

2. In planning this operation in conjunction with Rear-Admiral Drew, I made a military plan which was in outline that actually used in Operation "Ironclad", and together we reached certain conclusions which were of great importance in planning the latter operation:—

(a) The plan prepared by the Joint Planning Section envisaged a landing on the difficult beaches in Ambararata Bay on the West coast, by one brigade, which was to secure a bridgehead and to cover the landing and forming up of the remainder of the force. It was estimated that the advance on Antsirane could commence on D2 or D3. I formed the opinion that this very orthodox plan gave the enemy far too much time to recover from the hoped for initial surprise, and I decided that, in spite of the difficulties of the beaches and terrain, the first brigade to land should advance on Antsirane immediately after securing the beaches. I considered that speed in the advance of this brigade, with limited armour was more important than the completion of its supporting arms and transport. Further, this advance would give sufficient cover to enable the remainder of the force to land without undue risk.

(b) Rear-Admiral Drew and I decided that much fuller information than was then available would be necessary, that air photographs of the beach area ought to be taken, and that the risk of compromising surprise in doing so should be accepted. As a result of our request to the Chiefs of Staff, orders were issued for the air photographs to be taken which were subsequently used in the operation "Ironclad" and for the collection of further intelligence which was of great value in that operation.

(c) We also reached the conclusion that, while a night or dawn assault on the beaches was essential, the final approach could only be made under certain combined conditions of moon and tide. These, in the Spring and early Summer of 1942, occurred in the early part of each calendar month. We calculated the time required for loading ships, the move to Durban, adjustments at Durban, and final approach, deciding that, if the expedition sailed on 20th February, the assault could take place in the favourable period at the beginning of April.

Meanwhile arrangements were put in train for the rehearsal exercise which was to be conducted by H.Q. Expeditionary Force. About 15th January orders were received that operation "Bonus" was to be held in abeyance and that much of the shipping required for it was to be taken for other convoys.

On the cancellation of operation "Bonus" the forces concerned reverted to command of their normal formations. Later "Z" H.Q. Signals, the only combined operation signals in the United Kingdom, were drafted away.

Exercise "Charcoal"

3. In spite of the cancellation of operation "Bonus", I decided that rehearsal exercise for which plans had been prepared would be of value to my command. I therefore asked H.Q. Expeditionary Force to continue with the exercise, on the reduced scale necessitated by the removal of much of the shipping. This

exercise, known as exercise "Charcoal", was carried out by 102 R.M. Brigade early in February, and many valuable lessons were learnt. I summarise below two lessons which were of particular importance to operation "Ironclad".

This was the first combined operation exercise carried out since October that gave an opportunity to practise the naval and military staffs, the landing craft crews, the beach parties, the docks operating personnel, and the naval and military signals which took part in operation "Ironclad". Due to postings, it was the only combined operations training that many of the new drafts were able to be given.

The exercise was carried out over difficult beaches and required the rapid advance inland of one brigade. This drew attention to the extreme importance of close scrutiny of the landing tables, so that essential vehicles had priority in landing and that these had a high cross country performance. All units had to be prepared to make long advances with very little transport. Although the facts were well known to all concerned in combined operations, a new standard was set by the difficult beaches and terrain used in this exercise.

On conclusion of exercise "Charcoal", my H.Q. and the troops taking part dispersed to their billeting areas, and continued with their training.

Operation "Ironclad"

4. On the 12th March I received orders from H.Q. Expeditionary Force to report to the War Office on the morning 14th March. When I arrived at the War Office, I was informed that the Chiefs of Staff Committee had decided at 11 o'clock the previous night, that the operation, subsequently known as "Ironclad", was to be prepared to capture and to hold the naval base and air base at Diego Suarez during the favourable May moon and tide period, that is between the 3rd and 8th May. The expedition was to sail with convoy WS 17 which was to be delayed until the 23rd March.

Rear Admiral E. N. Syfret was nominated as Combined Commander and I was nominated as Military Commander under him. I was informed that a meeting with him was quite impossible until the arrival of the convoy at Freetown. For all planning before that, which of course included the vital planning for loading the assault ships, he would be represented by Capt. G. W. A. Waller, R.N., who was to be Chief of Staff for the operation; Captain G. A. Garnons-Williams, R.N., who had acted as C.O.S. to Rear Admiral Drew in planning operation "Bonus", was nominated as Senior Naval Officer (Landing) and Naval Assault Commander. Brigadier F. W. Festing as commander of 29 Independent Brigade, the only combined operationally-trained formation in this revised expedition, naturally became the Military Assault Commander.

It will be seen that the time available for preparing this expedition was far less than previously considered necessary. It was estimated, based on operation "Bonus", that the period of time for a similar operation to be mounted was 91 days from the issue of the preparatory orders to the assault; in the event, 52 days elapsed between the two. This saving of time was effected first by using the 29th Independent Brigade and