

—Mechili—Bir Tengeder. But on the 1st February it was found necessary to order the evacuation of Derna and to withdraw further to a line running south from Gazala. This decision was forced on us by the weakness of our armour and by the discovery, after close examination of new evidence, that the enemy's supply situation might permit him to advance in the next few days from Msus with at least one armoured division. He might then try to outflank our positions at Mechili and Tengeder from the south, and thus threaten the safety of our troops round Derna and Martuba, which, owing to the configuration of the coast were liable to be cut off. I took the further precaution of ordering defensive positions to be prepared on the Egyptian frontier and at Giarabub.

While these operations were in progress, Lieutenant-General Godwin-Austen asked to be relieved of his command of the 13th Corps, as he felt that General Ritchie had displayed a lack of confidence in him by issuing orders directly to his subordinate commanders. I had no option but to relieve him of his command, and replaced him by Major-General Gott, then commanding the 7th Armoured Division.

During the withdrawal from Agedabia the 1st Armoured Division lost about ninety of its tanks, thirty twenty-five-pounder guns, thirty two-pounder anti-tank guns and twenty-five light Bofors anti-aircraft guns, besides about a fifth of its load-carrying transport. The 4th Indian Division also lost heavily in vehicles. The losses inflicted on the enemy do not appear to have been serious, though the 1st Armoured Division claimed to have destroyed twenty enemy tanks and damaged twenty-five more.

I returned to my General Headquarters on the 1st February disquieted by the failure of the Eighth Army to check the enemy advance. The weakness of our armour was particularly disturbing, and I doubted whether we might not have to withdraw to the frontier positions. When I got back to Cairo, however, I found that the prospects of rebuilding our armoured force reasonably quickly were better than I had supposed, and I decided to try to hold Tobruk, since to possess it would undoubtedly make it very much easier to resume the offensive. I therefore sent General Ritchie preliminary instructions to hold the enemy as far west as possible without risking the destruction or isolation of the Eighth Army west of the Egyptian frontier.

Whatever happened, I was determined not to allow Tobruk to be besieged a second time. The configuration of the coast invited investment, and with my existing resources of infantry and armour I did not consider I could afford to lock up one and a quarter divisions in a fortress. Admiral Cunningham agreed, particularly since the siege had proved very costly in ships, and so did Air Chief Marshal Tedder, who doubted whether he had sufficient aircraft to provide fighter cover. It was still my firm intention, however, to resume the offensive and for that Tobruk would be invaluable as an advanced base. Consequently I instructed General Ritchie to make every effort to hold Tobruk, short of allowing it to become invested.

Having studied further the problem of destroying the enemy and occupying Tripolitania, I reached two principal conclusions, namely that, when we attacked again we must have complete superiority in armour and that

our offensive must not lose momentum as a result of inability to maintain powerful forces beyond Bengasi.

In the open desert country of Cyrenaica superiority in armour was in my opinion the essential of any offensive. To achieve this we needed at least half as many tanks again as the enemy, taking into account the relative efficiency of the German tanks and our own. Over and above that we needed a reserve equal to at least twenty-five per cent. of the number deployed with units. Judging from past experience, the reserve should have been double that figure; but I was prepared to take that risk. Estimates of relative strengths, based on information then available and on the assumption that no troops or equipment would have to be diverted to the Northern Front or elsewhere, showed that we might hope to attain the desired position by the 1st May.*

Bitter experience showed the truth of my second conclusion. As transport was still short and distances great, we could not hope to maintain powerful forces round Agedabia and El Agheila unless Bengasi could be used as a port. Our first objective must be to take Bengasi, and we must be able to maintain south of the Gebel Akhdar a force strong enough to protect the place against the powerful and resolute enemy forces which might be expected to be still in existence. Our immediate aim, therefore, was to stabilise a front as far west as possible behind which to build up a striking force and accumulate reserves.

The Middle East Defence Committee approved this policy and I confirmed my orders to General Ritchie, amplifying them in due course.† While preparing to resume the offensive at the earliest possible date, the Eighth Army was to hold a line covering Tobruk, and also Giarabub to secure the southern flank. As an insurance, defensive positions were to be prepared on the line Sollum—Maddalena. Tobruk was on no account to be allowed to become invested. The possibility of carrying out a limited advance to secure the landing grounds round Derna and Martuba was to be examined, but there was no intention of undertaking it, if it were likely to prejudice the success of the main offensive later.

The Eighth Army was able to carry out the consolidation of the Gazala position practically undisturbed, as the enemy had halted and deployed in a defensive position on the line Tmimi—Mechili. After a lull necessitated by supply difficulties Rommel sent strong columns forward on the 16th February in what was probably an attempt to draw us into an engagement; but General Ritchie refused to be drawn, and the enemy retired leaving the Eighth Army to continue its preparations.

By the 26th February a strong defensive position had been prepared, well-mined and organised in depth over an area thirty-six miles square. A minefield, extending from the coast at Gazala to Bir Hacheim in the south, blocked the coastal road and all the important tracks from east to west. Within the minefield strong defensive localities had been developed from Gazala to Sidi Muftah and at Bir Hacheim. The fortress of Tobruk gave depth to the de-

* Note on "Future Operations in Libya," 4th Feb. 1942—Appendix 8.

† G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. 111, 11th Feb. 1942—Appendix 9.