

opinion in French North Africa would be attained if, just before the landing, we could win a decisive victory over the Axis forces at Alamein. It was important, also, to impress General Franco, whose attitude was dubious; had he admitted German forces into Spain and Spanish Morocco the operation would have been seriously hazarded.

From this point of view it would be an advantage to win our victory as soon as possible and the Prime Minister expressed disappointment that I had put back the date of my offensive a fortnight beyond my first very tentative estimate. I called a Commanders-in-Chief meeting to discuss the problem, with Admiral Harwood, Air Chief Marshal Tedder and Mr. Casey, the Resident Minister in the Middle East. At this meeting I explained the situation fully, pointing out that if the battle was to have its desired effect, both in the military and political fields, it must be crushing and decisive beyond any doubt, and to ensure that I must have an adequate time for full preparations. I laid particular stress also on the importance of having a good moon. TORCH* was scheduled for 8th November. My offensive was planned to precede it by just over a fortnight and I was convinced that this was the best interval that could be looked for in the circumstances. It would be long enough to destroy the greater part of the Axis army facing us, but on the other hand it would be too short for the enemy to start reinforcing Africa on any significant scale. Both these facts would be likely to have a strong effect on the French attitude. The decisive factor was that I was certain that to attack before I was ready would be to risk failure if not to court disaster. My colleagues agreed with this exposition of the situation and I sent a telegram explaining in full the decisions of the meeting. On this basis the date of 23rd October was definitely accepted.

Before giving the final plan it will be as well to consider the enemy dispositions as they faced us on D-day. The two preceding months had seen him energetically engaged in strengthening his field works. The most important element in these, as always in the desert, was the minefield, both anti-tank and anti-personnel. In the north a second line of defended localities had been prepared behind the main forward minefields. The two lines were connected with each other by transverse minefields and the idea was to lead our attacking forces by prepared channels into deceptively attractive clear areas entirely surrounded by mines where they could be taken under fire from all sides. The effect was of a belt, between five and eight thousand yards deep, thickly covered with mines and defended posts, stretching from the sea to the Deir el Mreir, a deep depression lying south-west of the end of the Ruweisat ridge. North of El Mreir there was a peculiar minefield in the shape of a shallow S-bend running roughly east to west at right angles to the main positions and extending for some distance behind them; this was presumably intended as a cover for the right flank of the northern sector of the front should we be able to penetrate the southern sector. Behind the main defences in the north a third line of positions, starting just east of Sidi Abd el Rahman, eight miles from Tell el Eisa, and running south for about seven and a half miles, was still in course of prepara-

tion but already well advanced. The defences had been less systematically developed to the south of El Mreir, but since the capture of our minefields in September that part of the line also presented a formidable obstacle. There were two lines of defences, based on our old minefield and the original enemy minefield, with a gap between them. The going on the southern flank was bad and from Qaret el Himeimat the enemy had excellent observation.

Enemy attempts at reinforcement were less successful. Many vessels bringing tanks, guns, stores and supplies were sunk or forced to turn back. The unloading of those which did succeed in making port was a slow process on account of the havoc wrought by our bombers at Tobruk and Benghazi and it must be remembered that even Tobruk was three hundred and fifty miles from the front, over an indifferent road. Reinforcements in men arrived by destroyers and aircraft and, except for occasional interception, most of these reached Africa safely. These arrivals, however, which averaged about five thousand men a week, were unable to keep pace with the very heavy sick rate. Possibly owing to the congestion of troops on the ground, greater than ever known before in the desert, and to an inadequate medical and sanitary organization, especially among the Italians, diseases such as dysentery and infective jaundice were extraordinarily prevalent among the Axis troops. Some units suffered up to as much as twenty-five per cent. of their strength. Thanks to the efficiency of our own medical services our sickness rate did not rise above the normal for the time of year and to nothing like the extent on the enemy side of the line. The most prominent Axis casualty was the Army Commander. Rommel had been in poor health since August and in September he left for Germany, technically on leave. It appears, however, that he was not intended to return and he was replaced by General Stumme, who had previously commanded an armoured corps on the Russian front.* Rommel took advantage of the ceremony at which he was presented with his Field-Marshal's baton in Berlin on 3rd October to declare: "We hold the Gateway to Egypt with the full intention to act. We did not go there with any intention of being flung back sooner or later. You can rely on our holding fast to what we have got".

There had been little change in the general order of battle of the two Corps holding the fixed defences. XXI Corps in the northern sector had received a slight reinforcement in German infantry in addition to its two parachute battalions; otherwise the German 164th and the Italian Trento and Bologna Divisions held the same sectors. In X Corps sector the Pavia Division had been brought forward from Matruh and added to Brescia and Folgore, on the extreme south; the other two parachute battalions of Ramcke's brigade were on this front. The main line of defences was therefore held by rather more than six divisions. In reserve were four armoured and two mobile divisions, equally divided between German and Italian. This reserve had been treated as a single combined force for the purpose of the

* Code name for the North African landings.

* The Commander of the German Africa Corps was also a recent arrival from the Russian front; General von Thoma, who had succeeded General Cruewell, taken prisoner in June.