

the railhead was handling 2,000 tons daily. As many as 3,400 tons were unloaded in a single day; this was a remarkable feat and reflects much credit on the East African Labour Group working under Lieutenant-Colonel P. Matthews. On the 3rd April work began on the extension of the railway to Belhamed. Road construction was tackled with much energy, and in particular the roads up the escarpment at Sollum and through the Halfaya Pass were greatly improved.

The provision of adequate water was, as always, a difficulty, although the unusually heavy rains which had filled the desert *birs* eased the problem somewhat. The general water ration was three quarters of a gallon a day a head and for each vehicle while stationary, and one and a quarter gallons when on the move. To maintain even this scanty ration it was necessary to draw on the reserves of water stored at Tobruk which could be replenished only by sea. Only a limited number of tank vessels was available, and some of them were sunk by the enemy. The sources at Buq Buq and Bardia were developed and linked, and reservoirs were constructed to supply the defensive positions on the frontier. Shortage of materials, however, prevented us from undertaking the extension of the pipeline from Mischeifa. The old Italian bulk oil storage tanks in Tobruk were repaired and connected by pipeline to a wreck in the harbour whence petrol could be pumped direct from tankers. A canning plant was erected at Tobruk. The rations issued to the Eighth Army were on the full field service scale and of excellent quality, while canteen stores were also available.

The arrangements for the recovery, repair and delivery of tanks and armoured cars were completely reorganised. A tank delivery regiment, a corps tank delivery squadron and brigade tank delivery troops were created and manned. Many more tank transporters arrived during these three months and the system generally was greatly improved and worked smoothly and efficiently in the subsequent fighting.

The original date set for the completion of these preparations was the 15th May; but this was altered later to the 1st June, when it was estimated the Belhamed base and railhead would be ready. The general administrative arrangements, however, to sustain our own offensive or to meet an enemy attack were completed by the 15th May. The Belhamed railhead was opened eleven days later, but was only used for delivering tanks. By the 15th May it was evident that the enemy would in all probability anticipate our offensive and arrangements to cope with a possible withdrawal to the frontier were put in hand as a precautionary measure.

Preliminary Operations.

While both the enemy and ourselves were occupied with preparing for the coming conflict, the Eighth Army was by no means inactive, although there were no major engagements to record.

At first after the position had been stabilised at Gazala, the enemy kept his distance, holding back his main forces in the neighbourhood of Martuba and Msus, covered by outposts on the general line of Tmimi, Bir Temrad and Mechili. Our mobile columns were most active during

this period and harassed the enemy unremittingly, causing him inconvenience and loss. Then, as his supply position became easier, Rommel gradually concentrated his troops forward, using Italian formations to cover his front and keeping the German divisions in rear.

At the beginning of March I gave instructions for the Eighth Army to create a diversion while a convoy sailed to Malta from the east.* General Ritchie arranged for widespread raids to be made deep into the enemy's lines. On the night of 20th March the Long Range Desert Group carried out raids on the landing grounds at Barce, Benina and Bengasi. Meanwhile parties from the 1st South African and 50th Divisions sabotaged enemy material on the landing grounds at Tmimi and Martuba. The next day the 13th Corps sent three columns each from these same divisions to threaten the Tmimi and Martuba landing grounds, while the 1st Armoured Division covered their left flank. At the same time a column from the 1st Free French Brigade moved against an enemy position further south at Bir Hamarin. These operations were successful in diverting a considerable part of the enemy's air forces during the passage of the convoy; some loss was inflicted on the enemy and he was caused to evacuate his forward landing grounds for the time being.

Thereafter the enemy steadily closed up on our positions, occupying and fortifying Segnali, Bir Temrad, Sidi Breghisc and other points. On the 12th April General Ritchie carried out an operation against the Segnali area in connection with his plans for the offensive. The object of this operation was to deceive the enemy and to test his reactions to an advance in force in this direction. Another operation, but further to the south, was carried out early in May with the same object.

Expectation of Enemy Attack.

By the 10th May it was clear that an enemy attack was impending and it seemed almost certain that our own offensive would be anticipated. I considered that this might very well provide the opportunity we had been seeking. The chief disadvantage in our plan for an offensive, namely that we might have to weaken unduly the forces holding the Gazala position before we succeeded in inducing the enemy's armour to attack us, might well be eliminated. Provided we could throw back his initial thrust with heavy loss, we might be able to turn at once to the offensive with the odds heavily in our favour.

A document which contained the enemy's plan for his projected assault on Tobruk in November, 1941, had been captured, and it revealed that Rommel considered the capture of Tobruk to be an essential preliminary to an advance on Egypt. Now that our supply bases were sited in and about Tobruk, it seemed certain his first blow would be aimed at Tobruk. General Ritchie informed his two Corps Commanders accordingly and made all preparations to meet the expected attack and to turn it to our advantage.

Two courses seemed to be open to the enemy. He might try to smash his way through the minefields by the direct route to Tobruk astride the Trigh Capuzzo, or attempt to turn the whole of our position by directing his main effort to the south of Bir Hacheim and then northwards

* G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. 116, 8th March 1942—Appendix II.