

fence, and positions were being developed at Acroma, El Adem and Bir el Gubi.

This position was held by the 13th Corps (Lieutenant-General Gott) with the equivalent of three infantry divisions, an army tank brigade, and an armoured division. The 30th Corps (Lieutenant-General Norrie), with two infantry divisions less a brigade group was engaged in preparing two positions in the frontier area, and a detachment was occupying Giarabub.

The New Zealand railway construction companies and Indian pioneer companies had already begun work again after a well-earned rest, and the railway line was nearing Capuzzo.

Malta and the Libyan Offensive.

Our position in Cyrenaica had just been stabilised, when I received three disturbing pieces of information, none of them entirely unexpected. On the 17th February came a preparatory order from London to send two more divisions to the Far East. On the 18th Admiral Cunningham received a telegram from the Governor of Malta reporting that the supply situation in the island was extremely precarious. And a few days later I learned that an enemy convoy carrying a large number of tanks had reached Tripoli.

Having explained the necessity for asking for the 70th Division and the 9th Australian Division, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff warned me that one of the Indian divisions from Iraq might also have to go back to India. He added that it was realised that these withdrawals might entail abandoning our plan for regaining Cyrenaica, and adopting a defensive policy in Libya, and that the forces left on the Northern Front would hardly be enough even to keep order there.

The 70th Division did, in fact, proceed to India and Ceylon, equipped with its full scale of transport from Middle East resources; but adjustments in other theatres made it possible to allow me to retain the other two divisions, which was fortunate in view of subsequent events on our Western Front.

Quite apart from its effect on our policy in Libya, the withdrawal of two more, or possibly three, divisions from my command would expose my northern flank to extreme danger in the event of an attack. The troops allotted to its defence were already quite inadequate and our bases and our oilfields, destined shortly to be the only oilfields left in British hands, would be at the mercy of the invader. The forces which it was now proposed to leave in those regions, all of them politically unstable, were barely sufficient to ensure internal order. Even if the whole of our available forces were moved to that front, they would still have been too few to defend it. Although the danger was not immediate, since the enemy still had long distances to cover and great supply problems to solve, it was nevertheless one which we must be prepared to meet. The Middle East Defence Committee presented these views again to London and urged that four infantry divisions be sent to the Middle East without delay.

Meanwhile I issued revised instructions for the defence of the Northern Front.* Since we could no longer hope to stop a hostile advance

in strength through Persia and Syria, I intended to impose the maximum delay on the enemy so as to gain time to enable reinforcements to arrive. The Ninth and Tenth Armies would now retire before superior enemy forces and hold them on a rearward line through Dizful, Paitak, the Lesser Zab River, Abu Kemal on the Euphrates, Damascus, Ras Baalbek and Tripoli. They were, however, to fight delaying actions north of this line whenever a favourable opportunity offered.

This meant abandoning extensive defensive positions round Mosul on which much valuable work had been done but, as we could no longer hold Mosul with our reduced forces against a strong attack, there was no alternative but to concentrate all our efforts on strengthening the new positions in Central Iraq and Southern Syria.

The position in Malta was indeed serious. Until November we had held almost complete mastery of the air over the island; but since then the enemy had made increasingly heavy air attacks and by now had attained virtual dominance. It had become practically impossible for the air force based on Malta either to interfere with enemy vessels passing to Libya or to provide air cover for our own ships seeking to replenish it. The Governor of Malta, Lieutenant-General Sir William Dobbie, now reported that even on siege rations, supplies generally would last only until June, while stocks of diesel oil for submarines were sufficient only for two months. Yet it seemed useless to attempt to sail convoys to the island, since out of three ships which left Alexandria on 12th February none arrived.

The Middle East Defence Committee, therefore, asked that the arrival in Malta of fighter reinforcements should be accelerated.

The Chiefs of Staff were equally concerned at the situation reported in the Governor's telegrams. They were of the same mind that Malta was vital to operations in Cyrenaica and were prepared to take the most drastic action to sustain it. It was impossible to supply Malta from the west and the only chance of sailing convoys from the east, they considered, was to secure the aerodromes in Cyrenaica. Accordingly I was asked to consider carrying out an offensive in time to enable adequate air support to be given to a substantial convoy in mid-April.

There was no doubt that the possession of aerodromes in Western Cyrenaica would make it possible to provide aerial protection for convoys. But the converse was equally true; unless Malta could interfere with the enemy reinforcement of Libya the task of recapturing Western Cyrenaica would become more and more difficult. The news that an enemy convoy of seven ships, almost certainly bringing many tanks, had reached Tripoli confirmed my fears.

I had already reviewed the whole situation in the light of this information and my report to the Prime Minister actually crossed the telegram from the Chiefs of Staff. A forecast of the relative tank strength of the enemy and ourselves during the next three months showed that we were not likely to have the requisite superiority in armour to allow us to launch an offensive with a reasonable chance of success before the 1st June at the earliest. In attempting an offensive without this margin of

* G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. 112, 23rd Feb. 1942—Appendix 10.