



SUPPLEMENT

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OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM 1st NOVEMBER 1941 TO 15th AUGUST 1942.

The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 27th January, 1943, by GENERAL SIR CLAUDE J. E. AUCHINLECK, G.C.I.E., C.B., C.S.I., D.S.O., O.B.E., A.D.C., Commander-in-Chief, The Middle East Forces.

INTRODUCTION.

Of the numerous problems of the Middle East Command two ranked high above all others: to destroy the enemy in North Africa and to secure the northern flank.

I had always conceived the former to be my prime task, for the presence of strong and well-equipped Axis forces in Cyrenaica was a constant menace to our base in Egypt. I planned to occupy the whole of Libya, Tripolitania as well as Cyrenaica, so as to leave the enemy no foothold whence he might, at some future date, revive the threat to Egypt. Moreover, it was always possible that we might eventually launch an offensive against Italy herself, and as a stepping stone it seemed essential to capture Tripoli. This policy had the full approval of His Majesty's Government.

The other problem, however, I could not for one moment neglect. The danger that Germany might attack Turkey and that Turkey might collapse was always present. Moreover the German invasion of Russia, which progressed at first with alarming rapidity, meant that danger threatened the Northern Front from the Caucasus also.

Swift as their initial advance was, it seemed impossible that the Germans should appear in the Caucasus before the early spring of 1942, and I thought it might be possible to destroy the German and Italian army in North Africa before that should occur. In November, there were sufficient troops already in the Middle East and enough reinforcements promised, to allow me to conduct an offensive in the west and yet be able to turn in time to stave off a possible

threat from the north. The scope of the proposed offensive was ambitious, but it could be contemplated without running undue risks elsewhere, provided that the destruction of most of the enemy forces was effected in Eastern Cyrenaica. Above all, it was essential that there should be no delay.

The offensive was a success, but rather slower, more costly, and less complete than I had hoped. Nevertheless, of the enemy forces in Cyrenaica over two-thirds were destroyed.

Even before Cyrenaica had been reconquered, war had broken out with Japan, and His Majesty's Government were obliged to divert to the Far East two divisions and certain air force reinforcements intended for the Middle East. But there was still no necessity to rescind the decision to invade Tripolitania. The successful Russian counter-offensive in the winter of 1941-42 offset the loss of promised reinforcements in point of time, but not as regards the size of the forces which would eventually be required to garrison the whole Command, if the Germans should take the offensive once more and defeat the Russians. We were always handicapped in our calculations, I may say, by lack of knowledge of Soviet capabilities and intentions. However, so important to the conduct of the war as a whole were the advantages of securing Tripoli, that it was worth taking further risks.

While we were preparing to resume the offensive, two Australian divisions were recalled from Syria and Palestine to the Pacific theatre and several air force squadrons were withdrawn to the Far East.

In January, 1942, the enemy attacked, thus anticipating our proposed invasion of Tripolitania. Though our naval forces and aircraft had drastically restricted the enemy's build-up of supplies in Africa during the latter half of 1941, by the end of the year the situation had changed greatly to our disadvantage. Powerful German naval and air reinforcements now