

fight which followed the dawn encounter. They held their ground tenaciously in spite of very heavy losses and though eighty-seven of their tanks were destroyed they accounted for a large number of the enemy guns. At this price they held open the end of the salient for 1 Armoured Division to emerge. It had great difficulty, for it came under heavy fire at once and in a short time the enemy armour began furiously to engage both flanks of the salient. The armoured brigades turned outwards to meet these converging attacks, which were heaviest on the northern flank where 21 Panzer Division was soon engaged. The situation looked dangerous at times, but the enemy had been tricked into allowing his armoured divisions to become separated again and was once more compelled to pit his tanks in two separate groups against our massed armour and artillery. He fought with the certain knowledge that all was at stake and with all the skill of his long experience in armoured fighting. At one moment 21 Panzer Division broke right into the north flank of the salient; but slowly as the day wore on the enemy¹ was forced back. His losses were crippling and the Africa Corps would fight no more as a Corps on Egyptian soil.

The battle of 2nd November was the decisive action and it must have been that night that the enemy decided to withdraw. Indications of a withdrawal came early on 3rd November and increased as the day wore on. One armoured car regiment, the Royal Dragoons, had managed to pass round the enemy's gun line in the dawn mist on the 2nd and was already raiding his communications and firing his dumps in rear; but the main body of our armour was still penned in to the east of the Rahman track. 7 Motor Brigade had made a night attack on the night of the 2nd in an attempt to cut through the gun screen across the track, due west beyond Tell el Aqqaqir, but the country was completely flat and the positions gained would have been untenable by day. At dawn, therefore, 8 Armoured Brigade tried another tack and moved south-west; here too it struck ground sown with mines and raked with anti-tank fire so that after slow progress it was again held up on reaching the Rahman track. 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment, however, managed to slip past and raced to join the Royals at El Daba. Meanwhile the full weight of our air attack was switched to the main road, where slow-moving, close-packed transport already in retreat presented excellent targets from Ghazal to Fuka.

But although the enemy had acknowledged defeat and turned to flight he still hoped to be able to conduct an orderly retreat, and of this he had a reasonable chance as long as he maintained his blocking position on the Rahman track. An infantry assault was essential to break through the anti-tank screen, and the infantry on the spot were exhausted; General Montgomery decided accordingly to employ a detached force from 4 Indian Division which had hitherto not been heavily engaged. 5 Indian Brigade, composed of Essex, Baluch and Rajputana Rifles, was selected. After a night approach march of extreme difficulty the brigade attacked at 0230 hours on 4th November, about five miles south of Tell el Aqqaqir, behind a hastily organized but admirably fired moving barrage. The attack was completely successful; by dawn the southern

end of the enemy's gun screen had been forced back and it now faced south-east, covering the coast road. Round the end of it the armoured divisions of 10 Corps now poured. At the same time the area immediately south of Tell el Aqqaqir was cleared up under the direction of 51 Division and the Australians in the north, advancing into the central pocket, found that most of the Germans and Italians enclosed there had slipped away in the night.

10 Corps had been reorganized and regrouped for the pursuit and had now under command all three armoured divisions, 1st, 7th and 10th.* The New Zealand Division, with 9 Armoured Brigade, now reduced and reorganized as a composite armoured regiment, and adding 4 Light Armoured Brigade to its command, was held in reserve under 30 Corps. The three armoured divisions crossed the Rahman track soon after first light on 4th November with orders to make for the road at Ghazal and beyond it. They had advanced little more than six miles, however, when they again found themselves confronted by the anti-tank gun screen which had again fallen back to form a wide arc covering Ghazal. It was evidently Rommel's hope to extricate the greater part of his northernmost forces in an orderly manner behind this screen; but the hope was soon frustrated for shortly after midday the New Zealand Division, with 4 Light Armoured Brigade on its right flank, was sent in a wide sweep to the south with orders to press on and secure the escarpment at Fuka.

As this great mass of motorized and armoured troops was observed pressing westwards to the south of the German rearguards Rommel at first refused to believe that it was the British armour and to General von Thoma's expostulations replied that it could only be the Trieste Division, for the British could not have got so far forward in so short a time. The Commander of the German Africa Corps therefore went forward to make a personal reconnaissance to obtain the evidence to convince his superior and was captured in the process by a British tank. When thus dramatically convinced Rommel saw at once that only by the speediest withdrawal could he hope to extricate any of his German troops. The Italians must be abandoned to their fate; the majority of them were in any case already cut off. The whole of X Corps, being without any transport, and the survivors of XXI Corps in the same plight waited on the battlefield to surrender. Some attempted to march off to the west in long, straggling columns and some individuals undoubtedly perished in the desert while attempting to find their own way back. Formations from 13 Corps were employed to round up these stragglers. The Headquarters of XX Corps withdrew straight down the road without having taken any part in the battle; the remains of the Ariete Division followed their Corps Commander until overtaken by fuel shortage, whereupon they abandoned their remaining tanks at various points along the road.

* 1 Armoured Division with 2 Armoured and 7 Motor Brigades, the 7th with 22 Armoured and 131 Lorried Infantry Brigades and the 10th with 8 Armoured and 133 Lorried Infantry Brigades. The two Lorried Infantry Brigades were taken from 44 Division; the association of 131 Brigade with 7 Armoured Division, which began in this purely fortuitous manner, became permanent and 1 Armoured retained 7 Motor Brigade, the original 7 Armoured Division Support Group.