

hardest part of the business, as it is likely to entail stationing the bulk, if not the whole, of our armoured force south of the Gebel Akhdar area to guard against any enemy attempt to move north against the garrison of Bengasi, which itself must be strictly limited in size by maintenance considerations. The operation should not be impossible, however, though it will be more difficult than in December last, as we shall not have a beaten and disorganized enemy to deal with as we had then. The implication of this is that the operation is likely to have to be much more deliberate.

10. Our immediate need therefore is to stabilise a front in Libya behind which we can build up a striking force with which to resume the offensive at the earliest possible date.

This front should cover Tobruk and as many as possible of the forward landing grounds in Eastern Cyrenaica. It should not, however, be too far to the west, as during the period which must elapse before we can launch our offensive, we should aim at making it as difficult as possible for the enemy to concentrate strong forces against our covering position and so force us to waste our strength in opposing him. This can best be avoided by making him extend his line of communications to the maximum extent without thereby endangering points vital to ourselves.

11. I propose therefore to confirm the instructions already given to General Ritchie, which are:—

- (i) To hold a line covering Tobruk.
- (ii) To hold Giarabub in order to secure our southern flank against enemy raids based on Siwa.
- (iii) To proceed, as an insurance, with making of defensive areas at Sollum and near Maddalena, in accordance with the policy previously laid down.

And to tell him at once to begin to build up a striking force for the resumption of the offensive at the earliest possible moment.

12. It is vital to the success of this plan that every possible effort should be made from now on by our naval and air forces to deny the use of Bengasi to the enemy for supply purposes.

To do this effectively it is necessary that we should have the use of landing grounds in the area Derna—Martuba and be able to base motor torpedo boats, with which to attack enemy shipping using Bengasi, on the port of Derna.

The possibility of undertaking a limited offensive at an early date to secure Derna must therefore be seriously and urgently considered. It is important, however, that such an operation should not prejudice the chances of success of a main offensive later.

C. J. A.

9.

G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. III.
Lieutenant-General N. M. Ritchie,
Commander, Eighth Army.

11th February 1942.

1. I intend to resume the offensive in Libya as soon as possible with the aim of defeating the enemy forces in the field, occupying Cyrenaica and subsequently Tripolitania.

2. The enemy, however, may try to drive us back from our present positions round Gazala and from Tobruk, before we are ready to launch our offensive.

3. It is essential to retain Tobruk as a supply base for our offensive. Our present positions on the line Gazala—Hacheim will, therefore, continue to be held, and no effort will be spared to make them as strong as possible.

4. If, for any reason, we should be forced at some future date to withdraw from our present forward positions, every effort will still be made to prevent Tobruk being lost to the enemy; but it is not my intention to continue to hold it once the enemy is in a position to invest it effectively.

Should this appear inevitable, the place will be evacuated, and the maximum amount of destruction carried out in it, so as to make it useless to the enemy as a supply base. In this eventuality the enemy's advance will be stopped on the general line Sollum—Maddalena—Giarabub, as laid down in Operation Instruction No. 110.

5. It is extremely desirable to regain for our air forces the use of the landing grounds in the area Derna—Martuba, for the following reasons:—

(a) To enable our air reconnaissance and air striking forces to join up with those from Malta, so as to cover the whole sea area.

(b) To enable them to keep up a more effective offensive against Bengasi, and thus prevent or severely restrict its use by the enemy for supply purposes.

(c) To reduce the degree of support the enemy can give his forward troops.

The possession of Derna would also permit the use of motor torpedo boats against enemy shipping using Bengasi.

6. To get and keep possession of the area Derna—Tmimi—Gazala entails holding firmly up to, and inclusive of, the general line Lamluda—Mechili—Tengeder, and it is not my intention that you should attempt this operation until you are sure:—

(a) That it will not endanger the safety of Tobruk.

(b) That it will not involve the risk of defeat in detail and so prejudice the chances of our launching a major offensive.

I wish you, however, to study the possibilities of such an operation, and to make all preparations for carrying it out immediately circumstances permit.

7. Meanwhile you will do all you can by the use of offensive mobile columns to prevent the use by the enemy air force of landing grounds in the area Derna—Martuba—Mechili.

8. The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force are making every effort to deny the use of the ports of Bengasi and Derna to the enemy.

9. Your tasks are, therefore:—

(a) To hold the enemy as far west of Tobruk as possible without risking defeat in detail.

(b) To organise a striking force with which to resume the offensive, with the object of destroying the enemy forces in the field, and occupying Cyrenaica at the earliest possible date.