

Wadi Faregh, which runs in a south-westerly direction from Giof el Matar to the Ageheila marshes and is a formidable natural barrier. Apart from a wide outflanking movement to the south-east of the Wadi Faregh, which it was far beyond the capacity of the 13th Corps to undertake, there were only two courses open to us: either to make a frontal attack on the main enemy position astride the road just north of Agedabia village, or to attempt an outflanking movement over the difficult country to the south.

General Godwin-Austen tried a combination of both. The 22nd Armoured Brigade, for which it at last became possible to provide fuel, was ordered to work round to the south towards Chor es Sufan, while the Guards Brigade made its way through the sand dunes to attack Agedabia from the west. The Guards Brigade's attack, made on the 26th December, failed owing to misdirection, and the following day the 22nd Armoured Brigade was heavily engaged by the remnants of the enemy's armoured divisions which had been lying to the south-east. The long march across the desert from Gazala had been too much for many of the tanks with which the brigade had been fitted out: out of a hundred and thirty tanks, sixty had fallen by the way, and in the battle eight more were lost out of a total of fourteen as a result of mechanical breakdown. Although the brigade failed in its object of getting round behind the main position and was forced to retire to El Haseiat, it inflicted considerable damage on the enemy, destroying twenty of his tanks and damaging twenty more. A further action on the 30th December, in which the 22nd Armoured Brigade again lost a number of tanks, drove General Godwin-Austen to the conclusion that the brigade was not fit for further operations. Accordingly he gave instructions for the 7th Support Group to relieve it, and had to content himself with harassing the enemy until fresh troops arrived.

It was evident that the troops in the forward zone were too weak for their task, and that they must be reinforced if the destruction of the enemy was to be completed. General Ritchie had issued orders for the 1st Armoured Division to move forward and intended that it should be used for the advance into Tripolitania when the time came. On the 3rd January the 13th Corps issued orders for the 4th Indian Division also to move forward, as soon as the administrative position permitted.

Our prospects of pushing the enemy back further depended entirely on our overcoming the difficulties of supply. There is no denying that the administrative position in Western Cyrenaica at the opening of the New Year was far from satisfactory. Transport resources were stretched to the limit to meet daily maintenance needs, and there were practically no reserves west of Tobruk. No substantial enemy stores had been found to supplement our own deficiencies. Moreover the troops had been on the reduced battle ration for many weeks, and it had become necessary to increase the rations to field service scale and to provide some canteen stores. The demand for engineer stores for the forward troops was also continually on the increase.

Until the port of Bengasi could be brought into use, little improvement could be looked for. Derna was opened as a port on the 6th January

and thereafter the supply of troops in the eastern part of the Gebel Akhdar was assured. A day later the first convoy arrived at Bengasi, but bad weather and the lack of lighters made unloading a slow business. Owing to the rough seas, lighters could not be sailed round the coast and as a result Bengasi was never brought into full operation. The Eighth Army was, therefore, forced to rely on land transport during the whole time it was operating in Western Cyrenaica.

The reduction of Bardia and Halfaya.

While the 13th Corps was pressing the pursuit of the main body of the defeated Axis forces and clearing the rest of Cyrenaica, the 30th Corps under General Norrie proceeded with the reduction of the enemy strongholds at Bardia and round Halfaya. By the middle of December, the 2nd South African Division with a brigade of the 1st South African Division under its command, was in touch with the enemy's forward defences, and communication by land between Halfaya and Bardia had been severed, as had the pipeline which brought water from Bardia to Sollum and Halfaya. The enemy still maintained communication by sea between the two strongholds, however, and sent supplies by launch from Bardia to Halfaya.

General Ritchie had instructed the 30th Corps to restore direct land communication with Tobruk by the main road through Sollum and Bardia as soon as possible, but had, with my full approval, stipulated that the task was to be carried out with the minimum of casualties. This was important in view of the difficulty of providing reinforcements to replace wastage in the infantry of the Union Defence Forces, which were to carry out the attack. The 1st Army Tank Brigade and a strong force of field and medium artillery were allotted to the 30th Corps, which was supported also by a bomber wing of the Royal Air Force.

The defences of Bardia, which was to be reduced first, were much as they had been when General Wavell took the place from the Italians in December, 1940. They consisted of a number of self-contained and mutually supporting defensive localities, covered by machine-gun and anti-tank gun posts, which in their turn were protected by barbed wire entanglements, anti-tank minefields and an efficient concrete anti-tank ditch. There were other defended localities and machine-gun posts in the interior of the fortress to give depth to the defence. The garrison was believed to number about 4,500, of whom 1,500 might be Germans, with a few tanks and some twenty field guns. Actually, at its fall, Bardia yielded nearly 8,000 prisoners, including 2,000 Germans, and about thirty-five guns. Owing to the length of the perimeter to be defended, the garrison could not provide any appreciable reserve.

On the 31st December, attacking from the south, the 3rd South African Infantry Brigade and a regiment of the 1st Army Tank Brigade broke through the enemy's defences to the east of the main road from Sollum, and penetrated deep into the fortress. The enemy counter-attacked, but, generally, we retained the ground taken. On the night of the 1st January the assault was resumed, again to the east of the main road. The enemy resisted stubbornly and inflicted a number of casualties on our tanks which led the attack. This bold night