

parties and race for safety through the gaps in our deployment, losing a number of tanks and guns but succeeding in getting the main body away. As soon as it was seen that by these tactics the enemy was escaping 4 Light Armoured Brigade was sent on to harass the fugitives. But almost every one of the bridges and culverts over the numerous wadis had been blown up, and the wadis sown with mines; in addition the country on either side of the road was exceedingly rough, so that the armoured cars were unable to close with the enemy. In spite of these difficulties the advance guard covered the forty miles to Nofilia by the evening of 16th December. For the next two days the Light Armoured Brigade engaged round Nofilia in skirmishes with the enemy rearguard, which began to retire on the 19th by stages to Sirte. By 22nd December 90 Light and 21 Panzer Divisions had joined the main body, which was hastily preparing a fresh defensive position at Buerat, leaving 15 Panzer Division to cover Sirte.

Beyond Nofilia an advance in force was for the moment impossible for administrative reasons: Nofilia itself is two hundred and sixty miles from Benghazi, the advanced base, and Sirte eighty miles further still. An advance was essential, however, for the sake of the Royal Air Force, since there were very few landing grounds in the area in which we were operating and it was vital to secure those at Sirte, in order to give close support to the attack on the Buerat line. An armoured car regiment was therefore sent to work round to the south of the village. Fearful for the loss of half of his remaining tanks the enemy at once withdrew and shortly after noon on Christmas Day the village was entered without opposition. As the enemy had proved so sensitive to an outflanking movement the manoeuvre was continued until finally, by 30th December, he had fallen back before our armoured car patrols to the main position.

The Buerat position was not particularly strong and could easily be outflanked. East of the village was the broad and difficult Wadi Bey el Kebir and west of it the Wadi Zem Zem; it was on the latter that the enemy established his main position, which was less than twenty-five miles in length. It was a subject of considerable conjecture at the time why Rommel should have decided on standing where he did rather than further back, in particular on the naturally very strong line from Tarhuna to Homs. The reason, as it now appears, was that the Axis had decided to evacuate the whole of Tripolitania and concentrate all their resources on the defence of Tunisia. The decision had been made by 31st December. Strategically the intention was sound; the German High Command believed that it would be possible to hold a permanent bridgehead in Tunisia which could tie down our forces there and continue to maintain the barrier in the Mediterranean communications at the Sicilian narrows. Naturally the more time that could be obtained for the purpose of evacuation the better and the mobile rearguard would therefore await our attack as far forward as was safe. The Italian infantry divisions began to move back in the first week in January and shortly afterwards the Trieste Division, including the remains of all the Italian divisions destroyed at Alamein, and 21 Panzer Division

were detached from the Army and sent to southern Tunisia. The rearguard therefore consisted mainly of 90 Light and 15 Panzer Divisions.

We were naturally unaware of the enemy intention to withdraw right into Tunisia and to all appearance the problem now facing us was a most difficult one. It would be comparatively simple to turn the Buerat line but before we attempted that it was essential to be in a position to advance direct on Tripoli without a pause and seize the port. Just before we reached it we should be six hundred miles from our nearest base, at Benghazi, and to maintain any appreciable force over that distance would present insuperable difficulties. There was no suitable port on the Gulf of Sirte and everything had to come up by the one road; it would require at least two weeks to build up the reserves, especially the petrol, which would be needed for the dash to Tripoli. In the meantime there was a good deal of reconnaissance to be done. This country was quite unknown to us, except from the not very reliable Italian maps, and General Montgomery employed the Long Range Desert Group, which I had put under his command, for an extensive programme of reconnoitring routes forward and landing grounds. I cannot speak too highly of the work of this very specialized organization both now and on previous occasions; its members, all picked volunteers, had reduced the problem of moving across the desert to something between an exact science and a fine art.

General Montgomery's plan was to attack up the main road with 50 and 51 Divisions and make a wide outflanking movement through the desert to the left with 7 Armoured and 2 New Zealand Divisions, all under 30 Corps. He was very anxious, however, not to scare the enemy off his present line prematurely, for a withdrawal would multiply our problems. Accordingly the main bodies of this force were left right back and the enemy observed only with an armoured car screen from 4 Light Armoured Brigade. 7 Armoured Division was forty-five miles further east, the New Zealand Division a hundred miles and 51 Division, except for 154 Brigade on the Wadi Bey el Kebir, two hundred miles behind the front. This, of course, had the additional advantage of easing the problem of maintenance. Advance parties were brought forward to reconnoitre the proposed routes of attack and some artillery registration was carried out. The intention was to attack on 15th January if the enemy showed signs of withdrawing and on the 19th if he was prepared to stand. It was soon clear that the former was the more likely; the infantry began moving off, Pistoia and Spezia on the 3rd and 4th and the Young Fascists shortly afterwards. At this point, however, an unexpected difficulty arose. On 4th and 5th January very heavy gales at Benghazi caused severe damage; the outer mole was breached, four ships, one containing over two thousand tons of ammunition, were sunk and the capacity of the port was reduced by two-thirds. The intake of stores had to be supplemented by road from Tobruk. In order to make up for this while still sticking to the proposed date General Montgomery decided to drop 50 Division from the attack and leave it and the rest of 10 Corps, which he had intended to bring forward to the Agheila area, back in Cyrenaica