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WAR CABINET.

THE MIDDLE EAST : DIRECTIVE TO THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF.

NOTE BY THE PRIME MINISTER.

I CIRCULATE herewith for the information of my colleagues a general directive to the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, which has been drawn up in consultation with the Chiefs of Staff and despatched to General Wavell by telegram.

W. S. C.

10 *Downing Street,*
August 22, 1940.

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WAR CABINET.**GENERAL DIRECTIVE FOR COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF,
MIDDLE EAST.**

THE following General Directive for Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, has been drawn up by the Minister of Defence in consultation with the Chiefs of Staff, on which your observations are requested :—

1. A major invasion of Egypt from Libya must be expected at any time now. It is necessary, therefore, to assemble and deploy the largest possible army upon and towards the western frontier. All political and administrative considerations must be set in proper subordination to this.

2. The evacuation of Somaliland is enforced upon us by the enemy, but is none the less strategically convenient. All forces in or assigned to Somaliland should be sent to Aden, to the Sudan via Port Sudan, or to Egypt, as may be thought best. East Africans may go to Kenya, if desired.

3. The defence of Kenya must rank after the defence of the Sudan. There should be time after the crisis in Egypt and the Sudan is passed to reinforce Kenya by sea and rail before any large Italian expedition can reach the Tana river. We can always reinforce Kenya faster than Italy can pass large forces thither from Abyssinia or Italian Somaliland. It is not necessary to hold the frontier and you may be able to achieve economy of force by surrendering the desert areas to the enemy and holding the line of the Tana river with a suitable extension to cover essential communications in the gap between Garissa and Lake Rudolph. It is hoped to send to Kenya in the near future some A.F.V.'s and anti-tank guns in order to compel the enemy to advance with heavy infantry forces.

4. Accordingly, if this can be done without endangering Nairobi and the railway, either the two West African Brigades or two Brigades of the K.A.R. should be moved forthwith to Khartoum. General Smuts is being asked to allow the Union Brigade, or a large part of it, to move to the Canal Zone and the Delta for internal security purposes. Arrangements should be made to continue their training. The Admiralty are being asked to report on shipping possibilities in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

5. The two Brigades, one of Regulars and the other Australian, which are held ready in Palestine, should now move into the Delta in order to clear the Palestine communications for the movement of further reserves as soon as they can be equipped for field service or organised for internal security duties.

6. The rest of the Australians, numbering six battalions, in Palestine will thus be available at five days' notice to move into the Delta for internal security or other emergency employment.

7. However, immediately three or four Regiments of British Cavalry, without their horses, should, it would seem, take over the necessary duties in the Canal Zone, liberating the three Regular battalions there for general reserve of the field army of the Delta.

8. The Polish Brigade should move to the Delta from Palestine as may be convenient and join the general reserve, which already includes the French Volunteer unit.

9. The movement of the Indian Division and the three Batteries of British Artillery, although horse-drawn, now embarking or in transit are being accelerated to the utmost.

10. Most of the above movements should be completed before the 1st October, and on this basis the army of the Delta should comprise:—

- (a) The British Armoured Force in Egypt.
- (b) The Five British battalions at Mersa Matruh, the two at Alexandria and the two in Cairo—total nine.
- (c) The three Battalions from the Canal zone.
- (d) The reserve British Brigade from Palestine—total fifteen British Regular Infantry Battalions.
- (e) The New Zealand Brigade.
- (f) The Australian Brigade from Palestine.
- (g) The Polish Brigade and French Volunteer Unit.
- (h) Part of the Union Brigade from East Africa.
- (i) The Fourth Indian Division now in rear of Mersa Matruh (less one Brigade).
- (j) The new Indian Division, less one brigade, in transit.
- (k) The 11,000 men in drafts arriving almost at once at Suez, and additional 13,700 details arriving about the 15th September.
- (l) All the artillery (212 guns) (including from India) now in the Middle East or *en route* from India.
- (m) The Egyptian army so far as it can be used for field operations.

11. The above should constitute by the 1st October at the latest a force of 39 Battalions together with armoured forces; a total of about 56,000 men and 212 guns. This is exclusive of internal security troops.

12. It is hoped that the armoured brigade from England of three Regiments of tanks will be passed through the Mediterranean by the Admiralty. If this is impossible their arrival round the Cape may be counted upon by the 3rd October. The arrival of this force by the earliest possible date must be considered so important as to justify a considerable degree of risk in their transportation.

Tactical employment of the army in Egypt.

13. The aim must be to destroy Italian forces in the desert, but as a last resort the line of the Delta must be held at all costs. The Mersa Matruh position must be fortified completely and with the utmost speed. The sector held by the three Egyptian battalions must be taken over by three British battalions, making the force homogeneous. This must be done even if the Egyptian Government wish to withdraw the artillery now supporting these three battalions. The possibility of reinforcing by sea the Mersa Matruh position and cutting enemy communications, if they should have succeeded in passing it by on their march to the Delta, must be studied with the Naval and Air Commanders-in-Chief. Alternatively, a descent upon the communications at Sollum or further west may be preferred.

14. If a retirement should be necessary, no attempt should be made to leave small parties to defend the wells near the coast in this region. All water supplies between Mersa Matruh and the Alexandria defences must be rendered depotable (a special note on this is attached).* The road from Sollum to Mersa Matruh, and still more the tarmak road from Mersa Matruh to Alexandria, must be rendered impassable as and when it is abandoned by (a) delay action mines (see special note†); or by chemical treatment of the asphalt surface (see special note‡).

* Annex I.

† Annex II.

‡ Annex III.

15. The final line of defence must be prepared from Alexandria along the edge of the cultivated zone and irrigation canals of the Delta. For this purpose the strongest concrete and sandbag works and pill-boxes should be built or completed from the sea to the cultivated zone and the main irrigation canal. The pipe-line forward of this front should be extended as fast as possible. The Delta zone is the most effective obstacle to tanks of all kinds, and can be lightly held by sandbag works to give protection to Egypt and form a very strong extended flank for the Alexandria front. A broad strip, four or five miles wide, should if feasible be inundated from the flood waters of the Nile, controlled at Assouan. Amid or behind this belt a series of strong posts, supported when possible by artillery, should be constructed.

16. In this posture then the army of the Delta will finally defeat the Italian invasion. It must be expected that the enemy will advance in great force, limited only, but severely, by the supply of water and petrol. He will certainly have strong armoured forces on his right hand to contain and drive back our weaker forces unless these can be reinforced in time by the armoured regiments from Great Britain. He may attempt to mask if he cannot storm Mersa Matruh. But, if the main line of the Delta is diligently fortified and resolutely held, he will be forced to deploy an army whose supply of water, petrol, food and ammunition will be difficult. Once the army is deployed and seriously engaged, the action against his communications by bombardment from the sea, by descent at Mersa Matruh, Sollum, or even much further west, would be a deadly blow to him.

17. The campaign for the Defence of *Egypt* may, therefore, as a last resort, resolve itself into: *strong defence with the left arm from Alexandria inland, and a reaching out with the right hand, using sea-power upon his communications.* At a later date it is hoped that the reinforcement of the A.A. defence of Malta and its re-occupation by the Fleet will hamper the sending of further reinforcements—Italian or German—from Europe into Africa, and that an air offensive may ultimately be developed from Malta against Italy.

18. All this (except Malta) might be put effectively in train by the 1st October, *provided we are allowed the time.* If not, we must do what we can. All trained or Regular units, whether fully equipped or not, must be used in defence of Egypt against invasion. All armed white men and also Indian or foreign units must be used for internal security. The Egyptian army must be made to play its part in support of the Delta front, thus leaving only riotous crowds to be dealt with in Egypt proper.

ANNEX I.

Note on Method of Dealing with Drinking Water.

Presumably distilling plants or aqueducts, such as exist at Matruh, will be blown up in case of retreat.

If the water in tanks cannot be run out or forced out by filling in sand or gravel, the water can be rendered useless by adding a suitable chemical. If ordinary brine or salt is available 1 per cent. should suffice. Alternatively, smaller quantities of more potent substances can be used.

These will be required for wells or sources in which ordinary salt would be quickly dissolved and washed away.

Investigations under the auspices of the Chemical Defence Department seem to show that Pyridine Bases, Creosote Oils or if obtainable Bone Oil, would be very suitable for rendering water non-potable. One part in 4,000 would render water too nauseating for human consumption.

If poured into a well which filled up by percolation through the bottom, one part in, say, 500 of the daily flow would probably render the well useless for a month. Though the lighter fractions would soon be washed away, the less soluble fraction would seep into the bottom and slowly dissolve as fresh water flowed in.

Inquiries about supplies of these substances here and in Egypt are in hand.

It may be remarked that none of these substances is toxic in the ordinary sense; indeed, pyridine has long been used as a denaturant to render alcohol (methylated spirits) non-potable for that very reason.

ANNEX II.

Note on Delay-action Mines.

NO fuzes extant are made for a delay of more than a week. Four hundred of one such type are on their way out to Egypt in one of H.M. ships.

2. Another type, of which there are about 2,000, could probably have its period extended to 18 days and possibly 25 or 30. These were made for the W scheme, so would presumably fit the ordinary aeroplane bomb, of which there must be a number available in the Near East. It would be important to bury them deep when a long delay was desired, as the delay will be reduced the higher the temperature.

3. It is suggested that the work necessary to extend the period of delay of this type should be done, and that a number should be sent out as soon as possible to Egypt by air.

August 16, 1940.

ANNEX III.

Note on Treatment of Asphalt Surface of Road.

EGYPT. WESTERN DESERT.

Proposal to make the Road between Sollum and Mersa Matruh unfit for use with Heavy Oil.

ACCORDING to available information, about 80 kilometres of the road between Sollum and Mersa Matruh are surfaced with tarmac. The road is about 16 feet wide, and can thus take a double line of traffic.

2. By applying heavy oil to the surface, it is probable that the bitumen which binds the stone would be liquefied, and become sticky; with the result that traffic using the road would cause it to tear up, and become impassable. The effect would be very much greater if the surface could first be scarified, so as to allow the oil to penetrate.

3. Without an accurate knowledge of local conditions, and some experiment, it is difficult to say how much oil would have to be applied, but a rough estimate is a 50-gallon drum every 30 yards (8 to 10 tons per mile). The figure is expressed this way, because it is almost certain that few, if any, tank wagons are available in Egypt.

4. Whether this method of putting the road out of action is worth pursuing depends upon—

- (a) The extent to which the Italians would rely on the road for the success of an advance.
- (b) The practical possibility of spreading the oil when the moment comes. This can only be judged by the local Commander, but examination might show that it would be worth dealing with the road now, and foregoing the use of it for ourselves, in order to ensure that it will not be available to the Italians.

5. It is suggested that this Note might be communicated to General Wavell, so that, if he considered the matter worth pursuing, he could arrange for experiments to be carried out on his return to Egypt. Mr. Llewellyn of the Shell Company in Egypt would be able to advise on the type* of fuel oil to employ, and on other technical details.

August 16, 1940.

* It is believed that gas-oil would give the best results.



