

The immediate cause of the failure of this operation was the delay in getting the tanks forward to support the 69th Brigade, but the fundamental cause was, as before, the lack of enough fresh well-trained troops to keep up the impetus of the attack and to take full advantage of the large concentration of artillery which had been built up in support.

Preparations for a Decisive Attack.

Throughout July the Eighth Army had been continuously attacking and had materially improved its positions, thus paving the way for a major offensive later on. It had effectively prevented any further enemy advance on the Delta, and had taken over 7,000 prisoners, more than a thousand of them German. This effort on the part of troops, most of whom had suffered severe losses in the fighting round Tobruk in June, and had then been seriously disorganised by having to withdraw rapidly for over 300 miles closely pursued by the enemy, speaks well for their morale, discipline and determination.

The Eighth Army casualties in battle during July were about 750 officers and 12,500 men, of whom 4,000 belonged to the New Zealand Division and 3,000 to the 5th Indian Division. The casualties in the action of the 27th July were about 1,300, mostly in the 69th Infantry and 24th Australian Infantry Brigades.

Our attack in the north having failed in spite of the advantage which the possession of the Tel el Eisa salient gave us, I was forced to consider whether the Eighth Army was capable of further effort in view of the growing strength of the enemy positions for defence, and of the continued weakness of our armoured forces. The weakness of the Eighth Army relative to the front which had to be held or closely watched, prevented me from forming a real reserve, in which troops could be rested, re-formed and trained for fresh assaults on the enemy; and there were no more formations in the Delta or further to the east on which I could call. The 44th Division, which had just arrived from the United Kingdom, was training in desert warfare outside Cairo, but could not be expected to be ready before the end of August. The 8th Armoured Division, also fresh from England, was being re-armed with American medium tanks instead of its original Valentines which, mounting only two-pounder guns, were no match for the German tanks. The 10th Armoured Division was still training and equipping and unlikely to be ready for action before mid-September. On the 30th July, therefore, having discussed the situation exhaustively with the two Corps Commanders, Generals Gott and Ramsden, I most reluctantly concluded that no further offensive operations were feasible for the present. We must therefore remain temporarily on the defensive, and recruit our strength for a new and decisive effort, which did not seem possible before the middle of September.

Throughout July I devoted all available resources to constructing defences to give depth to the El Alamein position, and these were now almost complete. The keys to the defensive zone contained in the triangle El Alamein, El Hammam and the Qattara Depression were the three main ridges running east and west. The most northerly followed the coast, that in the centre was the well-known Ruweisat ridge and on our left ran the Alam el Halfa ridge. On these ridges, within field artillery range of each

other, were built a series of strongpoints designed to deny the essential observation points to the enemy and to preserve them for ourselves. These strongpoints were designed to take garrisons of two battalions and a regiment of twenty-five pounder guns. But the majority of the field artillery, with its necessary escort of motorised infantry, and all the armoured forces were to be kept mobile to attack the enemy with fire wherever he might appear, using the strongpoints as pivots of manoeuvre and for observation. The preparation of these defences called for great energy and skilful organisation and both of these qualities were admirably displayed by Brigadier Kisch, Chief Engineer of the Eighth Army.

The essence of the defensive plan was fluidity and mobility and the maximum use of artillery fire. The defensive zone extended for thirty miles behind our forward positions. If the enemy attempted to pass round it towards Burg el Arab, he was to be delayed by our light armoured troops in front and struck in flank by our armoured force and mobile artillery groups.

The so-called Barrel Track leading from Qaret el Himeimat directly to Cairo gave me some anxiety in case the enemy should try to make a rapid advance by this route. The track itself was so difficult, however, owing to the soft deep sand which it traversed for a great part of its length, that I did not consider an enemy advance by that way possible. There was also a bare chance that the enemy might try to effect a diversion by striking at Cairo from Siwa along the southern edge of the Qattara Depression through the Bahariya Oasis. I therefore posted troops of the Sudan Defence Force to watch this route.

In anticipation of the renewal of our offensive, I ordered General Ramsden commanding the 30th Corps to begin planning intensively for a deliberate attack south of the Tel el Eisa salient with a view to making a rapid advance along the coastal road. I considered this operation offered the greatest chances of success, but at the same time I told General Gott to continue to explore the possibilities of breaking through the enemy defences about Gebel Kalakh and the Taqa Plateau to turn his southern flank.

From the 1st August until I handed over direct command of the Eighth Army to Lieutenant-General B. L. Montgomery, contact with the enemy was confined to patrolling and exchanges of artillery fire. Both sides were deeply engaged in extending their positions and in preparing for further operations.

Throughout this first phase of the battle for Egypt, our air forces could not have done more than they did to help and sustain the Eighth Army in its struggle. Their effort was continuous by day and night and the effect on the enemy was tremendous. I am certain that, had it not been for their devoted and exceptional efforts, we should not have been able to stop the enemy on the El Alamein position, and I wish to record my gratitude and that of the whole of the Eighth Army to Air Chief Marshal Tedder, Air Marshal Coningham and the air forces under their command.

On handing over command I addressed this Order of the Day to the Eighth Army:—

“It has been a great honour to have held direct command of the Eighth Army for nearly