

a short time only, unless the port could be freely used, which would be possible only when all danger of land attack and sustained attack from the air had been removed.

In the advance beyond Tobruk maintenance would again be the governing factor. Plans for bringing the ports of Tobruk, Derna, and Bengasi into operation at the earliest possible moment were carefully worked out. But, owing to limited transport resources, the size of the forces for the subsequent advance and their radius of action would be severely restricted. For that reason it was all-important that the enemy's main forces should be destroyed before they could withdraw beyond our reach.

Camouflage and Deception.

It was of supreme importance to mislead the enemy as to our intention and no effort was spared to achieve this.

Reconnaissance.

For many weeks before the operation every part of Libya in which enemy troops were quartered was thoroughly reconnoitred. It cannot be said that any one type of reconnaissance provided more valuable results than any other, but the sum of their efforts produced most accurate information about the enemy. It will be seen that we were acquainted with almost every important detail of the enemy's dispositions, his order of battle and defensive arrangements.

The Royal Air Force covered the whole of the enemy's lines of communication from Tripoli and Bengasi up to the forward area. In addition a thorough photographic survey was made of all the important areas between Gazala and the Egyptian frontier. The interpreters of the Army Air Photo-Interpretation unit attached to the Eighth Army showed great skill in plotting enemy defences and depots of supplies from these photographs. Practically the whole of the enemy's dispositions round Tobruk were pin-pointed from air photographs interpreted by officers of this unit, and the plan for the Tobruk sortie was based largely on this information.

The Long Range Desert Group were also engaged in important reconnaissances. Operating over an area approximately five hundred miles from north to south and six hundred miles from east to west behind the enemy lines, desert patrols secured much useful topographical information, enabling existing inaccurate maps to be revised. Small parties lay up for long periods three hundred miles behind the enemy's advanced troops, observing the coastal road and taking a complete census of traffic passing between Tripoli and Bengasi. Both in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania enemy convoys were attacked, and the prisoners taken imparted valuable information.

The armoured car regiments in the frontier zone were also busy supplying information about the enemy's activities. It was particularly important that we should know the extent to which the enemy used the area south of the Trigh el Abd and west of the frontier. Penetrating up to fifty miles beyond the wire, patrols brought back the heartening knowledge that the area was not closely watched and that we might expect to obtain a high degree of surprise.

Bombardment of Enemy Supply Lines.

A description of the valuable preparatory work carried out by the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force does not come within the scope of this Despatch, though there can be no doubt that its effect on the subsequent land operations was little short of decisive. For many weeks, while the Army was engaged in making its own preparations, the supply lines of the enemy were subjected to constant heavy attack by sea and air. Many ships carrying reinforcements in men and vehicles were sunk, and many thousands of tons of stores and fuel destroyed.

Enemy Dispositions.

In mid-November the greater part of the enemy forces in North Africa were concentrated in Eastern Cyrenaica, leaving in Tripolitania only the regular garrison troops and the weak Sabrata Division, which was serving as a drafting formation. The main forces consisted of three armoured, two motorised, and five infantry divisions. These were organised as follows:—

Panzer Gruppe, Afrika (General Rommel).

Afrika Korps—

- 15th Panzer Division.
- 21st Panzer Division.
- 90th Light Division. (Afrika Division).

Mobile Corps—

- Ariete Division (armoured).
- Trieste Division (motorised).
- Trento Division.

21st Corps—

- Bologna Division.
- Pavia Division.
- Brescia Division.

Frontier Group—

- Savona Division.
- Elements of other divisions, German and Italian.

The 21st Corps, stiffened by three German infantry battalions, was investing Tobruk and the Trento Division had lately joined it. The frontier defences at Halfaya, Sollum and Capuzzo, constructed during the summer, were manned by German infantry battalions and those round Sidi Omar by the Savona Division. Bardia, where General Schmitt had his headquarters, was occupied by a mixed garrison of Italians and Germans.

Between these two main infantry groups were the armoured and mobile forces. The 21st Panzer Division lay astride the Trigh Capuzzo some 12 miles south of Gambut, where General Rommel's headquarters were. The 15th Panzer Division and the Afrika Division, an infantry division specially formed for service overseas, were concentrated round El Adem, Ed Duda and Sidi Rezegh. The Ariete and Trieste Divisions had recently moved to Bir el Gubi and Bir Hacheim respectively.

Date of the Offensive.

I knew before we launched an offensive that preparations pointing to an attack on Tobruk were in train, but I did not know the date of the proposed assault. I did, however, seriously consider postponing my offensive until Rommel struck at Tobruk, with the idea of catching the enemy facing the wrong way and at a disadvantage. However, the urgent need for opening our offensive at the earliest moment and the