

battle and not divided by nationalities. The armoured divisions were organised in two main groups, a northern one consisting of 15 Panzer Division and Littorio and a southern consisting of 21 Panzer Division and Ariete; these groups were again subdivided each into three mixed battle groups and disposed at intervals all along the rear of the battle front. This was in accordance with the principles for the use of armour in a defensive battle as practiced on the Russian front: dispersion rather than concentration in order to ensure that no part of the threatened area was unsupported by armour. I imagine that these dispositions were adopted on General Stumme's initiative as they differed widely from Rommel's practice of concentrating his armour. Further to the rear still was 90 Light Division, watching the coast in the area of El Ghazal, halfway between Sidi Abd el Rahman and Daba, and the Trieste Division round Daba itself. The system of command of the reserve, as between Headquarters German Africa Corps and the Italian XX Corps, is obscure but the latter probably had little real responsibility beyond administration. It will be noted that throughout these dispositions German and Italian units were closely mingled in order to stiffen the latter's morale.

It is worth while refuting here a legend which has grown up about the enemy dispositions at Alamein, as it has appeared in almost all accounts of the battle, including some semi-official accounts.* Briefly this story supposes that Rommel had planned a trap for us: he had deliberately weakened his centre, while keeping his left and right strong, in order to lure us into attacking that point; in rear he had concentrated his armour in two blocks north and south of his centre so that when we emerged between them we would be crushed by simultaneous attacks on both flanks. This is completely contrary to the facts. The centre was not weakened, on the contrary it was specially strengthened by the reinforcement of three German parachute battalions. In general the troops available were fairly evenly divided over the whole front, though the northern sector was stronger than the southern as one of the three divisions there was German; on the other hand Folgore, in the southern sector, was the best of the Italian divisions. The field defences were strongest in the north, as that was the vital sector, and diminished gradually in strength towards the south. Finally the armoured force was not disposed in two concentrated groups but split up into battle groups evenly stationed along the whole front. I do not know the origin of this legend—possibly an imaginative journalist with a vague recollection of Miltiades' alleged stratagem at Marathon—but it was of extraordinary rapid growth since it appeared for the first time immediately after the battle.

In face of these enemy dispositions one fact was quite clear about the coming battle; that in its early stages at least it would be primarily an infantry battle. It would be impossible for Eighth Army to use its armour in a broad out-flanking movement because neither of the enemy's flanks was open, nor could the armour break through the thickly developed enemy

defences frontally except at a prohibitive cost. The infantry would have to make the gap to pass the armour through and the strength of the defences was such that the operation of making the gap would involve a battle on the grandest scale. The operation would begin, therefore, like a battle of the 1914-1918 war, with the assault of an entrenched position in depth and it would not be until that battle had been fought and won that we should be able to proceed to the more swift-moving clash of armoured forces which had distinguished the decisive campaigns of this war. Fortunately our infantry was superior both in numbers and, above all, in fighting ability to the Italo-German infantry and with the advantage of the initiative it could be concentrated against any chosen portion of the enemy line in very great superiority. In the attack it could be supported by a massed artillery backed by lavish resources in ammunition. Strong though the enemy defences were I felt confident of our ability to pierce them.

I had carried out a thorough reconnaissance of the whole front in my car and had discussed the plan of attack in all possible aspects with General Montgomery. There were two main lines of approach to the problem: an attack in the south, where the enemy defences were rather weaker, which would develop into one more variation on the classic desert theme of an envelopment of the inland flank, or a straight blow at the north where the defences were stronger but the results of success would be more important. The plan which General Montgomery submitted to me was to make the main thrust in the north, with a secondary attack in the south as a feint to pin down the enemy forces there. This plan was in my judgment much the most promising. It was the easiest for us, since our communications would be shorter and on better ground. More important still was the fact that a penetration here, along the line of the coast road, would force the enemy away from his communications, putting all the forces to the south of the breach in imminent danger of isolation, and would produce an immediate threat to his landing grounds and supply centre at El Daba. The hostile front might be compared to a door, hinged at its northern end; to push at the free end might cause it to swing back some way before any serious damage was done but a successful blow at the hinge would dislocate the whole front and throw the doorway wide open. One of the main features of the plan was the concentration of the greatest possible number of guns of all calibres, under centralised control, against the principal point of attack. The key to the enemy's position in the northern sector was the Miteiriya ridge. This is a long, narrow ridge, called after the cistern of Sanyet el Miteiriya, rising to about a hundred feet above sea level and running parallel to the Tell el Eisa ridge about four miles further south of it. If we could break through between these two ridges and wrest the southern one from the enemy—the northern we already held—we should have a corridor through the enemy's defences protected on either flank by slightly higher ground and the enemy minefield on the other side of the Miteiriya ridge would give us additional protection from an enemy counter-attack in that sector. General Montgomery carried out a long reconnaissance of the Miteiriya ridge from our

* For example the film "Desert Victory" and the War Office pamphlet "The Battle of Egypt"