

11. The supply situation in Malta is bad and will become worse after May. Moreover, Malta's effort is waning, so that enemy convoys are passing more easily to North Africa; and his situation there is improving accordingly. We should, therefore, strike as soon as we can with a reasonable prospect of success, that is, as soon as we have the needed relative superiority over the enemy and the resources to enable us to sustain the momentum of our attack.

12. The relative numerical strength of our own and the enemy's armoured forces is shown in the Annexure to this paper. In comparing the strength of these forces, the following factors must be borne in mind:—

(a) The enemy's cruiser tanks are better than ours. The leadership and training of his armoured formations is probably still better than ours. To give a reasonable chance of our offensive succeeding, we should have about 50 per cent. numerical superiority over the German armoured forces, though we can accept equality with the Italians.

(b) Our Valentine tanks are too slow to be employed with our cruiser tanks, as they are for this reason at a great disadvantage when operating against enemy cruiser tanks. They are, however, a most valuable asset for counter-attack within defensive positions held by our infantry, or to support our infantry in attacks on enemy defensive positions.

(c) Our infantry formations, supported by Valentine tanks, are superior in quality; and at present in quantity also, to enemy infantry formations.

13. An examination of the figures in the Annexure shows that we are severely handicapped by the lack of reliable information, which may result in lost opportunities, or in our attempting the impossible. It is clear, however, that we cannot pass to the offensive now, but that we might be able to attack about 15th May, though 1st June is a more likely date.

14. *Derna—Martuba.*—The maintenance of Malta would be easier if we could operate air forces from landing grounds in the Derna and Martuba area, and the possibility of a limited operation to secure these aerodromes is being carefully and continuously examined.

To secure these landing grounds we must secure Derna and Mechili. The enemy has prepared positions on this line, and we would be playing into his hands if we attacked him on this ground of his own choosing. We would require the same superiority of forces to capture this line as we would to capture Cyrenaica, because the enemy's strength is all deployed forward. There is no reason for limiting the objective of our offensive to the capture of the line Derna—Mechili, unless for administrative reasons it is impossible to advance with adequate forces beyond it. Our losses in this limited operation would almost certainly exceed

those of the enemy, and the launching of the main offensive would be likely to be correspondingly delayed. Apart from any considerations of supply, were we to attempt this operation with inferior armoured forces, we should jeopardise the security of Egypt, because the integrity of our own defensive positions in the Gazala—Tobruk—Bir Hacheim and Sollum—Maddalena areas, strongly entrenched and mined as they are, depends entirely on the availability of a reasonably strong mobile reserve of armoured forces with which to counter-attack the enemy armoured troops, should they succeed in breaking through or passing round the infantry positions. The fronts held in these positions are perforce very extended, and the troops available to hold them are relatively few. Consequently, the various defended localities comprised in them are situated at some distance apart, and there is in no sense a continuous line of defence, though the whole may be covered by a more or less continuous minefield. Moreover, if forced to halt on the Derna—Mechili position and then to adopt a strategically defensive attitude on our Western Front, we should be much less favourably placed tactically than in the Gazala or Sollum positions, because of the longer frontage to be held, and the far greater vulnerability of our communications, consequent on the configuration of the coast.

15. *Conclusions.*—It is evident, therefore:—

(i) That our first objective is to secure Cyrenaica.

(ii) That in securing Cyrenaica, we must destroy as much as possible of the enemy's army.

(iii) That to secure Cyrenaica we must be able to maintain sufficient forces in the El Agheila neighbourhood to hold it against heavy enemy attack.

(iv) That the sooner we can launch an offensive the better.

(v) That, to give our offensive a reasonable chance of success, we should have a numerical superiority in tanks of 50 per cent. over the Germans, and equality with the Italians.

(vi) That a limited offensive to secure the landing grounds in the Derna-Martuba area is likely to need the same relative superiority in tanks as an offensive to recover Cyrenaica, and has nothing to recommend it except that it may be possible, from the maintenance point of view, before the latter.

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#### ANNEXURE "A".

##### *Comparative Armoured Strengths.*

NOTE.—(i) The enemy figures are based on no new formations being sent other than Littorio.

(ii) It has been assumed that enemy tanks are available for shipment.

(iii) Shipping will not be a limiting factor.

	Our tanks.			Enemy tanks.		
				German.	Italian.	Total.
1st April, 1942—						
Best case for us	...	...	(a) 300	260	90	350
Worst case for us	...	...	(a) 300	360	140	500
15th May, 1942	...	...	(b) 450	350	300	(c) 650
1st June, 1942	...	...	(b) 600	350	300	(c) 650

(a) Infantry tanks, numbering 150, have been omitted. These 300 are cruiser tanks with approximately 40 per cent. Grants.

(b) Infantry tanks, numbering 150, have been omitted.

(c) This represents "worst case" for us. It is not possible at this date to state a "best case".