



# *DESTRUCTION OF AN ARMY*

The First Campaign  
in Libya  
Sept. 1940–Feb. 1941

**THE ARMY AT WAR**

## 2

### The Prize was Suez

THE CHIEF strategic importance of Egypt lies in the command it gives of the Suez Canal, which connects the eastern oceans with the Mediterranean. Even before the canal was cut, the Isthmus of Suez had been for centuries a route of great trade and military importance. The route which runs along the northern coast of the Sinai Peninsula, although little more than a scarce-defined camel track, has in the course of history seen the movement eastward and westward of many armies and many famous soldiers—Rameses, Alexander the Great and Napoleon among them—all struggling for possession of the vital artery that links east and west.

The opening of the canal in 1869 turned Egypt from a terminus into a halt on the world stage route. Not only is the canal important as a line of communication, but it is scarcely less so as a potential base, thanks to the ports of Port Said and Suez, and their connection with Alexandria.

The maintenance of the Suez Canal as a highway, open to every peaceful nation, has long been one of the keys to British foreign policy. The need to defend Egypt and the canal against attack by nations bent on world domination explains much of the fighting in the Middle East in the last war, as it explains why to-day British forces are fighting against the enemy on a bleak desert in North Africa.

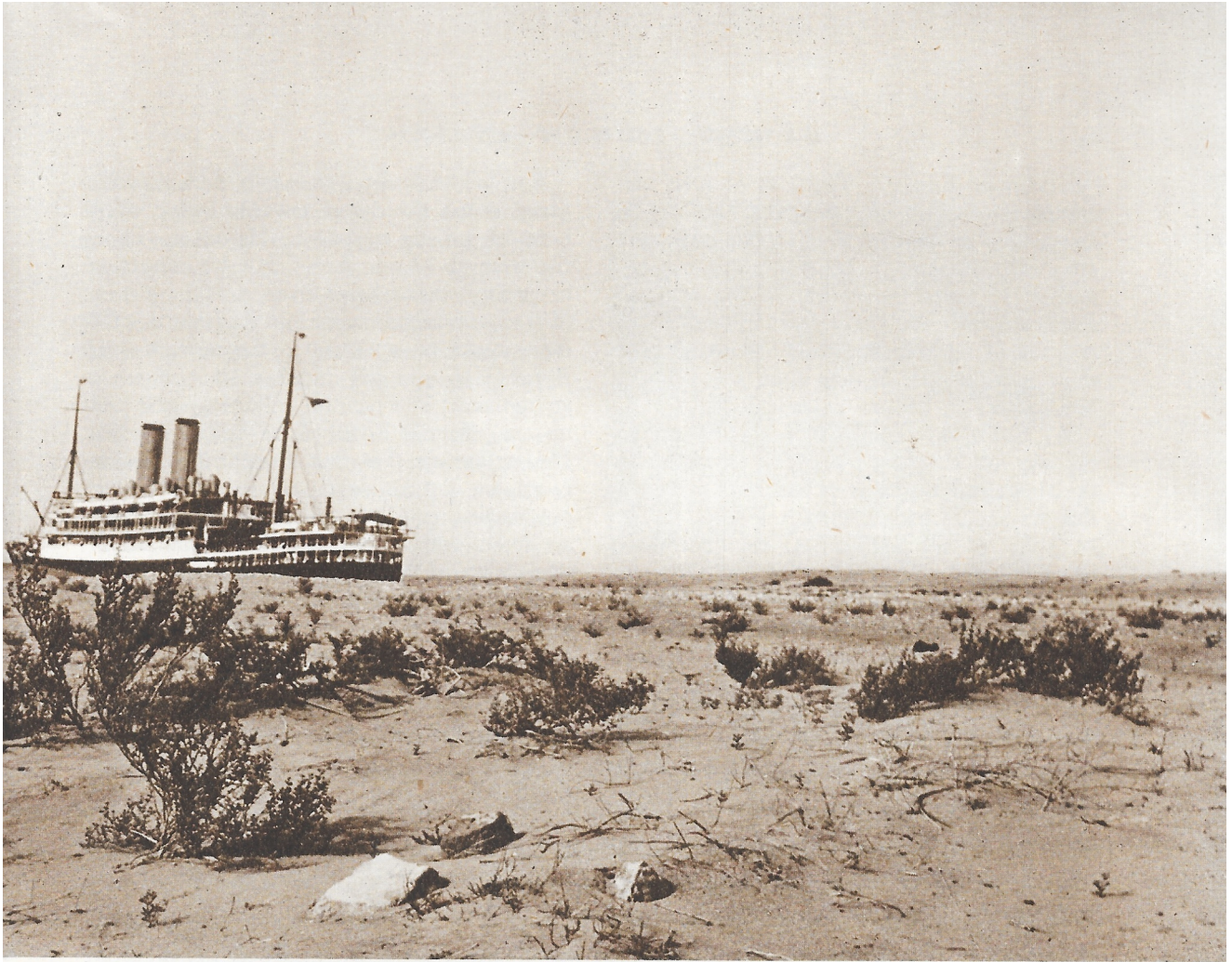
Modern warfare is swift, and we have seen how vast mechanised armies can swoop upon great areas. To-day the outer defences of an objective must be deep and extensive. The canal area itself is well defended, but the threats to it came from forces that were situated hundreds of miles away. The chances of a German attack from the east after a drive



THE SUEZ CANAL, strategic focus and

through the Balkans and Asia Minor originally seemed remote. But there was a clear and immediate threat from the west, where, on the Libyan frontier of Egypt, the Italians had massed a huge army.

In the north the territories of the Levant under French mandate, and the British-mandated territory of Palestine, together with a friendly Turkey in the background, seemed to provide an adequate bulwark against an attack from that direction. To the west the Egyptian desert formed an obstacle to an invader, while the strong French forces in North Africa were ready to harass the Italians



a main artery of the world's trade, is vulnerable to attack by mechanised armies from distances seemingly remote.

on their western frontier, and so relieve any pressure on the Egyptian front.

The sudden collapse of France dramatically changed the situation. When on 17th June, 1940, Marshal Pétain asked for armistice terms, the British High Command in the Middle East hoped that the French colonies and overseas possessions would continue the struggle. But after some hesitation General Nogues in North Africa and General Mittelhauser in Syria decided to obey the orders to capitulate. Their capitulation threw down the barrier of Syria. Moreover, it released very large Italian air and ground forces for use against

the western frontier of Egypt, since they no longer had anything to fear from the French North African Army.

Also the Balkan aspect became more important. Germany was looking that way, and the defenders of Egypt could not ignore the possibility of the war spreading through Eastern Europe to the Black Sea and the Levant.

The British withdrawal from Dunkirk had a marked, if not an immediately apparent, effect on the Middle East. To cope with the growing Italian menace from Libya, reinforcements of men and material were necessary to make good the loss of power caused by the

defection of France. The loss of men and equipment at Dunkirk meant that the Middle East had to go short for a time. Not only were our forces numerically below the safe number needed to resist the enemy in the changed circumstances, but there was a shortage of reserves of fighting material. Moreover, the short route to the Middle East, through the Mediterranean, became precarious.

We had always known that if Italy entered the war we should be subjected to strain in the Mediterranean; but we had never reckoned that we should have to bear the strain alone. In spite of the difficulties, reinforcements began to flow into Egypt, but on 28th October, at a time when the situation was looking more promising than it had since the Italian entry into the war, Italy invaded Greece. We had to take the risk of weakening the air arm in Egypt to help the Greeks. The decision to do so proved to be not only honourable but also wise. The heroic resistance of the Greeks, and our own sure and steady accumulation of reinforcements, dashed the Italian hopes on two fronts. Their attack on Egypt was brought to a standstill, and while they hesitated our forces grew. Something like a miracle had been accomplished. In June the situation had seemed bleak. We had lost our Allies to the north and west; we were outnumbered by the enemy; we were short of men and equipment, and our communications with Britain were slow and uncertain.

Happily we could rely on our communications with the East, and this meant the arrival of a steady stream of reinforcements from Australia, New Zealand and India. Troops of this quality greatly relieved the original anxieties about the defence of Egypt, and rendered possible the later launching of our counter-offensive.

Thus in the six months that passed we grew in strength, and by the end of the year it was possible for General Wavell to order an offensive in the Western Desert and to hurl the Italian invaders off Egyptian soil.

But, in the autumn of 1940, Graziani, as he gazed across the desert towards Egypt, must have felt quietly confident. He did not know the strength of our forces, but he knew that he greatly outnumbered them, and the history of the last war had taught him that even a small force could be a threat to the defenders of Egypt. If a small number of tribesmen, strengthened by a handful of Turks, could lock up a substantial British force in the Western Desert during the first World War, what could he not do with his vast army, his mechanised equipment, the aid of a strong air force, and a navy that had promised to take charge of the Mediterranean?

A grim disillusion was coming to the Italian army—the loss of 133,000 prisoners, 1,300 guns and 420 tanks in two months!

Marshal Graziani, at fifty-nine, was the most spectacular of Italian generals. He was commissioned in 1906 and had a fairly good record in the Great War; but it was on his colonial service after 1919 that he built up his reputation. His ruthless suppression of the Tripolitanian revolt, the occupation of Cyrenaica, the crushing of the Senussi, and the fine administrative feat of occupying Kufra were all successes that increased his reputation among his compatriots; but it must be remembered that in all these campaigns he was using the instruments of modern war against medieval opposition.

He had further successes in the Abyssinian campaign, but he was in command in the easier terrain in the south, and had an opposition divided in loyalties. The administrative handling of the campaign was excellent, but the reputation for boldness was perhaps not too hard to earn, for he had everything in his favour. Even so, he had to be ordered to the attack three times by Badoglio, because he did not think his numerical superiority great enough.

All his campaigns had been against primitive peoples whom he had been un-Roman enough to persecute after subjection. He had little

experience of modern warfare or of fighting under difficulties. He might prove to be a good commander and director of modern warfare, but at this time he was almost an unknown quantity. He knew, however, that our forces in Egypt had been limited under the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936, and that reinforcement on a large scale was therefore impossible until the outbreak of war.

From the beginning, the Royal Engineers had been working on defensive preparations at Matruh and elsewhere in the vicinity, and the preparation of concrete pill-boxes, anti-tank ditches, mine-fields and other defences was pressed on continuously. This entailed providing and moving quantities of stores, main-



THE DEFENCE GOES UNDERGROUND. (Above) The entrance to an H.Q., deep under the sand. (Below) Battalion H.Q. in an old Roman tomb. Bunks are rigged in the coffin niches.

maintaining hundreds of miles of road, and, to supplement the water supply, laying many miles of water-piping and installing pumping plant. This work both maintained the defensive garrison and prepared for the time when our forces should take the offensive ; for it was clear that water and communications would be crucial considerations when the time to advance came.

Matruh became a town of troglodytes, for there was a vast system of dug-outs, and as Italian air raids increased we went underground so that work could be carried on with the minimum of interruption. Sleeping quarters, company and other offices, and the casualty clearing and main dressing stations were all deep under the sand, and to the casual visitor there were times when Matruh seemed a deserted village, though in actual fact it was teeming with life. The garrison was small but it was well trained, and the troops had a good knowledge of the terrain. Such was the base on which General Wavell decided to fall back.

But our story begins earlier than that. It begins with the preliminary work of the British patrols.