

On the 28th May, having made a demonstration towards Acroma, the German tanks dispersed into small parties. The Ariete Division, on its way north to join the rest of the enemy armour, likewise broke up when attacked by the 2nd Armoured Brigade and a battalion of heavy tanks. General Ritchie decided to keep his armour within close inter-supporting distance, so that it should be ready either to deal separately with the small bodies into which the enemy now appeared to be splitting, or to deliver a heavy blow should the enemy again appear in strength.

Having failed to get to the rear of our Gazala positions and consequently to open the coastal road, the enemy had to rely for supplies on using the long and exposed route round Bir Hacheim. He was therefore obliged to act on the defensive, until he could either capture Bir Hacheim or force a passage through our minefield. Being now in need of supplies, the enemy striking force made a general move southwards to meet a maintenance convoy which had been sent to them round Bir Hacheim. While the Royal Air Force played havoc with the supply column, both armoured brigades of the 1st Armoured Division and the 1st Army Tank Brigade hurled themselves on the enemy armour, which fought desperately. The issue of the armoured battle at times lay in the balance and, to weight the scale, at about midday the 4th Armoured Brigade was sent in from the south-east to take the enemy in the flank; but at this moment the wind rose and a sandstorm brought the action to a standstill.

Although his original lightning attack had failed, the enemy nevertheless gained a solid advantage; for, while this battle was in progress, the Trieste Division at last succeeded in clearing paths through the minefield where it is crossed by the Trigh Capuzzo and the Trigh el Abd. The 150th Brigade and the Free French engaged the numerous enemy vehicles passing through with all the fire they could bring to bear, but they were unable to obstruct the gaps completely.

Rommel now concentrated on making his bridgehead secure. On the 30th May his main body was still lying on the scene of the previous day's fighting and gave battle when the armoured brigades and the army tank brigade converged on it again at daybreak; but at about midday there were clear indications that the enemy was shifting westwards. Our armour then strove to interpose itself between the enemy and the paths through the minefield; but he covered his retirement in characteristic fashion with a powerful anti-tank screen which our armour could neither penetrate nor outflank. This screen was established in a wide arc on the high ground astride the Trigh Capuzzo with its southern flank resting on the eastern arm of our own minefield, so that the armoured brigades, which had been operating round Bir Harmat, had to fetch a very wide compass to the north to outflank it. The 1st Army Tank Brigade had been operating further north and was therefore better placed to outflank the enemy, but lacked the speed and mobility with which to cover the eighteen or twenty miles to the northern gap. The whole of our armour was thus powerless to close on the gaps. The multitude of vehicles traversing the minefield

was subjected to heavy artillery fire and intense aerial attack, but many succeeded in getting through.

The Eighth Army's Counter-Attack.

The enemy's intentions were by no means clear at this juncture; but there was no doubt that the time had come for the Eighth Army to counter-attack. The knowledge that the enemy's first plan had gone awry, the destruction of many of his tanks and finally the press of vehicles on the tracks through the minefield pointed to the conclusion that a general withdrawal was in progress. Although this conclusion was incorrect, for it turned out that the enemy was not routed but reorganising, it did not signify, since this was indeed the opportunity for counter-attack.

Plans for seizing the opportunity when it should occur had naturally been made before battle was joined, based on the correct assumption that the first battle would take place astride the Trigh Capuzzo and to the east of our minefields. Having brought the enemy's first onslaught to a standstill, the Eighth Army was to proceed according to its own plan, sending tanks round Bir Hacheim to take the enemy on his southern flank where he was most sensitive.

On the 30th May General Ritchie decided the time had come to put his plan into operation. But he did not think he could safely let his tanks go far afield leaving the bulk of the enemy's armour unwatched, until some definite move on our part had caused the enemy to look to his rear. The 1st South African and 50th Divisions with all the heavy tanks were to attack and secure Tmimi and Afrag. The 5th Indian Division would then pass through and penetrate into the Gebel Akhdar, while our armoured divisions moved towards Mechili, operating against the enemy's southern flank or attacking his armour as opportunity offered.

I had urged General Ritchie to lose no time in developing his counter-attack, and he proposed to begin the operation on the night of the 31st May. But both Corps Commanders asked for twenty-four hours' respite so that they might assemble and prepare their forces. In the course of the day, however, two important facts were discovered which changed the whole complexion of affairs: it became clear that the enemy had no intention of withdrawing, and furthermore that the greater part of his striking force was still lying astride our minefield with a considerable number of tanks in its midst. We could muster about two hundred and twenty medium tanks, and the enemy almost certainly no fewer. Consequently General Ritchie decided that it was necessary first to reduce the main body of the enemy, since they might threaten Tobruk and the Army's rear while the projected offensive was in progress.

Since our medium tank force was at best equal in number to the enemy's and since our tanks themselves were outmatched by his, it seemed that we should have to employ all the infantry tanks as well; and, without tank support, a break-through in the north, where the enemy were strongly entrenched, could not be contemplated. All might have been well, had General Ritchie been able to use the 1st Armoured Brigade, with its hundred and fifty tanks, for counter-attack. But that formation had only recently been reformed and equipped with tanks and was just arriving in Libya when the battle started, and consequently had had