

little as a week, either before or after a major engagement on the Alamein line, the result might prove fatal to the enemy. It had been found impossible to carry out these operations in July and August and they had consequently been postponed to the favourable moon period of September.

As the operations were sure to prove most hazardous the possible advantages to be gained had to be carefully balanced against the chances of success and the cost of failure. Accordingly I reviewed the project again on 3rd September with the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, Admiral Harwood*, and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Tedder.† The fighting at El Alamein was then in full swing. Two weeks' reserve of supplies on operational scales were all that the enemy had been able to accumulate for his offensive and, although there was little hope of doing irreparable damage to the ports, a temporary dislocation of supplies following the failure of the offensive (which was now obvious), might well prove disastrous to Rommel's Army. Even if the operations were unsuccessful they would undoubtedly have an effect on enemy morale and probably lead him to take precautions against a future repetition which would diminish the strength available for the defence of his positions in Egypt. Air Chief Marshal Tedder pointed out that no air support whatever could be provided except an attack by bombers to help in covering the approach. Fighter cover was impossible throughout owing to the distance. Admiral Harwood realized that the whole seaborne force, including the two destroyers he proposed to use, might well be lost, but he accepted the risk. It was finally decided that the effects of success would be great enough to justify the risks involved; orders were accordingly given for the operations to be carried out as planned.

The raids were launched on the night of 13th September. At Tobruk the plan was to capture the port by a combined operation from two sides, by sea and overland, and hold it long enough to allow the destruction of the stored fuel and hasty demolition of the port. The small overland force successfully carried out its part of the operation but very few members of the two seaborne forces managed to land and the attack was a failure. The attack on Benghazi was to be carried out by a small motorized column from Kufra, over five hundred miles to the south. It reached its destination successfully but a last-minute alteration in its plans, based on unreliable information, caused an abandonment of the operation after an attack had been made on a part of the defences which was on the alert. A third force attacked Gialo on the night of 14th September, mainly in order to cover the retirement of the column raiding Benghazi but also in the hope of holding it for a short while as a base for future operations. The oasis was strongly held and it was impossible to capture it but the operation served its purpose in that the Benghazi force was able to retire unmolested by the Gialo garrison. A diversionary raid on Barce was completely successful. From the material point of view the raids had been a failure and our losses had been heavy but it is possible that they had

had the psychological effects we had hoped for. They probably helped to keep the Pistoia Division at Bardia and assisted in diverting Rommel's attention to the possibility of seaborne raids on his long open flank. 90 Light Division, after the conclusion of the Alam el Halfa battle, was moved back to Daba and employed for defence against a landing and for some weeks the Pavia Division was retained at Matruh in a similar role. The failure of these subsidiary operations had no effect on the plans and preparations for the great offensive which was shortly to be launched against the enemy's main forces.

No further attempt was made to raid the enemy's supply lines by land except for some successful sabotage of the desert railway by the Long Range Desert Group. This standard gauge line, which had been extended to Matruh in 1940, was pushed forward in the summer of 1941 towards the Libyan frontier and just before the Gazala battles had reached Belhamed on the Tobruk perimeter. The enemy had now extended it down to the port and, having repaired the breaks we had made during the retreat, had brought it into use. Our air force, however, continued to attack the railway and intensified their bombardment of enemy ports. Tobruk was raided almost nightly to such an extent that a large proportion of enemy shipping was diverted to Benghazi, thus increasing the road haul. Benghazi too was heavily attacked and all convoys en route to these ports had to run the gauntlet of our naval and air forces. I must also mention the valuable services of the air forces in securing information about the enemy's dispositions and denying him observation of our own. Eighth Army was kept supplied with regular air photographs of the enemy's dispositions on the basis of which most detailed maps were constructed and widely distributed. On the defensive side the Royal Air Force established such complete air superiority that enemy aircraft were unable to interfere with our preparations.

My administrative position was very satisfactory. I found on arrival in Middle East a highly developed administrative machine already in existence and staffs well acquainted with the problems of desert warfare. Repaired and reconditioned tanks, lorries and guns were pouring out of workshops; new equipment was arriving from overseas and being assembled and modified in Egypt. Men from Great Britain and from hospitals in the Middle East were passing in a steady stream to the front, far exceeding battle casualties. The reinforcement and repair organisations had been working at high pressure for many months, but it needed only the knowledge of the forthcoming offensive as a spur to intensify their efforts. Forty-one thousand men joined units at the front between 1st August and 23rd October, besides those arriving with the new formations. In the same period over a thousand tanks, three hundred and sixty carriers and eight thousand seven hundred vehicles were sent to the Eighth Army. Forty-nine pioneer companies were assembled and equipped to undertake the many manual tasks that would otherwise have fallen on the fighting troops.

Full preparations were made for the enormous extension of the supply services which would be necessary when the enemy had been defeated and we turned to the pursuit. There

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