

this end, probably in a last effort to keep his hold on the valuable base and port of Bengasi. General Ritchie placed more troops at General Godwin-Austen's disposal to enable him to increase the frontal pressure and instructed him to send the Armoured Division to turn the enemy's southern flank. The 4th Armoured Brigade moved wide over difficult country and gained a position to the south of Tmimi well in rear of the enemy's positions, but its subsequent movements were much impeded by bad going. On the night of the 16th December the enemy began to withdraw from his Gazala positions and the remnants of his armoured forces managed to slip away in the darkness.

Having destroyed two-thirds of the Axis army we could justly claim a victory; but our advantages henceforth were more apparent than real, for only very light forces could be sent in pursuit of the enemy and even these were much hampered by supply difficulties. Transport resources had been stretched to the limit to sustain the operations in Eastern Cyrenaica, a hundred and twenty miles ahead of railhead; in Western Cyrenaica we were operating at twice to three times that distance from the new forward base at Tobruk. Rough country, waterlogged in many places after the recent heavy rains, increased our supply troubles.

The 13th Corps set out to follow and cut off the defeated enemy. The 4th Indian Division advanced through the Gebel Akhdar and proceeded at a great pace, occupying Derna on 19th December and Barce four days later. The bulk of the German forces, including forty to fifty tanks, withdrew south-westwards across the desert and guarded the coastal road leading south from Bengasi. The 7th Armoured Division followed as fast as it could; but, as the armoured brigade was held up for lack of petrol, General Gott sent mobile columns ahead with orders to make straight for Bengasi. These columns found the going difficult on the southern slopes of the Gebel which were particularly rough and waterlogged; but as they approached, the enemy forces, holding the defiles through the escarpment to cover Bengasi, retired. Our armoured cars entered Bengasi on Christmas Eve and found the town evacuated. By the 26th December all the hill country up to and including Bengasi, with much booty, but unfortunately few prisoners, was in our hands.

The Guards Brigade was sent even wider to the south towards Antelat and Agedabia. No supply vehicles could be provided, however, until 20th December, and, when the brigade reached Antelat on the 22nd, they found their way to the coast road barred by a force of German tanks at Beda Fomm. The 22nd Armoured Brigade reached Saunnu on the 23rd December, but there they were again immobilised by lack of petrol. That evening the enemy armoured forces retired to Agedabia.

Agedabia was a naturally strong position and difficult to turn, and, after the 22nd Armoured Brigade had had an unsuccessful encounter with enemy tanks on the 28th December and again on the 30th, it became clear that we needed fresh troops if we were to advance further. The tanks of the armoured brigade were mechanically unsound after the long march across the desert, and this was largely responsible for their lack of success in these

engagements. The 1st Armoured Division reached Antelat on 6th January, and the next morning patrols reported that the enemy had withdrawn from Agedabia.

While these operations were going on in Eastern Cyrenaica, General Norrie was eliminating the enemy still holding out on the Egyptian frontier. It was of the utmost importance that direct road communication through Sollum should be quickly restored, as the long detour across the desert was most uneconomical in motor transport upon a sufficiency of which depended our ability to maintain an adequate force round Agedabia and Agheila.

On the 2nd January Bardia was captured by the 2nd South African Division, supported by the 1st Army Tank Brigade, after a sustained bombardment from land, sea and air. Sollum was captured on the 11th January, and on the 17th the last remaining garrison at Halfaya surrendered. With that the first stage of the Libyan offensive was successfully concluded.

In sketching the course of the campaign I have not attempted to describe the part played by the Royal Air Force, and even in the fuller narrative of Part II it has not been possible to do justice to their magnificent work. It is no exaggeration to say that but for the unfailing and complete response of the Royal Air Force to all demands and requests made by the Eighth Army, the relief of Tobruk could not have been accomplished. Co-operation between the two Services was excellent from the beginning, and Air Vice-Marshal Coningham and General Ritchie shared a joint headquarters. It need hardly be said that Air Chief Marshal Tedder and I worked in the closest collaboration and most thorough understanding in this, as in every other enterprise in the Middle East.

Co-operation with the Royal Navy and my own relations with Admiral Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, were equally harmonious. During the eight long months of siege Tobruk had been kept continuously supplied at very great risk by ships of the Royal Navy, and when the fortress was at length relieved a very large part of the Eighth Army's supplies continued to be brought by sea. Captain G. Grantham, R.N., permanently accredited as naval liaison officer to General Ritchie's Headquarters, provided a valuable link between the Army Commander and Naval Headquarters at Alexandria.

On the 12th January I wrote to the Prime Minister reviewing the recent fighting in Libya and outlining my intentions for the future. Although our plan to draw the enemy tanks into the open by moving on Tobruk was successful, the ensuing battle had not gone as we had hoped. In spite of their slight numerical superiority our armoured brigades failed in the first instance to neutralise or destroy the enemy armour, which was essential to the complete success of the plan. The Italian M 13 tanks, which, as a result of the experiences of the previous campaign, we had been inclined to dismiss as valueless, fought well and had an appreciable effect on the battle. There was little doubt that the presence of German troops had stiffened Italian morale, particularly that of their armoured troops.

Judging by the results of the tank battles round Tobruk and at Agedabia, it was obvious that not only were all our tanks outgunned by the German tanks, but our cruiser tanks were