

his communications with the 13th Corps had broken down, General Ritchie well knew that its situation was critical and ordered the brigade to move forward when he heard that it had halted. It broke leaguer at night and moved on. By the evening of the 29th, Point 175 was in sight when Brigadier Pienaar found that his rendezvous was strongly held by the enemy. The wireless set of a South African armoured car which had reached General Freyberg's headquarters broke down at the crucial moment, and Brigadier Pienaar postponed further advance until daylight when he could see what was happening. By midday on the 30th November wireless touch with the New Zealand Division was restored, and General Norrie, who had stayed with the South Africans, arranged with General Freyberg for them to attack Point 175 from the east. The advance proceeded slowly and there was a long pause when the brigade reached the escarpment east of Point 175. Finally a moonlight attack was staged. But the position was strong and well supported by tanks, so that at dawn on the 1st December the South Africans were still 3,000 yards short of their objective, and spent the whole day attempting to take the position.

Belhamed fell early on the 1st December before a heavy attack launched by enemy tanks and infantry from Sidi Rezegh. The 4th Armoured Brigade rushed from its leaguer some miles south of Point 175, but arrived in time only to cover the retirement of the New Zealand Division to Zafraan.

As the New Zealand Division had had extremely heavy casualties and was now in danger of becoming entirely cut off, General Norrie gave the order for them to withdraw. Having repulsed further attacks on Zafraan during the day, they withdrew during the night with the survivors of the 1st Army Tank Brigade, the partner of their successes, and reached the frontier in the early hours of the 2nd December, exhausted but in good heart. At the same time the 1st South African Infantry Brigade was ordered to abandon the attempt to recapture Point 175. During the night they retired southwards to Taieb el Essem, leaving a rearguard to mask Point 175 until the New Zealanders had passed in safety.

Tobruk was once more isolated, with a greater commitment than before and smaller resources. The length of front to be held had been increased from twenty-seven miles to forty-four. Two New Zealand battalions had been cut off from their division on Ed Duda, but this hardly offset the heavy losses the garrison had suffered. The tank strength was now only twenty runners. It is not to be wondered at that the Corps Commander should have asked leave, if need be, to withdraw to the original perimeter. General Ritchie gave his permission, but pointed out that the garrison would make a valuable contribution to the success of the offensive if they could hold the salient. It reflects high credit on the garrison that the Fortress Commander could decline the idea and that they, far from yielding any ground, were ready within a short time to carry out a further advance.

Preparations for Attacking El Adem.

Judging that the issue of the battle for Tobruk still lay in the balance and wishing to be at hand in case a decision should be required of

me as Commander-in-Chief, on the 1st December I flew to join General Ritchie at his advanced headquarters near Maddalena. I remained there for the next ten days, but naturally left the direction of the Eighth Army entirely in General Ritchie's hands.

General Ritchie was already making plans for restoring the momentum of the offensive, undeterred by the loss of the positions which the New Zealand Division so gallantly won and defended, or by the renewed isolation of Tobruk. On the day I arrived he visited by air the headquarters of the 13th Corps in Tobruk, and also the headquarters of the 30th Corps to concert his plans. It was his firm conviction—and I agreed with him—that the enemy was hard pressed and would be defeated if we continued to give him no rest.

The Eighth Army itself had sustained heavy blows and was in need of reinforcement. I had already given instructions for an armoured car regiment from Syria and the 150th Infantry Brigade from Cyprus to move to the Western Desert, and I formed three hitherto unbrigaded Indian battalions into the 38th Indian Infantry Brigade and sent it forward to guard the Eighth Army's rearward communications. The convoy bringing the 1st Armoured Division from the United Kingdom had just arrived, and I arranged for the divisional armoured car regiment to join the Eighth Army at once. The remainder of the division was to move forward by regiments and undergo intensive training just east of the frontier under command of the Eighth Army.

By regrouping his forces General Ritchie was able to release fresh troops. He had already drawn the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade into reserve near Maddalena and furnished it with transport, and he now arranged for the 2nd South African Division to relieve the other two brigades of the 4th Indian Division.

The new organisation of the Eighth Army was as follows:—

30th Corps. (Lieutenant-General Norrie.)

7th Armoured Division.

4th Armoured Brigade.

7th Support Group.

4th Indian Division.

1st South African Infantry Brigade Group.

Five armoured car regiments.

13th Corps. (Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austin.)

70th Division.

32nd Army Tank Brigade.

Polish Carpathian Brigade Group.

Polish Carpathian Cavalry.

18th and 19th New Zealand Infantry Battalions.

2/13th Australian Infantry Battalion.

11th Czechoslovak Battalion.

2nd South African Division. (Major-General de Villiers.)

3rd South African Infantry Brigade Group.

6th South African Infantry Brigade Group.

5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade Group (attached).

1st Army Tank Brigade (attached).

Rear Area.

New Zealand Division

(4th and 6th Brigades).

38th Indian Infantry Brigade.

5th South African Infantry Brigade.