

Meanwhile the enemy's assaults on Bir Hacheim were renewed. Beginning on the 6th June, the attacks continued and grew in intensity. The Free French resisted valiantly, but on the evening of the 8th June, General Koenig was obliged to report that the situation had become serious. It seemed likely that the stronghold would fall unless the garrison was given support from outside. Moreover the supply situation was becoming critical. General Ritchie was anxious to retain possession of it since, if it were lost, we should have to form a new and extended front facing southwards behind which we might be hemmed in and deprived of our power of manoeuvre. The threat to our rear would be increased, and, while it would be more necessary than ever to attack the enemy's supply lines, to do so from the south would become correspondingly more difficult. I agreed that we must hold the enemy frontally and do everything in our power to deprive him of supplies. Orders were therefore issued for an armoured regimental group from the 4th Armoured Brigade with two columns each from the 7th Motor Brigade and the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade to attack the 90th Light Division in the rear next day. At the same time a convoy was to be passed in, and arrangements were made for aircraft to drop supplies. It was intended that the armoured regimental group should eventually join the forces operating round Mteifel.

On the 8th June, an enemy attack on Bir Hacheim for the first time made some progress, one of our positions being overrun. Next morning the garrison was subjected to intense dive-bombing and shelling. Attacks from the north continued all day, but in the evening the Free French drove the enemy back once more. On the 10th June General Ritchie decided to order the Free French to evacuate Bir Hacheim. Enemy pressure continued from the south and the attacks of the armoured regimental group had not succeeded in relieving it. It was clear, too, that the resistance of the garrison was being worn down. Having been again subjected to heavy bombing from the air, and having again held off a strong enemy attack, the 1st Free French Brigade withdrew during the night escorted by the 7th Armoured Division. Next morning it was reported that at least two thousand men had been safely withdrawn and that many others were coming in.

The Defeat of our Armour.

The enemy's reaction to the evacuation of Bir Hacheim was immediate and determined. By midnight on the 11th June, the 90th Light Division had moved up to an area some nine miles south of El Adem where it leaguered. The 15th Panzer Division, having been engaged with inconclusive results by the 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades, leaguered to the left of the 90th Light Division, with the Trieste Division echeloned in rear, guarding the left flank.

The 29th Indian Infantry Brigade was holding a defensive locality on the ridge south of El Adem, with a detachment thrown out on the northern escarpment where the by-pass road crosses it. The 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades lay immediately to the west of the locality with orders to destroy the enemy armour. Columns of the 7th Motor Brigade and the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade under the 7th Armoured Division were in the south, ready to attack the

enemy's southern and eastern flanks. The 22nd Armoured Brigade remained at Knightsbridge watching the 21st Panzer and Ariete Divisions which had not moved from their positions west of Bir Harmat. All three armoured brigades were under command of the 1st Armoured Division.

The enemy's next move made it seem as if the orders of the 27th May had been issued again. While the 15th Panzer Division protected its western flank, the 90th Light Division attacked the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade at El Adem. This attack was successfully repulsed, but the enemy occupied the landing ground to the north. The 15th Panzer Division then swung north-west to meet the 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades, whose attempts to get to grips in the morning had been frustrated by a characteristic enemy anti-tank screen. The ensuing armoured battle lasted until nightfall, by which time the 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades had been forced back some four miles north of the Batruna ridge. The 90th Light Division took advantage of this to establish a series of defended posts on the ridge.

On the 13th June, after a quiet morning, the 15th Panzer Division returned to the attack, engaging the 2nd and 4th Armoured Brigades. Soon the 21st Panzer Division was thrown in from the west, and the 22nd Armoured Brigade also joined in the battle which took place in the area of Maabus es Rigel and Hagiag er Raml. When evening came, the enemy had gained possession of both these ridges and was consolidating, thus extending the line of posts he had secured on the Batruna ridge.

This battle was the culmination of the armoured fighting which had been going on intermittently since the 27th May. At its conclusion our armour in the Acroma area was reduced to thirty cruiser and twenty infantry tanks, while the enemy was believed to possess at least twice this number. Moreover the Eighth Army had lost the inestimable advantage of being able to recover its damaged tanks from the battlefield.

Withdrawal from Gazala and Investment of Tobruk.

The loss of so considerable a part of our armour called for a complete revision of our plans. The security of the twenty-four mile long southern flank of our position between Gazala and Tobruk depended on a strong armoured backing which no longer existed. It would be only a matter of time before the enemy cut the supply lines of the two forward divisions, and their reserves would last them at best a week. In that short time it would be impossible to restore our armoured strength sufficiently to turn the tables on the enemy. Having obtained my permission, General Ritchie therefore gave orders on the 14th June for the 1st South African and 50th Divisions to be withdrawn from the Gazala—Alem Hamza position into reserve. The 201st Guards Brigade, which had been garrisoning Knightsbridge and whose position had become dangerously exposed, had already been ordered to retire to Acroma the previous night.

The Gazala—Alem Hamza position gave us a tactical advantage I was loth to abandon. Straddling the coastal road, it denied the enemy easy access to his supplies and made reinforcement slower. Besides being of great value so long as we remained on the defensive, it was