

## Chapter 3

## MIDDLE EAST

Apart from the UK, during the first part of World War Two, the main centres of military locomotive operations were in the Middle East and the Near East. The railways in the Middle East, in particular the Western Desert Extension Railway, were used to supply the British forces during the fluctuating war in the desert. Before World War Two, the Egyptian Western Desert Railway was a single-track standard-gauge line along the coast, extended to Mersa Matruh on strategic grounds in April 1936. Thus, Mersa Matruh was connected to Alexandria some 200 miles away by this line. The war naturally brought considerable traffic to this line, and the WD were responsible for an extension which was called the Western Desert Extension Railway.

a counter-offensive. El Agheila fell on 24 March, and the German forces crossed the 150 miles to Benghazi in a few days. The British evacuated Benghazi on 3 April and by 13 April, the Germans had reached Bardia near the Egyptian frontier, leaving Tobruk as an isolated British garrison. As an aside, on 6 April 1941, Greece and Yugoslavia were invaded, and by 28 April the British and Commonwealth forces had left Greece. The British reinforced Tobruk by sea with some Australian units, and the Germans failed to take it. During May and June, there were attacks and counter-attacks in the Sollum and Fort Capuzzo areas, but no large scale offensive was launched against Egypt.

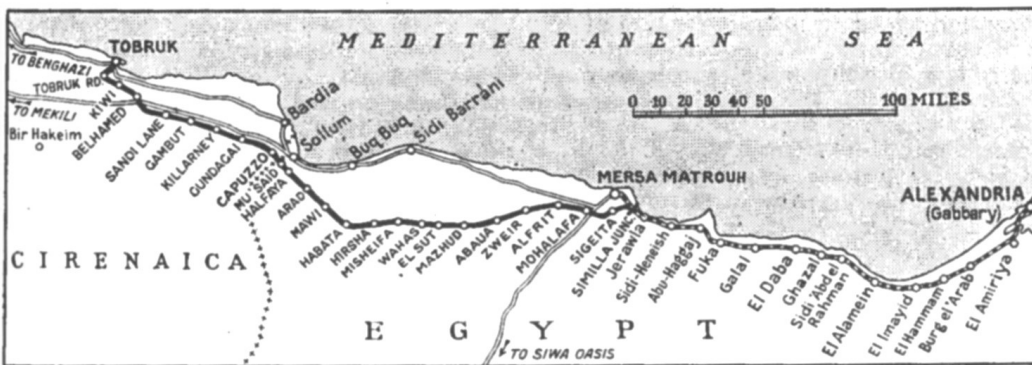
The Allies in the Middle East had other distractions at this time. The Abyssinian

Egypt under WD jurisdiction (see Chapter 21). Some of these engines were used by the Railway Operating Companies on the Western Desert Extension Railway and, for a while, also on the Daba to Mersa Matruh section of the Egyptian State Railway Western Desert line. It was realised that if the Western Desert branch was to be extended, to Tobruk or even further, diesel locomotives would be required, as the use of steam locomotives would necessitate major developments. Accordingly, orders were placed with the Whitcomb Locomotive Co for fifty-two 0-4-4-0 diesel-electric locomotives (see Chapter 25).

On 18 November 1941, the Eighth Army took the offensive and after much fighting of mixed fortunes eventually relieved Tobruk on 10 December. By early January, the German forces had withdrawn once more to El Agheila. However, German reinforcements arrived, while Allied forces were diverted or withdrawn to strengthen the Far East following the shock of Pearl Harbour. On 21 January, the Germans launched a counter-attack and on 29 January recaptured Benghazi. The Allies withdrew and for four months, the front was just east of Derna.

The British authorities had decided, as soon as the way to Tobruk was clear, that the Western Desert Extension Railway should be further extended to that point. By March 1942, the line had been extended to Capuzzo, being operated by steam locomotives. Construction continued and by 12 June 1942, the railhead was opened at Bel Hamed, only 15 miles from Tobruk. The British were getting ready to attack.

However, the Germans moved first and on 26 May a heavy attack was launched. Unfortunately, the British had 10,000 tons of stores at Tobruk and 26,000 tons at Bel Hamed ready for their own attack, and the need to protect these dumps hampered the Eighth Army's freedom of manoeuvre. The Eighth Army counter-attacked unsuccessfully on 5 June, and by 11 June Rommel was up in the Ed Adem area, and by 13 June the Eighth Army was forced to withdraw to the Egyptian frontier. Thus, the Capuzzo to Bel Hamed section of the WDER did not come into full use because five days later the Eighth Army withdrew. Tobruk was attacked on 20 June and surrendered on 21 June. Three days later, the Germans reached a point beyond Sidi



Map 2 Sketch map of the Western Desert Extension Railway from Similla Junction (near Mersa Matruh) to Tobruk (Courtesy Railway Magazine)

The Italians entered the war on 10 June 1940, and invaded Egyptian territory, proceeding to a point east of Sidi Barrani, but west of Mersa Matruh. In October 1940, the New Zealand 16 & 17 Rly Op Coys Royal Engineers began an extension ready for a military offensive. To climb the escarpment behind Mersa Matruh, it was decided to begin the extension at a point roughly midway between Jerawla and Mersa Matruh, which became known as Similla Junction. The first British advance began on 9 December 1940, and Benghazi was occupied on 7 February 1941. In view of this advance, work stopped on the extension in January 1941. The British advance reached El Agheila and thus covered virtually the whole of Cyrenaica.

At this time, Churchill directed that major effort should be directed towards Greece and the Balkans. The best military units and equipment were stripped from the desert front. However, on 12 February 1941, Rommel arrived in Africa! At the end of March, the German forces launched

campaign did not end until mid-May. On 20 May, the Germans invaded Crete and by 31 May, the British forces were driven out. The Royal Navy had lost so many surface ships in the Mediterranean Sea that convoys could no longer safely pass from Gibraltar to Egypt.

With the position in the western desert more or less stabilised, it was decided in June 1941 to carry on with the extension to the WDR for some 108 miles to a railhead immediately behind the British lines. By September, the railhead had reached Mohalafa ("Alliance") and by December 1941 the New Zealanders had reached Misheifa which lay south of Sidi Barrani. This was also the head of the Western Desert water pipeline. At Misheifa, a large circular depot was laid out (similar in principle to Bicester or Bramley) to minimise enemy attack, and a dummy railhead was built further west which took most of the bombing!

At the end of 1941, forty-two ex-LMS Class Stanier 2-8-0s were put to work in

Barrani; on 27 June they reached Mersa Matruh and on 30 June El Daba. The British positions at El Alamein were then established. Rommel attempted to attack on 1 July but failed.

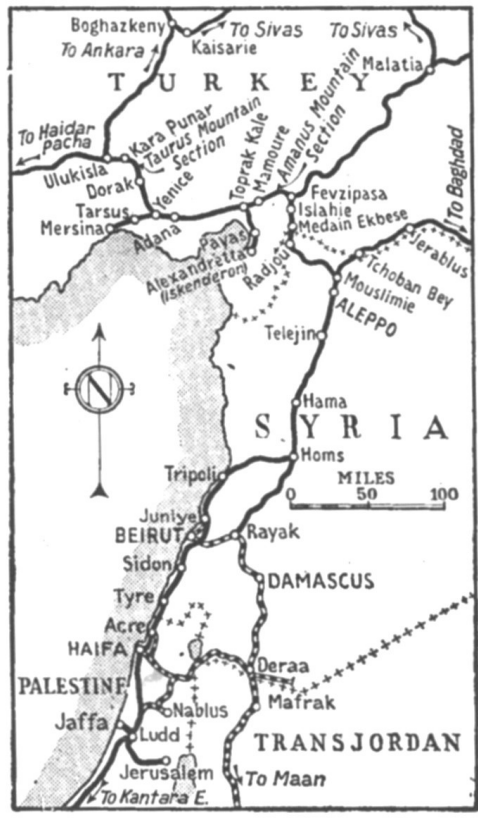
It was not possible in the limited time available for the track to be demolished effectively, but no locomotives were allowed to fall into enemy hands, except one ESR 2-6-0 590 which had failed at El Daba and was immobilised by charges in the frames, but some wagons were left behind. The railhead for the British forces became Burg El'Arab. The Germans repaired the part of the railway that they held. German and Italian diesel locomotives were shipped to Africa and by October the Germans were regularly working the 280 miles between Bel Hamed and El Daba with captured British wagons. In addition, the line was extended by the Germans from Bel Hamed to Tobruk.

The British forces had to consider anti-aircraft defences. Some LMS 2-8-0s were fitted with either armour plate or concrete slabs to protect the cabs and boilers. Some trains had box wagons at each end with twin machine guns, or barrage balloons attached by steel cables! Some Whitcomb diesels were also fitted with armour plate and/or disguised as box vans and marshalled in the middle of the trains!

Rommel attacked again between 31 August and 3 September 1942, but failed again. Rommel had come to a dead end. American supplies were beginning to arrive in the Middle East, Malta had survived and was being reinforced and could therefore intercept supplies going to Rommel.

The next Allied offensive, the famous Battle of Alamein, started with massed artillery fire on 23 October 1942. After hard fighting, by 4 November the German forces started to retreat. By 5 November, the Allies were in the Fuka area. On 6 November, it rained heavily turning the desert into a quagmire but the Allies reached Sidi Heneish. The chase was on! About this time, the Allies were landing in North Africa (see Chapter 5), convoys were getting through to Malta, and the Royal Navy was active again.

For this offensive, the Whitcomb diesel locomotives took over the operation of the Western Desert line from the Stanier 2-8-0s, which were then mostly loaned to the ESR, with the exception of two which remained to operate passenger trains. In the early stages of the advance, it was essential that the railway should be repaired and operated as rapidly as possible and that the railhead be advanced as quickly as the tactical situation allowed. Construction trains were operated on a shuttle service from Gabbary, the marshalling yard at



Map 3 Sketch map of the railways of Syria and adjoining countries. Full lines represent standard gauge track and dotted lines narrow gauge (Courtesy Railway Magazine)

Alexandria. The railhead was advanced to El Imayid by 27 October and then to El Alamein by 5 November, progress being limited by the rate at which the permanent way could be repaired, the provision of water for the locomotives and by the need for adequate signal communications.

Heavy work was required to open the section through the battle area westwards to El Daba by 9 November 1942 owing to the damage caused by enemy demolitions as well as by our own shelling and bombing. The enemy had also constructed many dugouts in the railway embankments. Less work was required west of El Daba, although track demolitions had occurred and points, crossings and lengths of track had been removed. Teller mines had been laid in the track, every yard of which had to be examined before the line was opened as far as Mersa Matruh on 14 November and Tobruk on 18 November. By 20 November, the railhead was at Capuzzo and on 22 November a construction train reached Bel Hamed. By 28 November, about a month after the offensive started, the line was open to Tobruk Road, situated on top of the escarpment about seven miles from the harbour, and by 1 December was in operation to that point. No less than 355 miles of railway had been cleared and repaired in a month. ESR 590 was recaptured at El Daba, remaining exactly as it had been left!

The heavy traffic on the Western

Desert Extension Railway caused by the advance of our forces was foreseen and a mobile shop train was constructed containing machine tools and maintenance gear to ensure that locomotives were repaired as rapidly as possible.

As the railhead advanced, it was followed by the water pipeline. The custom was for steam power to be used up to and sometimes on the section immediately after the pipe head and for diesel power to be used further west. To begin with, water was available at Hamman, which was carried forward to El Daba by rail tank wagons. Later, water was similarly carried from El Daba to Similla Junction, the diesel locomotives being moved forward to operate the line further west. On 25 November, the water pipe was extended to Similla, whence it was carried by rail to Misheifa while the pipe was being extended that far. Steam locomotives then operated to Misheifa and the diesel locomotives were moved westward to Capuzzo. On 7 December, the water pipe reached Misheifa and the steam locomotives then worked to Capuzzo and the diesels from Capuzzo to Tobruk Road, the railhead.

Originally, the railway was operated throughout by a New Zealand Railway Operating Company but when the line was opened to Mersa Matruh this naturally was too big a job for one Company so that shortly afterwards the 6th Railway Operating Group consisting of the 193 (British) and 115 (Indian) Railway Operating Companies took over the Alexandria to Mersa Matruh section, leaving the original NZ Company free to concentrate on the line west of Mersa Matruh. Eventually the service through to Tobruk Road averaged six 450-ton trains a day, with a maximum of eight trains on peak days, so that Tobruk Road was operating at 2700 tons a day.

As the advance continued, Benghazi was occupied and the 0.95 metre gauge Benghazi Barce and Soluch Railway came under British control (see Chapter 22). The German forces had started to extend the Barce line to Tobruk but had built only the track foundations without laying any track. The British authorities considered carrying on with this work, and also extending the line westwards to connect with the Tripolitanian Railway, but neither project was ever started.

Supplies had to come to Benghazi either by the single road hundreds of miles back to the Egyptian bases, or by rail to Tobruk and then mostly by sea to Benghazi port. Plans called for about 2380 tons per day by road and 2200 tons per day by rail and sea. On 3/4 January 1943, there was a bad gale and the mole of Benghazi