

eastern end of a valley where the Trigh Capuzzo and the Tobruk by-pass road run side by side. They would thereby sever the enemy's communications with the west. At the same time the 13th Corps, whose initial task it was to prevent the enemy garrisons of the frontier positions moving east or south, would advance northwards and cut off these positions from the west. Part of the 13th Corps was then to move west to help the 30th Corps.

On the 17/18th November, following a month's intensive preparatory air effort, the advance began, the 30th Corps (7th Armoured Division, 4th Armoured Brigade, 1st South African Division, Guards Brigade) being directed by General Cunningham wide to the south of Sidi Omar towards Bir el Gubi and Tobruk, while the 13th Corps (New Zealand Division, 4th Indian Division, 1st Army Tank Brigade) watched the front and southern flank of the frontier positions.

All went well for the first three days. The enemy was certainly taken by surprise: his forces were actually in process of taking up fresh dispositions for an attack on Tobruk due to take place on the 23rd November. On the 19th what appeared to be the bulk of the German armoured divisions moved south from the coastal area, where they had been lying, and engaged the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades a few miles west of Sidi Omar.

Since the Panzer divisions now seemed to be committed to battle and were reported to be losing a considerable number of tanks, General Cunningham allowed the signal to be given for the Tobruk sorties to begin and for the 13th Corps to start operations. On 21st November, however, our difficulties began. The enemy, as was to be expected, reacted at once to the threat to Sidi Rezegh, and his armoured divisions evaded the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades. The whole of the enemy armour then combined to drive us from this vital area and to prevent help reaching the Support Group and the 7th Armoured Brigade which were isolated there. Neither of these formations was designed to carry out a prolonged defence and it is greatly to their credit that they managed to do so, unaided, throughout the 21st. The 5th South African Infantry Brigade, which was expected to reach the scene before the development of the enemy attack, failed to do so, partly owing to the opposition of the Ariete Armoured Division and partly because of inexperience in handling the very large number of vehicles with which it took the field.

Next day all three armoured brigades joined in the defence of the area. But our tanks and anti-tank guns were no match for the German, although they were fought with great gallantry: and on the evening of the 22nd November the 30th Corps was compelled to retire, having lost two thirds of its tanks and leaving the garrison of Tobruk with a huge salient to defend.

The enemy rounded off his success in spectacular fashion. In a night attack he surprised and completely disorganised the 4th Armoured Brigade whose hundred tanks represented two-thirds of our remaining armoured strength. On the 23rd he practically annihilated the 5th South African Infantry Brigade, one of the only two infantry brigades General Norrie had under command—there was no transport for any more—and then on the 24th with his armoured divisions he made a powerful counterstroke to

the frontier. Before this, it had become quite clear that the first reports had grossly exaggerated enemy tank losses and that he had at least as many tanks as we had and better, and was in a position to recover more from the battlefield which remained in his hands.

This shifting of the balance of strength between the opposing armoured forces produced a most critical situation and led General Cunningham to represent to me that a continuation of our offensive might result in the annihilation of our tank force, and so endanger the safety of Egypt. I visited General Cunningham at his advanced headquarters on the 23rd November and told him to continue to press the offensive against the enemy. He loyally gave effect to these orders; but on my return to Cairo on the 25th, I most reluctantly decided that I must relieve him of his command, as I had come to the conclusion, after long and anxious consideration, that he was unduly influenced by the threat of an enemy counterstroke against his communications. I therefore replaced him on the 26th November by Major-General N. M. Ritchie.

The enemy's counterstroke caused considerable confusion and some loss among headquarters, troops and transport, and enemy tanks penetrated to Halfaya, Sollum and Bardia. The battered 30th Corps could do little, but the 13th Corps proved equal to the occasion, and its stubborn resistance prevented the enemy from doing much serious damage. The enemy suffered heavy losses by air attack during his thrust.

The New Zealand Division (4th and 6th Brigades) had been despatched westwards as soon as the country west of the frontier positions had been occupied. By the 27th November they had recaptured Sidi Rezegh, taken Belhamed on the northern ridge and joined hands with the garrison of Tobruk, who for their part, after holding the salient for five days against numerous counter-attacks, had completed their sortie by taking Ed Duda. By the 28th the whole of this important tactical locality was in our hands.

Finding that the heavy blows sustained by the 30th Corps and his bold counterstroke had not turned us from our purpose, the enemy returned from the frontier to launch violent assaults on our new positions. The Armoured Division had reorganised but was unable either seriously to impede the enemy's return or to intervene effectively when his tanks attacked the New Zealand Division. In spite of the gallantry with which they fought, our armoured troops were worsted in almost every encounter with the enemy tanks, not only because they were comparatively inexperienced, but also because the enemy tanks mounted guns of greater range. Whenever our tanks attempted to take the enemy in the rear, they were confronted by formidable 88 millimetre guns to which we possessed no counterpart.

Like the Support Group a week before, the New Zealand Brigades holding Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed were thin on the ground, the more so as they had incurred heavy casualties in taking the positions. Realising this, General Ritchie ordered the 1st South African Infantry Brigade to join the 13th Corps. This brigade, which was the only one having its own transport and therefore immediately available, suffered, like the 5th South African Infantry