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OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM 7TH FEBRUARY, 1941 TO 15TH JULY, 1941

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 5th September, 1941, by GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief, in the Middle East.

OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST. 7th FEBRUARY, 1941, TO 15th JULY, 1941.

Situation after Capture of Benghazi.

1. While the operations in the Western Desert and Cyrenaica, described in my despatch covering the period 7th December, 1940, to 7th February, 1941, were taking place, a campaign which was to prove of almost equal importance to the fortunes of the British Forces in the Middle East was being fought in Greece and Albania.

The unprovoked and treacherous attack of the Italians on Greece which had begun at the end of October, 1940, had been repulsed by a swift Greek counter-stroke, and the Italians had been driven back into Albania. During the winter of 1940/41 the Greeks, in spite of appalling conditions of weather and in most difficult country, gradually forced the Italians back in Albania and had hopes of driving them out of Albania altogether. A small British air force with certain army units for its protection and service, had been in Greece since November.

2. At first the senior partner of the Axis had seemed to be disinterested in the Italian misfortunes in Albania as well as in Libya, but early in 1941 German troops were fully established in occupation of Rumania and it became clear that a further movement south-east was impending. The attitude of Bulgaria, obviously to be the next victim of German aggression, did not long remain doubtful, and it soon became fairly certain that her rulers did not intend to resist a German advance through Bulgaria, which might be directed either at Turkey or at Greece, our only two remaining allies in Europe who were likely to resist German aggression.

3. In the middle of January, while operations against Tobruk were still in progress, I had been

ordered by the War Cabinet to visit Greece and to make an offer to the Greeks of armoured troops, field artillery, anti-tank artillery and anti-aircraft guns to assist their forces in the defence of Salonika and Macedonia against possible German aggression. I was in Athens from 13th to 17th January and had a series of conferences with the Greek Premier, General Metaxas, and the Greek Commander-in-Chief, General Papagos. As a result, the offer of the British Government was declined, mainly on the grounds that the landing of further British forces in Greece was likely to provoke German aggression without being strong enough to check it. Had this offer been accepted, it is improbable that it would have been possible to continue the operations in Cyrenaica beyond Tobruk. After the refusal of assistance by the Greeks, an offer was made by the Prime Minister of assistance, especially by air forces, to Turkey, which was also declined on similar grounds.

4. Immediately after the fall of Benghazi on 7th February, I received a telegram from the Chiefs of Staff setting out a new policy for the forces in the Middle East. General Metaxas had died towards the end of January and the new Greek Government had sent a request on 8th February for information as to what help we could afford them in the event of a German attack. The War Cabinet accordingly directed that no operations were to be undertaken beyond the frontier of Cyrenaica, which should be held with the minimum possible force necessary to secure the flank of our Egyptian base, and that it was essential to be able to send the largest possible army and air forces from the Middle East to assist the Greeks against a German attack through Bulgaria. At the same time the operations against the Italian Dodecanese, which were in preparation, were to be pressed on and undertaken at the earliest possible moment.

5. The Chiefs of Staff's telegram stated that the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Eden, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir John