

needless peril. He therefore postponed the final phase of the operation.

Desultory fighting broke out again on the aerodrome during the morning of the 22nd November, and in the afternoon developed into a pitched battle in which the enemy employed at least a hundred tanks, besides large numbers of anti-tank guns and infantry. On our side, in addition to the wearied Support Group and 7th Armoured Brigade, all three regiments of the 22nd Armoured Brigade and two of the 4th Armoured Brigade were involved. The fog of war literally descended on the battlefield, for the clouds of dust and smoke raised by tanks and bursting shells made accurate shooting impossible, and at times it was difficult to tell friend from foe. At the conclusion of the battle, which raged until after dark, our armoured brigades were finally driven off the aerodrome. At the same time the Support Group, attacked in overwhelming strength, was compelled to abandon Sidi Rezegh which it had defended for three days against great odds and to retire to the southern escarpment, where it leaguered to the north of the armoured brigades.

The 5th South African Infantry Brigade had arrived during the morning and had been ordered to capture Point 178 on the southern escarpment which overlooked the western end of the valley, where the enemy was assembling to attack the aerodrome. Although they strove with determination to gain their objective, they fell short of it and finally received orders to abandon the attempt. The brigade then retired to leaguer to the west of the Support Group.

The enemy lost no time in pressing their advantage, striking two crippling blows in swift succession. A surprise night attack chanced on the headquarters of the 4th Armoured Brigade, and most of its wireless links were captured. For the next twenty-four hours that brigade, which, with its hundred tanks, was the only substantial armoured force we had left, ceased to be a fighting entity. The Germans, on the other hand, still had a number of tanks in running order and could recover others from the battlefield. Moreover, the Ariete Division had not been seriously engaged since the 19th November and must have had about eighty tanks. To these the 22nd Armoured Brigade could oppose about forty-five and the 7th Armoured Brigade only ten. Consequently, when the enemy attacked the 5th South African Infantry Brigade with over a hundred tanks and a large force of lorried infantry in the afternoon of the 23rd, the 22nd Armoured Brigade was hopelessly outnumbered. The South Africans resisted gallantly, but the German attack was by all accounts well conceived and brilliantly executed; and the 5th South African Infantry Brigade was practically destroyed.

After these reverses, General Norrie decided to rally the armoured brigades in a central position north of the Trigh el Abd while the 1st South African Infantry Brigade retired to Taieb el Essem to watch the western flank.

#### *The Advance of the 13th Corps.*

On the 21st November, thinking like everybody else that the enemy's armoured forces had been or were being neutralised by ours, General Cunningham gave the order for the 13th Corps to begin operations; and I agreed with this decision.

A detachment of the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade had already occupied the high ground

overlooking the Omars from the west, and the New Zealand Division had moved up in readiness for the advance. When the word was given the New Zealand Division moved forward and gained control of the country to the west of the enemy's line of fortresses up to the outskirts of Bardia. Capuzzo, Musaid and Sollum Barracks were occupied with little trouble.

At the same time the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade took Sidi Omar in the rear and captured two of its defended localities. It was not until several days later, however, that the area was finally cleared by the capture of Libyan Omar.

The 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade moved straight on westwards along the Trigh Capuzzo, capturing the headquarters of the Afrika Korps on the way. On the 23rd November they stormed Point 175 on the ridge only five miles west of Sidi Rezegh. This occurred a few hours before the mishap to the 5th South African Infantry Brigade. Indeed one of the New Zealand battalions, instructed to make contact with the 30th Corps, arrived just east of the South African leaguer when some of the enemy tanks which had overrun it were emerging. Fortunately the battalion was able to beat them off and returned safely to its brigade when the 30th Corps retired.

Leaving the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade to watch the enemy in Bardia and Halfaya, General Freyberg moved westwards with the remainder of the division on the 23rd November. Having captured Gambut aerodrome the same afternoon, they joined the 6th Brigade at Point 175 on the 24th November.

#### *Change in Command.*

It was on the 23rd November that I heard that the optimistic earlier reports of the damage inflicted on the enemy's armoured forces were not borne out by the latest news. In response to an urgent request from General Cunningham I flew to his advanced headquarters near Maddalena, accompanied by Air Chief Marshal Tedder. Further news had come in by the time we arrived, and I learned of the disorganisation of the 4th Armoured Brigade and of the disaster which had overtaken the 5th South African Infantry Brigade.

General Cunningham was perturbed by the general situation which he considered to be critical owing to the small number of tanks in running order he had left. Five days' heavy fighting and constant movement had resulted in many tanks being destroyed or immobilised either by enemy action or on account of mechanical breakdown. Enemy losses, on the other hand, had been over-estimated. The enemy's facilities for tank recovery were far better than our own, and, being left in possession of the principal battlefield, he was able to repair many tanks previously reported as having been destroyed. Our initial numerical superiority had now disappeared, and it seemed as if we could hope to have, at best, only as many tanks as the enemy. This was a serious state of affairs, particularly since the German tanks were superior to ours in fighting qualities, though this was not true of the Italian tanks. Excluding those of infantry pattern which were too slow to take part in battle against enemy armoured forces, we appeared to dispose of about a hundred tanks, of which a large proportion were American light tanks,