

force held the coast road to Benghazi, while the Southern lay across the track which led there direct across the desert, at the point where it is joined by the only tracks leading Southward through the Jebel Akhdar from the coast.

The dispersal of the enemy in two forces, the strong grounds for belief that no reinforcements had yet reached Cyrenaica, the shortening of our lines of communication by the capture of Tobruk and its harbour, and the additional motor transport and fuel, taken at Tobruk and Bardia, offered the opportunity of a rapid advance on Benghazi and a decisive victory.

42. The enemy's position at Derna was a strong one, unless it were threatened by an advance from Mechili. The first plan considered was to contain him at Derna until the force at Mechili could be attacked and destroyed. The 19th Australian Infantry Brigade was moved forward in motor transport on the 22nd January immediately after the fall of Tobruk, to relieve patrols of 7th Armoured Division who were in contact East of Derna. The bulk of 7th Armoured Division started on the same day towards Mechili and gained contact with the enemy before that place by the evening of the 23rd January.

During the night the 26th-27th January the enemy force at Mechili withdrew North-Westwards towards Slonta, the Armoured Division and the Royal Air Force inflicting loss on him as he went. The flank of the enemy at Derna was thus exposed, and the desert route to Benghazi opened. But 7th Armoured Division was by now reduced to 50 cruiser tanks and 95 light tanks; and our supply situation in the forward area did not yet permit of an advance.

43. I discussed the situation with General O'Connor, and approved a plan for a rapid advance by the Armoured Division and an infantry brigade group South of the Jebel Akhdar by the desert route to cut the road South of Benghazi, while the remainder of the force pressed the enemy along the Northern route. The advance was to be made as soon as the supply situation permitted, which was estimated as the 12th February, by which date also a reinforcement of a fresh unit of cruiser tanks was expected.

44. The 6th Australian Division sent the 17th Australian Infantry Brigade to increase the pressure on Derna while the 16th Australian Infantry Brigade was to join 7th Armoured Division in the Mechili area as soon as depots of supplies were established in that area. 7th Armoured Division was to show activity to the North-West, but to do nothing to attract attention to the desert route South of Mechili.

#### 14. *Interception and Destruction of Enemy.*

45. Early on the 30th January the enemy withdrew from his advanced positions East of Derna whilst still holding his ground on the Wadi Derna. By Monday the 3rd February air reconnaissance proved beyond doubt that the enemy had decided on further withdrawal. Large columns were moving Westward, tanks were being entrained at Barce and general cessation of hostile air activity indicated the abandoning of aerodromes South of Benghazi. It was therefore decided to move, at once across the desert without awaiting completion of force or of supply arrangements. H.Q., 13th Corps, accordingly directed 7th Armoured Division to move on Msus with all available resources,

from where it could operate against either Soluch or Agedabia as required; 6th Australian Division was to press hard against the enemy's rearguard on the Northern route. The R.A.F. was ordered to bomb the railway terminals at Barce and Soluch and the junction at Benghazi, in order to interfere with the move of enemy tanks to what might become a decisive flank.

46. 7th Armoured Division moved from its position about Mechili at first light on the 4th February. The cruiser reinforcements had not arrived and the tank strength of this Division was now the equivalent of one Armoured Brigade. Difficulties were further increased by lack of reconnaissance of the ground between Mechili and Msus, which, for purposes of deception, had been previously forbidden. The first 50 miles was extremely rough going, which reduced the pace and took toll of vehicles, particularly light tanks. West of Bir-el-Gerrari the track improved and the advance was continued in moonlight. By daybreak on the 5th February the Division was just east of Msus, which had been occupied by our armoured cars.

From the administrative aspect the accelerated advance South-Westwards of 7th Armoured Division placed a severe strain on the maintenance organisation since the stocking up of new advanced depots near Mechili had only just begun. The Armoured Division moved with two days' rations, a sufficiency of ammunition and petrol, but the margin was very close.

47. Early on the 5th February Commander, 7th Armoured Division, sent forward two detachments. The Southern (consisting of 11th Hussars (less one squadron), one squadron K.D.G., one battery each 3rd and 4th R.H.A., one anti-tank battery and 2nd Rifle Brigade) was directed straight to the coast via Antelat with orders to cut the main road Benghazi-Tripoli North of Agedabia. Antelat was to be avoided if found to be occupied by the enemy. The 4th Armoured Brigade (7th Hussars and 2nd R.T.R.) was to follow this detachment as soon as possible. The Northern detachment (comprising 1st R.H.A. and 1st K.R.R.C.) was directed on Soluch, via Sceleidima.

At 1700 hours the same day, situation 13th Corps was briefly as follows:—

(a) 6th Australian Division pressing hard on retreating enemy 6th Division along the coast between Derna and Barce.

(b) Northern detachment of 7th Armoured Division closing in on the main road West of Soluch, having overcome enemy resistance at Sceleidima.

(c) 4th Armoured Brigade approaching Beda Fomm.

(d) Southern detachment of 7th Armoured Division established since 1200 hours astride the two main routes South-West of Beda Fomm, with armoured car patrols, both to the North and South.

(e) Remainder 7th Armoured Division in area of Antelat.

(f) Advanced H.Q. 13th Corps moving to, or at, Msus.

On this same evening a retreating enemy column, strength approximately 5,000, mainly artillery, but with a considerable proportion of civilians, and a number of guns, met the