

1st South African Division, to the south, moved in a wider sweep to cover the western flank, while the Guards Brigade followed to guard the landing grounds and field maintenance centres. On the night of 18th-19th November H.M. Ships Naiad and Euryalus bombarded the Halfaya fortifications.

Beyond increased shelling in the frontier area and the capture of two German armoured cars, no incident marked the approach march. Our offensive surprised the enemy. Indeed, I believe that for at least one day, if not for two, he thought we were making a reconnaissance in force.

As the enemy made no move, General Cunningham decided to follow the original plan and to push on towards Tobruk.

The Battle of Sidi Rezegh—First Phase.

On 19th November, the armoured battle developed in grim earnest. On the left the 22nd Armoured Brigade engaged the Ariete Division in a sharp, but successful encounter. On the right the 4th Armoured Brigade became engaged with German armoured forces near Gabr Bu Meliha, and General Norrie, judging that the greater part of the enemy armour was in that area, moved the 22nd Armoured Brigade across from Bir el Gubi to assist, leaving the 1st South African Division to watch the Ariete Division. In the centre the 6th Royal Tank Regiment shook itself free from the skirmishing in which the 7th Armoured Brigade was engaged, and moved north-west on Sidi Rezegh which they found virtually unguarded. There the Support Group of the 7th Armoured Division and the remainder of the 7th Armoured Brigade joined them next morning.

The course of events to date seemed so satisfactory that General Norrie wished the 70th Division to make its sortie from Tobruk next morning. According to the original plan the 1st South African Division was to support the sortie. The new proposal meant that the Support Group, backed by two armoured regiments was to take Sidi Rezegh and that the 5th South African Infantry Brigade, which was due to arrive an hour and a half before the attack, was to help them to consolidate and to make touch with the 70th Division. There were strong indications of considerable enemy movement westwards, away from the battleground, and it seemed quite possible that the enemy was trying to avoid conflict. At the same time the greater part of the enemy's armoured forces appeared to be engaged with our armoured brigades away to the south near Gabr Saleh. So General Cunningham consented to the proposal.

On the morning of the 21st, however, the whole scene was transformed. The blow at the bottleneck in the enemy's communications had been shrewdly aimed, and Rommel summoned all his armoured forces to deny us the commanding positions we were clearly about to gain. Only half an hour before the Support Group was due to launch its attack, two strong enemy armoured columns were sighted to the south-east heading for Sidi Rezegh. Zero hour for the 70th Division had long passed and there was no going back. Brigadier Davy, who was directing operations, therefore decided to leave only one armoured regiment to support the attack and took the other two to meet the enemy columns.

At eight-thirty the Support Group put in their attack and after a hard struggle captured Sidi Rezegh. Almost simultaneously the two armoured regiments engaged the 15th Panzer Division to the south-east. One regiment claimed fifteen enemy tanks out of thirty-five in one column, but the other suffered heavily in a gallant action with about a hundred enemy tanks.

The survivors of these actions had scarcely returned to the aerodrome and the Support Group had barely secured Sidi Rezegh, when they had to face about to throw off an attack from the south. This, it seems, was the 21st Panzer Division, which had eluded the efforts of the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades to check them near Gabr Saleh. After heavy fighting the enemy drew off to refuel.

By mid-day the situation at Sidi Rezegh had become critical. The enemy armoured divisions had in all probability joined forces and were clearly forming up for another attack. The defenders had suffered many casualties and were isolated. The 5th South African Infantry Brigade had not arrived. Brigadier Armstrong had obtained permission for the brigade to halt overnight on the plea that it was not sufficiently trained to move on a moonless night over unknown ground, and next morning had found himself confronted by tanks from the Ariete Division and could make no progress. The 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades had been summoned to the rescue, but could not be expected for some time.

The expected attack developed in the afternoon. The Support Group and the 7th Armoured Brigade resisted valiantly and at length compelled the enemy to abandon the attack. The inspiring example set by Brigadier Campbell* who led several tank charges in person greatly contributed to this result. The Support Group and 7th Armoured Brigade achieved this success practically single-handed; for the 22nd Armoured Brigade did not intervene until about an hour before dusk, while the 4th Armoured Brigade had been checked by a screen of 88 millimetre guns some miles to the south-east and never reached the scene.

The Tobruk sortie started at dawn on the 21st and made good progress against stiff opposition. The two feint attacks achieved their object, deceiving the enemy sufficiently to cause him to bring up reserves to the threatened sectors and to distract his attention from the preparations for the main attack. Owing to unexpectedly severe opposition, however, the sortie progressed more slowly and proved more costly in men and tanks than we had anticipated. The junction between the Bologna and Pavia Divisions had been selected as the best point to attack; but, in the interval between the maturing of the plan and its execution, the Afrika Division had been moved into precisely that sector for the projected enemy assault on Tobruk. Owing to the prevalence of trench warfare conditions an elaborate plan had had to be prepared from which it was impossible to depart at short notice.

In the event the delay was of no consequence. For General Norrie considered that, since the 5th South African Infantry Brigade had still not arrived and as the Support Group was hard put to it even to retain its hold on Sidi Rezegh, the 70th Division on Ed Duda would be exposed to

* Afterwards Major-General Campbell, V.C.