

north-western Persia the country is mountainous, and therefore unfavourable to the employment of armoured forces. Briefly, my intention was to stop the enemy as far forward as we could by moving light forces rapidly to the River Araxes and covering for as long as possible the landing grounds in northern Persia. The Tenth Army was in any event to prevent the enemy establishing himself south of the general line Pahlevi—Kasvin—Hamadan—Senna—Rowanduz Gorge.

The Persian railway was to be extended from its existing terminus at Khorramshahr to the Shatt-el-Arab opposite Basra, so that the Tenth Army operating in Persia might draw on the main Iraq bases at Basra and Shaiba. Various other improvements in communications were also ordered.

During May we pointed out to the Chiefs of Staff that we could not plan and prepare to fight the enemy in Northern Persia, as we must do if we were to keep his air forces at a sufficient distance from our bases and oil installations at the head of the Gulf, unless we had full facilities to explore and prepare the ground. These facilities the Russians, who controlled this zone, would not give us. Moreover, we had no information of their plans for the defence of the Caucasus. We asked that arrangements be made without delay for us to co-operate with the Russians; but this seemed impossible, owing, apparently, to the Russian High Command's insistence on centralisation and great secrecy. We therefore acted ourselves, and on my instructions General Quinan sent reconnaissance parties into Northern Persia to procure at least some of the essential information. These parties established good relations with the Russians and did their work with little friction.

The preparation of defences and communications in Iraq and Syria went on steadily throughout May, and I was concerned to use as much local and hired labour as I could procure, in addition to all available organised labour units, in order to give the few fighting troops the fullest opportunity for training.

At the end of May the Germans launched their expected offensive in Russia and from that moment the danger, against which we were still so ill-prepared, steadily grew more imminent. Simultaneously Rommel launched an attack in Cyrenaica.

Rommel's Counter-offensive.

The continual reinforcement of the German and Italian army in Libya, which in the absence of heavy bombers and strong naval forces in the Mediterranean we had been unable to prevent, and which had caused our own offensive to be deferred, had progressed so far by the middle of May that it was evident the enemy thought himself strong enough to take the offensive. I was reasonably confident that the Eighth Army was prepared to withstand assault. Although General Ritchie, in close consultation with myself, had been maturing his plans for an early resumption of the offensive, precautions for meeting an enemy attack had not been neglected; and during March, April and early May the defensive system within the quadrilateral formed by Gazala, Tobruk, Bir el Gubi and Bir Hacheim had been steadily developed and strengthened. As the days went by it became more and more certain that our offensive would be forestalled. Accordingly General Ritchie and his two Corps

Commanders put the finishing touches to their arrangements for meeting the attack and for passing at once to the offensive, when it had been repulsed.

In planning to launch our own offensive in mid-June, the fact that we should have only a small margin of superiority over the enemy by land and in the air had occasioned me some anxiety. I was disposed therefore to regard the prospect of fighting the first action on our own prepared ground as likely to counter-balance this disadvantage. To enable General Ritchie to form a reserve of infantry, I arranged to send reinforcements to the Eighth Army, including the 10th Indian Division which I brought across from Iraq. I regretted that I had no more armoured formations which were ready for battle, to send him. Numerically the Eighth Army was superior in tank strength to the enemy; but in quality our tanks were on the whole still inferior to his, notwithstanding the inclusion in our armoured brigades of a number of new American medium tanks. On the other hand, the Eighth Army was now getting a quantity of the new six-pounder anti-tank guns which would neutralise to some extent the marked advantage in this type of weapon the Germans had hitherto enjoyed. It was unfortunate that the troops had not more time to become accustomed to their use.

The enemy appeared to have two courses open to him: one to pass armoured forces round the south of Bir Hacheim and then to strike northwards, and the other to concentrate all his armour and most of his artillery in an attempt to break through our centre. In either event his objective would be Tobruk; and in either event our reaction would be the same, namely, to use our armour to counter-attack the enemy and destroy him east of our minefield belt.* For this purpose our armoured forces, comprising the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions, three armoured brigades altogether, under General Norrie, the Commander of the 30th Corps, were to be held centrally, ready to act in either direction.

As it turned out, the enemy chose to make his main thrust by the southern route and, having concentrated his armoured formations round Segnali, moved them during the night of the 26th May to the east of Bir Hacheim. Early on the 27th he struck rapidly northwards towards Acroma and El Adem. Meanwhile he made an abortive attack on Bir Hacheim and a half-hearted demonstration against our positions between Gazala and Alem Hamza. Though somewhat scattered, the 30th Corps met the enemy's northward thrust, and heavy but indecisive fighting continued all day and resulted in the enemy being held south of a line through Knightsbridge and El Adem.

We learned later from captured documents that the enemy planned to take Tobruk by the 30th May, after destroying our armoured forces and attacking our troops holding the Gazala defences from the rear as well as from the front. The success of this plan depended upon reducing Bir Hacheim or breaching our minefield further north and then inflicting upon our armour a decisive blow. In all of these objects the enemy was thwarted. On the 28th May the enemy moved against Acroma but withdrew, and on the 29th his main armoured force

* Letter to Commander, Eighth Army, 20th May 1942—Appendix 16.