

Egyptian frontier; but our small force continued to dominate the situation and to inflict considerable casualties.

30. During the remainder of July operations continued on the same lines. The enemy continued to suffer heavy casualties but gradually moved forward his camps and established a force of at least four divisions within easy reach of the Egyptian frontier. During this period the 8th Hussars relieved the 7th Hussars, who went back for a rest, and H.Q. of the 7th Armoured Brigade relieved H.Q. 4th Armoured Brigade. All vehicles were beginning to show considerable signs of wear, and replacement was difficult owing to the distance from railhead and the almost entire absence of spares in Egypt for the armoured fighting vehicles. For this reason about the end of July I gave instructions that track vehicles should be withdrawn from the frontier for overhaul and refit, as I was afraid that otherwise when the enemy advanced our armoured fighting vehicles would be very largely out of action. Of 306 tanks on the War Establishment 200 were normally available with units, the remainder being under repair in workshops. There was no reserve of tanks to meet war wastage.

31. After the withdrawal of the Armoured Brigade the frontier was held by a force under the command of the Support Group of the Armoured Division, consisting of the 3rd Coldstream Guards from the Matruh garrison, the 1st K.R.R.C., 2nd Rifle Brigade, 11th Hussars, one squadron 1st Royal Tank Regiment and two batteries of Royal Horse Artillery (one of anti-tank guns, one of 18-25 pdrs.). A section of the 7th Medium Regiment was also brought forward to harass the enemy. This small force was distributed over a front of some 60 miles from Sollum to Fort Maddalena. The troops continued the same policy of active patrolling, but the enemy's numbers were now very much increased, his artillery was numerous and active and the opportunities for effective action were fewer. Nevertheless this small force continued to inflict heavy casualties on the enemy with practically no loss to itself, and to hold in check a force of four or five divisions for a further six weeks. A skilful use was made of dummy tanks to deceive the enemy.

32. By 10th September it became obvious that an enemy advance across the frontier was imminent. All preparations had already been made for the withdrawal of our frontier force and the first stage of this was now put into execution. On 13th September the enemy advance began, a large force being deployed under heavy artillery preparation against the escarpment above Sollum, which had for some time past been held only by a platoon and had by now been evacuated. At the same time another enemy column advanced on the Halfaya Pass down the escarpment towards Sollum. Both these columns were engaged by our artillery, which inflicted considerable losses on them.

It had been uncertain whether the enemy would make his main advance along the coast road, or would attempt a wide movement south of the escarpment. There is some reason to believe that the latter may have been the enemy's original intention, but in the event his advance was made on a narrow front along

the coast road with two divisions in the front line and two in support, and one more and a Mobile Force (Maletti Group) in close reserve. He was supported by a numerous artillery and by about 200 light and medium tanks.

The part of our covering force which was north of the escarpment and on which this attack fell consisted of the 3rd Coldstream Guards, one battery 3rd Royal Horse Artillery and one section of the 7th Medium Regiment. It was subsequently supported by a detachment of the 1st K.R.R.C. and a company of the French battalion.* The remainder of our covering force was south of the escarpment to provide against an enemy movement from that flank. The 1st Royal Tank Regiment, which was south of the escarpment, was moved to the northern flank when the direction of the enemy advance became evident, but for various reasons arrived too late to take any part in the actions during the withdrawal.

33. For four days, from 13th September to 16th September, our small force withdrew along the coast road from Sollum to the east of Sidi Barrani. The enemy reached Sidi Barrani, which is merely a collection of a few houses and a landing ground, on 16th September and there halted.

Although the enemy had large numbers of medium and light tanks with his forward troops and the leading infantry was in M.T., his advance was slow and unenterprising. He made little attempt to use his immensely superior numbers or his mobility to outflank and overwhelm our small force. His artillery was boldly used, even in front of the leading infantry, but their fire, though reasonably accurate, was ineffective. His tanks were mainly used for the protection of the infantry columns, and only on one occasion, on 16th September, was any attempt made to use them to outflank our troops; and even on this occasion their timidity and hesitation lost them an opportunity.

34. The withdrawal of our small force was effected with admirable skill, and there is no doubt whatever that very serious losses were inflicted on the enemy, both by the artillery, which was boldly and effectively handled, and, whenever opportunity offered, by machine gun and small arms fire. Our own losses were under 50 men and a small number of vehicles.

The greatest possible credit is due to Brigadier W. H. E. Gott, M.C., commanding the Support Group, and to Lieut.-Colonel J. C. Campbell, M.C., commanding the Artillery, for the cool and efficient way in which this withdrawal was carried out, also to the troops for their endurance and tactical skill.

Since their advance to Sidi Barrani the enemy has remained practically stationary for the last two months. Small mobile columns formed from the 7th Armoured Division have continually engaged and harassed the enemy in the same manner as on the frontier and with similar success. The enemy has, in the same way as on the frontier, placed his troops in a number of defended camps with all round perimeters, from Maktila on the coast, 10 to 15 miles east of Sidi Barrani, to Sofafi on the escarpment southwest of Sidi Barrani. He is undoubtedly suffering considerable administrative difficulties and it is at present uncertain whether he will continue his advance.

* See Appendix B.