

Egypt 1940

Italy versus the British Empire



The Surprise Strike



The Attack

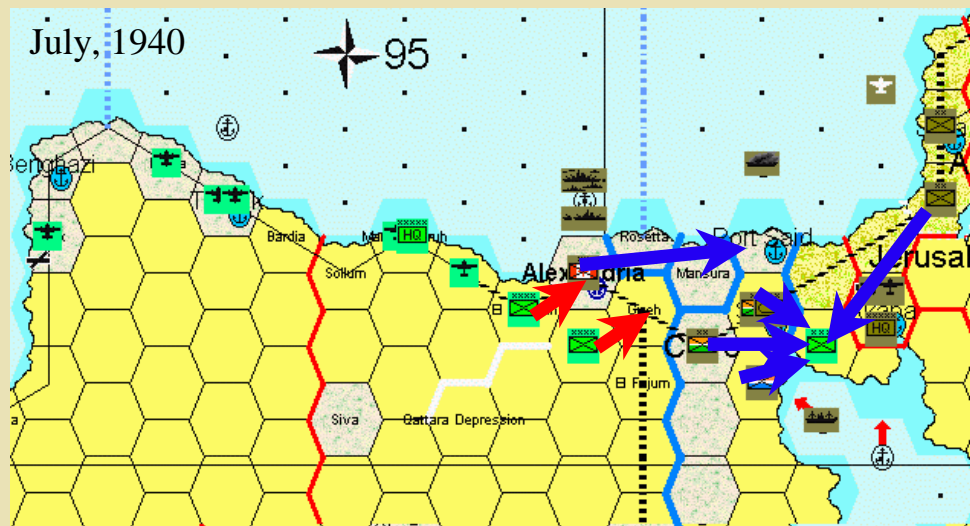
Italy assembled four corps plus HQ at Tobruk, three corps on troop transports in Taranto. Four wings of Italian bombers were readied in eastern Cyrenaica, with more to come in the following weeks. The Italian army crossed the border to Egypt on April 5th, contact with British forces between Mersa Matruh and El Alamein was established by the 10th. The British sought not to defend rigidly but delay action until the gates of Alexandria, a maneuver that proved costly to the Italians.



Port Said

Here the British forces were caught by surprise. The task force at Port Said was on peacetime duty. Many sailors were on the leave as the Italian Fleet closed in to deliver 150,000 men, 1,000 guns and armor. The Italians landed in three waves with three corps on three landing sites. Coastal defense was practically nonexistent. Royal Navy ships could sink several transports within line of sight, but most of the spearhead troops deployed safely, then swiftly overran the small port garrison.

Destruction of 2nd Legion



A Fatal Mistake

Badoglio's plan was simply to destroy the port facilities of Suez and then return to defend Port Said. But supplies for the 2nd Legion were already low at that time! Wavell figured out that the Italians could not stand a continued and determined assault, and ordered a daring sweep with 1st Armored and 12th Indian Corps across the Nile delta. 2nd South African, just being deployed at Suez, had orders to retreat if attacked. That perfectly matched to entrap the Italian army moving south, vacating Port Said for a critical period that finally spawned its doom.

Death Trap

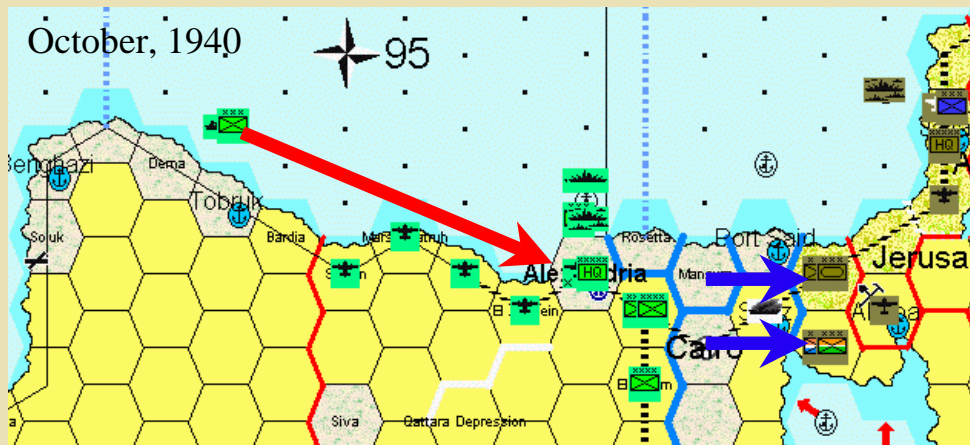
Lack of mobility again proved a major defect of the Italians. When the slow Legion reached the outskirts of Suez, British armor already crossed the last Nile arm and entered Port Said. With combined forces, the 2nd Legion, now cut from all supply that was bunkered in Port Said, was attacked from all directions. Only one corps managed to retreat into Sinai. Here, the newly raised Jewish formations had their heyday. The British had difficulties attacking across the canal, but the Khova Brigade & Jaffa Division single-handedly stomped out all resistance.

The British Retreat



Defending the Nile

August was a quiet month with both sides beefing up and rearranging forces. In September, the British had prepared firm defenses behind the Nile. Italy shipped troops directly into Alexandria. Failing to challenge the Regia Marina in the Mediterranean, the Royal Navy became more and more a passive target to Italian bomber planes. Italy, on the other hand, had not to care for their home defense, as Gibraltar was firmly in the hands of Spain, and so kept pouring legion over legion into the African ports.



The Retreat

On September 20, General Wavell was dismissed by Churchill. From then on, Field Marshal Lord Gort was put in charge of Commonwealth troops in all theaters. Seeing the massive Italian build-up, and deprived of effective support by the Navy, Gort ordered a retreat behind the Suez Canal to avoid being circumvented from the south by the numerous Italian troops. The Italians, as expected, maneuvered cautiously south while at the same time assembling in force before Cairo. Cairo, as Alexandria before, was given up without a fight.

Summary

Italy began preparations for this offensive as early as September 1939. The 5th, 15th and 17th Corps trained in amphibious operations for more than three months. Transports were refitted with small motorized landing boats and barques. Troops were secretly deployed in eastern Libya and air fields were constructed to host the many airplanes designated for rebase to Africa. Air superiority was the single most important factor in the Italian victory. It kept British bombers at bay, reduced the effectivity of the Royal Navy and provided the decisive punch for the land battles. Britain was uneasy to commit forces to the African theater. Instead of rushing in the required reinforcements, especially air force units, the 8th army was beefed up by 40% while Italy more than doubled her initial troops. But the British mistakes were seemingly unavoidable, as they were hard pressed by Italy's allies. After France, which the British hoped to defend with a good commitment of troops, the Germans threatened to invade the British isles. The fall of Gibraltar put Britain at a severe disadvantage in Africa. Ironically, the British admiralty had planned a pre-emptive strike at Taranto as early as March 1940, but the attack was suddenly called off by the government. If one cause must be determined as the decisive one, it was the strange timing of events.

Britain/Commonwealth

Bad Points

- Unawareness of enemy surprises
- Missed chances at sea
- Wasted and uncommitted naval power
- Minimal air support
- General lack of reinforcements

Good Points

- Excellent fighting power
- Superb morale of troops
- Superior mobility
- Fast exploitation of enemy weakness
- Superb reaction to invasion from rear



HMS Ark Royal fell prey to the assault on Port Said



Air superiority gave the decisive weight to the Italian operations

Italy

Bad Points

- Attritious and hazardous attacks
- Slow and cautious advance
- Lack of supplies/supply planning
- General poor fighting power

Good Points

- Excellent planning ahead
- Emphasis on air support
- Amphibious assault execution
- Stubborn advance, no fear
- All-out commitment of reserves

Losses

Land Losses Totals

Britain & Commonwealth

Dead	25,000
Wounded	50,000
<u>POW</u>	<u>10,000</u>
Total	85,000

Italy

Dead	100,000
Wounded	150,000
<u>POW</u>	<u>100,000</u>
Total	350,000



The best fighter that Britain could spare for Egypt: the Hurricane

Sea action losses

Air raid & assault on Port Said

BB Valiant
CV Ark Royal
6xCL Fiji class (scuttled)
6x CA Achilles class (scuttled)

Sea battle of Cape Matapan

6xCL Carlsisle class
BB Leonardo da Vinci
BB Conte di Cavour
8x CA Guiseppe Garibaldi class

Air strike at Alexandria

BB Barham
2x CA Sussex class

Sea battle of Crete

BM Erebus
BM Terror
6x CL Camicia Nera class
4x CA Duca D'Aosta class
25x AT Troop Transport

Sea Losses Totals

Britain & Commonwealth

Battleships	2
Monitors	2
Aircraft Carriers	1
Heavy Cruisers	8
<u>Light Cruisers</u>	<u>12</u>
Total	25

Italy

Battleships	2
Heavy Cruisers	12
Light Cruisers	6
<u>Transports</u>	<u>25</u>
Total	45



Savoia-Marchetti SM-79 bomber/transport saw much action against British ships

Battle Honors

Total troops committed

Britain & Commonwealth

British	100,000
Canadian	50,000
French	50,000
Indian	70,000
Jewish	30,000
<u>South African</u>	<u>50,000</u>
Total	350,000

Italy

Italian	930,000
<u>Libyan</u>	<u>50,000</u>
Total	980,000

British 8th Army

Commander:

General Sir Archibald Wavell
(From September 20:
Field Marshal Lord Gort)

(April 1940)

1st Armoured Corps
12th Indian Corps
1st Canadian Corps
1st Indian Division
2nd Motorized Division
AHQ

(Later)

2nd South African Corps
Jaffa Division (Jewish)
Bar Khova Brigade (Jewish)
1st Anglo-French Corps

Italian Army Group Africa

Commander:

Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio

(April 1940)

1st Legion:
1st Corps
2nd Corps
21st Corps

2nd Legion:
5th Corps
15th Corps
17th Corps

1st Libyan Corps
AG HQ

(Later)
4th Legion
3rd Legion
1st New Legion (rebuilt)
18th Motorized Corps