

superiority, it seemed to me, we should run a grave risk of being defeated in detail and possibly of losing Egypt.

The possibility of launching an offensive in Cyrenaica, I took care to point out, depended on there being no increase in the threat to our Northern Front. A maximum of four infantry divisions would probably suffice for recapturing Western Cyrenaica. Assuming that the total number of infantry divisions in the Middle East would be reduced to eight in consequence of diversions to the Far East, it would be just possible to find these four divisions by accepting a considerable reduction in the garrison of Cyprus, which I was prepared to risk for the time being. Any threat to the Northern Front would entail an immediate reduction of the infantry and the transfer of all the armour.

My immediate intention, therefore, was to continue to build up an armoured striking force in the forward area as quickly as possible. Meanwhile our defensive positions round Gazala and Tobruk were to be strengthened as much as possible and the work of extending the desert railway to El Adem was to be hastened. I meant to seize the first chance of making a limited offensive in order to regain the landing grounds round Derna and Martuba, provided this could be done without prejudicing the chances of success of a subsequent major offensive, or the safety of our base at Tobruk.

My telegram to the Prime Minister evoked a reply from the War Office in which they declared that they were greatly disturbed by my review of the situation. The dominant factor in the Mediterranean and the Middle East at that time, they pointed out, was Malta, whose position would be critical if it did not receive a substantial convoy during May. They queried the correctness of my estimates of relative tank strengths of ourselves and the enemy, and suggested that my review took no account whatever of the air situation, which seemed favourable to us at the moment but likely to deteriorate as time went on. They went on to urge that an attempt to drive the Germans out of Cyrenaica in the next few weeks was imperative not only because the safety of Malta demanded it, but because it held out the only hope of fighting while the enemy was still comparatively weak and short of resources. I was requested to reconsider the matter urgently.

At the same time I was informed by the Chiefs of Staff that it had been decided to place the military garrison of Malta under my command, just as the Naval and Royal Air Force garrisons were under command of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean and the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief respectively. The change took place on the 11th March. In actual fact it made little practical difference except that henceforward the three Commanders-in-Chief and the Middle East Defence Committee had a unified responsibility for Malta as an integral part of the Middle East theatre. The position of General Dobbie as Commander-in-Chief of Malta was not affected.

The Middle East Defence Committee appreciated to the full the urgency of securing Western Cyrenaica both to enable Malta to hold out and for broader reasons. From the point of view of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force there was nothing to gain and everything to lose by delaying the offensive. But all were agreed that it must primarily be a land battle and that it would be most dangerous to start,

before the Army, and our armoured forces in particular, were ready. On present showing it seemed that we should not have achieved the requisite superiority in armour until even later than we had at first supposed. It was not merely a matter of issuing tanks to units: estimates depended on many imponderable factors. If, for instance, the Axis failed to reinforce Tripoli, we might be able to start earlier.

A limited offensive to secure Derna was considered, but it appeared that nothing short of recapturing Bengasi and the whole of the Gebel Akhdar would make it possible to sail substantial convoys to Malta. To be able to use the Derna landing grounds, however, would be of some slight assistance in protecting convoys, and much more in preparing the way for a major offensive later. We, therefore, proposed to undertake the operation, but only when a suitable opportunity arose.

A much broader issue than the retention of Malta was raised by the War Office telegram, however: it was a question of whether or not, in an effort to save Malta, we were to risk the whole Middle East. As regards risks in other parts of the Command, owing to the recent and projected withdrawals of land and air forces, if all the land forces in the Middle East were concentrated in the Northern Front, they would still be insufficient to make that front secure against the anticipated enemy scale of attack. A premature offensive in the next few weeks might result in the piecemeal destruction of the new armoured force we were trying to create. Egypt would then be placed in even more imminent peril.

For the present, therefore, the Middle East Defence Committee believed that we must rely on continuing to run convoys to Malta under existing conditions in the hope of getting a proportion of the ships through, and on using every possible shift and device to pass in supplies.

Accordingly it was decided to make another attempt during the moonless period in the middle of March. On the 8th March I issued instructions* to General Ritchie to create a diversion with not less than the equivalent of a brigade group to draw off enemy air attack during the daylight passage of the convoy, and on the 20th and 21st the Eighth Army and the Long Range Desert Group raided the landing grounds round Derna and Bengasi. The convoy, however, did not escape notice by enemy reconnaissance aircraft, and only part succeeded in reaching the island; and then the surviving ships were heavily bombed while they were being unloaded.

The divergence of views between London and Cairo as to the ability of the Eighth Army to mount an offensive appeared to be too great to be settled by correspondence, and the Prime Minister requested me to come to England for consultation. Reluctantly and after most anxious consideration I decided that at that time it was impossible for me to leave my command even for ten days or a fortnight and still remain responsible for it. To the Chief of the General Staff who pressed me to go, as there were many large questions of strategy to be discussed, I was compelled to make the same reply. In a telegram from the Eighth Army Headquarters, where I was at that time, I pointed out that large questions of planning and reorganisation

* G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. 116, 8th March 1942—Appendix II.