

when I returned to Cairo on the 23rd, I found that the enemy had taken the offensive in the Western Desert.

*The Eighth Army's Withdrawal to Gazala.*

When the enemy went back from Agedabia to the El Agheila positions he was closely followed by our light motorised columns, and planning and preparations began at once for a further offensive to be launched in mid-February.

It was estimated that the enemy losses since the opening of our offensive in November were 36,000 prisoners of war, of which some 10,000 were German, and 24,000 killed and wounded including 11,000 Germans—a total of about 60,000 out of an original strength of about 100,000. Over 200 German and 120 Italian tanks and some 850 aircraft had been captured or destroyed. In addition the enemy had lost two-thirds of his artillery.

Our own losses came to about 18,000 officers and men out of an army of 118,000; and, although our tank losses had been much heavier than the enemy's, we were fortunate in having a fresh armoured brigade in training. Moreover, many of the tanks now out of commission could be repaired, though our recovery and repair organisation would take some time to cope with the volume of work.

The enemy seemed too weak to stage a counter-offensive. But at the same time our own forces in Western Cyrenaica were also weak, as all available transport had to be applied to building up reserves in the forward area without which further advance was impossible. The possibility of the enemy forestalling us was, therefore, by no means ruled out, and plans were made to meet such an eventuality.

We had in Western Cyrenaica the 1st Armoured Division, which had recently relieved the 7th Armoured Division and, being newly arrived from the United Kingdom, was inexperienced in desert fighting. There were also the 201st Guards Motor Brigade and one or two units of the Oases Force. These troops were watching the enemy at El Agheila and reconnoitring for our resumption of the offensive. In addition there were two brigades of the 4th Indian Division round Barce and Bengasi, temporarily immobilised for lack of vehicles.

Should the enemy move forward to upset our preparations for a further advance, the forward troops were to stand on the line Agedabia—El Haseiat until we could launch a counter-attack and drive him back to his original positions.

It seems doubtful whether the enemy, who was certainly weak and in difficulties over his supply problem, launched his counter-stroke with the definite intention of recapturing Cyrenaica. He does not seem to have used more than one hundred tanks throughout and some of these were light tanks. However this may be, he certainly exploited his initial success with great vigour and skill.

Strongly supported by his air force, the enemy took the offensive early on 21st January, moving in three columns, one north of the main road, the others to the south. He pushed back our troops on the northern flank and was consequently able to move rapidly up the main road outstripping our southern columns which were delayed by bad going. The

Support Group, getting into difficulties in the soft sand further south, was overtaken by enemy tanks and lost guns and transport.

By evening the enemy was within thirty miles of Agedabia and Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen, commanding the 13th Corps, realising that the enemy had advanced in force, ordered a withdrawal to the line Agedabia—El Haseiat, giving Major-General Messervy, who was commanding the 1st Armoured Division, discretion to withdraw on Agedabia, Antelat and Msus, should he consider it necessary for the security of his force. The 4th Indian Division (Major-General Tucker) was told to stop any enemy advance on Bengasi along the coastal plain.

On the 22nd the enemy, driving our troops in front of him and using the main road, again outstripped our slower moving columns on the flanks and occupied Agedabia. On the 23rd our armoured troops engaged the enemy round Antelat and Saunnu, but were unable to prevent him occupying these two places the same evening.

The enemy halted on the 24th and plans were made to counter-attack, retake Antelat and Saunnu and keep him to the south of that line. On the 25th, however, the enemy again advanced very rapidly, out-distancing our troops, and took Msus in spite of being engaged all day by the 2nd Armoured and Guards Brigades. The 1st Armoured Division, which had now become very weak was then ordered to withdraw through Charruba on Mechili, leaving a detachment to guard the flank of the 4th Indian Division as it withdrew from Bengasi and Barce through the Gebel Akhdar.

On the 23rd January I returned to Cairo from Haifa, where I had been conferring with Generals Wilson and Quinan, and on the 25th I flew to Tmimi to join General Ritchie at his Headquarters, where I remained until the 1st February.

General Ritchie then took the 4th Indian Division under his direct control and countermanded the 13th Corps' orders for a general withdrawal. I approved of this change of plan as I considered it still possible to make an effort to hold Bengasi and counter-attack.

General Ritchie then ordered a counter-attack to be carried out by the 4th Indian and 1st Armoured Division from the north and west against the enemy concentrations round Msus. Preparations for this were in progress when, on the 27th, the enemy resumed his advance, feinting towards Mechili while making his main effort against the 4th Indian Division round Bengasi. His feint was successful in drawing off our armoured force, and the 4th Indian Division, left without tank support, was ordered to withdraw through the Gebel Akhdar towards Derna, its southern flank being protected by the 1st Armoured Division.

Before the troops holding Bengasi could withdraw, the enemy cut the roads to the north, thus isolating them. With great daring, however, they broke through to the south and the majority eventually succeeded in rejoining the Eighth Army.

Closely followed by the enemy, the remainder of the 4th Indian Division withdrew through the hills fighting a series of rearguard actions. On the 4th February, however, they succeeded in reaching the line at Gazala which the rest of the Eighth Army was fortifying.

I had hoped that General Ritchie would be able to stabilise the position on the line Derna