

the forward area, to release the 4th Armoured Brigade to attack southward against the enemy column from Sidi Omar while the 7th Armoured Brigade attacked northwards. Owing to mechanical breakdowns and the exhaustion of his crews Brigadier Gatehouse, commanding the 4th Armoured Brigade, was unable to move before daylight. As soon as he began to move southwards, a large enemy column of tanks advanced against the left flank and rear of the 22nd Guards Brigade, and General Messervy was compelled to request Brigadier Gatehouse to return and counter attack. The 4th Armoured Brigade drove back the enemy tanks, but incurred some losses. When it again attempted to move southwards to attack the enemy column from Sidi Omar, the enemy again advanced against the 22nd Guards Brigade, and General Messervy was compelled to inform General Creagh that he could not hold his position without the support of the 4th Armoured Brigade.

105. I had gone up to General Beresford-Peirse's Headquarters at Sidi Barrani on the afternoon of 16th June. On the morning of 17th June, hearing of the critical situation at the front, I flew to General Creagh's Headquarters. Before I reached General Creagh's Headquarters, General Messervy had ordered the withdrawal of the forward troops, as it appeared to him that unless he withdrew without delay the enemy column from Sidi Omar combined with the enemy column from the westward would completely surround him and close his line of retreat. The 7th Armoured Brigade had by this time, as already stated, only some 20 Cruiser tanks in action, while the 4th Armoured Brigade was reduced to less than 20 "I" tanks. Both air force and ground observation estimated the advancing enemy columns as containing at least 200 tanks supported by numerous artillery.

In the circumstances I considered that General Messervy's decision to withdraw was justified and that any delay would have led to his force being cut off and in all probability the loss of the greater part of it without any corresponding gain. The withdrawal was carried out in good order, and the enemy tanks, which were heavily attacked by the bombers of the Royal Air Force, made only half hearted attempts to close with our forces.

106. Our losses in personnel in this three days' battle were just over 1,000, of whom approximately 150 were killed and 250 missing. Our losses in tanks were unfortunately heavy, 25 cruiser tanks and 70 "I" tanks were lost. The great majority of the cruiser tanks were lost by enemy action, but a considerable proportion of the "I" tank losses were due to mechanical breakdowns which could have been put right had time been available, but had to be left behind during the withdrawal, for lack of transporters to bring them back.

It is estimated that 40-50 enemy tanks were destroyed by ground action and much mechanical transport, in addition to numbers destroyed by air action. The enemy personnel losses are not known but must have been heavy; 220 German and 350 Italian prisoners were taken, and a large number of enemy were buried.

107. The main cause of our failure was undoubtedly the difficulty in combining the action of cruiser and "I" tanks, the cramping effect

on manoeuvre of having only two regiments in each armoured brigade and the lack of training in the 7th Armoured Division. Had tank crews had more practice with their weapons they would have destroyed a much larger number of enemy tanks; and had they all been more experienced in maintenance there would have been fewer tanks out of action through mechanical breakdown; so that instead of being so outnumbered at the end of the battle, we should have been in sufficient strength to have defeated the enemy.

The enemy manoeuvred his forces skilfully but showed little boldness or inclination to close and had undoubtedly a most healthy respect for the efficiency of the 2-pdr. and the shooting of our artillery. He was prepared for our attack and had anticipated the lines it would probably take, which were dictated by the lie of the ground. He succeeded in concentrating practically the whole of his tank forces in the forward area without our becoming aware of it.

108. After the action I withdrew the 7th Armoured Division to Matruh to refit and held the forward area as before by small columns of mobile infantry and artillery. The enemy made no attempt to exploit his success and had undoubtedly been severely handled. In fact, his attitude ever since has been entirely defensive both on the Egyptian frontier and outside Tobruk.

Summary of Operations.

109. In the six months covered by this despatch, from 7th February (date of the capture of Benghazi) to 14th July (date of the signing of the Convention with the French in Syria), Middle East was called upon to conduct no fewer than six major campaigns—in Greece, in Cyrenaica, in Crete, in Iraq, in Syria, and in Italian East Africa. During May, five of these were being conducted simultaneously, and there were never less than three on hand at one time. The theatres of these operations were several hundreds of miles apart, in some instances well over a thousand. Resources to meet the enemy strength were inadequate, both on the ground and in the air. In the circumstances, the fact that three of these campaigns, in Italian East Africa, in Iraq and in Syria, were brought to successful conclusions, and that the enemy counter offensive in Cyrenaica was firmly checked, may be considered to reflect credit on the troops and commanders concerned. In Greece and in Crete, the odds against our forces, especially in the air, were too heavy for successful defence; but in both theatres the great majority of the troops engaged were withdrawn, thanks to the skill and self-sacrifice of the Royal Navy, after having repulsed many enemy attacks and without having suffered tactical defeat. The losses inflicted on the enemy in Crete undoubtedly saved the general position in the Middle East by destroying the greater part of the enemy's air-borne troops and a very large number of his aircraft.

110. Throughout these operations the morale of the troops remained high and they had always well justified confidence that with anything like material equality, they were more than a match for any German troops. The defence of Crete and of Tobruk will rank among the finest achievements of the forces of the British Empire.