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OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM 16TH FEBRUARY, 1943, TO 8TH JANUARY, 1944.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 31st August, 1944, by GENERAL SIR H. MAITLAND WILSON, G.C.B., G.B.E., D.S.O., A.D.C., Commander-in-Chief, The Middle East Forces.

I. INTRODUCTORY.

1. When I was appointed to Middle East Command, on 16th February, 1943, the Command included Egypt, Libya, Malta, Palestine and Transjordan, Cyprus, Sudan, Eritrea, most of Syria and a small part of Iraq.

2. The situation within the Command, and in the Middle East generally, was then more satisfactory than at any time since the outbreak of the war. The Axis armies had been driven back from the outskirts of the Delta to the borders of Tunisia, the possibility of a German attack through Turkey had been diminished, the Balkans were proving a serious burden to Germany, Italian morale was obviously cracking, and British equipment was better and British morale higher than at any previous time.

3. My main tasks, in order of priority, were to maintain Eighth Army and support its present operations to the utmost, to plan for future operations in conformity with the requirements of General Eisenhower, to prepare to support Turkey, and to conduct amphibious operations. In addition I was to make plans, when required, for land operations in the Balkan States, Crete, and the islands in the Aegean; I was to plan possible operations in Arabia and to be ready to assume command of the land forces in Aden should major land operations develop in or beyond the borders of that Protectorate.

4. Under my command, to carry out this role, were about 31,000 officers and 494,000 men, divided between the major commands of Ninth Army, British Troops in Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Cyrenaica District, Aden and Malta. The Order of Battle of these troops is given in Appendix I.

5. This total did not include the 8,500 officers and 180,000 men of Eighth Army, which had reached the borders of Tunisia by February, and which passed under command of 18 Army Group on 20th February. Maintenance of Eighth Army during the remainder of the Tunisian Campaign, until 12th May, 1943, when the campaign ended with the capture of Tunis and Bizerta, remained my responsibility and proved a heavy one. All other claims were subordinated to this task. Expenditure in materials, vehicles, and, at times, in personnel was high, but the Army was always well-found and this, together with the absence of food deficiency diseases in a campaign fought over a thousand miles from the Middle East base, speaks better than anything else for the adequacy of the maintenance system.

6. During the later stages of the Tunisian campaign the second of my tasks, planning for future operations, began to assume increasing importance. Plans for the invasion of Sicily had been laid at the Casablanca Conference, and detailed planning of these operations was continued throughout the campaign in Tunisia. So, even before the Tunisian campaign was over, Middle East had already begun to train and equip units for Sicily.

7. The invasion of Sicily was to be conducted by two forces, of which the bulk of the Eastern Task Force was to be trained, equipped, mounted, and maintained in the early stages, from Middle East Command. This meant that Eighth Army had to be withdrawn from