

22. The shortage of transport was probably the most hampering factor on all operations in the Middle East during the first six months of 1941. I had been informed by the War Office that from January onwards a supply of some 3,000 vehicles a month would arrive in the Middle East from the United States; and I based my plans for the organisation of my troops and operations on the arrival of this transport. In fact, during the first four months, less than half of the amount promised arrived (2,341 in January, 2,094 in February, 725 in March, 705 in April). The consequent shortage hampered operations in Cyrenaica, in Crete, in Iraq, and in Syria. The force sent to Greece was made up to its full complement of transport at the expense of other theatres, and the whole of this transport, some 8,000 vehicles, was lost in the evacuation of Greece.

23. Our covering forces, towards the end of March, on the frontier of Cyrenaica, just east of Agheila, 150 miles south of Benghazi, consisted of the 2nd Armoured Division, less 1st Armoured Brigade Group in Greece. The division comprised an armoured car regiment, the 3rd Armoured Brigade and a portion of the Support Group. The armoured car regiment, the King's Dragoon Guards, were only newly converted from horsed cavalry to this role and had little experience of the desert. The 3rd Armoured Brigade consisted of the 3rd Hussars (light tanks), 5th Royal Tank Regiment (Cruisers), and 6th Royal Tank Regiment, armed with captured Italian tanks. Of the above, 3rd Hussars had had, at the end of March, only 29 light tanks in action out of their establishment of 52, and these were in a poor mechanical state; the 5th Royal Tank Regiment had only 23 cruisers available out of 52, and these had done a very considerable mileage and were in an even poorer mechanical state. 6th Royal Tank Regiment had, on 30th March, only one squadron available, while the second was formed two days later, the day after the enemy attack began. They had had little time to become accustomed to the Italian tanks. Headquarters 2nd Division had only arrived in the forward area in the third week in March and had not had time to settle down; the same applied to the Support Group, which consisted of the 1st Tower Hamlets, the 104th Royal Horse Artillery (25-pdrs.), 3rd Royal Horse Artillery (Anti-Tank Regiment), and one company Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (Machine-gun Regiment). The whole formation was unpractised and required at least another month to find its feet. I had hoped that this period would be available before the enemy attacked. I did not become aware of the dangerously poor mechanical state of the armoured troop till a few days before the enemy attack. The strongest position for defence on the Cyrenaican frontier was west of Agheila, where some salt marshes confined the approaches from the west. I had given orders that this position should be occupied, but owing to the transport shortage mentioned above, it was found impossible to carry out the maintenance of the force if it pushed forward this additional 40 miles.

24. My instructions to General Neame, commanding in Cyrenaica, were that, if attacked, he was to fight a delaying action between his forward position, east of Agheila and Benghazi. I told him that he should not hesitate to give

up ground if necessary as far as Benghazi, and even to evacuate Benghazi if the situation demanded it, but to hold on to the high ground above Benghazi for as long as possible. The 9th Australian Division had only two brigades forward, the third having to remain back at Tobruk owing to shortage of transport. I instructed General Neame to conserve his armoured troops as much as possible, since I could not provide him with any armoured reinforcements before May and without armoured troops his whole position would be compromised. I still believed at this time that no enemy advance in strength was probable for another three or four weeks.

25. Before describing the enemy's counter attack, it may be mentioned that on 21st March the last Italian detachment left in Cyrenaica had been captured. This was the force occupying Jarabub Oasis, which had retreated there in the middle of December after the battle of Sidi Barrani. It originally comprised about 800 Italian and 1,200 native troops. Ever since then it had been merely observed by the divisional cavalry regiment (mechanised) of the 6th Australian Division. I had not the transport available to maintain a larger force at such a distance from the main line of communications and estimated that the exhaustion of its supplies would compel the surrender of the force. Although practically the whole of the native troops had surrendered, the Italian part of the garrison was still in its defences by the middle of March and was being supplied by air. Since the force observing Jarabub was required in Greece I determined to attack and capture the garrison. This was carried out by the 2nd/9th Australian Infantry battalion under Brigadier Wootten, and the Divisional Cavalry Regiment already in front of Jarabub. In face of a skilfully conducted attack the garrison surrendered, putting up a poor fight in spite of its strong defences.

26. On 31st March the enemy counter offensive against our troops in Cyrenaica began. The attacking force consisted of the 5th German Light Armoured Division and two Italian divisions (one armoured, one motorised). It was supported by a considerable air force, the enemy being numerically superior throughout the operations, although they did not make full use of this superiority, largely as a result of the initiative and aggressiveness of our R.A.F. During the first three days the 2nd Armoured Division withdrew slowly northwards, and by the evening of 2nd April was north of Agedabia. The enemy so far had not pressed his advance with much vigour. Our intention was that the armoured force should maintain a position from which they would be on the flank of any enemy advance by the main road to Benghazi and would also block any attempt to turn our positions in Cyrenaica by taking the desert route to Mechili. The Commander of the 2nd Armoured Division had originally intended to counter attack the enemy north of Agedabia if opportunity offered; but on being warned that no tank reinforcements were available and that he should not attack unless a specially favourable opportunity offered, he decided to continue the withdrawal.

27. The 3rd April was the unfortunate day of these operations. It was intended to continue the gradual withdrawal east of and parallel to the Benghazi road, and the force