

Troops in Egypt, elaborating my policy for the general defence of Egypt against an enemy advance from the West.

As the armoured units were re-equipped and became more numerous a more offensive policy was gradually adopted. Finally, immediately following an enemy reconnaissance in force on the 14th September, it was possible to move armoured troops, supported by an infantry division, well in advance of Sidi Barrani to cover the preparations for the coming offensive, and to secure the advanced landing grounds of the Royal Air Force against attack.

25. On the 14th September the enemy advanced to test our strength and dispositions above the escarpment. The force consisted of two columns. The northern column was composed of about 100 tanks, and the southern contained chiefly lorried infantry and maintenance vehicles escorted by armoured cars. Our reconnaissance elements and light columns withdrew, inflicting casualties on the enemy. By nightfall the enemy tanks had reached the Rabia area, but during the night they withdrew. By first light on the 17th September our troops had returned to their original positions.

Our columns and aircraft inflicted greater losses on the enemy than they received. Our losses were fifteen casualties, an armoured car, a bomber and six fighters destroyed and several trucks and one fighter damaged; against this the enemy suffered almost a hundred casualties and lost fourteen tanks, fifteen vehicles and twenty-two aircraft. It was fortunate that the test of our strength and intentions came at a time when our policy was about to be completely altered.

26. The enemy also undertook the reorganisation of his forces in North Africa during this period. On the 19th July General Ettore Bastico took over the Supreme Command in Libya from General Garibaldi. It is probable that the appointment of General Bastico, a reported expert on mechanised warfare, was intended as much to show that Italian interests in Libya were at least equal to German interests in Libya as to reorganise the Italian forces and revive their morale.

There is little doubt that General Bastico made progress in the work of reorganisation, although to what extent he was able to raise Italian prestige and morale remained to be seen. The much-battered Trento Division was relieved at Tobruk by the Bologna Division, and the almost extinct Sabarata Division was reorganised and employed on garrison duties. The 21st Corps Headquarters was reconstituted to control the divisions about Tobruk. But the most important measure taken by General Bastico was the organisation of a mobile corps in Cyrenaica. This corps comprises the Trento and Ariete Divisions and also the Trieste Division, which reached Tripoli by the end of August. Although this division probably lost much of its transport in sea transit, it appears to have refurnished itself from an Autocentro which arrived in Tripoli at about the same time. The Ariete Division was reorganised on a basis of three tank battalions with a total of 138 tanks.

During the same period the German forces had also undergone reorganisation. About mid-August the 5th Light (motorised) Division was converted into an armoured division and re-

numbered 24. Units of a German positional division were identified in Libya, three battalions having taken the place of lorried infantry in the line at Tobruk. There was evidence that the Germans were contemplating the despatch of such a division as early as May, and the first units began to arrive in July. The main purpose in sending this division appeared to be the release of the lorried infantry for their proper mobile role. Both the 5th and 8th Tank Regiments were reinforced from June onwards on a new establishment totalling 136 tanks. Finally, Panzergruppe Afrika was formed, consisting of the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, commanded by General Rommel.

Throughout the summer the enemy devoted much attention to building defences on the frontier between Sollum and Sidi Omar. The Halfaya position was completed, and Sidi Omar was also fortified and surrounded by minefields. The enemy further attempted to link these two positions and the intervening posts with further minefields. The whole purpose of this position seemed to be to provide a strong pivot from the shelter of which the enemy could manoeuvre south and south-east of Sidi Omar or against British forces attempting to move from the frontier area towards Tobruk.

TOBRUK.

27. Our freedom from embarrassment in the frontier area for four and a half months is to be ascribed largely to the defenders of Tobruk. Behaving not as a hardly pressed garrison but as a spirited force ready at any moment to launch an attack, they contained an enemy force twice their strength. By keeping the enemy continually in a high state of tension, they held back four Italian divisions and three German battalions from the frontier area from April until November.

The exploits of the garrison, which was commanded from the first days of the siege until 22nd October by Major-General L. J. Morshead, are famous all over the world and are too numerous to be recounted in detail here. In spite of continuous strain, the spirit of the British, Imperial and Allied troops was magnificent throughout. The infantry displayed great stubbornness in defence and dash in attack, while the work of the field and anti-aircraft artillery and of the machine guns, inflicting many casualties on the enemy, was of the highest order. The exploits of the innumerable patrols carried out almost nightly by the cavalry and infantry units of the garrison deserve the highest praise. Not only did these patrols collect most valuable information and numerous prisoners, but they were in large part responsible for making it possible to hold a perimeter thirty miles long with only seven battalions and one cavalry regiment in the front line.

Major-General L. J. Morshead organised the defence with great ability and resourcefulness. He was assisted in his difficult task by his G.S.O.I., Colonel C. E. M. Lloyd, whose industry and cheerfulness were unfailing.

I also wish to commend especially the work of the anti-aircraft defences under Brigadier J. R. Slater. They formed the sole means of defence against air attack, as our air bases were too distant to allow fighter aircraft to operate over this area. They performed their duties with