". . . THE END OF THE BEGINNING"

By J. E. WALLACE STERLING

Professor of History, California Institute of Technology

On Sunday, November 15, the churchbells of Britain were rung in grateful celebration of the victorious Battle of Egypt. That battle had begun just more than three weeks earlier, on October 23. While the world waited to learn if the reinforced and newly equipped British Eighth Army would this time be able actually to destroy the Axis forces under the command of Field Marshal Rommel, there came the breath-taking news that a great American and British expeditionary force had made landings in French North Africa. It was at once clear to the interested observer that the Battle of Egypt and the landings in Morocco and Algeria were two related parts of the same campaign. Two days after these landings had been made, Prime Minister Churchill spoke at the Lord Mayor's dinner at the Mansion House. He recapitulated briefly the exciting Allied accomplishments of the previous three weeks, and placed them in perspective by saying: "Now, this is not the end. It is not even the beginning to the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

On the next day — Armistice Day, November 11 — Mr. Churchill reviewed for the House of Commons the planning and preparations which made possible the momentous campaigns in North Africa. The speech in which he made this review is the best exposition yet made of what had happened in Allied high places during the first nine months of 1942, especially during the months since June. It throws more light on the "second front" problem than any official statement made heretofore.

It will be recalled that Prime Minister Churchill visited President Roosevelt in Washington late last year, after the outbreak of war in the Pacific. During that visit decisions were made and strategic plans were submitted for further study. Among the decisions made was one already mentioned in a previous article in this series, namely, that the major emphasis of the Allied war effort should be directed first against the European end of the Axis. Both Secretary of the Navy Knox and First Lord of the Admiralty Alexander revealed this decision in public statements during the month of January, 1942; they pointed out that the outbreak of war in the Pacific had not altered the determination of the leaders of the United Nations to deal the first of their heaviest blows against Germany and Italy.

With this decision taken, it remained to determine by what plan it could be most effectively put into effect. How many plans were considered has not been made known, but Mr. Churchill has revealed that two plans were agreed on for further study. One of these plans held in prospect an Allied invasion of French North Africa. President Roosevelt strongly favored this scheme, as did the British. But there were some doubts that operations based on this plan would bring as much relief to hard pressed Russia as would an invasion of western Europe. Consequently, it was decided in Washington at the end of last year that both plans should be studied "with the utmost attention"; meanwhile preparations were undertaken to make possible the carrying out of whichever plan should be adopted.

During spring and early summer it became clear, according to Mr. Churchill, that there would not be available a sufficient number of landing craft for the invasion of western Europe during the "favorable-weather" period of 1942. Consequently, when General Marshall and Admiral King visited Britain in July, it was decided to go ahead with the plan for the invasion of North Africa, while taking sufficient action with regard to western Europe to tie down enemy forces in that sector. From that time on, all energy was applied to complete necessary preparations as quickly as possible; even so, more than three months elapsed from the time of the final decision to the actual invasion.

This decision fitted well with one already taken by Britain to strengthen the Eighth Army in Egypt. Rommel's victorious sweep eastward from his lines at El Agheila across Libya into Egypt occurred in June; by the end of the first week in July he had been stopped some 65 miles short of Alexandria. There he remained for four months, until the Eighth Army attacked in force on October 23. The reinforcements, without which the attack of October 23 would have been impossible, left England in late May or early June, that is to say before Rommel had well begun his advance across Libya; and the heavy guns and the heavily armored and gunned tanks, which the reinforced Eighth Army have recently used to such good purpose, had left England before Tobruk fell to Rommel on June 20-21. As a matter of fact, the fall of Tobruk found Mr. Churchill in Washington. The news came to him as a severe blow, but the blow was somewhat softened by the alacrity with which American aid was made available. Mr. Churchill described what happened as follows:

> They [United States officials] had no thought but to help. Their very best tanks, the Shermans, were just coming out of factories. The first batch of them had been waiting for them. The President took a large number of these tanks back from the troops to whom they had just been given. These were placed on board ship in the early days of July and they sailed direct to Suez under American escort.

Thus the decision to prepare for the eventual defeat of Rommel in Egypt and Libya had been taken in Britain before the final decision to invade French North Africa had been made. Rommel's victories of June took heavy toll of the British Eighth Army and its heavy weapons, so that after July the Allied problem in Egypt was not merely to reinforce but also to rebuild the forces there. When Mr. Churchill visited Egypt early in August on his way to Moscow, he made changes which were designed to expedite this rebuilding process. General Alexander replaced General Auchinleck as Commander in Chief, and General Montgomery was given command of the Eighth Army, formerly commanded by General Ritchie. In

addition, General Alexander was relieved of responsibility for the armies in Syria and Persia. These armies were regrouped under a new command placed in the charge of General Maitland Wilson. Thus enabled to concentrate their attention and energies on preparations for the defeat of Rommel, Generals Alexander and Montgomery trained their new troops in the use of improved equipment which began to reach Egypt in August. When Rommel tried to beat the Allies to the punch by attacking their lines on the night of August 30-31, the units being trained in the Allied rear were not yet ready for battle. But Rommel's attack bogged down after three days and he was obliged to withdraw with heavy losses to the positions from which his attack had been launched. Seven weeks later, when the Egyptian moon was near the full, the carefully trained and heavily equipped troops of the Eighth Army went into action. The battle was opened by an intensive artillery barrage from 25-pounder guns distributed along the front, one to every 23 yards. (In weight of metal hurled, this artillery concentration compared favorably with the barrages of 1918 against the Hindenburg Line, when an 18-pounder gun was located every fifteen yards along wide fronts.) After the artillery barrage, the infantry moved forward, clearing a way for the tanks. The tanks themselves were used to exploit the breakthroughs made by artillery and infantry. This tactic represented a change from tactics employed in the earlier fighting in Libya, when the initial blows in pitched battle were dealt by tanks. The effectiveness of the new tactic is a credit to the skill and forcefulness of Generals Alexander and Montgomery.

Once the High Command of Britain and the United States had decided on the North African campaign in preference to the invasion of Western Europe, it was necessary that Stalin be informed of the decision. The prime purpose of Mr. Churchill's visit to Moscow was to convey this information. All British promises to Russia have been made "in writing or given across the table in recorded conversations with the Soviet representatives." In accordance with this practice, Mr. Churchill had written to the Russian Government in June stating that Britain could not promise to invade the continent in 1942, although they were speeding preparations to undertake the invasion as early as possible. Unquestionably, however, the Russians had entertained hopes that these preparations would be successful enough to make the invasion possible in 1942. Therefore Mr. Churchill's task of telling the Russians that their hopes could not be realized was not a pleasant one. But, said Mr. Churchill,

> The Russians bore their disappointment like men. They faced the enemy and now they [have] reached the winter successfully, although we were unable to give them help they so earnestly demanded, and had it been physically practical, would so gladly have afforded.

Mr. Churchill also offered an explanation of the much-discussed communique which emanated from him and President Roosevelt in the second week of June. This communique, it will be recalled, stated that Britain and the United States had signed pacts with Russia concerning the prosecution and conduct of the war and that these three powers had reached a full understanding "with regard to the urgent tasks of creating a second front in Europe in 1942." It is now clear that the deliberately vague wording of this communique was in accord with the written statement sent by Mr. Churchill to the Russian government. Neither the statement nor the communique made any explicit promise to invade Europe in 1942, although both held out hopes that such an invasion might be possible. It was not until mid-August that Stalin learned from Mr. Churchill's own lips that the plan for invading Europe had been abandoned for 1942. Mr. Churchill met the charge of having thus allowed Russia to entertain false hopes by explaining that the purpose of the communique was to deceive the enemy. He contended that the Russian ally had not likewise been deceived because of his written statement of June.

Just how the costly Dieppe raid of August 19 fits into this picture is not yet clear. It was, of course, important that the Germans be made to expect an invasion of the continent. Such expectation would have the effect of tying down German troops in the West, some of which might otherwise conceivably have been used in Russia. One possibility is that the Dieppe raid was intended to intensify the threat of invasion, and thereby make doubly sure that the German defensive positions in western Europe would be held in strength. German troops garrisoned in Norway, France or the Low Countries were not available for service elsewhere on short notice,—and elsewhere included North Africa as well as Russia. The Dieppe raid may, then, have been part of the whole plan to deceive the enemy. But the heavy losses incurred by the raiders suggest that a high price was paid merely for a piece of deception. The raid almost certainly had other purposes, such as the testing of landing equipment and tactics, the collection of information about German defensive strength, and about German plans for the use of the Luftwaffe in the event of an allied invasion. If these purposes were served, as Allied officials have said they were, then even the heavy losses may be justified, for the knowledge gained in the raid will presumably be turned to good advantage when the invasion of the continent is undertaken in force and in earnest,—as Mr. Churchill has assured us it will be in due course. If the Dieppe raid was thus undertaken primarily for these latter purposes, it is entirely possible that it was so timed as to make more ominous the threat of invasion implied in the joint British-American communique issued in the second week of June.

When Mr. Churchill credited President Roosevelt with the authorship of the plan for invading French North Africa, he was being overly modest. Mr. Churchill and his military advisors have long recognized the strategic importance of the whole Mediterranean area; and well they might, for their conduct of the war has been seriously handicapped by the fact that the entry of Italy into belligerency made the Mediterranean route unsafe for Allied transport. Great sacrifices were made and high costs paid in order to keep Malta provided with food, equipment, and men necessary for its defense. Similarly, high priority was given to the Egyptian and Near Eastern theaters of war. The successes of the present North African campaign were made possible not only by those who planned it but also by the fact that bases in the Mediterranean area had long been held against great odds. From Malta and Egypt, the airpower and seapower of the United Nations struck heavily at

(Continued on page 20)

" . . THE END OF THE BEGINNING"

(Continued from page 13)

Axis supply lines from Europe to Africa. One-third of the ships the Axis has employed in the Mediterranean to feed its North African campaign have been sunk by Allied planes and ships. These shipping losses obliged Germany and Italy to use one-third of their transport and long-range reconnaisance planes merely to supply Rommel's armies with food, munitions and fuel. And these large Axis planes suffered heavily from attack by Allied fighters.

The British decision to hold Egypt and Malta was taken early in the war. In July, 1940, about a month after Dunkirk, the one armored division left in the British army was put aboard ship and sent around the Cape of Good Hope to Egypt. This move was made when Britain stood alone and inadequately prepared to defend herself against the expected German invasion. This armored division contributed greatly to the success of General Wavell's offensive in December of 1940, when, although his army of 40,000 was outnumbered by more than four to one, he pushed back the Italians from the Egyptian border to Bengazi. Since then the battle of Libya has seesawed back and forth. Some of General Wavell's divisions were sent to the aid of Greece, and with his strength thus depleted he proved no match for the force which Rommel threw against him in the spring of 1941. In a few weeks Axis armies were once more on the Egyptian border, but in November, 1941, Wavell's successor, General Auchinleck, drove Rommel back to Bengazi again. Then late in May, Rommel began the attack which eventually carried Axis forces closer to Suez than ever before, only to be hurled back beyond Bengazi in the present campaign. Had Egypt,—and Malta,—not been held through 1940, 1941, and the nine months of 1942, the present North African battles could not have been fought successfully by the Allies. And had it not been for the valor and tenacity of the Russians, it is doubtful if Egypt and Malta could have been held. But Malta and Egypt, Moscow and Stalingrad *were* held, and while they were being held the Allies generated the power for the offensives which at the moment dominate the battlefields of Europe and Africa. Only the future will reveal how effectively these Allied offensives can be sustained, how long and how intensely their pressure can be kept up. In the Mansion House speech, Mr. Churchill was careful to avoid excess optimism: He stressed the fact that the new and spectacular successes did not mark "even the beginning to the end." But his admission that they might be considered as marking "the end of the beginning" is a source of encouragement and of hope that the "beginning of the end" will not be long delayed.