

Tunisia, re-formed, re-equipped, trained for a new kind of warfare; and supplied with ancillary units necessary for amphibious operations. The resources of the whole Command, from Syria to Malta, were co-ordinated in this preparation for knocking Italy out of the war—and once more, as in Tunisia, the operation was successful.

8. With the conquest of Sicily and the invasion of Italy, Eighth Army passed out of the sphere of Middle East Command, as a direct maintenance responsibility, when 15 Army Group took over its administration and maintenance on 12th August, 1943. The actual maintenance, however, could not be transferred immediately, and Middle East slowly transferred the commitment during the ensuing weeks, thereafter being responsible only for partial maintenance on demands made by 15 Army Group. Even then, reinforcements and supplies for Eighth Army were still required in considerable quantities, and the 10th Corps remained to be mounted from Tripoli for the landing at Salerno. Meanwhile, with the collapse of Italy, Middle East Command had become engaged in another role.

9. Plans for action in the islands of the Aegean had already been prepared by Middle East Command and by September a division was mounted ready to carry out the operation. But the diversion of the shipping, and other commitments, caused this operation to be cancelled at the last minute; before other plans could be made, the armistice with Italy was announced and the Germans succeeded in gaining control over the Italians on the two key islands of Rhodes and Scarpanto. The most which we could achieve by extemporised action with the forces available was to slip small garrisons into Cos, Leros, and Samos, and to place patrols in outlying islands.

10. With Rhodes, Crete and the airfields on the Greek mainland at their disposal, the Germans had command of the air in the Aegean, and with the loss of our only landing grounds at Cos on 2nd October we were unable to ship adequate reinforcements and were in no position to defend the other two islands. Leros was captured by assault, after a prolonged bombing and dive-bombing attack, on 16th November, and Samos was evacuated in the next few days.

Nevertheless, the German local air superiority was not sufficient to prevent our air and naval forces continuing to make the enemy's reinforcing efforts hazardous and for a time ineffectual.

11. Our lack of success in the Aegean undoubtedly affected our rising prestige in Middle East countries. Despite this setback, Middle East Command was able to fulfil its tasks, largely because the year was marked by internal security and confidence in the Allied cause. This was achieved although Egypt, Palestine, Syria and the Lebanon all suffered from political troubles: Egypt owing to the failure of the Wafd Government to remedy social and economic difficulties, Palestine owing to the ambitions, suspicions and lawlessness of some elements in the Jewish population, and Syria and the Lebanon owing to the clash between their demands for independence and the views of the French Mandatory authorities.

12. These various political situations demanded constant watchfulness and careful handling. During the year they were not allowed to interfere with military requirements and considerations, and British prestige has on the whole been enhanced during the period, with consequent advantages and increased freedom of action in the military situation.

13. As in our dealings with Middle East countries, so in dealing with our allies (always excepting the United States), there has been a constant danger that political considerations might prejudice military problems. Much effective work has nevertheless been carried out in stimulating and maintaining patriot activities in the Balkans and in equipping and training allied forces in the Middle East. The policy of supplying Turkey with armaments has also been carried out by Middle East Command, and large commitments have been undertaken to prepare that country for entry into the war.

14. In general, it may be said that during the year of my command the war moved away from Middle East, leaving it a role which was no longer operational but which was of great importance as a base and training centre.

## II. NARRATIVE—TUNISIA.

15. By 16th February, 1943, when I took over command of Middle East Forces, Eighth Army had taken Tripoli (on 23rd January) and was preparing to advance in Tunisia. The first responsibility of Middle East Command was to supply Eighth Army for this advance.

16. This responsibility involved Middle East Command in three major administrative commitments: to repair the port of Tripoli and establish it as an overseas advanced base; to build up reserves in Tripoli in preparation for the advance; to supply the needs of Eighth Army during the advance, and to clear backloads and casualties from Tripoli.

17. 18 Army Group was set up on 20th February, 1943, under the command of General Sir H. Alexander. General Alexander was to command First and Eighth Armies, and 18 Army Group was to co-ordinate the operational and administrative efforts of the two armies. This, however, did not affect the role of Middle East Command, and the task of maintaining Eighth Army remained my first responsibility.

18. Until 3rd March, 1943, all arrangements for maintenance were made direct with Eighth Army, which, during this period, was bringing up parts of the 10th Corps from the Benghazi area, forming the New Zealand Corps for the attack on the Mareth position, and re-equipping itself for a further advance. The distance at which Eighth Army was working from Middle East Base made it necessary to modify this arrangement; Tripoli is 980 miles by sea from the Delta and 650 miles by sea from Tobruk, the nearest railhead.

19. Headquarters, Tripolitania Base and Lines of Communication, was therefore established and took up its role, under the command of Major-General Sir B. N. Robertson, on 3rd March, 1943. This headquarters was under command of Eighth Army, for which it acted as a rear echelon; under the general direction of General Headquarters Middle East, Eighth Army was to be responsible for the lay-out and administration of the advanced base. This was in conformity with the principle that the army