

and the entrance to the harbour was blocked with sunken ships.

By the end of the month the rest of Tripolitania had been cleared. In this task we were aided by a column of Fighting French from the Chad Territory which, while Eighth Army was advancing along the coast, invaded the country from the south and conquered the Saharan province of the Fezzan. This represented a great feat of endurance and skill, for they started from Fort Lamy, fifteen hundred miles by air line south of Tripoli. The commander was General Leclerc,* later famous as the commander of 2 French Armoured Division, which liberated Paris. The Fezzan was held by numerous Italian garrisons, each disposed to cover a water source, so that failure at any one point would have meant the risk of complete lack of water for the force. The first garrison to be overwhelmed was that of Umm el Araneb which surrendered on 4th January. The northern garrisons heeded the warning and began to withdraw before the end of the year. The southern garrisons had greater difficulty in getting away, mainly because of shortage of transport and fuel and the low morale of their native troops. Gatrun, Murzuk and Sciuref surrendered in swift succession. Ghadames, the most westerly, was attacked on 10th January. By the 15th the remnants of the Sahara Command, reduced by desertion and surrender to two thirds of its original strength of about three thousand five hundred, were gathered at Mizda and Garian and it was they who constituted the garrison of the latter place until the 22nd. Next day Mizda surrendered to an attack. With the fall of Ghadames on 29th January the conquest of the Fezzan was completed.

I must mention before concluding this part of the narrative those others under my command in areas where no operations took place but where our forces were employed in the wearisome round of guard duties and the maintenance of law and order. Lieut.-General (now Sir George) Holmes, commanding the Ninth Army in Syria, Palestine and Trans-Jordan, had to deal with a political situation which was always delicate and which might in certain circumstances have become explosive. His forces were very small indeed and of various nationalities but he was entirely successful in the tasks he had been set. With the flight of the enemy from Egypt the task which had been given the Egyptian army of watching the Suez Canal for mines dropped by enemy aircraft became superfluous. I visited in the course of the winter our garrisons in Syria, Cyprus, Eritrea and the Sudan to confirm by observation the soundness of our existing arrangements. It was on small detachments such as these that the security of our Middle East base depended and I was glad of the opportunity of assuring them of the value of their unspectacular assignments.

I should like also to express my appreciation of the assistance I received from my colleagues of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, Admiral Harwood and Air Chief Marshal Tedder. Admiral Harwood had succeeded to the command of our naval forces in the Eastern²¹ Mediterranean at a time when our resources were at their lowest ebb. Our only two battle-

ships in the Eastern Mediterranean had been severely damaged in 1941 by a daring assault by Italian swimming saboteurs in Alexandria harbour, leaving only light forces in the area. A large part of Alexandria harbour was occupied by the former French Eastern Mediterranean Squadron to whom we had given refuge and continued maintenance since July 1940; at that time, however, they could not see their way to throwing in their lot with the Allies. Our submarines continued to do most valuable work but perhaps I may be permitted to lay particular stress on the support which the Navy gave to the Army in our westward advance. Their work in reopening demolished ports and the convoying of supplies was of inestimable value and without it we could not have maintained our forces in Libya. Air Chief Marshal Tedder was to be my colleague in many campaigns still lying in the future. He had the most remarkable grasp of air problems of any Royal Air Force officer with whom I have served and a comprehension also of the needs of the Army. He organized, with the invaluable assistance of Air Vice Marshal Coningham, his Air Commander in the Desert throughout the campaign, the most complete measure of air cover for the fighting troops but the services of the Royal Air Force went beyond this purely defensive task, vital though it is; reaching out ahead of our advancing forces and striking the enemy without pause in his retreat he showed how a tactical air force well handled can intervene to effect in the ground battle. These actions are spectacular and obvious, but I would draw attention also to the degree of administrative skill which is required to maintain the forward movement of an air force at such a speed as frequently to outstrip the troops on the ground and seize new bases ever further forward from which to strike the enemy.

The capture of Tripoli, three months to the day from the opening of our offensive, marked a definite phase in the African campaign. Tripoli had always shone as a far distant goal in the eyes of the Desert Army since the time when the first armoured cars crossed the frontier wire into Libya on the morning of 11th June 1940. When Eighth Army advanced further out of Libya into Tunisia it became part of a large machine and a break at this point is therefore appropriate. The desert had been left behind; by comparison Tunisia is almost European. And none could doubt that the end of the long years of fighting in Africa was now near at hand.

PART II.—THE CONQUEST OF TUNISIA.

Formation of Eighteenth Army Group.

On 14th January, 1943, a conference of the Combined Chiefs of Staff opened at Anfa near Casablanca in French Morocco. It was attended by the Prime Minister and the President and by General Eisenhower, Commander-in-Chief, Allied Expeditionary Force. I was also summoned to attend and flew from Cairo with Air Chief Marshal Tedder. Among the other decisions taken at this historic meeting was the decision to reorganize the chain of command in Africa. Eighth Army was to come under General Eisenhower's command when it entered Tunisia from Tripolitania. In order to co-ordinate the action of the large forces, of three different nationalities, which

* He later added this "nom de guerre" to his family name and is known as Général d'Armée J. P. Leclerc de Hautecloque