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OPERATIONS IN THE WESTERN DESERT FROM DECEMBER 7TH, 1940, TO FEBRUARY 7TH, 1941.

The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 21st June, 1941, by GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East.

PART I.—FIRST PHASE—BATTLE OF SIDI BARRANI—DECEMBER 7 TO 13, 1940.

1. *Introductory.*

1. In a former despatch I gave a summary of events in the Middle East Command down to the 15th November, 1940. The present despatch will deal with events in one part of the Middle East only, the Western frontier of Egypt and Cyrenaica, from the 7th December, 1940, when the counter-offensive against the Italian army began, down to the 7th February, the date on which Benghazi surrendered.

2. In the previous despatch the advance of the Italians to Sidi Barrani was described. In accordance with our pre-arranged policy, little opposition had been offered to the enemy's advance, and it was not proposed to oppose him in strength until he reached our prepared defences at Mersa Matruh. It was not, however, intended that the defence should be a passive one. On the 21st September I had issued orders for a counter-stroke to be prepared against the enemy, so soon as he became engaged with the defences of Matruh. I found that General Wilson, Commander of British Troops in Egypt, and General O'Connor, Commanding the Western Desert Force, had already made the preliminary arrangements for such a counter-stroke. During the next month, as our defences and our forces grew in strength, so the plan for the counter-stroke was developed; and a scheme was eventually prepared for striking at the enemy as he approached Matruh. This plan was studied in detail by the commanders

and troops concerned, and all possible arrangements made to put it into effect, if the enemy advanced against Matruh in the manner that we judged most probable.

2. *Preparation of Plan of Attack.*

3. About the middle of October, when the enemy had been stationary for a month and there seemed no immediate probability of his further advance, I began to consider the possibility of an early offensive action in spite of our numerical inferiority. The enemy's defensive arrangements seemed to me to be thoroughly faulty. He was spread over a wide front in a series of fortified camps which were not mutually supporting and were separated by wide distances. His defences seemed to lack depth.

On the 20th October I issued a personal note to General Wilson instructing him to consider the possibility of an attack on the enemy forward camps. The plan I directed him to consider was an attack at both ends of the enemy's line, by the 7th Armoured Division reinforced with some mobile infantry battalions against the enemy's right flank on the escarpment near Sofafi, and by the 4th Indian Division, reinforced, if possible, by one additional brigade, against the camps immediately east of Sidi Barrani, near the coast. If the initial attacks were successful, I proposed that the Armoured Division should exploit its success northwards towards the coast and the 4th Indian Division westwards. I stated that the operations would be dependent on all the troops being made mobile and being able to move 30 to 40 miles in a night, so as to cover in two successive nights the distance between our front and the enemy's and to attack on