

should retain control of its sea-head. On all matters save those of policy, Headquarters, Tripolitania Base and Lines of Communication, was to deal direct with Middle East and, in effect, it consolidated Eighth Army's demands on General Headquarters Middle East, and distributed supplies to Eighth Army, thereby simplifying many of the problems of supply.

20. This re-organisation, valuable though it was, left Middle East Command still faced with the problems inseparable from the length of the supply route, the need for maintenance and guards, the time-lag involved, and the large tonnages required to stock the advanced base and to keep the army in action.

21. In order to prepare the port of Tripoli and to put it into working order as rapidly as possible, heavy repair and maintenance projects had to be carried through, with consequent demands for cement, oxygen, acetylene and labour.

22. The most important installation to need repair was the bulk petrol storage. Captured storage tanks with a capacity of nearly 11,000 tons were rapidly repaired and put into service, and bulk tanker shipments of petrol were begun immediately. It proved quicker to repair existing installations than to erect new ones, and further repairs were continued; although not completed by the end of the Tunisian campaign, a total of 26,000 tons of petrol storage was in use by the end of May. In addition, a tin factory was despatched to Tripoli and erected there, but was not in use until 16th May. By that date it was too late to be of use in the Tunisian campaign, but proved of great value for subsequent maintenance of the line of communication and for building up reserves in preparation for the invasion of Sicily.

23. Another problem was the repair and operation of the cold-storage plant at Tripoli. The difficulties of keeping the army supplied with fresh meat were never satisfactorily solved to the end of the Tunisian campaign, owing to the shortage of refrigerator ships, of which there were only two available for this run. Although the cold-storage capacity at Tripoli was increased from 200 tons in February to 700 tons in April this was still barely adequate for the needs of the Army.

24. As a result of the repair and maintenance work carried out at Tripoli, by 23rd February the port had reached an average daily capacity of almost 3,000 tons, excluding bulk petrol which then averaged 1,000 tons a day. During March the capacity was further increased and at times reached 5,000 tons of stores a day in addition to bulk petrol. By the end of the campaign, in May, nearly 290,000 tons of stores and 66,000 tons of bulk petrol had been discharged at this one port.

25. Whilst these heavy repairs were being carried out at Tripoli, Middle East was also providing many of the new installations necessary to enable the advanced base to be set up.

26. The development of Tripoli as a medical base was slow owing to the limited amount of shipping space available, and some anxiety was felt before the Battle of Mareth because of the number of hospital beds available. By 13th March only two general hospitals and two African sections, with accommodation for 1,600 beds, plus a further hospital with

stretchers for 200 light cases, had been opened. By 21st March this had been increased to 4,400 beds, and by the middle of April Tripoli had 5,100 hospital beds and a convalescent depot with a capacity of 2,000.

Owing to the distance from Cairo it was also necessary to establish a base transfusion unit at Tripoli. Blood was got from troops in the Tripoli area, which relieved the strain on the unit at Cairo. During March to April over 2,800 bottles of blood and almost 2,500 bottles of plasma were sent to Eighth Army. This efficient blood transfusion service, and the mobile casualty clearing stations and field surgical units, avoided much suffering and saved many lives.

27. Middle East was also still responsible for fourth echelon repair after Eighth Army passed to the command of 18 Army Group, and to carry out this duty it was necessary to establish an advanced base workshop at Tripoli. This was installed and at work by the end of February. Although difficulties were anticipated, during the campaign the field workshops of Eighth Army were always kept amply supplied with major replacement assemblies to meet the army's requirements.

28. This development of Tripoli as the advanced base for Eighth Army did not mean that the Western Desert ports and the road line of communication could be neglected. Much work remained to be done at Tobruk and Benghazi; at both ports water supplies were developed and improved, electric supply and drainage systems were repaired and kept running, and large slipways were constructed for the Royal Navy.

On the line of communication both up to and forward of Tripoli, engineering work was handicapped by a shortage of transporters for moving forward heavy equipment; but the road system was put into working order after the systematic demolitions which it had suffered, the telephone system had to be re-organised and re-established, and there was also a considerable amount of work to be undertaken in the construction of airfields urgently needed for both the offensive and defensive operations of the Royal Air Force. In all twenty-two all-weather runways were completed in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, in addition to about fifty fair-weather landing grounds and the numerous fighter strips made for Eighth Army.

29. The result of the successful establishment of Tripoli as an advanced base was that the build-up of Eighth Army for its further advance was carried through. Both the 30th Corps and the 10th Corps were brought up to strength, and by 3rd March, 11,318 reinforcements had been despatched from the Delta against demands for 8,900. Sixty-two per cent. of Middle East's intake of vehicles was sent up to Eighth Army during the period up to 15th March, including a special despatch of 520 vehicles which was sent up on 23rd February, and by the end of March 20,000 tons of ammunition had been sent through Tripoli for distribution to Eighth Army.

30. Once the advanced base at Tripoli had been established, and Eighth Army prepared for its further advance, the forwarding of supplies and reinforcements for the army during the advance became my most serious