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THE AFRICAN CAMPAIGN FROM EL ALAMEIN TO TUNIS, FROM 10TH AUGUST, 1942 TO 13TH MAY, 1943.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on the 23rd May, 1947, by HIS EXCELLENCY FIELD-MARSHAL THE VISCOUNT ALEXANDER OF TUNIS, K.G., G.C.B., G.C.M.G., C.S.I., D.S.O., M.C., former Commander-in-Chief the Middle East Forces and Eighteenth Army Group.

PART I. THE CONQUEST OF LIBYA

Situation in August 1942

The summer months of 1942 formed the most critical period in the history of the war on all fronts. They witnessed the greatest exertion of strength, both on the part of the European Axis powers and of the Japanese, of which our enemies were ever capable and when these great efforts were nullified by the Allied victories of that winter, although it was clear that the struggle would be hard and long before complete victory could be attained, we could feel confident that the possibility of an Allied defeat had now been excluded. It was a tremendous change in the whole climate of the war from the days when the Japanese were hammering at the eastern gates of India, the German armies in Russia were lapping round the northern bulwarks of the Caucasus and a tired and battered British army turned at bay among the sandhills of El Alamein, only sixty miles from Alexandria.

At the centre of these three thrusts stood the British Middle East Forces. For over two years this small but battle-hardened army had stood on guard at the centre of communications of the three great continents of Europe, Africa and Asia. It was originally intended as part only of a larger Anglo-French force, under command of General Weygand; but with the defeat of France and the entry of Italy into the war

the defence of the Middle East had become a purely British responsibility and the forces commanded by General Wavell* and, later, by General Auchinleck†, were in the nature of a beleaguered garrison, connected with the mother country by a perilous sea route of twelve thousand miles. During those two years the garrison, though always outnumbered, had made many sorties; northwards to clear up their defensive flank in Syria, Iraq and Persia, southwards to overrun the Italian Empire in East Africa and safeguard the vital life-line through the Red Sea and, above all, westwards to destroy the closest enemy threat to their positions and to lay the first foundations for the reopening of the Mediterranean. Twice these westward sorties had cleared Cyrenaica and twice the call of other theatres, the Balkans in 1941, and the Far East in early 1942, had robbed us of the strength to exploit further or to retain our conquests. On the second occasion the simultaneous reduction in our strength and increase in the enemy's had been too great and before the necessary reinforcements in men and, above all, in tanks could arrive the enemy had taken the offensive, defeated the Eighth Army at Gazala and Tobruk and driven it back to El Alamein. There it stood and, on the critical day of 2nd July, defeated the enemy's most desperate efforts to break through. By this stand the survivors of the old Desert Army gained the vital time necessary for the arrival of the fresh divisions and improved tanks which were to turn the scale of battle.

I arrived in Cairo by air on 8th August, 1942 and on the morning of the same day I had a private interview with the Prime Minister,

* Now Field-Marshal The Earl Wavell, P.C., G.C.B., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E., C.M.G., M.C.

† Now Field-Marshal Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck, G.C.B., G.C.I.E., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E., A.D.C.