

Brigade, through no fault of its own, from lack of training and its movements were also hampered by superfluous transport. Consequently it arrived too late to assist the New Zealanders, who in the face of powerful attacks had to retire, first from Sidi Rezegh and then from Belhamed.

The enemy were now again in possession of the vitally important ground at Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh. The troops of the Tobruk garrison were still holding the Ed Duda salient, but their front was enormous relative to their strength and was exposed to attack from north, east, and south. On the frontier, the 13th Corps had captured the Omars, but the enemy garrisons at Bardia and Halfaya were still holding out and were strong in artillery. Of the two brigades of the 1st South African Division one had been practically destroyed. Two-thirds of the New Zealand Division had been cut to pieces, and had had to be withdrawn to refit. The three armoured brigades with which the offensive had been launched had been reduced to one composite formation mustering about a hundred and twenty tanks, all of them inferior to the German tanks of which there were at least half as many. Moreover there were numerous Italian tanks, which had shown themselves to be better than we had believed.

Apart from the 7th Armoured Division (Support Group and composite Armoured Brigade), there remained the 22nd Guards Brigade, which had scarcely been engaged; the 4th Indian Division, one brigade of which had captured the Omars after heavy fighting; the 1st South African Infantry Brigade; the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade; and the 2nd South African Division, only partially trained, which was in process of relieving the 4th Indian Division in front of Bardia and Halfaya. There were also the independent armoured car units, the Oases Force committed in the Gialo region, and the Tobruk garrison, which was not, however, capable of more than a limited offensive effort.

But the enemy also had had a severe hammering both on the ground and from the air and was much reduced in strength. It became therefore a question of maintaining the momentum of our attack, and I was determined that it should be maintained. In order to be on the spot, should a decision be required from me, I stayed at General Ritchie's headquarters from the 1st to 11th December and was able to confer with him constantly on the course of the operations. General Ritchie clearly needed fresh troops. I therefore arranged to make the Royal Dragoons from Syria and the 12th Royal Lancers, newly arrived from England, immediately available, and ordered the 1st Armoured Division, which had just arrived from the United Kingdom, and a brigade group of the 50th Division, which had been ordered to Iraq, to join the Eighth Army. I also formed three Indian battalions into the 38th Indian Infantry Brigade to help in the defence of the lines of communication.

General Ritchie still had enough forces to continue, and he had already made up his mind, rightly, that the ridges north and south of El Adem, due south of Tobruk, were the key to the whole position. He therefore instructed the two Corps Commanders to secure them as soon as possible: the 13th Corps was to advance westwards along the northern ridge from the flank of the Tobruk salient and the

30th Corps to capture El Gubi and close on El Adem from the south. The role of the Armoured Division remained unchanged: to neutralise and destroy the enemy's armoured forces.

For various reasons the operation did not materialise. First, a hitch arose over the provision of transport to lift one of the Indian brigades from the frontier—we were working to very fine margins with transport—and the Indian Division was nearly a day late in assembling. Then a preliminary attack against the enemy's southern flank at Bir el Gubi met with strong opposition and failed in its object of clearing the way for the advance. Finally, when the 30th Corps had massed for the operation, the enemy had occupied the general line El Adem—Bir el Gubi in strength, with the greater part of his armoured forces on the southern flank, astride the proposed axis of advance. The enemy having failed meanwhile in a last attempt to reach Bardia, and, having several times attacked the Tobruk salient furiously but in vain, had divined our plan and withdrawn from the east of Tobruk. The Armoured Division succeeded in destroying quite a number of Italian tanks during this time, but the German armour and the greater part of the enemy forces remained inaccessible behind a powerful screen of artillery and anti-tank guns.

Light columns and armoured cars of the 30th Corps were operating well to the north-west of Bir el Gubi, but the Armoured Division was unable either to dislodge the enemy from the southern flank or to turn the position. Seeing that there was no time to lose, General Ritchie took the initiative with the 13th Corps. During the night of the 7th December the 70th Division began to advance along El Adem Ridge, and by the 9th they were well to the west of the Tobruk—El Adem road, having cleared the whole area between the perimeter and the by-pass road. At General Godwin-Austen's request, General Ritchie sent the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade from Bardia to reinforce this advance.

On the 8th December the enemy began to withdraw rapidly but in good order towards Gazala, covering his retirement with rearguards strong in anti-tank artillery. The pursuit was closely pressed by motorised columns on the flanks and by the infantry of both Corps in the centre and was accompanied by harassing air action. On the 10th December the Polish Brigade broke out of the western perimeter of Tobruk, and the long investment of the fortress came to an end.

After the withdrawal to Gazala a brief lull followed during which the supply lines were reorganised with Tobruk as a forward base; but by the 12th December our forward troops were increasing their pressure on the new line which the enemy had taken up, running southwards from Gazala. The 13th Corps took command of operations in the forward area, and the headquarters of the 30th Corps went back to direct operations against the enemy garrisons in the frontier positions.

I had at first thought that the enemy's stand at Gazala was only another delaying action to cover further withdrawal. But the resistance offered to our pressure, his heavy counter-attacks, of which the 4th Indian Division bore the brunt, and numerous air attacks showed that he hoped to check our advance on this line and was using all his available forces to