

Division which used its artillery with great effect against them. Throughout the 27th, the 13th Corps were engaged with the enemy round Sidi Hamza, while the 10th Corps engaged enemy forces which had passed the minefields and were moving north-eastwards. Towards evening General Gott found that the enemy had succeeded in interposing themselves between his own and the 10th Corps, and ordered the 13th Corps to withdraw towards Fuka.

I ordered the 10th Corps to conform; but the 10th Corps were short of vehicles owing to the withdrawal of transport to make the New Zealand Division fully mobile for the part it had to play on the southern flank. Before they could get clear of Matruh and Bagush, the enemy had cut the road about twenty miles east of Matruh. The 50th Division and the 10th Indian Division had therefore to fight their way out. This they succeeded in doing during the night of the 28th June, though much ammunition and equipment had to be left behind; and when they reached the El Alamein position, these troops had to be withdrawn to the Delta to reorganise and refit.

The 29th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered by the 13th Corps to hold the passes down the escarpment at Fuka in order to assist the withdrawal of the 10th Corps, but it was overwhelmed just before dark on the 28th June. The 10th Corps, therefore, completed their break-out on the 29th southwards by way of the desert, covered by the 7th Motor Brigade which continued to attack northwards against the flank of the advancing enemy.

The clearing of stores and materials from Matruh and Bagush was reasonably successful and demolitions were effectively carried out. There was however considerable unavoidable congestion on the railway at El Daba, but most of the rolling stock was got away. The success of this arduous work of evacuation was largely due to the efforts of the Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster-General of the Eighth Army, Brigadier Sir Brian Robertson, who refused to be shaken even by the most disconcerting events.

The Occupation of El Alamein.

While this regrouping was going on, the enemy continued to press forward along the coast, and, in spite of the vigorous opposition of the 13th Corps, reached Sidi Abd el Rahman, only fifteen miles west of El Alamein on the evening of the 29th June. On the 30th June I ordered our armoured and motor Brigades, which were still operating far to the west and well behind the line reached by the enemy's advanced elements, to withdraw into reserve.

The 13th Corps took over the southern half of the El Alamein-Qattara Depression line, with what was left of the New Zealand and 5th Indian Divisions, while the 30th Corps, with the 50th and 1st South African divisions, concentrated on the defence of the northern sector and especially of the El Alamein fortifications. Not needing a third corps headquarters on the El Alamein position, I sent General Holmes with his 10th Corps Staff back to command Delta Force which was forming in Egypt to defend Alexandria and the western edge of the Delta.

On the morning of the 1st July the enemy unsuccessfully attacked the 1st South African

Division which was holding the fortifications round El Alamein itself. At the same time he launched an infantry attack with strong artillery support against the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade Group, holding the Deir el Shein defensive locality. This attack was beaten off. But the brigade had just arrived from Iraq and suffered from inexperience and from the difficulties of having to take up a defensive position at very short notice. When a further attack strongly supported by tanks developed late in the afternoon under cover of a dust-storm, which undoubtedly favoured the attackers, the brigade was eventually overrun, after five hours stalwart resistance. Only one infantry battalion survived the attack, but the stand made by the brigade certainly gained valuable time for the organisation of the El Alamein line generally.

Regaining the Tactical Initiative.

Except for the semi-permanent fortifications round El Alamein itself, our positions were still weak, disconnected and lacking in depth. Moreover, there was a serious shortage of troops to hold our extended front, and the defence of the all-important Ruweisat Ridge had had to be entrusted to battle groups, weak in infantry, backed by what remained of our armoured troops. Consequently I decided not to attempt to hold the prepared positions round Bab el Qattara in the centre, and at Naqb Abu Dweis in the extreme south on the edge of the Qattara Depression. In the absence of sufficient armoured troops to support them, I was not prepared to risk their garrisons being isolated and eventually destroyed. I was still very anxious lest a sudden and concentrated attack should break through our defences and repeat what had occurred at Matruh. During the forenoon of 2nd July the enemy appeared to be massing for an attack on the 1st South African Division holding the El Alamein fortress, and I considered it essential to deprive him of the power to deliver a concentrated blow in the north. The best way to do this was to attack him.

I decided, therefore, to regain the tactical initiative by counter-attacking, and ordered the 13th Corps to wheel north with its right flank on our defended locality at Bab el Qattara, and attack the enemy in flank and rear. The 30th Corps meanwhile was to hold its ground in the north and prevent any enemy attempt to advance eastwards. The 13th Corps started its attack on the afternoon of the 2nd July, using the New Zealand Division and what was left of the 5th Indian Division. Close fighting between our infantry and the enemy's took place on the 3rd July, and we took prisoners and guns, besides destroying some enemy tanks. The operations were greatly assisted by the splendid work of our air forces, which carried out over 150 bomber sorties on this day and over 500 fighter sorties.

The New Zealand and 5th Indian Divisions and the 7th Motor Brigade continued their northward thrust on the 4th and 5th of July, occupying El Mreir and approaching our former defensive locality at Deir el Shein. More enemy tanks were destroyed and more prisoners taken. Our air forces continued to support the infantry and to batter enemy concentrations. The enemy, meanwhile, had been hurriedly entrenching his new southern front, and extending