

in Abyssinia on the outbreak of war with Italy. For the reasons stated in paragraph 8 above, our preparations had been considerably hampered, but a number of arms had been collected and a Mission had been formed to get in touch with the patriots as soon as possible. The Emperor, His Majesty Haile Selassie, arrived in the Sudan, with the object of providing a focus for the rising. Arrangements were made for him to be accommodated at Khartoum until it should be possible for him to enter Abyssinia.

23. Meanwhile, on 17th June, the French Government had asked for armistice terms, which they accepted on 22nd June. It was at first hoped that the French Colonies and Oversea territories would continue the struggle; but General Nogues in North Africa, after a little hesitation, decided to obey the orders to capitulate, and his example was followed shortly afterwards by General Mittelhauser in Syria, who only a few days earlier had declared to me at Beirut his unalterable determination to continue the struggle. General Legentilhomme at Jibuti held out for nearly a month longer.

The collapse of the French in North Africa meant that the Italians could employ the whole weight of their large ground and air forces in Libya against the Western frontier of Egypt. The defection of Syria meant that Palestine no longer had a secure and friendly northern flank and that the French force of three divisions which had constituted the general reserve of the Middle East for assistance to Turkey or Greece, or for the defence of Egypt if required, could no longer be counted on.

A certain number of officers and men from Syria, including the greater part of a Colonial battalion which had, at the request of the French, been stationed at Cyprus, joined the British forces and were formed into a mobile battalion which is now engaged on the Western Frontier of Egypt.

A Polish force of some 4,000 men, which had been formed and was under training by the French in Syria, came to Palestine and joined the British Forces.

A note on the foreign contingents which have joined the Forces in the Middle East is given in Appendix B.

24. Thus before the end of July it became obvious that unless reinforcements in men and material were sent to the Middle East forthwith, there was grave danger of our being unable to withstand the enemy's attacks. I received orders to visit England to discuss the situation with the military authorities and the War Cabinet. As a result of the discussions reinforcements were despatched to the Middle East. The greater part of the forces available who were sufficiently equipped and trained were moved to the Western Desert. This included a New Zealand Brigade Group and later an Australian Brigade Group.

Italian Attack on Somaliland

25. Meanwhile in French Somaliland General Legentilhomme had found himself unable, in spite of his gallant efforts, to induce the Colony to continue to fight. The Italians were thus enabled to concentrate the whole weight of their very numerous forces in the East of Italian East Africa against British Somaliland, which they invaded early in August. The operations, which resulted in the temporary loss of British Somaliland, have already been described in a despatch dated 12th September, 1940.

Operations on Western Frontier of Egypt. June-November, 1940.

26. The force sent to the Western frontier of Egypt was the 7th Armoured Division less one armoured brigade. Actually the troops to proceed to the frontier were the 7th Hussars, a light tank regiment of the 4th Armoured Brigade; the 11th Hussars, armoured car regiment; the 1st King's Royal Rifle Corps and 2nd Rifle Brigade, motor battalions; and two regiments of Royal Horse Artillery, one of which was an anti-tank regiment with 37 mm. Bofors guns for which only a limited supply of ammunition was available. The 6th Royal Tank Regiment, the second regiment of the 4th Armoured Brigade, was kept in divisional reserve. The 4th Armoured Brigade had no third regiment, and all its units were much below establishment.

27. Just east of the Egyptian frontier an escarpment several hundred feet high runs from Sollum south-eastwards for about 30 miles, and is passable to mechanised vehicles only at a few places. At Sollum itself the road up the escarpment is steep with a number of hairpin bends. South and west of the escarpment the ground is generally easily passable by all types of mechanised vehicles. Between the escarpment and the sea the going is more difficult and movement is generally confined to certain tracks.

Our force on the frontier was operating at a distance of 120 miles from the railhead at Matruh which made the administrative problem an extremely difficult one and limited the number of troops that could be employed.

28. On the night of 11/12th June the 11th Hussars crossed the frontier and captured a detachment of two Italian officers and 59 other ranks. On 14th June the enemy's two frontier forts at Capuzzo and Maddalena were attacked and captured by the 7th Hussars, 11th Hussars and a company of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, about 220 prisoners being captured.

29. On 16th June a most successful action was fought by the 7th Hussars and 11th Hussars supported by a troop of "J" Battery R.H.A. nine miles north of Sidi Omar. Twelve enemy tanks were destroyed, and a considerable number of the enemy killed and about 160 prisoners taken. Three guns and a number of lorries were also captured or destroyed. On the same day a troop of the 11th Hussars intercepted a convoy on the Tobruk-Bardia road, destroyed 30 lorries and captured a number of prisoners, including a general officer.

Several other successful patrol actions were fought during the next few weeks. An operation to capture the Jerabub Oasis was planned for the beginning of July, but abandoned owing to great heat. Meanwhile large enemy forces, amounting to at least two divisions, had advanced towards the frontier. An enemy brigade reoccupied the ruins of Fort Capuzzo, which had been destroyed, and advanced towards Sollum, but was repulsed. The enemy's position at Fort Capuzzo was made extremely uncomfortable for him. His force was continually shelled by our artillery, and transport bringing up supplies from Bardia was constantly attacked or shelled, with the result that the enemy undoubtedly suffered extremely heavy casualties both in men and in vehicles.

By the middle of July the enemy had two divisions, and elements of two more, on the