

35. I wish to draw special attention to the work of the small covering force on the Western Frontier of Egypt during the period from the outbreak of war with Italy in June to the middle of September, when the Italian advance halted at Sidi Barrani. For over three months in hard and difficult climatic conditions this force not only held in check an Italian force many times its superior in numbers, but established a definite ascendancy over it, penetrating well into enemy territory, taking the offensive whenever the least opportunity offered, and inflicting very heavy losses at trifling cost to itself. The published Italian casualties in Libya for the period were approximately 3,500, while our total casualties were just over 150. Over 700 prisoners were taken, and a considerable number of guns, tanks and lorries were captured or destroyed.

Major-General M. O'Moore Creagh, M.C., Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, directed these operations with admirable skill and initiative, and was ably seconded by his brigade and regimental commanders. Of the units which took part, the 11th Hussars, the Armoured Car Regiment, was continuously in the front line, and usually behind that of the enemy, during the whole period; its tireless and daring search for information and constant harassing of the enemy showed a spirit and efficiency worthy of the best traditions of this fine regiment. The light tank regiments, first the 7th Hussars, later relieved by the 8th Hussars, showed a similar eagerness to take opportunities and skill to make the most of them, while the 1st and 6th Royal Tank Regiments backed up the light tank regiments most efficiently when required. The batteries of the R.H.A. were handled with great dash and most effectively; they unquestionably made themselves feared by the enemy and inflicted heavy losses on them. The engineer work of the Force was effectively carried out by 2nd Cheshire Field Squadron, which had been borrowed from the 1st Cavalry Division. Finally, the infantry battalions in or attached to the Support Group, the 3rd Coldstream Guards, 1st Battalion K.R.R.C. and the 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade, provided a solid backing of fire power when required, were readily mobile, and gained a complete mastery of the debateable area between themselves and the enemy by active night patrolling.

*Operations in the Sudan. October-November, 1940.*

36. Soon after the arrival of Indian reinforcements in the Sudan I instructed Major-General W. Platt, C.B., D.S.O., to make plans for minor offensive operations as soon as he could do so, and indicated the recapture of the frontier post of Gallabat as a suitable objective. A plan was accordingly prepared by Major-General L. M. Heath, C.B., C.I.E., D.S.O., M.C., commanding the 5th Indian Division, for an operation against the Italian troops in the Gallabat-Metemma area, to be carried out by the 10th Indian Brigade and a squadron of the 6th Royal Tank Regiment, which had been sent to the Sudan early in September when an enemy advance from the Kassala area with armoured fighting vehicles appeared possible.

37. The two frontier posts of Gallabat and Metemma, the former in the Sudan and the latter in Italian East Africa, face one another across a *khôr* (ravine) in a valley about two miles wide. Both posts are on forward slopes

and have behind them higher features. Gallabat had, as already related in para. 19, been occupied by the Italians since July. The Italian troops in the Gallabat-Metemma area consisted, at the time that the attack was planned, of five Colonial Battalions with a battery, a machine-gun battalion, an anti-tank platoon, and a number of irregulars, totalling about 5,300 men.

38. The operation was originally intended to take place on 8th November, but at the end of October information was received of a large convoy from Gondar approaching the Metemma area. Air action was taken to delay the march of this column but was only partially successful. It was therefore decided to advance the date of the attack to 6th November in the hope of forestalling the arrival of the reinforcements.

39. The operation, although it resulted in our retaking Gallabat and inflicting very heavy losses on the enemy, was not as successful as had been hoped owing to certain factors which could not be foreseen.

The first of these was the breakdown, mainly from mechanical causes, of all the tanks except one light tank during the capture of Gallabat. The chief causes of the breakdown were damage to the tracks by the rough ground or by enemy mines. The second factor was a temporary loss of command of the air due to six of our fighter aircraft being shot down in a combat with the enemy.

40. Gallabat was captured early on 6th November by the 3rd Garhwal Rifles and the squadron of the Royal Tank Regiment with few casualties, one enemy colonial battalion being practically destroyed. The further advance on Metemma had, however, to be postponed owing to the breakdown of the tanks. The enemy positions at Metemma were very heavily wired and defended by a large number of machine guns, and without tank support it was considered inadvisable to attempt their capture. The further advance was therefore postponed till the afternoon when it was hoped that some of the tanks would be repaired.

41. During the morning, however, the enemy gained control of the air and developed an extremely heavy bombing attack on our forward troops, the Garhwal Rifles who had captured Gallabat and the 1st Essex Regiment who were in process of relieving them. There was little cover and the ground was too rocky to dig shelter trenches. Both battalions suffered heavy casualties and their morale was temporarily affected. Also the workshop lorry of the Tank squadron was destroyed by a bomb and three fitters were wounded, which greatly hampered the task of repairing the tanks.

42. The Brigade Commander therefore decided that he must cancel the attack on Metemma, and that in view of the enemy's continued command of the air and the target offered by Gallabat it would be necessary to withdraw the somewhat shaken troops from that area.

A withdrawal was therefore made to the high ground west of Gallabat on the evening of 7th November.

43. Gallabat has since been reoccupied as an outpost position, the main position being established on the high ground to the west of it. The enemy fort at Metemma has been practically destroyed and rendered untenable by artillery fire and he has also withdrawn