

no training as a brigade. I therefore gave General Ritchie permission to use its units, tanks and personnel to replace casualties in the other three armoured brigades.

As regards tank casualties generally in this battle, our recovery organisation and our arrangements for destroying enemy tanks which had been knocked out were now as efficient as the German. The new organisation worked admirably and displayed none of the shortcomings previously experienced. Moreover, we had many more recovery vehicles than before. Recovery crews worked by night protected by armoured cars, while sapper teams destroyed derelict enemy tanks. Very few of our own tanks other than utter wrecks were left on the battlefield and many enemy tanks were destroyed. Nevertheless on the 1st June our effective strength in tanks relative to the enemy's was such that we must employ them all to reduce the enemy's striking force before passing to our own counter-offensive.

The 150th Brigade at Sidi Muftah was situated already well within the enemy concentrations, and General Ritchie determined to establish two more brigade group positions within the enemy anti-tank screen, so as to provide our artillery with positions from which they could shell enemy concentrations, and our armour with a passage through which to pass to take the enemy in the rear. This operation was to start on the night of the 1st June as a preliminary to a general counter-offensive. Meanwhile the Free French were ordered to capture Segnali, which they found unoccupied.

The situation deteriorated, however, before the operation could begin. Heavy attacks on the 150th Infantry Brigade began early in the afternoon of the 31st May. The 1st Armoured Division and the 1st Army Tank Brigade hastened to its assistance, but the brigade was overpowered before midday on the 1st June after a very gallant resistance. With it went a considerable part of the 1st Army Tank Brigade.

Serious as it was, General Ritchie did not consider that the loss of the position held by the 150th Brigade was so vital as to make it necessary to countermand the whole operation. The 69th Infantry Brigade was to attack from the north with the ridge Sghifet es Sidra as its objective, and the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade from the east from about Bir Harmat. The operation failed completely: the 69th Infantry Brigade was held up short of its objective and the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade could not launch its attack at all, as a raging sandstorm made it impossible to carry out the essential reconnaissances.

I viewed the destruction of the 150th Brigade and the gradual consolidation of the enemy's salient with considerable misgiving. It seemed to me that, if the enemy were to be allowed to continue to occupy a deep wedge in the centre of our minefield, the whole Gazala line and Bir Hacheim in particular would become untenable. Moreover there were unconfirmed reports that the enemy was moving an increasingly large number of tanks into the salient. We appeared to be rapidly losing the initiative we had gained by bringing his first attack to a standstill. I agreed with General Ritchie that he ought neither to split his armoured forces and risk their being defeated in detail, nor order them to try to battle their way through the anti-tank

screen to the east of the enemy concentrations. Therefore some other solution must be found.

I suggested two possible solutions.* The best course, it seemed, would be to launch a counter-offensive directed towards Bir Temrad so as to threaten the enemy's bases, and at the same time to continue to attack his supply lines from the south. The great majority of the enemy tanks appeared to be lying to the east of the minefield; we were consequently unlikely to encounter many in the northern sector. The Eighth Army, on the other hand, had two battalions of infantry tanks belonging to the 32nd Army Tank Brigade practically intact and sufficient artillery to make success fairly certain. In putting forward this suggestion I expressed concern at what appeared to be the undue dispersion of the 5th Indian Division—9th Brigade at Tobruk, 10th Brigade at Bir Harmat, 29th Brigade at El Adem. One infantry division at least, I considered, should be held in reserve to provide a strong striking force.

As an alternative to striking westwards, we might profit by the fact that the Alem Hamza position flanked the enemy's supply route. A powerful blow southwards against the Italian divisions protecting it, whose morale was almost certain to be indifferent, might do the enemy much damage.

Having examined these proposals and a third suggestion General Ritchie decided that he could not carry them out.† It had been his intention to launch a counterstroke in the north, but he believed that our armoured brigades might still be too weak to contain the enemy while it was in progress. This was due to the fact that tank crews were not being assembled as fast as replacements of tanks were being delivered—a fault which was being set right at once. Since the enemy might thus be able to advance on Tobruk or to take the Gazala positions in the rear, General Ritchie had been compelled to discard this idea. Moreover he feared it would be almost impossible to concentrate the 5th Indian Division behind the northern positions without interruption. The idea of striking southwards from Alem Hamza had also been considered. A third course, that of sending the 5th Indian Division in a wide turning movement round Hacheim towards Afrag had also been rejected for the same reason, that the relative weakness of our armour would make it too great a risk.

General Ritchie finally decided that the only practicable course was to use infantry to make a direct assault on the enemy salient. This was to take the form of a pincer movement, the 69th Infantry Brigade attacking from the north, the 9th and 10th Indian Infantry Brigades from the east. The northern arm was to have a limited objective. The main thrust was to be made by the eastern arm: by seizing the ground round Got el Scerab the Indian brigades were to open a corridor through which the 22nd Armoured Brigade could pass behind the enemy and close the gaps. After this operation had been successfully carried out, the Eighth Army was to take the offensive, striking first in the northern sector.

* Letter to General Ritchie, 3rd June 1942—Appendix 17.

† Letter from General Ritchie, 3rd June 1942—Appendix 18.