

Persian Gulf came under the Commander-in-Chief, East Indies.

Consequently, although this Despatch deals with the work of the land forces in the Middle East, every strategical plan concerned all three Services, and had to be approved by the three Commanders-in-Chief, under the general direction of the Minister of State.

PART I.

GENERAL NARRATIVE OF EVENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

In my first Despatch on the Middle East I described how, having arranged for the Northern Front to be placed in a state of defence, I concentrated on preparing to take the offensive in Northern Africa. It was primarily to consider this undertaking that I was summoned to London by the Prime Minister in August, 1941. The various problems involved were discussed thoroughly and at length at meetings of the War Cabinet and the Defence Committee, and the records of these meetings show that His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom considered it essential to take the offensive in North Africa at the earliest possible moment.

In any event the Germans were then advancing rapidly in Russia and it seemed that, provided this progress was maintained, it would not be very long before the road to the Caucasus would be opened to them. They might then be able not only to strike at Persia and Iraq from the north, but to invade Turkey from the north and east as well as from the west. It seemed not at all impossible that this danger would take shape early in 1942. It behoved us, therefore, to rid ourselves of the threat to Egypt from the west, before we might have to turn to meet an attack from the north and north-east.

By the end of October, 1941, our land forces in the Command seemed strong enough and sufficiently well-equipped to warrant making an attack. But to make this possible it was necessary to concentrate practically all the available air forces in the west, thus leaving Syria, Palestine and Cyprus unprotected. It was not necessary to denude these areas of land forces, although the garrison had to be deprived of transport in order to equip the Eighth Army.

However, these risks were felt to be justifiable. Winter was approaching and the enemy could not appear south of the Caucasus for some months. The Germans were heavily engaged in Russia, and, even if they could spare aircraft and troops from the Russian front to reinforce Libya, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force could be relied on to make this a hazardous undertaking.

The Offensive in Cyrenaica.

With the approval of His Majesty's Government, I laid my plans and made my preparations not only to defeat the enemy forces in the field, but also to occupy the whole of Libya. This was to be carried out in two stages. In the first stage it was intended that the Eighth Army should trap the enemy forces and destroy them in Eastern Cyrenaica: in the second the Eighth Army was to occupy Tripolitania. The success of the second stage depended upon how far we managed to achieve our aim in the first and to what extent we were able to overcome the

difficulty of supplying our forces over such great distances.

When I originally gave orders in September, 1941, for plans to be prepared, I hoped that it might be possible to launch the offensive about the 1st November. I was careful, however, to explain to His Majesty's Government that the date on which it could be launched depended on the arrival of the troops and equipment, especially tanks, required to give that measure of superiority over the enemy I considered necessary to ensure a reasonable chance of success, and without which I did not think it right to try to defeat him.

My original estimate of the armoured forces needed for the conquest of Cyrenaica was three armoured divisions. The offensive had to be launched with one and a half armoured divisions and one brigade of infantry tanks.

For various unavoidable reasons, I had, most reluctantly, to postpone the opening date from the 1st to the 15th November. The chief cause was the tardy arrival of the 22nd Armoured Brigade from the United Kingdom: this formation was expected to reach Egypt between the 13th and 20th September, but its disembarkation was not actually completed until the 14th October. As a result, the brigade was not fully trained when it took the field.

The offensive had to be postponed for a further three days as the 1st South African Division, which was to play an important part in the initial operations, had not had enough time to train for a mobile role owing to the late arrival of the bulk of its vehicles.

We were working to very close margins as regards equipment and training. The same conditions applied to the building up of supplies and the construction of pipelines and railways. The essential preparations were barely complete when the campaign was launched, and the standard of training of many of the troops engaged left much to be desired. This was due to no fault of their own, but solely to lack of time and shortage of equipment.

For some time before the offensive opened, practically the whole of the German and Italian forces in Libya had been concentrated in the north-eastern angle of Cyrenaica, and I had considered striking direct at Bengasi by way of the desert so as to seize their chief supply port and cut the land reinforcement route from Tripoli at one and the same time. Our land and air forces slightly outnumbered the enemy's (disregarding the formidable Axis air strength elsewhere in the Mediterranean) but our margin of superiority was so small that our forces could not safely be divided, and there were considerable maintenance difficulties; so I eventually rejected this idea as impracticable. Instead I decided to envelop the enemy in Eastern Cyrenaica and destroy him there.

The German armoured divisions were the backbone of the enemy's army, and to destroy them was our principal object. The three armoured brigades were concentrated in the 30th Corps and General Norrie was instructed to use them to seek out and destroy the enemy's armour. When the Panzer divisions had been well and truly dealt with, the rest of our forces would carry out their parts in the operation. The 30th Corps and the garrison of Tobruk were then to secure the two ridges of Sidi Rezegh and Ed Duda which command the