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OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 5 JULY 1941—31 OCTOBER 1941.

The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on the 8th March 1942 by GENERAL SIR CLAUDE J. E. AUCHINCLOSS, C.B., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E., A.D.C., Commander-in-Chief the Middle East Forces.

1. On taking over command of the Middle East Forces on the 5th July 1941 I found the general position incomparably better than it had been a year earlier on the collapse of France. This improvement was entirely due to the energy of my predecessor, General Sir Archibald Wavell, and to his vigour in seeking out the enemy wherever he was to be found.

The defeat and capture of the Italian armies in East Africa had eliminated one serious threat to our bases and communications, and the winter offensive in Cyrenaica had resulted in the destruction of another large Italian Army. Although the fresh forces brought up by the enemy had succeeded in recapturing most of Cyrenaica, they were unable to proceed much further without first reducing Tobruk. Moreover our operation in June, though unsuccessful, had robbed their armoured forces of much of their offensive power. In the East, the overthrow of the rebel government had cleared the atmosphere in Iraq, while the operations in Syria, though as yet unfinished, would deny potential air and land bases in that country to the Axis.

Only in the North had recent events made our position more difficult. The enemy occupation of Greece and Crete increased the threat of aerial attacks on our bases and lines of communication, and, even more important, seriously restricted the movements of the Fleet in the Central Mediterranean. The enemy's hold on Cyrenaica greatly increased this restriction. The running of convoys with supplies and reinforcements to Malta from Egypt thus became more difficult. The German attack on Russia, however, had come at a very oppor-

tune moment for ourselves as it prevented the enemy from exploiting to the full his success in the Balkans and the Aegean.

Although there was thus no immediate threat to our base, there was every reason to believe that in time such a threat would materialise on either flank, and I found preparations to meet this well in hand.

2. General Wavell's campaigns in Libya, Eritrea, Abyssinia, Greece, Crete, Iraq and Syria had followed each other with such bewildering rapidity and had been undertaken with such inadequate forces and equipment that a considerable degree of disorganisation in the Army as a whole was inevitable. Brigades had perforce become separated from their divisions and units from their brigades, while some formations, especially those of the armoured forces, had practically ceased to exist. This entailed a comprehensive programme of re-organisation, improvization, re-equipment and training, which I found in progress on taking over.

In no sense do I wish to infer that I found an unsatisfactory situation on my arrival—far from it. Not only was I greatly impressed by the solid foundations laid by my predecessor, but I was also able to appreciate the vastness of the problems with which he had been confronted and the greatness of his achievements, in a command in which some 40 different languages are spoken by the British and Allied Forces.

3. I soon found that the work of the operations, planning and intelligence branches of the General Staff was good and thorough, and that a sound system existed for the administration of personnel, supplies, ordnance and medical arrangements.

Liaison between the Navy, Army and Air Force was excellent and it may here be of interest to give some details of interservice co-operation.

(a) On the highest level there is the Middle East War Council with the Minister of State in the chair. This body is mainly concerned with political matters affecting the Services and other problems of the Middle East.

(b) Then there is the Middle East Defence Committee which met for the first time on the 25th August. It consists of the Minister of State, who presides, and the three Commanders-in-Chief. It deals with major operations and plans.

(c) Next comes the Commanders-in-Chiefs' Committee which is also attended by senior Staff Officers and deals with all important operational and administrative questions. The above normally meet once a week.

(d) Daily liaison is maintained in General Headquarters by an Inter-Service Intelligence Staff Conference and an Inter-Service Operational Staff Conference and by individual officers of all three Services.

(e) The Inter-Service Air Defence Committee makes recommendations for the disposal of available anti-aircraft units and equipment, and has been of great value.

(f) Moreover I myself am in constant personal touch with the Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief.

It will thus be seen that a firm foundation exists to ensure that the efforts of the Navy, Army and Royal Air Force are co-ordinated.

4. I readily subscribed to my predecessor's policy of concentrating on re-organisation and training, as an essential part of the preparations for driving the enemy out of Libya and for meeting his eventual thrust in Asia. These were my chief preoccupations during the period under review. The paragraphs which follow are, therefore, chiefly concerned with local aspects of these preparations as they arose in the various areas of the Middle East.

SYRIA AND PALESTINE.

5. The Syrian Campaign was drawing to a close when I assumed command. In the north-east the 10th Indian Division, which formed part of the forces under Lieutenant-General E. P. Quinan in Iraq and which the Commander-in-Chief, India, had placed at General Wavell's disposal, had advanced along the River Euphrates as far as Deir ez Zor and along the railway from Tel Kotchek towards Kameschle. In the West the enemy were resisting stubbornly along the line of the River Damour, on the southern slopes of the Lebanon and on the southern and western slopes of the Anti-Lebanon.

In the Euphrates Province the 10th Indian Division made steady progress in the face of heavy air attacks, and by the 8th July, with the capture of Raqqa and Kameschle, they were in control of the key points of the Province. On the line Hama—Homs—Anti-Lebanon the Vichy French were thinning out, until on the 10th July Homs was threatened by the 4th Cavalry Brigade who had cut the railway to the South and now stood before the town. The crossing of the River Damour by the 17th Australian Infantry Brigade on the 7th July, and the capture of the town itself by the 21st Australian Infantry Brigade on the 9th July removed the chief obstacle to our advance on Beirut from the South. The town was also threatened from the direction of Damascus by the 16th Infantry Brigade (6th Division), which

on the 10th July attacked the enemy holding positions astride the road near Dimas.

Having lost control of the Northern Desert and the Euphrates Province, and being threatened with the imminent loss of Beirut General Dentz decided to ask for an armistice.

6. On the evening of the 11th July, I received a wireless message from General Dentz, proposing the suspension of hostilities six hours later, at midnight. General Dentz declared himself ready to engage in talks on the basis of a memorandum presented to him that morning by the United States Consul at Beirut on behalf of the British Government. But he made the reservation that he was empowered by the French Government to treat only with the British representatives to the exclusion of those of the Free French.

General Dentz's proposals were considered at once by the Middle East War Council, which also took into account the opinion of the American Consul at Beirut, that Dentz was entirely insincere and might be playing for time in the hope of a last minute rescue by the Germans. Accordingly his conditions were rejected and he was called on to send his plenipotentiaries to the British outpost on the Beirut—Haifa Road at or before 0900 hrs. on the 12th July, under threat of resuming hostilities at that hour.

The Vichy French Representatives duly appeared and were conducted to Acre, where discussions began at once. We were represented by General Sir Henry Wilson, Air Commodore L. O. Brown and Captain J. A. V. Morse, Royal Navy, the Free French by General Catroux, and the Vichy French by General de Verdillac. At 2200 hrs. on the 12th July the Convention was initialled and was finally signed by General Wilson and General de Verdillac at Acre on the 14th July 1941.

7. The Commission of Control, set up in accordance with Article 21 to supervise the execution of the terms of the Convention, assembled formally for the first time on the 16th July at Ain Sofar in the Lebanon under the presidency of Major-General J. I. Chrystall.

The question of repatriation was difficult, as our desire to clear the country of Vichy French troops and civilians at the earliest possible moment conflicted with the Free French wish to retain them as long as possible, in the hope that after a prolonged period of propaganda a larger number of recruits would be obtained. Events proved the anticipations of the Free French to be over-optimistic, for of 37,736 personnel of the Troupes Français du Levant, who were offered the choice, only 5,668 declared in favour of Free France.

In all eight convoys, three hospital ships and one "gleaner" ship sailed for France between the 7th August and the 27th September 1941. The total number of persons repatriated, both civilian and military was 37,563. It speaks well for the work of the Embarkation Board that these convoys were cleared without any unfortunate incident. After the departure of these ships, nearly all personnel of the Troupes Français du Levant had been repatriated.

The return of British Prisoners of War who had been evacuated from Syria and the Lebanon placed the Troupes Français du Levant in an unfortunate position, particularly when it was established that a number of these prisoners had been sent out of Syria after the

Convention had been initialled. The delay in obtaining the return of prisoners led to the detention in Palestine of General Dentz, and twenty-nine of his most senior officers. They were released in due course as the British prisoners were returned to Syria.

The work of the Commission of Control and its twenty sub-committees deserves the highest praise. In the space of ten weeks they accomplished the task of arranging the orderly evacuation of an army 37,000 strong, of checking and handing over all its equipment and of transferring the public services from one administration to another, in conditions which the war had rendered chaotic.

8. The capitulation of the Vichy Forces and the occupation of Syria by the British and Free French made it necessary to take a number of decisions, political and military. General de Gaulle considered that the Armistice terms did not give the Free French enough facilities for rallying the Vichy troops, and did not fully safeguard the position of Free France. After discussions between the Minister of State and General de Gaulle in Cairo in the first week of July, agreements were reached under which the civil authority in Syria and the Lebanon was to rest in the hands of the Free French provided that our military security was not jeopardised. General de Gaulle recognised the unity of command and placed the Free French Forces throughout the Middle East under the British Commander-in-Chief for operational purposes. He also recognised that in the British Military Zone the civil authority must carry out the requests of the military authority where the security of the armed forces was concerned.

Meanwhile the Free French took over the civil administration of Syria under General Catroux as Délégué Général de la France, the title of High Commissioner being dropped. Unfortunately the French were short of experienced personnel. On the civilian side out of about 1,200 Frenchmen in Syria (excluding religious orders and their dependents), about one-third rallied to the Free French, one-third were allowed to remain in Syria on sufferance without rallying, and one-third returned to France. No doubt a number of those who rallied did so as a matter of personal expediency. In any case, the lack of first-rate men with administrative ability was severely felt, and there were many complaints from the Syrians and Lebanese that former Vichy officials, who were corrupt or discredited, were being retained in their old positions. The first weeks were also marked by a good deal of friction between the British and French, particularly in connection with the work of the Disarmament Commission. Mistakes were made on both sides but obstacles were gradually overcome. The Spears Mission, working under difficult conditions, established good relations with their Free French colleagues. A British Security Mission was appointed under Brigadier A. S. Mavrogordato and a joint Anglo-French propaganda plan was agreed upon.

9. Early in September economic difficulties led to a crisis. Stocks of essential commodities were short owing to the British blockade before the fall of the Vichy régime. The wheat crop was below normal, and wheat was hoarded partly in the hopes of realising higher and

higher prices as the shortage increased, and partly from fear. In certain areas there was hardship, and minor bread riots occurred. British assistance was given in distributing supplies, and arrangements have now been made for large quantities to be available throughout the winter.

10. A certain amount of political unrest was inevitable. The necessity for safeguarding the interests of France, whose special position we had recognised, on the one hand, and the need for setting up a friendly and stable government on the other were not easy to reconcile. There was much disappointment that Great Britain had not taken over Syria and the Lebanon herself. French administration under the mandate had never succeeded in reconciling the Nationalist opposition, or in attracting popular support. The Free French promises of independence were not believed, and there was general fear that the old régime would be perpetuated. Added to this was a desire to play off the British against the Free French.

Late in September there was trouble among the tribes of the Euphrates and of the Syrian Desert, who had always chafed under French political control. Administrative shortcomings and mistakes on the French side and failure by the local Free French authorities to keep the British military commander of the district informed of their intentions led to tribal outbreaks in the Abu Kemal district. There were several clashes between the Arabs and Free French troops resulting in casualties to both sides. Finally it became necessary for British troops to intervene, but eventually an agreement was reached to cease hostilities and to refer the dispute to arbitration by a joint Anglo-French Commission.

The military security of this vital area was discussed during October both in London with General de Gaulle and in the Middle East with General Catroux. General de Gaulle agreed in principle to the authority necessary to safeguard it being delegated in certain circumstances to the British Command, and General Catroux gave me an undertaking to proclaim *Etat de Siège* immediately, if troubles begin in any area and threaten to spread, and in the event of threatened enemy attack.

11. Pursuing the policy previously approved I had already decided that as soon as the Syrian campaign was successfully concluded, every effort should be concentrated on intensive preparations for driving the enemy out of North Africa. Consequently the North must be defended with a minimum of troops. Apart from the Free French forces, which for political reasons have been disposed in detachments all over Syria by their High Command, I have so far been unable to allot more than five divisions at any one time to the defence of Syria and Palestine since the end of the campaign.

The 1st Australian Corps and the skeleton Headquarters of the 10th Corps have already carried out detailed reconnaissances of the defensive areas. Work on the defences has begun and is being pushed on as fast as the number of troops and the amount of civilian labour available will permit.

CYPRUS.

12. The Defence Committee considered it essential to deny the enemy the use of Cyprus as a base for naval and air operations against

our sea communications in the Eastern Mediterranean and our land communications in Egypt, Palestine and Syria.

Hitherto the defence of the island had been considered only on the basis of attack from the West. But now it was necessary to provide against a possible attack by an enemy established in Turkey. In these changed circumstances, General Wavell had determined to increase the garrison of Cyprus, and I decided to adhere to his plan by reinforcing the troops there as soon as possible by one division. The Minister for Defence and the Chiefs of Staff approved this plan accepting the principle that measures to ensure the retention of Cyprus being part of the consolidation of our position in the North, must come before the offensive in the Western Desert.

Accordingly on the 12th July I decided to send to Cyprus the 50th Division (Major-General W. H. Ramsden), just arriving from England, and also the 3rd Hussars (less one Squadron) to replace the 7th Australian Divisional Cavalry Regiment as a mobile armoured reserve. The move of these troops and 90 days reserves of supplies and munitions was completed by the 29th August thanks to the efficient arrangements made by the Royal Navy.

Work on the construction of the defences began at once and is now approaching completion.

At the end of October the 5th Indian Division relieved the 50th Division in order to release a British Division for service in the Caucasus. This relief took place without incident between the 2nd and the 8th November, again owing to the efforts of the Royal Navy.

I wish to record my appreciation of the sound judgment and energy shown by Major-General Ramsden in his direction of the preparation of these defences and of the excellent work done by the 50th Division in their construction. I would also like to add my appreciation of the unfailing help and co-operation of the Governor of Cyprus, H.E. Sir William Battershill, K.C.M.G., and of the acting Governor, Captain J. V. W. Shaw, both of whom did everything in their power to assist the work.

IRAN.

13. While the work of consolidation in Syria was still in its initial stages, it was becoming increasingly evident that it would be necessary to eliminate German influence in Iran.

For some time past nationalist feeling in that country had been rising against Great Britain and Russia and by the end of 1939 there was a well organised German community of about three thousand, almost every one of whom could be relied upon to give as much of his attention to the designs of the Fatherland as to the technical work on which he was ostensibly engaged.

The expulsion of the Germans had been the subject of an exchange of views between London and Moscow, and between the War Office, Commander-in-Chief, India, and myself for some time, when on the 24th July, I received a cable from the Chiefs of Staff informing me that there was general agreement that the Germans must be expelled as soon as possible. If joint British and Russian diplomatic pressure were unavailing, both Powers were intending to take joint military action to enforce their demands.

The enterprise entailed the loan of troops from the Middle East as well as the release of the 10th Indian Division from North-eastern Syria. On

the 29th July I arrived in England and had the opportunity of discussing, among other matters, the measure of support the Middle East could afford. I was reluctant to spare more troops than absolutely necessary because of the heavy demands for garrison duties and because it would upset the re-organisation and re-equipment essential to the early resumption of the offensive in the Western Desert. But the success of the operation was of the greatest importance to the common defence of India and the Middle East.

The scale of assistance required from the Middle East grew, in the first place because it was feared that trouble might develop in Iraq and then because it was believed that the Iranians were likely to offer considerable resistance. First I despatched the 9th Armoured Brigade (late 4th Cavalry Brigade) still organised on a truck basis only. The 5th Indian Division (less the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade Group and one field regiment) followed.

Fears of serious resistance however proved groundless, and the 5th Indian Divisional Column had only reached a point about 50 miles within Iraqi territory when the Iranians gave in. The march of the column continued, however, as the Division was needed in Iraq until another arrived from India.

At dawn on the 25th August Russian troops entered Iran from the north and, occupying Tabriz, advanced along the south-western shore of the Caspian, while our troops entered from Iraq in the Ahwaz-Abadan area and in two columns from Khaniqin. The 9th Armoured Brigade formed part of the northern column which rapidly overcame opposition in the Paitak Pass and reached Shahbad on the morning of the 27th August. The Persians offered little real opposition either to the British or the Russian advance, and on the 28th August the Shah ordered all resistance to cease.

On the 8th October the 9th Armoured Brigade returned from Teheran, and on the 18th October the last elements of the 5th Indian Division also reached the Middle East.

TURKEY.

14. Turkey's reactions to German threats had always been of the greatest moment to ourselves, and now that we had a common frontier her attitude was of even greater consequence. The end of the Syrian campaign and the pacification of Iraq were causes of relief to Turkey because our forces were now in direct contact with her southern frontiers. The outbreak of the Russo-German War, however, caused her misgiving since our new ally was her traditional enemy.

It was most important that the Turks should offer the utmost resistance to a German invasion. From a purely strategical point of view the country fell naturally into our defensive system, as in it the enemy's communications would be most vulnerable to attack, and I was anxious to be able to engage the enemy before he emerged from the mountains of Anatolia into the plains of Syria and Iraq. I was therefore glad when at the end of July, the Chief of the Turkish General Staff, on behalf of the President, made a tentative approach, having as its object the renewal of staff talks on the lines of those held in the Spring. Unfortunately this step was abruptly revoked, the Turkish General Staff having reason to believe that their

move had become known to the enemy. It was, however, agreed that informal staff contacts should take place through the medium of our service attaches.

Material for these contacts was carefully compiled in Cairo in consultation with the Commander-in-Chief, India. We were prepared to make a firm offer to send British Forces to Turkey in the event of a German attack. But we stressed the importance of being allowed to build up supplies and stores in advance and to reconnoitre and improve maintenance facilities in Anatolia.

During the early part of the conversations the Turks proposed that we should concentrate in north-western Anatolia; but latterly, with the rapid German advance in South Russia and the possibility that the eventual threat might come from the north-east rather than the north-west, the Turkish military authorities were less averse than I had expected from considering Eastern Anatolia as the possible theatre of the German offensive. There was little doubt, however, that the Turkish statesmen and, to a lesser degree, the senior Turkish Generals, were impressed by the rapidity of the German advance in Russia, and uneasy at our association with the Soviet in the occupation of Iran.

Although I believe that the Turks are genuine in their desire to exclude the Germans from their country and to side with us if the situation is favourable, I cannot conceal from myself the possibility of circumstances proving too strong for them, and I am making my plans accordingly.

CO-OPERATIVE PLANNING WITH INDIA.

15. The problem of frustrating a German thrust through Anatolia or the Caucasus or both can only be solved by the closest co-operation between India and the Middle East. Before General Wavell left the Middle East for India, we discussed the matter, and it was the subject of an exchange of views between the War Office, India and the Middle East. To facilitate liaison an officer from General Headquarters, India, was posted to the Joint Planning Staff, Middle East, during September.

At a conference at Baghdad on the 26th September, attended by the Commander-in-Chief India and myself it was agreed that the Joint Planning Staff should study the problem of defending Persia, Iraq, Palestine and Syria against invasion either through Western Anatolia or the Caucasus or by both routes. A planning party visited those countries and at the beginning of November representatives of the Middle East Planning Staff went to India to discuss the Northern Front. Since then planning has gone forward on the policy agreed to after the joint review of the problem.

EAST AFRICA.

16. In East Africa operations have been very nearly at a standstill during this period. The brilliant campaigns of Lieutenant General Sir Alan Cunningham and Lieutenant General Sir William Platt during the previous six months had eliminated all but one centre of resistance, that in the Gondar area. Owing to the heavy rains, our troops could not at once attempt the task of reducing this stronghold. During the months of July, August, and September, therefore, operations were confined to harassing raids carried out by our Air Forces.

17. Owing to the complete success of earlier operations, General Wavell had been able to withdraw three divisions which had been operating in this theatre. By the beginning of July the 1st South African and the 4th Indian Divisions had been withdrawn, and the last brigade of the 5th Indian Division had received orders to move. I carried on my predecessor's policy of withdrawing every unit that it was possible to release. Finally, there remained only the 11th and 12th African Divisions to carry out all the necessary internal security duties in this vast stretch of territory, as well as to contain the Italian forces in the Gondar area until these could be finally liquidated, and also to enforce the landward blockade of French Somaliland.

18. The administration of the conquered territories presented a large number of problems, which were ably handled by Major-General Sir Philip Mitchell, Chief Political Officer, who on the 27th June had become British Representative in Ethiopia. On the first of August by formal Proclamation I delegated to him the full legislative, judicial, administrative and financial authority which I exercised in Eritrea and Somalia, and an Administrative Instruction of the Secretary of State for War entrusted to him supervisory powers over the Military Governor of British Somaliland. Although it was impossible in international law for me to divest myself of the authority which I held by right of conquest in Somaliland and Eritrea, by the Proclamation I was in fact released from all but ultimate responsibility.

On the many problems involved in organising and directing the administrations in the conquered territories it is unnecessary for me to enlarge. Let it suffice to say that Sir Philip Mitchell lost no time and spared no effort in handling these problems with the energy and discretion they demanded. The achievements of Sir Philip and his assistants were remarkable, especially as officers and police were scarce and communications difficult. Although it was far from complete when I relinquished command of the areas, much progress had been made in the task of pacification.

19. From both political and military stand-points the problem of French Somaliland was pressing and difficult. This territory, which is controlled by a Government committed to collaboration with the enemy, adjoins the Straits of Bab el Mandeb and is therefore a potential base for hostile naval operations against us in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Yet to reduce it by force might well lead to the destruction of the port of Jibuti and the railway to Addis Ababa, making the evacuation of the numerous Italian civilians interned in the Addis Ababa area difficult, if not impossible. The evacuation of these Italians, for some time past the subject of negotiations with the Italian Government, was essential. Their continued presence constituted a menace to internal security in that they might escape; a military liability, in that they must be protected from the possible vengeance of the Ethiopians; and a political stumbling-block in that their protection involved a measure of interference in Ethiopian affairs which filled the Emperor and his subjects with suspicion and resentment.

To continue the blockade was the only solution. At the beginning of July, prospects of an early capitulation seemed good, but dhow from the Yemen and French submarines from Madagascar succeeded in running the blockade; and, in spite of a considerable tightening of the blockade, the colony was still holding out at the time the East African Command took over and was seemingly no nearer capitulation.

20. It had been suggested earlier that the dividing line between Europe and Africa was not the Mediterranean but the Sahara and the Sudd, and that a second Command should be formed to include the Sudan and all territories south of it as far as and including Southern Rhodesia. Apart from economic and political considerations, it was clearly not true from a strategic point of view, so long as there remained in East Africa large enemy forces able to operate on interior lines against Kenya, Egypt and the Sudan. The suggestion was therefore rejected for the time being.

With the defeat and capture of the greater part of the Italian forces in East Africa, the threat to the Middle East was removed, and military and all other considerations made it desirable to remove the Central and East African areas from the Middle East command. The Belgian Congo as a "sphere of interest" had been transferred to the West African Command on 1st July, and the transfer of the remainder of the territories was considered by a Conference which assembled at Nairobi on the 1st August under the presidency of Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Cunningham, G.O.C. East Africa.

Representatives of Air Headquarters East Africa, Middle East, the 203rd Mission, Southern and Northern Rhodesia, West African Command and the Sudan attended. The representative of the Union of South Africa was absent, because the Conference was finally held at very short notice. The recommendations of the Conference, however, were submitted to Field Marshal Smuts for approval.

The Conference recommended that the new Command should come directly under the War Office and comprise Eritrea, Ethiopia, the Somalilands, Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia. It considered that the Commander in the southern territories of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland should advise the Southern Rhodesian Governor on defence matters, and co-ordinate plans in which the three territories and the Union of South Africa were concerned; and that in concerted operations he should command not only his own forces, but any forces Southern Rhodesia might contribute. The Conference agreed that Portuguese East Africa, the Katanga Province of the Belgian Congo, and Angola should be included in the Commander's spheres of influence in co-operation with the Union of South Africa. The recommendations of the Conference were accepted with a few modifications.

On the 15th September, 1941, all the territories with the exception of Eritrea passed to the East African Command. Eritrea passed under command on the 11th October, 1941.

21. Before the East African Command was formed I had arranged for the transfer of considerable quantities of captured arms, ammunition and other material. This arrangement was

confirmed and the equipment is being brought to the Middle East as quickly as transport facilities permit. Middle East have also retained a lien on Eritrea for the purpose of siting certain base installations and hospitals in a safe area.

SUDAN.

22. The Sudan was not included in the East African Command for political and strategic reasons. The Anglo-Egyptian condominium in the country made it desirable that the military authority should be exercised by the Commander-in-Chief in Cairo, as also did the importance of the Sudan as a base for operations in the Western Desert from the south and for possible operations in the Chad.

23. On the 4th October, 1941, Lieutenant-General Sir N. M. de la P. Beresford-Peirse assumed command in the Sudan in place of Lieutenant-General Sir William Platt, who became General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, East Africa Command.

WESTERN DESERT.

24. While the other areas under my command were the scenes of consolidation and reorganisation, the chief theatre of activity was the Western Desert. Here my policy was dictated by two main considerations. Advantage must be taken of the favourable conditions created by the Russian campaign to resume the offensive at the earliest possible moment. Meanwhile it was necessary to remain on the defensive, employing only a minimum of troops. The maximum effort could then be devoted to organising, training and equipping the forces destined for the invasion of Cyrenaica and to completing the vast administrative preparations. This will receive full treatment in a later despatch.

The situation in the Western Desert from mid-June until mid-September corresponded to that envisaged in my General Instruction of the 26th July laying down the principles of defence in areas in which the attackers might be expected to be considerably stronger in armoured force than the defenders. This was undoubtedly the case in the Western Desert, where our armoured forces were appreciably inferior to those of the enemy. Moreover three of the areas essential to this system of defence already existed, namely, Tobruk, Matruh and Bagush; and General Wavell had already given the order to prepare a fourth situated in the defile between the Qattara Depression and the sea at El Alamein.

Accordingly, on the 21st July, I issued an Instruction (Appendix "A") to Lieutenant-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse, commanding the Western Desert Forces, informing him of my decision that in the event of an enemy advance his armoured forces were to be brought to battle in the area south of Matruh, whither the Headquarters and Armoured Brigades of the 7th Armoured Division had already been withdrawn. This decision entailed the surrender of our forward landing grounds in the Sidi Barrani area, which would mean that our ability to provide fighter protection to our shipping engaged in maintaining Tobruk would be greatly impaired. As our armoured forces were relatively weak, this risk had to be accepted.

On the 30th July I issued a further Instruction (Appendix "B") to the Commanders of the Western Desert Forces and of the British

Troops in Egypt, elaborating my policy for the general defence of Egypt against an enemy advance from the West.

As the armoured units were re-equipped and became more numerous a more offensive policy was gradually adopted. Finally, immediately following an enemy reconnaissance in force on the 14th September, it was possible to move armoured troops, supported by an infantry division, well in advance of Sidi Barrani to cover the preparations for the coming offensive, and to secure the advanced landing grounds of the Royal Air Force against attack.

25. On the 14th September the enemy advanced to test our strength and dispositions above the escarpment. The force consisted of two columns. The northern column was composed of about 100 tanks, and the southern contained chiefly lorried infantry and maintenance vehicles escorted by armoured cars. Our reconnaissance elements and light columns withdrew, inflicting casualties on the enemy. By nightfall the enemy tanks had reached the Rabia area, but during the night they withdrew. By first light on the 17th September our troops had returned to their original positions.

Our columns and aircraft inflicted greater losses on the enemy than they received. Our losses were fifteen casualties, an armoured car, a bomber and six fighters destroyed and several trucks and one fighter damaged; against this the enemy suffered almost a hundred casualties and lost fourteen tanks, fifteen vehicles and twenty-two aircraft. It was fortunate that the test of our strength and intentions came at a time when our policy was about to be completely altered.

26. The enemy also undertook the reorganisation of his forces in North Africa during this period. On the 19th July General Ettore Bastico took over the Supreme Command in Libya from General Garibaldi. It is probable that the appointment of General Bastico, a reported expert on mechanised warfare, was intended as much to show that Italian interests in Libya were at least equal to German interests in Libya as to reorganise the Italian forces and revive their morale.

There is little doubt that General Bastico made progress in the work of reorganisation, although to what extent he was able to raise Italian prestige and morale remained to be seen. The much-battered Trento Division was relieved at Tobruk by the Bologna Division, and the almost extinct Sabarata Division was reorganised and employed on garrison duties. The 21st Corps Headquarters was reconstituted to control the divisions about Tobruk. But the most important measure taken by General Bastico was the organisation of a mobile corps in Cyrenaica. This corps comprises the Trento and Ariete Divisions and also the Trieste Division, which reached Tripoli by the end of August. Although this division probably lost much of its transport in sea transit, it appears to have refurnished itself from an Autocentro which arrived in Tripoli at about the same time. The Ariete Division was reorganised on a basis of three tank battalions with a total of 138 tanks.

During the same period the German forces had also undergone reorganisation. About mid-August the 5th Light (motorised) Division was converted into an armoured division and re-

numbered 224. Units of a German positional division were identified in Libya, three battalions having taken the place of lorried infantry in the line at Tobruk. There was evidence that the Germans were contemplating the despatch of such a division as early as May, and the first units began to arrive in July. The main purpose in sending this division appeared to be the release of the lorried infantry for their proper mobile role. Both the 5th and 8th Tank Regiments were reinforced from June onwards on a new establishment totalling 136 tanks. Finally, Panzergruppe Afrika was formed, consisting of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, commanded by General Rommel.

Throughout the summer the enemy devoted much attention to building defences on the frontier between Sollum and Sidi Omar. The Halfaya position was completed, and Sidi Omar was also fortified and surrounded by minefields. The enemy further attempted to link these two positions and the intervening posts with further minefields. The whole purpose of this position seemed to be to provide a strong pivot from the shelter of which the enemy could manoeuvre south and south-east of Sidi Omar or against British forces attempting to move from the frontier area towards Tobruk.

TOBRUK.

27. Our freedom from embarrassment in the frontier area for four and a half months is to be ascribed largely to the defenders of Tobruk. Behaving not as a hardly pressed garrison but as a spirited force ready at any moment to launch an attack, they contained an enemy force twice their strength. By keeping the enemy continually in a high state of tension, they held back four Italian divisions and three German battalions from the frontier area from April until November.

The exploits of the garrison, which was commanded from the first days of the siege until 22nd October by Major-General L. J. Morshead, are famous all over the world and are too numerous to be recounted in detail here. In spite of continuous strain, the spirit of the British, Imperial and Allied troops was magnificent throughout. The infantry displayed great stubbornness in defence and dash in attack, while the work of the field and anti-aircraft artillery and of the machine guns, inflicting many casualties on the enemy, was of the highest order. The exploits of the innumerable patrols carried out almost nightly by the cavalry and infantry units of the garrison deserve the highest praise. Not only did these patrols collect most valuable information and numerous prisoners, but they were in large part responsible for making it possible to hold a perimeter thirty miles long with only seven battalions and one cavalry regiment in the front line.

Major-General L. J. Morshead organised the defence with great ability and resourcefulness. He was assisted in his difficult task by his G.S.O.I., Colonel C. E. M. Lloyd, whose industry and cheerfulness were unflinching.

I also wish to commend especially the work of the anti-aircraft defences under Brigadier J. R. Slater. They formed the sole means of defence against air attack, as our air bases were too distant to allow fighter aircraft to operate over this area. They performed their duties with

such efficiency that in spite of continual raids serious damage was rarely inflicted by enemy aircraft, of which several were shot down and many damaged.

28. On the 18th July I received from Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey, commanding the Australian Imperial Forces, a letter, written at the instance of the Australian Government, urging me to consider the relief* of the whole garrison as the health of all the troops composing it showed signs of marked deterioration. He represented to me that the relief of the Australian portion of the Garrison was particularly desirable in view of the growing feeling in Australia that the time had come to fulfil the agreement made between their own and the British Government that the Australian troops should be concentrated under one command and serve as one force. He suggested that the lull in operations presented an opportunity which should not be missed. This letter was followed on the 23rd July by a telegram from the War Office repeating a message to the same effect from the Australian Government and urging me to give full and sympathetic consideration to the views of the Australian Government.

I agreed in principle to the relief of the garrison both for the sake of the troops and in order to fulfil the undertaking given to the Australian Government; but I was doubtful whether it would be practicable to relieve the whole garrison. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, however, believed that he would be able to effect the relief and maintain the fortress by sea at the same time.

29. A complete plan was drawn up by which the Polish Independent Brigade should replace the 18th Australian Infantry Brigade and the 18th Cavalry (Indian Army) during the moonless period in August and the 70th (6th) Division relieve the 9th Australian Division during the two succeeding moonless periods. The first

*In order that the conditions which necessitated this relief shall be clearly understood, comments of (i) the Commonwealth Government and (ii) General Blamey, are appended below:—

(i) (Commonwealth Government)

"The relief of Australian troops in Tobruk was supported by three successive Australian Governments. It is in agreement with General Blamey's observations which were confirmed by the Inspector General of Medical Services of the Australian Army (Major-General R. M. Downes) who on his return from a visit to the Middle East reported in 1941:

"The first A.I.F. troops transferred from Tobruk had suffered a considerable decline in their physical powers. The men did not think that they were tired but few of them would be able to march eight miles . . ."

(ii) (General Blamey)

"I concur with the statements except that I do not think the first portion of paragraph 29 accurately represents the position. It will be noted that on 18th July I had made representations on the great decline in the physical condition of the troops who had been holding Tobruk. This decline continued and two months later when the Chiefs of Staff directed the relief on 15th September the condition of the troops was such that any strong attack by the enemy might have endangered the safety of the fortress. Moreover, an offensive was contemplated and plans included operations by the defenders at a later date, which I was certain that they could not have maintained owing to their loss of strength and physical condition. I opposed General Auchinleck most strongly in his proposals to retain these troops any longer in Tobruk. It took a considerable time for them to recover their strength after their relief."

relief was carried out with complete success between the 19th and the 29th August, releasing the 18th Australian Infantry Brigade to rejoin its Division in Syria and the 18th Cavalry to join its formation, the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, in Egypt.

It was then necessary to consider whether further relief of the garrison was desirable or feasible. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief and myself were unanimous in recommending that it was undesirable to continue the programme for the following reasons. The relief effected in August had not only proved a great strain on the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, but had inevitably limited the latter's offensive action. To continue in the next two moonless periods would again interfere with other important operational tasks and impose a further heavy strain on the two Services. This would be increased by having to continue to maintain the fortress by sea during moonlight periods and thus expose our valuable shipping to unjustifiable risks. It was impossible to defer the last phase until the November moonless period, as this would have clashed with the date provisionally set for the beginning of our new offensive. Furthermore, no alternative formation being available for the purpose, the immediate employment of the 70th Division in Tobruk would prevent Indian units from Iraq being introduced into it in accordance with a policy which will be explained later in this Despatch. Finally the decline in the health of the garrison, which had been advanced as a pressing reason for effecting relief, did not appear to be so great as to warrant its continuation in the face of so many important objections. I submitted these arguments in a cable to London and stated that, subject to the Prime Minister's approval, I would reinforce the garrison at once with an infantry tank battalion instead of continuing the relief.

On the 15th September, however, I received a cable from the Chiefs of Staff informing me that, after careful consideration of the opinion of the Commanders in Chief, the Australian Government felt compelled to request the withdrawal of the 9th Australian Division and the reconcentration of the Australian Imperial Force.

Accordingly the relief of most of the 9th Australian Division by the 70th Division was completed in the next two moonless periods, between the 18th and the 28th September and the 12th and the 26th October. Only the 2/13th Infantry Battalion now remains in Tobruk.

The 4th Battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment was despatched at the same time.

The withdrawal of the Australian Division necessitated a change in command. On the 22nd October, 1941, Major General R. MacK. Scobie, commanding the 70th Division, took over command of the fortress.

30. I wish to acknowledge the services rendered in the siege of Tobruk by the Royal Navy, the Fleet Air Arm and the Royal Air Force. Not only did they enable the relief to be carried out with negligible loss to army personnel, though at great strain and some loss to themselves, but by continuing to maintain the fortress for eight months in spite of heavy risks and great difficulties they made it possible to renew the offensive which otherwise would have been considerably delayed.

The services of the following officers were particularly noteworthy:—

Royal Navy.

Acting Rear Admiral G. H. Creswell, Rear Admiral Alexandria, Captain A. L. Poland, Senior Naval Officer, Inshore Squadron; Captain F. M. Smith, Naval Officer in charge, Tobruk, Acting Commander H. R. M. Nicholl who performed the duties of Naval Officer in charge, Tobruk, during the sickness of Captain Smith, Lieutenant Commander J. W. Best, Naval Officer in charge Mersa Matruh.

Royal Air Force.

Wing Commander E. R. E. Black, commanding the Royal Air Force Detachment; Squadron Leader R. D. Williams commanding No. 145 Squadron; Acting Flight Lieutenant C. W. Morle, commanding the Air Ministry Experimental Station; and Pilot Officer W. C. Mackintosh and Pilot Officer H. M. Briscoe, Code and Ciphers Officers.

EGYPT.

31. In Egypt certain problems vitally affected the security of our base. These arose in part directly out of the war and in part out of the circumstance that Egypt herself is not a belligerent.

Apart from political difficulties, the problem of telephonic communications has been pressing. The Egyptian State Telegraphs and Telephones Departments have always given us excellent service, but the use of the civilian system manned by civilian personnel is prejudicial to security. Holding the view that, so long as the country is not at war, military considerations cannot override civilian requirements, the Departments have consistently refused to hand over any part of the system to British Control. Nor will they allow the infiltration of British Military personnel to handle our own traffic and become used to the system so as to be able to take over in an emergency; such might arise if heavy bombing attacks occurred. The difficulty became particularly acute in connection with the projected offensive in Cyrenaica; but in October I was able to arrange to take over the working of the lines in the forward area.

32. There has also been an agitation for the declaration of Cairo, as well as other Egyptian cities, as an "open city." As the bombing of Alexandria increased, so did the Cairo "open city" movement gain impetus. In mid-September the Egyptian Prime Minister was handed a Memorandum stating that it was entirely out of the question to move British troops and military depots from Cairo: an end should, therefore, be put to the agitation. The recent diminution of enemy air raids on Egyptian towns has automatically put this question into the background; but it is bound to reappear with its attendant dangers to internal security as soon as heavy scale bombing is resumed. Against that day an elaborate air raid precautions scheme has been prepared, to which His Majesty's Government have given considerable financial assistance.

33. The worst result of the air raids was that they seriously threatened shipping in the Suez Canal and in the Gulf of Suez. Incidentally they also caused a reduction in the amount of Egyptian casual labour; but this was speedily remedied by improving the

arrangements for air raid precautions and importing labour from Upper Egypt. The threat to shipping demanded that immediate and effective measures be taken, and they were the more urgent in that air raids coincided with the arrival of important convoys carrying large numbers of men and vehicles. Moreover it was essential to give adequate protection to American ships which had just begun to arrive. I therefore took every possible precaution. Several anti-aircraft batteries were moved from other areas to Suez during moonlight periods, and anti-aircraft crews were placed aboard American ships, while the Royal Navy stationed an anti-aircraft cruiser in Suez Roads. In addition it was decided to provide two defended anchorages in the Gulf of Suez, at Abu Zenima and at Ras Ghemsa, for use in the event of Port Tewfik becoming unusable.

34. The help given us by the Egyptian Army is an earnest of the friendly intentions of the Government. In addition to finding internal security guards in the Delta and on the land, they found a garrison for Siwa at a time when it was necessary for us to leave as few of our own troops as possible in the Western Desert. The services of the Egyptian Army have been particularly valuable. Providing as they have a complete and efficient observer system as well as searchlight and anti-aircraft units at Cairo, Alexandria and in the Canal area, they have relieved the strain on our resources to a very great extent.

PART II—ADMINISTRATION.

35. During this period I was chiefly concerned with the problems of administration. The comparatively peaceful conditions prevailing gave me the opportunity of carrying out the large amount of reorganisation and development rendered necessary by the increasing strength of the Middle East Forces.

GENERAL ORGANISATION.

Formation of Eighth and Ninth Armies.

36. The conclusion of the Balkan and East African Campaigns caused our forces to be concentrated in Egypt, Palestine and Syria, and narrowed the potential theatres of operations. It was therefore certain that in future the strength of the forces engaged in operations could be reckoned, not in Brigades and Divisions as heretofore but in Corps. The existing small headquarters were obviously inadequate to control operations on this scale. I therefore determined that the basic organisation should comprise two Army Headquarters to command all the troops in the two principal theatres of operations, with two Base and Line of Communication Areas directly administered by G.H.Q. relieving the armies of the administration of these areas.

Accordingly on the 26th September the Headquarters of the Eighth Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Cunningham, assumed command of all troops in the Western Desert forward of Bahig, with the exception of those in Tobruk who came under command on the 30th October. Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt, became in effect a large Base and Lines of Communication Area Command operationally responsible only for the internal security and anti-aircraft defence of the Egyptian base.

In Palestine and Syria operational command was assigned in the same way to the Headquarters of the Ninth Army, commanded by General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson, and Palestine and Transjordan became a Base and Line of Communication Area.

Appointment of Lieutenant General Administration.

37. The great increase in the strength of the Middle East Forces since the collapse of France produced a corresponding increase in the volume of routine administrative work, while the promise of further growth of the forces and the prospect of large-scale operations on two fronts presented a large number of problems in administrative planning.

These matters had hitherto been dealt with by my Deputy Quartermaster General, Major General B. O. Hutchison and by my Deputy Adjutant General, Major General N. W. Napier Clavering. I wish to pay the highest tribute to the industry, efficiency and foresight with which they carried out their work, of which the vast amount of reorganisation and development carried out during the period covered by this Despatch and before is the best testimony.

I realised that, well served as they were, the problems confronting them were already too multitudinous, and that in due course the growing number of day-to-day questions must inevitably usurp most of their time. I therefore decided to ask the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to sanction the appointment of a principal administrative staff officer, who should relieve them of part of their burden, and whose functions should include co-ordinating the work of the Quartermaster General's and the Adjutant General's Departments and directing administrative planning.

On the 18th October Lieutenant-General T. S. Riddell Webster assumed the appointment of Lieutenant-General Administration as my principal administrative staff officer.

Formation of Union Defence Force Administrative Headquarters.

38. When South African troops first came to Egypt it was intended that they should be treated in the same way as British troops, matters peculiar to South Africa being dealt with by staff officers attached to my General Headquarters and provided with the necessary clerical staff. The differences between South African and British administration, however, were pronounced; and many of the problems arising had a domestic political bearing. In order to overcome these and other lesser difficulties Field Marshal Smuts decided to form a separate administrative headquarters. Accordingly on the 25th September Major-General F. A. Theron was appointed General Officer Administration, Union Defence Force, Middle East, with executive powers.

MANPOWER.

39. Of all the administrative problems of the Middle East the shortage of manpower was the most urgent. It arose in a particularly acute form in the British and South African elements of the force.

British.

40. The supply of British personnel was necessarily limited by the amount of shipping available and the great distance they must travel to reach the Middle East. In order to save

British manpower every effort has been made to provide substitutes. It is my policy to dilute British formations with Indian units and an exchange of battalions between Iraq and the Middle East has already taken place.

Men from Cyprus, India, Malta, Mauritius, Palestine, the Sudan, East Africa, and the South African Protectorate have entered the Services and are doing valuable work.

These services have also been tapped for the formation of Pioneer Corps units. By the end of October there were 69 such units in the Middle East.

To supplement uniformed labour, civilian labour has been used to the greatest extent practicable. The number employed has risen from 101,000 in July to 144,000 at the beginning of October. Unfortunately local labour was not altogether satisfactory when bombing first occurred. But confidence gradually returned with experience of the slight casualties inflicted when proper precautions are taken. Labourers enlisted from the Sudan and elsewhere showed themselves better able to stand up to bombing.

I have also examined the practicability of using women in the place of men for non-combatant duties. Appreciable numbers of European women are to be found chiefly in South Africa and Palestine. The Union has already sent 250 women to the Middle East and all are engaged in useful work in Egypt and the Sudan. The Government of Palestine and the War Office have agreed in principle to units of the Auxiliary Territorial Service being raised in Palestine.

South African.

41. The South African contingent felt the manpower problem even more acutely, and the Government of the Union decided to employ in all units as many Non-Europeans as possible for non-combatant work in order to release Europeans for combatant service. This is to be carried out on a very comprehensive scale, the new war establishment of a South African Division being 14,900 Europeans and 10,400 Non-Europeans.

DEVELOPMENT OF BASES AND COMMUNICATIONS.

42. The growth of the Middle East Forces was naturally reflected in the tonnage to be handled at ports. To deal with the increased volume of traffic and to provide alternative approaches to the Base, as a precaution against enemy action, extensive Transportation and Works developments have been undertaken.

Much constructional work has been undertaken to meet both future operational requirements and the general needs of the growing force. A comprehensive programme for the expansion of base installations is being carried out. Many improvements to communications and harbours have been put in hand, and much new accommodation is being completed.

Transportation.

43. The Movements Branch of the Staff and Transportation Services have been brought under one head in the person of my Deputy Quartermaster General, Movement and Transportation, Brigadier R. K. Hewer, and the new organisation is working well.

Seventy-five miles of the extension to the Western Desert Railway have been completed and the line between Suez and Ismailia has been doubled during the period under review. The Transportation Service has also been engaged

in constructing some 390 miles of railway line elsewhere in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, as well as a Depot at Kantara East, a swing bridge over the Suez Canal, and two railway bridges in Syria.

Works Services.

44. The considerable achievements of the Works Services are in no small measure due to my Director of Works, Major General E. F. Tickell.

Constructional work has proceeded steadily, though hampered somewhat by a certain shortage of materials on the sites. The rate of delivery of engineer stores has improved, but is still limited not only by the amount of shipping available but also by restricted transportation facilities in Egypt. These could not be adequately supplemented by service transport because it was necessary to meet the deficiencies of operational and maintenance units. The transport problem will be considerably easier when these deficiencies have been made up.

Works Services have taken over responsibility for the construction of all docks and harbour works.

Preliminary work has been put in hand for deep water quays at Suez and Safaga. The lighter wharf programme has been continued and about one mile of additional wharf has been completed since June.

A pipe line carrying a thousand tons of oil a day from Suez to Port Said has been laid. The Desert water pipe line has been completed as far as Matruh and is being extended. A large number of additional filtering plants have been built in the Delta. Well boring has been continued throughout the Middle East and many hundreds of miles of distribution pipe have been laid.

Work on a large number of roads in Egypt, the Western Desert, Syria and Palestine has continued, and much road maintenance has been carried out in Syria, the Sudan, Eritrea and Abyssinia.

Many aerodromes and landing grounds have been constructed in the Western Desert and elsewhere. Work on a large number of others is continuing.

The programme for building hospitals, as originally planned, has been completed, and many camps have been erected in Egypt and Palestine.

Increased local production has done much to supplement shipments from abroad.

Vehicle Assembly.

45. By far the greater number of wheeled vehicles arriving from overseas come cased and partly dismantled. The work of assembly has been shared by the Royal Army Service Corps and the Royal Army Ordnance Corps with valuable assistance from the South African personnel sent up by the Union for this purpose.

Middle East Provision Office.

46. This is now established under the Eastern Group Supply system and provision forecasts for the period 1st April to 31st December, 1942, have been forwarded to the Central Provision Office, New Delhi. A plan for co-ordinating and stimulating local production is now being prepared.

RE-EQUIPMENT AND REORGANISATION

47. Large consignments of war material of every description made it possible to carry out

re-equipment on a large scale. Various tables showing this are set out in Appendix "C."

Vehicles of all types came in a steady stream from Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and the Union of South Africa, and in July tanks and trucks began to arrive in increasing volume from the United States of America. Between the 1st July and the 31st October we received in all almost 34,000 trucks and lorries and 2,100 armoured vehicles. Considerable consignments of artillery and small arms were also received. Among these were 600 field guns, 200 anti-tank guns, 160 light and 80 heavy anti-aircraft guns. Shipments of small arms included approximately 3,700 Bren guns, 900 mortars, and 80,000 rifles, and quantities of ammunition and equipment.

Yet, large as they were, these consignments, necessarily limited in quantity by the amount of shipping space available, were insufficient to replace all the wastage which had occurred or to enable reserves of many important items of equipment to be built up.

48. Limitations of shipping space were much more severely felt in connection with personnel, making it necessary to choose between fighting troops and administrative units, and between complete formations or units and drafts. It seemed best to ask for the greater part of the available space to be allotted to fighting formations, as this brought a greater increase in fighting strength than would have resulted from accepting a preponderance of drafts. Against 27,300 men arriving with units we received 17,000 in drafts. However one half of the number arriving in drafts were absorbed by new units which it was found necessary to form in the Middle East.

A serious shortage of personnel and administrative units had to be accepted as the inevitable consequence of this policy. The shortage of personnel extended to every arm of the Service but the rearward services suffered most. In many cases there were insufficient men to make even units in contact with the enemy up to full establishment. At the beginning of July the overall deficit in personnel, the deficit compared to war establishments plus first reinforcements, was 16 per cent.; by the end of October, when the strain on reserves was increased by the number of complete units received, the deficit was slightly larger. Nevertheless, by disposing personnel to the best advantage and by increasing their efforts all arms contrived to fulfil their functions with great efficiency, and I wish to record my appreciation of the manner in which they overcame this serious handicap.

Armoured Formations.

49. The armoured formations presented the most striking example of the extent to which it was possible to carry out re-equipment and re-organisation. At the beginning of July I could put into the field only two armoured car regiments and the 7th Armoured Division, whose range and mobility was seriously restricted by the fact that one Brigade was equipped with infantry tanks owing to the shortage of cruisers. At the end of October I had at my disposal the 7th Armoured Division, the 22nd Armoured Brigade, the 1st Army Tank Brigade complete, and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade complete except for one battalion. I was also able to re-equip a third British armoured car regiment and to complete the equipment of two South African armoured car regiments.

Infantry Formations.

50. Similar improvements took place in the condition of other formations. The intake of unarmoured vehicles was sufficient to allow me to replace the transport of the 1st South African Division and to complete that of the 4th Indian Division which had seen much hard service in East Africa and was unsuited to desert warfare. It was also possible to fulfil the requirements of the New Zealand Division, whose transport had been lost in Greece. The equipping of the 1st South African Division was particularly remarkable as the whole process of issuing and delivering 1,300 vehicles from the base to the desert occupied only six days. The 7th Armoured Division, the 1st Army Tank Brigade, and the 22nd Armoured Brigade were also brought up to full establishment in these vehicles during the period. In addition the requirements of a number of divisional and non-divisional troops have been completed while the losses in Greece have been largely replaced.

Table B of Appendix "C" shows the holdings of formations in unarmoured vehicles and equipment at the beginning and end of the period.

Royal Artillery—Field Branch.

51. There was a great improvement in the general state of equipment of the Royal Artillery Field Branch regiments as is shown in Table C of Appendix "C".

In the case of Field Regiments, however, a shortage of personnel precluded our taking full advantage of all the equipment available.

In spite of the very considerable increase in the number of 2-pounder equipments available, the situation was still unsatisfactory in two respects. There were insufficient guns to bring all regiments up to the full establishment of 48 guns; and in order to equip four of them on the new 64-gun basis, it was necessary to give them 16 eighteen-pounder guns apiece. However, the added weight of these guns may well prove to be an advantage.

More serious was the fact that three Infantry Divisions were without anti-tank regiments. As this weakness could not be tolerated in a terrain offering few natural anti-tank obstacles, it was necessary to convert the 149th Field and the 73rd Medium Regiments into anti-tank artillery, thereby setting highly trained personnel to a less skilled task.

Royal Artillery—Anti-Aircraft and Coast Artillery Branch.

52. Arrivals of Anti-Aircraft artillery increased the heavy anti-aircraft fire power by 40 per cent. and the light anti-aircraft by 75 per cent. (Table D of Appendix "C".) 106 captured anti-aircraft guns were retained in use in addition. Coast batteries provided for the defence of additional ports were mainly equipped with captured guns and searchlights.

The release of additional light anti-aircraft equipment and the arrival of fresh units made it possible to put into practice plans for providing divisional light anti-aircraft regiments. This involved re-organising one Australian and two South African regiments as divisional light anti-aircraft regiments on British war establishments. Five divisional light anti-aircraft regiments, all on a 36-gun basis, were provided for the Eighth Army, and the equipping of two Australian divisional light anti-aircraft regiments for the 1st Australian Corps was started.

Passive Air Defence.

53. Special attention has been paid to improving the Passive Air Defence organisation, which now embraces all military fire fighting.

Royal Engineers.

54. Unit equipment came forward fairly well and most units are now up to scale in the more important items, though there is still a shortage of certain essentials, and very few reserves. American equipment began to arrive, notably mobile compressor units and bridging equipment with special carrying vehicles.

A considerable number of new units were sent out from the United Kingdom. Several South African Engineer units also arrived from East Africa and the Union, forming a very valuable addition to our Engineer resources. There is still a chronic shortage of electrical and mechanical equipment operating units.

Royal Corps of Signals.

55. Considerable supplies of signal stores were received and the situation as regards line equipment for forward areas is now satisfactory. Although now more plentiful than they used to be, supplies of permanent line equipment, telephones and switchboards for lines of communications and back areas are still insufficient to provide a satisfactory reserve. Wireless equipment is still short, but at the end of June it was shorter. The services of the R.I.A.O.C. workshops and two mobile W/T repair sections have been particularly valuable in reconditioning existing wireless equipment.

Deficiencies in signal units have been very serious. In spite of the arrival of two corps signal units, we are still deficient of six complete non-divisional units and fifty-seven miscellaneous sections required to complete existing non-divisional units—a total shortage of 6000 personnel.

Royal Army Service Corps.

56. Apart from the lack of units the Royal Army Service Corps experienced a 15 per cent. shortage of personnel for existing units.

The number of vehicles held by the Corps steadily increased, reaching approximately 86 per cent. of authorised strength by the end of October. But it has not yet been possible to form a reserve of vehicles.

Improvements in bulk storage and distribution of motor spirit resulted in a saving in cost of tins of over £12,500 per month, and great economy in material, labour and transport. Further improvements now in hand should greatly increase these savings.

Medical Services.

57. Like the other services, the Medical Service suffered from shortages in units, stores and transport. Although the Royal Army Medical Corps had been very nearly completely equipped by the end of October transport resources were still inadequate, as the authorised scale of transport is scarcely sufficient to meet the highly mobile conditions obtaining in the Middle East. Practical experience of mobile warfare in Syria and the Western Desert, where the absence of roads and railways necessitates long evacuation by ambulance cars, had shown the need for increasing the proportion of motor ambulance convoys to fighting troops. Motor ambulances arrived slowly, and it is only recently that deliveries began to be adequate.

Most items of medical stores are now being delivered in satisfactory quantities. The percentage of hospital beds fell in arrears, owing to the exclusion from convoys of even the minimum number required. The number of field hygiene sections was, and still is, inadequate to the needs of the force.

In previous campaigns the need for mobile casualty clearing stations had been experienced. Three units were given sufficient transport to move the complete light section together with half the heavy section in one shift.

It has also been found necessary to form mobile surgical teams provided with their own transport, so that major surgery can be performed as far forward as the main dressing stations.

Royal Army Ordnance Corps.

58. The excellent example of ceaseless hard work set by my Director of Ordnance Services, Brigadier W. O. Richards, has been emulated by the whole Corps. Several measures have been taken to ensure even greater efficiency.

The Royal Army Ordnance Corps lacked a number of essential units, of which only a few arrived between the end of June and the end of October. On the other hand, deficiencies in equipment and vehicles except for reserves have been largely made up, although there is still a serious shortage of machine tools.

Reorganisation of the Corps in accordance with the latest system designed by the War Office is now in progress, but it is not yet sufficiently far advanced to enable me to see whether the system will need to be modified to suit the conditions in the Middle East. Some five thousand additional personnel will be required to complete the reorganisation and it is therefore unlikely to be completed before next August.

The swift movement and lengthy communications characteristic of mechanised warfare made two innovations necessary.

Strict limits have been set to the scale of repairs to be undertaken by second line repair workshops, recourse being had as far as possible to the system of assembly exchanges.

It has also been found necessary to organise a system for the delivery of urgent spare parts and fighting stores. A special unit has been formed to deliver such stores by road and a further scheme has been prepared in conjunction with the Royal Air Force for the delivery of stores by air.

59. It was no easy task to re-equip and re-organise practically the whole of the Middle East Forces within the space of four months. Units had to be restored to their brigades, and brigades to their divisions. Equipment had to be distributed in such a way as to meet operational needs and to permit a maximum of training to be carried out. At the same time Cyprus had to be reinforced, and Tobruk relieved, units withdrawn from Syria and East Africa and the concentration for the offensive begun. The coordination of all these activities placed a great strain on the Staff Duties Branch of the General Staff and of all subordinate Headquarters. The smooth efficiency with which it was all accomplished is largely due to the untiring efforts of my Deputy Director of Staff Duties, Brigadier B. Temple.

TRAINING.

60. Under the guidance of my Deputy Chief of General Staff, Major General N. M. Ritchie,

every aspect of training in theory and practice has received the closest attention.

The lull in operations made it possible to give almost every fighting unit and formation the opportunity of carrying out further training, although the scope of training was necessarily limited by deficiencies in equipment. Incoming units and formations put in a spell of training in desert warfare before being sent to the operational zone, and particular attention has been paid to desert movement of mechanised columns by day and night.

The Combined Training Centre at Kabrit was employed to capacity throughout. One Brigade of the 5th Indian Division and two brigade groups of the New Zealand Division underwent a complete course at the Centre.

Air Support.

61. An Inter-Service Committee, consisting of representatives of the Army and the Royal Air Force, was formed late in July to study the question of air support for the Army. Experiments were carried out during August, and a system was finally evolved.

The first two air support controls in the Middle East were formed at Mena on 8th October, the Army component of the first being formed by the Australian Imperial Force, and of the second from British and New Zealand personnel. The air component of both was provided by the Royal Air Force.

Parachute Detachment.

62. A small parachute detachment known as "L" Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade, was formed at Kabrit during July. It was composed of about 70 volunteers, recruited mainly from the survivors of the Commando Force.

Preliminary training was carried out during August and September, and the first live drops were successfully made on the 4th October.

Captain A. D. Stirling, who commanded the detachment directed all training without expert assistance. Great credit is due to him and to his officers and non-commissioned officers for their initiative in improvising equipment and inventing an entirely new type of training.

Schools.

63. The Middle East Officers Cadet Training Unit has been reorganised and expanded. The specialist wings have been abolished; and all cadets now follow the same eight weeks' basic course, specialists passing on to officers' wings at the training school of the arm concerned. The annual capacity of the Training unit has been thereby increased from thirteen hundred to two thousand and forty cadets.

Special stress has been laid on anti-aircraft action at the Weapon Training School, moving targets being employed. Experiments have been made with kites and drogues towed by a truck to produce a satisfactory target.

The School of Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence moved to Haifa and reopened on the 14th September, as air raids had interfered with instruction at Port Said.

A Royal Army Ordnance Corps School of Instruction, having general engineering and ammunition wings, has been opened.

A school has been opened at the Infantry Base Depot for training regimental specialists.

Six Indian Wings have recently been opened at existing schools.

CAMOUFLAGE AND TACTICAL DECEPTION.

64. The urgent need for general training in the theory, practice and discipline of camouflage has been met by creating small camouflage training units on the scale of one to each division and higher formation. In addition, the formation of a camouflage training and development centre, Royal Engineers, has been authorised.

The 85th Camouflage Company, South African Engineering Corps, joined the Middle East Forces on 22nd August. It was the first and only complete camouflage and deception works unit in the British and Dominion Forces in the Middle East. It is well equipped. It provides mobile detachments for work in forward areas, and a factory and experimental section capable of limited production of deception equipment and of new devices.

The principal technical developments during the period under review have been improved types of lorry hoods for use on tanks, mobile dummy tanks mounted on lorry chassis, collapsible static dummy tanks of improved design, and collapsible dummy guns.

Under the technical direction of the camouflage staffs, defence lines on all commands have been extensively camouflaged. Much work has been done on installations of all kinds.

Progress has been made with organised concealment and display in battle. Operations at Tobruk provided the opportunity for carrying out local schemes of deception both in defence and attack, schemes of misdirection, decoy and ambush being employed with promising results.

Two battalions of dummy tanks using static dummies and two battalions using mobile dummies have been provided.

HEALTH.

65. The general health of the troops has been very good with comparatively low percentage of cases of dysentery and a very low percentage of cases in the typhoid group. The low incidence of Malaria has, in the circumstances, been satisfactory.

WELFARE AND EDUCATION.

66. Considerable progress has been made in catering for the welfare of the troops but the demand for amenities of all kinds continually outstrips the supply. To meet the growing demand for welfare and educational facilities throughout the Army it has become necessary to provide additional Welfare and Education Officers.

PRISONERS OF WAR.

67. The evacuation of prisoners of war from Egypt and the Sudan has proceeded reasonably satisfactorily, the number of Italian and German prisoners of war in Egypt having been reduced from 58,000 to 27,000 and those in the Sudan from 23,000 to 9,000.

Many schemes for employing prisoners of war have been considered and tried, but the results have on the whole fallen short of expectations. This has been due to several causes, chief among them being the difficulty of finding the number of guards needed and the restrictions imposed by the Geneva Convention.

CO-OPERATION OF OTHER SERVICES.

68. I have referred to our great indebtedness to the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force

for enabling us to maintain and relieve Tobruk. This was but a small part of their contribution to the preparations of the Army. Both Services were ceaselessly engaged in preventing the enemy from reinforcing and supplying his forces. It was largely due to the conspicuous success which attended their efforts that the enemy was compelled to allow us the respite we so sorely needed. Moreover it is due to their tireless devotion in organising and protecting convoys that we received the reinforcements and vast quantities of stores which enabled us to reorganise and re-equip the armies of the Middle East. To the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force and to Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham and Air Marshal A. W. Tedder in particular we owe a deep debt of gratitude.

APPRECIATION OF SERVICES.

69. It must be clear that the manifold activities related in this Despatch were not carried on without the loyal co-operation of every Branch of my own Staff and of Commanders and Staffs of subordinate Headquarters.

I wish to place on record my appreciation of the fighting spirit of all combatant units in the Middle East Forces and of the conscientious and efficient work of all ranks employed in base areas, without whose loyal efforts the usefulness of the battle formations would have been impaired.

APPENDIX "A" (see para. 24).

SUBJECT: Policy covering the defence of the Western Desert.

G.H.Q., M.E.F.

21 July, 1941.

Lieut.-General Sir Noel Beresford Peirse,
K.B.E., D.S.O., Commanding W.D.F.

1. Intelligence appreciations indicate that the enemy will not be in a position before September 1941 to launch an attack with the Delta as his first main objective. An enemy advance, before that date, with a series of limited objectives is, however, possible.

2. A comparison of relative strengths shows that, while at present the enemy can put into the field an appreciably superior force of armoured fighting vehicles, this situation should have been considerably alleviated early in September.

3. In view of these factors, the Commander-in-Chief has decided that in the event of an enemy advance, his armoured forces will be brought to battle in the area South of Matruh.

4. In order to concentrate the maximum armoured forces for the main battle South of Matruh, no serviceable cruiser or "I" tanks should be located prior to the battle in the "boxes" at Matruh or Bagush. This ruling will be reviewed at a later date, when the total number of tanks available has increased.

5. In order that as much assistance as possible may be rendered by other formations to 7 Armoured Division during this tank battle, you are authorised to proceed with the development of a position to the West and South of Matruh, for occupation by not more than two Infantry Brigades.

6. The question of W.D.F. coming under the the Matruh and Bagush Boxes), G.O.C. and command of B.T.E. is receiving further consideration at this H.Q.

7. Acknowledge.

ARTHUR SMITH,
Lieut.-General,
Chief of the General Staff.

APPENDIX "B" (see para. 24).

SUBJECT: Policy covering the defence of the Western Desert.

G.H.Q., M.E.F.

30 July, 1941.

G.O.C.-in-C., B.T.E.
G.O.C., W.D.F.

In continuation of Instruction dated 21st July, 1941.

1. In the event of the enemy launching an attack in the Western Desert, the X Corps, comprising 5 Ind. Division and 2 S.A. Division, under command of G.O.C.-in-C., B.T.E., will:

(a) Hold the El Alamein position, provided that a small Armoured Force can be made available.

(b) Hold a sector of the Delta Defences if no Armoured Force is available.

2. Should the enemy advance necessitate the withdrawal of the W.D.F. (less the garrisons of

3. The boundary between W.D.F. and B.T.E. remains unaltered, i.e. (all including W.D.F.) Daba-Bab el Qaud—Longitude 28° to Qaret Agnes-Sitra-Siwa-Jalo.

4. As a guiding principle, troops of W.D.F. will rally on the El Alamein position, whether the position is held by X Corps or not.

5. G.O.C.-in-C., B.T.E., and G.O.C., W.D.F., will make mutual arrangements to ensure that units are withdrawn in such a way as to fit in best with the B.T.E. Defence Plan. Such arrangements will include movement tables, traffic control and measures for rallying units

6. The fortresses of Matruh and Bagush will come under command of G.H.Q. when W.D.F. comes under B.T.E., or earlier, should G.O.C., W.D.F., consider such a course desirable.

7. Acknowledge.

ARTHUR SMITH,
Lieut.-General,
Chief of the General Staff.

APPENDIX "C" (see paras. 47-52)

TABLES SHOWING COMPARATIVE STATES OF EQUIPMENT

A. Armoured Vehicles.

Formations	26th June, 1941		23rd October, 1941	
	No. of Units	A.F.V.	No. of Units	A.F.V.
7 Armd. Div.	—	50%	—	100%
7 Armd. Bde.	3	50%	3	82%
4 Armd. Bde.	3	30%	3	100%
10 Armd. Div.	—	Forming	—	—
8 Armd. Bde.	3		3	Training scale
9 Armd. Bde.	3		3	Nil
1 Armd. Bde.	4	Nil	1	Nil
22 Armd. Bde.	Not arrived	30%	3	100%
1 Army Tank Bde.	Not arrived		3	85%
32 Army Tank Bde.	1		2	67%
<i>Arm'd. Car Regts.</i>				
11 Hussars		92%		67%*
K.D.G.		40%		100%
Royals		92%		100%
4 S. African Armd. Car R.		50%		100%
6 S. African Armd. Car R.		50%		100%

* Remainder available, but being modified.

B. Other Equipment.

Formations	1st July, 1941		31st October, 1941	
	M.T.	S.A. and Equipment	M.T.	S.A. and Equipment
7 Armd. Div.	75%	70%	100%	90%
10 Armd. Div.	—	20%	10%	20%
1 Armd. Bde.	—	20%	10%	20%
22 Armd. Bde.	—	—	100%	100%
1 Army Tank Bde.	50%	90%	100%	90%
50 Div.	—	—	60%	90%
70 Div.	100%	80%	—	100%
6 Aust. Div.	10%	75%	60%	80%
7 Aust. Div.	100%	80%	85%	80%
9 Aust. Div.	30%	100%	10%	50%
N.Z. Div.	30%	45%	100%	90%
1 S. African Div.	90%*	90%	100%	90%
2 S. African Div.	50%*	20%	50%	70%
4 Ind. Div.	30%	90%	90%	100%
5 Ind. Div.	50%	75%	75%	100%
22 Gds. Bde.	100%	65%	100%	100%
3 Ind. Motor Bde.	—	45%	100%	100%
Polish Bde. Gp.	10%	100%	—	100%
Greek Bde. Gp.		Training scale		Training scale

* Non-desertworthy transport.

C. Artillery—Field Branch.

	1st July, 1941		4th November, 1941		Increase
	No. of Regts.	State of Equipment	No. of Regts.	State of Equipment	
Field Arty.	35	57%	39	91%	60%
A.-Tk. Arty. *	10	58%	11	76%	86%
Medium Arty.	3	100%	5	100%	40%

* Figures based on establishment of 36 guns for two regts. on both dates, with remainder on 48 gun basis on 1st July and 64 gun basis on 4th November.

D. Artillery—Anti-Aircraft.

	4th July, 1941			31st October, 1941			Increase British
	No. of Btys.	State of Equipt.		No. of Btys.	State of Equipt.		
		British	Total		British	Total	
Heavy A.A.	*	70%	70%	34	90%	95%	42%
Light A.A.	31	50%	69%	49	68%	83%	77%
Searchlight	8	47%	47%	7	78%	78%	44%
G/L Sets	—	25 sets	—	—	32 sets	—	28%

* Does not include Free French or Egyptian Units.

† Includes captured equipment.

E. Services

	1st July, 1941	31st October, 1941
R.A.S.C.	M.T. 54%	M.T. 86%
R.A.M.C.	84%	96%
R.A.O.C.	*	100%

* Figures not available

NOTICE

The following Amendment should be made to the Despatch submitted by General Sir Archibald P. Wavell, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander in Chief in the Middle East on Operations in East Africa, November 1940—July 1941, published on Wednesday, the 10th of July, 1946, as a Supplement to the London Gazette of Tuesday, the 9th of July, 1946.

Page 3572, Part III—General.

Para. 106, Lines 20–21 for "impossible" substitute "possible".

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