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## OPERATIONS IN THE WESTERN DESERT FROM DECEMBER 7TH, 1940, TO FEBRUARY 7TH, 1941.

*The following despatch was submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 21st June, 1941, by GENERAL SIR ARCHIBALD P. WAVELL, G.C.B., C.M.G., M.C., Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East.*

PART I.—FIRST PHASE—BATTLE OF SIDI BARRANI—DECEMBER 7 TO 13, 1940.

### 1. *Introductory.*

1. In a former despatch I gave a summary of events in the Middle East Command down to the 15th November, 1940. The present despatch will deal with events in one part of the Middle East only, the Western frontier of Egypt and Cyrenaica, from the 7th December, 1940, when the counter-offensive against the Italian army began, down to the 7th February, the date on which Benghazi surrendered.

2. In the previous despatch the advance of the Italians to Sidi Barrani was described. In accordance with our pre-arranged policy, little opposition had been offered to the enemy's advance, and it was not proposed to oppose him in strength until he reached our prepared defences at Mersa Matruh. It was not, however, intended that the defence should be a passive one. On the 21st September I had issued orders for a counter-stroke to be prepared against the enemy, so soon as he became engaged with the defences of Matruh. I found that General Wilson, Commander of British Troops in Egypt, and General O'Connor, Commanding the Western Desert Force, had already made the preliminary arrangements for such a counter-stroke. During the next month, as our defences and our forces grew in strength, so the plan for the counter-stroke was developed; and a scheme was eventually prepared for striking at the enemy as he approached Matruh. This plan was studied in detail by the commanders

and troops concerned, and all possible arrangements made to put it into effect, if the enemy advanced against Matruh in the manner that we judged most probable.

### 2. *Preparation of Plan of Attack.*

3. About the middle of October, when the enemy had been stationary for a month and there seemed no immediate probability of his further advance, I began to consider the possibility of an early offensive action in spite of our numerical inferiority. The enemy's defensive arrangements seemed to me to be thoroughly faulty. He was spread over a wide front in a series of fortified camps which were not mutually supporting and were separated by wide distances. His defences seemed to lack depth.

On the 20th October I issued a personal note to General Wilson instructing him to consider the possibility of an attack on the enemy forward camps. The plan I directed him to consider was an attack at both ends of the enemy's line, by the 7th Armoured Division reinforced with some mobile infantry battalions against the enemy's right flank on the escarpment near Sofafi, and by the 4th Indian Division, reinforced, if possible, by one additional brigade, against the camps immediately east of Sidi Barrani, near the coast. If the initial attacks were successful, I proposed that the Armoured Division should exploit its success northwards towards the coast and the 4th Indian Division westwards. I stated that the operations would be dependent on all the troops being made mobile and being able to move 30 to 40 miles in a night, so as to cover in two successive nights the distance between our front and the enemy's and to attack on

the morning following the second night march. I suggested that it would probably only be possible to stage an operation lasting four or five days, since that appeared to be the limit for which supply arrangements could be made.

4. Meanwhile, General Wilson and General O'Connor had also been considering plans for an offensive. After discussion with them, it was agreed that there were objections to an attack on the Sofafi group of camps owing to their comparative strength and to the greater distance from our starting base at which they lay. It was decided to make the attack against the enemy's centre, leaving his flanks, on the coast and at Sofafi, to be contained by small forces. I directed that detailed plans and preparations should be put in hand at once.

At this time Mr. Eden, the Secretary of State for War, visited Egypt and was made aware of the plans, to which he gave approval and promised his full support. It was largely this support which enabled us to obtain the air reinforcement on which the success of the plan greatly depended.

The provisional date originally selected was in the last week of November. It soon, however, became obvious that the preparations for the attack, especially the provision of additional transport and the re-equipment of the artillery with 25-pdrs., would not be completed in time. Further, the invasion of Greece by Italy at the end of October brought a demand for support from Greece, and instructions from the War Cabinet to send certain troops from the Middle East to occupy Crete and to assist Greece. It looked at one time as if this might cause the postponement or abandonment of the plan, since it very seriously weakened the air support available and also removed from the Western Desert some anti-aircraft guns, engineers, transport and other troops which it had been intended to employ in the operation. Owing to the intervention of the Secretary of State, reinforcements of aircraft were promised, and it was decided to stage the operation if the air situation made it at all possible. The date was postponed till about the end of the first week in December.

5. In order to maintain secrecy, as few persons as possible were made aware of the plan. Its details were worked out by Generals O'Connor, Creagh (commanding 7th Armoured Division), and Beresford-Peirse (commanding 4th Indian Division). General Wilson and myself visited the Western Desert at frequent intervals and discussed the progress of the plan and the additional troops required in the Western Desert. Practically nothing whatever was put on paper, and not more than a dozen senior commanders and staff officers knew of the plan until shortly before its execution.

6. On the 25th and 26th November a training exercise was held near Matruh, which was, in fact, a rehearsal of the proposed operation. Entrenched camps were marked out on the ground to represent the enemy camps to be attacked, though this was of course known only to the few who were aware of the forthcoming operation. To the troops it was represented as a training exercise in attack on enemy camps, and it was intimated that a further exercise would be held at a date early in December. As a result of this exercise it was possible to make several improvements in the plan of attack,

and General Wilson issued a paper laying down certain methods, which were used in the actual attack and proved to be sound.

7. Co-operation with the Royal Navy was arranged through a naval liaison officer attached to General O'Connor's headquarters, and the air plan was drawn up by Wing Commander Collishaw, commanding the Air Force in the Western Desert. Needless to say, both Royal Navy and Royal Air Force co-operated most whole-heartedly, both in the plans for attack and in maintaining complete secrecy.

### 3. *Enemy's Position and Strength.*

8. The Italian force East of the Egyptian frontier was believed to consist of 6 or 7 divisions (of which two or three were Libyan divisions, two were Blackshirt divisions and two Metropolitan divisions) and an armoured group. The total strength was believed to be about 80,000 (63,000 Italian, 17,000 Libyan), with 250 guns and 120 tanks.

9. These forces were distributed in a series of fortified camps, from the sea East of Sidi Barrani to the escarpment about Sofafi, a distance of about 50 miles, in echelon from the left flank. The camps were usually circular, with an anti-tank obstacle round them and defences consisting for the most part of stone sangars. There was a gap of over 20 miles between the enemy's right flank at Sofafi and the next camp at Nibeiwa. It was through this gap that General O'Connor intended to pass the attacking force. Arrangements were made during the planning stage to prevent the enemy establishing a camp to close this gap.

To the North of Nibeiwa lay the Tummar group of camps, occupied by the 2nd Libyan Division, and to the North-East of these lay the enemy's most advanced camp near the sea coast at Maktila, occupied by the 1st Libyan Division. There were further fortifications round Sidi Barrani, but there did not otherwise seem to be any organised second line of defence.

### 4. *Plan of Attack.*

10. The troops taking part in the attack were:—

7th Armoured Division ...	General Creagh.
4th Indian Division ...	General Beresford-Peirse
16th Infantry Brigade ...	(Brigadier Lomax, attached to the 4th Indian Division.)
7th Battalion R.T.R. ...	(Infantry tanks.)
Matruh Garrison Force ...	(Brigadier Selby—a brigade group made up from the Matruh Garrison.)

Total force consisted of approximately 31,000 men, 120 guns, 275 tanks, of which more than half were light tanks, 50 were infantry tanks and remainder cruisers, and 60 armoured cars.

11. In view of the limited amount of transport available it was necessary to form dumps of ammunition, water and petrol in the desert between our lines at Matruh and those of the enemy. This was successfully accomplished, apparently without attracting the enemy's notice. Several days' supplies for the whole force were actually stored some 20 to 30 miles in advance of our fortified lines, covered only by our advanced patrols.

12. The general plan of attack was as follows:—

The Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division was to observe the group of enemy camps round Sofafi and prevent the enemy from these camps intervening in the battle. The remainder of the Armoured Division and the 4th Indian Division were to pass through the gap between the Sofafi camps and Nibeiwa camp. A brigade of the 4th Indian Division with the 7th Battalion R.T.R. (Infantry tanks) was then to attack Nibeiwa camp from the West, while the Armoured Division covered the attack and prevented any intervention from the enemy to the North.

After the capture of Nibeiwa camp, another brigade of the 4th Indian Division, again supported by 7th R.T.R., was to attack the Tummar groups of camps from the West. It was intended that their capture should conclude the first day's operation. Meanwhile, the Matruh Garrison force was to observe and contain the enemy camp at Maktila.

If the attacks on Nibeiwa and Tummar were successful, it was intended to attack and capture Sidi Barrani on the following day, and thereafter exploit success as far Westward as possible.

13. Although our forces were numerically inferior to those of the enemy, their morale, training and equipment was believed to be sufficiently high to compensate for this. The enemy had so far shown little enterprise or power of manoeuvre.

The plan involved a preliminary movement of some 70 miles for the majority of the troops over open desert. This was to be covered in two marches on successive nights (the whole force being mechanised or motorised), the attack taking place on the early morning following the second night march. It would thus be necessary for the whole force to spend one day in the open desert, within about 30 miles of the enemy, and it was feared that, if the enemy observed this movement, heavy air attacks would be made by his numerically superior air force. This risk, however, had to be taken, and it was hoped to counter it by concealment and dispersion and by the protection of our fighter aircraft and anti-aircraft guns. In fact, the enemy made no attack whatever.

#### 5. *The Battle of Sidi Barrani.*

14. Operations began on the night of the 7th/8th December, during which the whole force moved forward over the desert. The movement was made without difficulty, owing to good training and discipline, and the troops reached their appointed positions up to time.

During the 8th December the force remained in the desert, expecting attack by the enemy air force which never took place. Next night the force moved forward again and took up its positions for the next day's attack. This movement also was made without a hitch.

15. The attack on Nibeiwa was begun at 0700 hours on the 9th December by 11th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Savory—consisting of 2nd Cameron Highlanders, 1/6th Rajputana Rifles and 4/7th Rajput Regiment) and the 7th battalion R.T.R. The enemy force holding this camp was believed to consist of some 3,000 men with a considerable number of

guns and tanks, under General Maletti. During a short bombardment the 7th R.T.R. moved forward and entered the perimeter at 0735 hours. They soon destroyed the enemy tanks and then met an extremely hot fire from artillery and weapons of all descriptions. This the heavy armour of the Infantry tanks resisted, to the surprise and demoralisation of the enemy. The leading infantry battalion, 2nd Cameron Highlanders, advanced in M.T. behind the tanks to within 700 yards of the perimeter, where they debussed and entered the camp. By 0830 hours the camp was completely in our hands. General Maletti was killed.

16. At 0830 hours the Commander of the 4th Indian Division ordered the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Lloyd—consisting of 1st Royal Fusiliers, 3/1st Punjab Regiment and 4/6th Rajputana Rifles) to move to the West of the Tummar camps in readiness for an attack on them. The 16th British Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Lomax—consisting of 2nd Queens, 2nd Leicesters and 1st Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders) was moved up to a position just west of Nibeiwa. The artillery and 7th R.T.R., having refilled at Nibeiwa, also moved into position for the attacks on Tummar camps. The third brigade of the Indian Division, the 7th Brigade, was held in reserve. It took charge of prisoners and protected the line of communications, but took no part in the actual fighting.

At 1330 hours the artillery concentration on the Tummar camps began and at 1350 hours the 7th R.T.R., now reduced to 22 tanks, entered Tummar West from the North. The leading infantry, 1st Royal Fusiliers, followed in lorries 20 minutes after the tanks, and debussed within 500 yards of the camp. Events inside the camp followed much the same sequence as at Nibeiwa, except that there were few enemy tanks in this camp. After the occupation of Tummar West the Commander 4th Indian Division ordered an attack to be launched against Tummar East. Just as the advance began with the 7th R.T.R. leading, followed by one battalion, 4/6th Rajputana Rifles, an enemy counter-attack was met but quickly repulsed. By dark the greater part of Tummar East was in our hands.

17. At 1615 hours, in view of the successful progress of operations, the Commander of the 4th Indian Division ordered the 16th Infantry Brigade to push forward as far as possible before darkness towards Sidi Barrani. Two regiments of artillery were to join the brigade during the night, while the 7th R.T.R. were to refit as far as possible and be ready for operations next day.

18. Meanwhile 7th Armoured Division had successfully fulfilled its rôle of protecting the left flank of the 4th Indian Division and cutting the Sidi Barrani-Buq Buq road. By 1000 hours 4th Armoured Brigade, moving West of the enemy camps, had got astride the Sidi Barrani-Buq Buq road. The 7th Armoured Brigade remained in reserve. During this advance the 4th Armoured Brigade captured a number of prisoners and vehicles and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy.

19. At dawn on the 10th December the 16th Infantry Brigade advanced in lorries towards Sidi Barrani with the object of getting astride the roads leading Westwards and cutting off the

Italian forces. The 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was moved up from Nibeiwa to near the Tummar camps, while the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade completed the occupation of Tummar East.

At about 0730 hours the right battalion of the 16th Brigade; 2nd Battalion Leicester Regiment, engaged a defended Italian camp and captured it, after a short fight, with about 2,000 prisoners of the 4th Blackshirt Division. Meanwhile the remainder of the 16th Infantry Brigade continued their advance in a violent dust storm. They suffered some casualties from enemy fire but continued to push on, and were assisted by the arrival of some 10 tanks of the 7th R.T.R. which over-ran some enemy guns. The 11th Indian Infantry Brigade moved up on the right flank of the 16th Brigade.

20. At about 1330 hours the Commander of the 4th Indian Division was at 16th Infantry Brigade Headquarters and ordered an attack on Sidi Barrani, placing part of 11th Indian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier Lomax. This attack was launched at 1615 hours by the 2nd Queen's on the right and 2nd Cameron Highlanders on the left, supported by artillery fire, some tanks of the 7th R.T.R., and by an attack by 2nd R.T.R. (cruiser tanks) North of the Sidi-Barrani-Buq Buq road. The attack was completely successful, and Sidi Barrani was in our hands when darkness fell, many prisoners and guns being captured.

21. The force organised from Matruh Garrison had advanced towards Maktila camp and established itself two miles East of Maktila by the evening of the 8th December. This force was a composite one, in which the 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards was the only complete unit. Detachments of Royal Artillery, 7th Hussars (light tanks), 1st Durham Light Infantry, 1st South Staffords, machine gunners from 1st Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and 1st Cheshires, as well as a number of dummy tanks, made up the balance. It remained in observation of Maktila camp until the afternoon of the 9th December, when, learning that Nibeiwa had been captured, Brigadier Selby gave orders to move forward and endeavour to prevent the withdrawal Westwards of the 1st Libyan Division. Owing to the comparative weakness of the force and difficult going, it was unable to prevent the withdrawal of the enemy towards Sidi Barrani, but pursued them with all possible speed on the 10th December.

The situation at nightfall on the 10th December was that Sidi Barrani had been captured and the 2nd Libyan and 4th Blackshirt Divisions destroyed. East of Barrani, however, the 1st Libyan Division from Maktila was still of some fighting value, and an enemy camp at Point 90 had not been attacked and remained intact.

22. On the evening of the 10th December General O'Connor issued instructions to the Armoured Division to send a force early the following day to prevent any enemy withdrawal from the Sofafi area; to send another force to Buq Buq to deal with any enemy in that direction; and in the event of further retreat to pursue the enemy towards Halfaya, Sidi Omar and Sollum.

#### 6. *Exploitation after Sidi Barrani.*

23. I had always intended if possible to send the 4th Indian Division to reinforce the

Sudan during the winter 1940/41, in order to enable our forces in the Sudan to recapture Kassala and to take the offensive against the enemy. I had proposed to relieve them in the Western Desert by the 6th Australian Division as soon as this was ready and equipped. For several reasons, the principal of which was the availability of shipping, I had to decide while the battle of Sidi Barrani was still in progress whether or not to carry out this relief. There was an opportunity to do so after the operations of the 11th December and the capture of Sidi Barrani, since the supply organisation would only permit of a very limited force being used for further pursuit of the enemy. I decided therefore to withdraw the 4th Indian Division and to replace it by the 6th Australian Division as soon as this could be brought forward. The 16th Infantry Brigade, which had been attached to the 4th Indian Division, remained in the forward area available for pursuit.

I should have liked also to employ the New Zealand Brigade Group which had been in the forward area for some time and was available, but the New Zealand Division itself was not complete, one brigade being in the United Kingdom, and I knew that it was the wish of the New Zealand Government that the division should be employed as a whole if possible.

24. From the 11th December onwards the operations consisted of a pursuit by 7th Armoured Division, followed up by 16th Infantry Brigade.

The 7th Armoured Division advanced at first in two main groups, the 7th Armoured Brigade North of the escarpment towards Sollum and the 4th Armoured Brigade South of the escarpment towards Halfaya, Sidi Omar and Capuzzo. On the afternoon of the 11th December 7th Armoured Brigade made contact with a long enemy column between Buq Buq and Sollum. It promptly attacked and by dusk had secured 14,000 prisoners, 68 guns and much other material. By the 15th December all enemy troops had been driven out of Egypt, and the 7th Armoured Division had concentrated South-West of Bardia. The 4th Armoured Brigade now cut the Bardia-Tobruk road while the Support Group engaged the Western and South-Western defences of Bardia. Meanwhile, the 16th Infantry Brigade moved up to the South-East face of the Bardia perimeter, to cover our use of Sollum harbour. The greater part of the Italian army remaining in Cyrenaica had withdrawn within the defences of Bardia, which was now isolated. It was decided to capture Bardia with the 6th Australian Division as soon as ready, while 7th Armoured Division protected their left flank and prevented any movement along the Bardia-Tobruk road.

25. This ended the first phase of the operation, which may be called the Battle of Sidi Barrani. It had resulted in the destruction of the greater part of five enemy divisions. Over 38,000 prisoners, 400 guns, some 50 tanks and much other war material had been captured. Our own casualties were only 133 killed, 387 wounded and 8 missing.

26. This outstanding success may be attributed to—

(a) Good co-operation between the three Services;

(b) Effect of surprise;

(c) Fine leadership and fighting qualities displayed by all personnel.

Our equipment, in particular the Infantry Tanks, Cruiser Tanks and 25-pounders, proved to be excellent.

**PART II.—SECOND PHASE—OPERATIONS FROM BARDIA TO TOBRUK—DECEMBER 15, 1940, TO JANUARY 21, 1941.**

**7. Bardia—Enemy Position and Strength.**

27. The enemy forces within the perimeter of Bardia comprised the greater part of four infantry divisions, together with guns and tanks. Some of these formations had taken part in the later stages of the fighting after the capture of Sidi Barrani.

28. The defences of Bardia, apart from coastal and anti-aircraft defences, consisted of a perimeter seventeen miles in extent, lying mainly on a level plain South-West of the escarpment. The perimeter itself consisted of concrete posts at intervals of some seven hundred yards, containing machine guns and anti-tank guns, each post being wired and having an anti-tank ditch. Five hundred yards behind the first line was a second but less elaborate line of support posts. Outside the whole ran a continuous anti-tank trench and wire obstacle. Only at the Southern end of the perimeter was there an additional switch line, three to four thousands yards from the outer line.

**8. Plan of Attack on Bardia.**

29. The troops available for the attack were:—

7th Armoured Division: Major-General Creagh.

6th Australian Division: Major-General Mackay.

16th Infantry Brigade.

7th Battalion R.T.R.: Now reduced to 26 tanks.

1st Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers: Machine-gun battalion.

Corps Artillery: Consisting of one field and one medium regiment.

Two squadrons of the Australian Divisional Cavalry Regiment had been diverted to observe Jarabub, to which a considerable enemy force had withdrawn. The rôle of 7th Armoured Division was to prevent the enemy reinforcing from or escaping to the North, and the assaulting troops therefore consisted of approximately 20,000 men, 122 guns and 26 tanks.

30. The diminished resources of infantry tanks necessitated a bold employment of infantry both in the assault and in the exploitation. This demanded a high expenditure of ammunition for their protection. The period of sixteen days between the arrival of the first infantry outside Bardia and the launching of the attack was occupied mainly in bringing up large additional supplies of ammunition from railhead at Mersa Matruh. The harbour of Sollum, which the enemy withdrawal behind the defences of Bardia had put at our disposal, was used for this purpose, and its possession greatly facilitated the task.

31. The following was the general plan:—

One infantry battalion, of the 16th Australian Brigade, closely followed by engineers, was to attack at dawn at a point due West of Bardia, where the anti-tank

ditch and the wire nearly coincided. Covered by a heavy artillery concentration, the battalion was to seize and hold a bridge-head while the engineers filled in the anti-tank ditch at five separate points. This achieved, tanks and infantry were to enter the perimeter and sweep South-Eastwards on a wide front as far as the road Bardia-Capuzzo and the edge of the escarpment overlooking Bardia. Thereafter units of the 17th Australian Brigade were to break into the perimeter South of the original point of entry, and, driving still further to the South-East, contain the enemy forces manning the strongest positions at the Southern end. The attack would then be exploited East and North-East to Bardia.

While these operations were in progress demonstrations were to be made against parts of the perimeter remote from the real attack; on the North by 7th Armoured Division, and on the South by those units of 17th Australian Brigade not taking part in the attack. The area North of the road Bardia-Tobruk was to be subjected to heavy bombardment both from the sea and from the air.

**9. The Assault on Bardia.**

32. By the 27th December, the 16th and 17th Australian Brigades were in position opposite the defences, and on New Year's Day the 19th Australian Brigade also arrived. On the 3rd January, at 0530 hours, the attack began. The 2/1st Battalion Australian Infantry successfully established the bridge-head, and the engineers had completed their task within 50 minutes. 16th and 17th Australian Brigades (Brigadiers Allen and Savage) captured their objectives with small loss, in spite of a counter-attack by enemy tanks. At 1745 hours on 4th January tanks and infantry entered Bardia; and on the 5th the defenders of the South-Eastern sector surrendered. 45,000 prisoners and 462 guns, of which 216 were field guns, were taken—117 light and 12 medium tanks were also captured.

**10. Tobruk.—Enemy Position and Strength.**

33. With the loss of Bardia, the Italian forces remaining in Cyrenaica were:—

(a) At Tobruk:—

61st Sirte Infantry Division.

Headquarters and Corps troops of XXII Corps.

Coast Defence and Anti-Aircraft units of Tobruk garrison.

Remnants of the divisions from the forward areas.

(b) Further West—

60th Infantry Division.

(c) About Mechili—

Nucleus of armoured formation under General Babini.

Even before Bardia fell I had decided that an attack on Tobruk was justified on both operational and administrative grounds. By the 6th January, 7th Armoured Division had cut the roads Tobruk-Derna and Tobruk-Mechili, and was in contact with the perimeter and with enemy troops East of Derna and Mechili, causing the enemy to abandon the aerodromes at Gazala, Tmimi and Bomba. By the 7th January, 19th Australian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Robertson) was in position facing the Eastern defences, and the remainder of

6th Australian Division, with 7th R.T.R., was also moving Westwards.

34. The perimeter of Tobruk was 27 miles in length and resembled that of Bardia, except that the anti-tank ditch was at many points not deep enough to be effective. Anti-tank minefields were known to exist. The harbour and installations of Tobruk were well defended with coast defence and anti-aircraft guns.

#### II. Plan of Attack on Tobruk.

35. The following troops were available for the attack:—

7th Armoured Division.

6th Australian Division.

7th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment (consisting now of only 16 tanks).

1st Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (Machine-gun battalion).

1st Battalion Cheshire Regiment (Machine-gun battalion).

Corps Artillery, consisting of two field and one medium regiments, one additional medium battery.

36. As at Bardia, preparations were made to provide a heavy scale of artillery support. Between the 7th and the 19th January, ammunition was brought up and artillery positions prepared. Detailed and continuous reconnaissance of the forward defences and aggressive patrolling against the perimeter at points distant from that selected for the attack were carried out while preparations went forward.

37. The general plan was as follows. 16th Australian Infantry Brigade and infantry tanks were to penetrate the perimeter at a point on its Southern face where the anti-tank ditch was shallow, and where the minefields could be easily removed. The point chosen was midway between the roads Tobruk-Bardia and Tobruk-El Adem, whose junction lay 8,000 yards inside the perimeter at Sidi Mahmoud. Their task was to secure a line some 4,000 yards from the point of entry, which would involve the over-running of all the forward enemy battery positions in this sector. When this line had been secured, 19th Australian Infantry Brigade was to form up within the captured battery area and advance under a barrage to the junction of the two main roads at Sidi Mahmoud. From this point, 19th Brigade would exploit South-West, West and North; while units of the 17th Brigade would assume control of the ground overlooking the declivities towards the sea. 16th Australian Infantry Brigade would then concentrate near the road Tobruk-El Adem. The infantry tanks were to be used solely to reduce the defensive and battery positions in the Southern sector of the perimeter.

The task of the artillery, which amounted to 146 guns and 20 howitzers, was:—

(a) To provide a barrage and flank concentrations for the initial penetration by the leading battalion.

(b) To neutralise hostile batteries on the entry of the infantry tanks.

(c) To provide barrages for the protection of infantry in the later stages of the advance, and a concentration on the Sidi Mahmoud area.

In addition, a proportion of guns was to be engaged throughout on counter-battery rôles.

7th Armoured Division, as at Bardia, was to make demonstrations against the defences from the North and to prevent either reinforcement or escape.

#### 12. Assault on Tobruk.

38. The attack was launched at 0530 hours on the 21st January, having been postponed for one day owing to severe sandstorms. 19th Australian Brigade followed the 16th through the gap at 0830 hours. The fire of our artillery was heavy and accurate, and the enemy opposition was not great. Both brigades were established on their objectives by twelve noon with small loss. Armoured carriers of the Divisional Cavalry Regiment reached a point on the edge of the escarpment 3,000 yards above Tobruk early in the afternoon, but were compelled to withdraw owing to accurate fire from the enemy coast defence and anti-aircraft guns at Tobruk. Determined opposition was encountered about Palastrino, a point in the middle of the perimeter 9,000 yards South-West of Tobruk. Elsewhere successful exploitation carried the advance to the edge of the escarpment overlooking the town. And by nightfall the Western and South-Western portion of the perimeter, amounting to about one-third of the whole, was in our hands.

39. Early on the morning of the 22nd, the town was entered without resistance. During the night, fires and explosions had been seen and heard, and it was found that demolitions had been carried out in the harbour and on other installations and stores. Further West, the Free French companies of the Armoured Division had penetrated the perimeter near the sea. No further resistance was offered. The number of prisoners amounted to nearly 30,000, among whom were many specialists and a naval detachment of over 2,000. 236 guns of 75 mm. and over, 87 tanks and much motor transport were also taken, but many of these proved to have been damaged before capture.

40. Co-operation by Royal Air Force and Royal Naval units was excellent and invaluable. For three nights before the battle the Royal Air Force bombed Palastrino, Sidi Mahmoud, the harbour, the road leading up the escarpment out of Tobruk towards Sidi Mahmoud, and other key areas. These areas were also bombed from 0330 to 0600 hours on the first day of the battle, and thereafter as need. The Royal Navy bombarded Palastrino and the road leading out of Tobruk as well as two areas on the North-West of the perimeter near the road Tobruk-Derna on the nights 19th/20th and 20th/21st January. In the course of this bombardment from both air and sea the cruiser *San Giorgio* was sunk in the harbour.

#### PART III.—FINAL PHASE—INTERCEPTION AND FINAL DESTRUCTION OF ENEMY NORTH OF AGEDABIA, JANUARY 22-FEBRUARY 7.

##### 13. Preparations for further Advance.

41. The fall of Tobruk left the remainder of the Italian forces in Cyrenaica in two main detachments. The first comprised the 60th Division, less one Infantry Brigade Group, in position just East of Derna. The second, which consisted of a formation of about 160 tanks, and the remaining Brigade Group of the 60th Division, was in the area Mechili under the command of General Babini. The Northern



force held the coast road to Benghazi, while the Southern lay across the track which led there direct across the desert, at the point where it is joined by the only tracks leading Southward through the Jebel Akhdar from the coast.

The dispersal of the enemy in two forces, the strong grounds for belief that no reinforcements had yet reached Cyrenaica, the shortening of our lines of communication by the capture of Tobruk and its harbour, and the additional motor transport and fuel, taken at Tobruk and Bardia, offered the opportunity of a rapid advance on Benghazi and a decisive victory.

42. The enemy's position at Derna was a strong one, unless it were threatened by an advance from Mechili. The first plan considered was to contain him at Derna until the force at Mechili could be attacked and destroyed. The 19th Australian Infantry Brigade was moved forward in motor transport on the 22nd January immediately after the fall of Tobruk, to relieve patrols of 7th Armoured Division who were in contact East of Derna. The bulk of 7th Armoured Division started on the same day towards Mechili and gained contact with the enemy before that place by the evening of the 23rd January.

During the night the 26th-27th January the enemy force at Mechili withdrew North-Westwards towards Slonta, the Armoured Division and the Royal Air Force inflicting loss on him as he went. The flank of the enemy at Derna was thus exposed, and the desert route to Benghazi opened. But 7th Armoured Division was by now reduced to 50 cruiser tanks and 95 light tanks; and our supply situation in the forward area did not yet permit of an advance.

43. I discussed the situation with General O'Connor, and approved a plan for a rapid advance by the Armoured Division and an infantry brigade group South of the Jebel Akhdar by the desert route to cut the road South of Benghazi, while the remainder of the force pressed the enemy along the Northern route. The advance was to be made as soon as the supply situation permitted, which was estimated as the 12th February, by which date also a reinforcement of a fresh unit of cruiser tanks was expected.

44. The 6th Australian Division sent the 17th Australian Infantry Brigade to increase the pressure on Derna while the 16th Australian Infantry Brigade was to join 7th Armoured Division in the Mechili area as soon as depots of supplies were established in that area. 7th Armoured Division was to show activity to the North-West, but to do nothing to attract attention to the desert route South of Mechili.

#### 14. *Interception and Destruction of Enemy.*

45. Early on the 30th January the enemy withdrew from his advanced positions East of Derna whilst still holding his ground on the Wadi Derna. By Monday the 3rd February air reconnaissance proved beyond doubt that the enemy had decided on further withdrawal. Large columns were moving Westward, tanks were being entrained at Barce and general cessation of hostile air activity indicated the abandoning of aerodromes South of Benghazi. It was therefore decided to move, at once across the desert without awaiting completion of force or of supply arrangements. H.Q., 13th Corps, accordingly directed 7th Armoured Division to move on Msus with all available resources,

from where it could operate against either Soluch or Agedabia as required; 6th Australian Division was to press hard against the enemy's rearguard on the Northern route. The R.A.F. was ordered to bomb the railway terminals at Barce and Soluch and the junction at Benghazi, in order to interfere with the move of enemy tanks to what might become a decisive flank.

46. 7th Armoured Division moved from its position about Mechili at first light on the 4th February. The cruiser reinforcements had not arrived and the tank strength of this Division was now the equivalent of one Armoured Brigade. Difficulties were further increased by lack of reconnaissance of the ground between Mechili and Msus, which, for purposes of deception, had been previously forbidden. The first 50 miles was extremely rough going, which reduced the pace and took toll of vehicles, particularly light tanks. West of Bir-el-Gerrari the track improved and the advance was continued in moonlight. By daybreak on the 5th February the Division was just east of Msus, which had been occupied by our armoured cars.

From the administrative aspect the accelerated advance South-Westwards of 7th Armoured Division placed a severe strain on the maintenance organisation since the stocking up of new advanced depots near Mechili had only just begun. The Armoured Division moved with two days' rations, a sufficiency of ammunition and petrol, but the margin was very close.

47. Early on the 5th February Commander, 7th Armoured Division, sent forward two detachments. The Southern (consisting of 11th Hussars (less one squadron), one squadron K.D.G., one battery each 3rd and 4th R.H.A., one anti-tank battery and 2nd Rifle Brigade) was directed straight to the coast via Antelat with orders to cut the main road Benghazi-Tripoli North of Agedabia. Antelat was to be avoided if found to be occupied by the enemy. The 4th Armoured Brigade (7th Hussars and 2nd R.T.R.) was to follow this detachment as soon as possible. The Northern detachment (comprising 1st R.H.A. and 1st K.R.R.C.) was directed on Soluch, via Sceleidima.

At 1700 hours the same day, situation 13th Corps was briefly as follows:—

(a) 6th Australian Division pressing hard on retreating enemy 6th Division along the coast between Derna and Barce.

(b) Northern detachment of 7th Armoured Division closing in on the main road West of Soluch, having overcome enemy resistance at Sceleidima.

(c) 4th Armoured Brigade approaching Beda Fomm.

(d) Southern detachment of 7th Armoured Division established since 1200 hours astride the two main routes South-West of Beda Fomm, with armoured car patrols, both to the North and South.

(e) Remainder 7th Armoured Division in area of Antelat.

(f) Advanced H.Q. 13th Corps moving to, or at, Msus.

On this same evening a retreating enemy column, strength approximately 5,000, mainly artillery, but with a considerable proportion of civilians, and a number of guns, met the

Southern detachment block and, completely surprised, surrendered. Meanwhile to the North a further enemy column was surrounded and captured by 4th Armoured Brigade.

48. From an early hour on the 6th February the enemy main columns began to appear, and severe fighting occurred throughout the day as successive enemy groups, including a large number of tanks, attempted unsuccessfully to break through the 4th Armoured Brigade, later reinforced by 7th Armoured Brigade (1st R.T.R.) as more and more enemy tanks continued to appear—84 were put out of action during the day's fighting. By nightfall the situation was unchanged. The enemy's position was desperate, with a confused mass of vehicles almost 20 miles in length pinned to the roads between our Armoured Brigades in the South and the Northern detachment in the Soluch area, now beginning to turn South-West. Certain enemy groups had, however, managed to evade the 4th Armoured Brigade by moving through the sand dune area between the main road and the sea. One group in particular, consisting of tanks strongly supported by infantry, repeatedly attacked the Southern detachment, now reinforced by a third R.H.A. battery, during the night 6th/7th February and early morning 7th February. In all nine attacks were delivered against 2nd Rifle Brigade, and although on one occasion tanks penetrated to the Reserve Company areas, all were repulsed. These enemy attacks were pressed home with considerable vigour, but lacked co-ordination. 1st R.T.R. (7th Armoured Brigade) had been put under command of the Southern detachment early on the 7th February, but did not arrive in time to take part in this fight.

Shortly after dawn on the 7th February a final attempt was made by 30 enemy tanks to break through. When this, too, failed, General Berganzoli surrendered unconditionally.

49. Previously, on the 6th February, the Corps Commander had by wireless directed 6th Australian Division to send a detachment, made mobile from divisional resources, along the coast road to Ghemines, in order to complete the encirclement of the enemy. This detachment, comprising the equivalent of a Brigade Group, pressed on with great resolution and received the surrender of Benghazi, but did not reach Ghemines until about noon on the 7th February, by which time all fighting had ceased.

50. The surrender completed the destruction of the Italian Tenth Army, whose commander, General Tellera, was killed during the action. Enemy losses in this final phase were approximately 20,000 personnel, of whom the large majority were captured, 120 tanks and 190 guns.

#### PART IV.—SUMMARY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

51. During the two months from the 7th December to the 7th February, the Army of the Nile had advanced 500 miles. They had beaten and destroyed an Italian army of four Corps comprising nine divisions and part of a tenth, and had captured 130,000 prisoners, 400 tanks and 1,290 guns, besides vast quantities of other war material.

In these operations we never employed a larger force than two divisions, of which one was armoured. Actually three divisions took part, since the 6th Australian Division relieved

the 4th Indian Division after the Sidi Barrani battle. The 7th Armoured Division took part in the operations throughout, at the end of which it was practically reduced to a skeleton.

Our casualties were extremely light and amounted to 500 killed, 1,373 wounded, 55 missing only.

52. The outstanding success of these operations was very largely due to the most capable commanders of the formations engaged: Lieut.-General Sir Maitland Wilson, G.O.C.-in-C. Egypt; Lieut.-General R. N. O'Connor, commanding Western Desert Corps; Major-General M. O'M. Creagh, commanding 7th Armoured Division; Major-General N. M. Beresford-Peirse, commanding 4th Indian Division; and Major-General I. G. Mackay, commanding 6th Australian Division.

53. All combatant troops engaged displayed high fighting qualities and resolute skill in manoeuvre. The 7th Armoured Division, during three months' continuous fighting in the van of the battle, showed great tactical efficiency and powers of endurance; the untiring work of the technical personnel which enabled so many vehicles to be kept in action for so long a period was admirable.

Special mention must be made of one unit, the 11th Hussars. As the only armoured car regiment in the force it was continually in the Western Desert for a period of about nine months, from the entry of Italy into the war till the fall of Benghazi. During this period it always supplied the most advanced elements in close contact with the enemy. Seldom can a unit have had a more prolonged spell of work in the front line or performed it with greater skill and boldness.

7th Royal Tank Regiment, equipped with infantry tanks, assaulted five strongly defended positions (Nibeiba, Tummar, Sidi Barrani, Bardia, Tobruk) in a little over one month, and advanced more than 200 miles during this period. The resolution shown in these assaults and the technical skill and hard work by which so many tanks were kept in action over so long a range deserve great credit.

The Royal Engineer units and Royal Corps of Signals did much hard and admirable work.

54. The work of the ancillary corps, Royal Army Service Corps, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, Royal Army Medical Corps, Pioneer Corps, deserves all praise. Conditions in the desert were difficult and onerous. Drivers of lorries or ambulances had to cover long distances over bad tracks, sometimes in dust storms; mechanics in the field and at the Base worked long hours on repair and maintenance; pioneers unloaded stores under air bombing or artillery fire.

55. The Army owes much to the Royal Navy, under Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, for its support through the operation, both in pre-arranged bombardments of enemy positions previous to the attacks on Sidi Barrani, Bardia and Tobruk, and in answering emergency calls during the actual attacks. The effect of these accurate bombardments on enemy morale alone was very considerable, and did much to simplify the task of the Army. Lastly, the maintenance problems in this quick-moving operation over a distance of 500 miles would have been insurmountable without the Navy's assistance in keeping open the sea supply lines and



opening up of Sollum, Bardia and Tobruk, thereby shortening the L. of C. and releasing Motor Transport for the vital task of stocking up successive Field Supply Depots.

56. During the operations the Royal Air Force, under the able direction of Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Longmore, obtained and maintained, in spite of inferior numbers, complete superiority over the Italian air force. They thereby contributed greatly to the successes won

by enabling our ground forces to move freely, with little interference or loss from enemy air attack. They also provided accurate information of enemy movements, and on many occasions inflicted considerable loss on his forces. The Army owes a special debt to Air Commodore R. Collishaw, commanding air forces in the Western Desert, for his whole-hearted co-operation and for the energy and optimism which were an inspiration to all.

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