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OPERATIONS IN EAST AFRICA, NOVEMBER, 1940—JULY, 1941

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on the 21st May, 1942, by General SIR ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East.

(TO COVER REPORTS BY LIEUT.-GENERAL W. PLATT AND LIEUT.-GENERAL A. G. CUNNINGHAM.)

1. I forward herewith accounts of the operations in the Sudan from November 1940 to July 1941 by Lieut.-General W. Platt and of the operations from Kenya between November 1940 and August 1941 by Lieut.-General A. Cunningham. These two accounts between them describe the conquest of practically the whole of Italian East Africa between the dates given. This covering despatch is intended to give the strategical background of the operations and to explain the instructions I issued as Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East.

2. In a previous despatch dated 11th December, 1940, I described how East Africa was placed under my command on 3rd February, 1940. The very small force then in East Africa was reinforced by a South African brigade and South African Air Contingent in June and two West African brigades in July. The remainder of the 1st South African Division arrived during the autumn of 1940, so that by October 1940 there were three divisions in East Africa, the 1st South African Division, and the 11th and 12th African Divisions. None of these divisions was of normal composition; their organisation is given in the Appendices to Lieut.-General Cunningham's report.

3. During the autumn and winter of 1940-41, in deciding the operations to be conducted from East Africa, I had to take into account two conflicting policies which were urged on me from different quarters. I was being pressed by the Defence Minister at Home to move forces from East Africa to Egypt; he complained that there were large masses of troops and

transport standing idle with no prospect of successful employment while there was great need for both further north in the Sudan and Egypt. During a visit I paid to London in August 1940 he had urged on me the policy of reducing troops to an absolute minimum in Kenya and he continued to suggest that a proportion of the troops in East Africa could more usefully be employed elsewhere. On the other hand I was made well aware of the undoubted feeling of nervousness, not only in Kenya but also in Rhodesia and even in South Africa, that the forces in East Africa were not sufficient to prevent an Italian invasion of Kenya and of the countries further south; in particular there was fear of an enemy occupation of the port of Mombasa. General Smuts frequently impressed on me the danger of reducing the Forces in East Africa.

Furthermore, the South African Division had originally been provided on the understanding that it was not to be used north of the Equator, while it was very doubtful whether the African troops for climatic reasons and their low scale of equipment would be so suitable for operations in other theatres. I resisted, therefore, proposals to reduce the force in East Africa, at least until we had driven the enemy further back.

4. On 1st November Lieut.-General A. Cunningham took over command in East Africa from Lieut.-General D. P. Dickinson.

5. On the 2nd December, 1940, on the eve of the offensive against Marshal Graziani's forces in the Western Desert, I held a meeting at Cairo, at which the Commanders in the Sudan and East Africa were present, to consider the strategy to be adopted against Italian East Africa. I laid down the following general policy at this conference:—

In the Sudan:

(a) To prepare an operation for the recapture of Kassala, which had been occupied by the enemy soon after the outbreak of war with