

The 13th Corps attack in the north was a straightforward operation in which the 69th Brigade, supported by the 32nd Army Tank Brigade, was to capture Sghifet es Sidra. Had it been launched in this strength on the 1st June, as General Ritchie had intended, instead of three days later, very probably it would have succeeded. As it was, by the night of the 4th June the enemy had had time to fortify the ridge strongly and could afford to support the garrison with tanks. The 32nd Army Tank Brigade was attacked on its right flank by enemy tanks, and having run on an uncharted enemy minefield and so lost fifty tanks out of its original seventy, could give the infantry no support when they in their turn were attacked by tanks. Consequently, the 69th Infantry Brigade was pinned down short of its objective.

How far the failure of the 69th Brigade to capture Sghifet es Sidra and to support the 30th Corps attack with flanking fire was responsible for the difficulties which the 30th Corps encountered, it is difficult to say; but there is no doubt that the enemy would have been considerably hampered, if the ridge had been taken. The first phase of the 30th Corps operation was entirely successful; the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade captured Aslagh ridge and four regiments of field artillery moved up in readiness to support the 22nd Armoured Brigade which was to pass through followed by the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, and secure Sidi Muftah. It was then that plans began to go amiss. The 22nd Armoured Brigade came up against a second anti-tank screen covering Sidi Muftah and wheeled north. Having, apparently, been informed that it had no responsibility for the infantry, the 22nd Armoured Brigade did not intervene when the right flank of the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade was attacked and driven back, or when a battalion of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had pushed forward, was also in difficulties. The latter attack fortunately was not pressed home, so that the battalion managed to withdraw having lost a company. The enemy then engaged the 22nd Armoured Brigade and inflicted on them considerable casualties.

After desultory fighting which lasted all day, a strong detachment of the enemy worked round the southern flank of the newly won position on Dahar el Aslagh, overcame the single battalion of the 21st Indian Infantry Brigade thrown out as a protection to the southern flank, and overran the tactical headquarters of the 5th Indian Division and the headquarters of the 10th Indian Infantry Brigade. The infantry of the 9th Indian Infantry Brigade were withdrawn during the night, and the infantry of the 10th Brigade with the motor battalion of the 22nd Armoured Brigade and the four field regiments were left to defend the ridge.

Although communication with these troops had broken down entirely as a result of the loss of the headquarters, the commanders of the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions appear to have realised fully their serious plight and to have devised plans for a counter-attack to aid them. General Messervy found that the 22nd Armoured Brigade which had reached its leaguer just before dawn was in no condition to take part. The 4th Armoured Brigade whose

losses had been made good by a partially trained regiment from the 1st Armoured Brigade, made very slow progress in consequence, and some misundertaking arose over the orders to the 2nd Armoured Brigade which put in an attack too far to the north and found its progress blocked by an impassable escarpment. Owing to the large number of wireless sets destroyed, communications generally were very bad indeed. The counter-attack therefore came too late to prevent the enemy overwhelming the infantry and artillery holding Dahar el Aslagh, of whom scattered elements only escaped.

The Attacks on Bir Hacheim.

The failure of the Eighth Army's counter-attack on the 5th June was probably the turning point of the battle. Until then our chances of putting the enemy to flight and even of destroying him had seemed good. But even after the attack had failed, it did not at once become necessary to evacuate the Gazala line or to abandon all hope of eventually making a counter-offensive. Our tank force was believed to be still equal in number to the enemy's and our prospects of obtaining reinforcements as good as if not better than his. But before we could take the offensive again we needed time to reorganise, and the enemy's powers of rapid recuperation seemed greater than our own.

The enemy made a swift riposte. Moving the bulk of his armour north-eastwards towards Knightsbridge, where it directly menaced Tobruk, he set to work to reduce Bir Hacheim.

General Ritchie was intent on taking counter-offensive action against the main body of the enemy, but to intensify our attacks on his supply line seemed the only course for the moment. He had again considered launching a counter-stroke from the northern sector, but the 1st South African Division, which had attempted to carry out a limited advance in that area on the night of the 4th June, reported that it was strongly held and would need a strong and carefully staged attack to break through it. A column of the 151st Brigade which penetrated to Sidi Breghise brought back confirmation of this. General Ritchie therefore decided that he could no longer spare the 7th Motor Brigade to support the Free French and ordered it to Metifel to operate against the enemy's supply line from the south, as the 50th Division was doing from the north.

The problem of supplying Bir Hacheim was becoming increasingly difficult, because the 90th Light Division had been methodically surrounding the position with a series of entrenched posts and the eastern face had now been completely masked. Realising that the withdrawal of the 7th Motor Brigade might make it necessary to give up Bir Hacheim altogether, General Ritchie issued warning orders for the Free French to withdraw.

On the 6th June an armoured battle began round Knightsbridge in which both Panzer Divisions and all three of our armoured brigades were involved. Nevertheless neither side gained an advantage, and the tank fighting died down for some days. But the presence of the greater part of the enemy armour round Knightsbridge continued to offer a threat to Tobruk which could at no time be disregarded.