

(c) Fine leadership and fighting qualities displayed by all personnel.

Our equipment, in particular the Infantry Tanks, Cruiser Tanks and 25-pounders, proved to be excellent.

PART II.—SECOND PHASE—OPERATIONS FROM BARDIA TO TOBRUK—DECEMBER 15, 1940, TO JANUARY 21, 1941.

7. Bardia—Enemy Position and Strength.

27. The enemy forces within the perimeter of Bardia comprised the greater part of four infantry divisions, together with guns and tanks. Some of these formations had taken part in the later stages of the fighting after the capture of Sidi Barrani.

28. The defences of Bardia, apart from coastal and anti-aircraft defences, consisted of a perimeter seventeen miles in extent, lying mainly on a level plain South-West of the escarpment. The perimeter itself consisted of concrete posts at intervals of some seven hundred yards, containing machine guns and anti-tank guns, each post being wired and having an anti-tank ditch. Five hundred yards behind the first line was a second but less elaborate line of support posts. Outside the whole ran a continuous anti-tank trench and wire obstacle. Only at the Southern end of the perimeter was there an additional switch line, three to four thousands yards from the outer line.

8. Plan of Attack on Bardia.

29. The troops available for the attack were:—

7th Armoured Division: Major-General Creagh.

6th Australian Division: Major-General Mackay.

16th Infantry Brigade.

7th Battalion R.T.R.: Now reduced to 26 tanks.

1st Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers: Machine-gun battalion.

Corps Artillery: Consisting of one field and one medium regiment.

Two squadrons of the Australian Divisional Cavalry Regiment had been diverted to observe Jarabub, to which a considerable enemy force had withdrawn. The rôle of 7th Armoured Division was to prevent the enemy reinforcing from or escaping to the North, and the assaulting troops therefore consisted of approximately 20,000 men, 122 guns and 26 tanks.

30. The diminished resources of infantry tanks necessitated a bold employment of infantry both in the assault and in the exploitation. This demanded a high expenditure of ammunition for their protection. The period of sixteen days between the arrival of the first infantry outside Bardia and the launching of the attack was occupied mainly in bringing up large additional supplies of ammunition from railhead at Mersa Matruh. The harbour of Sollum, which the enemy withdrawal behind the defences of Bardia had put at our disposal, was used for this purpose, and its possession greatly facilitated the task.

31. The following was the general plan:—

One infantry battalion, of the 16th Australian Brigade, closely followed by engineers, was to attack at dawn at a point due West of Bardia, where the anti-tank

ditch and the wire nearly coincided. Covered by a heavy artillery concentration, the battalion was to seize and hold a bridge-head while the engineers filled in the anti-tank ditch at five separate points. This achieved, tanks and infantry were to enter the perimeter and sweep South-Eastwards on a wide front as far as the road Bardia-Capuzzo and the edge of the escarpment overlooking Bardia. Thereafter units of the 17th Australian Brigade were to break into the perimeter South of the original point of entry, and, driving still further to the South-East, contain the enemy forces manning the strongest positions at the Southern end. The attack would then be exploited East and North-East to Bardia.

While these operations were in progress demonstrations were to be made against parts of the perimeter remote from the real attack; on the North by 7th Armoured Division, and on the South by those units of 17th Australian Brigade not taking part in the attack. The area North of the road Bardia-Tobruk was to be subjected to heavy bombardment both from the sea and from the air.

9. The Assault on Bardia.

32. By the 27th December, the 16th and 17th Australian Brigades were in position opposite the defences, and on New Year's Day the 19th Australian Brigade also arrived. On the 3rd January, at 0530 hours, the attack began. The 2/1st Battalion Australian Infantry successfully established the bridge-head, and the engineers had completed their task within 50 minutes. 16th and 17th Australian Brigades (Brigadiers Allen and Savige) captured their objectives with small loss, in spite of a counter-attack by enemy tanks. At 1745 hours on 4th January tanks and infantry entered Bardia; and on the 5th the defenders of the South-Eastern sector surrendered. 45,000 prisoners and 462 guns, of which 216 were field guns, were taken—117 light and 12 medium tanks were also captured.

10. Tobruk.—Enemy Position and Strength.

33. With the loss of Bardia, the Italian forces remaining in Cyrenaica were:—

(a) At Tobruk:—

61st Sirte Infantry Division.

Headquarters and Corps troops of XXII Corps.

Coast Defence and Anti-Aircraft units of Tobruk garrison.

Remnants of the divisions from the forward areas.

(b) Further West—

60th Infantry Division.

(c) About Mechili—

Nucleus of armoured formation under General Babini.

Even before Bardia fell I had decided that an attack on Tobruk was justified on both operational and administrative grounds. By the 6th January, 7th Armoured Division had cut the roads Tobruk-Derna and Tobruk-Mechili, and was in contact with the perimeter and with enemy troops East of Derna and Mechili, causing the enemy to abandon the aerodromes at Gazala, Tmimi and Bomba. By the 7th January, 19th Australian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Robertson) was in position facing the Eastern defences, and the remainder of