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Monday, Feb. 17, 1941

World War, SOUTHERN THEATRE: Fall of Bengasi

"Bengasi is in our hands."

These five quiet words last week couched an amazing event. Far faster than even the sanguine British had imagined possible, eastern Libya had collapsed. In exactly two months Italy's colonial ambitions of 15 years had collapsed like a pricked balloon.

There had been nothing like it in that part of the world for 31 centuries—since the Pharaoh Merneptah, in 1221 B.C., sent his archers out to stop an invasion by the Libyans. Like General Sir Archibald Wavell, Merneptah surprised himself with a brilliant success: drove the Libyans to the Mount of the Horns of the Earth, well inside Libya, killed almost half of the invading force, captured most of the others, and took over 120,000 pieces of equipment, including 9,000 copper swords and the King of Libya's sandals, which the King had removed so as to run a little faster.

The Italians could not run fast enough last week. The fall of Bengasi was brought about by swift execution of the familiar tactic of the giant pincer. While the main Australian force chased Italians along the coast, a mechanized force branched across the hump of Cyrenaica to form the pincer's nether jaw. This body, meeting little resistance other than a sandstorm which choked carburetors as well as throats, headed for a spot about 50 miles south of Bengasi—just below Soluch, the southern terminus of a short railway spur which runs down the coast from Bengasi. The British force straddled the highway to Tripoli and waited.

Up north the Australian pursuit was relentless. R. A. F. bombers made junk of Italian trucks along the way, and Hurricanes mounting eight guns brushed the marching refugee troops with lead. The Italians hurried for Barce, where the northern railway spur from Bengasi ends, but before many troops could entrain and get away, the Australians were right on the Italian behind.

The Italians who reached Bengasi did not pause even for a last sentimental look at the white houses, the long rows of mimosa, the great marble facade of the Berenice Hotel. They beat it to the south in headlong flight—only to come smack up against the southern jaw of the pincer. With claustrophobic fury they threw tanks, field guns, even suicide troops with gasoline bombs, against the British ring of mobile steel. But the British held, and soon the Italians gave up.

The British hurried the weary process of rounding up and counting prisoners. About 20,000 were taken, including General Annibale ("Electric Whiskers") Bergonzoli, the little general of tremendous appetite and temper whom the British thought they had at Bardia, but who escaped by motorboat. Recalling the old saw about the British being a nation of shopkeepers, an enthusiastic BBC announcer telling of the Bengasi victory' exclaimed: "The British are rapidly becoming a nation of wop-keepers."

Beyond Bengasi the only remaining British goal was Tripoli. At first it looked doubtful whether the British would go on to take it. The way was long: 600 miles. The first 300 to Sirte were across blank desert, broken only by occasional airfields marked with white stones very much like gravestones. After Sirte the land was more hospitable, goat and camel country where the determined Italians had planted 3,500,000 date palms and 2,000,000 olive trees, and arable fields which yield a hard wheat suitable for macaroni. But even this more fruitful country seemed hardly worth taking. The British had made it certain that Egypt would not be attacked again. They had insured Suez from the West. They had destroyed the Italian Libyan Army and taken new ports for the Fleet.

But the British apparently saw advantages in pressing on. At week's end they announced that advance forces had already taken el-Aghéila, 170 miles beyond Bengasi and half way across the Sirte desert. There were hints that mechanical units would press on along the coastal highway, that troops might be transported by sea (see p. 30).

If the British could take Tripoli, they would be within 300 miles of Sicily and the new Stuka bases there. At Tripoli they would have another naval operating base, besides Malta, near the Sicilian channel. To throw Italy entirely and finally out of Africa was a goal not to be sneered at. Perhaps British proximity might prove to be a beneficial persuasion on General Maxime Weygand. The Vichy censors decided it was about time to let French newspapers pay a little attention to the Italian situation in Africa. The paper Montague of Clermont-Ferrand went so far as to say: "The word 'retreat' should now be used."

Whether or not the British take Tripoli, General Sir Archibald Wavell had accomplished a brilliant tactical triumph. He had rolled up his enemy and then kept him rolling. Failure to do just that is an occupational disease among generals, who often have a fatal weakness for consolidation after partial victory—e.g., Meade after Gettysburg, Lee after Manassas I and II. For the first time in this war the Axis had run up against someone who could hit hard and follow through.

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