

which to reinforce divisions whose fire-power might need strengthening during crises in the battle. Throughout the period of my command, the Middle East Forces suffered from a chronic shortage of field artillery. It was only at the end of my time that we had enough personnel and equipment to give divisions their full complement of this supremely important arm.

On the other hand, the Eighth Army was at last receiving anti-tank guns comparable to the enemy's 88 millimetre dual-purpose weapons which had proved so effective against our tanks during the fighting of the past winter. It was hard indeed that these six-pounder guns should have arrived so recently that the motorised brigades, to whom they were issued first, should not have had enough time to become really familiar with them. The ordinary infantry brigades which took over the two-pounder guns thus released likewise had little chance to train with them before the battle started.

As regards armour, the three brigades deployed with the 30th Corps were fully trained and equipped, although the 2nd Armoured Brigade had only just completed its training. For our proposed offensive, I had intended to place the 1st Armoured Brigade also at General Ritchie's disposal so that the two armoured divisions should each have two armoured brigades. The 1st Armoured Brigade however had only recently received its tanks and its training was far from complete. Nevertheless, I decided to send it forward to complete its training in the Eighth Army area so that it might be available if need should arise. I also arranged to send forward the 32nd Army Tank Brigade with its two regiments of infantry tanks; this brigade began to arrive as the battle opened and was placed under the command of the 13th Corps.

It is not easy to make a true comparison of the enemy's armoured strength and our own. Numerically, the Eighth Army undoubtedly had a considerable superiority, but our infantry tanks were too slow to be put into battle against the enemy's medium tanks, and in spite of the fact that we had a considerable number of American General Grant medium tanks in the line, our tanks were still generally inferior in gunpower and reliability to those of the enemy. Moreover, the General Grant tank though greatly superior to any that had hitherto been available to us, was not free from faults. Chief among these were the very limited arc of traverse of its principal weapon, the 75 millimetre gun, and the low position of this gun in the tank itself which entailed exposing the whole turret when in action. On the other hand, we had a much larger reserve of tanks to draw on than the enemy.

Whether the enemy should try to break our centre or to pass to the south of Bir Hacheim, was not to affect the broad outline of General Ritchie's plan to defeat his attack. In either event, the enemy was to be met by our armoured forces east of our minefields. If the enemy took the southern line, the minefield belt was to be kept intact. If he succeeded in penetrating it, the breach was to be closed at once. The intention in either case was to force the enemy to depend on the long and exposed southern route for his supplies, and having thus placed him at a disadvantage, to defeat him in the triangle formed by Gazala, Tobruk and Bir Hacheim.

I naturally kept in very close touch with General Ritchie so that I might be fully in his mind.* I was well satisfied with his dispositions generally. But I stressed two points in particular: that the armoured divisions should be fought as divisions and not split up, and that, having defeated the enemy, the Eighth Army should lose no time in passing to the counter-offensive for which plans had been in preparation for so long.

THE RETREAT FROM CYRENAICA.

Initial Failure of the Enemy Attack.

The first reports of enemy movement came from the 7th Armoured Division during the afternoon of the 26th May. In the evening an enemy force was reported to be moving south-east from Segnali, and the columns of the 7th Motor Brigade retired to their defensive position between Bir Hacheim and Bir el Gubi and prepared to meet the attack.

The enemy leaguered for the night some fifteen miles south-east of Bir Hacheim and advanced again at sunrise, Panzer Divisions on the left, 90th Light Division battle group on the right. The latter swept over the 7th Motor Brigade, captured the headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division and inflicted a number of casualties on the 4th Armoured Brigade which engaged it. The 7th Motor Brigade rallied at Bir el Gubi, some two hundred of its personnel who had been taken prisoner escaped, and the brigade was ready to fight again next day. The headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division also was soon functioning again. At the same time the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade met the full force of the Panzer Divisions. The brigade had only just begun to dig in, but it gave a brilliant account of itself before being overrun. The survivors rallied at Bir Hacheim and were sent, with eight hundred others who were later released by the Free French, to Buq Buq to reform.

The Panzer Divisions resumed their advance and, despite the opposition of the 22nd Armoured Brigade, the Guards Brigade and the 1st Army Tank Brigade, succeeded in reaching Knightsbridge. There they were again attacked by the 1st Armoured Division but without conclusive results.

The Ariete Division's attack on Bir Hacheim was soon repulsed. The Trieste Division failed to breach our minefield. Demonstrations against our northern positions deceived no one and cost the enemy twenty tanks.

What appeared at first to be the most dangerous threat developed on the east, where the 90th Light Division drove back the 4th Armoured Brigade and reached the area south of El Adem. General Ritchie was concerned for the safety of Tobruk and the forward bases and ordered the 7th Support Group to occupy the ridge south of Sidi Rezegh, until the 21st Indian Infantry Brigade should arrive. Next day the 4th Armoured Brigade put an end to this threat by driving the 90th Light Division well away to the south, and on the 29th May the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade came up from Bir el Gubi to take over the El Adem locality permanently.

* Letter to Commander, Eighth Army, 20th May 1942—Appendix 16.