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AIR OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM JANUARY 1ST, 1941, TO MAY 3RD, 1941.

The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for Air on November 24th, 1941, by Air Chief Marshal SIR ARTHUR LONGMORE, G.C.B., D.S.O., Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Royal Air Force, Middle East.

1. This Despatch covers the period from 1st January, 1941, to 3rd May, 1941. On this latter date I was recalled to England and did not return to resume command of the R.A.F., Middle East.

The main features to be recorded during these four months can be summarised as follows:—

(a) The complete defeat of the Italian Air Force in Libya; the successful and rapid advance to Benghazi (6th February) and the subsequent temporary stabilisation in Cyrenaica as far West as El Ageila.

(b) The reduction of British Forces in Cyrenaica, both Army and Air, in order to meet fresh Greek Commitments due to development of the threat to Greece from German Forces which had crossed from Roumania into Bulgaria. The decision being made on the 22nd February to send British Land Forces to Greece.

(c) The subsequent German-Italian offensive in North Africa leading to the withdrawal of British Forces in Cyrenaica to the Frontier and to the isolation of Tobruk.

(d) The German invasion of Yugo-Slavia and Greece on 5th April, resulting in the capitulation of the Armies of both countries and the evacuation of British Forces to Crete and Egypt.

(e) Intensified attacks on Malta and Naval communications in that area by German aircraft based in Sicily.

(f) The successful offensives against Italian East Africa from Kenya and Sudan, including the re-occupation of Berbera.

Note: A separate report has been rendered on the R.A.F. operations in Crete from the 17th April to the 31st May, the control of which ceased to be my responsibility from the 3rd May. On that date the German Air Invasion of the Island had not yet developed.

The full report on Air Operations in East Africa from 10th February to 5th April, 1941, has been forwarded to Air Ministry, but a Summary of these operations is included in this Despatch.

2. The location of units in the Middle East Command on 1st January, 1941, is the same as that given in Despatch No. 1 for the 31st December, 1941, and is repeated at Appendix "A".* Appendix "B" gives the location of units as at 30th April, 1941.

Libya.

3. In my previous Despatch I recorded in para. 28 that by 31st December, 1940, the whole territory East of the Italian-Egyptian frontier was in our hands. The Army had already advanced to positions surrounding Bardia and forward patrols had already penetrated towards Tobruk.

4. Air operations were continued in direct support of the Army, all types of aircraft contributing to this end during the advance, the role of squadrons being as follows:—

Heavy bombers attacked military objectives by night, such as Bardia and Tobruk, prior to the assault by our troops. At other times their objectives included Benghazi Port and aerodromes.

* Appendices not reproduced.