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*The War Office,
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OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 5 JULY 1941—31 OCTOBER 1941.

The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on the 8th March 1942 by GENERAL SIR CLAUDE J. E. AUCHINCLOSS, C.B., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E., A.D.C., Commander-in-Chief the Middle East Forces.

1. On taking over command of the Middle East Forces on the 5th July 1941 I found the general position incomparably better than it had been a year earlier on the collapse of France. This improvement was entirely due to the energy of my predecessor, General Sir Archibald Wavell, and to his vigour in seeking out the enemy wherever he was to be found.

The defeat and capture of the Italian armies in East Africa had eliminated one serious threat to our bases and communications, and the winter offensive in Cyrenaica had resulted in the destruction of another large Italian Army. Although the fresh forces brought up by the enemy had succeeded in recapturing most of Cyrenaica, they were unable to proceed much further without first reducing Tobruk. Moreover our operation in June, though unsuccessful, had robbed their armoured forces of much of their offensive power. In the East, the overthrow of the rebel government had cleared the atmosphere in Iraq, while the operations in Syria, though as yet unfinished, would deny potential air and land bases in that country to the Axis.

Only in the North had recent events made our position more difficult. The enemy occupation of Greece and Crete increased the threat of aerial attacks on our bases and lines of communication, and, even more important, seriously restricted the movements of the Fleet in the Central Mediterranean. The enemy's hold on Cyrenaica greatly increased this restriction. The running of convoys with supplies and reinforcements to Malta from Egypt thus became more difficult. The German attack on Russia, however, had come at a very oppor-

tune moment for ourselves as it prevented the enemy from exploiting to the full his success in the Balkans and the Aegean.

Although there was thus no immediate threat to our base, there was every reason to believe that in time such a threat would materialise on either flank, and I found preparations to meet this well in hand.

2. General Wavell's campaigns in Libya, Eritrea, Abyssinia, Greece, Crete, Iraq and Syria had followed each other with such bewildering rapidity and had been undertaken with such inadequate forces and equipment that a considerable degree of disorganisation in the Army as a whole was inevitable. Brigades had perforce become separated from their divisions and units from their brigades, while some formations, especially those of the armoured forces, had practically ceased to exist. This entailed a comprehensive programme of reorganisation, improvisation, re-equipment and training, which I found in progress on taking over.

In no sense do I wish to infer that I found an unsatisfactory situation on my arrival—far from it. Not only was I greatly impressed by the solid foundations laid by my predecessor, but I was also able the better to appreciate the vastness of the problems with which he had been confronted and the greatness of his achievements, in a command in which some 40 different languages are spoken by the British and Allied Forces.

3. I soon found that the work of the operations, planning and intelligence branches of the General Staff was good and thorough, and that a sound system existed for the administration of personnel, supplies, ordnance and medical arrangements.

Liaison between the Navy, Army and Air Force was excellent and it may here be of interest to give some details of interservice co-operation.