commander-in-Chief of the French Forces in the Middle East, decided to accept the German terms. In consequence a number of French sub-units and individual French soldiers immediately made their way into Palestine to join the British forces. In addition, the Polish Carpathian Brigade which had been serving with the French in Syria, and a large party of Czechs who had been awaiting onward passage to France, decided to continue the struggle. These

formed the nucleus of the various Allied Contingents in the Middle East, details of which are given below:

(a) *French.*

After a short stay in Palestine, it was decided to bring the French contingent to Moascar. There they have been reorganised into:

- (i) A motorised infantry battalion.
- (ii) A squadron of Spahis.
- (iii) A training depot.

One Company of the Infantry Battalion was put under the command of 7th Armoured Division on 8th September, 1940, and has taken its part in operations in the Western Desert. The remainder of the battalion was sent to Daba on 23rd October, 1940, for further training before joining the first Company.

The Spahis were sent to the Sudan a week later, and it is hoped that they will shortly be engaged in active operations on the Abyssinian frontier.

In Cairo there is a very active French National Committee under the presidency of Baron de Benoit. The Chief of the Cabinet Militaire is Commandant des Essars, who has very ably carried out the responsible duties of General de Gaulle's military representative in the Middle East. He has recently been appointed Chief of Staff to General Catroux, the new Delegate General of Free France in the Middle East. Commandant des Essars is in close touch with the situation in Greece (where there is a strong French Committee), in Syria and in French Equatorial Africa.

(b) *Polish.*

The Polish Brigade was originally stationed at Latrun in Palestine, but early in October it was moved to Egypt to take up a defensive position on the Western outskirts of Alexandria. A reserve Depot was left at Latrun and here new arrivals from the Balkans are equipped and trained before joining the Brigade.

The flow of recruits from the Balkans fluctuates with the political situation; according to a recent estimate by the Military Attaché at Ankara, the maximum rate we can expect at present is 100 per week. The Brigade is still over 1,000 under strength in other ranks, but has a surplus of officers. It has now been decided (at General Kopanski's suggestion) to form these surplus officers into an Officers' Legion for garrison duties in Alexandria. It has also been decided that the Brigade should ultimately be organised on a British W.E.—as and when equipment becomes available.

(c) *Czechoslovak.*

The Czechoslovak contingent is stationed at Gadera in Palestine; it consists of an Infantry

Battalion (on British W.E.), a training depot and a small contingent headquarters. At present there are some 35 surplus officers, but the contingent is nearly 600 under strength in other ranks.

The chief source of supply for Czech volunteers is S.E. Europe. Owing to German pressure and to the fact that there are no Czech legations in the Balkan countries, the Military Attaché Ankara considers that the maximum flow from the Balkans and Russia will not exceed 100 per month. There are at present over 600 potential Czech volunteers in Russia; but owing to financial difficulties few have as yet arrived.

General Gak, the Chief of the Czechoslovak Military Mission in the Middle East, arrived in August, and he and his staff are responsible for co-ordinating the recruiting of Czech volunteers from Egypt, Palestine, Iran and the Balkans.

(d) *Spanish.*

There is no separate Spanish contingent. Spanish volunteers, who are ex-members of the French Foreign Legion, are accepted for training at the Free French Depot. When a party of twenty-five has been collected, they are drafted into a Commando after formal enlistment and attestation into the British Army. There are at present some fifty Spanish volunteers serving with 50 (ME) Commando.

(e) *Belgians.*

Owing to the comparatively small size of the Belgian communities in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, and to the fact that many men were already serving with the Belgian Army prior to the French collapse, it was not possible to form a separate Belgian contingent. Individuals with special qualifications, however, have been accepted for service in the British Army—notably as officers in the British Arab Force. Recently a small party of Belgian volunteers left to join the Belgian forces in the U.K. It was decided, for the present, not to accept offers of service from Belgian units or individuals in the Congo, as they could best help the common cause by maintaining the situation in Central Africa.

(f) *Greeks.*

Negotiations are now in progress with the Greek authorities for the raising and training of units of the Greek Army in Egypt. It is proposed to form as soon as possible technical units initially for service with the British Army. In addition, it is proposed to organise a training depot with a view to the ultimate formation of a Greek Brigade Group, when more equipment is available. The Greek Government is prepared to send a liaison mission of 15 officers and 20 cadets to assist in training. Colonel Oeconnomopoulos has already arrived as Chief Liaison Officer.

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