

part to the retention of air superiority by the R.A.F.

I now had to decide whether to try to hold Tobruk or not. I had made it quite clear to all concerned that, in the event of the enemy returning to the offensive in Cyrenaica after his defeat in December, 1941, I had no intention of allowing forces under my command to be again besieged in Tobruk.* This continued to be my policy throughout the subsequent fighting. But, unless Tobruk was fully stocked and equipped as an advanced base of supply, it was not possible for us to consider seizing the initiative from the enemy and resuming our offensive against Tripolitania, which always remained my object. It was to protect Tobruk, therefore, that I had ordered General Ritchie to stand fast on the Gazala—Bir Hacheim position. The railway had been extended to Belhamed and much effort had been expended in equipping Tobruk as an advanced base, and our preparations for the offensive were practically complete.

When the enemy, by building up his tank strength more quickly than we could, was able to anticipate our intended offensive, I hoped that, having defeated his armoured forces, we might still be able to make an offensive on the lines we had been planning since the enemy was first checked at Gazala in February. The initial course of the battle, which began on the 27th May, gave me no cause to give up hope of turning to the attack when the enemy's strength should have been spent.

The destruction of an infantry brigade group on the 1st June and of two infantry brigades and four regiments of artillery four days later, the withdrawal from Bir Hacheim, and, finally, the heavy losses of tanks we incurred on the 13th June undoubtedly reduced considerably our chances of making an early change to the offensive. But there was no reason to suppose that, for all the vigour he was displaying, the enemy had not also suffered heavily. When we had reduced our commitments by evacuating Gazala, it seemed to me we should have sufficient forces to man Tobruk and the principal tactical localities to the south and south-east of it as well as the frontier positions, all of which had been prepared for defence. By preventing the enemy from establishing himself to the east of Tobruk, which it still seemed possible to do, we should not only deny him landing grounds further to the east than those he had been using, but also gain time to build up a force with which to strike back. A small armoured force was still in being to assist in the task, besides numerous armoured cars and two motor brigades; workshops were turning out repaired tanks at a satisfactory pace, and the New Zealand Division, which I had ordered down from Syria, was due shortly. The losses we had sustained, considerable though they might have been, did not appear so serious as to make it imperative to abandon the fruits of the previous success, and thus leave Malta to surrender and Egypt to be invaded.

Consequently, when I agreed to General Ritchie's withdrawal of the two divisions from Gazala, I ordered him to stop the enemy on a line through Acroma, El Adem, and then southwards, and not to allow Tobruk to be invested. General Ritchie believed he could fight on the

western and southern faces of the Tobruk perimeter, El Adem and to the south. But he did not think it essential to hold Acroma, and considered that our defence south of Tobruk must be ensured by a mobile force with a maximum quota of artillery, since isolated strong-points would be liable to be overwhelmed in detail owing to the weakness of our armoured forces. It might take time to organise the artillery of the 1st South African and 50th Divisions for employment in a mobile role, and in the interval General Ritchie visualised a situation arising in which Tobruk might become temporarily invested. On the 16th June I told him that, although I was determined Tobruk must not be besieged, I accepted the possibility of its becoming temporarily isolated, and left him full liberty to make his dispositions accordingly.

I was glad to have the assurance of the Prime Minister that the instructions I had given to General Ritchie were approved in London. The position seemed to me to be quite different to that which had obtained in 1941, as we now held fortified positions on the frontier, and it did not seem as if the enemy had enough forces both to invest Tobruk and at the same time neutralise our troops to the east of it. I was therefore able to tell the Prime Minister that I hoped to be able to prevent the control of the country between Tobruk and the frontier passing into enemy hands.

In deciding to hold Tobruk, I had not visualised that the Eighth Army would be unable to interfere with the enemy's operations against the fortress, or that the garrison would be required to hold more than the western and southern faces of the perimeter against a serious attack, which its strength and composition should have enabled it to do, always provided that mobile forces were operating on its southern flank.

The Eighth Army had at that time three infantry divisions and an infantry brigade group comparatively fresh, two more of its divisions still had considerable fighting value, and the New Zealand Division was on its way from Syria. The armoured divisions, however, had lost heavily and could only muster about a hundred tanks in all; but more tanks were on the way, and there were many under repair in the Eighth Army's field workshops. Two of the motor brigade groups were fighting vigorously and the reorganisation of the third was almost complete.

General Ritchie put four infantry brigade groups into Tobruk with their proper complement of artillery and some infantry tanks, and kept the rest of the Eighth Army as a mobile force outside it. Major-General Klopper, the commander of the 2nd South African Division, was put in command of the fortress.

The enemy now concentrated his efforts against El Adem, Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed and this area became just as important tactically as it had been in the previous winter. I instructed General Ritchie to strengthen it without delay, but he was unable to do so; and on the 17th June the enemy took Sidi Rezegh, thus beginning the encirclement of Tobruk. The same afternoon our remaining armoured brigade suffered a severe reverse in an encounter with a powerful enemy tank force and was forced to retire on Gambut, having lost all but twenty of its tanks. This entailed the withdrawal of

* See Appendices 6 and 9.