

attack convinced General Schmitt commanding the garrison, however, of the futility of further resistance and early on the 2nd January the garrison surrendered unconditionally.

Our casualties in this successful operation were slight and did not exceed 450 all told, of which the majority belonged to the 2nd South African Division. In addition to prisoners and material captured from the enemy, the fall of Bardia released over 1,100 of our own men, who had been kept in the fortress as prisoners of war, in conditions of great privation. Much enemy ammunition fell into our hands.

Preparations were at once put in hand for the reduction of Halfaya, and it was hoped that the fall of Bardia would intensify the lack of food and water from which the place was already suffering, if prisoners' stories were to be believed. On the 11th January the Transvaal Scottish attacked Sollum and completed its capture early the next day, with nearly 350 prisoners. On the 13th the South Africans finally denied to the enemy access to his last source of water supply, and his surrender became inevitable. Plans were made for the final attack, in which the 1st Free French Brigade Group were to take the main part; but early on the 17th January General de Giorgis, the commander of the garrison, surrendered unconditionally. Some 5,500 prisoners were taken, of whom 2,000 were Germans. Few serviceable weapons fell into our hands and no stores of any value. The prisoners were exhausted from lack of nourishment.

The Enemy retires to El Agheila.

In Western Cyrenaica early January was a period of acute administrative difficulty. The expenditure of artillery ammunition, except by troops actually attacked by the enemy, was limited to twenty-five rounds a gun a day, in order to allow reserves to be accumulated for the projected assault on the enemy holding Agedabia, which was to be launched when the 1st Armoured Division arrived. The move of this division had been delayed owing to the lack of transport to bring forward petrol, but it eventually reached Antelat on the 6th January. On the morning of the 7th our patrols reported that Agedabia had been evacuated.

Columns of the 22nd Guards Brigade followed up, but were delayed by the minefields round Agedabia and by bad going; and it was not until the evening of the 8th January that they came up against the enemy in strong positions sixteen miles further south. The enemy withdrew from these positions two days later, and on the 11th January the Guards Brigade were in contact with the forward positions of the enemy's final line running southwards from Marsa Brega.

The country round El Agheila offers one of the most easily defensible positions in Libya. A broad belt of salt pans, sand dunes and innumerable small cliffs stretches southwards for fifty miles, its southern flank resting on the Libyan Sand Sea, a vast expanse of shifting sand. Apart from the main road from Bengasi to Tripoli only a few tracks cross this inhospitable country, so that the thirty-five thousand enemy now left out of the original hundred thousand sufficed to hold it. Accordingly Rommel set his infantry to guard the approaches at Marsa Brega, Bir el Ginn, Bir

es Suera, Bir el Cleibat and Marada, and withdrew his armoured force to re-equip.

I was as anxious to secure this area as Rommel was to hold it. Apart from the need to traverse it to invade Tripolitania, which was my ultimate intention, I considered it essential to control this region in order to hold Cyrenaica. Otherwise, I feared, we should have to retire to the frontier, if the enemy were, at some later date, again to become strong enough to launch an offensive in force.*

Before we could approach the task of throwing the enemy out of El Agheila, however, we were obliged to wait for reserves to be accumulated and the administrative situation to improve, so that we might concentrate sufficient troops for this difficult undertaking. Until that time came, which I judged would be about the middle of February, we must content ourselves with leaving only light forces to watch the enemy. It seemed highly unlikely that he would be in a position to attack us before then, but the Eighth Army and the 13th Corps issued instructions against this contingency. On the 21st January the improbable occurred, and without warning the Axis forces began to advance.

CONSOLIDATION AT GAZALA.

Dispositions and Plans of the Opposing Forces.

Prior to the 21st January, the enemy appeared to have three weak Italian divisions of the 21st Corps, Pavia, Sabrata and Brescia, in Agheila itself and to the east of it. The Trieste, Ariete and Trento Divisions seemed to be round Maaten Giofer about twenty miles to the south, watching the gap between the Wadi el Faregh and the marshes to the west, through which runs the track from Agheila to Marada. At Marada itself were thought to be some of the German 90th Light Division, the Burckhardt battle group and some Italian troops. The bulk of the 90th Light Division was probably in the dangerous sector immediately south of Marsa el Brega on the coast, while the two Panzer Divisions were believed to be between the minefields which covered the 90th Light Division's positions and the north bank of the Wadi el Faregh. Elements of the 90th Light Division were also thought to be watching the coast west of El Agheila towards Ras el Aali.

About the middle of January the enemy's strength was estimated at some 17,000 German and 18,000 Italian troops with about seventy medium tanks altogether, of which twenty-five were German. Another twenty German medium tanks might be available at short notice.

It was not thought possible for Rommel to receive any new German formations for some time, though the arrival of a fresh Italian armoured division with some hundred and forty tanks might be expected within a month or so. Even the arrival of these reinforcements, would probably not enable the enemy to take the offensive, as his supply problem appeared to be acute. He was expected to stand on the Agheila—Marada line until forced to withdraw from it by our pressure, or because of difficulties of supply.

* G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. 110, 19th January 1942—Appendix 6.