

Norrie ordered them to take up positions to the south of Bir el Gubi, while the Armoured Brigade sought out the enemy's armoured forces. These were very elusive: apart from two brief appearances in the morning when small parties of enemy tanks were engaged north-east and south-east of Bir el Gubi, they were seen no more until the afternoon, when they appeared to be forming up to attack the Guards Brigade west of Bir el Gubi. The artillery of the Guards Brigade opened fire, and after a short while the enemy moved away. It was discovered later that General Neumann-Silkow, commander of the 15th Panzer Division, was mortally wounded by a shell which may explain why the attack never developed. It is more likely that the enemy intercepted a wireless call to the Armoured Brigade, and had orders not to allow themselves to be dragged into an engagement with a force of tanks now manifestly superior in numbers.

The Support Group had for some days been ranging the country from Bir el Gubi almost to Sidi Azeiz, and every day had brought its toll of enemy vehicles. On the 6th December the Support Group achieved a notable success against an enemy rearguard consisting of five hundred vehicles and twenty-five light tanks east of Sidi Rezegh. All the tanks were destroyed, as well as a battery of medium guns and many of the vehicles. Thereafter the Support Group rejoined the 7th Armoured Division.

The Armoured Brigade spent the 7th December attacking enemy tanks protecting Bir el Gubi and proved unable to outflank or dislodge them, though it claimed to have done them much damage. Although the enemy was hitting out with great vigour, General Ritchie was positive that he was doing so only to cover the preparation of new positions in rear and decided to wait no longer. He therefore ordered the 13th Corps to proceed with their part in the operation against El Adem. Some two hours after dark on the 7th December the 23rd Infantry Brigade began their advance along Ed Duda ridge. By daybreak they had captured an enemy position on the ridge within 2,000 yards of the Tobruk—El Adem road and by evening the whole of the enemy fortifications south-east of Tobruk had been cleared.

The advance of the 13th Corps came not a moment too soon, for on the 8th December the enemy began a rapid but orderly withdrawal to Gazala. As soon as reports of the withdrawal were received, the Armoured Brigade was directed to advance on Knightsbridge in the hope that this would bring them round or against the enemy's western flank. In fact it brought them against the centre of the position the enemy rearguard had taken up astride Genadel ridge. The customary powerful screen of anti-tank guns was produced, and the enemy tanks took cover and fired from hull-down positions when engaged. Repeated attempts to turn the position on either flank were unsuccessful, and when evening came the enemy were still holding the ridge. The early hours of the 9th December brought indications that the withdrawal was continuing. The Armoured Brigade proceeded along the same axis, and came up against a rearguard position running north-east from Bir Harmat covering Knightsbridge. They engaged, this time with more success, twice forcing the enemy to give ground. In the evening they attacked and halted a party of twenty enemy

tanks trying to break back and interfere with our infantry who by then had occupied El Adem. During the night the enemy retired once more, but the Armoured Brigade could not give chase as the supply system of the 30th Corps had been stretched to the limit.

Although the progress of our armour was first retarded by the enemy rearguards and finally brought to a standstill by lack of petrol, the momentum of the advance was kept up by columns of the Support Group and the 4th Indian Division. The former were themselves temporarily held up by a strong enemy position at Hagfet en Nezha, until the 30th Corps ordered the 1st South African Infantry Brigade to relieve them. The Support Group then moved round by way of Acroma and on the 10th December was in contact with the outposts of the enemy's new line running southwards from Gazala. The 7th Indian Infantry Brigade struck northwards and made contact with the 23rd Infantry Brigade at El Adem on the evening of the 9th. The 5th Indian Infantry Brigade drew level fifteen miles further west, while on the western flank the Indian divisional motorised cavalry, reinforced by infantry, engaged the left flank of the enemy rearguard resting on Bir Harmat, and secured Hagaig er Raml.

The 13th Corps, working westwards round the perimeter of Tobruk, continued to roll up the enemy by the same method of making an outflanking movement along the ridge and then clearing the positions in the intervening low ground. On the 10th December both corps carried out a concerted movement against Acroma. The Polish Brigade broke out before dawn along the Derna road; the Polish Cavalry then passed through and, after a successful engagement with enemy rearguards, turned southwards. The 16th Infantry Brigade approached from the south-east and entered Acroma to find it had already been occupied by the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade. The 5th Indian Infantry Brigade came up into line further west, securing the western end of Acroma ridge and all but a small part of another eminence five miles to the west. Thus the eight months siege of Tobruk came to an end.

During the period of the siege, the task of maintaining supplies to the garrison was carried out entirely by the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy. Between them they transported 72 tanks, 92 guns and 34,000 tons of stores, replaced 32,667 men of the garrison by 34,113 fresh troops and withdrew 7,516 wounded and 7,097 prisoners of war. The cost to the Navy amounted to 25 ships sunk and 9 seriously damaged, and to the Merchant Navy of 5 ships sunk and 4 seriously damaged, a total casualty list of 43 ships.

Some of the units forming the garrison of the fortress and the greater part of the administrative and base personnel had been through the whole siege, which began early in April. The remainder, comprising the 70th Division, the Polish Carpathian Brigade Group and Cavalry and a heavy tank battalion had taken over the defence of the fortress in the late summer. The new garrison under Major-General Scobie was most active in harassing the besiegers by ceaseless patrolling and numerous minor enterprises. The part they played in the Eighth Army's offensive has already been described, and there is no doubt that the task allotted to them proved much more exacting than had been anticipated. Their unyielding determination to hold the