

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 convoying 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