

soon as the necessary protection could be provided.

As usual, time was the ruling factor. We were unlikely to be strong enough by the spring of 1942 to conduct an offensive in the west and at the same time hold off a determined attack from the north which, according to information then available, was likely eventually to present the more serious threat to our bases in the Middle East and Iraq. Should our offensive be delayed for some unforeseen reason, we might have to stop short and resist attack from the north before achieving our ultimate object of seizing Tripolitania.

I explained my views in an Instruction issued on the 17th October to the Commanders of the Eighth and Ninth Armies and of the British Troops in Egypt.* Every possible step which could be taken must be taken at once and every possible need which could be foreseen must be foreseen at once, so as to ensure the complete success of the offensive. General Cunningham must be given all the forces and resources he needed and must retain them as long as he required them.

On the 29th September General Cunningham gave me his appreciation and plan.† Of the two courses General Cunningham preferred that of an attack from the centre along the coast. He explained the reasons for his choice in his appreciation and again at a meeting of the three Commanders-in-Chief.

To capture Bengasi by an advance based on Giarabub and Gialo would not, it seemed, necessarily ensure the immediate surrender of the enemy forces in Eastern Cyrenaica, as they had built up enough reserves there to allow them to subsist for some time. Our lines of communication would be very long and vulnerable. Moreover, we should be compelled to split our air forces and, still more important as their range was limited, our armoured forces. As we seemed likely to have slightly fewer aircraft and to be not greatly superior to the enemy in armour, it was essential to concentrate our forces. We were bent on destroying the enemy's armoured forces as early as possible, and it seemed that the best way of bringing them to battle under conditions most favourable to ourselves from all points of view, was to direct our own armoured formations towards Tobruk.

In the earliest stages of my planning, I had hoped to be able to leave a sufficiently strong armoured force to contain the enemy in the Tobruk area, moving straight with the remainder on Bengasi. This depended on my having at my disposal at least two armoured divisions. The requisite forces were not available, and this plan would, I think, have been impossible in any event owing to maintenance difficulties.

The other plan was examined and analysed many times during the months preceding the launching of the offensive and was considered by all those primarily responsible, including myself, to be the best. The Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief and I agreed that the main attack should be directed not on Bengasi, but towards Tobruk, and that this would be the most likely way of making the enemy give

battle on ground of our choosing. At a conference on the 3rd October we gave our approval to the land and air plans which differed only in detail from the final plans to be described later.

Outline Plan.

The plan which General Cunningham submitted went no further than the destruction of the enemy's armour and the relief of Tobruk. Subsequent plans for capturing Bengasi depended on the success of the first part of the operation. If any enemy tanks should escape, our further course of action would depend on their strength and movements.

Briefly, the original conception was that our armoured forces should open the offensive by moving directly on Tobruk, followed by a completely motorised division. The two Panzer Divisions, believed to be lying between Bardia and Tobruk, would then be drawn out and compelled to accept battle away from their supporting fortresses and infantry formations.

We counted on being able to oppose between 450 and 500 cruiser and American tanks to the enemy's 250. This latter figure did not include the 138 tanks of the Italian Ariete Division, which, although it lay to the south of Tobruk on the flank of our proposed line of advance, was believed to be not very formidable. This estimate of its value, based on the experience of General Wavell's campaign of the previous winter, proved to be somewhat erroneous.

The idea was that by moving wide we should force the enemy to come out and fight on ground not of his choosing and away from his minefields and prepared defences round Sidi Omar and Capuzzo. We hoped that our numerical superiority in tanks would enable us to destroy his two Panzer divisions and open the way for the motorised divisions to force a passage to Tobruk. Meanwhile the 13th Corps comprising two infantry divisions with all the available infantry tanks, were to contain the enemy in the frontier area. But they were not to expose themselves to attack by enemy tanks by moving forward into the no-man's land between Tobruk and Bardia until this risk had been removed by the victory of our armoured forces.*

Administrative Arrangements.

Two great constructional enterprises were undertaken in order to solve the two principal difficulties confronting the army in mounting an offensive in Cyrenaica. In previous operations the railhead and main water-point had been at Matruh, some hundred and thirty miles from the frontier. This was nearly twice the usually accepted distance between railhead and the front, and the frontier was only the starting line, the proposed battlefield being about seventy-five miles further on.

General Wavell, who had himself suffered from this grave disadvantage, had taken steps to remedy it as soon as the necessary resources were available, and had given orders in June for work to begin at once on the extension of the railway above the escarpment towards Capuzzo. Remarkable progress was made and by the end of October a new railhead was opened at Bir Misheifa, seventy-five miles west of Matruh. The new line brought an

* G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. 103, 17th October 1941—Appendix 3.

† Appreciation by Lt.-Gen. Sir Alan Cunningham, 28th September 1941—Appendix 2.

* My ideas on the general strategy of the offensive are given in a note prepared on the 30th October 1941—Appendix 4.