

mechanically inferior under battle conditions. Though the American light tanks, as fighting machines, could not compare with our own or German medium tanks, they were mechanically far more reliable than British medium tanks. The inferior armament and mechanical unreliability of our tanks was aggravated by a great shortage of anti-tank weapons compared with the Germans. We were indeed fortunate in having a reserve of over two hundred fast medium tanks with which to replace those rendered unserviceable in battle, whereas it was doubtful if the enemy could produce more than fifty or sixty for this purpose.

It was also obvious that if we were to fight the Germans on the Northern Front in the coming summer under the same adverse conditions so far as equipment was concerned, the standard of leadership and tactical handling of our armoured forces must be improved. I believed that our tank tactics were inferior to those of the Germans because we had failed adequately to co-ordinate the action of tanks, infantry and artillery on the battlefield. The three arms must therefore associate much more closely and continuously in training and in battle, and I proposed to ensure this by making changes in the organisation of our formations.

I urged that we should be allowed to go forward with our plan for the invasion of Tripolitania. With the equivalent of two armoured and four infantry divisions, General Ritchie had inflicted a heavy defeat on an enemy not only nearly equal in number, but possessing undoubted advantages in tanks and artillery. Out of an original enemy total strength of about a hundred thousand men a maximum of thirty-five thousand were now manning the defences at Agheila, while his armoured forces had been reduced from three armoured divisions to the equivalent of about one regiment. On our side a fresh armoured brigade had moved into the forward area. It seemed that we could reasonably undertake the invasion of Tripolitania, when the great difficulties inherent in the maintenance of considerable forces in Western Cyrenaica could be overcome. Every effort was being made to do this, and Bengasi had just begun to function as an advanced supply base, although regular supply by sea had not yet been assured.

If by any chance we should have to break off the offensive on the borders of Cyrenaica, it was essential at all costs to secure a position which could be held indefinitely against an enemy counter-offensive. Such a position had not been secured the year before when Rommel drove General Wavell's forces back to Tobruk and beyond. To find it we must go forward to the line of marshes west of Agheila and also occupy Marada to cover the southern flank.

Diversion of Forces to the Far East.

While Cyrenaica was being cleared of the enemy, events in the Far East began to affect the Middle East Command. War broke out with Japan on the 8th December, 1941, and four days later, before the enemy had been driven from Gazala, the Prime Minister informed me that, owing to the Japanese threat to the Malay Peninsula and Burma, certain reinforcements on their way to the Middle East must be diverted. These were the 18th (United Kingdom) Division, four light bomber squadrons, a number of anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns and the 17th Indian Division. It was also

proposed to extend the Middle East Command to include Iraq and Persia, so as to ensure local unity of command on the Northern Front. The Commander-in-Chief, India, would in future have to look east.

The Middle East Defence Committee felt bound to point out the serious implications of the diversion of these reinforcements. A minimum of seventeen infantry divisions, apart from armoured formations which there was then no question of diverting, was required to defend our Northern and Western Fronts. Unless further reinforcements were received, no more than twelve infantry divisions would be available. The diversion of air reinforcements and anti-aircraft guns, together with the proposed transfer of six light bomber squadrons already in the Command, might seriously prejudice our ability to support the Libyan offensive. This was the more likely as the German Air Force in Libya was being strengthened. Moreover the security of our own communications in the Mediterranean and our power of interrupting the enemy's would be gravely affected.

Two days after the Eighth Army had entered Bengasi, the Prime Minister informed me that four squadrons of Hurricane fighters were also to be transferred from the Middle East to Singapore and asked me to spare at least a hundred American light tanks. The situation in the Far East was obviously very grave, and I therefore informed the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that I was prepared to send fifty light tanks, of which twenty-five would be manned, and a hundred and ten American light tanks, for which I would provide a complete armoured brigade headquarters with signal section and workshops and two armoured regiments, all with experience of the recent fighting. I also offered an anti-tank battery, a field battery, and the loan of an Australian Infantry brigade group, provided that it could be replaced or returned by the spring. These troops I thought could be spared without prejudicing the success of our campaign in Tripolitania.

Grave as the Far Eastern situation undoubtedly was, it seemed to the Middle East Defence Committee that the relative importance of the two theatres must be carefully assessed before the Middle East was called on to provide further reinforcements. The defeat of Germany by a land offensive against her territory was our ultimate object. Therefore, to send any forces to the Far East in excess of the minimum required to secure our bases and sea communications would constitute a diversion from our main object.

Moreover if the American effort was to be directed into the right channel from the outset, it should be decided without delay from which theatre the eventual offensive against Germany was to be launched. The Mediterranean, in my opinion, offered good, if not the best strategic prospects. As a preliminary to a grand offensive from the south against the mainland of Europe it was essential to secure Tunisia, and the Committee urged the Minister of Defence and Chiefs of Staff to consider providing the necessary forces, including possibly American, for this operation.

Apart from this, it was essential to hold the bases of the Middle East including Malta; yet, as we pointed out, our naval, land and air forces already fell far short of our minimum requirements for the spring of 1942. So far as the