

arrived in the Central Mediterranean and for some months we were no longer able to enjoy the former degree of success against enemy convoys. The enemy's improved supply situation in early 1942 enabled him to exploit his advance, which caught us at a critical time when our forward troops were unavoidably weak and our armoured units in the forward area inexperienced. After an unsuccessful attempt to oppose the enemy advance, the Eighth Army withdrew to a defensive position covering Tobruk. This withdrawal naturally made still more difficult the problem of attacking the enemy's convoys, and he was able to bring in supplies in increasing quantities in preparation for a renewed offensive.

I at once began to plan afresh for an offensive in Libya, although to do so it was necessary drastically to revise our arrangements for defending Syria, Iraq and Persia. It soon became evident, however, that our armoured forces would certainly not be strong enough to take the field with any prospects of success for at least another three months. This caused profound concern in London, where it was feared that unless we acted quickly, Malta might be starved into submission. Grave as Malta's position had undoubtedly become, I believed that by launching the offensive prematurely we should risk an even greater calamity, that we might lose Egypt.

His Majesty's Government were at length persuaded that the delay was inevitable. They were warned that even then the attack could be launched, only if no more of our forces were withdrawn to the Far East. Moreover it was imperative that both Malta and the Middle East should be reinforced with aircraft, and heavy bombers in particular, so that we might effectively impede enemy shipping to Libya which our existing naval and air forces were practically unable to do. But, when His Majesty's Government found themselves unable to provide the reinforcements we asked and were obliged to order more of our air forces to be sent to the Far East, the Middle East Defence Committee were compelled to represent to them that the offensive could not now be undertaken before the middle of June. We pointed out the grave dangers to which the northern flank would be exposed in the event of Soviet resistance collapsing and our continuing with the offensive in North Africa. The whole matter was thoroughly reviewed, and His Majesty's Government ruled that the offensive should be launched by the 15th June notwithstanding.

In the middle of May we found that we had not been able to prevent the enemy reinforcing his North African army and it became clear that our offensive would be forestalled. The enemy advance began on the 26th May. The ensuing battle was fought with the object not only of repulsing the enemy, but of launching an immediate counter-offensive. At times during the first few days it seemed that we might succeed, but at length, after three weeks' fighting had cost it heavy losses, the Eighth Army was forced to retire. Syria, Iraq and Persia had to be stripped bare to enable us to stop the enemy at El Alamein. There we seized the initiative once more, but attempts to turn the tables on the enemy failed, because our own troops were no less exhausted than his and because the armoured troops employed were inexperienced. I then began to plan a

deliberate offensive, knowing that a large number of tanks and anti-tank guns of greatly improved design, heavy bombers, and fresh divisions were on the way.

By this time the Germans had reached the Caucasus and only Stalingrad, where the defenders were slowly losing ground, stood between the Middle East and the gravest danger. It was then proposed to remove Persia and Iraq from the Middle East Command and to set up a separate command, in order to allow the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, to conduct an offensive in North Africa without having to take thought for his northern flank. I could not agree that this was any solution to the problems of the Middle East as a whole.

This is the theme of the general narrative of events which forms Part I of this Despatch. The campaigns in Cyrenaica and the Western Desert were only one, although the most important, of the many activities in my command. A continuous narrative of these operations is therefore given separately in Part II, so that they may be described in appropriate detail without overshadowing matters of general policy.

Part III deals with organisation, training and administration. Many of our difficulties are attributable directly to faults or deficiencies in one or other of these. In my previous Despatch I mentioned some of the administrative and constructional enterprises undertaken. The building of railways, ports, roads and pipelines continued. Some of these enterprises gave an immediate return, the benefit of others will be experienced later.

As far as training was concerned, we had much to learn. In November, 1941, a British Army for the first time took the field against the Germans with a superiority in numbers, for the first time we possessed an imposing array of tanks, for the first time the Army enjoyed full air support in a major offensive against the Germans. All commanders and troops had to learn to use these unaccustomed benefits. An adequate system for controlling air support had been devised, liaison was close, and headquarters of land and air forces formed one camp; but many improvements were possible. Our experience with tanks was less happy: there was much that there was no time to learn and much that could be learned only in action. To learn to handle tanks cost us dear, particularly when we found that ours were no match for the German tanks and that our own anti-tank guns were greatly inferior to the German.

On the 1st November, 1941, the area covered by my Command included Syria, Cyprus, Palestine and Trans-Jordan, Egypt, the Sudan, part of Eritrea, and Aden. The spheres of influence of the Command included Turkey and the Balkans, Crete, Libya, part of French Equatorial Africa, and Arabia. Iraq and Persia were transferred to my Command early in January, 1942, the remainder of Eritrea in February, and Malta in March. The responsibilities of the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, were wider than mine, including, as they did, the control of air forces in Iraq and Persia, in East Africa and, last but not least, Malta, throughout the period. The responsibilities of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, coincided, geographically, more or less with my own, except that the Red Sea and the