

69. The failure to hold Crete was due mainly to the overwhelming superiority of the enemy aircraft and the way in which it was handled in conjunction with ground troops. Officers who had fought through the last war and had been engaged in France during this war have expressed their opinion that the bombardment the troops underwent in Crete was severer and more continuous than anything they had ever experienced. The handicap under which the force laboured in regard to lack of equipment and the difficulties of reinforcing the island with either men or material have been explained, but it was the enemy air force which was the deciding factor. Even had the German attack been beaten off it is very doubtful whether the troops in Crete could have been maintained in face of the enemy air force, which made the approach of shipping to the island most hazardous.

The troops, including the Greeks on the island, fought magnificently under the most stern conditions, and deserve the very greatest credit for their efforts. General Freyberg and General Weston, and the subordinate commanders under them such as Brigadiers Puttick, Chappell, Hargest, Vasey and Colonel Campbell, set a fine example to their men and handled their troops with determination and skill.

The work of the Royal Navy in preventing the enemy attempts at invasion by sea and in evacuation of the troops in spite of extremely heavy losses in ships and in men was beyond all praise. To Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham himself, who took the responsibility of ordering the evacuation to proceed in spite of the losses, the Army owes a deep debt of gratitude.

Although they were completely outmatched in numbers, the Royal Air Force never failed to do their utmost to support the Army. Though they were obliged to operate from distant places in Egypt, they attacked to the utmost of their ability and in spite of heavy and inevitable losses.

70. The defence of Crete, though unsuccessful, undoubtedly frustrated the enemy plan for future operations by destroying so large a portion of his air-borne troops. The total enemy losses were at least 12,000-15,000, of whom a very high proportion were killed.

The defence saved in all probability Cyprus, Syria, Iraq and perhaps Tobruk.

Thus our losses in Crete, though heavy, were very far from being in vain, and the gallant resistance of the force saved our position in the Middle East at a critical time. The fighting in Crete may prove a turning point of the war.

Revolt in Iraq.

71. While our preparations for the defence of Crete and of the Western Desert were absorbing practically our whole attention and resources, a critical situation in Iraq suddenly made fresh demands on Middle East.

Our relations with the Iraq Government during the war had become increasingly unsatisfactory. By treaty Iraq was pledged to give us assistance in war and to permit the passage of British troops through Iraq. There was a British Military Mission with the Iraq Army and the Royal Air Force had stations at Habbaniyah, some 40 miles west of Baghdad, and at Shaibah, near Basra. For the protection of the R.A.F. establishments there were locally enlisted Iraq Levies.

All operational aircraft were removed from Iraq early in the war, and there remained only a few obsolete machines at Shaibah and a depôt and training school at Habbaniyah with training aircraft only.

72. Although the Iraq Government, after some pressure, broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, they did not declare war; and when Italy entered the war they did not even break off relations with the Italian Government and allowed the Italian Legation to remain in Baghdad, a hot bed of anti-British propaganda and espionage. As the military successes of the Axis powers increased, so did the unfriendly influence of Rashid Ali become more effective in controlling the conduct of the Iraq Government. The Mufti of Jerusalem and other malcontents from Palestine, to whom Iraq had given asylum, formed a centre of anti-British intrigue. A force had been under preparation in India for use in Iraq should enemy forces reach that country, but the situation in Middle East after the Italians entered into the war and the Japanese threat to Malaya made it necessary to divert this force in other directions which were of more urgent importance.

73. Early in 1941 it was decided to take diplomatic action to try and improve relations with the Iraq Government and to this end Sir Kinahan Cornwallis was appointed ambassador. There was, however, considerable delay in his despatch to Iraq and he did not reach Baghdad till a few days before the revolt broke out.

74. Political crises and frequent changes of Government are an ordinary feature in Iraq. The beginning of the troubles was a change of Government which brought into power as Prime Minister Rashid Ali Ghailani, who was known to our Intelligence to be in the pay of the Axis. At first he professed himself as desirous of co-operating with His Majesty's Government, but his subservience to Axis direction became more and more manifest and he even contemplated re-establishing diplomatic relations with Germany. It was also clear that the real power behind him was four well-known pro-Axis generals in the Iraqi army who were popularly known as the Golden Square.

75. On 31st March, the Regent of Iraq, learning of a plot to arrest him, left Baghdad for Basra and shortly afterwards took refuge on a British warship. Later he flew to Transjordan with his most prominent supporters. The general position in Iraq became so threatening that about the middle of April His Majesty's Government decided to land a force at Basra in accordance with our treaty rights of passing troops through Iraq. A line of communications from Basra to Baghdad by rail and thence by road across the desert to Haifa, had been prepared early in the war as an alternative line of communications to the Middle East, should the Red Sea be rendered unsafe by enemy action; a large sum of money had been spent in improving the road across the desert from Haifa to Baghdad.

76. A brigade group was about to sail from India as reinforcement to Malaya; this brigade was diverted at short notice to the Persian Gulf and landed at Basra on 18th April.

Control of the military situation in Iraq had been a responsibility of the Middle East since the beginning of the war, but the Commander-in-Chief in India had lately raised the question whether, in the event of operations in Iraq,