STUDY PROJECT

CHURCHILL AND WAVELL: A STUDY IN POLITICAL / MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS

BY

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20 February 1990

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CHURCHILL AND WAVELL: A STUDY IN POLITICAL / MILITARY RELATIONSHIPS

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

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The relationship between Wavell and the British High Command was similarly effective, despite personal conflict between him and Churchill. The High Command provided Wavell with broad strategic guidance, the resources to implement it, and allowed him a relatively free hand to do so. It was only when he strayed from strategic guidance that he came into conflict with the High Command.

Following a brilliant opening series of campaigns in North and East Africa, Wavell lost his broad strategic vision. He allowed part of his limited forces to be dissipated to Greece at a critical time, while under estimating the implications of German intervention in North Africa. He then failed to appreciate the strategic implications of Axis threats to both Iraq and to Syria, and finally he allowed himself to be pressured into a premature counter offensive in the Western Desert. It is argued that it was these errors which caused Wavell's dismissal, and not a failing in the political/military interface.

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AUTHORS NOTE: Spelling throughout this paper is in accordance with the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Australian edition), in keeping with the author's national practice.

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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

In war, a theatre level commander must produce a campaign plan which utilizes his available military assets in a timely and effective manner to secure his military objective. This requires that he be placed under minimal constraints and receive the full trust and confidence of his superiors, both political and military, otherwise he is unable to optimize his operational skills in fighting the battle. Recent history records many instances where such trust was not given, and where commanders in the field were consequently subjected to detailed daily political control to the detriment of their campaigns.

The advent of advanced communications technology has facilitated national leaders, if they so desire, even controlling the actions of troops in forward weapons pits. But given the specialized nature of modern warfare, the desire for close involvement of political leaders in military matters seems to be personality driven. Some choose to become involved, despite their lack of a military background; while others are happy to leave the implementation of military strategy to their military commanders. The very nature of a democratic system, where governments can change overnight, requires that a sound political/military relationship be established at the national level in peace-time. This relationship must be resilient enough to cope with the management of peace-time crises, the transition to war, changes in personalities, and even changes in government.

One has only to contrast the command environments in which the respective commanders in the Vietnam War and the Falklands War operated, to see the implications of political meddling

in military matters. In the first case, commanders were even told which enemy targets to hit; while in the second, they were allowed freedom to operate under broad political guidance.

GERMAN AND BRITISH POLITICAL CONTROL IN WORLD WAR II

A comparison of the higher direction of Axis and Allied war efforts in World War II provides similar contrasts. The constraints which Hitler imposed on his commanders on the Eastern Front were especially restrictive. At one stage he become involved in the detailed disposition of forces down to battalion level, with his operational commanders required to seek his approval to withdraw any unit.[1] The extent of his control was exemplified by his ability to refuse to allow the encircled German Sixth Army to fight its way out at Stalingrad. The capture of that army was very much a result of the constraints which he was able to impose on his field commanders.[2]

Much speculation has occurred as to the possible outcome on the Eastern Front had these commanders been left to execute their tasks without Hitler's interference, given the remarkable performance of the German army under similar circumstances elsewhere. Manstein, the Army Group Commander at Stalingrad and Kursk, was convinced that Hitler's over control of German forces on the Eastern Front cost them victory.[3] The major reason Hitler was able to exert such influence was that he had reduced the power of the German High Command to such an extent that it merely followed his orders, and had ceased to function as an effective command structure.[4]

A cursory examination of British operations in World War II indicates that Churchill had a similar penchant for becoming overly involved in military matters. His widely reported traits of constantly corresponding with commanders in the field, and of bypassing his Chiefs of Staff in seeking alternate views

on the conduct of operations, could be construed as indicative of a poor political/ military relationship.

In July 1941, he removed General Sir Archibald Wavell from command in the Middle East, following a series of set backs in that theatre. Prior to his dismissal, Wavell had received many messages directly from Churchill regarding the conduct of his campaign, and this involvement could well be construed as interference.

SCOPE OF PAPER

This paper will examine the command environment in which Wavell operated, as a measure of the effectiveness of the British national high command structure. It will argue that Britain's high command structure was sound, by demonstrating that Wavell's dismissal was a result of a series of errors which he made in executing his campaign plan, and was not directly due to Churchill's interference. The paper will further demonstrate how policy and strategy, which were initially in harmony, became mismatched through the failure of Wavell to appreciate changes in political thought as a consequence of developments in his theatre of war.

ENDNOTES

1. Wilmot, Chester. The Struggle for Europe. Collins, London, 1952. p. 164.

2. Dupuy, Colonel T.N, USA Ret. A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff 1807-1945. Prentice-Hall, New Jersey,1977. pp. 271,273.

3. Ibid., p. 273.

4. To facilitate this control, Hitler had assumed the duties of both Defence Minister and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces in early 1938. Ibid., p. 276.

CHAPTER II

BRITISH NATIONAL AND THEATRE COMMAND STRUCTURE

NATIONAL COMMAND DEVELOPMENTS PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

The war weariness suffered by Britain in the post World War I period significantly hampered her defence preparedness for World War II. It was difficult to attract either government or public interest in the 1920's and 1930's to defence matters. Consequently such important issues as the mechanisation of the British Army, and the development of a modern air force, were deferred. In general terms Britain's war preparations only gained impetus after 1936 when war with Germany appeared inevitable.

One defence area however which did receive attention in this period of military apathy was the British higher command and control structure. In 1924, a Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee was formed and incorporated into the Committee for Imperial Defence. This was done to ensure that service input was provided to those Cabinet Ministers tasked to plan the defence of Britain and her empire. Each of the three Chiefs of Staff was tasked from this time on with providing advice on both single service matters, and on defence matters as a whole.[1]

The reason for this "uncharacteristic" defence initiative was that one of the major lessons the British Government had learned from World War I was the need to have an effective political/military organisation in place to oversee the war effort. This recognition came about as a result of conflict between the wartime Prime Minister, Lloyd-George, and his Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Field Marshal Sir William Robertson. The conflict occurred because of an absence of "effective" military and political consultation and coordination at the strategic level throughout the war, despite the existence

of the British Committee of Imperial Defence which had been formed in 1904. Asquith (the Prime Minister at the start of the war), had chosen to consult with his Secretary for State (Lord Kitchener) and his First Lord of the Admiralty (Winston Churchill) in the formulation of national defence policy in preference to the Service Chiefs.[2] Yet until 1916 Allied military strategy on the Western front was formulated by the French and British theatre commanders without consultation with their respective heads of government.[3] Thus when Lloyd George became British Prime Minister in 1917, replacing Asquith, he soon came into conflict with Robertson when he attempted to involve himself in the formulation of national military strategy. Robertson clearly saw this as a military function, and the internal conflict which evolved remained unresolved at the signing of the armistice.[4] The lack of an effective national policy/strategy interface significantly hampered Britain's efforts as the respective realms of policy and strategy were not defined; and the roles, functions and prerogatives of policy makers and strategists remained a constant source of friction.

By 1924, with the benefit of hindsight, the British Government understood its role in defence policy formulation and recognized the need for high-level military input. However, the Chiefs of Staff Committee it then formed was flawed by the lack of an organic intelligence staff, and a joint planning staff.[5] It therefore had restricted capability to provide considered military advice until these staffs were added in 1940 as part of a series of improvements to Defence planning coordination.[6]

At the outbreak of World War II the Committee of Imperial Defence went into abeyance with responsibility for the higher direction of the war passing to a smaller, but more effective, War Cabinet which was served by the Chiefs of Staff Committee.[7] Thus while Britain's war preparations were generally neglected in the lead up to World War II, the higher defence machinery

had been thought through, with the role of the Chiefs of Staff well established.

NATIONAL COMMAND DEVELOPMENTS DURING 1940

The British parliamentary system continued to function throughout World War II. Churchill as the Prime Minister was given extraordinary powers of office but remained answerable to Parliament, through the War Cabinet, for his direction of the war. He was therefore careful to ensure that his appointed ministers were brought into the War Cabinet when matters were discussed which fell within their respective portfolios.[8] But despite these democratic measures, he was frequently threatened in Parliament with votes of no confidence over his conduct of the war, which if successful would have seen him removed from office. Because of his parliamentary accountability, he remained continually conscious of the need to achieve proper political/military coordination and avoid the internal conflict of World War I.

When he became Prime Minister in May 1940, Churchill found that the national defence structure did not meet his full requirements. He therefore made two important changes. Firstly, he assumed the additional portfolio of Minister for Defence, with the consequential responsibilities of overseeing Britain's defence operations. This position allowed Churchill the right, as Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, to exercise his interest in military strategy and debate possible strategy options with his Service Chiefs prior to formal presentation to the Defence Committee. The arrangement was also beneficial to the Chiefs of Staff as they now had close contact with the Prime Minister, and access to his vast powers of office which could overcome the bureaucratic inertia they had experienced previously. Secondly, Churchill split the Defence Committee which made recommendations to the War Cabinet,

and formed a Defence Committee (Supplies) and a Defence Committee (Operations). This latter committee comprised the Prime Minister; the Deputy Prime Minister; the three Service Ministers; and the Foreign Secretary; with the Chiefs of Staff always in attendance.[9] Thus not only did members of the War Cabinet have the benefit of ready service advice, but as importantly, the Service Chiefs remained aware of current political thought.

Churchill further bonded the two elements by appointing the Secretary of the Defence Committee (Operations), General Ismay, as Secretary to the Chiefs of Staff Committee.[10] This later appointment provided a conduit through which the views of the Chiefs of Staff could be readily transmitted to Churchill, and vice versa.[11] Concurrent with these changes, the Joint Planning Staff and the Joint Intelligence Staff were enlarged to better analyse possible military options for submission to the Defence Committee (Operations). This coordinating structure was kept largely intact throughout the War, with slight modification in late 1941 to accommodate the requirements of coalition warfare with the United States.

Britain's national defence machinery as modified by Churchill in 1940 allowed for close correlation of policy with strategy. Yet the close contact established by Churchill with his Chiefs of Staff limited the potential of this political/military interface because its effectiveness became dependent on personalities, and the interpersonal relationships of those involved.[12]

CHURCHILL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS CHIEFS OF STAFF

Churchill's central role in the direction of the war has been well recognized, along with those personality traits which gained him the reputation of an amateur tactician.[13] To properly

understand Churchill's penchant for becoming involved in military matters it is essential to highlight some of his background.

While his career was essentially that of a politician, it did include intermittent periods of active military service. In his early days, he saw action in India, the Sudan and South Africa, and late in World War I he commanded a battalion in France. His early political career also saw him heavily involved in the formulation of national military strategy. As First Lord of the Admiralty he was a close adviser to Asquith the Prime Minister, and succeeded in convincing him to open a second front against Germany through the Dardanelles which he saw as the means to break the stalemate on the Western Front. However, the political responsibility for the failure of the campaign was subsequently directed at him and he was forced to resign from the Cabinet. After World War I, he briefly held the position of Minister for Air, and at the outbreak of World War II he again served as First Lord of the Admiralty.[14] Thus he went into World War II with a long history of military involvement.

Churchill's limited military experience however had not provided him with a good appreciation for operational detail or for the administrative complexity of modern warfare, and this contributed to the friction which subsequently developed within the Defence Committee (Operations) and the Chiefs of Staff Committee.[15] Here he became frustrated by what he perceived as negative attitudes (albeit based on practicalities), towards his unceasing flow of innovative strategic and tactical ideas to win victory.[16] His strong personality and perceived strong background in military matters produced lively debate, and resulted in considerable tension within the Committees.

To add to these difficulties, Churchill had some annoying personal characteristics. He kept erratic work hours and required his Chiefs to be on call until late at night.[17] He

constantly bombarded them with questions and ideas, all of which involved considerable staff effort to answer. He also continually sought alternate advice from subordinate commanders and staff officers.[18] The Chiefs of Staff were unsuccessful in breaking him of these habits and had to endure the inconvenience they caused. To ensure that the Chiefs remained aware of his concerns, they saw to it that all responses to Churchill came through them.

The composition of the Chiefs of Staff changed during the war as members reached retirement age and were replaced. Lord Ismay, who remained with Churchill throughout the war, acknowledges that there was less stress once Alanbrooke replaced Dill as the CIGS, simply due to the better manner in which he handled Churchill.[19] Such was the impact of personal relationships.

The effectiveness of his relationship with his Chiefs of Staff, despite the personal conflict which developed, is exemplified in their role in the War Cabinet decision to sink the French fleet after the fall of France, to prevent it falling into German hands. Here Churchill was firmly opposed to this action. France had been Britain's ally in two World Wars. His own personal feelings were pro-French and he saw the proposed action as being almost treacherous in nature. He also did not wish to alienate the Vichy Government, which at that stage was non aggressive towards Britain. Yet the Chiefs of Staff were able to convince him on purely military grounds that the four capital ships and their escorts constituted a major threat to Britain. Churchill finally agreed to the action and the Royal Navy launched a surprise attack which sank all but one of the ships at Mers-el-Kebir.[20] This was but one of many instances where Churchill deferred to the advice of his Chiefs of Staff.

Opinions as to the effectiveness of both the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff Committee do however vary. Menzies,

the Australian Prime Minister, considered both to be ineffective; with Churchill exerting dictatorial power in deciding the higher direction of the war.[21] However, this opinion was based on limited observation, and was influenced by personal antagonism by Menzies towards Churchill. Thus, one is drawn back to the views of those who operated continually in the environment, such as Lord Ismay, who considered the relationship to have been effective.[22]

Churchill's habit of directly corresponding with commanders in the field could be construed as indicative of a lack of faith in his Chiefs of Staff. But Lord Ismay is emphatic in his memoirs that there was no motive to interfere. He argues that Churchill was seeking to personally encourage his commanders to take offensive action, in the knowledge that they had his full support regardless of the consequences of their actions.[23] Interpretation of the intent of these messages however, often lay in the eye of the receiver.

In August 1940, without consulting his Chiefs of Staff, Churchill sent a directive to Wavell in the Middle East in which he set out tactical instructions down to dispositions of battalions. Wavell is reported to have "... carried out those parts that were practicable and useful and disregarded a good deal of it. "[24] This directive like many others, generated considerable staff work for Wavell and the Chiefs of Staff.

Accepting Ismay's explanation, Churchill's habit of directly corresponding with subordinate commanders in itself did not indicate a weak political/ military relationship at the strategic level; but rather was the product of his frustration with their lack of offensive action. Thus despite the friction that Churchill developed with his Chiefs of Staff, the general opinion of those who worked in the environment was that they worked effectively as a team; with the Chiefs of Staff being confident in their knowledge of Churchill and of his intent.

MIDDLE-EAST COMMAND - 1940

At the outbreak of World War II, British forces in each theatre of war were commanded by Commanders in Chief (CinC), from all three services. These commanders were given specific directives from their respective Service Chief, as the agent of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. Thev were allocated resources, to undertake their missions and reported back through their Service Chief to the Chiefs of Staff. As can be appreciated, strong bonds were established between the Service Chief and his deployed CinCs.

Within the theatres of war, the three CinCs worked through a local coordinating committee and joint effectiveness was therefore very much personality dependent. The theatre coordinating committees also included local representatives of the Crown and the Foreign Office. While the need for an overall theatre commander was recognized, it was opposed from within the Chiefs of Staff Committee for reasons of service prestige.[25] Ultimately, the Allied coalition led to the supreme commander concept being adopted at the American suggestion, but that was not until 1942, after the period covered in this paper.[26]

Middle East Command followed this command pattern and Wavell, on assuming command in August 1939, was but one of three CinCs. His naval and air force counterparts were Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, and Air Chief Marshal Sir William Mitchell.[27] With the preponderance of British forces being ground forces, Wavell assumed chairmanship of the local CinC committee and immediately began joint preparations for the defence against the expected Italian attack.[28] The success of this informal committee can be gauged from the degree of joint cooperation achieved in the theatre. This cooperation was exemplified by the intimate support by the Royal Navy to evacuate forces from Greece and Crete; and the close air support the army received

in the Western Desert, which stopped Rommel on a number of occasions. Yet Wavell had only a staff of five to undertake joint coordination within the entire theatre.[29]

Middle East Command comprised three distinct theatres of operation: North Africa, East Africa and Palestine/Jordan; and was spread over nine countries in two continents.[30] The diplomatic and political aspects of Wavell's appointment were significant and these added to Wavell's command problems.

In planning their campaigns and conducting their operations, Wavell and his fellow CinCs were given great autonomy by the Chiefs of Staff. The CIGS and the other Service Chiefs did not meddle. They offered advice and they criticized concepts where warranted; but at all times they respected the right of the man on the spot, namely the CinC, to make decisions.[31] Thus, the British higher command mechanism provided theatre commanders with freedom to operate within broad strategic guidance, which itself was the product of close political/military consultation. Yet, the fact that Churchill was able to deal directly with these commanders was indicative of potential for conflict which remained within a system which had been established primarily to avoid just such confrontation.

ENDNOTES

1. Ismay, Hastings L. The Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay. Heinemann, London, 1960. p. 51.

2. Sixsmith, Major General E K G. British Generalship in the Twentieth Century. Arms and Armour Press, Aberdeen, 1970. pp. 55,56.

3. Ibid., p. 69.

4. Ismay, p. 50.

5. Ibid., p. 52.

6. Ibid., p. 161.

7. Sixsmith, p. 196.

8. Ibid.

9. Ismay, p. 159.

10. Ibid., p. 167.

11. Ibid., pp. 168,170.

12. Although the relationship between Churchill and Alanbrooke (who succeeded Dill as CIGS) has been cited as a model of political/military relationships, the frustrations of working with Churchill were revealed with the publication of the Alanbrooke Diaries after the war. These diaries were the means by which Alanbrooke had relieved his inner tensions throughout the war.

Sixsmith, p. 198.

13. Dill was to describe Churchill as "... the greatest leader Britain could possibly have had but certainly no one could describe him as the greatest strategist."

Kennedy, Major General Sir John. The Business of War. Hutchinson, London, 1957. p. 74.

14. Ismay, pp. 162,163.

15. Fraser, David. Alanbrooke. Atheneum, New York, 1982. p. 532. and Sixsmith, p. 198.

16. Kennedy, pp. 60,61.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 132.

19. Sixsmith, pp. 197,198.

20. Ismay, pp. 147-149.

21. Day, David. Menzies and Churchill at War. Paragon House, New York, 1988. p. 65.

22. This relationship was explained by Churchill in July 1942, in answering a question in parliament relating to his management of the national defence structure when he stated that the three Chiefs of Staff worked under his supervision and were responsible for the direct operational control of British forces, and that

he worked under the control and supervision of the War Cabinet.

Gilbert, Martin. Winston S. Churchill-Road to Victory 1941-1945, Volume VII. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1986. p. 139.

23. Ismay, pp. 208,209.

24. Connell, John. Wavell: Scholar and Soldier. Harcourt, Brace and World, New York, 1964. pp. 266,267.

25. Ibid, p. 213.

26. Ironically, it was Wavell who was the first Allied Supreme Commander of the short lived ABDA Command during the rapid Japanese advance through the Pacific in early 1942.

27. Kennedy, p. 206.

28. Lewin, Ronald. The Chief: Field Marshal Lord Wavell-Commander in Chief and Viceroy 1939-1945. Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York, 1982. p. 33.

29. Connell, p. 230.

30. Ibid., p. 209.

31. Fraser, David. Alanbrooke. Atheneum, New York, 1982. pp. 530,531.

CHAPTER III

WAVELL'S STRATEGIC CONCEPT AND OPENING CAMPAIGNS

WAVELL'S THREAT ASSESSMENT

Prior to World War II the British had assessed the main threat to the Middle East as coming from the Italians. British war plans called for reinforcement of the theatre by Dominion troops from Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa and the war plans were predicated on having time to mobilize and deploy those forces.[1] Accordingly, British forces available to Wavell in early 1940 were only about 36,000 in Egypt, and a further 27,000 in Palestine, with small security forces in East Africa and Trans Jordan.[2] Against these forces the Italians had an army in North Africa of about 250,000, and a similar sized army in Ethiopia and Eritrea, both well supported by armour and artillery.[3] Despite this disparity in relative strengths, the British High Command had been satisfied that its existing forces and those of its major ally, France, would be capable of dealing with any Italian threat.

The directive which Wavell received from the CIGS on assuming command was understandably vague, as in 1939 the situation prevailing in the Middle East was clouded by political uncertainties.[4] He was therefore required to first produce a threat assessment which would guide the planning of his campaign against the Axis forces in the theatre.

Wavell quickly recognized the importance of the Middle East oil supplies to both Britain's ability to wage war, and to the Axis ability to sustain military operations. Like the Chiefs of Staff, Wavell saw that Germany's lack of oil would eventually paralyse her war effort.[5] He clearly identified his centre of gravity to be the oil-fields of Iran and Iraq. He further saw that the greatest threat posed to those oil fields lay in

the Italian forces in Africa, and that his peace-time troop dispositions made it vital that he defend the supply bases in Egypt in order to engage those forces.[6] There was certainly secondary benefit to the British in retaining control of Egypt, which lay in the importance of the Suez Canal as a means to shorten Britain's links with her empire. However, the primary value of defending Egypt remained as the means of denying the oil supplies to the Axis powers. This logic flow was important because the rapid development of crises in the theatre during 1941 distorted strategic thinking in both Britain and the Middle East with regard to regional priorities, and contributed to Wavell's dismissal.

Wavell submitted his threat assessment to the CIGS in May 1940; he in turn, gained War Cabinet approval of its contents, including Wavell's views on the relative importance of Egypt.[7]

WAVELL'S CAMPAIGN CONCEPT

Relative strength considerations led Wavell to a campaign concept of three phases. Firstly, he planned to hold the Italian forces in East Africa while he concentrated his force to engage the enemy forces in the Western Desert. His aim being to remove the immediate threat of invasion from Libya, where the Italians could be readily supported from Italy. Once this was accomplished, he intended to reinforce in East Africa and defeat the Italian East African Army which could be effectively cut off from Italy. Having won in East Africa, Wavell then intended to concentrate his forces to defeat the Italian North African Army and thereby remove the threat to the oil fields.[8]

This campaign strategy was coordinated at theatre level with the other CinCs and endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff during Wavell's visit to London in August 1940. From Wavell's perspective, it appears that he received sufficient guidance

and support from the Chiefs of Staff and that Churchill was satisfied with the arrangements put in place. Otherwise there would have been modifications to either his threat assessment or to his campaign concept.

CHURCHILL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH WAVELL

In May 1940, Churchill had directed the CIGS to redeploy eight regular battalions from the Middle East to assist with Britain's home defences. With war threatening in the Middle East, Wavell recognised that he had meagre enough resources as it was, and opposed the redeployment. He was supported in this action by the CIGS and while Churchill was talked out of pressing the matter, he never forgot Wavell's opposition and this clouded their relationship from the start.[9]

As Wavell was putting the finishing touches to his campaign concept, in August 1940, he was summoned to London for consultations with the Defence Committee. The catalyst for this meeting was Wavell's proposed employment of South African troops in East Africa, rather than the Western Desert where Churchill thought that they should be used to defend Egypt.[10] While the August meeting further coordinated theatre defences and gained added armour assets for Wavell it also brought him into direct conflict with Churchill.

The extreme differences in personality between the two contributed to the situation. Unlike Churchill, Wavell was reserved in manner and could not argue forcefully with him; his strength lay more in his written skills. Wavell therefore did not project himself to Churchill as a confident commander. His broad political vision which constrained his support of some of Churchill's ideas was also seen as being unduly negative.

Wavell left London at this early stage in their relationship

with the clear opinion that he did not enjoy Churchill's full confidence.[11] While this personality conflict certainly made it difficult for Wavell, the well established national political/military link allowed him to continue to operate without undue restraint.

In fairness to Churchill, his occasional clashes with Wavell throughout his tenure as CinC Middle East were balanced by otherwise strong support up until the time of his relief. This was demonstrated by his willingness to provide scarce resources to Wavell at a period when Britain still faced a possible (albeit receding) threat of German invasion. Churchill also sent Wavell frequent messages of support and of congratulations, as appropriate, during his campaign. Thus the relationship between Churchill and Wavell can be viewed as strained but workable, and was not a major factor in Wavell's dismissal. Otherwise Churchill would have relieved him at his first failure; possibly when he did not appreciate the threat that Rommel posed to the Western Desert in early 1941.

THE OPENING CAMPAIGNS - SEPTEMBER 1940 / MARCH 1941

Wavell's two theatres of operation commanders in the Middle East at the outbreak of hostilities were General O'Connor in the Western Desert and General Cunningham in East Africa. Both officers understood Wavell's campaign intent, and despite the paucity of resources, they were confident of success. On 10 June 1940, Italy declared war on Britain and in the Middle East Wavell's commanders held their forces back from the borders to provide room to manoeuvre without becoming decisively engaged. None the less, from the outset they conducted local limited raids and aggressive patrolling against the Italians. This offensive activity ensured British forces gained the initiative at the unit level over the Italians, which subsequently allowed them to undertake seemingly impossible tasks with impunity.

In East Africa, the Italians invaded British Somaliland and the small British garrison was quickly overwhelmed and was evacuated to Aden. Italian forces invaded Egypt on 13 September, advancing 60 miles to the small coastal town of Sidi Barrani where they stopped to establish a series of defensive camps and bring forward additional supplies for a further advance.[12]

Wavell directed O'Connor, commanding a force comprising one infantry and one armoured division, to plan a counter offensive in accordance with phase one of his campaign concept. "Operation Compass" had as its objective the capture of the coastal town of Tobruk in Libya from which British forces defending the Western approach to Egypt could be better supported.[13] Having put the Italians off balance, Wavell then intended to redeploy one of those divisions to East Africa while O'Connor held the Italians in the West. Wavell demonstrated a high degree of offensive spirit in ordering this counter offensive because O'Connor's units were the only troops then at his disposal to defend Egypt.[14] Yet the plan was a calculated risk rather than a gamble because of the relatively high standard and morale of his forces compared to the Italians.

O'Connor proved to be a master of desert warfare. With the scant resources of his "Army of the Nile", he launched his operation on 9 December 1940 and within a few days he had inflicted significant losses on the Italians, capturing tens of thousands of their troops and much equipment. The offensive spirit of his troops, together with his operational audacity, routed the Italians who withdrew in disarray.

Wavell quickly appreciated the unexpected opportunity which now lay before him but remained conscious of his overall campaign strategy. While he allowed O'Connor to pursue the Italians into Libya, he arranged for a newly arrived Australian division to be sent forward, thereby releasing the battle hardened 4th Indian Division for his planned operations in East Africa.

Meanwhile O'Connor continued to maintain constant pressure on the withdrawing Italians, and by the end of January his small force had captured much of Libya and the possibility was there for it to advance into Tripoli and destroy the remaining Italian forces in North Africa. But he was operating over a lengthening tenuous line of communication and was experiencing difficulty in sustaining his force. The difficulty to sustain forces in the area was to prove the Achilles heel of both Allied and Axis commanders and the British were now experiencing the real limitations which logistics were to impose on campaigning. Indeed, for much of the pursuit O'Connor had been relying on captured materiel for sustainment. To add to his problems, his troops were tired and their equipment was in a poor state of repair. O'Connor was close to reaching a culminating point.

At this stage of operations the Allied situation in the Balkans was also deteriorating.[15] Greece had sought British assistance in the form of air and naval assets, and given the situation in Britain at that time, the Defence Council had decided that this support was to come from the Middle East theatre.[15] With the threat in North Africa now reduced, the Defence Council saw the Balkan situation as having priority over the Western Desert.[16] Thus in January 1941, O'Connor faced the prospects of losing the bulk of his close air support, which up until then had been a decisive factor in his success over the Italians.

With O'Connor still 500 miles from obtaining complete victory in the Western Desert, the combination of these factors led the Defence Council to decide that he could not be further supported, given the resources at hand. Both Dill and Wavell sought additional resources but were unsuccessful.

Wavell appreciated that O'Connor was unable to continue without additional support, despite the light opposition he was encountering. Accordingly, he ordered him to halt his

advance in early February and his force was withdrawn to Egypt for much needed rest and maintenance. The western approaches to Egypt were then lightly held by a newly arrived brigade, despite Wavell being warned of the arrival of German forces in North Africa.[17] He clearly failed to appreciate the implication of the introduction of German forces into the theatre with their ability to stiffen Axis resistance in North Africa.

"Operation Compass" had been a resounding success. Wavell's forces had advanced 500 miles and captured 125,000 prisoners and great quantities of materiel. He had grasped the unexpected opportunity he had been given to quickly destroy the Italian forces in North Africa, but competition for scarce resources between theatres of operation had stopped him from achieving that goal.

Having withdrawn the 4th Indian Division from O'Connor in December, Wavell moved it 1,000 miles to the East Africa theatre. Wavell's campaign concept was for a pincer movement through Eritrea and Somaliland by a two divisional force, combined with a central thrust in Ethiopia by local guerrilla forces.[18] Here, Wavell's strategy was at odds with that of Churchill who was less offensive minded and favoured a combination of defensive tactics (using the South African forces newly arrived in Egypt), in concert with an economic blockade of Italy's East African colonies to slowly drain Italian strength.[19] Yet Churchill did not interfere.

Faced with the growing prospects of a heavy commitment to Greece, Wavell sought to move quickly in East Africa. He launched his offensives on 11 February, and by early March when British ground forces deployed for Greece, Italian resistance in East Africa was diminishing; although the campaign was not completed until May 1941. In this four month campaign Wavell's forces were entirely successful. The Italian East African Army was destroyed with 250,000 troops either killed or captured,

and over a million square miles of territory liberated.[20] The campaign was Britain's first real victory in the war and brought much needed relief to Churchill and the British people.

Wavell's concept for the initial campaigns had been sound and remained matched to British strategic policy, which was just starting to change as a result of events in Greece. Despite developments elsewhere in his ever-widening theatre, he had maintained his vision and received considerable moral support from both Churchill and Dill, without ever gaining Churchill's full confidence.[21]

In January 1941 this lack of confidence manifested itself in concerns over Wavell's use of resources. Throughout the war, Churchill continually failed to appreciate the administrative difficulties of modern desert warfare and of the significant manpower requirements in the Middle East for internal security. During the remainder of Wavell's tenure of command he was to continually question both him and Dill on the employment of the 350,000 men which were then in his theatre.[22] But his expressed concern of January 1941 is in stark contrast to an earlier message to Wavell (during O'Connor's pursuit), which said in part "...ask and it shall be given to you..."[23]

Manpower utilization remained essentially the same in the Middle East until 1943, and Churchill did not press Alanbrooke, Alexander or Montgomery in the same way as he did Dill and Wavell. Thus this probing, while within his right as Minister for Defence, appears to have only been applied to those in whom he did not have full confidence. Wavell's success in his initial campaigns did not heal the rift with Churchill and this basic problem, coupled with Wavell's later mistakes in conducting the campaign, was to lead to his eventual dismissal.

Difficulties with Churchill aside, these early campaigns

demonstrate Wavell's brilliance as a theatre commander. Despite the size and complexity of his theatre, and the daunting enemy force structure, he was able to clearly determine priorities for employment of his limited forces. His strategic vision was matched by good operational ability, as shown by the close joint cooperation which he developed, by his handling of subordinate tactical commanders, and by his overall control of theatre resources.

ENDNOTES

1. Sixsmith, Major General E K G. British Generalship in the Twentieth Century. Arms and Armour Press, Aberdeen, 1970. p. 187.

2. Ibid., p. 194.

3. Connell, John. Wavell: Scholar and Soldier. Harcourt Brace and World, New York, 1964. p. 214.

4. Ibid., p. 209.

5. Howard, Michael. The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War. Frederick A. Praeger, New York, 1988. pp. 7,10.

6. Connell, pp. 212,232.

7. Ibid., p. 233.

8. Ibid., p. 246.

9. Ibid., p. 234.

10. Ibid., p. 248.

11. Ibid., p. 256.

12. Barnett, Correlli. The Desert Generals. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982. p. 28.

13. Connell, p. 273.

14. At this stage, Dominion forces were beginning to arrive in theatre but could not be readily employed. They generally

lacked equipment, and required acclimatization and training in desert warfare techniques. It was not until early 1941 that Wavell could actually employ any of these forces in theatre.

15. Connell, p. 311.

16. Ibid., pp. 327,328.

17. Hitler had offered this support to Mussolini as a consequence of O'Connors success. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p. 358.

19. Ibid., p. 359.

20. Ibid., p. 380.

21. Ibid., pp. 298,303.

22. Ibid., p. 306.

23. Ibid., p. 299.

CHAPTER IV

POLICY AND STRATEGY MISMATCH

THE GREEK CAMPAIGN

In 1939 as part of their pre-war preparations, Britain and France had negotiated a defence pact with Greece to come to its aid should it be attacked by an Axis nation.[1] The Italian attack on Greece in October 1940 thus presented the British Defence Council with a strategic dilemma. While the Greeks were successfully holding the Italian attack, it was likely that Hitler would offer German support to Mussolini, as Ultra sources had indicated was to occur in North Africa. Britain was already aware of a large German force build up in Romania, which was seen as preparation for an attack against Greece.[2]

The Defence Council considered that if Britain had allowed the Axis powers to capture Greece, it would have made the Allied position in the Eastern Mediterranean very difficult. From Greece the Axis powers could have placed additional pressure on Turkey, which at that stage was wavering in its support of the Allies; and a pro-Axis government in Turkey would then have opened the way for Axis domination of Iraq and Iran, the Allied 'Centre of Gravity' in the Middle East. The loss of the oil supplies, and subsequently the southern resupply route into Russia, would have been disastrous to Allied war efforts. Thus Churchill wanted to commit British combat forces to Greece despite competing pressures for these limited resources. He saw this commitment eventually leading to the possibility of opening a second front against Germany through the Balkans; a strategic option he was to propose at Allied conferences throughout the war.

The Greek Government, appreciating that Britain could not provide the forces required to defend against a determined German

attack, saw the provision of any lesser amount of British ground forces as certain provocation for Germany to attack. Hence the Greek government of General Metaxas was reluctant to accept ground support from Britain.[3] It did however accept the offer of five squadrons of aircraft which duly came from the Middle East.

Strategic opinion within the British High Command was divided. Churchill was keen to open the second front in the Balkans once the immediate threat to Egypt diminished, and unlike his Chiefs of Staff did not see the need for victory in North Africa as a prerequisite.[4] While, given Britain's overall limited resources, the Chiefs of Staff did not see a German attack on Greece as posing a critical threat to her key interests.[5] They acknowledged the relative importance of Turkey (to British strategic interests), but not Greece. A German occupied Greece, while difficult for Mediterranean operations, was still acceptable given Britain's lack of reserve combat capability at that time.[6] This view caused Churchill considerable annoyance.[7]

Late in January 1941 Mataxas died and Papagos, the new Prime Minister, was quick to request British ground force assistance. The Defence Council directed Wavell to determine the force required to stop a German attack on Greece with any degree of certainty. He visited Greece in mid January and determined a combined force of 12 divisions would be required, of which three would be Greek. He assessed that Middle East Command if ordered could only provide a maximum of three divisions, including some newly arrived in theatre, which was well short of the nine or so required for success.[8] This advice was passed to London and further assisted Dill in his opposition to the proposal.

Churchill then sent Dill and Eden, the Minister for State for the Middle East, to Greece on 19 February in response to

a further Greek request for ground forces. The extent of dissent over strategic priorities within the High Command was demonstrated when he sent Dill and Eden a message on 21 February in which he advised that "...If in your hearts you feel (the) Greek enterprise will be another Norwegian fiasco, do not consider yourselves obligated to it.."[9] Churchill's change of heart at the eleventh hour has been attributed to the continual opposition of his military advisers to the operation. However, recent disclosures from the Ultra files have indicated that Churchill was aware that the Germans were preparing a force of 10 divisions for the attack on Greece. This coupled with the assessment by the Director of Intelligence that any British force committed to Greece would be lost, must have given Churchill second thoughts about the proposal.[10]

Both Dill and Wavell began to demonstrate support for the proposal at this time for reasons which are unclear given their previous opposition to it. This change caught the military staff in London by surprise, especially when messages were received from Dill and Wavell which assessed the venture to have a 'fair chance of success'.[11] Given Dill's declared position in deferring to the local commander on regional matters, it is suggested that the initial change of heart must have come from Wavell.

This optimistic outlook is difficult to understand. During their visit to Greece neither Wavell nor Dill was given the opportunity to reconnoitre the proposed defensive line and the agreement signed by Dill on 5 March clearly showed that the Greeks could only provide a force of three divisions. The proposed combined British/Greek force was only six divisions, well short of the 12 deemed necessary by Wavell.[12] In 1950, Wavell defended his support of the Greek campaign by arguing that he did not bow to political pressure in changing his position, but rather sought to "engage the enemy as far forward as possible" noting that "undue prudence never won battles or

wars".[13] This change of position by Dill and Wavell, regardless of the reason, satisfied any misgivings Churchill had over the matter. On 24 February the War Cabinet approved the deployment of the force, and authorized Dill to coordinate final details.[14]

The decision to deploy British forces to Greece while a political initiative certainly received military support. Churchill provided Wavell and Dill with the opportunity to stop negotiations when he sent his message of 21 February, but by then Wavell appeared to have changed his mind. He must therefore accept some responsibility for allowing his forces to be split at a critical period in his campaign, thus allowing a gap to develop between policy and his theatre strategy. This diversion of forces sealed the fate of O'Connor's pursuit and it could be argued that by doing so the war in the Western Desert was prolonged by 18 months.

Strategically, a German attack on Greece did not directly threaten Wavell's centres of gravity (the oil fields and his bases in Egypt from which he could develop his combat power). The Chiefs of Staff recognised that differences had arisen between national policy and military strategy in the Middle East and sought assurance from Wavell that his desert flank was secure.[15] He reassured them on 2 March that all was well but admitted later that he had clearly underestimated the impact Rommel and his force would have.[16] This misjudgement was made despite Wavell knowing (through Ultra sources) of Rommel's presence and intentions.[17] Rommel's Axis forces steadily pushed Wavell's forces back to the Halfaya Pass during the period March 1941 to May 1941. The diversion of forces to Greece denied Wavell critical combat assets to stop Rommel and it was only the Allied air interdiction of his lines of communication, and the ensuing logistic difficulties he encountered which finally halted his advance.

History records the fate of the British Expeditionary Force

in Greece. As Wavell had correctly predicted from the start, the force proved to be inadequate and was committed too late to be of much assistance. Poor tactical coordination of forces led to it having its flank exposed when Greek forces withdrew, requiring another "Dunkirk" type evacuation to Crete and Egypt in which its transport, armour and artillery were lost. Again the remnants of this force had to be evacuated to Egypt in May by the Royal Navy following the attack on Crete. The ill-fated Greek campaign cost the British 24,000 troops killed or captured at a critical time in the Middle East.

While Churchill was supportive throughout the Greek campaign, and accepted full responsibility for its consequences, none the less he continued to apply pressure to Wavell for a victory in the Western Desert. Here Churchill believed victory was possible given the overall relative strength picture as his Ultra sources told him that Rommel was experiencing sustainment difficulties and that his armoured strength was declining. However, as always, he did not appreciate the difficulties of desert warfare.

The decision to commit forces to Greece had an unexpected benefit for the Allies. As it transpired, the German High Command prepared 24 divisions for the attack on Greece, including a number of mechanized and armoured divisions which were also earmarked for "Operation Barbarossa", the invasion of Russia. While the full implications of the Greek campaign on "Barbarossa" are difficult to assess, it has been conservatively estimated that it delayed the attack by about six weeks.[18] Given that the German advance into Russia was halted primarily by the onset of winter, these six weeks were to prove vital for the Allied war effort. They possibly kept Russia in the war, and certainly allowed her to gain strength faster than she otherwise would have done. Thus with the benefit of hind sight, Wavell's decision to support the Greek campaign was wise, albeit for reasons not known by him at the time.

THE IRAQ REBELLION

The strategic position of Iraq had been recognized by Britain prior to World War II. In 1930 the British and Iraqi governments had signed a defence treaty, in which Britain assumed responsibility for Iraq's defence in return for concessions with regard to basing and passage of forces in times of defence emergency.[19] British defence debate over the division of service responsibilities had been vigorous post World War I, being initiated in part by the advent of air power which blurred previously agreed service boundaries.[20] The persuasive arguments advanced by the RAF had resulted in their being given prime responsibility for defence in a number of British colonies and treaty commitments, including Iraq.[21]

Although Iraq formed part of Middle East Command, British contingency planning called for the dispatch of an expeditionary force of three divisions from India, initially under the command of Army Headquarters (India), to occupy the port of Basra to protect the oil-fields in the Gulf. Command and control arrangements of the plans were unclear as to when operational command of the force would pass from CinC (India) to CinC (Middle East).[22]

In 1941, Wavell had neither the resources nor the time to spare to Iraq, as his attention was fully committed elsewhere. He had therefore sought and gained Chiefs of Staff agreement that in the event of political trouble in Iraq, the situation should be handled by instruments of national power other than the military option. His preference was for strong diplomatic action supported by economic and socio-psychological means.[23] From the outset, Wavell had made it clear that he did not have the resources to deal with any trouble in Iraq, despite its strategic location. Conversely, Auchinleck the CinC (India), with no similar resource constraints at that stage of the war, was keen to become involved. He therefore took the initiative

in the area, recognizing its strategic importance for his defence of India. Thus, in 1941 there was a degree of confusion as to the Defence response and command responsibilities in Iraq, should British military action become necessary.

The political situation in Iraq at the outbreak of World War II was relatively stable, but difficulties were emerging. The King, Feisel II, was only a boy and his uncle was acting as Regent. Political power was exercised by a pro-British Prime Minister who was steadily losing influence in favour of Rashid Ali, a pro-Axis politician. In early April 1941, Rashid Ali launched a coup with Axis support and took power forcing the Prime Minister to resign. Despite the previous agreement with Wavell, the Chiefs of Staff insisted that military intervention occur and that the forces should come from Middle East Command and be under Wavell's tactical and strategic control.[24] The Chiefs of Staff were concerned over any threat to the oil-fields or to Basra where it had been planned to build an assembly base for American lend-lease supplies.[25]

In response to the threat, Auchinleck independently proposed the dispatch of forces from India to safeguard the Persian Gulf; while Wavell continued to adopt his previous position and advised the Chiefs of Staff that he was fully committed elsewhere. The War Cabinet 'gratefully' accepted India's offer on 10 April but at the same time pressed Wavell to send forces from Palestine to assist.[26] Wavell continued to resist this, and subsequent requests on the grounds that his forces in Palestine and Trans-Jordan were fully committed on internal security tasks.[27] Rashid Ali meanwhile was playing political games with the British Ambassador by promising to honour the bilateral treaty, while he was negotiating Axis support. This political intrigue delayed the deployment of troops from India for some weeks, by which time Iraqi forces had besieged the British Embassy, and the RAF base at Habbaniya, some 50 miles from Bagdad. By the end of April 300 soldiers from the Gulf force, along with additional

air assets, had been flown to Habbaniya, in response to the encirclement of the base by 9,000 Iraqi troops. These reinforcements gave Air Vice Marshal Smart, the local commander, a small ground element, 82 assorted antiquated aircraft, and 12 RAF armoured cars with which to defend the base.[28]

On 2 May 1941 the Chiefs of Staff gave Wavell operational command of the forces in the Gulf and Iraq, against his wishes. This directive was to counter one Auchinleck had issued to the commander of the Indian forces deployed to the Gulf, in which he specified that those forces were to remain under operational command of Headquarters (India). Wavell advised the Chiefs that an additional brigade group, with strong artillery and armour support, was needed to restore the situation in Iraq, and that he did not have that force to spare in Palestine. He also advised them that he did not see how "he could exercise operational control of the (Indian) forces in the Gulf of whose disposition and strength he was unaware"[29] The ensuing stream of messages saw Wavell reluctantly accepting responsibility for the area, with Auchinleck continuing to offer further assistance of up to two divisions.[30] Although Wavell subsequently offered to structure an ad-hoc force from those at his disposal in Palestine and Trans Jordan, the damage had been done to his shaky relationship with Churchill.[31]

Wavell's attitude throughout the incident had angered Churchill to the extent that he discussed his possible sacking with Dill on 5 May, after he had learned of the existence of a cavalry brigade in Palestine throughout the period.[32] Churchill told Dill that he had lost confidence in Wavell and wished to replace him with Auchinleck, although he took no further action in the matter at that time.[33]

While Wavell was being pressured to assume operational responsibility for Iraq, the besieged RAF force launched a counter attack which caught the Iraqi forces by surprise. A

joint air and ground attack drove the besieging troops back, and the Iraqis withdrew in disarray. A belated attempt by the Axis powers to intervene failed when the Luftwaffe commander sent to assist Rashid Ali, was killed by rebel forces while attempting to coordinate assistance.[34] British forces then slowly advanced on Bagdad, delayed by flooded rivers and Iraqi demolitions but by the end of May the rebellion was over and a new pro-British administration took control.

While the rebellion ended favourably for Wavell in that he did not have to deploy forces from Palestine, he lost considerable political favour. His recalcitrant attitude is difficult to understand, given his normally clear strategic judgement but a possible explanation could lie in the fact that Wavell had been under constant pressure since he assumed command and it has been acknowledged that he was becoming tired.

Churchill and the Chiefs of Staff had correctly appreciated the potential gravity of the situation and were correct in putting pressure on Wavell to act. Some blame can be levelled at the Chiefs of Staff for the ambiguous command and control arrangements of the contingency plans, and for their earlier acceptance of Wavell's view that other than a military option should be employed in the event of political problems in Iraq, given its strategically important location. However, the major error of judgement lay with Wavell not recognizing the strategic implications of the rebellion, and acting accordingly. It was indeed fortuitous that prompt action by the local RAF commander stabilized the situation before the Axis powers could act decisively.

OPERATION BATTLE-AXE AND THE SYRIAN CAMPAIGN

Churchill had available the broad details of Rommel's effective tank strength and of his growing logistical difficulties through Ultra sources in early 1941.[35] On this basis he firmly believed the British had good prospects for victory in the Western Desert. Reinforcements from Britain and the Dominions had been pouring into the Middle East and from his perspective in London, Churchill assessed that Wavell had the resources to win. He did not appreciate the significant difficulties which Wavell was facing at that time. O'Connor's victorious force had been dissipated throughout the Command, (with some elements committed in East Africa and others involved with the Expeditionary Force to Greece). His senior battle-skilled commanders had also moved on, with O'Connor resting in Egypt, exhausted after the intensive Operation "Compass".[36] The newly arrived forces were generally ill-equipped, especially in armour and artillery assets, they were not acclimatized for desert warfare, and needed time to train collectively in the all arms environment so necessary for desert warfare. But from Churchill's perspective, Wavell had 500,000 troops with which to win victory.[37]

As a matter of urgency in April 1941, Churchill undertook to provide Wavell with an additional 300 tanks to replace those lost in action. In return, Churchill placed considerable pressure on Wavell to launch a counter-offensive against Rommel by June.[38] Churchill's decision to provide tanks from Britain's limited inventory in early 1941 was particularly courageous in view of its impact on Britain's home defences. While recent Ultra disclosures indicate he was aware then that the immediate threat of German invasion was past, none-the-less the provision of tanks to Wavell was carried out in the face of strong opposition from his Chiefs of Staff.[39]

In response to Churchill's prodding, Wavell advised that

"Operation Battle-Axe", his counter offensive , would be launched as soon as possible after the arrival of the tanks. From the outset, planning for this counter offensive was closely tied to the arrival of the tank in the Middle East. This was to prove disastrous for Wavell because of the haste with which the operation was eventually mounted.

The Chiefs of Staff in late April also directed Wavell to provide forces to assist Free French forces to gain control of the Vichy held territories of Syria and Lebanon. The urgency of this tasking was to pre-empt a perceived German airborne invasion of those countries.[40] Wavell had long held concern over the potential threat against his flank from Syria but felt constrained from proposing any action because of his limited resources.[41] He understood that more than the token British effort forecast by the Chiefs of Staff would be required for the task, and indicated those concerns when he was directed to identify available forces for the operation.[42] Following so closely on the Iraq incident, Churchill was angered by what he perceived as further inactivity by Wavell in the face of a major German threat. He therefore decided that Wavell would be relieved and discussed this with Dill on 19 May, although again he took no further action at that stage.[43]

Meanwhile, Wavell and the Chiefs of Staff were at odds over the provision of support to the Syrian operation because of the competition this created for his limited resources. His strategic concept required priority for the real threat Rommel posed to his bases in Egypt, rather than reaction to an as yet non-existent threat in Syria. The conflict was not resolved when he was told that although the Western Desert had first priority he was still to undertake the operations in Syria and Lebanon. The mismatch between policy and strategy in this case was mainly due to differing perceptions over the force requirements for Syria.

Wavell finally accepted the Syrian directive and began to identify forces available for the task, advising that it could only be mounted by taking risks in the Western Desert.[44] Despite the message traffic between London and the Middle East, Wavell's acceptance, albeit reluctanty, still surprised some in the War Office. General Kennedy, Dill's Director of Operations, clearly saw the impact the Syrian operation would have on preparations for "Battle-Axe". In view of the "questionable" immediacy of the German threat to Syria, Kennedy held the view that "Operation Exporter", the Syrian operation, should have been postponed until the completion of "Battle-Axe".[45] Wavell was to claim after the war that he had been unfairly treated over these conflicting requirements given to him by London.[46]

Wavell began planning the Syrian campaign, and on about 20 May, he had reversed his views on the strategic situation in his theatre when he expressed the opinion to London that the threat in Syria might well be more serious than that from Cyrenacia.[47] Accordingly he planned to add the 6th Australian Division from Egypt to the forces he had identified earlier for Syria, and this further weakened his position in the Western Desert. The two operations became further linked when Syrian campaign planning was to prevent him from planning "Battle-Axe". He delegated this latter task to General Beresford-Peirse, his commander in the Western Desert, which was to prove disastrous because of the pedestrian approach Beresford-Pierse took.

Unaware of his re-appreciation of the relative importance of the Syrian operation, Churchill wrote to Wavell on 21 May advising him that Syria must not detract from winning in the Western Desert, while still directing him to support the Syrian operation. Churchill further added that if he was unable to undertake both tasks, "he would accommodate any request from him to be relieved of command"; such was his lack of confidence in Wavell at that time.[48] Being aware of Churchill's letter, Dill wrote to Wavell that same evening requesting he do nothing

to seek removal in view of the range of activities underway within Wavell's theatre at that time.[49] Wavell was clearly conscious he had lost Churchill's trust before either "Battle -Axe" or "Exporter" took place.

The War Cabinet approved Wavell's plan for the Syrian campaign which began on 8 June 1941 and proved to be as Wavell had predicted. Bitter fighting ensued instead of the Vichy French willingly handing over control to the Free French (and British forces). "Exporter" therefore continued to divert Wavell's attention as final preparations were put in place for "Battle -Axe".

Wavell received 240 of his promised 300 tanks on 12 May 1941, and immediately came under pressure from Churchill to launch his counter offensive. Not only did these replacement tanks lack the capabilities of Rommel's armour but they were in poor mechanical condition, having been hurriedly collected in England, and required at least two weeks of workshop repairs.[50] This forced Wavell to postpone "Battle-Axe" two weeks (until 15 June), which further infuriated Churchill.[51]

The counter offensive was finally launched in haste. Prior to the attack Wavell had recognised the inadequacies of the planning and preparation, and the consequent possible risk of defeat. On 28 May he had signalled Dill that "Battle-Axe" would be a close run event, despite him having a two to one tank superiority over Rommel.[52] He was particularly concerned with the relatively poor quality of armour compared to that of the Axis forces. The actual attack pitted two weak divisions frontally against Rommel's prepared defences, with forces committed piecemeal where they were destroyed. The haste with which the operation was launched resulted in crews not being properly trained and some tanks having their guns calibrated en route to the start line.[53] Wavell called off the operation after three days. By 17 June, the British had lost about 150

tanks, compared to German losses of about 25, and withdrew back into a defensive posture.[54]

WAVELL'S DISMISSAL

"Battle-Axe" sealed the fate of Wavell in the Middle East. The message he received 21 June from Churchill advising him that he would be replaced by Auchinleck came as no surprise. He accepted it stoically, knowing he had lost Churchill's confidence and had to go. Wavell had allowed Churchill to force him to accept battle with Rommel before he was ready.[55] Given the other pressing commitments he had in the Middle East at that time, it is surprising he did not take a harder line with Churchill, through Dill, on the timing of the operation. Since Rommel was still experiencing logistic difficulties and was not ready to attack, and given the resistance his forces encountered in Syria, he should have sought a postponement to "Battle-Axe". Yet there is no ready evidence that he sought Dill's intervention in the matter.

While he may have had some degree of confidence in being able to mount an early offensive against Rommel, when pushed by Churchill in early 1941, developments in the theatre from then until June clearly precluded this. The losses in the Greek campaign, the difficult battle for Crete, the Syrian campaign, and the commitment to East Africa, all consumed resources which he required for victory in the Western Desert. The lack of resources was accentuated by the unpreparedness of his forces for battle in June due to their involvement in a succession of ad-hoc campaigns since March. Given Wavell's previous background as a trainer, and his excellent appreciation for the administrative difficulties of desert warfare, he must have recognized he was clearly not ready for an offensive in June.

One reason for missing what otherwise should have been obvious

to him lies in the fact that on the eve of battle he recognised he was becoming tired and requested leave.[56] He had been under significant pressure since before the war and had little opportunity for leave. Churchill certainly felt that Wavell was becoming tired, and this was a factor he considered in deciding to remove him.

Senior Commanders have recourse to the ultimate step of tendering their resignation if their military judgement is unheeded. If Churchill had continued to insist that Wavell proceed with a premature offensive, with its high likelihood of failure, he could have taken this step to maintain his self respect. No doubt given Dill's history of support, he would have backed Wavell in this matter whole heartedly, despite his earlier request for Wavell not to take offence with Churchill's message on Syria. However, military commanders are also conscious of the consequent loss of morale in their command should they take this ultimate step and no doubt this consideration prevented Wavell from taking this action.

The sacking of Wavell did not diminish the acceptance of his accomplishments or of his military ability. Both ally and enemy alike have paid tribute to his accomplishments in the Middle East. Rommel rated him as the only opponent with "a touch of genius". Churchill's decision to give Wavell command in India, and subsequently to have him appointed as viceroy, is clear evidence that Churchill continued to hold him in high esteem, despite the difficulties they had in the Middle East. Roosevelt also personally recommended him as Supreme Commander in the Far East in early 1942, after he had become CinC (India).[57]

ENDNOTES

1. Connell, John. Wavell: Scholar and Soldier. Harcourt Brace and World, New York, 1957. p. 330.

2. Ibid., p. 307.

3. Ibid., p. 313.

4. Lewin, Ronald. The Chief: Field Marshal Lord Wavell Commander-in-Chief and Viceroy, 1939-1947. Farrar Straus Giroux,New York, 1980. p. 90.

5. Connell, pp. 307,310; and Kennedy, General Sir John. The Business of War. Hutchinson, London, 1957. p. 75.

6. Wavell had advised the High Command that he had neither the resources to spare, nor could any British ground force arrive in time to be of value, should Germany attack Greece.

7. Kennedy, p. 75.

8. Connell, p. 314.

9. Kennedy, p. 85.

10. Barnett, Correlli. The Desert Generals. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982. p. 67.

11. Kennedy, p. 85.

12. Woollcombe, Robert. The Campaigns of Wavell, 1939-1943. Cassell, London, 1959. p. 73.

13. Connell, p. 348.

14. Ibid., p. 344.

15. Lewin, p. 122; and Ismay, Hastings L. The Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay. Heinemann, London, 1960. p. 200.

16. Connell, p. 384,385.

17. Lewin, p. 122.

18. Wilmot, Chester. The Struggle for Europe. Collins, London, 1952. p. 77.

19. Connell, p. 429.

20. Ismay, Hastings L. Memoirs of General the Lord Ismay. Heinemann, London, 1960. p. 51.

21. Connell, p. 151.

22. Ibid., pp. 429,430.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., p. 432.

25. Woolcombe, p. 115.

26. Connell, p. 432.

27. Wavell had also been concerned since August 1940 with possible Vichy French activity in the region, although he does not appear to have raised these concerns with London at this stage.

28 Connell, p. 434.

29. Ibid., pp. 434,435.

30. Lewin, p. 115.

31. Connell, p.437.

32. The order of battle in London gave Churchill the impression that there was a considerable mechanized force in Palestine, despite units being considerably understrength. It appears that Churchill also did not know or understand the concern that Wavell had over the possible actions of the Vichy French in Lebanon and Syria, and therefore did not appreciate why he had resisted the attempts to weaken his forces in Palestine.

33. Connell, p. 438.

34. Ibid., pp. 440-443.

35. Lewin, p. 142.

36. Ibid., p. 120.

37. Kennedy, pp. 75 and 123.

38. Connell, p. 425.

39. Lewin, p. 142, and Kennedy, p. 91.

40. British intervention was also designed to consolidate the political position of the Free French under De Gaulle.

Connell, p. 457.

41. The measure of his concern can be gauged from his

insistence on maintaining large protective forces in Palestine and Trans Jordan, and his reluctance to assume responsibility for the Iraq problem.

42. Connell, p. 460.

43. Ibid.

44. Lewin, p. 140.

45. Kennedy, p. 122.

46. Connell, p. 490.

47. Kennedy, p. 122.

48. Connell, p. 462.

49. Ibid., and p.463.

50. The replacement armoured vehicles consisted of a mix of cruiser tanks (which while capable of speeds of 26 miles per hour, were no match for Rommel's superior armour), and infantry tanks (which although well armoured, were only capable of a top speed of eight miles an hour, insufficient for desert armoured warfare).

51. Ismay, p. 209.

52. Connell, pp. 480,481.

53. The mechanical condition of many tanks was still poor, despite their time in workshops, with some going into battle their armour plate held in place by finger-tight bolts.

54. Woollcombe, p. 147

55. Dill also acknowledged that Wavell was forced into "Battle -Axe" before he was ready, and wrote to Auchinleck (as he assumed command) to warn him against being pressured into action prematurely.

Connell, John. Auchinleck. Cassell, London, 1959. pp. 246-248.

56. Connell, Wavell, p. 490.

57. Liddell Hart, B H, The Rommel Papers, Da Capo, New York, 1982, p. 520. and Ismay, p. 211.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The British Government recognized the need for an effective political/ military interface at the national level because of significant internal conflict it experienced within Britain's Higher Defence machinery during World War I. The degree of governmental concern on this matter was evident by its creation of the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 1924, during an era marked by general military apathy. Successive British Governments then relied heavily on this committee for military advice in the formulation of Defence policy, although there was little priority given to other defence matters until war with Germany seemed imminent. Transition to war saw this civil/military interface remain intact, despite Churchill modifying arrangements to better suit his needs as both Prime Minister and Minister for Defence. Churchill's changes strengthened the role of the Chiefs of Staff in that they had constant contact with him as Prime Minister, and this bonding of policy with military strategy avoided much of the internal conflict of World War I. From the outset, Churchill clearly intended to use his Chiefs of Staff to improve the quality of defence policy. This was demonstrated by his 1940 organizational changes which provided the Chiefs of Staff with both a joint intelligence staff and a joint planning staff to better evaluate military strategy options.

While Churchill sought an effective relationship with his Chiefs of Staff, his personality traits and penchant for becoming involved in the detail of military strategy and tactics, made their working environment difficult. Churchill's leadership qualities were recognized by his Chiefs of Staff, but he was not a good military strategist or tactician, and his constant

attempts to influence their military thinking caused them considerable work, to the detriment of their other duties. They continually had to prove to him that his ideas were not feasible, and to suggest alternative strategies. Yet, there is ample evidence that Churchill would not go against their military advice, and continued to work closely with them throughout the war.

Despite his being given extraordinary powers of office, Churchill was often criticized for adopting a dictatorial approach in his direction of the war. He thus remained careful to ensure that proper parliamentary procedures were observed. His relationship with his Chiefs of Staff was scrutinized by the War Cabinet; but he could clearly demonstrate that there was full consultation on military matters. It could be argued that there was possibly too much contact between the Prime Minister and his principal military advisers, because of the demands that he made on their time. However, despite the difficulties of working with Churchill, those around him remained impressed throughout the war with his national leadership .

The Chiefs of Staff's position was not undermined by his habit of consulting outside the established chain of command. Those he consulted provided their respective Service Chief with the detail of Churchill's concerns, thereby ensuring the Chiefs of Staff Committee remained informed. Churchill's actions in corresponding directly with commanders in the field however, was potentially more damaging to the political/ military relationship during the war, due to the implied pressure that was then placed on field commanders. The pressure he placed on Wavell to launch "Battle-Axe" was a good example of the implications of such action. The Chiefs of Staff clearly recognized the problem and frequently sought to break Churchill of the habit, without success. The intention behind this correspondence is debatable. Ismay's explanation as to Churchill's motives, while plausible, certainly does not reflect

the views of the recipients. On one hand, Wavell's reaction to essentially ignore Churchill's detailed directive in August 1940, and the subsequent lack of rebuke from Churchill supports Ismay's explanation; yet Wavell ultimately gave in to the continual pressure which Churchill applied and prematurely launched his counter offensive against Rommel. Once Churchill had reason to lose confidence in a commander, he seemed to increase the frequency of direct correspondence; questioning all aspects of the field commander's operations. However, it must be acknowledged that Churchill was properly executing his parliamentary responsibilities (as Minister for Defence), when he questioned commanders on the employment of Britain's Defence resources. While this practice did not jeopardize political/ military coordination at the highest levels, it enhanced tension between Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff. Such was the case with need for both Dill and Wavell to constantly justify the employment of manpower in the Middle East.

The high degree of autonomy accorded to British theatre commanders in World War II brought with it a commensurate degree of responsibility. The Chiefs of Staff provided their military strategic guidance, their resources to implement that guidance, and allowed them adequate freedom to operate. While there were certainly stresses in Wavell's working relationship with his masters in London, he none-the-less had both adequate authority and responsibility to carry out his duties. The War Cabinet acceptance of his threat assessment and subsequent campaign plan, demonstrates both this sound command relationship and the close match of policy and military strategy at the start of hostilities. While the Chiefs of Staff gave their theatre commanders this degree of freedom, they were also quick to correct commanders when they strayed from their guidance. When Wavell did not readily respond to developing threats to the major British centre of gravity in the theatre, namely the

oil-fields in Iraq and Iran, Dill intervened and directed him to take action.

Churchill and Wavell clashed from the outset, and this clouded their relationship throughout 1940/1941. Although their relationship was strained, they still continued to work together with Churchill providing Wavell ample opportunity to demonstrate his command ability. This forbearance was aptly shown when Churchill did not seek to remove Wavell after he made his first operational error; that being when he consciously weakened his forces screening the Western Desert in early 1941, despite knowing of the arrival of Rommel and his armoured force in Tripoli. It was only when Wavell had clearly lost sight of British strategic priorities (as a result of Axis threats in early 1941), and failed to modify his campaign strategy, that he lost the remaining confidence of Churchill and was finally removed from command.

In 1940, he had correctly identified the British centres of gravity as being the oil fields in Iran and Iraq, and his established bases in Egypt. The major threat to these centres of gravity came from the Italian forces in North and East Africa. However, without destroying the Axis threat in North Africa, and only just commencing operations in East Africa, he allowed his limited force to be dissipated for the ill-fated Greek Expedition. This was against a threat to an axis which did not directly threaten his centres of gravity. The weakening of his Western Desert force prevented any early resumption of the offensive (which had so nearly cleared Axis forces from North Africa), and also removed any effective reserve with which he could have countered Rommel's offensive.

Wavell was influential in Churchill's decision to commit ground forces to Greece and must therefore accept some responsibility for the resulting difficulties he experienced during the remainder of his tenure in the Middle East. While

Churchill was clearly in favour of British ground force intervention in Greece, he would not order it against the advice of his Chiefs of Staff. The message which he sent to Dill on 21 February 1941 was evidence of misgivings he was having over the matter. It was not until he received the supportive messages of Wavell and Dill that he finally decided to assist in Greece, and formally discussed the matter in the War Cabinet. Wavell's earlier visit to Greece had confirmed that he had insufficient forces to spare in the Middle East to stop a determined German attack, and that any force deployed in response to an attack would arrive too late to be effective. It was therefore surprising that he changed his mind and supported the venture. He was not being pressured by Churchill at that stage, and could have continued to oppose the proposal. Given Churchill's uncertainty at that time, if Wavell had remained against the idea, it would have been unlikely that any ground troops would have been deployed to Greece.

A similar loss of strategic vision occurred over the Iraq rebellion. Here Wavell failed to appreciate the potential of the Axis threat developing adjacent to the oil-fields. While he certainly had other threats to contend with, the Iraq situation only required one armoured brigade from his resources, in addition to the forces already provided by CinC (India). Wavell had this force to spare in Palestine where there was no immediate threat, but chose not to use them until directed to do so by the Chiefs of Staff. The deployment of Luftwaffe elements into northern Iraq was indication of active German intent in the region, and while this was appreciated in London it was not appreciated by Wavell. He clearly did not accord Iraq the priority it deserved, and it was fortunate for both Wavell and Britain that the local RAF force took the initiative and brought the situation under control. His unwillingness to take any action in Iraq was in stark contrast to that shown by Auchinleck in India, and further aggravated Churchill.

His similarly poor strategic appreciation of implications of a possible German airborne threat to Syria, brought Wavell's strategic judgement into question once again a few weeks after the Iraq problem. While he had no intelligence to support such an occurrence, the British High Command certainly believed it likely. Given the successful German parachute assault on Crete, the High Command had good reason to hold this view. With limited resources at his disposal, and pressure from Churchill to launch his counter offensive against Rommel, Wavell did not fight hard enough to postpone "Battle-Axe" and deal with the problem in Syria (which he correctly had assessed as being beyond token support to the Free French). However, albeit reluctantly, he undertook both operations when he had doubt as to the chances of 'Battle-Axe" succeeding. He had time after the Syrian campaign commenced to demonstrate the force requirements of that operation and thereby seek deferral in the Western Desert. Wavell's reluctance to act promptly in Syria, coming so soon after the Iraq operation, had lost him any remaining trust from Churchill. Yet, while Churchill made the decision to relieve Wavell on 19 May 1941, he did not act to implement it as he was awaiting the results of "Battle-Axe".

A combination of factors doomed "Battle-Axe" to failure from the start. Firstly, the timing of the offensive was tied to the arrival of tank replacements, regardless of the situation in the Middle East at the time, and was not altered despite a succession of crises which developed in the Theatre. Secondly, as it transpired, Wavell did not have the time to devote to planning the operation and was forced to delegate it to a subordinate with lesser operational skills. Thirdly, Wavell's military judgement told him his force was not ready for an offensive, being both inadequately trained and poorly equipped. While he had misgivings prior to the operation, and advised Dill of these in late May, Wavell did not seek to postpone the operation. He had other options, including that of resignation,

if the High Command would not heed his advice. However, he chose to comply with what was clearly an impractical directive.

Wavell had performed magnificently in the Middle East until February 1941. With a markedly numerically inferior force he had all but destroyed the Italian armies in North and East Africa. But as further crises developed he appeared to have lost sight of the basis of the reasoning behind his strategic concept. He was hard-pressed reacting to the multiple crises which developed during 1941, and was already tired at the start of the campaign. Wavell himself was noticing his tiredness and this was shown by his advice to Dill (prior to the Syrian operation), that he would be seeking leave. Given the evidence of his operational brilliance during 1940/early 1941, his lapse in performance after February 1941, must have been partly due to this growing tiredness.

It is therefore argued that Wavell's removal from command by Churchill in July 1941 was due to a number of serious mistakes which Wavell had made, and cannot be attributed to a poor political/military relationship at the national level. Indeed, it is further argued, that despite strained inter-personal relationships, Churchill and his Chiefs of Staff worked as an effective team.

The major lesson to be drawn from this study of Wavell's command in the Middle East, is the need for a theatre commander to continually revise his campaign strategy to ensure it meets the requirements of national policy. Consequently a theatre commander cannot become embroiled in detail. He must continually re-evaluate his strategy in line with both enemy reactions and changes to national political thought. To do otherwise is to either court operational failure, or to renounce the primacy of civil authority.

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