

our troops from Belhamed which enabled the enemy to complete the isolation of Tobruk. On the 18th June, the enemy pushed forward to Gambut and thus denied us the use of forward landing grounds in that neighbourhood, a most serious matter since it then became practically impossible for fighter aircraft to operate in support of the Tobruk garrison.

Early on the 20th, having cleared the arena, the enemy turned on Tobruk. The attack, which was directed against the eastern face of the perimeter and supported by a heavy concentration of artillery and dive-bombers, rapidly penetrated the defences. Exact and reliable accounts of the fighting are still unobtainable. Gallant but isolated counter-attacks were made by our troops. The infantry tanks which formed the principal reserve of the fortress appeared to have been defeated in detail at an early stage of the battle. Thereafter the enemy tanks pressed on deep into the fortress, overwhelming the best part of the artillery and infantry of two brigades, and reached the harbour the same evening.

On hearing that the attack was taking place, General Ritchie ordered General Norrie to relieve the pressure on Tobruk with the 7th Armoured Division, and the 7th Motor Brigade reached an area some 20 miles south of the perimeter that evening. By that time the whole of the eastern part of the fortress was in enemy hands, and General Klopper asked General Ritchie's permission to break out. Permission was accorded, but an hour later General Klopper said that it would be impossible as the greater part of his transport had been cut off in the harbour area. Early on the 21st June, General Klopper reported that all his transport had been captured, and that organised resistance was breaking down. Orders to destroy arms and equipment were circulated to the garrison. In spite of this, however, a number of troops fought on gallantly for a considerable time, and some broke out and rejoined the Eighth Army.

The precipitate and wholly unexpected collapse of Tobruk denied us the respite we so much needed to re-create our armoured force. Owing to our inferiority in armour, we could not hope to hold the frontier positions for long against the full weight of the enemy's attack. There seemed to be no alternative but to fall back on Matruh where there was a position already partially prepared for defence. The best we could hope to do was to impose the maximum delay on the enemy to give us time to strengthen the Matruh defences and build up a sufficiently powerful tank force with which to meet him.

The consequences of withdrawing to Matruh were undoubtedly grave. The Delta, with its ports and base installations, would be exposed to heavier aerial attack. It would become impossible for us to run a convoy to Malta from the east on the one hand, and on the other the enemy would find it easier to supply his forces in North Africa. Moreover, internal trouble might break out in Egypt and the proximity of the enemy to our main bases would make it hard to release forces for our Northern Front, where the danger was daily drawing nearer. Yet, if these consequences were not accepted, even worse might befall. The Middle East Defence Committee approved my proposal to withdraw to Matruh and informed the Defence Committee in London accordingly.

The War Cabinet approved our proposals generally but urged that a more determined stand should be made on the frontier, assuring us that every effort would be made to divert to the Middle East material then on the sea. Nevertheless the Middle East Defence Committee were obliged to reply that to stand on the frontier without the requisite armoured force would be to risk piecemeal destruction. We could only reiterate our intention of imposing the maximum delay on the enemy and of preparing to give battle round Matruh.

The enemy rapidly reorganised his army after the fall of Tobruk and pressed on towards the frontier. By the 23rd his forward troops were in touch with ours in front of Sollum, and he was obviously preparing to advance in strength to the south of Sidi Omar. But his forward troops were successfully held back for the time being by our mobile columns. The withdrawal of our infantry from the frontier positions, covered by our motorised forces, began on the 22nd June and proceeded without interruption from the enemy.

On the 24th June I telegraphed to the Prime Minister, giving him my view of the situation and explaining my future plans. I assured him that it was my firm intention to resume the offensive, immediately our armoured forces were strong enough to make this possible with a reasonable chance of success, and that plans for reorganising our forces to make them better fitted for their task were well advanced. At the same time, I informed him that I did not think it safe further to denude the Ninth and Tenth Armies of troops, as in the whole of this huge area there remained only two and one-third infantry divisions, besides some allied contingents not yet fully trained or equipped.

The enemy began his advance into Egypt on the 24th, striking north-east from Sheferzen towards Halfaya and eastward from Maddalena. He moved very rapidly and our rearguards fell back before him, until by evening they were level with Sidi Barrani. On the 25th he continued his advance in the face of damaging air attacks and his main bodies came within forty miles of Matruh.

Meanwhile, our depleted infantry divisions, under the 10th Corps Headquarters (Lieutenant-General Holmes) which had recently come from Syria, were taking up positions round Matruh and hastily extending the minefields. The 13th Corps (Lieutenant-General Gott), which had the 1st Armoured Division and was being reinforced by the New Zealand Division, was watching the southern flank. Lieutenant-General Norrie with his 30th Corps Headquarters was organising the defence of the El Alamein position, and had under his command the 1st South African Division and such other troops as could be collected.

I decided on the 25th June that the position of the Eighth Army was so critical and the danger to Egypt so great, that I must assume command myself. I took this step with great reluctance as I knew well that one man could not carry out the duties of Commander-in-Chief and Commander of the Eighth Army with full efficiency. Moreover I had grave doubts as to the wisdom of changing commanders at so critical a time.

I appointed my Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General T. W. Corbett, to be my deputy at General Headquarters in Cairo, and instructed him to deal with all matters, except