

1940 - BRITAIN AT WAR

Victory in the Desert

The importance of holding the Middle East was well recognised by the Chamberlain government well before the commencement of hostilities. In August 1939 General Archibald Wavell took over command of all British forces in Egypt, the Sudan, Palestine, Transjordan and Cyprus. His first priority was to turn Egypt in to a base from which he could supply the logistical requirements of his army.

At the end of May 1940 when a German victory in Western Europe seemed inevitable Italy declared war on Britain and France. Although France still had large forces in her North African colonial empire these were effectively out of the battle and war in the Middle East was to be between Britain and Italy alone. Immediately upon the outbreak of war Wavell's 7th Armoured Division took the initiative, in less than a fortnight they inflicted heavy casualties on the Italians taking more than 500 prisoners and destroying more than 50 aircraft. They stayed on the offensive for the remainder of June and July. If numbers were all that mattered Wavell had no chance as he faced an Italian army comprising almost 250,000 men, however this was not the case. His principal opponent Marshal Graziani eventually made a ponderous advance against Wavell's small force who responded by making a skilful withdrawal to Sidi Barrani. By mid-September a much needed convoy of tanks and guns reached the 7th Armoured Division in Egypt and these were ready for deployment in late October.

Wavell's plan of attack was a mixture of purposes; initially he wanted to make it seem nothing more than a five day reconnaissance raid in

strength. If this was successful his intention was to exploit this in full and to advance across Libya taking Tobruk and on to Benghazi. The attack began on December 6 and within two days had covered 60 miles in to enemy territory. During the following days the 7th Armoured Division's tanks were able to penetrate well behind the Italian lines and continue its advance along the coastal road virtually unopposed. This was greeted with buoyant optimism in London by Winston Churchill and the British press anxious for some good news. Axis dismay was considerable and Graziani gave orders that Tobruk was to be held at all costs. To this end the Italians now began to withdraw all available forces to strengthen the defence of the city. Offshore the battleships Warspite, Valiant and Barham provided support for the British infantry from their heavy guns.

There were recriminations on the Italian side, Rome radio proclaimed that their troops had been attacked by 250,000 men with 1,000 aircraft. Several of the Italian Generals who were not captured by the advancing British were sacked. In just under a month they had lost eight divisions and their Airforce had ceased to exist. The British, however, were now beginning to feel the strain; the establishment of supply dumps was growing more and more difficult. Petrol and ammunition took priority over food and troops were down to half rations for days on end. Despite this the attack on Tobruk went ahead on January 21 and after a day of heavy fighting the British troops were ranged along the ridge overlooking the city. The following morning the defenders surrendered with very little further resistance. Attempts had been made to put the harbour out of action but the Royal Navy had it ready to receive shipping within 48 hours. Following the fall of Tobruk it became apparent to Wavell that the Italians were preparing to quit the whole of the coastal approaches to Benghazi and so the greatest speed in pursuing them was

essential. All through the early part of February the advance continued with the battered remains of the 7th Armoured Division reaching the outskirts of Benghazi on February 6th and receiving the Italian surrender the day after.

In just ten weeks Wavell's force of no more than two divisions a total strength of 31,000 men had advanced 500 miles and destroyed an Italian army of ten divisions, taken 130,000 prisoners and captured over 1000 tanks and artillery pieces. Their casualties totalled less than 2000, with 500 killed and 1,500 wounded. There have been fewer greater victories in military history.