



# **Operations in North Africa and the Middle East 1939-1942: Tobruk, Crete, Syria and East Africa (Despatches from the Front)**

*John Grehan, Martin Mace*

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The Middle East Command in the Second World War covered a vast region, stretching across Egypt, Libya, Malta, Palestine and Transjordan, Cyprus, Sudan, Eritrea, most of Syria and a small part of Iraq, and included some forty different languages. At one point it also oversaw operations in Greece, Kenya and British Somaliland. Its campaign area ran for a thousand miles from the Jordan to the Horn of Africa.

Initially under the leadership of General Sir Archibald Wavell, Middle East Command's early actions were in contending with the Italian forces in Libya and Italian East Africa. He was soon distracted by the German invasion of Greece and the subsequent defence of, and withdrawal from, the Island of Crete. With his attention turned from North Africa to the Ægean, Italian forces in North Africa were able to hold their ground and even receive reinforcements in the form of Rommel's Afrika Korps .

Wavell's despatches detail all of these campaigns up to July 1941, when he was superseded by General Claude Auchinleck. The 'Auk' had to deal with the Anglo-Free French invasion of Syria and Lebanon and the nationalist uprising in Iraq. His main concern, though, was with stopping Rommel's advances through Libya. The Axis forces were eventually held close to the border of Egypt at El Alamein. It was as far as Rommel would go and it marked the end of the long run of Axis successes in North Africa.

The despatches presented here form a unique collection of original reports from the commanding officers in this widespread and difficult region. This is the first time these

documents have been brought together in a single volume

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