

their progress via Italy and Sicily, no definite information to justify our expecting the presence of German troops in Africa had been received up to the middle of February. Our intelligence from Italy was meagre in the extreme and usually unreliable; nor were sufficient long range aircraft available for more than a very occasional reconnaissance of shipping in Italian harbours or in Tripoli. From North Africa itself our intelligence reports were practically none, since no service of agents had been established there during the period before Italy came into the war nor was it possible now to establish one. We were thus working almost entirely in the dark as to the possibility of German formations being sent to Libya, and on the whole the balance of our information was against any such troops having been sent or being on their way to Libya. Actually, the landing of a German Light Armoured Division at Tripoli had begun early in February.

I estimated that it would be at least two months after the landing of German forces at Tripoli before they could undertake a serious offensive against Cyrenaica, and that, therefore, there was not likely to be any serious threat to our positions there before May at the earliest. I accordingly considered that a garrison of one armoured brigade and one division would be sufficient to leave as a flank guard in Cyrenaica and that it would be safe to leave comparatively unequipped and untrained troops there so long as their training and equipment would be completed by May, by which time I hoped to have reinforcements available of at least one Indian Division from the Sudan.

I had intended originally that the division to be left in Cyrenaica should be the 6th Australian Division, and that the 7th Australian Division should be the first Australian division to proceed to Greece. This would mean that at least one fully equipped and seasoned division would be available for the defence of Cyrenaica for the first month or so, since it was calculated that the despatch of the total force to Greece would take 10 weeks to complete. General Blamey, commanding the Australian Forces, insisted, however, and as it proved rightly so, that the 7th Division was not sufficiently trained or equipped and that the 6th Division must be the first to proceed. This involved relieving the 6th Australian Division at once by the 9th Australian Division, which was only partially trained and equipped.

The armoured troops for the defence of Cyrenaica would have to be found by taking one brigade from the 2nd Armoured Division, leaving the other brigade available for despatch to Greece; both brigades would consist of one Cruiser regiment and one light tank regiment only. I decided to send part of the Support Group with each brigade and to send the Headquarters of the 2nd Armoured Division to Cyrenaica. General Tilly, soon after reaching Egypt, had died and Major-General Gambier-Parry was now in command of the division.

To increase the armoured troops in Cyrenaica, I decided to form a unit from captured Italian medium tanks.

Conversations with Greek Government.

11. At the conversations held at Tatoi Palace on the evening of 22nd February, the Greek Commander-in-Chief, General Papagos, described his proposals for defence in the event of a German attack on Greece. It will be ob-

vious that against a German attack through Bulgaria the long narrow strip of Macedonia and Western Thrace would be, in spite of the limited approaches through the mountain ranges to the north, extremely difficult to defend owing to the lack of depth. The Greeks had prepared a fortified line covering Macedonia which had considerable strength; but the greater part of the garrison had already been taken for operations in Albania, and the troops remaining, even with the proposed British reinforcements, would be insufficient to hold this long line. The same objections applied to a somewhat shorter position approximately on the line of the Struma Valley covering Salonika. West of Salonika there was a much shorter and naturally strong defensive line along the line of hills west of the Vardar, following in part the line of the Aliakhmon river. This defensive position was called by General Papagos the "Aliakhmon Line." He stated that, if the Yugoslavs would act as allies, there was every advantage in holding a line covering Salonika since this was the only port through which munitions and supplies could be sent to Yugoslavia; in view, however, of the dubious attitude of the Yugoslavs it was impossible to rely on their co-operation; and he therefore proposed to withdraw the Greek troops in Macedonia and Eastern Thrace, except for covering detachments, to the Aliakhmon Line to prepare a defensive position there. He also indicated that it would probably be necessary to begin the withdrawal of the Greek forces in Albania to a shorter line and to use a part of them for the reinforcement of the Aliakhmon Line. He stated that it would require some twenty days to withdraw the troops in Macedonia and that he would then have a concentration of thirty-five battalions on the Aliakhmon line with one or two divisions in reserve. When joined by the British contingent, this would constitute a formidable defensive force in a very strong natural position. The main danger to it lay in the exposure of the left flank if German forces succeeded in advancing through Southern Yugoslavia and in entering Greece by the valley of the Cherna or Monastir Gap. It was considered, however, that the Yugoslavs, even if they would not beforehand make common cause with the Allies in resisting the Germans, would fight to deny them passage through Yugoslavia and that, if so, the mountainous nature of the country would make the German turning movement slow and difficult.

The proposals of General Papagos appeared to offer a reasonable prospect of establishing an effective defence against German aggression in the north-east of Greece. It was recognised that our chief dangers would come from our inferiority in the air, the uncertainty of the Yugoslav attitude and the dangers to our shipping in the narrow waters of the Aegean. It was considered, however, that the importance of bringing timely assistance to Greece was such that these risks were acceptable. The conference agreed to the proposals of General Papagos; and it was understood that he would at once begin the withdrawal of troops from Macedonia to the Aliakhmon line.

12. While active preparations were made for the despatch of the force to Greece, the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the Imperial