

Tobruk was thus gradually becoming surrounded. But as the remainder of the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade was holding out at Belhamed, and as the 2nd Free French and 21st Indian Infantry Brigades were occupying the high ground overlooking Gambut, the Bardia road was still open. On the afternoon of the 17th June, however, the Eighth Army suffered a further reverse which put an end to our hopes of preventing Tobruk from becoming completely surrounded. After an engagement south of Sidi Rezegh with an enemy force numbering nearly a hundred and twenty tanks, the 4th Armoured Brigade was driven back almost to Gambut, having lost all but twenty of its tanks.

Before this engagement the Eighth Army had about five hundred tanks altogether. But three hundred and eight of these were under repair in workshops and a further forty in course of delivery. Of the remainder, forty-eight heavy tanks were in Tobruk and twenty-three more on the frontier. Apart from a squadron operating with the 7th Motor Brigade, the 4th Armoured Brigade with sixty tanks, had been the only striking force capable of supporting the infantry brigades covering the coastal road, so that, when it was defeated the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade had to be withdrawn from Belhamed.

On the 18th June the enemy made as if to continue his thrust eastwards. He advanced no further than Gambut, however, where he cut off a battalion of the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade, which had been acting as rearguard. It was appreciated that the enemy would be unable to make a serious attempt to invade Egypt so long as Tobruk held out, but the occupation of Gambut was a serious matter, since it was now practically impossible to operate fighter aircraft in support of the garrison of the fortress.

A general movement westwards of the enemy was reported on the 19th June, and on the 20th the attack on Tobruk began.

The Fall of Tobruk.

On the 15th June, General Gott appointed Major-General Klopper, commanding the 2nd South African Division, to command the fortress and placed the following forces at his disposal:—

Headquarters of the 2nd South African Division—

- 4th South African Infantry Brigade.
- 6th South African Infantry Brigade.
- H.Q. 201 Guards Brigade with
 - 2 Coldstream Guards,
 - 1 Sherwood Foresters, and elements of
 - 1 Worcesters.
- 11th Indian Infantry Brigade.
- 32nd Army Tank Brigade.
- 4th Anti-Aircraft Brigade (Less 18 guns).
- 83rd Sub-Area Headquarters.

General Klopper was told to defend Tobruk at all costs and to be prepared to hold it for some time. He was also vigorously to oppose the enemy outside the defences of the fortress. On the 16th June, he was given further instructions concerning his future action in certain circumstances. He was to prepare a plan for co-operating with mobile columns to the south to keep his landward communications

open, or to withdraw the garrison if need be. If Belhamed fell, the garrison was to provide a force of all arms to recapture it in conjunction with an attack to be made by the 30th Corps.

General Gott remained for two days in Tobruk to help to organise the defence. He also left a senior administrative staff officer to help General Klopper's staff. General Klopper had been in command of the 2nd South African Division since the 15th May, and during this time had had his headquarters in Tobruk. During the earlier fighting he was responsible for the defence of the fortress and of the coastal area between Tobruk and the rear of the Gazala position. It was well realised, however, that the task was a difficult one, but it was hoped that the experience of the commanders of the 4th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigade, the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and of the 83rd Sub-Area, all of whom, with their formations, had been in Tobruk during the siege would help to lighten it.

Prior to the evacuation of the Gazala positions, General Klopper had naturally concentrated his attention on the defence of the western and south-western faces of the perimeter.

Three infantry brigades were disposed on the perimeter, which consisted of a series of mutually supporting posts, each mined and wired. The 6th and 4th South African Infantry Brigades occupied the western and southern sectors respectively, while the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade held the eastern sector. The field artillery was allotted in approximately equal proportions to the infantry brigades, and the anti-tank guns were also distributed between the sectors, being sited mostly in positions close to the perimeter. The fortress reserve consisted of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and the 201st Guards Brigade. The 4th Royal Tank Regiment was located near the junction of the Bardia and El Adem roads, called King's Cross, while the 7th Royal Tank Regiment were situated near Pilastrino with one squadron north of the Derna road. The 201st Guards Brigade was deployed in the defences of the inner perimeter between the El Adem road and Pilastrino.

The attack opened at about six-thirty in the morning of the 20th June with a heavy artillery bombardment and dive-bombing attacks on the centre of the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade. Within an hour the posts on the perimeter in that sector had been overrun. An immediate counter-attack was made by carriers of the Mahratta Light Infantry, but was brought to a standstill by anti-tank gunfire. Then the enemy, covered by smoke screens, began to penetrate gaps in the minefields on the right of the brigade sector, and to advance deliberately on a narrow front towards King's Cross.

At about eight-thirty the Coldstream Guards were warned to move to the west of King's Cross to attack in conjunction with the 4th Royal Tank Regiment. But, when they arrived, it was discovered that both squadrons of that regiment had already been committed to a counter-attack. Meanwhile the 7th Royal Tank Regiment had also been ordered to move to the threatened area. But it seems that they, too, had gone into action along the road towards El Adem. By one o'clock, apparently all our tanks were out of action.