

Hacheim and Rotonda Segnali, so as to out-flank any possible opposition on the road, and occupied Martuba on the following day. Derna was reported clear on 16th November. On that day the Gazala landing grounds were brought into use and on the 18th our fighters were able to cover the passage of the Malta convoy. Its safe arrival marked the end of the siege and the beginning of the delivery of the brave garrison and people of Malta from the greatest continuous ordeal of the war.

The enemy was withdrawing through the Gebel and it was a great temptation to imitate our previous strategy by pushing a force across the desert to cut him off at or near Agedabia. General Montgomery was determined, however, not to take any chances, especially in view of the difficulties of the maintenance situation, and 10 Corps was instructed to despatch only armoured cars by this route. Later, however, when it appeared that the enemy's retreat had actually been brought to a temporary standstill by lack of fuel, 10 Corps was ordered to strengthen, if possible, the outflanking force; this proved impracticable in the then existing circumstances. By very careful organisation of reserves 4 Light Armoured Brigade had found it possible to advance to Maraua on 18th November, in spite of demolitions and mines on the road. The main body of 10 Corps was halted around Tmimi.

In the meantime two mobile columns, consisting of 11 Hussars and the Royals, with supporting arms, under command of 7 Armoured Division, were directed on Msus across the desert. By the evening of 16th November they had reported Mechili clear and were operating within forty miles of Msus. Rain now began to fall again and it took the two columns twenty-four hours to struggle through sixty miles of waterlogged ground to the escarpment which the enemy rearguard was holding to cover the evacuation of Benghazi. On 18th November they engaged the rearguard at Sceleidima and Antelat, the two main passes in the escarpment, but were unable to force their way past. During the night the enemy withdrew and the advance of the two columns was again delayed by bad going. On the 20th 11 Hussars entered Benghazi* and found the town and neighbourhood clear of enemy, and it was not until mid-day of the 21st that the Royals made touch with the enemy rearguard again at Agedabia. The administrative position was now becoming easier and the vanguard of 22 Armoured Brigade, having raced across two hundred and sixty miles of desert, at once began to turn the enemy's flank. Thus threatened he lost no time in abandoning Agedabia. The road southwards was heavily mined and the advance was much impeded; but by 25th November patrols were in contact with the next enemy position at Agheila. The whole of Cyrenaica was now in our hands.

During this phase of the pursuit, when 10 Corps was unable to come to grips with the enemy, the work of the Royal Air Force was particularly valuable. All the way from Daba to the frontier, and particularly at Sollum,

where the congestion was greatest, retreating enemy transport was relentlessly attacked. On 11th November, while the New Zealand Division was occupying the frontier area, our fighters caught up with the enemy air force and had a specially successful day, shooting down enemy aircraft not only over the frontier but also on the enemy's own landing grounds at Gambut and El Adem. By the 13th our own aircraft were based on these same two airfields, bombing and machine-gunning enemy transport in the Gebel Akhdar. On the same day two squadrons of fighters made a bold move, completely by air transport, to a landing ground only a hundred and eighty miles east of Agedabia, well ahead and to the south of our forward troops, and inflicted considerable damage on the enemy's columns retreating round the bend of the Gulf of Sirte. By 16th November the main fighter force was operating from Gazala and destroyed thirty-seven enemy transport aircraft by the use of which the enemy was desperately trying to relieve his fuel shortage. After this the air force, like the main body of the Army, was temporarily chained to the Tobruk area until the supply situation improved and for a few days enemy aircraft were able to attack our light columns in the desert on a scale to which we had long been unused. By 26th November, however, two wings of fighters were established at Msus and our air superiority over the forward area was restored.

The Conquest of Tripolitania.

At Agheila Eighth Army was facing the strongest position in Libya. An army advancing from the east comes first upon a large area of salt marsh, running roughly north to south, known as the Sebkha es Seghira; there is then a gap of about fifteen miles between this and another salt marsh to the south, Sebkhet Gheizel. This gap is filled with soft sand and difficult going, including large areas of wind-blown crescent-shaped dunes. The south side of the position is protected by a partly impassible escarpment, more sand dunes and more salt marshes and the rear is entirely covered by the Sebkha el Kebira. These salt marshes would be at their most difficult in this comparatively rainy season. Remoteness was another great strength of the position; to build up sufficient reserves for a proper attack at a distance of a hundred and fifty miles from Benghazi and three hundred from Tobruk was a matter of some time. This had in the past been one of the reasons why Agheila had twice marked the high-water-mark of a British advance into Libya.

On this occasion, however, the enemy was in no position to reinforce his troops at Agheila. The Anglo-American invasion forces in French North Africa had established themselves firmly in Morocco and Algeria and by the time Eighth Army made contact with the Agheila position the vanguards of First Army were within twenty-five miles of Tunis. All available Axis reinforcements had to be rushed to Tunisia, whose retention was judged by the enemy much more valuable than that of Tripolitania, and there were none available for Rommel. He had picked up three divisions on the way back from Alamein; of these the Pistoia and Young Fascists Divisions were inexperienced and 80 Spezia Division had lost a large part of its

* 11 Hussars had been the first British troops to enter Benghazi on its first capture in February, 1941; they were also first into Tripoli in January, 1943, and Tunis in May 1943 (with 1 Derbyshire Yeomanry).