

against about the same number of enemy tanks of which about fifty might be German.

General Cunningham felt it was his duty to point out to me that, if he continued to attack the enemy as he had been doing since the 19th November, we might find ourselves for the time being without any serviceable tanks at all. He considered we now had to choose between two courses; continuing the offensive and risking the possibility of being left with no tanks or very few, while the enemy still retained some, possibly more efficient than ours; or abandoning the offensive. The risks attendant on persisting in the offensive were not negligible, since, should this result in the enemy retaining a appreciable superiority in tanks, the safety of Egypt might once more be endangered.

I was in no doubt myself at any time as to the right course, and at once instructed General Cunningham to continue his offensive with the object of recapturing Sidi Rezegh and joining hands with the Tobruk garrison.* It looked as if the enemy was hard pressed and stretched to the limit, and this was borne out by his behaviour at this period of the battle: he was thrusting here, there and everywhere in what seemed to me a desperate effort to throw us off our balance, create chaos in our ranks, and so pave the way for regaining the initiative. The enemy, it is true, had temporarily succeeded in seizing the local tactical initiative, but the strategical initiative remained with us: we were attacking, he was defending. This general initiative it was at all costs essential to retain.

General Cunningham received my decision loyally and at once issued his orders to give effect to it. I was, however, somewhat disturbed by what seemed to be excessive anxiety on his part lest the enemy should break through in force to our rear areas, and dislocate our vulnerable supply and repair organisation east of the frontier. His anxiety undoubtedly grew when the enemy swiftly followed up his recent success by a powerful counter-stroke with that very intention, thrusting eastwards on the 24th November with his armoured divisions to the frontier and beyond. I thought, however, that, after discussing the situation with me and hearing that I was determined to continue the offensive, he would feel himself capable of giving effect to my decision whole heartedly. I therefore returned to Cairo on 25th November.

While at the headquarters of the Eighth Army, I had discussed the situation exhaustively with Air Marshal Tedder and found that he too had grave misgivings about the direction of the Eighth Army in the circumstances then obtaining. After returning to Cairo, I again gave the whole question most anxious consideration and concluded that in so critical a situation, I could not retain in the field a commander in whose ability to carry out my intentions I had not complete confidence.

I therefore decided with great reluctance that I must replace General Cunningham. I selected my Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Major-General N. M. Ritchie, as the best officer available on the spot to succeed him, and ordered him to take over command at once with the acting rank of Lieutenant-General. I informed the Minister of State in Cairo and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff in London of my decision and asked for the approval of His

Majesty's Government, which was immediately accorded. Throughout this critical time, and indeed at all times, until he went to England in March to take up a command, I received the greatest possible help and support from my Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Smith.

The Enemy's Counterstroke.

When General Ritchie assumed command on the 26th November the force of the enemy's counterstroke was by no means spent. Showing great boldness and vigour, the enemy had driven eastwards on the 24th November with the greater part of his remaining tanks and lorried infantry, causing considerable havoc in our rearward areas amongst transport and headquarters.

The Support Group engaged one enemy column near Gabr Saleh, and the 1st South African Infantry Brigade shelled others passing within range of their leaguer at Taieb el Essem. The 7th Armoured Brigade with only ten tanks kept up a running fight with yet another column containing more than twice that number over a distance of thirty miles. The 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades had to be posted to guard the flank of the New Zealand Division and were not available to engage the enemy.

The enemy tanks crossed the frontier wire at several points, and by the 25th November parties of the enemy were scattered all over the country east of it. Twice, enemy tanks attacked the 4th Indian Division at Sidi Omar; but thanks to the staunchness and restraint of the artillery and to the skilful dispositions of General Messervy, they were driven off with heavy loss. Nevertheless the enemy captured many prisoners and reached a point nineteen miles east of Sidi Omar and within fifty miles of our railhead. They also created a stir in the advanced headquarters of the Eighth Army near Maddalena by moving southwards along the frontier wire towards it. On the 26th November the enemy tanks turned north into Halfaya. Then, after an unsuccessful attack on Capuzzo and Musaid, they passed through a gap east of Sollum Barracks, which the New Zealanders had previously tried in vain to close, and entered Bardia, where they were joined by other columns from the south-east.

Part of the enemy's armoured forces did not cross the frontier, but remained to the west to do such damage as they could. The Support Group and the Guards Brigade rapidly formed mobile columns and harassed them very effectively.

On the 27th November enemy tanks, based on Bardia, captured the headquarters of the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade at Sidi Azeiz. Then, after two further attacks on Capuzzo, one of which was comparatively successful, the enemy armoured forces disappeared from the frontier area. By this time most of them were already hurrying back to Sidi Rezegh in response to insistent calls for help.

On the whole the enemy thrust inflicted little material damage, and the moral effect was almost negligible as the transport and other units, which were scattered by his lightning advance, soon re-assembled and reorganised themselves. Inasmuch as the New Zealand Division was able to fight through to Tobruk, which they might never have been able to do if the weight of the enemy armour had been

* Letter to Lieut.-General Cunningham, 24th November 1941—Appendix 5.