

EGYPT-LIBYA



The U.S. Army Campaigns
of World War II

Introduction

World War II was the largest and most violent armed conflict in the history of mankind. However, the half century that now separates us from that conflict has exacted its toll on our collective knowledge. While World War II continues to absorb the interest of military scholars and historians, as well as its veterans, a generation of Americans has grown to maturity largely unaware of the political, social, and military implications of a war that, more than any other, united us as a people with a common purpose.

Highly relevant today, World War II has much to teach us, not only about the profession of arms, but also about military preparedness, global strategy, and combined operations in the coalition war against fascism. During the next several years, the U.S. Army will participate in the nation's 50th anniversary commemoration of World War II. The commemoration will include the publication of various materials to help educate Americans about that war. The works produced will provide great opportunities to learn about and renew pride in an Army that fought so magnificently in what has been called "the mighty endeavor."

World War II was waged on land, on sea, and in the air over several diverse theaters of operation for approximately six years. The following essay is one of a series of campaign studies highlighting those struggles that, with their accompanying suggestions for further reading, are designed to introduce you to one of the Army's significant military feats from that war.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by Clayton R. Newell. I hope this absorbing account of that period will enhance your appreciation of American achievements during World War II.

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Egypt-Libya

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When the United States entered World War II in December 1941, the British had been fighting German and Italian armies in the Western Desert of Egypt and Libya for over a year. In countering an Italian offensive in 1940, the British had at first enjoyed great success. In 1941, however, when German forces entered the theater in support of their Italian ally, the British suffered severe reversals, eventually losing nearly all their hard-won gains in North Africa.

Even though the United States had not yet entered the war as an active combatant, by the time General Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the German Army's *Afrika Korps*, began his offensive against the British Eighth Army in Libya in March 1941, the American and British air chiefs were already discussing American support for the British Eighth Army. Rommel's rapid and unexpected success in the Libyan desert forced British and American staff officers in London to accelerate their planning. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his advisers also agreed that the British might need American support in the Middle East. Overall theater responsibility would continue to be British, but the President recognized that a British collapse in Egypt would have far-reaching implications and approved contingency measures to prepare for American support to the theater at a future date.

Strategic Setting

The Middle East, a large, vaguely defined area comprising the land bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa, was a key area of consideration in the development of British-American strategy early in World War II. At the beginning of the Egypt-Libya Campaign the region included Libya, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. Although limited geographically to the two countries designated in its name, the events comprising this campaign extended throughout the Allied Middle East Theater of Operations. The area constituted a crucial link in the worldwide communications systems connecting the various Allied theaters of operations. Loss of the air and sea routes through the Mediterranean Sea and the Suez Canal that led to China and India would have required



A period of relative inactivity. (DA photograph)

Allied shipping to travel far to the south around the tip of Africa, thus lengthening the time required to supply American and British forces in the China, Burma, India (CBI) Theater of Operations.

In addition to maintaining their global lines of communications, Allied leaders had several other reasons to consider the Middle East strategically important. Its domination by Germany and Japan would have further isolated China, the Soviet Union, and Turkey. Equally significant, the loss of Iran and Iraq would have meant that the area's oil, the lifeblood of mechanized warfare, would flow into Axis tanks, planes, and ships, rather than those of the Allies.

In early 1942 the key to Allied control of this vital region lay in Egypt. The British Mediterranean Fleet based its operations in Alexandria, the British Middle East Command maintained its headquarters in Cairo, and the Suez Canal provided an essential Allied line of communications to the CBI and Pacific Theaters of Operations. All of these facilities would have been vulnerable to Axis control had the *Afrika Korps* and the *Italian Army* been able to push the British out of northern Egypt.

The battle for control of Egypt centered in Cyrenaica, a desert region in northeastern Libya just west of Egypt. Control of Cyrenaica,

or the Western Desert as it was more popularly known, would have provided the Axis with a secure line of communications for resupplying its forces. For three years the war in the Western Desert consisted of a series of advances and retreats which came to be known as the "Benghazi Handicap" by the British soldiers who alternated between pursuing and being pursued.

The so-called Handicap took place along a narrow strip of barren desert land in North Africa bordering the Mediterranean Sea. A single highway ran along the coast connecting the major port cities of Tripoli and Benghazi in Libya and Alexandria in Egypt. Scattered between these three cities were numerous smaller ports which could be used to supply ground forces from the sea. Off the coastal highway to the south there was ample room for the maneuver of mechanized forces, and there was virtually no civilian population outside the cities along the coast. These factors combined to produce a tactical pattern which repeated itself in the ground operations of both sides: infantry forces moved along the coastal road to secure a port to resupply the mechanized forces for a flanking movement into the desert to clear the road to the next port, which would be secured by the infantry in order to resupply the mechanized forces, and so forth.

The campaign which established this pattern began in September 1940 when an Italian army under the command of Marshal Rodolfo Graziani attacked the lightly held British frontier outposts in Egypt, drove them back, and established fortified defensive positions along the coastal highway well inside Egypt. In November the British launched a counteroffensive that by mid-December had cleared Egypt of all Italian units. By February 1941 Cyrenaica was in British hands, but their hold was tenuous. British forces in Egypt and Libya were short of ground transport, possessed badly outdated air and ground equipment, and had to make do with very little shipping.

In early 1941 Germany joined forces with Italy and began offensive operations throughout much of the Mediterranean. Air attacks from *Luftwaffe* units that had deployed to the Mediterranean in January reduced the British use of the sea. Rommel arrived in Africa during February and by March was ready to launch a campaign against the British line in Libya. In April the Germans then invaded and conquered Greece, and in May they added Crete to their Mediterranean holdings. In a desperate attempt to hold Greece and Crete, the British had diverted extensive forces from Africa, thereby significantly reducing their already limited capabilities in the Western Desert.

By the end of May the Axis offensive had driven the British back into Egypt, although they did manage to hold on to the port of Tobruk

in Cyrenaica. Possession of the besieged port effectively thwarted any further offensive drives by Rommel, who needed its facilities to resupply his mechanized forces. When the British attempted an offensive of their own in June, however, Rommel decisively repulsed it.

By November the British Eighth Army, now armed with American tanks, was once again ready to take the offensive in the Western Desert. Its attack began on 18 November, and nine days later elements of the Eighth Army relieved the garrison which had held Tobruk since the British withdrawal in May. During the first week in December, German and Italian forces finally began withdrawing under British pressure, eventually occupying positions in El Agheila in western Libya. Although the ground forces on both sides settled down in defensive positions, each began preparations to resume the offensive. Rommel was ready first. On 21 January 1942, he opened his second offensive in the Western Desert, moving east in a series of rapid advances, broken only by periods of relative inactivity while resupplying from the coastal ports. Logistics thus dictated the pace of the Axis offensive, and every mile it moved east lengthened a tenuous supply line. But the German and Italian logistics difficulties were not severe enough to halt the attack. When the Egypt-Libya Campaign opened for the United States, the British Eighth Army was retreating out of Libya toward Egypt in yet another eastbound lap of the Benghazi Handicap.

Operations

By June 1942 it was apparent that if the Allies were to hold Egypt, and by extension the Middle East, the British Eighth Army needed time to reorganize, refit, and reinforce. To gain that time, the German-Italian offensive had to be stopped or at least slowed. Since all Axis supplies had to cross the Mediterranean from Europe to Africa and then move along the coastal highway to the fighting units, interrupting that flow of men and materiel into Libya became the primary Allied strategic objective. To attain that objective, the British were eager to obtain American heavy bombers to reinforce the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the Middle East. By early 1942, however, British problems in the Western Desert were but one of a number of worldwide U.S. concerns. The eventual buildup of American air power in the Middle East Theater of Operations actually had less to do with British desires than with a circumstantial combination of Japanese success in Burma and American assistance to the Soviet Union.

Well before the United States declared war on Japan, the Lend-Lease Act of March 1941 effectively made America an economic bel-



Italian anti-aircraft gun. (DA photograph)

ligerent. The act came about primarily as a result of President Roosevelt's desire to assist the British war effort. At the time lend-lease went into effect, British requirements for aid overshadowed those of other nations. But the German invasion of the Soviet Union and deteriorating Japanese-American relations soon widened the demand for lend-lease assistance, and in late 1941 the United States began organizing military missions to coordinate the aid. In October the War



U.S. planes bomb oil fields. (USAF photograph)

Department established a mission for North Africa to supervise lend-lease support to the British in the Middle East. In November Brig. Gen. Russell L. Maxwell, head of this North Africa military mission, opened his headquarters in Cairo. In an apparently unrelated move, two months before Maxwell's arrival in Cairo an American military mission opened in China where events there would contribute to introducing American air power to the Middle East.

In May 1941 the President had decided that the defense of China was vital to American security, making that country eligible for lend-lease assistance. To coordinate this aid, the War Department established the American Military Mission to China (AMMISCA) in September. The Japanese occupation of China, which had begun in 1937, by 1941 had virtually sealed off the country from the rest of the world. American lend-lease materiel reached China by way of the Burma Road, a narrow, twisting route through the mountains that connected Lashio, Burma, with Kunming, China. In May 1942, while the British were suffering serious reverses in the Western Desert, Japan's successful invasion of Burma closed this last route for lend-lease aid into China.

During this same period the United States was supporting another hard-pressed ally, the Soviet Union. As a result of the German invasion of Russia in June 1941, the United States had established a mission to coordinate lend-lease operations for the Soviets. One of the resupply routes was through the Middle East—along the so-called Persian Corridor—and the U.S. Military Iranian Mission began coordinating operations along this route from its headquarters in Baghdad on 30 November 1941. When the Japanese closed the Burma Road in May 1942, almost half of the Allied aid to the Soviet Union was moving through the Persian Corridor.

The Army Air Forces (AAF) began planning for a buildup of American air power in the Middle East in January 1942 in response to a request from the British Chief of the Air Staff. At that time American planners projected June as the earliest date that any American forces could reach the theater. AAF planners had to reconcile providing American planes (including necessary maintenance support) to the RAF with organizing and equipping American air combat units. The dilemma was clear: as a simple equation the greater the number of American units sent to the Middle East, the fewer aircraft available for the RAF. The RAF believed that providing its combat-experienced squadrons with new aircraft would produce more rapid results than waiting for the AAF to organize new units, but the AAF wanted to get on with building a strong American air force with minimal diversions. The situation demanded compromise, and by the end of May the RAF and the AAF had agreed on a schedule for providing American air combat units to support the RAF in North Africa beginning in October 1942. When Axis successes in the Western Desert that summer caused that agreement to fall apart, however, American planners and decision makers then turned to exploring options that would provide immediate support to their British allies.

As it happened, a special group of B-24s found itself in the Middle East in early June 1942. The so-called Halverson Detachment, named for its commander, Col. Harry A. Halverson, consisted of twenty-three B-24D Liberator heavy bombers with hand-picked crews. HALPRO, the detachment's code name, had been designed and trained to bomb Tokyo from bases in China, but by the time it was ready to deploy Japanese control of the Burma Road had made it highly improbable that the detachment could be logistically supported in China. General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of the Army, therefore sought and received permission from Roosevelt to divert the detachment to Egypt for a surprise raid on oil refineries in Ploesti, Rumania. The idea behind the Ploesti raid was to upset German prepa-



rations for their expected summer offensive against the Soviet Union.

With the President's approval of the scheme, HALPRO moved to Khartoum, a city in the Sudan 1,700 miles upstream on the Nile from Cairo, to await further instructions. Shortly after Halverson and his detachment arrived in Khartoum, they received orders sending them to Egypt in preparation for the Ploesti raid. On 11 June 1942, the U.S. Army's Egypt-Libya Campaign opened with thirteen of Halverson's

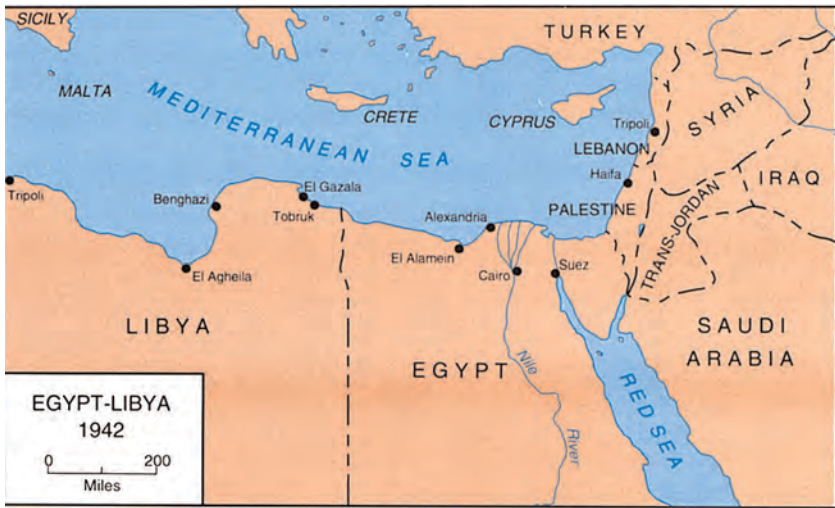
four-engine heavy bombers taking off from an RAF field at Fayid near the Suez Canal to attack the Rumanian oil refineries. On 12 June, after inflicting what turned out to be negligible damage on the target, four of the planes landed in Turkey, where they were interned. The others made it to various airfields in Syria and Iraq.

Although the raid had little effect on the German offensive into the Soviet Union, it did have psychological significance for the Allied cause. As the first American air raid conducted against a strategic target in Europe during World War II, it had an impact similar to that of the Doolittle bombing of Tokyo two months earlier. The strike symbolized America's entrance as a military combatant into what had been a primarily European contest. It also demonstrated that American military forces had the ability and willingness to strike at the heart of their opponent's industrial power.

As Halverson's planes returned from their raid in Rumania, the British Eighth Army suffered further reverses in Libya. In just two days, 12 and 13 June, the German-Italian forces destroyed some 230 British tanks during the Battle of Gazala, greatly increasing American concern about British prospects of holding Libya and Egypt.

As they were struggling in the desert, the British were also trying to resupply their garrison at Malta by sea, and they requested American heavy bombers to support that effort. The War Department gave Halverson the mission, and on 15 June he sent seven of his planes to assist the RAF in attacking an Italian fleet which had put to sea to intercept a British resupply convoy on its way to Malta. Although the American bombers inflicted only minimal damage on the Italian fleet, the RAF later credited the raid with keeping two Italian battleships in port for the remainder of the summer. The mission proved to be first of many that HALPRO would fly in support of British forces in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, General Marshall had begun to establish a stronger American command and control organization for the Middle East theater. On the day after the Ploesti raid, he created U.S. Army Forces in the Middle East (USAFIME) to replace both the North African Mission in Cairo and the Iranian Mission in the Persian Corridor. On 16 June the War Department named General Maxwell as the first commander of USAFIME. The next day the War Department informed Maxwell that the Halverson Detachment would remain in Egypt as a part of USAFIME. With the China mission overtaken by the Japanese closure of the Burma Road, HALPRO had thus become part of the campaign in the Middle East by default, and eventually it would become the nucleus of the U.S. Army Middle East Air Force (USAMEAF). In addition to



HALPRO, Maxwell's new command included the U.S. Army personnel previously assigned to the North African and Iranian military missions.

USAFIME's specific responsibilities were vague, as was its charter. The message instructing Maxwell to activate USAFIME designated him as the "initial" commander, who would "probably" be replaced should it become necessary to send "an appreciable number of combat troops" to the command. The ambiguous tone of the message reflected American uncertainty over the type of assistance the British would ultimately need. Initially the War Department planned to send about 6,000 American support troops to USAFIME, the first of whom would arrive in October 1942, but there were no plans to provide any combat forces.

On the same day Halverson and Maxwell learned that HALPRO would remain in Egypt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was traveling to the United States to discuss Allied strategy with President Roosevelt. In light of the recent British reverses in the Mediterranean, the British Prime Minister was particularly eloquent in his pleas for additional American support, especially in the form of heavy bombers. Churchill's request presented the American Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) with something of a dilemma. On the one hand, they wanted to conserve American resources in the hope of launching decisive air and amphibious actions against the German forces in western Europe by 1943, a course of action the Soviets strongly supported. But on the other hand, if the British were unable to hold the Middle East, then the Persian Corridor supply route to the Soviet Union, plus the existing air

ferry route to India and China and the oil now supplied from Iraq and Iran, all stood a good chance of being lost to the Axis, a situation that would be highly detrimental to any Allied efforts in western Europe. The JCS, in effect, faced a choice between providing support to the British in Egypt, the key to the Middle East, or holding American forces in reserve for a future attack on the European continent, hoping that the British alone could somehow hang on to Egypt.

Complicating this choice was Churchill's unbending desire for an Anglo-American amphibious landing in French North Africa in late 1942. In combination with an offensive by the British Eighth Army in Libya, such a stroke would have the goal of ending Axis domination of the southern shore of the Mediterranean. But such a plan also supported the argument for holding American ground forces and materiel out of the more immediate fight in the Western Desert. Yet without increased assistance the likelihood of a strong British Eighth Army offensive into Libya or anywhere else seemed very unlikely.

The JCS straddled the fence. Although Churchill was persuasive enough to inspire brief interest in a plan that would have sent Maj. Gen. George S. Patton, Jr., and an American armored division to Egypt to bolster the British Eighth Army, the JCS limited American troop commitments in the theater to air units. Seeking compromise, Marshall proposed sending some of the Army's latest equipment to the British forces in Egypt: 300 M4 Sherman tanks, 100 self-propelled 105-mm. artillery pieces, and 150 men qualified to maintain and repair this equipment, which had only recently entered the American inventory. The President immediately approved the proposal, and the Prime Minister quickly accepted it. The British especially appreciated the Sherman models because their 75-mm. guns were mounted more effectively in turrets instead of in sponsons (protrusions mounted on the side of the hull). The Sherman gave the British a tank approximately equal to the German *panzers* facing the Eighth Army. Although the War Department immediately began to implement the agreement, the distances between the United States and Egypt and the acute shortage of Allied shipping meant that the tanks, artillery, and support troops would not actually arrive in Egypt until early September.

British and American staffs also developed plans to move additional air combat units and their ground support elements into Egypt. By early July they had agreed to move six U.S. air groups to Egypt: three bomber and three fighter. As with the tanks and artillery, it was some time before the first of these American air combat organizations were operational in Egypt.

In anticipation of the arrival of the American air groups, the War Department sent Maj. Gen. Lewis H. Brereton, commander of the U.S. Tenth Air Force in India, to Cairo for temporary duty to assist the British. His orders instructed him to take as many planes as he could to Egypt. After managing to police up nine B-17s (described as “near cripples”), he arrived in Cairo on 25 June, along with 225 assorted staff officers, fliers, and mechanics. When these forces arrived from India, Maxwell, as commander of USAFIME, established the U.S. Army Middle East Air Force (USAMEAF) and named Brereton its commander. The new command initially comprised the Halverson Detachment, the Brereton Detachment (the nine bombers from India), and a few transport and liaison aircraft previously assigned to the small air section of the old North African mission.

Brereton, an experienced aviator, was understandably surprised to find himself subordinate to Maxwell, a brigadier general with no aviation background. But he may also have been aware of Maxwell’s appointment as an interim commander who would probably be replaced when substantial American combat forces arrived in the theater. Brereton initially regarded both Maxwell and USAFIME as somewhat superfluous, believing a direct relationship between his own organization and the British a more sensible and efficient arrangement. When Maxwell and Brereton both appealed to Marshall for guidance, the Chief of Staff left the command organization unchanged. He sent them a brief message expressing his expectation that they would work together in harmony and implied that they had better things to do than worry about rank. Both officers replied immediately with assurances of mutual cooperation. Their initial coolness toward each other did not affect the support they provided the British, and Maxwell and Brereton shortly developed a cordial working relationship.

USAMEAF started small, but with the experience already gained by the North African mission in studying the tactical and logistical problems of the British, Brereton was able to coordinate effective support almost immediately. The situation in front of the British Eighth Army was deteriorating rapidly; Rommel had captured Tobruk on 21 June, and the Axis offensive was continuing to make progress toward Egypt. As early as 30 June Brereton had directed the B-17s which he had brought from India to move their operations to Palestine, while the B-24s of the Halverson Detachment continued to fly their missions from Fayid in Egypt. But both units flew day and night bombing missions against the Axis’ increasingly inadequate supply lines, concentrating their efforts against the port of Tobruk. The missions were small when compared to what the Allies were able to put into the air

later in the war; no more than ten American bombers flew together at one time, and most missions were even more modest. Nonetheless, the bombing put further pressure on Rommel's tenuous enemy supply lines as his offensive finally reached its culminating point at El Alamein. By the end of July both sides had settled into defensive postures on the ground to rest and await reinforcements.

As the fighting in the desert reached a temporary halt, the American materiel shipped from the United States in late June began to arrive. The first American planes flew into Egypt by the end of July, and ground support personnel and equipment began to arrive by ship in early August. In the same month the American and British governments officially agreed to mount Operation TORCH in November 1942 to relieve the increasing German pressure on the Soviet Union and to remove, once and for all, the Axis domination of North Africa.

When the Americans and British came to an agreement on TORCH, they also debated the possibility of sending air support to the Soviet Union. Against the advice of the War Department, which feared that such an effort would weaken support to the British in Egypt, President Roosevelt agreed to provide an American air transport group and a heavy bomber group to a new combined Anglo-American air force that would support the Soviet Army in the Caucasus. Negotiations dragged on until December 1942, when it became apparent that Soviet concern over having Allied forces near their oil reserves in the Caucasus overrode their desire for air support. During the negotiations, however, the Allies prepared to provide the promised support, and Brereton organized a bomber group from his meager USAMEAF assets to deploy to the USSR. When the Soviets finally decided they did not require Allied air support, the newly organized 376th Bombardment Group stayed in USAMEAF.

Even as the American fighter and bomber groups promised in June became operational in the theater, the focus of Allied attention moved from the eastern to the western portion of North Africa in anticipation of Operation TORCH. This change of focus restricted the growth of USAMEAF. As early as 8 August Brereton was told that because of other "important projects," it was unlikely that the air forces at his disposal would be further increased beyond the six air groups already en route. Although USAMEAF was second in priority for support in the Mediterranean, Allied shipping shortages dictated that most of the available carrying capacity went to support TORCH.

Despite the prospect that USAMEAF would remain a relatively small and now secondary force, Brereton energetically pressed ahead supporting the British. He took advantage of his excellent relations

with the British Western Desert Air Force to draw on RAF help to introduce newly arrived American air combat units to the nature of the air war in North Africa. The heavy bombers of the Brereton and Halverson detachments (now combined into the 1st Provisional Group, under Halverson's command) had been flying with the British for some time, and drawing on that experience, the 98th Bombardment Group (Heavy) which arrived in mid-August, was able to go directly into action. The newly arrived medium bombers and fighters were the units that benefited from further training from RAF instructors.

When the 12th Bombardment Group (Medium) and the 57th Fighter Group arrived in the theater of operations, they entered a highly cooperative type of air warfare in an unfamiliar desert environment. Initially, they were integrated into comparable RAF formations, allowing them to observe firsthand the complex techniques of air-ground coordination that the British had developed during their years of fighting in the Western Desert. For American airmen, this was their first experience coordinating close air support with ground forces. British techniques soon proved popular with American fliers, and they became instrumental in liberating both the RAF and the AAF from the direct control of ground commanders.

By late 1942 the commanders of the British Eighth Army and its RAF counterpart, the Western Desert Air Force, agreed that ground and aviation command elements at the army level would function best if they worked as equal partners. Air and ground staffs in the evolving British system shared the same headquarters facilities and living quarters. The result was a truly joint command where neither the ground nor air commander held ultimate authority. The techniques of joint command seemed to work particularly well in offensive operations, as demonstrated during the renewed British offensive in October. Brereton reported to Lt. Gen. Henry H. (Hap) Arnold, Chief of the AAF, that joint ground-air command arrangements were of utmost importance. He emphasized that the British system of cooperation derived from a natural sympathy and understanding between air and ground commanders and urged its adoption by the American leadership.

Essentially the British joint system allowed the air commander to exploit the peculiar capabilities of his units to the mutual benefit of both air and ground forces. Aircraft were not tied to specific ground units. This allowed the available air power to be concentrated for maximum effect reflecting the changing character of the battle. The ground support elements of RAF units in the Western Desert were highly mobile and could move rapidly between airfields as the tactical situation dictated. Ground support could thus be sequentially positioned at

the airfields located most advantageously for supporting the land battle.

By October, as the British prepared to resume the offensive at El Alamein, USAMEAF had established the IX Bomber Command in order to effectively coordinate the activities of all heavy bombers in the theater. Although it initially controlled only the American heavy bombers in the 1st Provisional and the 98th Groups, those units constituted 80 percent of the heavy bombers then available in the Middle East. Subsequent agreements with the RAF put the British heavy bombers of the 160 Squadron under the control of the IX Bomber Command as well.

To gain experience in handling air forces in support of a fast-moving offensive operation, USAMEAF attached an advance element to the forward headquarters of the RAF's Western Desert Air Force as it prepared to support the El Alamein offensive of the British Eighth Army. This advance element became the Desert Air Task Force Headquarters in late October. The task force, which remained in existence until the end of the Egypt-Libya Campaign in February 1943, exercised administrative control over the American air forces supporting the British Western Desert Air Force.

While USAMEAF was maturing in North Africa, its higher headquarters, USAFIME, evolved rather more slowly. The responsibilities of the Services of Supply (SOS), USAFIME, had been increasing steadily as more American planes and crews arrived in the theater. Initially SOS, USAFIME, developed an ambitious construction program to support a large buildup of Allied forces in Egypt. But available Allied shipping could not simultaneously support both this construction program and the growing American air presence in the theater. Priority went to air force personnel and equipment, and the larger support projects were deferred.

Further delays followed. The arrival of a large contingent of support troops scheduled for August had to be canceled to provide shipping for the ground elements of the air groups that had flown their planes to North Africa in July. By mid-August SOS, USAFIME, had only about 1,000 personnel assigned, and by early November there were still less than 3,000. Although some 6,000 additional men were en route or at least scheduled for transport to the theater, most did not actually arrive until early in 1943. Supplies and construction material were likewise slow in arriving. As a result of these delays, by the end of 1942 only about half of the planned Allied construction projects in Egypt had been completed. By then, however, the British Eighth Army was back in Libya, and the Axis threat to the Middle East was over.

As the British successfully moved west, USAFIME turned its attentions to other parts of the Middle East. In November, Lt. Gen. Frank M. Andrews assumed command of USAFIME, replacing Maxwell. Andrews was an experienced airman, and one of his first acts was to establish the Ninth Air Force to replace USAMEAF. Brereton assumed command of the new organization and established the IX Air Service Command, which joined the IX Bomber Command and the IX Fighter Command as the major subordinate headquarters of the Ninth Air Force. The 376th Bombardment Group, originally organized to support Soviet forces, became part of the IX Bomber Command. As was the case with the Halverson Detachment, the 376th flew its first combat missions not in support of its original mission but over the deserts of North Africa.

As USAFIME and the Ninth Air Force went about their various reorganizations, events on the western shores of North Africa had shifted Allied attention away from Egypt and Libya. On 8 November 1942, Operation TORCH, the Anglo-American amphibious invasion of the western portion of North Africa, began, and the Axis forces found themselves squeezed between two Allied offensives. But even though TORCH received first priority for troops and materiel, operations in the Western Desert continued. The British, with American support, pushed west through Libya until February 1943, when the Northwest African and the Middle East theaters merged. The U.S. Army's Egypt-Libya Campaign ended on 12 February 1943, when the Allied forces finally succeeded in driving all Axis forces out of Libya.

Analysis

The Egypt-Libya Campaign was one of the smaller, less well known U.S. Army campaigns of World War II. Its significance, however, cannot be measured simply by counting Army forces involved. The campaign made a major contribution to Allied success in World War II by laying a firm foundation of Anglo-American cooperation for the later, much larger combined endeavors on the European continent.

Strategically, the United States had to balance support to the British in North Africa with growing demands for help from other Allies in other theaters. The need to react quickly and decisively to the rapidly deteriorating British position at the beginning of the campaign gave the American high command experience in the flexible deployment of forces. The Halverson Detachment and the 376th Bombardment Group had been designed and trained for specific

missions elsewhere, but both units quickly and successfully adapted to a different role in North Africa.

Tactically, the air-ground teamwork the AAF learned by working with the RAF provided the embryo of the techniques adapted during the Allied advance across Europe two years later. Given the existing state of technology, organization, and experience, air power was still quite limited in its ability to provide direct air support for individual ground commanders. Although the air forces were theoretically free to move throughout the theater wherever they were needed, in reality communications limited their range. The existing radios simply did not provide effective long-distance communications, and even communications between pilots and tactically engaged ground commanders were extremely problematic. Pilots also could not clearly distinguish between friendly and enemy ground forces from the air. But the effort to develop effective, direct, close air support had begun.

Logistically, the success of the Eighth Army's offensive in October 1942 made the completion of many of the remaining planned American support projects unnecessary. The American assistance effort, however, had been significant, and its results did play a major role in the British autumn campaign. American tanks, artillery, and motor transport operated by British troops contributed to the breakthrough and exploitation at the Battle of El Alamein. The American equipment and support provided by the SOS, USAFIME, helped give the British the superior mobility and logistical ground support required to finally push the Axis forces out of Egypt and Libya. The fact that many of the American bases in the Middle East were never completed after the British victory at El Alamein, on the other hand, did lead to a decline in the importance of USAFIME before it ever reached its projected full strength.

In the final analysis, although the U.S. Army provided no ground combat troops to the Egypt-Libya Campaign, the close cooperation between American and British staffs set the tone for Anglo-American cooperation for the rest of the war in the Mediterranean and European Theaters of Operations. American leaders had agreed that the Middle East was a British responsibility but that American support was essential for it to remain in Allied hands. Both parties clearly understood and followed through on the necessity to work together to defeat a common foe in a theater critical to Allied worldwide goals.

EGYPT-LIBYA 1942-1943

Further Readings

There is no single authoritative source on the Egypt-Libya Campaign, although a substantial amount of information is available in the U.S. and British histories of World War II. In the Center of Military History's U.S. Army in World War II series, the most useful volumes are Richard M. Leighton and Robert W. Coakley's *Global Logistics and Strategy: 1940-1943* (1955) and Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell's *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare: 1941-1942* (1953). Two volumes in The Army Air Forces in World War II series, edited by Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate are also helpful: volume 1, *Plans and Early Operations—January 1939 to August 1942* (1948) includes the background and first part of the campaign, while volume 2, *Europe: TORCH to POINTBLANK—August 1942 to December 1943* (1949) covers its conclusion. The British perspective is available in two volumes from the Mediterranean and Middle East series in the United Kingdom's History of the Second World War, edited by Sir James Butler. The campaign opens in volume 3, *British Fortunes Reach Their Lowest Ebb*, by Major-General I. S. O. Playfair (1960) and concludes in volume 4, *The Destruction of the Axis in Africa*, by Playfair and Brigadier C. J. C. Molony (1966).

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