



**SUPPLEMENT**

TO

# The London Gazette

Of TUESDAY, the 2nd of JULY, 1946

**Published by Authority**

*Registered as a newspaper*

WEDNESDAY, 3 JULY, 1946

*The War Office,  
July, 1946.*

## OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST FROM 7TH FEBRUARY, 1941 TO 15TH JULY, 1941

*The following Despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 5th September, 1941, by GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief, in the Middle East.*

### OPERATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST. 7th FEBRUARY, 1941, TO 15th JULY, 1941.

#### *Situation after Capture of Benghazi.*

1. While the operations in the Western Desert and Cyrenaica, described in my despatch covering the period 7th December, 1940, to 7th February, 1941, were taking place, a campaign which was to prove of almost equal importance to the fortunes of the British Forces in the Middle East was being fought in Greece and Albania.

The unprovoked and treacherous attack of the Italians on Greece which had begun at the end of October, 1940, had been repulsed by a swift Greek counter-stroke, and the Italians had been driven back into Albania. During the winter of 1940/41 the Greeks, in spite of appalling conditions of weather and in most difficult country, gradually forced the Italians back in Albania and had hopes of driving them out of Albania altogether. A small British air force with certain army units for its protection and service, had been in Greece since November.

2. At first the senior partner of the Axis had seemed to be disinterested in the Italian misfortunes in Albania as well as in Libya, but early in 1941 German troops were fully established in occupation of Rumania and it became clear that a further movement south-east was impending. The attitude of Bulgaria, obviously to be the next victim of German aggression, did not long remain doubtful, and it soon became fairly certain that her rulers did not intend to resist a German advance through Bulgaria, which might be directed either at Turkey or at Greece, our only two remaining allies in Europe who were likely to resist German aggression.

3. In the middle of January, while operations against Tobruk were still in progress, I had been

ordered by the War Cabinet to visit Greece and to make an offer to the Greeks of armoured troops, field artillery, anti-tank artillery and anti-aircraft guns to assist their forces in the defence of Salonika and Macedonia against possible German aggression. I was in Athens from 13th to 17th January and had a series of conferences with the Greek Premier, General Metaxas, and the Greek Commander-in-Chief, General Papagos. As a result, the offer of the British Government was declined, mainly on the grounds that the landing of further British forces in Greece was likely to provoke German aggression without being strong enough to check it. Had this offer been accepted, it is improbable that it would have been possible to continue the operations in Cyrenaica beyond Tobruk. After the refusal of assistance by the Greeks, an offer was made by the Prime Minister of assistance, especially by air forces, to Turkey, which was also declined on similar grounds.

4. Immediately after the fall of Benghazi on 7th February, I received a telegram from the Chiefs of Staff setting out a new policy for the forces in the Middle East. General Metaxas had died towards the end of January and the new Greek Government had sent a request on 8th February for information as to what help we could afford them in the event of a German attack. The War Cabinet accordingly directed that no operations were to be undertaken beyond the frontier of Cyrenaica, which should be held with the minimum possible force necessary to secure the flank of our Egyptian base, and that it was essential to be able to send the largest possible army and air forces from the Middle East to assist the Greeks against a German attack through Bulgaria. At the same time the operations against the Italian Dodecanese, which were in preparation, were to be pressed on and undertaken at the earliest possible moment.

5. The Chiefs of Staff's telegram stated that the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Eden, and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir John

Dill, were setting out by air for Cairo on 12th February to discuss our policy and strategy in the Middle East. They were delayed owing to bad weather in the Mediterranean and did not arrive in Cairo till late at night on 19th February, five valuable days being thus lost at a critical time. Shortly after their arrival, on 22nd February, British representatives, including Mr. Eden, General Sir John Dill, Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore (Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East) and myself flew to Greece and held a series of conversations that evening at Tatoi Palace near Athens.

*Military Position in Middle East at beginning of February.*

6. It is necessary at this stage to recapitulate the troops available in the Middle East Command and their state of readiness for battle. The following formations existed:—

<i>In Western Desert</i>	7th Armoured Division. 6th Australian Division.
<i>In Egypt</i>	2nd Armoured Division. New Zealand Division. 6th British Division (in process of formation). Polish Brigade Group.
<i>In Palestine</i>	7th Australian Division. 9th Australian Division.
<i>In Eritrea</i>	(Engaged in front of Keren). 4th Indian Division. 5th Indian Division.
<i>In East Africa</i>	1st South African Division, 11th African Division, 12th African Division (about to begin operations against Kisumu).

7. Of the above, the 7th Armoured Division had been fighting continuously for eight months and was mechanically incapable of further action; only a fraction of its tanks had succeeded, thanks to most skilful maintenance, in reaching Beda Fomm for the final engagement of the Cyrenaican campaign. It was obvious that the armoured vehicles of this division would require a complete overhaul and would be in workshops for many weeks to come. For all practical purposes the 7th Armoured Division had ceased to be available as a fighting formation.

The 2nd Armoured Division, which arrived from the United Kingdom on 1st January, 1941, consisted of two Cruiser regiments and two Light Tank regiments only, the other two regiments of the division having been sent out some months previously to bring up to strength the 7th Armoured Division which had always been short of two regiments of its establishment. These two regiments of the 2nd Armoured Division had formed part of the 7th Armoured Division throughout the Western Desert operation and shared with the rest of the 7th Armoured Division the same mechanical exhaustion.

Thus all the armoured troops available were the four regiments and Support Group of the 2nd Armoured Division, and from these I had to find armoured forces for both Cyrenaica and Greece. The Commander of the 2nd Armoured Division, Major-General J. C. Tilly, on arrival in Egypt gave me a most alarming

account of the mechanical state of his two Cruiser regiments, of which he said the tracks were practically worn out, while the engines had already done a considerable mileage. He had been informed that fresh tracks would be supplied him in the Middle East, which had been specially made in Australia. After some investigation these tracks were discovered but on trial proved to be practically useless; and the two Cruiser regiments continued with their old tracks, which it was hoped would give less trouble in the desert than they had at home.

8. Of the three Australian divisions, the 6th Australian Division had taken part in the Cyrenaican campaign from Bardia to Benghazi, was seasoned and fully equipped and had not suffered heavy casualties. The 7th Australian Division had had no training as a division and was still in process of equipment, while the 9th Australian Division had only recently arrived, was only partially trained and was very short of equipment.

The New Zealand Division was fully trained and equipped and available for operations, but the 6th British Division, which was being formed out of various British battalions in Egypt, had practically speaking no existence as a division and was without artillery and supporting arms; it was being trained for landing operations against the Italian Dodecanese. The Polish Brigade Group was available but was not fully equipped.

The 4th and 5th Indian Divisions were engaged in front of Keren; it was hoped, should Keren fall and the campaign in Eritrea be concluded, to withdraw one of these divisions to garrison Cyrenaica; meantime neither division could be reckoned as available.

Of the troops in East Africa, the South African Division had been provided by South Africa for the operations in East Africa only and had not been released for operations further north, while the two African divisions were not suitable in personnel, training or equipment for operations in North Africa or on the continent of Europe.

9. Thus the maximum force that could be made available for Greece was part of the 2nd Armoured Division, the New Zealand Division, two Australian Divisions (the 6th and 7th) and the Polish Brigade Group, and of these both the 7th Australian Division and the Polish Brigade Group were still incomplete in equipment.

It was not considered that any smaller force than the above would be likely to affect the operations in Greece, but the despatch of this force involved removing from the Middle East practically the whole of the troops which were fully equipped and fit for operations.

10. At the time when the decision as to the maximum force which could be despatched to Greece had to be made, there seemed no serious risk to our position anywhere in North Africa. The Italian armies in Cyrenaica had been so completely defeated that any counter-attack by them could be ruled out for some time to come, practically the whole of their armoured fighting vehicles and nearly all the Italian artillery in North Africa had been captured or destroyed and the fighting value of the Italian troops remaining in Tripolitania could, for all practical purposes, be discounted.

Though unconfirmed reports had been received from time to time of the preparation of German troops for despatch to Libya and of

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 Tatou 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

General Staff, accompanied by my Chief of the General Staff, proceeded to Turkey for discussions with the Turkish Government and General Staff. Though the Turks showed themselves still cordial to the alliance and approved our action in supporting Greece, they professed themselves unable, owing to lack of modern equipment, to take any action should the Germans enter Bulgaria, or to give assistance to the Greeks should the Germans attack them. While these conversations were still in progress the Germans, on 1st March, entered Bulgaria.

13. From Turkey the party proceeded direct on a further visit to Athens. On arrival there they found to their dismay that General Papagos had changed his attitude. He had not, apparently for political reasons, ordered the withdrawal of the troops in Macedonia to the Aliakhmon Line and he now declared this to be impossible in view of the German entry into Bulgaria, since the troops might be attacked while in process of withdrawal. He also stated that any withdrawal of reserves from Albania was impossible. He now proposed that the British contingent should land at Salonika and be sent forward to hold the advanced line in Macedonia which he had agreed at the previous conference was strategically unsound.

The British representatives were therefore faced with the situation that, instead of a strong and effective Greek force to hold the Aliakhmon Line, there would only be one weak division, and that there was every prospect of the Greek forces being defeated in detail. In these circumstances I was summoned to Athens and a series of long conferences took place between 2nd and 5th March, as a result of which it was decided that the Greek army should leave three divisions in Macedonia to defend the prepared positions on the frontier, but would concentrate on the Aliakhmon Line three divisions and seven independent battalions, to hold the line and prepare it for defence until the arrival of the British contingent, which would be disembarked mainly at the Piraeus, except for certain units and stores which would be landed at Volos. This was a very unsatisfactory arrangement in comparison with the original proposal but it was found impossible to persuade the Greeks to move back the troops in Macedonia, and the alternative of refusing to send aid to the Greeks altogether seemed politically impossible.

14. The despatch of the British force to Greece began on 5th March. The formations were to proceed in the following order:—

- 1st Armoured Brigade.
- New Zealand Division.
- 6th Australian Division.
- Polish Independent Brigade Group.
- 7th Australian Division.

It was estimated that the programme would be completed by 11th May.

#### *Concentration of British Forces in Greece*

15. General Sir H. M. Wilson had been selected for command of the British forces in Greece, his place in Cyrenaica being taken by Lieut.-General P. Neame from Palestine. General Wilson arrived in Athens on 4th March, but owing to the insistence of the Greek Government on the avoidance of anything that might be held to provoke the Germans he was compelled for a month to remain incognito under

the pseudonym of Mr. Watt. This restriction hampered him in supervising the occupation of the Aliakhmon position and in reconnoitring the ground over which operations might take place. Several representations to the Greek Government, however, were met with a request that his incognito should be preserved, although it was quite obvious that the Germans were well informed both of his presence and of the landing of British troops. It was agreed with the Greek Government that General Wilson, when the time came, should be in command of all the troops, British and Greek, in the Aliakhmon position. This force was subsequently entitled "W" Force. The Greek portion of it was known as the Central Macedonian Army. Its original composition was the 12th Division from Macedonia (six battalions, one field battery, one or two mountain batteries and a group of seven 150 mm. guns); the 20th Division from Florina (six battalions, one or two field batteries and one or two mountain batteries); and the 19th Mechanized Division from Larissa, which had only recently been formed, had little training and was of slight value. The 19th Division was removed to another front on the arrival of the New Zealand Division. There were also seven battalions to be withdrawn from Western Thrace. This Greek force consisted of second line troops of doubtful fighting value, and was a very poor substitute for the original force of five good divisions promised by General Papagos.

16. The general situation in Greece at this time was that practically the whole of the Greek army was involved in Albania, where some 300,000 troops had been concentrated. The aim of the Greek army in Albania had been, ever since their successful counter-attack at the end of 1940, to reach the line Berat-Valona. Not only would this line enable them considerably to shorten their front, but it was estimated that if the port of Valona passed out of Italian hands, the Italians would be quite unable to support the large force they had assembled in northern Albania. The Greeks had made frequent representations to the British Government that British naval and air forces should combine to prevent the transport of reinforcements from Italy across the Adriatic to Albania. In the narrow waters of the Adriatic it was impossible to maintain a sufficient naval force, and our air resources were never sufficient to keep up a heavy scale of attack on the ports in Italy or Albania. Consequently the Italians were able to keep up a continual flow of reinforcements into Albania and to prevent the Greeks from attaining their main objective of Valona. As a result of the appalling conditions of their long winter campaign the Greek army had begun to deteriorate in morale and fighting value.

When the German menace developed it would obviously have been sound strategy for the Greeks to withdraw from Albania to a shorter front, so as to make available reserves for north-eastern Greece to meet the German attack. General Papagos, however, while recognising the theoretical soundness of this move, felt that a withdrawal would have a disastrous effect on the morale of the Greek army after its series of successes over the Italians. Further, the lack of mechanical transport and shortage even of pack animals, together with the very poor communications

available, made it almost impossible to transfer any considerable portion of the Greek army from the Albanian front elsewhere without very long delays. A further consideration that influenced General Papagos in delaying any transfer of troops till too late was the hope that the Yugoslavs might yet join the Allies, and by attacking the Italian forces in the rear compel the evacuation or surrender of the Italian army in Albania. This would have enabled a large proportion of the Greek army to be transferred to meet the Germans without loss of morale.

17. The undeveloped state of communications in Greece and the poor equipment of the Greek army must be borne in mind throughout in considering the operations in Greece. Greece is for the most part a country of high and difficult mountains with poor communications, where pack transport or ox wagons are the normal means of communication. There are few good roads and these are usually narrow where they pass through the mountains, making the use of mechanical transport extremely difficult. The Greek army was almost entirely unprovided with mechanical transport, except such as we had supplied, while our own troops on a mechanized basis and without pack transport often found extreme difficulty in working mechanical transport on the difficult, hilly roads or in the conditions of deep mud in the plains. The climate during March and April is severe in the hilly country, where snow falls were frequent, and there was much rain in the plains, rendering the poor roads even more difficult.

So far as was possible, the Greek troops with their pack transport held the hilly country, while the British forces were employed to cover the main roads by which alone their mechanical transport could operate.

18. The first flight of the British force disembarked at the Piraeus on 7th March, nearly a week after the Germans had entered Bulgaria. The first fighting troops to arrive were the 1st Armoured Brigade Group, under Brigadier H. V. S. Charrington. It consisted of:—

- 4th Hussars (Light Tanks).
- 3rd R.T.R. (Cruiser Tanks).
- 2 R.H.A. (25-pounders).
- Northumberland Hussars (Anti-tank).
- 3rd Cheshire Field Squadron, R.E.
- Rangers (Motor Battalion).

It completed its concentration in the forward area about 21st March, and was given the task of operating east of the defensive position in order to cover the occupation of the position and the preparation of demolitions by the Royal Engineers.

The next to arrive was the New Zealand Division, under Major-General Freyberg, which was concentrated on the right of the position, in the Katerini area, by 2nd April. The 6th Australian Division, under Major-General Sir Ivan Mackay, was still in process of arrival when the Germans invaded Greece.

19. The attitude of the Yugoslav Government had, as already indicated, been most uncertain. Finally, towards the end of March, they signed an agreement with the Germans. This caused deep resentment to the greater part of the Yugoslav nation and led to a *coup d'état* on the 27th March in which the existing Government was overthrown and a new one formed, pledged to defend Yugoslavia against any German attack. The reaction of the

Germans was practically immediate, and on 6th April German forces invaded both Greece and Yugoslavia.

Although repeated efforts had been made to get into touch with the Yugoslav authorities and to concert some plan of action in the event of Yugoslavia defending herself against a German attack, it had proved impossible to get the Yugoslavs to agree to any plan of combined action or even to a meeting. On 9th March the Yugoslav General Staff had sent an officer in mufti, under the name of Mr. Hope, to Athens for discussion, but he had had no power to commit the Yugoslav General Staff to any plans and did not even seem to be aware if any plan existed. Eventually, after the *coup d'état*, the C.I.G.S., Sir John Dill, flew to Belgrade on 1st April, but was unable to obtain agreement to a combined plan of action. Two days later a meeting was arranged with considerable difficulty at Florina, at which General Papagos and General Wilson met General Jankovitch, the newly appointed Yugoslav Director of Military Operations and Intelligence. The discussions revealed that the Yugoslavs were completely unready, had no practical plan of action, had an entirely exaggerated idea of the strength of the British forces in Greece and had made no preparations to meet a German attack. The German attack took place two days later and no further touch was obtained with the Yugoslav army.

#### *German Counter Attack in Cyrenaica.*

20. Before describing the campaign in Greece it will be convenient to turn to events in Cyrenaica. During March, while the concentration in Greece was proceeding, the situation in Cyrenaica gave me increasing cause for anxiety. Evidence accumulated of the presence of German armoured troops in Libya; but, as already explained, our intelligence reports from Italy and Libya were so scanty and so few aircraft were available for long-range reconnaissance that we remained very much in the dark as to the enemy's real strength or intentions. I still considered, from the evidence available, that an enemy attack was unlikely before the middle of April at the earliest, and I hoped that it might not take place before May, by which time I hoped to be able to strengthen considerably the force in Cyrenaica.

21. The position in Cyrenaica was rendered more difficult by the German air attacks on Benghazi. These began soon after our occupation and in the absence of any effective defence, since practically all available fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft guns were required for Greece, made it hazardous to bring shipping into Benghazi. By the third week in February, the air attacks had become so heavy that it was agreed that the Navy should not risk any more shipping into Benghazi until an effective air defence could be provided. This meant that all supplies had to be brought from Tobruk, increasing the line of communications to the forward troops by more than 200 miles. This was most serious, since it meant that practically all the transport available had to be used in transporting supplies and the mobility of the forward troops was greatly affected. In particular, the 2nd Armoured Division had to be supplied from dumps, instead of having its own transport. This fact later had a very serious effect on operations.

22. The shortage of transport was probably the most hampering factor on all operations in the Middle East during the first six months of 1941. I had been informed by the War Office that from January onwards a supply of some 3,000 vehicles a month would arrive in the Middle East from the United States; and I based my plans for the organisation of my troops and operations on the arrival of this transport. In fact, during the first four months, less than half of the amount promised arrived (2,341 in January, 2,094 in February, 725 in March, 705 in April). The consequent shortage hampered operations in Cyrenaica, in Crete, in Iraq, and in Syria. The force sent to Greece was made up to its full complement of transport at the expense of other theatres, and the whole of this transport, some 8,000 vehicles, was lost in the evacuation of Greece.

23. Our covering forces, towards the end of March, on the frontier of Cyrenaica, just east of Agheila, 150 miles south of Benghazi, consisted of the 2nd Armoured Division, less 1st Armoured Brigade Group in Greece. The division comprised an armoured car regiment, the 3rd Armoured Brigade and a portion of the Support Group. The armoured car regiment, the King's Dragoon Guards, were only newly converted from horsed cavalry to this role and had little experience of the desert. The 3rd Armoured Brigade consisted of the 3rd Hussars (light tanks), 5th Royal Tank Regiment (Cruisers), and 6th Royal Tank Regiment, armed with captured Italian tanks. Of the above, 3rd Hussars had had, at the end of March, only 29 light tanks in action out of their establishment of 52, and these were in a poor mechanical state; the 5th Royal Tank Regiment had only 23 cruisers available out of 52, and these had done a very considerable mileage and were in an even poorer mechanical state. 6th Royal Tank Regiment had, on 30th March, only one squadron available, while the second was formed two days later, the day after the enemy attack began. They had had little time to become accustomed to the Italian tanks. Headquarters 2nd Division had only arrived in the forward area in the third week in March and had not had time to settle down; the same applied to the Support Group, which consisted of the 1st Tower Hamlets, the 104th Royal Horse Artillery (25-pdrs.), 3rd Royal Horse Artillery (Anti-Tank Regiment), and one company Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (Machine-gun Regiment). The whole formation was unpractised and required at least another month to find its feet. I had hoped that this period would be available before the enemy attacked. I did not become aware of the dangerously poor mechanical state of the armoured troop till a few days before the enemy attack. The strongest position for defence on the Cyrenaican frontier was west of Agheila, where some salt marshes confined the approaches from the west. I had given orders that this position should be occupied, but owing to the transport shortage mentioned above, it was found impossible to carry out the maintenance of the force if it pushed forward this additional 40 miles.

24. My instructions to General Neame, commanding in Cyrenaica, were that, if attacked, he was to fight a delaying action between his forward position, east of Agheila and Benghazi. I told him that he should not hesitate to give

up ground if necessary as far as Benghazi, and even to evacuate Benghazi if the situation demanded it, but to hold on to the high ground above Benghazi for as long as possible. The 9th Australian Division had only two brigades forward, the third having to remain back at Tobruk owing to shortage of transport. I instructed General Neame to conserve his armoured troops as much as possible, since I could not provide him with any armoured reinforcements before May and without armoured troops his whole position would be compromised. I still believed at this time that no enemy advance in strength was probable for another three or four weeks.

25. Before describing the enemy's counter attack, it may be mentioned that on 21st March the last Italian detachment left in Cyrenaica had been captured. This was the force occupying Jarabub Oasis, which had retreated there in the middle of December after the battle of Sidi Barrani. It originally comprised about 800 Italian and 1,200 native troops. Ever since then it had been merely observed by the divisional cavalry regiment (mechanised) of the 6th Australian Division. I had not the transport available to maintain a larger force at such a distance from the main line of communications and estimated that the exhaustion of its supplies would compel the surrender of the force. Although practically the whole of the native troops had surrendered, the Italian part of the garrison was still in its defences by the middle of March and was being supplied by air. Since the force observing Jarabub was required in Greece I determined to attack and capture the garrison. This was carried out by the 2nd/9th Australian Infantry battalion under Brigadier Wootten, and the Divisional Cavalry Regiment already in front of Jarabub. In face of a skilfully conducted attack the garrison surrendered, putting up a poor fight in spite of its strong defences.

26. On 31st March the enemy counter offensive against our troops in Cyrenaica began. The attacking force consisted of the 5th German Light Armoured Division and two Italian divisions (one armoured, one motorised). It was supported by a considerable air force, the enemy being numerically superior throughout the operations, although they did not make full use of this superiority, largely as a result of the initiative and aggressiveness of our R.A.F. During the first three days the 2nd Armoured Division withdrew slowly northwards, and by the evening of 2nd April was north of Agedabia. The enemy so far had not pressed his advance with much vigour. Our intention was that the armoured force should maintain a position from which they would be on the flank of any enemy advance by the main road to Benghazi and would also block any attempt to turn our positions in Cyrenaica by taking the desert route to Mechili. The Commander of the 2nd Armoured Division had originally intended to counter attack the enemy north of Agedabia if opportunity offered; but on being warned that no tank reinforcements were available and that he should not attack unless a specially favourable opportunity offered, he decided to continue the withdrawal.

27. The 3rd April was the unfortunate day of these operations. It was intended to continue the gradual withdrawal east of and parallel to the Benghazi road, and the force



was in process of taking up position about Sceleidima, when a report was received that a large enemy armoured force was approaching Msus, where the principal dump of petrol and supplies for the armoured division was. As a result of this report there was considerable confusion. The Support Group finally continued its retirement to Regima on the left flank of the 9th Australian Division, while the 3rd Armoured Brigade moved to Msus. On arrival there it found that the detachment guarding the dump had destroyed all the petrol on hearing that the enemy were approaching. From now onwards the movements of the 3rd Armoured Brigade were almost entirely dictated by the lack of petrol. Benghazi had been evacuated on 3rd April, after extensive demolitions. On the night of 3rd/4th April, General Neame decided, in view of the weakness of the 2nd Armoured Division, which had been reduced, more by mechanical breakdowns than by enemy action, to about a dozen Cruisers, 20 light tanks and 20 Italian tanks, to withdraw the whole force to the line of the Wadi Derna-Mechili. He ordered 9th Australian Division to withdraw to the Wadi Derna; and ordered 2nd Armoured Division to Mechili, where it would join the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade which had been moved from the Tobruk area to protect that place. The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade consisted of three motorised Indian cavalry regiments which had recently arrived in Middle East and had been sent to Cyrenaica to complete their training. The Brigade had no armoured vehicles, and I had warned General Neame of the danger of exposing it to attack by the enemy's armoured troops.

28. The 9th Australian Division, after repulsing an enemy tank attack at Regima, withdrew without particular incident and in good order. It was found impossible, in view of the development of events to the south, to maintain a position on the Wadi Derna, and the Division was finally withdrawn to Tobruk, where one of its brigades already was. It had established itself west of the Tobruk defences by 7th April.

29. The fate of the 2nd Armoured Division was very different. From 4th April onwards, owing to breakdown of communications and difficulties as regards petrol supply, Headquarters 2nd Armoured Division was never properly in touch with the whole of the force under its command. The enemy air force repeatedly attacked the Division and made a particular set at wireless vehicles and at petrol carrying transport, which still further increased the difficulties of communication and petrol supply. Headquarters 2nd Armoured Division finally reached Mechili on the evening of 6th April. The intention was that 3rd Armoured Brigade should follow it to Mechili but owing to shortage of petrol the Brigade Commander appears to have decided to go to Derna. He, with his Brigade Headquarters and the greater part of the remains of the Brigade, were cut off in Derna and captured. The King's Dragoon Guards (armoured cars) and the Support Group had also gone by Derna and the majority of them succeeded in making good their withdrawal to Tobruk. The Support Group fought a skilful and determined action on the eastern outskirts of Derna and checked a strong enemy force, putting out of action a number of tanks.

30. Thus on 7th April the force in Mechili consisted of the Headquarters 2nd Armoured

Division (practically all unarmoured vehicles), 3rd Indian Motor Brigade and elements of certain other units, including part of the 1st Royal Horse Artillery. Enemy troops had arrived at Mechili on the afternoon of 6th April; they seem to have consisted of motorised infantry and artillery. The Indian Motor Brigade had no difficulty in holding them off and captured some prisoners. On 7th April the enemy made a series of small attacks on Mechili which were easily beaten off, a number of prisoners being captured. Demands from the enemy for surrender were treated with contempt. The whole force could have withdrawn on this day, but it was still hoped that the remains of the 3rd Armoured Brigade would join it, and it was not till evening that orders were received from Force Headquarters to withdraw to El Adem, south of Tobruk.

On 8th April an attempt was made to break out of Mechili at dawn. The enemy had by this time been reinforced by armoured troops, and our troops came under heavy artillery and machine gun fire. Certain parties which showed great determination and resource, managed to escape. In particular the detachment of the 1st Royal Horse Artillery with some Indian troops broke away to the south and eventually reached Sollum on 11th April. Another party of the 18th Indian Cavalry Regiment with some Australian Anti-Tank guns also got away. The remainder of the force, including practically the whole of the Headquarters of the Division, was captured.

31. There was a further misfortune to the force during the night of 6th/7th April. Lieut.-General Sir Richard O'Connor and Lieut.-Colonel Combe, 11th Hussars, had been sent up to Cyrenaica to assist General Neame during the withdrawal in view of their knowledge of this area and of desert operations. All three officers remained behind at Barce after Force Headquarters had gone back through Derna towards Tobruk. They were proceeding to rejoin their Headquarters when they were held up by an enemy mechanised patrol which had penetrated towards Derna and were all three taken prisoner.

32. The disaster to the 2nd Armoured Division can be attributed mainly to the poor mechanical state of its vehicles, nearly half of which were in workshops while the remainder were in no condition for a prolonged retreat; to the shortage of transport which tied the Division to a vulnerable system of dumps; to the change of plan consequent on the report on 3rd April of the enemy being at Msus; and finally to the breakdown of communications due to loss of wireless vehicles by enemy action and lack of opportunity for charging batteries.

The loss of this armoured force created a dangerous situation since there were few armoured vehicles left available for the defence of Egypt, and without an armoured force it was extremely difficult in the open desert to check the enemy advance.

33. I decided that it was essential to hold Tobruk, in order to secure the large reserves of supplies there and to prevent the enemy obtaining the use of the port and water supply for his further advance. The Italian defences, which had an outer perimeter of some 27 miles, were extremely extended for the force available. I ordered a brigade of the 7th Australian Division to be embarked and sent round to

Tobruk to strengthen the defence. It arrived in Tobruk on 7th April. Some tanks which had been under repair in Tobruk were available for the defence and I reinforced this armoured detachment with some more tanks from Egypt.

A mobile force consisting of the remains of the Support Group of the 2nd Armoured Division, strengthened by certain other detachments, was left outside the defences of Tobruk about El Adem. This force was driven back to the Egyptian frontier about Sollum by 11th April and from this date Tobruk became invested.

*Operations in Greece, 6th April to 30th April.*

34. The situation of the Imperial Forces on 6th April when the German attack opened was that the 1st Armoured Brigade Group and the New Zealand Division had arrived complete in the forward area and that the 6th Australian Division was in process of arrival. The 12th and 20th Greek Divisions were in the line but the so-called "mechanised" 19th Division had been moved across the River Axios and put under the command of the Eastern Macedonian Army, when the New Zealand Division took up its position.

35. The line held ran from the Aegean Sea east of Mount Olympus to Veria and Edessa and thence northwards to the Yugoslav frontier. Its length was approximately 100 miles, through high mountains in which there were four main passes—those on either side of Mount Olympus and those at Veria and Edessa. The railway ran between Mount Olympus and the coast, and roads through each of the other passes.

The New Zealand Division held the right of the line, including the two Olympus Passes; the 6th Australian Division was to assume the defence of the Veria Pass with one Brigade, the second being at Kozani, and the third in reserve. On the left of the Australians along the mountains was the 20th Greek Division; the 12th Greek Division, which was being relieved by the arrival of the Dominion troops, was also designed for a position in the mountains, for which its pack and ox-drawn transport was as suitable as our mechanical transport was unsuitable.

The position was naturally a strong one provided it was not turned through Yugoslavia. If the Germans succeeded in forcing a way through Yugoslavia the whole position could be outflanked from an easy valley which ran from Monastir down to Kozani. As early as 27th March General Wilson had begun to form a detachment at Amynteion to watch this gap, consisting of the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, the 27th New Zealand Machine-gun Battalion, less two companies, and the 64th Medium Regiment, the whole under Brigadier Lee. On 8th April, three days after Germany invaded Yugoslavia and Greece, it became clear that Yugoslav resistance in the south had collapsed and that from Monastir southwards the road was open to the Germans. To meet this threat it was decided that no further relief in the Veria Pass should be undertaken by units of the 6th Australian Division, and that a force should be formed about Veve under Major-General Mackay, consisting of 19th Australian Infantry Brigade, less one battalion, with a Field Regiment and an Anti-Tank Regiment. Brigadier Lee's force was added to General Mackay's and later the remainder of

the 1st Armoured Brigade, after blowing the demolition belts east of the main position, also joined his command. At the same time Major-General Freyberg was ordered to move one brigade group of the New Zealand Division to Servia as a pivot on which any subsequent withdrawal from the north could be based.

These moves were completed early on 10th April.

36. The line was now held as follows:—

On the right was the New Zealand Division, one brigade group of the 6th Australian Division, the bulk of the 12th Greek Division (whose relief had been interrupted by the diversion of General Mackay's command to Amynteion) and certain other troops. All troops in this sector, Greek and Dominion, were under the command of General Blamey.

The centre sector, under Greek command, included the 20th and part of the 12th Greek Division.

The left sector, about Amynteion, consisted of the troops described above under the command of General Mackay, who was directly under the command of General Wilson.

On 12th April the 6th Australian Division and the New Zealand Division, hitherto called the 1st Australian Corps, became known as the "Anzac Corps." The revival of this historic title was welcomed with pride by all in the corps.

37. The first contact was made with the enemy on 8th April, when detachments of the 1st Armoured Brigade encountered elements of the enemy on the line of the River Axios. On the evening of 10th April, General Mackay's force was attacked in the Amynteion area. This developed next day into the first serious engagement, which lasted for two days. Although the enemy attack was held and heavy casualties inflicted on him, it was obvious that the Olympus-Veria-Amynteion position could not be held for ever. The position was much too extended for the troops available; there had not been time to consolidate it properly; the left flank was protected only by a Greek cavalry division on an extremely wide front, and between this cavalry division and the Greek forces in Albania there was a large gap through which the enemy were likely to penetrate.

A new line was therefore decided on, that running from Mount Olympus along the line of the River Aliakhmon. This was a strong position provided that the Yugoslavs and the Greeks were able to close the roads by which the line could be turned. The withdrawal began on the night 11th/12th April and was completed by dawn on the 13th. But during its course it became obvious that the 12th and 20th Greek Divisions were disintegrating. They soon became thoroughly disorganized and only a few sub-units retained any fighting value. This was due in no way to lack of courage or fighting spirit, but to their lack of modern armament and their ox-drawn transport, which was too slow and unwieldy as soon as it became necessary to embark on a long move. The withdrawal of General Mackay's force from Amynteion had to be covered by the 1st Armoured Brigade, who carried out successful counter-attacks on enemy armoured fighting vehicles. During this withdrawal the brigade experienced considerable mechanical trouble, similar to that of the 3rd Armoured Brigade in



Cyrenaica, and had to leave many of their tanks behind.

38. While the withdrawal was in progress the news reaching General Wilson was of such gravity that he already began to consider the necessity for further withdrawal. It was reported that the Yugoslav army in the south had capitulated and it became obvious that the Greek armies in Albania were incapable of withdrawing to take their place in the line west of General Wilson's force and in fact that very little reliance could be placed on the fighting ability of the Greek army. The difficulties that General Papagos had foreseen in any attempt to withdraw from Albania and its effect on Greek morale had been justified and were increased by the collapse of the Yugoslavs.

General Wilson therefore decided to continue the withdrawal to the Thermopylae Line, which could be held at least temporarily by the Imperial forces alone. At a meeting between General Wilson and General Papagos on 14th April General Papagos approved this decision and made for the first time a suggestion that the British forces should evacuate Greece to avoid further fighting and devastation of that country.

39. Meanwhile, under circumstances of great difficulty, the Anzac Corps had taken up its new line and on it had had its first experience of the intense aerial bombardment by the German Air Force against its positions and its lines of communication. No great enemy pressure was developed against its positions, although on the morning of 15th April, determined small-scale attacks were made in both the Servia and the Katerini Passes. An attack on the positions of the 4th New Zealand Brigade in the Servia Pass was repulsed with the loss to the enemy of 180 prisoners and at least several hundred killed and wounded. Our losses were negligible. The Greek troops, which had been under General Wilson, had reverted to Greek command on the occupation of the new position.

40. General Wilson was anxious for the safety of his left flank during this new withdrawal, the more so as the Germans were known to have broken through the Greek troops at Kleisoura. Consequently, a force had to be found to block the roads leading southwards from the Grevena and Matsova areas into the Larissa Plain. Actually, no threat came from this flank and the main danger to the withdrawal arose from the speed with which the enemy followed it up from the north and from the heavy attack launched against a combined New Zealand and Australian force in the Peneios Gorge. This attack began late on 15th April and was pressed home by infantry and tanks, which proved to be the leading elements of one armoured and one mountain division. The 16th Australian Infantry Brigade which had been detailed to form a left flank guard on the Larissa-Kalabaka road was diverted, except for one battalion, to cover the western exit of the Peneios Gorge and to afford support to the 21st New Zealand Battalion, which was holding the gorge alone. The attack was made in such strength as to necessitate the transference of the weight of the defence from west to east. The defence of the gorge was carried out with such spirit that when at last on the evening of 18th April the Germans were masters of the gorge, the main body of the

Anzac Corps had successfully withdrawn past its western exit. The 21st New Zealand Battalion had been overrun and the whole of the 2nd/2nd Australian Battalion had been forced off their line of withdrawal into the hills after a stubborn fight against greatly superior forces. This action, together with other minor ones, and the use of skilful demolitions, prevented the enemy's armoured and mechanized units from following up closely. During the first two vital days of the withdrawal, enemy air action had fortunately been prevented by mist and low clouds, but from Larissa onwards columns on the road suffered air attack without respite. Otherwise, thanks to the rear-guard actions described above, the withdrawal was successfully carried out under the orders of General Blamey almost without interference,

41. By the morning of 20th April, the withdrawal to the Thermopylae line was practically complete. This naturally strong position was occupied by the New Zealand Division on the right from the sea to the summit of the mountains, covering the coast road; while the 6th Australian Division occupied the Brailos position covering the main road to Thebes and Athens. The 1st Armoured Brigade, which by this time had lost the greater part of its tanks from mechanical failure, was in reserve and protected the right and rear of the Anzac Corps against a threat from Euboea. The weakness of the position lay in the fact that the disintegration of the Greek forces made possible a German penetration on the extreme left of the line about Delphi.

42. Meanwhile in anticipation of the possible necessity of the evacuation of Greece, a committee of the Joint Planning Staff had been formed in the Middle East and was sent to Athens on 17th April under Rear-Admiral Baillie Grohman. The general situation in Greece now betokened the near end of Greek resistance. The Greek forces on the left of the Imperial troops had already disintegrated and it was obvious that little more could be expected from the Greek armies in Albania. The Piraeus had been so heavily bombed that it was practically unusable as a port, so that to send further reinforcements or supplies to Greece had become a matter of extreme difficulty. I cancelled the sailing of the Polish Brigade and the 7th Australian Division and went to Athens myself on 19th April. The Greek Prime Minister had committed suicide on 18th April. I saw General Wilson and General Blamey and had audience with His Majesty the King, who was now acting as head of his Government. It was decided, with the full approval of His Majesty the King and the Greek Government, that the evacuation of the British forces was essential. It was obviously impossible, in view of the overwhelming superiority of the German air force, to use the Piraeus or any other port for the re-embarkation of the force, which would have to take place from open beaches. I instructed General Wilson that the embarkation should take place on as wide a front as possible and that any troops who were cut off or were unable to embark on the beaches selected should not surrender but should make for the Peloponnesus, where there might be possibilities of evacuating them later.

43. General Wilson originally selected 28th April as the first night for embarkation, but the capitulation of the Greek army in the Epirus

on 21st April made it necessary to advance the date, since it was now possible that a German force might reach Athens from the west before the Imperial forces could be re-embarked. It was accordingly decided to begin the embarkation on the night 24th-25th April and to endeavour to complete it in three nights. The time had afterwards to be extended.

44. The withdrawal from the Thermopylae position to the beaches was covered by a brigade group of the New Zealand Division, which inflicted severe casualties on the enemy and knocked out a considerable number of tanks on 26th April.

On 23rd April the remaining Hurricanes, about twelve in number, on which reliance had been placed to protect the convoys during the first part of their journey from Greece, were, owing to unavoidable lack of A.A. defences, all destroyed on the ground at Argos by enemy action. The embarkation programme was accordingly revised to enable a greater number of troops to be embarked in the Peloponnesus whence the journey to Crete would be shorter and less exposed to air attack. Fortunately, however, the plan remained elastic, and when the Corinth Canal was cut by enemy parachutists in the early morning of 26th April, it was possible again to change the plans and to embark the 4th New Zealand Brigade from a beach east of Athens, Porto Rafti, instead of from the Peloponnesus.

45. Thanks to the excellent arrangements by the Royal Navy, the air cover of some few Blenheim fighters and the good work of the Joint Planning Staff sent to Greece, the embarkations were carried out according to plan except in two places. At Nauplion on the night of 26th-27th April, some 1,700 personnel had to be left behind owing to one of the ships, which had been set on fire by enemy bombing, having blocked the channel, so that the destroyers could not get alongside the quay. Another merchant ship which conveyed troops from this place was bombed and set on fire soon after leaving Greece and two destroyers which picked up the survivors from the ship were both sunk by bombs within a few minutes of each other. Some 700 troops are believed to have lost their lives. These were practically the only casualties during the voyage from Greece.

The second failure to embark personnel was at Kalamata, in the south of the Peloponnesus, on the night of 28th-29th April. The senior officer at this port had neglected to make proper arrangements for local protection or reconnaissance, and a German force entered the town and reached the quays just as embarkation was due to begin. By the efforts of a number of officers who got together small parties and organised counter attacks on their own, the enemy was driven out and 150 prisoners taken. But in the meantime the Royal Navy had been informed that the Germans were in the town and that the quays were mined, and no information appears ever to have reached them that the enemy had been driven out again. The Naval Commander, therefore, naturally decided not to risk his valuable forces by entering the harbour. The troops at Kalamata are believed to have numbered some 8,000, including 1,500 Yugoslavs. The greater part of the remainder were labour units and details, and comparatively few were fighting troops. Unfortunately,

among them were the first reinforcements of the New Zealand Division.

46. The total number of troops sent to Greece was approximately 57,660; of these close on 43,000 were safely re-embarked. All guns, transport and equipment other than personal were, however, lost. In view of the complete enemy air superiority, the re-embarkation of so many troops may be considered an extremely fine performance. It was due to the magnificent work of the Royal Navy, the good staff arrangements made by those concerned, and the discipline and endurance of the troops themselves.

Of the troops re-embarked, about 27,000 were landed in Crete and the remainder taken back to Egypt. The reason for landing so many troops in Crete was to shorten the sea journey and to make possible quicker and more frequent journeys.

#### *Summary of Greek Operations.*

47. As will be seen from the above account, the expedition to Greece was ill starred from the first. The change of plan by the Greek Commander-in-Chief after the first decision to despatch a force resulted in the position on which the Imperial forces were to concentrate being held by a very inadequate Greek force instead of the five organised divisions which General Papagos had promised. The uncertainties of the Yugoslav attitude seriously affected the plans both of ourselves and of the Greeks, while the complete collapse of their armies on the German invasion exposed the flank of what was otherwise an extremely strong position. The German attack took place while the Imperial force was still in process of concentration and before it had time to get properly settled down. That the Greek army which had fought so heroically against the Italians disintegrated so rapidly under the German attack is not surprising. They had already been strained to the uttermost and neither their organisation nor equipment were sufficiently up to date to enable them to face the German army. Finally the enemy bombing attacks on the Piraeus closed the only good port, deprived us of any chance of removing any of our heavy equipment and made the re-embarkation of the personnel of the force an extremely hazardous operation. Thus, while the whole expedition was something in the nature of a gamble, the dice were loaded against it from the first. It was not really such a forlorn hope from the military point of view as it may seem from its results.

#### *Situation in Middle East after Greek Campaign.*

48. The situation in the Middle East at the beginning of May was full of anxiety. I was threatened with having to undertake operations simultaneously in no fewer than five theatres with my resources in men and material very seriously depleted by the losses in Greece. There was an obvious possibility, which was soon confirmed, that the enemy would undertake operations against Crete; or he might reinforce his effort in the Western Desert, which though checked for the present still constituted a serious menace to Egypt; responsibility for dealing with the revolt in Iraq was handed over to Middle East from India in the first week in May; the Germans were making use of air bases in Syria which might constitute a very serious threat to the defence of the Canal and Egyptian ports as

well as to Palestine; and finally there still remained the remnants of the Italian forces in Abyssinia to be cleared up if possible before the rainy season set in.

To deal with these many responsibilities my resources were completely inadequate. To equip the forces for Greece I had had to strip many units of weapons and transport and all equipment that could not be carried had been lost. Transport was still reaching Middle East in very limited quantities and was the chief obstacle to completing for war a number of units and formations. My armoured troops, except for the detachment in Tobruk, consisted only of one weak battalion of Cruiser tanks and one, also incomplete, of "I" tanks. The formations which had fought in Greece, the 6th Australian Division and the New Zealand Division, required rest, reorganisation and re-equipment, but were at present divided between Crete and Egypt. The 7th Australian Division was complete but had one brigade locked up in Tobruk. The 9th Australian Division was in the Tobruk defences. The 6th Division had never been completely formed. It had only two infantry brigades (22nd Guards and 16th) and one other battalion, the Buffs. The 14th Brigade, which should have completed it, had been transferred to Crete. Of these two brigades, the 22nd Guards Brigade had 50 per cent. of its transport, while the 16th Brigade and the Buffs had practically none. It had only one field regiment of artillery and only two field companies of Engineers. The Polish Brigade was not complete in transport. The 1st Cavalry Division in Palestine had been stripped of its artillery, Engineers, Signals and transport to provide for the needs of other formations; it could provide one motorised cavalry brigade by pooling the whole of the divisional motor transport. Of the unbrigaded infantry battalions, two were under orders to reinforce Malta, and the remainder were hard put to it to find the necessary guards and escorts for the prisoners of war (of whom there were still over 100,000 in Egypt) and other internal security duties in Egypt and Palestine. All these battalions were short of transport and were equipped for static duties only.

From the above, which included no single complete formation available, I had to provide for the defence of the western frontier of Egypt, the defence of Crete, the restoration of the situation in Iraq and for a possible commitment in Syria. The German attacks by air on the Canal which began in February caused a fresh commitment, since large numbers of observers were required to watch for mines dropped in the Canal. Eventually the Egyptian Army took over a large part of this duty, and thus gave most effective aid to the defence of the Canal.

The 4th Indian Division was on its way from East Africa and the 1st South African Division would be available very shortly. But the move of both of these divisions depended on the provision of shipping, which was hard to come by.

49. The enemy advance in Cyrenaica had been checked on the frontier of Egypt and the active defence of the garrison of Tobruk constituted a menace to the enemy's line of communications, which was likely to prevent his further advance. He had made one determined attack on Tobruk on 1st May and had been severely repulsed with heavy losses in tanks

and in men. But the garrison of Tobruk was small for the perimeter it had to defend and it was known that another German armoured division, which might include as many as 400 medium tanks, had been landed in Libya and was on its way to the forward area, where it was expected to appear early in May. If the enemy also reinforced his air forces in Libya and delivered a determined attack on the Tobruk defences and harbour, we might be hard put to it to maintain the Tobruk garrison.

50. The 6th Division, as already stated, had been preparing and training for an operation against the Italian Dodecanese. Since, however, the Navy had been unable to support any expedition against the Dodecanese while engaged in conveying our troops to Greece, it had been necessary to postpone the operation until the completion of the move to Greece. When the German counter-offensive against Cyrenaica took place, it was necessary to move the 6th Division from their training areas to man the defences of Mersa Matruh, to guard against a German break through to the Delta. The 7th Australian Division (less one brigade in Tobruk) had also to be used for the defence of the Western Desert, and the Polish Brigade to man the Delta defences. The one incomplete armoured brigade was also allotted to the western defence of Egypt.

Thus, practically the whole of the resources at my disposal had to be used to safeguard the Egyptian base against the threat from the west; the one mobile force which could be improvised in Palestine, the cavalry brigade group, was soon to be despatched to the rescue of Habbaniyah in Iraq; and my only reserves in Egypt and Palestine were the New Zealand and Australian reinforcements.

51. There was on its way across the Mediterranean a convoy of ships containing some 200 tanks to re-equip the 7th Armoured Division and to counter the German armoured troops in the Western Desert. They were due to arrive in Egypt on 12th May, and all preparations to equip these tanks with the necessary fittings for use in the desert, and to place them in action with the least possible delay were made. The great majority of these tanks, however, were "I" tanks, the limited range and slowness of which made them ill-suited for use against fast moving German tanks in the wide open spaces of the Western Desert.

The convoy duly reached Egypt on 12th May with the loss of one ship containing 57 tanks, which was sunk by a mine. The problem now was whether these tanks could be manned and put into action before the German reinforcements arrived in the forward area. It was originally hoped that it might be possible to get all the tanks unloaded, through the workshops and ready for action by about the end of May. This estimate was to prove optimistic.

#### *The Defence of Crete.*

52. Meanwhile the arrangements for the defence of Crete were my particular preoccupation. Evidence accumulated fast of the German intentions. There was a large concentration of German aircraft in the south of Greece, and information of the presence of airborne troops and of preparations for an attack on Crete on a large scale by air and by sea.

My original intention after the evacuation of Greece had been to relieve the Australian and

New Zealand troops which had been landed in Crete by the infantry of the 6th Division, so as to enable the 6th Australian Division and the New Zealand Division to be reorganized, in Palestine and Egypt respectively, as soon as possible. During the early part of May, however, the Royal Navy was fully engaged in the operations necessary for the passage of the convoy mentioned in para. 51 above through the Mediterranean, and was unable to provide the necessary escorts for any large shipping movements between Crete and Egypt. Later, it became obvious that there would be no time to effect reliefs before the German attack developed and that it would be necessary to meet that attack with the troops already in Crete and to defer any question of relief until the German attack had been repulsed. Further, the German attacks on shipping to Crete were so intensive as to make it difficult and dangerous for shipping to approach the island. I visited Crete on 30th April and placed Major-General Freyberg in command. I instructed him to organize the defence of the island with the troops available and with such additional resources as I was able to send him from Egypt.

53. British forces had been first sent to Crete on 1st November, 1940. The force sent was only the Headquarters of an infantry brigade, two battalions, 2nd Battalion The Black Watch and 1st York and Lancaster Regiment, and certain other details. There was then a Greek division in the island; there seemed no immediate threat to Crete, and the only requirement was to secure Suda Bay as a refuelling base for the navy. The defensive arrangements were all made with this end in view. There was at the time no prospect of the island becoming an air base, and the coast defences, anti-aircraft defences and infantry defences, were designed solely to protect the naval anchorage at Suda Bay.

Towards the end of November the whole of the Greek troops in the island were removed. One additional British battalion (1st Welch Regiment) was sent to Crete in February, and orders were issued to prepare a base for one division. Meanwhile an aerodrome was under construction at Maleme, west of Canea, and the landing ground at Heraklion in the east of the island was being improved. With the constant shortage of aircraft in the Middle East, however, it was never possible to station any aircraft permanently in the island. At the end of November a Commando was sent to the island, its object being to carry out raids on the adjacent Italian islands. Otherwise the garrison remained at three battalions until after the evacuation from Greece. During the operations in Greece, however, Suda Bay became of greater importance to the Navy and it was therefore decided to send the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (M.N.B.D.O.), which had lately arrived in the Middle East, to improve the defence of Suda Bay.

54. In the light of after events, if we had been able to develop the defences of Crete more highly during the early period of occupation, we could have made the enemy's task in seizing it even more costly than it was. The value of the island was fully appreciated, but the constant shortage of troops and material in the Middle East was an effective obstacle to any large-scale defence measures, and any work would have been at the expense of other commitments in the Middle East, which at the time

appeared more important. Engineer units and equipment were always short, and were more urgently required in Greece, in the Western Desert and elsewhere. It was already necessary severely to ration steel for reinforced concrete works in the Western Desert and on the northern frontier of Palestine; and shipping to Crete was always scarce. It has been suggested that local labour could have been employed, but practically all able-bodied men in the island were serving in the Greek forces in Albania, while to collect the inhabitants from the long and poorly developed island a considerable quantity of transport would have been required, and this, as already stated, was the chief difficulty in all theatres in the Middle East.

55. The total troops in Crete when the German attack took place was approximately 28,600. Of these the great majority were in need of rest and reorganisation after the operations in Greece. There was a shortage of equipment of all kinds, and a proportion of the personnel was unarmed. Improvised units were formed from these men and were equipped with such arms as were available. It was intended to evacuate from the island before the German attack all such personnel as could not usefully be employed in the defence; but owing to the shortage of shipping and escorts mentioned above it was only possible to remove a small proportion before the German attack. As an additional embarrassment, there were 16,000 Italian prisoners of war, captured by the Greeks, under guard on the island.

Every effort was made to send stores and material to increase the means of defence; nine infantry tanks, a number of captured Italian guns, a certain amount of transport, and other arms and equipment were shipped. A considerable proportion, however, was sunk on the voyage, as the enemy scale of attack on shipping rapidly increased in intensity. The materials sunk included about half the field guns and more than half the engineer stores required for constructing defences.

56. The island of Crete is about 160 miles long and about 40 miles wide. It is very mountainous and there is only one main road which runs the whole length of the north coast, on which are all available harbours. The roads from north to south are few and poor. It is possible to find landing places in the south of the island, but there are usually no easy exits from them and no communications with the rest of the island. It had always been intended to develop landing places on the south of the island and roads from them to the north, in order to avoid the exposed passage round the north of the island; but there had never been, for the reasons given above, sufficient means to carry this out.

57. General Freyberg disposed his troops in four sectors as follows:—

(a) *Heraklion*.

Commander—Brigadier Chappell.  
Two British battalions.  
Three Greek battalions.  
300 Australian riflemen.  
250 Artillerymen armed as infantry.

(b) *Retimo*.

Commander—Brigadier Vasey.  
H.Q. 10th Australian Infantry Brigade.  
Four Australian battalions.  
Six Greek battalions.

(c) *Suda Bay.*

Commander—Maj.-Gen. Weston, R.M.  
 16th and 17th Australian battalions,  
 both improvised.  
 Some 1,200 British riflemen, formed  
 from various units.  
 106th Regiment, R.H.A., armed as  
 infantry.  
 Two Greek battalions.

(d) *Maleme.*

Commander—Brigadier Puttick, N.Z.  
 Div.  
 4th New Zealand Brigade in area  
 west of Canea.  
 5th New Zealand Brigade in  
 Maleme area.  
 10th (Improvised) Infantry Brigade  
 of composite battalions formed  
 from various New Zealand per-  
 sonnel and two Greek battalions.  
 One additional Greek battalion.

There were anti-aircraft defences round Suda Bay and at Maleme and Heraklion. The field artillery consisted of captured Italian guns intended for static defence only. Two infantry tanks had been provided for each of the aerodromes at Heraklion, Retimo and Maleme; and three additional "I" tanks were also sent to the island. The single means of land communication between the various sectors was the road which ran along the north coast of the island and was obviously likely to be the target of enemy air attack. The shortage of transport in any case prevented the possibility of large-scale reinforcement from one part of the island to another. Each of the three main groups, at Heraklion, at Retimo, and in the Suda Bay-Maleme area, had to fight as a separate force. The general scheme of defence was the same at each, to prevent enemy landings on the aerodromes and landings, whether air-borne or sea-borne, at the beaches.

58. The main enemy attack was preceded by air attacks, principally on Suda Bay and on shipping, which gradually increased in intensity. It soon became obvious that it would be impossible for our small force of fighter aircraft to maintain itself on the island and that it would merely be destroyed on the ground. It was accordingly decided to withdraw the few aeroplanes that remained, which was done on 19th May. There were thus none of our aircraft on the island during the attack, except two Hurricanes which reached Crete on 23rd May.

59. In a communication sent to me three days before the attack, General Freyberg reported that he had just returned from a final tour of the defences and felt greatly encouraged. He described the excellent morale of the troops and the strenuous efforts to render the island as strong as possible. He said in conclusion that while he did not wish to be over-confident, he felt that at least the defenders would give a good account of themselves, and trusted that with the aid of the Navy, Crete would be held. He did not anticipate, any more than anyone else, the overwhelming strength in which the German Air Force was to make the attack, nor how carefully and skilfully their plans had been laid nor the losses they were prepared to accept to attain their object.

60. The main enemy attack began soon after dawn on 20th May, with a heavy bombing attack on Maleme aerodrome. Under cover of

the clouds of dust and smoke which resulted, and while the bombing was still in progress, between 50 and 100 gliders landed troops in a river bed west of the aerodrome, whence they attacked the aerodrome. About the same time large numbers of parachutists began to land near Maleme, south and south-west of Canea and on the Akrotiri Peninsula north of Suda Bay, where gliders also landed. The great majority of these parachutists were accounted for, but a certain number succeeded in establishing themselves at various points and caused some trouble. His Majesty the King of Greece had a narrow escape from a party of parachutists which landed near the house in which he was. He made his escape with difficulty, and then under the protection of a platoon of New Zealanders, crossed the mountains by narrow tracks to the south coast, where he was taken off by a destroyer.

In the afternoon, similar attacks by parachutists were made against Heraklion and Retimo. At the former it is estimated that about 2,000 were landed, the great majority of whom had been killed or captured by the following morning. At Retimo, about 1,700 appear to have landed; the majority of these were also accounted for, but a party of about 100 succeeded in establishing themselves in buildings on the route between Retimo and Suda Bay, and thus cut off communications by land between Retimo and Force Headquarters during the remainder of the fighting. An effort to dislodge this party made several days later was unsuccessful.

Altogether, it is estimated that over 7,000 men, armed and equipped with great forethought, were landed on this day from the air. They suffered extremely heavy casualties and only at Maleme aerodrome did they succeed in establishing any serious footing.

61. On 21st May, every effort was made to eject the enemy from Maleme aerodrome. The experience of the previous day had shown what tremendous support was afforded to the enemy by his air forces, which made movement by day almost impossible. A night attack was therefore made by the 20th New Zealand Battalion and the 28th Maori Battalion, who recaptured almost the whole of the ground lost, but were exposed at daylight to intensive bombing by the enemy air forces and compelled to withdraw.

During the 21st and 22nd May troop-carrying aircraft continued to land on and about Maleme aerodrome although under artillery fire. It is estimated that as many as 600 troop carriers landed on one day. Their losses must have been extremely heavy, but they were able to establish a sufficiently strong force to drive back our troops in the Maleme sector with the aid of intensive support from bombing and fighting aircraft, which made movement by day practically impossible.

During the nights 21st/22nd May and 22nd/23rd May the Royal Navy intercepted and sunk large numbers of small craft transporting enemy troops, but suffered considerable losses during daylight from enemy air attack.

62. On 24th May and 25th May the fighting continued with the same intensity. The enemy continued to land troops and to force back our line from the Maleme area towards Canea, which was heavily bombed and almost

destroyed. General Freyberg now abolished the separate Maleme sector and put the New Zealand troops who had formerly occupied it under General Weston, Royal Marines, the commander of the M.N.B.D.O.

63. I had meanwhile been sending to the island such reinforcements as were available and could be transported. By this time no merchant ship had any chance of survival within 50 miles of the island, and the only means of sending reinforcements was by fast warship which could reach Suda Bay under cover of darkness, disembark their troops and get clear of the island before dawn. This limited both the number and type of troops that could be sent, even if such reinforcements had been available. It was, for instance, impossible to send any more guns by this method. As already stated in para. 48, the reinforcements available were in any case extremely limited, in all three battalions (2nd Battalion the Queen's, 2nd Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, 1st Battalion Leicester Regiment) and two battalions of Layforce, a body of specially picked troops who had been sent out from the United Kingdom for combined enterprises. Headquarters 16th Infantry Brigade and 2nd Queen's set out for the island, but the ship in which they were being transported was hit during the passage and had to return to Alexandria. Of the reinforcements sent, the Leicesters and Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were landed at Tymbaki on the south of the island and the former regiment and part of the latter made their way overland to the Heraklion sector; the remainder of the reinforcing units were landed at Suda Bay.

64. 26th May proved the critical day. Our line west of Canea was broken and driven back on Suda Bay, so that a considerable portion of the base area fell into enemy hands. Suda Bay became no longer tenable. All troops were much exhausted and the enemy air bombing was as intensive as ever. The enemy had by this time landed some 30,000 to 35,000 troops on the island. Early on the morning of 27th May General Freyberg decided that evacuation was inevitable, and reported to me accordingly. In view of the situation he described and the impossibility of sending further reinforcements, I gave orders for the withdrawal of our garrisons from Crete.

65. Meanwhile the troops at Heraklion had had considerable fighting but had never been seriously pressed. The enemy had, however, continued to land troops in a valley to the east, outside the range of our defences, and was gradually accumulating a large force there. The whole of the garrison, except those wounded who could not be moved, were evacuated by cruiser and destroyer on the night of 28th-29th May. At the moment of embarkation there were many indications that an attack was about to come in from the force which had been built up to the east, and which had been joined by tanks and additional troops landing from the sea near Matea.

66. It is impossible at present to relate the full story of events at Retimo. Headquarters, 19th Australian Brigade, had been summoned to Suda Bay area early in the battle and the command passed to Lieut.-Colonel I. Campbell. Communication by land had been blocked by the enemy detachment described above; the

garrison had no cyphers and was unable to communicate except by W/T in clear. General Freyberg reported that he was unable to communicate to the defenders the decision to withdraw and asked that an aeroplane might be sent to drop orders on the garrison. The aeroplane never returned and it is now known that the orders were never received. The 2/1st and 2/11th Australian Battalions under Lieut.-Colonel Campbell held their position until 31st May, when, after gallant fighting, they were overwhelmed by greatly superior forces including tanks. Most of the garrison became prisoners; a few escaped to the hills and small parties reached Egypt some weeks later.

67. The remains of the troops from the Maleme—Canea—Suda Bay area withdrew south across the island to Sphakia. The withdrawal was covered in the early stages by Layforce, 5th New Zealand Brigade and 19th Australian Brigade, the two latter working as one force. 4th New Zealand Brigade, some light tanks of 3rd Hussars, some guns and a battalion of Royal Marines also covered the retreat, which, in spite of very great difficulties was carried out with much bravery and determination, under the direction of General Weston. This withdrawal by troops who had already endured six days of the sternest fighting imaginable was a magnificent performance. The only blot on the story of the defence of Crete was the indiscipline of a certain proportion of the disorganized and unarmed elements of the force whom it had not been possible to evacuate before the attack. When the withdrawal to the southern beaches began, they much hampered both the retirement and orderly embarkation.

The road ends some miles short of the beach and thence there are only rough paths down to the beach. The climb from the beach to the high ground above, which was held by the rearguard troops, took a minimum of two hours.

68. The first evacuation from Sphakia took place during the nights of 28th-29th and 29th-30th May, when the wounded and non-fighting troops were mostly embarked. On 30th May the enemy made contact with the rearguard, but was repulsed and made little further effort to interfere with the re-embarkation.

The Navy had sustained heavy losses in ships during the passage to and from Crete, and it had been decided that the evacuation must end on the night of 31st May-1st June. The embarkation during the last two nights was carried out under conditions of considerable difficulty, rations and water were limited and the troops, scattered in various hiding places during the day to shelter from enemy air attack, were difficult to collect for embarkation. I ordered General Freyberg to return to Egypt on the night of 30th-31st May, and he and his staff were taken off by flying boat. General Weston remained in command and was taken off on the following night. It is regretted that a considerable number of troops had to be left behind, including an Australian battalion and the bulk of Layforce, who had all fought most skilfully and gallantly to the end.

Out of the total of 27,550 Imperial troops on the island at the beginning of the attack, 14,580 were evacuated (7,130 out of 14,000 British, 2,890 out of 6,450 Australians, 4,560 out of 7,100 New Zealanders). What proportion of the 13,000 casualties were killed and wounded cannot yet be determined.



69. The failure to hold Crete was due mainly to the overwhelming superiority of the enemy aircraft and the way in which it was handled in conjunction with ground troops. Officers who had fought through the last war and had been engaged in France during this war have expressed their opinion that the bombardment the troops underwent in Crete was severer and more continuous than anything they had ever experienced. The handicap under which the force laboured in regard to lack of equipment and the difficulties of reinforcing the island with either men or material have been explained, but it was the enemy air force which was the deciding factor. Even had the German attack been beaten off it is very doubtful whether the troops in Crete could have been maintained in face of the enemy air force, which made the approach of shipping to the island most hazardous.

The troops, including the Greeks on the island, fought magnificently under the most stern conditions, and deserve the very greatest credit for their efforts. General Freyberg and General Weston, and the subordinate commanders under them such as Brigadiers Puttick, Chappell, Hargest, Vasey and Colonel Campbell, set a fine example to their men and handled their troops with determination and skill.

The work of the Royal Navy in preventing the enemy attempts at invasion by sea and in evacuation of the troops in spite of extremely heavy losses in ships and in men was beyond all praise. To Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham himself, who took the responsibility of ordering the evacuation to proceed in spite of the losses, the Army owes a deep debt of gratitude.

Although they were completely outmatched in numbers, the Royal Air Force never failed to do their utmost to support the Army. Though they were obliged to operate from distant places in Egypt, they attacked to the utmost of their ability and in spite of heavy and inevitable losses.

70. The defence of Crete, though unsuccessful, undoubtedly frustrated the enemy plan for future operations by destroying so large a portion of his air-borne troops. The total enemy losses were at least 12,000-15,000, of whom a very high proportion were killed.

The defence saved in all probability Cyprus, Syria, Iraq and perhaps Tobruk.

Thus our losses in Crete, though heavy, were very far from being in vain, and the gallant resistance of the force saved our position in the Middle East at a critical time. The fighting in Crete may prove a turning point of the war.

#### *Revolt in Iraq.*

71. While our preparations for the defence of Crete and of the Western Desert were absorbing practically our whole attention and resources, a critical situation in Iraq suddenly made fresh demands on Middle East.

Our relations with the Iraq Government during the war had become increasingly unsatisfactory. By treaty Iraq was pledged to give us assistance in war and to permit the passage of British troops through Iraq. There was a British Military Mission with the Iraq Army and the Royal Air Force had stations at Habbaniyah, some 40 miles west of Baghdad, and at Shaibah, near Basra. For the protection of the R.A.F. establishments there were locally enlisted Iraq Levies.

All operational aircraft were removed from Iraq early in the war, and there remained only a few obsolete machines at Shaibah and a depôt and training school at Habbaniyah with training aircraft only.

72. Although the Iraq Government, after some pressure, broke off diplomatic relations with Germany, they did not declare war; and when Italy entered the war they did not even break off relations with the Italian Government and allowed the Italian Legation to remain in Baghdad, a hot bed of anti-British propaganda and espionage. As the military successes of the Axis powers increased, so did the unfriendly influence of Rashid Ali become more effective in controlling the conduct of the Iraq Government. The Mufti of Jerusalem and other malcontents from Palestine, to whom Iraq had given asylum, formed a centre of anti-British intrigue. A force had been under preparation in India for use in Iraq should enemy forces reach that country, but the situation in Middle East after the Italians entered into the war and the Japanese threat to Malaya made it necessary to divert this force in other directions which were of more urgent importance.

73. Early in 1941 it was decided to take diplomatic action to try and improve relations with the Iraq Government and to this end Sir Kinahan Cornwallis was appointed ambassador. There was, however, considerable delay in his despatch to Iraq and he did not reach Baghdad till a few days before the revolt broke out.

74. Political crises and frequent changes of Government are an ordinary feature in Iraq. The beginning of the troubles was a change of Government which brought into power as Prime Minister Rashid Ali Ghailani, who was known to our Intelligence to be in the pay of the Axis. At first he professed himself as desirous of co-operating with His Majesty's Government, but his subservience to Axis direction became more and more manifest and he even contemplated re-establishing diplomatic relations with Germany. It was also clear that the real power behind him was four well-known pro-Axis generals in the Iraqi army who were popularly known as the Golden Square.

75. On 31st March, the Regent of Iraq, learning of a plot to arrest him, left Baghdad for Basra and shortly afterwards took refuge on a British warship. Later he flew to Transjordan with his most prominent supporters. The general position in Iraq became so threatening that about the middle of April His Majesty's Government decided to land a force at Basra in accordance with our treaty rights of passing troops through Iraq. A line of communications from Basra to Baghdad by rail and thence by road across the desert to Haifa, had been prepared early in the war as an alternative line of communications to the Middle East, should the Red Sea be rendered unsafe by enemy action; a large sum of money had been spent in improving the road across the desert from Haifa to Baghdad.

76. A brigade group was about to sail from India as reinforcement to Malaya; this brigade was diverted at short notice to the Persian Gulf and landed at Basra on 18th April.

Control of the military situation in Iraq had been a responsibility of the Middle East since the beginning of the war, but the Commander-in-Chief in India had lately raised the question whether, in the event of operations in Iraq,

these should not be controlled from India. Since the great majority of troops in Iraq would in all probability be Indian and the line of communications through the Persian Gulf to Basra must be under Indian direction, I agreed that there would be considerable advantage in India assuming command, at all events of the Basra base and of operations in lower Iraq. Accordingly, on the landing of this force at Basra, responsibility for Iraq was handed over to the Commander-in-Chief in India.

77. The first effects of the landings of troops were favourable. But when Rashid Ali was informed that a second brigade would shortly be landed, he sought to refuse permission until the original brigade had moved out of Iraq. While the question was still under discussion Rashid Ali and the pro-Axis elements in Baghdad decided to take action against the Royal Air Force station at Habbaniyah, to which place the British women and children in Baghdad had been transferred on 29th April, in view of the obviously threatening attitude of certain elements in Baghdad.

78. The Air Force station at Habbaniyah lies on low ground near the River Euphrates, and is completely overlooked and commanded by high ground to the west between the station and Lake Habbaniyah. This ground is 150 ft. high and only some 1,000 yards from the station. The small force of levies at Habbaniyah was quite insufficient to occupy this high ground, on which the Iraqi mechanized force of approximately a brigade, with several batteries and a number of tanks and armoured cars, installed itself on 30th April. While the Ambassador at Baghdad was trying to secure the withdrawal of this Iraqi force by diplomatic means, its numbers were increased, till by the evening of 1st May, the total was about 11 battalions with some 50 guns, over 9,000 men in all. Their attitude became so threatening that the Air Officer Commanding Iraq, Air Vice-Marshal Smart, decided that it was essential to attack these troops without further warning. Accordingly, in the early morning of 2nd May, an improvised air force, made up mainly from the machines in the training school attacked the Iraqi forces. It was hoped that the effect of air bombing might shake the morale of the Iraqi troops and cause them to withdraw. The attacks did not, however, have the desired effect, the Iraqis finding good concealment in broken ground and maintaining their positions, although the ultimate result of this bombing must have contributed to their subsequent defeat and further air attacks on reserves prevented effective reinforcement.

79. The situation of the Royal Air Force in Habbaniyah was now critical. The defenders comprised only some 350 British infantry (flown up from Basra), R.A.F. Armoured Car Company of 18 cars, about 1,000 Royal Air Force personnel, and six companies of levies. They had no artillery and had to defend a perimeter of 7 miles, including the river frontage. The Iraqis on the high ground could command at close range with artillery and even with machine-guns the aerodrome from which machines had to take off and land and had they made a determined assault, it would hardly have been possible to withstand them. As it was they contented themselves with artillery fire, which did little damage. The Iraqi Air Force also began bombing attacks on Habbaniyah.

Reinforcement or relief of the garrison presented considerable difficulty; it was flood season in Iraq, which made movement from Basra by rail, road or river towards Baghdad difficult, and Iraqi forces had occupied points on the Tigris and on the railway to prevent movement northwards from Basra. A British battalion (1st King's Own Royal Regiment) was sent by air from Basra to Habbaniyah to reinforce the garrison and such aeroplanes as could be spared from Middle East were sent to Habbaniyah. These put the Iraqi Air Force out of action by 7th May, but meanwhile German air forces were being transported to Iraq, using landing grounds in Syria on the way, without interference and without protest from the Vichy French.

80. On 5th May, the War Cabinet transferred the responsibility for Iraq back from India to Middle East, and I was instructed to send a force across the desert to relieve Habbaniyah and occupy Baghdad. The only mobile force I could make available from Palestine was one cavalry brigade group. If this force was despatched to Iraq, there would be no possibility of providing a force for Syria should the need arise. The Chiefs of Staff accepted this conclusion and took the responsibility of ordering this force to be sent to Iraq. Accordingly, I made up a motorised column consisting of the 4th Cavalry Brigade, under Brigadier Kingstone (Household Cavalry Regiment, Wiltshire Yeomanry, Warwickshire Yeomanry), 60th Field Regiment, R.A., from Egypt and 1st Essex Regiment. The whole force was placed under the command of Major-General J. G. W. Clark, the Commander of the 1st Cavalry Division. The Arab Legion, a military police force enlisted in Transjordan from Bedouin Arabs, also accompanied the force and gave invaluable assistance.

There was extreme difficulty in raising sufficient transport for even this small force, and it was not until 10th May that it was possible for the force to advance across the Iraq frontier. Meanwhile, Iraqi forces had occupied the fort at Rutbah. The distance from Haifa to the Transjordan frontier is 284 miles, thence to Habbaniyah, 285 miles.

81. On 7th May, the garrison at Habbaniyah made a successful sortie and drove the Iraqi troops from the high ground overlooking the station, capturing some 400 prisoners, six guns and much equipment. The Iraqi forces retreated to Fallujah on the Euphrates.

On 18th May, Habforce, as Major-General Clark's column was termed, after recapturing Rutbah, where the Arab Legion greatly distinguished itself, reached Habbaniyah. It then began an advance on Baghdad by Fallujah, where, however, it was delayed for some days owing to the floods making the approaches to the river impassable for mechanical vehicles. After the road had been repaired with some difficulty, Fallujah was captured on 19th May. On 22nd May, an Iraqi force made a determined attack on Fallujah and succeeded temporarily in reoccupying the town. It was, however, driven out by a counter attack with considerable losses.

82. On 23rd May I flew to Basra to meet the Commander-in-Chief in India, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, to discuss further reinforcements and operations in Iraq. I instructed General Quinan, commanding the Indian forces, now that the situation at Basra was in hand, to

push a force by the line of the railway from Shaibah towards Baghdad as rapidly as possible. It was decided that India would send reinforcements to complete a total of two divisions in Iraq.

83. After repulsing the Iraqi counter attack at Fallujah, General Clark's small force moved on Baghdad in two columns. After overcoming the delays due to floods and the enemy's destruction of communications, he arrived within a short distance of Baghdad on 30th May. His strength was 1,200 men with eight guns and a few armoured cars.

Although there was practically the whole of a division of the Iraqi army in Baghdad and a further force at Ramadi on the Euphrates, in rear of General Clark's force, Rashid Ali and his supporters had lost heart and fled; and the Mayor of Baghdad sent out a white flag and asked for terms for capitulation. After discussion with the Ambassador, who had been confined to the Embassy for the past four weeks, satisfactory terms were arranged. The Regent of Iraq and some of his ministers, who had escaped to Transjordan at the time of Rashid Ali's *coup d'état*, returned to Baghdad on 1st June and formed a legitimate Government.

A small force of the Household Cavalry regiment and one battery with some armoured cars was at once sent on to Mosul to secure the landing ground there, which had been used by German air forces during the revolt. A Gurkha battalion was then flown up from Baghdad.

84. We may consider ourselves exceedingly fortunate to have liquidated what might have been a very serious commitment with such small forces and with little trouble. Rashid Ali and his adherents seem to have lost heart at the weakness of the support accorded to them by the Germans. The gallant defence of Habbaniyah and the bold advance of Habforce discouraged the Iraqi army, while the Germans in their turn were prevented from sending further reinforcements by the desperate resistance of our troops in Crete, and their crippling losses in men and aircraft. The majority of the Iraq population, especially the tribesmen outside the principal towns, did not give any active support to the revolutionary government but had the Germans sent sufficient forces to enable the Iraqi rebels to score a success, the whole country might well have risen against us.

The Iraqi army admitted to losses of 1,750, including 500 killed. Our own losses were slight.

#### *The Syrian Problem.*

85. Early in May, while Middle East was busily engaged with the problems of Crete, the Western Desert, and Iraq, a fresh commitment arose from the German infiltration into Syria. At the end of April the Chiefs of Staff pointed out the danger of the Germans establishing a footing in Syria and instructed me to be prepared to send a force into Syria if necessary to support any French resistance to the Germans. I replied that my information was to the effect that General Dentz, High Commissioner in Syria, was completely subservient to Vichy and was most unlikely to resist German penetration; and that the largest force I could make available in Palestine was one incomplete cavalry brigade group. I advised against an approach to Dentz, which had been

suggested by the Chiefs of Staff, as I considered it would only result in our strength, or rather weakness, becoming known to the enemy.

At this time the question of the use of the Free French forces in Syria came to the front. Some battalions of the Free French had been sent to the Middle East early in 1941 and had been used in the Sudan in operations against Eritrea. After the capture of Massawa, General de Gaulle requested that all the Free French forces in the Middle East should be concentrated in Egypt to be formed into a division under General Legentilhomme. Some additional units were on their way to Egypt. I arranged for the formation of the division in Egypt, and later agreed to transfer the French troops to Palestine on General de Gaulle's representations that he would like them to be readily available for use in Syria if the French in Syria resisted German penetration. By about the middle of May the Free French forces in Palestine consisted of six battalions, a battery and a company of about 20 tanks. They were located near Qastima, to the south of Jaffa. They were incomplete in transport, and in some instances in weapons.

86. Early in May, as already related, I was instructed to send the only mobile force available in Palestine to Iraq. When this had departed, the whole of the troops in Palestine were practically immobile and a great proportion of the civil transport available had been hired to make up Habforce. Nevertheless I was still being urged to enter Syria to expel the Germans from it.

87. Late on the evening of 18th May General Catroux, the Free French Commissioner in Middle East, came to me and said he had certain information that the French in Syria were withdrawing the whole of their troops into the Lebanon and were handing over the remainder of Syria to the Germans. He declared that the road to Damascus was open and that it was urgently necessary to take advantage of the opportunity and to send a force into Syria immediately. He was most insistent that I should issue orders to this effect there and then. Previous experience had taught me to regard the information produced by the Free French from Syria with caution, and what General Catroux stated was not confirmed by intelligence I had received from other sources. Quite apart from this, as stated above, I had not the troops or the transport available to send a force into Syria. I therefore refused to take any immediate action but summoned a meeting for the following morning to consider the whole question. At this meeting there was general agreement as to the desirability of forestalling the Germans in Syria, but the only means available was by weakening the defence of Egypt in the Western Desert. In the meantime, I insisted on verification of the Free French information before acting on it.

88. I reported General Catroux's request to the Chiefs of Staff, who again urged me to take immediate action in Syria, and, if I was unable to provide a force, to allow the Free French to enter Syria alone. I pointed out that the Free French could not move without transport which I was unable to supply and that they were unwilling to move without the support of some British artillery. I gave my opinion that nothing smaller than a corps with an armoured

division would be sufficient for the effective occupation of Syria and that it would be most unwise to attempt operations with a small, ill-equipped force, such as the Free French contingent.

On 21st May General Catroux, who had gone to Palestine to meet a French officer from Syria, cabled admitting that his information was entirely incorrect; that far from withdrawing into the Lebanon the French were moving troops south of Damascus and taking up positions to defend the routes to that city. He said that nothing but a large force could attempt the occupation of Syria. Meanwhile I had been receiving telegrams from General de Gaulle in West Africa, couched in imperative language, enquiring why the Free French troops were not already on the march to Damascus. This incident illustrates the difficulties there sometimes were in dealing with the Free French.

89. It was, however, apparent that I might have to take action in Syria in spite of my weakness. The dangers to the Suez Canal and our bases in Egypt if the enemy succeeded in establishing himself in Syria were obvious. Cyprus would be at his mercy, and a German occupation of Syria would practically complete the encirclement of Turkey and make it difficult for the Turks to continue to resist German demands.

I therefore decided that some risk to the defence of Egypt in the Western Desert must be accepted, and issued orders for the 7th Australian Division (less one brigade in Tobruk) to move to northern Palestine, and I sent to the northern frontier of Transjordan the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 4th Division which had just arrived from the Sudan. I instructed General Wilson, G.O.C. Palestine, to make preparations for a possible advance into Syria.

As usual, one of the principal difficulties was to find the necessary transport and signals for the force and the usual process of scraping from other units and formations had to be resorted to to produce any force at all.

90. On 25th May I reported to the War Office that I was preparing a plan for an advance into Syria with the 7th Australian Division less one brigade, the Free French troops, and certain units of the 1st Cavalry Division. This was a much smaller force than I considered necessary, also I disliked using the Free French since I knew that this would be likely to stiffen the resistance of the French in Syria, but I had no other troops I could make available. I was instructed by the Chiefs of Staff to advance into Syria as soon as the above force was reasonably prepared. I reported that 7th June was the earliest date by which the operation could start, actually it began on 8th June.

91. The general plan was to advance into Syria on a broad front. On the right the 5th Indian Brigade was to occupy Deraa and the line of the Yarmuk railway. The Free French force was then to pass through and advance on Damascus. On the left the 7th Australian Division was to advance in two columns, one by Merjayun, one by the coast road to Beirut. I realized that if the French resisted progress would be slow and that the force might not be strong enough to accomplish its object. The Vichy French were in

greatly superior numbers and had some 90 tanks, while no armoured vehicles could be spared from the Western Desert. The air support was bound to be comparatively weak, since the greater part of the air forces was required to support the attack which was being staged shortly afterwards in the Western Desert.

The Navy would support the advance with a squadron along the coast. Protection to this squadron from enemy air attack occupied the greater proportion of our fighter aircraft available.

92. The advance began early on 8th June and at first made fair progress. The French had obviously expected attack by a much larger force; but finding how weak we were, they soon took heart and their resistance stiffened. On the right the Free French had advanced to within about ten miles of Damascus by 12th June. On the left the Australian right column captured Merjayun, while on 9th June the left column after an extremely hard fight had crossed the river Litani on the coast. In this action a commando from Cyprus effected a landing on the coast and assisted in the Australian success, though at the cost of somewhat heavy casualties.

The French now began a series of counter-attacks. On the right they sent a column from Damascus which made a turning movement by the Jebel Druze and attacked our lines of communication between Deraa and Damascus. Further west another column attacked the 1st Royal Fusiliers at Kuneitra and captured the greater part of the battalion. Another column advanced on Merjayun and recaptured it, the Australian forces in this area having made a wide outflanking movement against the next French position and having thus left the main road open. On the coast also there was severe fighting. In all these counter-attacks the French used their medium tanks effectively. Although all these counter-attacks were driven back, their effect was to bring our advance almost to a standstill. I realized that I should have to send reinforcements. By the middle of June, by taking transport as it came off the ships and issuing it direct to units, I was able to make one brigade of the 6th Division and an artillery regiment mobile and placed them at General Wilson's disposal. Meanwhile a very fine effort by the 5th Indian Brigade under Brigadier Lloyd and by the Free French had resulted in the capture of Damascus by 21st June after some very bitter fighting, with heavy casualties on both sides.

93. Towards the end of June, I was able to make use of troops from Iraq to increase the pressure on Syria. Two brigades of General Quinan's force moved from Baghdad up the Euphrates by Abu Kemal and Deir Ez Zor towards Aleppo, while Habforce moved across the desert towards Palmyra and Homs. The Free French moved north from Damascus towards Homs, while the 6th Division, of which two brigades were now ready, moved north-west from Damascus towards Rayak. The 7th Australian Division which had advanced to Sidon prepared to assault the last remaining French position at Damour covering Beirut.

The 10th Indian Division (less one brigade) from Baghdad reached Deir Ez Zor without opposition other than air attack; Habforce

had a hard fight before capturing Palmyra; and the 6th Division met strong resistance on the road to Rayak; on 9th July the Australians assaulted and captured the French defences at Damour, with the assistance of bombardment from the sea by a naval squadron. Under pressure of these attacks the French asked for an armistice on 11th July. Terms were finally signed on 14th July, and Syria passed into Allied occupation.

94. The French in Syria put up an extremely stout fight on ground which was eminently favourable to the defence, and casualties on both sides were heavy. The feeling between the Vichy French and Free French was extremely bitter, and the French professional soldiers were also undoubtedly fighting with a view to preserving their professional honour.

General Wilson handled a difficult problem with his usual skill and imperturbability. General Lavarack commanded the 7th Australian Division, and later, the whole of the forces in Syria, most ably. The 7th Australian Division, most of whom were engaged for the first time, had a hard fight and acquitted themselves with great credit. A particular word of praise must be said for Brigadier Lloyd's 5th Indian Brigade, to whose determination and self-sacrifice the capture of Damascus is mainly due. The Free French fought stoutly in most unpleasant circumstances, their Commander, General Legentilhomme, carrying on in spite of a wound which broke his arm early in the operations.

We must be again considered fortunate in achieving our objective with forces which were really insufficient for their task. It was only skilful handling and determined fighting that brought about success.

#### *Operations in the Western Desert.*

95. During May and the early part of June, while the operations already described in Crete, Iraq and Syria were in progress, preparations were being made to re-form the 7th Armoured Division with the tanks sent from home and tanks which had been repaired in the workshops in Egypt, and to undertake operations against the enemy on the western frontier of Egypt with the object of driving him back and recovering Cyrenaica, at least as far as Tobruk.

On 1st May I had instructed Lieut.-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse, commanding in the Western Desert, to prepare an offensive operation as soon as our armoured strength permitted. It was hoped that it might be possible to re-equip the 7th Armoured Division before the end of May and to assume the offensive at the beginning of June. Meantime, however, the enemy was also being reinforced and was expected to bring forward an additional German armoured division by the middle of May. There was always the possibility that the enemy might forestall us and advance on the Delta before we were in a position to take the offensive ourselves. Defensive preparations in the Matruh area had therefore to be made at the same time.

96. In the middle of May, before the reinforcements from the United Kingdom could be unloaded, there seemed to be a fleeting opportunity of attacking the enemy forward troops on the Egyptian border near Sollum in favourable circumstances. Our intelligence seemed to show that the enemy strength in armoured

fighting vehicles in the forward area was small and that he was in difficulties with his supplies. I decided to make a limited attack with the small number of tanks I had available, about 30 Cruisers and 25 "I" tanks, in the hope of recovering Sollum and Capuzzo and thus securing a good jumping off place for an attack on a larger scale as soon as my reinforcements were available.

The attack was made on 15th May and was at first successful, Sollum and Capuzzo being captured and considerable losses inflicted on the enemy. Next day, however, the enemy succeeded in bringing up a large force of tanks from his reserve and we were compelled to retire. The enemy tanks showed a disinclination to engage closely, although in superior numbers, and we were able to withdraw with little loss.

97. The process of unloading the tanks from the United Kingdom and carrying out the necessary fittings and adjustments proved a longer and more difficult job than had been expected. In spite of every effort it was impossible to get all the tanks ready by the end of May. One of the ships had to be sent to Port Said for unloading since the cranes in Alexandria harbour were unable to lift the tanks from the hold. Many of the tanks required considerable overhaul, besides the fitting of sand filters and desert camouflage, and some of them were of a pattern which had not previously been in the Middle East. It was not until the first week in June that all the tanks were available, and then the state of training and readiness for battle of the 7th Armoured Division caused me considerable anxiety. The personnel of the Division had been without tanks since February, and so short had equipment been that there had not even been sufficient tanks or wireless sets available for them to continue their training while waiting to be re-equipped. Apart from normal wastage, detachments had been sent to Tobruk and to Crete, as well as to the Sudan. The units were, therefore, in no state to take over new equipment and immediately to be put into battle. Many light tank drivers and crews had to be put to man Cruisers or "I" tanks, the crews were as strange to one another as they were to their machines, and no high standard of driving, gunnery or maintenance could be looked for without at least a month's hard training. I was, however, being urged to attack with the least possible delay, and was myself anxious to forestall, if possible, the arrival of more German reinforcements.

10th June was the earliest possible date by which a sufficient force was available to take the offensive with any chance of success, but the Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, Major-General Sir Michael O'Moore Creagh, asked for at least five days to enable his crews to fire their guns and obtain some working knowledge of the new machines they were to take into action, as well as to allow staffs and commanders, many of whom were new since the Division had last been a formation, to settle down and become acquainted with each other. I therefore decided to attack on 15th June.

98. Meanwhile the enemy, on 27th May, had made a short advance in considerable strength and had driven my light covering forces back from the Halfaya Pass, which he occupied and began to prepare intensively for defence,

99. The length of my line of communications, 120 miles from Matruh to the Egyptian frontier across waterless desert, limited the size of the force it was possible to employ. In any event it was obvious that the battle would be decided mainly by the respective armoured forces, and I put into action the largest armoured force I could make available by this date. The 7th Armoured Division consisted of the 11th Hussars (Armoured Cars), the 7th Armoured Brigade of two Cruiser regiments and 4th Armoured Brigade of two "I" tank regiments, and a Support Group comprising two regiments of 25-pounders, one anti-tank regiment, one motorised infantry battalion and some light anti-aircraft artillery. Each armoured brigade was thus short of one regiment, but it would not have been possible to complete the brigades to their full complement of three regiments till the end of June or early in July. The pace and radius of action of the two armoured brigades was so widely different that it would obviously be extremely difficult to combine them. The Cruiser tanks had a speed of 15-20 miles an hour and a radius of action of 80-100 miles, whereas the "I" tanks had a radius of action of only 40 miles and a speed of no more than about 5 miles an hour in action.

100. The course of operations on or near the Egyptian frontier is largely conditioned by the escarpment which runs south-east from Sollum. It is steep and about 200 ft. high, impassable to tanks or vehicles for about 50 miles from Sollum except at Sollum itself and at Halfaya Pass. An advance along the coast therefore would have to find its way up one of these steep routes, while an advance south of the escarpment involved the exposure of the line of communications to a flanking attack from the south.

The plan drawn up by Lieut.-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse, which I approved, was to advance in three columns. The right column, along the sea coast, consisted of the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, Central India Horse, one field regiment and one field company; it was to advance to Sollum, assisting the centre column to capture Halfaya. The centre column, to move south of the escarpment, consisted of the 4th Armoured Brigade (two "I" tank battalions), two field regiments, one medium battery, one anti-tank regiment, and the 22nd Guards Brigade. It was to advance south of the escarpment, cross the frontier well to the south of Sollum, thus avoiding the enemy's prepared defences, and then turn north and capture Musaid, Bir Waer and Capuzzo. A detachment was to capture Halfaya. The left column, 7th Armoured Division less 4th Armoured Brigade was to advance further south of the escarpment to protect the left flank of the centre column and to attack the enemy tank forces wherever encountered. It was anticipated that the attack of the right and centre columns on the enemy defended areas, while the left column threatened the enemy's rear and supplies, would lead to reaction by the enemy armoured forces and bring on a tank battle either east of the frontier during the attack on Halfaya or west of the frontier after our capture of Capuzzo.

If the first stage of the attack was successful and the enemy forces on the frontier were defeated, it was intended to continue the

advance to the Tobruk-El Adem area, and to engage the enemy there in conjunction with a sortie in force by the Tobruk garrison.

101. It was estimated that there were in the forward area Bardia-Capuzzo-Sollum about 5,700 Germans with about 100 medium tanks and 50 armoured cars, 20 field guns and 70 anti-tank guns. The Italian forces in the same area were estimated at 7,500 with about 50 guns and 20 anti-tank guns. In the Tobruk-El Adem area there were over 11,000 Germans, with 120 medium and 70 light tanks, about 36 field guns and 80 anti-tank guns; there were about 16,000 Italians with 120 field guns, 32 anti-tank guns and a few tanks. Altogether, if he brought up his tanks from the Tobruk area, the enemy could concentrate 300 against our total of approximately 200.

102. The air forces available to support the attack consisted of six fighter squadrons, four medium bomber squadrons, and four squadrons (less detachments) of heavy night bombers. This force owing to other demands only became available just before the attack; in the week or ten days preceding the attack very little preparatory air action had been possible. Owing to the lack of equipment and some technical failures in the equipment available, photographic reconnaissance of the enemy positions before the battle had been scanty and disappointing. There was a great shortage of trained pilots for tactical reconnaissance.

103. During 15th and 16th June the attack progressed fairly satisfactorily. The 22nd Guards Brigade occupied Capuzzo and Bir Waer taking several hundred prisoners and some guns, and the Cruiser tanks of the 7th Armoured Division inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy tanks. The enemy, however, still held out at Halfaya and Sollum, one squadron of Cruiser tanks had lost practically all its vehicles in an attack west of Capuzzo by running on to a concealed enemy anti-tank gun position; and we had suffered considerable casualties in "I" tanks from enemy minefields and some enemy high velocity guns at Halfaya. On the evening of 16th June a strong force of enemy tanks attempted an outflanking movement to the south and was engaged by the 7th Armoured Brigade near Sidi Omar. Our Cruiser tanks inflicted casualties on the enemy but found themselves at the conclusion of the engagement heavily outnumbered and were compelled to withdraw.

104. The situation on the morning of 17th June was that the 22nd Guards Brigade was still in position at Capuzzo, Musaid and Bir Waer, with the 4th Armoured Brigade protecting its left flank. Enemy detachments still held out in Sollum and at Halfaya and strong enemy columns with a large number of armoured fighting vehicles were advancing south from Bardia and eastwards from southwest of Capuzzo. To the south the 7th Armoured Division had been forced back from Sidi Omar and was in the Sidi Suleiman area. An enemy column containing artillery and some 75 tanks had advanced east from Sidi Omar towards Halfaya and was threatening to cut off our troops in the forward area. The 7th Armoured Brigade had only some 20 Cruiser tanks remaining in action. During the night of 16th/17th June General Creagh had asked General Messervy who was commanding the troops in



the forward area, to release the 4th Armoured Brigade to attack southward against the enemy column from Sidi Omar while the 7th Armoured Brigade attacked northwards. Owing to mechanical breakdowns and the exhaustion of his crews Brigadier Gatehouse, commanding the 4th Armoured Brigade, was unable to move before daylight. As soon as he began to move southwards, a large enemy column of tanks advanced against the left flank and rear of the 22nd Guards Brigade, and General Messervy was compelled to request Brigadier Gatehouse to return and counter attack. The 4th Armoured Brigade drove back the enemy tanks, but incurred some losses. When it again attempted to move southwards to attack the enemy column from Sidi Omar, the enemy again advanced against the 22nd Guards Brigade, and General Messervy was compelled to inform General Creagh that he could not hold his position without the support of the 4th Armoured Brigade.

105. I had gone up to General Beresford-Peirse's Headquarters at Sidi Barrani on the afternoon of 16th June. On the morning of 17th June, hearing of the critical situation at the front, I flew to General Creagh's Headquarters. Before I reached General Creagh's Headquarters, General Messervy had ordered the withdrawal of the forward troops, as it appeared to him that unless he withdrew without delay the enemy column from Sidi Omar combined with the enemy column from the westward would completely surround him and close his line of retreat. The 7th Armoured Brigade had by this time, as already stated, only some 20 Cruiser tanks in action, while the 4th Armoured Brigade was reduced to less than 20 "I" tanks. Both air force and ground observation estimated the advancing enemy columns as containing at least 200 tanks supported by numerous artillery.

In the circumstances I considered that General Messervy's decision to withdraw was justified and that any delay would have led to his force being cut off and in all probability the loss of the greater part of it without any corresponding gain. The withdrawal was carried out in good order, and the enemy tanks, which were heavily attacked by the bombers of the Royal Air Force, made only half hearted attempts to close with our forces.

106. Our losses in personnel in this three days' battle were just over 1,000, of whom approximately 150 were killed and 250 missing. Our losses in tanks were unfortunately heavy, 25 cruiser tanks and 70 "I" tanks were lost. The great majority of the cruiser tanks were lost by enemy action, but a considerable proportion of the "I" tank losses were due to mechanical breakdowns which could have been put right had time been available, but had to be left behind during the withdrawal, for lack of transporters to bring them back.

It is estimated that 40-50 enemy tanks were destroyed by ground action and much mechanical transport, in addition to numbers destroyed by air action. The enemy personnel losses are not known but must have been heavy; 220 German and 350 Italian prisoners were taken, and a large number of enemy were buried.

107. The main cause of our failure was undoubtedly the difficulty in combining the action of cruiser and "I" tanks, the cramping effect

on manoeuvre of having only two regiments in each armoured brigade and the lack of training in the 7th Armoured Division. Had tank crews had more practice with their weapons they would have destroyed a much larger number of enemy tanks; and had they all been more experienced in maintenance there would have been fewer tanks out of action through mechanical breakdown; so that instead of being so outnumbered at the end of the battle, we should have been in sufficient strength to have defeated the enemy.

The enemy manoeuvred his forces skilfully but showed little boldness or inclination to close and had undoubtedly a most healthy respect for the efficiency of the 2-pdr. and the shooting of our artillery. He was prepared for our attack and had anticipated the lines it would probably take, which were dictated by the lie of the ground. He succeeded in concentrating practically the whole of his tank forces in the forward area without our becoming aware of it.

108. After the action I withdrew the 7th Armoured Division to Matruh to refit and held the forward area as before by small columns of mobile infantry and artillery. The enemy made no attempt to exploit his success and had undoubtedly been severely handled. In fact, his attitude ever since has been entirely defensive both on the Egyptian frontier and outside Tobruk.

#### *Summary of Operations.*

109. In the six months covered by this despatch, from 7th February (date of the capture of Benghazi) to 14th July (date of the signing of the Convention with the French in Syria), Middle East was called upon to conduct no fewer than six major campaigns—in Greece, in Cyrenaica, in Crete, in Iraq, in Syria, and in Italian East Africa. During May, five of these were being conducted simultaneously, and there were never less than three on hand at one time. The theatres of these operations were several hundreds of miles apart, in some instances well over a thousand. Resources to meet the enemy strength were inadequate, both on the ground and in the air. In the circumstances, the fact that three of these campaigns, in Italian East Africa, in Iraq and in Syria, were brought to successful conclusions, and that the enemy counter offensive in Cyrenaica was firmly checked, may be considered to reflect credit on the troops and commanders concerned. In Greece and in Crete, the odds against our forces, especially in the air, were too heavy for successful defence; but in both theatres the great majority of the troops engaged were withdrawn, thanks to the skill and self-sacrifice of the Royal Navy, after having repulsed many enemy attacks and without having suffered tactical defeat. The losses inflicted on the enemy in Crete undoubtedly saved the general position in the Middle East by destroying the greater part of the enemy's air-borne troops and a very large number of his aircraft.

110. Throughout these operations the morale of the troops remained high and they had always well justified confidence that with anything like material equality, they were more than a match for any German troops. The defence of Crete and of Tobruk will rank among the finest achievements of the forces of the British Empire.

III. The operations in Italian East Africa are being described in a separate despatch.

*Co-operation of other Services.*

II2. The Army in the Middle East owes a deep debt of gratitude to the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean, and to Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham in particular, not only for its magnificent work in twice embarking large forces from open beaches in circumstances of great difficulty and danger, but also for its day to day co-operation in protecting convoys, in carrying stores, in attacking enemy lines of communication and in assisting military operations by every possible means. In particular, the successful defence of Tobruk has only been possible by reason of the Navy's work in keeping the port open and the garrison supplied in spite of continual enemy air attack. The successful occupation of Syria also owed much to naval co-operation.

II3. The Royal Air Force has suffered throughout the operations described from possibly an even greater paucity of adequate means than the Army. So far as their resources allowed they have given to the Army the most self-sacrificing support. The forms of Army co-operation known and practised before the war, such as artillery observation and close tactical reconnaissance, have for all practical purposes ceased, since the machines designed for these tasks can no longer be flown in the presence of the enemy, and the supply of pilots trained for army co-operation is almost exhausted. Means of photographic reconnaissance have also never been sufficient for army requirements. The technique of close support of the Army by the Air Force on the battlefield, such as the Germans have put into practice with such effect, has hardly yet begun to be studied in our forces and the necessary machines and technical equipment are lacking. Over the opposing air forces the Royal Air Force have shown throughout the period their usual superiority in skill and efficiency; and subject to their numbers, and the limitations mentioned above, have always co-operated most whole-heartedly with the operations of the army in the Middle East, on whose behalf I desire to express my grateful thanks to Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore and to his successor Air Marshal A. W. Tedder.

*Appreciation of Services.*

II4. I should like to take this opportunity to bring to notice a small body of men who have for a year past done inconspicuous but invaluable service, the Long Range Desert Group. It was formed under Major (now Colonel) R. A. Bagnold in July, 1940, to reconnoitre the great Libyan desert on the western borders of Egypt and the Sudan. Operating in small independent columns, the

group has penetrated into nearly every part of desert Libya, an area comparable in size with that of India. Not only have the patrols brought back much information, but they have attacked enemy forts, captured personnel, transport and grounded aircraft as far as 800 miles inside hostile territory. They have protected Egypt and the Sudan from any possibility of raids and have caused the enemy, in a lively apprehension of their activities, to tie up considerable forces in the defence of distant outposts. Their journeys across vast regions of unexplored desert have entailed the crossing of physical obstacles and the endurance of extreme summer temperatures, both of which would a year ago have been deemed impossible. Their exploits have been achieved only by careful organization, and a very high standard of enterprise, discipline, mechanical maintenance and desert navigation. The personnel of these patrols was originally drawn almost entirely from the New Zealand forces; later, officers and men of British units and from Southern Rhodesia joined the group. A special word of praise must be added for the R.A.O.C. fitters whose work contributed so much to the mechanical endurance of the vehicles in such unprecedented conditions.

II5. As will be gathered from the facts related, the staff of the Middle East Command has had to work under continual severe pressure. I owe much to my two principal staff officers, Lieut.-General A. F. Smith and Major-General B. O. Hutchison, whose example of hard work and efficiency combined with cheerfulness and tact has inspired the whole staff. I wish here to express my deep appreciation of the work and spirit of all who have served me so loyally in G.H.Q., Middle East.

II6. Lieut.-General Sir Thomas Blamey was appointed Deputy Commander-in-Chief in May, 1941. His sound advice and ready assistance did much to lighten the burden on my shoulders.

II7. The Middle East Command owes a deep debt of gratitude to India. During the period of nearly two years while I was Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, I never made any request on India for men or material that was not instantly met if it was within India's resources to do so. I desire to express my thanks to the Government of India, to General Sir Robert Cassels, Commander-in-Chief, India, and to his successor, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, who now succeeds me in the Middle East Command.

II8. I should like to express my thanks to the large body of voluntary workers who by organising Service Men's clubs and in many other ways have done so much to improve the amenities for the men in the various theatres under my command.

LONDON

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

To be purchased directly from H.M. STATIONERY OFFICE at the following addresses:  
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