

Aegean Islands, a depot and training centre was formed in Palestine in the spring. In June a beginning was made with a second brigade group.

After consultation with me, His Majesty the King of the Hellenes visited Palestine in March and, as a result of his visit, a number of changes were made in the commanders and staffs of the contingent, which led to greater efficiency and more rapid progress.

Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, commander of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, undertook the responsibility of helping the Royal Greek Forces in their training and organisation, and generously placed his own training schools and facilities at their disposal. This assistance was of great value.

In June the 1st Brigade Group joined the Ninth Army in Syria, and in early August it was moved to Egypt where it helped to build the Amiriya defence works.

The Royal Yugoslav Forces.—The Royal Yugoslav forces under my command consisted of a Headquarters and one battalion of Royal Yugoslav Guards.

Early in 1942, the Yugoslav Government in England replaced the commander of their forces in the Middle East by an officer who was unacceptable to the great majority of the Yugoslav army and air force officers serving in the Command. After exhaustive but fruitless efforts to find a peaceful solution, I was compelled to place all the Yugoslav forces temporarily under the command of Lieutenant-General R. G. W. H. Stone, General Officer Commanding the British Troops in Egypt, who carried out this duty with great tact and skill. It was also necessary to intern at their own request a number of Yugoslav officers in order to avoid bloodshed, and a number of officers and men temporarily joined our forces during this period of unrest. My Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Smith was tireless in his efforts to compose these unfortunate dissensions.

The Royal Yugoslav Guards battalion did useful work in guarding important installations and in preparing defensive positions in the Western Desert. Towards the end of the period under review the battalion was moved to Haifa. As more than half of the personnel were ex-Italian prisoners of Slovene origin who had volunteered to serve against the Axis, it was considered desirable to remove them from the possibility of contact with their former employers.

The Czechoslovak Forces.—The Czechoslovak forces under my command consisted of the 11th Infantry Battalion, which was attached to the Polish Carpathian Brigade Group in Tobruk, where it did well. The Czechoslovak Military Mission then agreed to the conversion of the battalion into a light anti-aircraft regiment, and this was satisfactorily accomplished at Haifa.

Administration.

Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Riddell-Webster was Lieutenant-General in charge of administration until the 1st July 1942 when he was recalled to London to become Quarter-Master-General to the Forces. He was succeeded by Lieutenant-General Sir Wilfred Lindsell. To both of these officers I owe a great deal as I was able to leave the administration

of the Command in their able hands and thus devote myself to the major strategical and political issues.

By June 1942 the ration strength of the Middle East Command had risen to just over one million persons—an increase of more than three hundred thousand on the strength of November 1941. This figure included troops of many nationalities, labour units, prisoners of war and interned aliens. The increase was due principally to the incorporation of Iraq and Persia in the Middle East Command. The base and lines of communication organisation for this area was already in existence, and the change hardly affected the installations already functioning in the rest of the Command. The transfer of responsibility for maintaining the troops in Persia and Iraq from the India Command to the Middle East, however, was by no means easy, as the line of supply ran up the Persian Gulf and the natural base is India. But thanks to the labours of General Riddell-Webster and General Sir Edward Quinan, commanding the 10th Army, the change was carried out with the minimum of friction and delay.

When the Eighth Army withdrew to the El Alamein line, it was decided to revise the layout of our western base, in order to give a greater measure of security to the principal installations against danger either from the west or from the north. Henceforth the major base installations serving the Eighth and Ninth Armies were to be sited in Palestine south of Acre, and east of the Nile Delta. Fifty per cent. of the reserves were to be held in Egypt, forty per cent. in Palestine and ten per cent. in the Sudan and Eritrea.

Bases and Communications.—Vast distances and inadequate means of communication constitute one of the principal strategic problems of the Middle East Command. The improvement of communications progressed steadily throughout the period under review.

When the conquest of Syria was completed in July 1941, and we began to plan the defence of the Northern Front, the chief factor to be taken into account was the absence of rail communication between Syria and Iraq and our bases in Palestine. In August 1941, the construction of a standard gauge railway to link Haifa with Tripoli in Syria was begun. The enterprise entailed the construction of tunnels, one of them over a mile long, and much rock-cutting along the coast between Haifa and Beirut and was carried out with great skill by technical troops from the Union of South Africa and from Australia, aided by pioneer units from South Africa, India and other parts of the British Commonwealth, as well as by local labour. By the middle of August, 1942, the line had been laid between Haifa and Beirut and much work had been done on the northern section. When completed, the new line will provide through railway communication between Egypt and Turkey, as well as with Iraq.

On the other front the Western Desert railway was extended a further hundred and twenty-six miles, and the line reached Belhamed on the 26th May, 1942.

In Egypt a railway line was laid on the east bank of the Suez Canal from Kantara to Suez. A railway bridge across the Canal was opened shortly before the close of the period under review.