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OPERATIONS IN THE SOMALILAND PROTECTORATE, 1939–1940

PREFACE BY THE WAR OFFICE

1. The following despatch deals with the period from the outbreak of war with Germany in September, 1939, to the evacuation of British Forces from the Somaliland Protectorate in August, 1940, in the face of Italian invasion. It covers the preparatory stage before Italy's entry into the war on 11th June, 1940, and the brief period of operations from 5th to 18th August, during which the small British Garrison fought a fierce and skilful withdrawal action against overwhelming numbers.

2. This is the personal narrative of General Sir Archibald (now Field-Marshal Lord) Wavell, Commander-in-Chief, British Land Forces in the Middle East. As such he was responsible for preparations over a vast area against the possible entry of Italy into the war on the side of Germany. When this occurred in June, 1940, he was faced with the problem of disposing pitifully small resources in manpower and material to meet enemy aggression in an area which included Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, Sudan, Cyprus, Iraq, British Somaliland, the shores of the Persian Gulf and East Africa. The United Kingdom at the same time was facing a still more desperate situation caused by the fall of France and the apparent imminence of a German invasion.

3. No commander could have been satisfied with the inadequate resources available and it is understandable that the War Cabinet should have appeared to General Wavell to be preoccupied with the paramount task of the defence of the home country.

4. In retrospect it might appear that the policy of avoidance of any action which might give Italy cause for entering the war against the Allies was in some respects unjustified. On her eventual entry, all the disadvantages of such a policy became apparent, while the benefits which would have been gained by her continued neutrality tend to be forgotten. British Somaliland suffered particularly in lack of defence measures and intelligence of enemy dispositions owing to the original policy of complete evacuation in face of invasion. As a result of Anglo-French Staff conversations just prior to the outbreak of war this policy was modified to the extent that the British Force was to withdraw to French Somaliland.

This policy was dictated by the general weakness of the position and by the inadvisability of expending resources on a Protectorate which had little or no strategic importance.

By December, 1939, the French had strengthened their garrisons in French Somaliland and a common defence plan and a more enterprising policy become possible. This plan was based on the defence of Jibuti and Zeilah by the French while the British defended Berbera, the capital and centre of British interests in British Somaliland.

5. The new defence policy required a change of administrative control of the forces in British Somaliland from the Colonial Office to the War Office. Owing to discussions between the War Office, Colonial Office and G.O.C.-in-C., Middle East, this change did not become effective until June, 1940, when the War Office finally assumed responsibility for the administrative control of the forces in the Protectorate.

6. Italian troops crossed the frontier on 5th August, 1940, and the small British Force, deprived of the expected support of the French garrison of Jibuti, was pressed back on the port of Berbera and successfully evacuated. Many of the troops so saved were re-deployed to return on the tide of British offensives six months later, when all lost territory was regained in the first stages of the destruction of the Italian Colonial Empire.