

between Tobruk and Benghazi. Here they would be grounded and all their vehicles used to supplement the transport needed for the extra road-haul, an additional three hundred miles.

The main bodies of the divisions of 30 Corps which had been left in rear moved forward on 14th January and went straight into action from the approach march at 0715 hours on the 15th—a rare example of the “encounter battle”. On the right 51 Division met its first opposition beyond Buerat on the Wadi Kfif where it was held up all day. On the left the New Zealanders and 7 Armoured Division felt with some caution round the southern end of the enemy’s anti-tank screen. By the evening we had reached the Wadi Zem Zem and seized the main crossing at El Faskia. The battle of the Buerat line was now over in a day and the enemy began to withdraw on his whole front, making for the hilly country covering Tripoli on the south-east. His main anxiety throughout was for his desert flank, since his left, retreating by the road, had to make a fairly wide circuit through Misurata and Zliten. He went back fairly slowly, therefore, on his right, pivoting on Beni Ulid until 90 Light Division on the coast had reached Homs; then he drew his southern forces back to Tarhuna and by the 19th was again facing south-west on the general line Homs—Tarhuna. The two divisions on our left found great difficulty in coming to grips with the enemy for the country was very difficult and, in the early stages, strewn with mines. 51 Division, on the coast, met less enemy resistance but was delayed by heavy demolitions and mines all along the road. It was not until the early hours of 18th January that the division entered Misurata and the evening of the 19th when it entered Homs. We were now in close contact with the enemy all along his new position. By this time too our fighter aircraft had been installed on new landing grounds at Bir Dufan, south-west of Misurata, where they could attack the enemy in the hill country all the way to Tripoli.

So far the enemy had not been hustled but we should now be in a position to play on his fear for his right flank. Accordingly 4 Light Armoured Brigade, which had been operating far out on our left, was ordered to edge still more to the west; at the same time 22 Armoured Brigade, which had remained in Army Reserve between the two thrusts and had not yet been engaged, was sent due north to the coast road at Zliten. The intention was that, if the enemy reacted to our threat on the west, 51 Division, now reinforced with a hundred and fifty fresh tanks, should drive hard down the road to Tripoli. The ruse was successful: the enemy armour was kept south-west of Tarhuna to oppose 4 Light Armoured Brigade and the Ramcke Parachute Brigade was moved across to the same area from Homs. The enemy does not appear to have noticed the arrival of 22 Armoured Brigade at Zliten.

In spite of this success in misleading the enemy, the difficulties of the terrain west of Homs made up for the fewness of the defenders in that sector. For the first thirty-five miles from Homs the road to Tripoli winds through ravines and it had been demolished in many places with great skill and thoroughness. A rapid advance was impossible over such country and in face of opposition. After several

sharp actions with the rearguard, notably in the prepared defences west of Homs and again at Corradini, 51 Division emerged into the plain of Tripoli and captured Castelverde on the morning of 22nd January. Here they were only thirty miles from the town and since the country was now more open and suitable for the employment of armour 22 Armoured Brigade was brought into the lead. The rearguard of 90 Light Division made a final stand covering a demolished causeway fifteen miles east of Tripoli and darkness fell as the tanks were struggling in deep, soft sand to work round the flanks. There was only one company of infantry forward to deal with what was essentially an infantry problem. A battalion of 51 Division was therefore ordered forward, riding on “Valentine” tanks, to stage an attack in the full moonlight. The attack was successful and the infantry and tanks pressed on through the night down the main road to Tripoli. 22 Armoured Brigade followed, taking the by-pass road to approach the town from the south.

The advance of the left flanking column proceeded at about the same pace. Having entered Tarhuna on 19th January 7 Armoured Division was held up throughout the next day by enemy holding the hills flanking the defile through which the road descends into the plain of Tripoli. On the 21st the armoured cars of the division worked round the southern flank and entered the plain; at the same time leading elements of the New Zealand Division, which had been ordered to try the descent further west, found another way down the escarpment and came up on their left. But the way was not yet clear; the enemy rearguard was strong and continued to offer stiff resistance at Castel Benito, Azizia and Garian. Moreover it necessarily took some time to deploy our main forces in the plain, as the single road through the Tarhuna defile was demolished in several places and the alternative route which the New Zealanders had discovered traversed rough country. In the late afternoon of the 22nd, however, the enemy began to evacuate Garian, and shortly after Castel Benito also, and the southern approach to Tripoli was open.

11 Hussars entered Tripoli from the south at 0500 hours on 23rd January and at about the same time 1 Gordons of 51 Division came in from the west. At 0900 hours the same day General Montgomery received the formal surrender of the Italian authorities outside the city. The last of the enemy’s armed forces had left some hours before but the entire civilian population remained, in contrast with Benghazi which had been evacuated by the Italians. Eighth Army’s entry was accepted peacefully; the Italian municipal and police officials remained at their posts and the British Military Administration assumed the government of the city and province in an atmosphere of calm. A curfew was imposed on military and civilians. Private and civic buildings and establishments were little damaged. The public services were still functioning, but the food supply was restricted. This was remedied as occasion permitted and British soldiers were forbidden to buy civilian food; none of them, except those whose duties made it essential, were quartered in the town. Many of the military establishments and installations had been wrecked and the damage to the port was particularly widespread. Quays and wharves were cratered, the mole breached,