

On the 21st January our forward troops were under Major-General Messervy, commanding the 1st Armoured Division. On the right was the 201st Guards Motor Brigade, organised in four columns, each consisting of a company of infantry, a field battery and some anti-tank and light anti-aircraft guns, watching a front running south for some fifteen miles from the coast near Marsa el Brega; the third battalion of the brigade was in reserve at Agedabia. To the south was the Support Group of the 1st Armoured Division also organised in four mobile columns and a reserve, and responsible for the front from the left of the Guards Brigade to Maaten Burruei, south of the Wadi Faregh, an extent of some twenty-five to thirty miles. In reserve, twelve miles north of Saunnu, was the 2nd Armoured Brigade, whose training was still unfinished, with three regiments of field artillery and some anti-tank and light anti-aircraft artillery. The residue of the original Oases Force, now a battalion and one field battery, was in the desert some forty miles east of Agedabia and about to return to the Delta to refit after two strenuous months of unbroken operations.

The 1st Armoured Division Support Group had only just relieved that of the 7th Armoured Division and was inexperienced in desert driving. Moreover many of its vehicles were not thoroughly desertworthy, chiefly owing to weakness in the transmission and lack of spare parts. Tyres, too, were unreliable and liable to burst after a short life. These weaknesses were accentuated by the nature of the ground in this region: north of Antelat and Saunnu the going is good, but it becomes progressively worse towards the south, where it is probably as bad as anywhere in the desert. In consequence, in many places tracked vehicles could outpace wheeled.

General Messervy realised that the enemy might stage a local counter-attack and that his advanced troops were weak and widely dispersed. He had asked General Godwin-Austen that the 4th Indian Division might come forward to consolidate a position about Agedabia and El Haseiat and that the 2nd Armoured Brigade might be moved near to Giof el Matar, where it would be better placed to support the forward troops. Unfortunately these moves, though sanctioned, could not be carried out because of difficulties of supply caused by shortage of transport vehicles. Even as it was, the forward troops were on short rations, as the maximum number of vehicles had to be used for building up reserves to enable our offensive to be resumed. Moreover, it had been found necessary to withdraw all the armoured car regiments, with the exception of one squadron, to enable their vehicles to be repaired and refitted, because of the damage they were sustaining owing to the rough ground.

In the event of an enemy counter-attack, General Messervy's plan was for the forward troops to withdraw if necessary, fighting a delaying action, to the line Agedabia—El Haseiat which was to be held to the last. The 2nd Armoured Brigade were to be brought forward to counter-attack the enemy's right flank and rear.

It is doubtful whether the enemy's original plan went further than a reconnaissance in force to ascertain our dispositions and impede our

preparations for a renewal of our offensive. He does not appear to have used more than about eighty or ninety tanks throughout the operations and his troops seemed to have started the advance with only three days rations in hand. As usual, however, he rapidly and skilfully made the most of his initial success, being greatly helped by the remarkable elasticity of his supply organisation.

The Enemy Attacks.

The first warning of impending attack was given early in the morning of the 21st January by heavy shelling of our advanced troops. The enemy advanced in three columns. The left column, which included about thirty German tanks, moved up the main road; the centre and southern columns, the latter containing about thirty-five German tanks, moved to the south of the road and along the north bank of the Wadi Faregh. Initially things went well for us, but the Support Group to the south then ran into sand dunes and was overtaken by enemy light tanks which caught some of its infantry and artillery hampered by the difficult going. To the north the Guards Brigade were not in difficulty, and General Messervy told both his subordinate commanders to continue in their delaying role, but cancelled his orders to hold the Agedabia—El Haseiat line to the last, as the reserves of supplies which this line was intended to cover had not yet been placed in position. Enemy dive-bombers and fighter aircraft attacked our troops heavily and persistently throughout the day. Unfortunately our forward landing grounds were marshy after the recent heavy rains, and this hindered our aircraft giving our troops during the initial thrust the full protection and support which they previously and subsequently received.

On the 22nd January, the 2nd Armoured Brigade was ordered to move forward in support of our left flank. Meanwhile, however, the enemy's left column had managed to pass through the Guards Brigade and moved swiftly up the main road to Agedabia, where it was engaged by our tanks. General Messervy ordered the Guards Brigade to destroy this party and to block the main road north-west of Agedabia, as well as the track leading to Antelat. But our columns appeared to be incapable of rapid movement in the rough ground off the main road, along which the enemy moved with great speed, easily outstripping our troops struggling in the bad going to the east. The 13th Corps then ordered the 1st Armoured Division to interpose itself between the enemy and Msus and the 4th Indian Division, which had been reinforced by a battalion of heavy tanks, to oppose any attempt to advance on Bengasi.

On the morning of the 23rd January enemy tanks were reported to be moving about round Saunnu and Antelat, although Saunnu itself was not yet occupied. Two regiments of the 2nd Armoured Brigade were ordered to clear this area on their way northwards to cover Msus. Each regiment became engaged in a separate action with bodies of enemy tanks about fifty strong and each with its attached artillery suffered heavily. The third regiment reached its appointed position north of Antelat without incident, but when the whole brigade was finally assembled it numbered only eighty tanks altogether. By the evening the enemy were in occupation of Antelat and Saunnu.