

those of the highest strategical or political import which he might feel impelled to refer to me. He carried out this task with great wisdom and efficiency.

I then flew to the advanced headquarters of the Eighth Army at Bagush and took over the direct command from General Ritchie the same evening.

#### *The Battle for Egypt.*

When it was found impossible to hold the frontier positions without risking envelopment by the enemy, I had intended that the Eighth Army should stand and fight on the Matruh position, which was partially prepared and mined. General Ritchie had given instructions for this and the Eighth Army was preparing to carry them out when I took over command.

The enemy, however, had continued to press rapidly forward with what remained of his original striking force, and I realised that we were so weak in tanks and field artillery, two of the essentials for success in desert warfare, that it was very doubtful whether we could hope to hold the Matruh position, any more than we could the positions on the frontier. With his superiority in tanks, it seemed that the enemy might either envelop our open southern flank or pierce our centre, which we could hold only lightly. In either event, he was likely to isolate part of our forces and defeat them in detail, and this I was determined to avoid. I was convinced that it was necessary above all to hold together the much depleted Eighth Army and to keep it as a mobile force, retaining its freedom of action. I decided, therefore, that I could not risk its being pinned down at Matruh.

The loss of Matruh would be a further shock to Egyptian morale, and Axis propaganda would certainly hail it as another triumph. The disadvantages seemed small, however, compared with the danger of being defeated piecemeal. At that time, with the exception of the 9th Australian Division which I had summoned from Syria, there were no formations outside the Eighth Army which could have stood between Alexandria and Cairo and the enemy. Although a further retreat would bring the enemy to the very threshold of the Delta, El Alamein offered by far the strongest position in the Western Desert as both its flanks rested on impassable obstacles. Moreover, by drawing the enemy forward, we were lengthening his supply lines and shortening our own—no small advantage since the Eighth Army sorely needed an opportunity to re-equip and reorganise. I, therefore, cancelled the orders to stand at Matruh and gave instructions for the Eighth Army to withdraw on El Alamein, delaying the enemy as much as possible in its retirement.

On the 27th June, before these orders could take full effect, the enemy breached our minefields south of Matruh and, reaching the coast road, partially surrounded the 10th Corps which was holding Matruh and Bagush. During the next two days these troops managed to break through the enemy and reach El Alamein, though they lost heavily in the process and had to be withdrawn to the Delta to reorganise and refit. Meanwhile, the 13th Corps on the southern flank fought desperately and with some success to stem the enemy's advance. The enemy lost no time in following up our withdrawal from Matruh, and on the 1st July launched an attack against the 1st South

African Division, which was holding the El Alamein fortifications on our extreme northern flank. This attack was beaten off, but on the same day further to the south the enemy managed to overrun one of our defended localities and thus weaken our centre.

We were still very short of tanks and weak in artillery. The Eighth Army was depleted and disorganised after five weeks of desperate fighting ending in a rapid retreat closely pressed by the enemy. I realised that it might not be able to hold the enemy if he made a determined attack on our partially prepared and thinly held positions in spite of the advantage we retained in the air; I took the precaution, therefore, of making the necessary arrangements for a further withdrawal, should this be necessary in the last resort.

It was my fixed intention to wrest the initiative from the enemy at the earliest possible moment; and in spite of our lack of men and equipment I was convinced that the best way to do this was to attack the enemy without delay and give him no rest. I accordingly ordered the 13th Corps, which formed my left wing, to swing forward round the enemy's right flank, which at that time did not extend far to the south, and attack northwards with all the strength it could muster. I had to hold what tanks I had in the centre, ready to counter-attack, should the enemy try to break through and seize the vital Ruweisat Ridge, the key to our position. Consequently I could spare no more than light tanks and armoured cars to support the 13th Corps. Nevertheless their attack, which started on the 2nd July, went forward with vigour and dash and caused the enemy to form a defensive flank, extending some distance to the west, to save himself being cut off from El Daba. He also had to reinforce his Italian troops in the south by German units from the north, which relieved the pressure on our centre and right. Owing to the relative weakness of our armour, I was unable to maintain the momentum of the attack and carry it to a decisive conclusion. On the other hand the operation achieved considerable results. We had at last recovered the tactical initiative and thrown the enemy on to the defensive. The situation in the south then gradually stabilised, until the enemy gained a secure flank by extending his line to the Qattara Depression.

While the Eighth Army, strongly supported by the R.A.F., was carrying on a fierce struggle at El Alamein, continuous and intensive preparations were made to continue the fight in the Delta, in case the battle were to go against us. Defensive positions covering the approaches to Alexandria from the west were constructed, and large tracts of country to the south of the city were flooded. A fortified area was organised between the Wadi Natrun and the edge of the Delta, to provide a pivot of manoeuvre for the Eighth Army which was to be kept mobile to oppose any enemy forces which might move against Alexandria or Cairo. Strong defences were erected round Mena and the Pyramids to cover the immediate approaches to Cairo from the desert. All the fighting men who could be mobilised were pressed into service and organised into improvised units, columns and commandos. The improvement of rearward communications was hurried on: boat bridges were built over the Nile, and existing bridges, railways and roads