

such efficiency that in spite of continual raids serious damage was rarely inflicted by enemy aircraft, of which several were shot down and many damaged.

28. On the 18th July I received from Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Blamey, commanding the Australian Imperial Forces, a letter, written at the instance of the Australian Government, urging me to consider the relief* of the whole garrison as the health of all the troops composing it showed signs of marked deterioration. He represented to me that the relief of the Australian portion of the Garrison was particularly desirable in view of the growing feeling in Australia that the time had come to fulfil the agreement made between their own and the British Government that the Australian troops should be concentrated under one command and serve as one force. He suggested that the lull in operations presented an opportunity which should not be missed. This letter was followed on the 23rd July by a telegram from the War Office repeating a message to the same effect from the Australian Government and urging me to give full and sympathetic consideration to the views of the Australian Government.

I agreed in principle to the relief of the garrison both for the sake of the troops and in order to fulfil the undertaking given to the Australian Government; but I was doubtful whether it would be practicable to relieve the whole garrison. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, however, believed that he would be able to effect the relief and maintain the fortress by sea at the same time.

29. A complete plan was drawn up by which the Polish Independent Brigade should replace the 18th Australian Infantry Brigade and the 18th Cavalry (Indian Army) during the moonless period in August and the 70th (6th) Division relieve the 9th Australian Division during the two succeeding moonless periods. The first

*In order that the conditions which necessitated this relief shall be clearly understood, comments of (i) the Commonwealth Government and (ii) General Blamey, are appended below:—

(i) (Commonwealth Government)

"The relief of Australian troops in Tobruk was supported by three successive Australian Governments. It is in agreement with General Blamey's observations which were confirmed by the Inspector General of Medical Services of the Australian Army (Major-General R. M. Downes) who on his return from a visit to the Middle East reported in 1941:

"The first A.I.F. troops transferred from Tobruk had suffered a considerable decline in their physical powers. The men did not think that they were tired but few of them would be able to march eight miles . . ."

(ii) (General Blamey)

"I concur with the statements except that I do not think the first portion of paragraph 29 accurately represents the position. It will be noted that on 18th July I had made representations on the great decline in the physical condition of the troops who had been holding Tobruk. This decline continued and two months later when the Chiefs of Staff directed the relief on 15th September the condition of the troops was such that any strong attack by the enemy might have endangered the safety of the fortress. Moreover, an offensive was contemplated and plans included operations by the defenders at a later date, which I was certain that they could not have maintained owing to their loss of strength and physical condition. I opposed General Auchinleck most strongly in his proposals to retain these troops any longer in Tobruk. It took a considerable time for them to recover their strength after their relief."

relief was carried out with complete success between the 19th and the 29th August, releasing the 18th Australian Infantry Brigade to rejoin its Division in Syria and the 18th Cavalry to join its formation, the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, in Egypt.

It was then necessary to consider whether further relief of the garrison was desirable or feasible. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief and myself were unanimous in recommending that it was undesirable to continue the programme for the following reasons. The relief effected in August had not only proved a great strain on the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, but had inevitably limited the latter's offensive action. To continue in the next two moonless periods would again interfere with other important operational tasks and impose a further heavy strain on the two Services. This would be increased by having to continue to maintain the fortress by sea during moonlight periods and thus expose our valuable shipping to unjustifiable risks. It was impossible to defer the last phase until the November moonless period, as this would have clashed with the date provisionally set for the beginning of our new offensive. Furthermore, no alternative formation being available for the purpose, the immediate employment of the 70th Division in Tobruk would prevent Indian units from Iraq being introduced into it in accordance with a policy which will be explained later in this Despatch. Finally the decline in the health of the garrison, which had been advanced as a pressing reason for effecting relief, did not appear to be so great as to warrant its continuation in the face of so many important objections. I submitted these arguments in a cable to London and stated that, subject to the Prime Minister's approval, I would reinforce the garrison at once with an infantry tank battalion instead of continuing the relief.

On the 15th September, however, I received a cable from the Chiefs of Staff informing me that, after careful consideration of the opinion of the Commanders in Chief, the Australian Government felt compelled to request the withdrawal of the 9th Australian Division and the reconcentration of the Australian Imperial Force.

Accordingly the relief of most of the 9th Australian Division by the 70th Division was completed in the next two moonless periods, between the 18th and the 28th September and the 12th and the 26th October. Only the 2/13th Infantry Battalion now remains in Tobruk.

The 4th Battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment was despatched at the same time.

The withdrawal of the Australian Division necessitated a change in command. On the 22nd October, 1941, Major General R. MacK. Scobie, commanding the 70th Division, took over command of the fortress.

30. I wish to acknowledge the services rendered in the siege of Tobruk by the Royal Navy, the Fleet Air Arm and the Royal Air Force. Not only did they enable the relief to be carried out with negligible loss to army personnel, though at great strain and some loss to themselves, but by continuing to maintain the fortress for eight months in spite of heavy risks and great difficulties they made it possible to renew the offensive which otherwise would have been considerably delayed.