

salient they had created, in the face of the heaviest and most determined attacks, contributed greatly to General Ritchie's eventual victory.

The Enemy's Stand at Gazala.

The enemy's withdrawal from the neighbourhood of Tobruk marked the beginning of a third stage in the offensive. Had the Eighth Army been able to launch the attack on El Adem, it was anticipated that future operations would fall into two distinct phases, a short period of attack followed by the clearing of the Tobruk area, and then pursuit. But the enemy's orderly retirement, which the 13th Corps, though well placed, was unable to disrupt owing to lack of reserves, allowed him to extricate the Italian divisions besieging the western face of the fortress without serious casualties, and to develop and occupy a line running south from Gazala in some strength. Defeating the enemy now resolved itself into a matter not of clearing the country round Tobruk and then pursuing the remnants of a shattered army, but of dislodging a beaten but still organised force from an entrenched position resolutely held, and of preventing its escape.

So far, the maintenance of the Army had presented some hard problems, but it had been possible to solve them; henceforward, it became increasingly difficult and began seriously to limit the size of the force that could be kept in contact with the enemy. For the moment there was a short check in the pursuit, as the 30th Corps had outrun its supplies. But the plans had been well laid, and the order had gone out for the first convoy taking stores for the development of the port to sail to Tobruk as soon as the 70th and New Zealand Divisions joined hands at Ed Duda. Work on the port had begun, and there were reserves sufficient to tide the Eighth Army over the period until regular supply by sea could be instituted. There was therefore a minimum of delay in changing the supply base from desert railhead to Tobruk, and our main forces were able to take up the pursuit twenty-four hours after they had called a halt.

General Ritchie had decided to entrust the conduct of the pursuit to the headquarters of the 13th Corps and to send the headquarters of the 30th Corps back to direct operations on the frontier. The chief reasons for this decision were that one headquarters would suffice to control the operations of the limited forces which could be maintained forward; and that the 13th Corps, being already in Tobruk whence the advance was to be supplied, was conveniently placed to assume control at once. Accordingly on the 12th December General Norrie moved back to the frontier, with orders to eliminate the isolated enemy garrisons with the least delay, so that direct road and, eventually, rail communication might be established. This was a matter of considerable importance as it was known that supplies by sea would have to be supplemented from railhead, and the long detour by the desert was absorbing much transport urgently needed for the subsequent stages of the advance. The 1st South African Infantry Brigade was to follow as soon as the 13th Corps could spare it.

Shortly after midday on the 11th the 13th Corps began its advance. The 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade, which General Ritchie had ordered to join the 13th Corps, moved astride the coastal escarpment, its left

flank protected by the 32nd Army Tank Brigade, and masked Gazala where the enemy had developed strong positions. The 4th Indian Division was directed south of Gazala on Tmimi and Bir Halegh el Eleba. The principal task of the 7th Armoured Division (4th Armoured Brigade and 7th Support Group) was to protect the left flank of the Indian Division, but it was also to send columns and armoured cars to raid the enemy communications near Tmimi and to patrol towards Mechili. The movements of the 4th Armoured Brigade continued to be restricted by supply difficulties until the morning of the 13th December. The 22nd Guards Motor Brigade was placed under command of the Armoured Division and held in reserve near Knightsbridge. The 70th Division was left in Tobruk to round up scattered parties of the enemy lurking in the deep coastal *wadis*.

The New Zealand Brigade and the Indian Division came up against the enemy positions on the evening of the 11th December, and by the 12th it was clear that the enemy was firmly established on a defensive line running south-west from Gazala to the Trigh el Abd. A strong well-prepared position straddling the escarpment to the east of the Gazala inlet was occupied in strength by Italians, and another prepared position on the ridge at Alem Hamza was also held by Italians. From Alem Hamza the line ran due south and then turned west along the Trigh el Abd; this sector was not so well prepared or so strongly manned, but the superior fighting qualities of the German defenders and the superiority of German heavy anti-tank guns made it formidable. What remained of the German and Italian armoured formations were held in rear.

The 13th Corps began to attack this line on the 13th December. In the north the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade, which had already captured an important locality on the coast overlooking Gazala, could make no progress. In the centre the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade attempted to capture the Alem Hamza position and was repulsed, but later one battalion occupied a position to the south-west without opposition. The 7th Indian Infantry Brigade were forming up to attack further south when they were themselves attacked by tanks. After a sharp encounter the enemy was beaten off with heavy loss, but no new ground was captured. Meanwhile the Support Group, reinforced by an armoured regiment, succeeded in making the enemy fall back on the southern flank, although the armoured regiment lost one-third of its tanks in an action fought to the rear of the enemy positions.

Realising that practically all that remained of the German and Italian formations were facing the Eighth Army at Gazala, General Ritchie instructed General Godwin-Austen to use his armoured brigade with the utmost boldness to strike a decisive blow. Accordingly the 4th Armoured Brigade, covered by the Support Group, was ordered to move wide round the enemy's southern flank. The 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade and the Polish Brigade Group, which General Godwin-Austen had already drawn into reserve, were then to capture the Gazala position, while the 4th Indian Division, assisted by the 32nd Army Tank Brigade, attacked Alem Hamza.

The combined attack in the north started late, but went well. Only makeshift transport could be provided for the Polish Brigade which was