

6th Australian Division, with 7th R.T.R., was also moving Westwards.

34. The perimeter of Tobruk was 27 miles in length and resembled that of Bardia, except that the anti-tank ditch was at many points not deep enough to be effective. Anti-tank minefields were known to exist. The harbour and installations of Tobruk were well defended with coast defence and anti-aircraft guns.

II. *Plan of Attack on Tobruk.*

35. The following troops were available for the attack:—

7th Armoured Division.

6th Australian Division.

7th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment (consisting now of only 16 tanks).

1st Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (Machine-gun battalion).

1st Battalion Cheshire Regiment (Machine-gun battalion).

Corps Artillery, consisting of two field and one medium regiments, one additional medium battery.

36. As at Bardia, preparations were made to provide a heavy scale of artillery support. Between the 7th and the 19th January, ammunition was brought up and artillery positions prepared. Detailed and continuous reconnaissance of the forward defences and aggressive patrolling against the perimeter at points distant from that selected for the attack were carried out while preparations went forward.

37. The general plan was as follows. 16th Australian Infantry Brigade and infantry tanks were to penetrate the perimeter at a point on its Southern face where the anti-tank ditch was shallow, and where the minefields could be easily removed. The point chosen was midway between the roads Tobruk-Bardia and Tobruk-El Adem, whose junction lay 8,000 yards inside the perimeter at Sidi Mahmoud. Their task was to secure a line some 4,000 yards from the point of entry, which would involve the over-running of all the forward enemy battery positions in this sector. When this line had been secured, 19th Australian Infantry Brigade was to form up within the captured battery area and advance under a barrage to the junction of the two main roads at Sidi Mahmoud. From this point, 19th Brigade would exploit South-West, West and North; while units of the 17th Brigade would assume control of the ground overlooking the declivities towards the sea. 16th Australian Infantry Brigade would then concentrate near the road Tobruk-El Adem. The infantry tanks were to be used solely to reduce the defensive and battery positions in the Southern sector of the perimeter.

The task of the artillery, which amounted to 146 guns and 20 howitzers, was:—

(a) To provide a barrage and flank concentrations for the initial penetration by the leading battalion.

(b) To neutralise hostile batteries on the entry of the infantry tanks.

(c) To provide barrages for the protection of infantry in the later stages of the advance, and a concentration on the Sidi Mahmoud area.

In addition, a proportion of guns was to be engaged throughout on counter-battery rôles.

7th Armoured Division, as at Bardia, was to make demonstrations against the defences from the North and to prevent either reinforcement or escape.

12. *Assault on Tobruk.*

38. The attack was launched at 0530 hours on the 21st January, having been postponed for one day owing to severe sandstorms. 19th Australian Brigade followed the 16th through the gap at 0830 hours. The fire of our artillery was heavy and accurate, and the enemy opposition was not great. Both brigades were established on their objectives by twelve noon with small loss. Armoured carriers of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment reached a point on the edge of the escarpment 3,000 yards above Tobruk early in the afternoon, but were compelled to withdraw owing to accurate fire from the enemy coast defence and anti-aircraft guns at Tobruk. Determined opposition was encountered about Palastrino, a point in the middle of the perimeter 9,000 yards South-West of Tobruk. Elsewhere successful exploitation carried the advance to the edge of the escarpment overlooking the town. And by nightfall the Western and South-Western portion of the perimeter, amounting to about one-third of the whole, was in our hands.

39. Early on the morning of the 22nd, the town was entered without resistance. During the night, fires and explosions had been seen and heard, and it was found that demolitions had been carried out in the harbour and on other installations and stores. Further West, the Free French companies of the Armoured Division had penetrated the perimeter near the sea. No further resistance was offered. The number of prisoners amounted to nearly 30,000, among whom were many specialists and a naval detachment of over 2,000. 236 guns of 75 mm. and over, 87 tanks and much motor transport were also taken, but many of these proved to have been damaged before capture.

40. Co-operation by Royal Air Force and Royal Naval units was excellent and invaluable. For three nights before the battle the Royal Air Force bombed Palastrino, Sidi Mahmoud, the harbour, the road leading up the escarpment out of Tobruk towards Sidi Mahmoud, and other key areas. These areas were also bombed from 0330 to 0600 hours on the first day of the battle, and thereafter at need. The Royal Navy bombarded Palastrino and the road leading out of Tobruk as well as two areas on the North-West of the perimeter near the road Tobruk-Derna on the nights 19th/20th and 20th/21st January. In the course of this bombardment from both air and sea the cruiser *San Giorgio* was sunk in the harbour.

PART III.—FINAL PHASE—INTERCEPTION AND FINAL DESTRUCTION OF ENEMY NORTH OF AGEDABIA, JANUARY 22-FEBRUARY 7.

13. *Preparations for further Advance.*

41. The fall of Tobruk left the remainder of the Italian forces in Cyrenaica in two main detachments. The first comprised the 60th Division, less one Infantry Brigade Group, in position just East of Derna. The second, which consisted of a formation of about 160 tanks, and the remaining Brigade Group of the 60th Division, was in the area Mechili under the command of General Babini. The Northern