

the strength of the 2nd Armoured Brigade was now so low that it could not oppose more than twenty-five German tanks with any hope of success. It fortunately was not put to the test, since the enemy kept his main forces round Msus while pressing the pursuit of the 4th Indian Division. But the weakness of our armour made it necessary to retire rather more swiftly than had been intended, and, having obtained General Ritchie's permission, General Tucker withdrew to Gaf Tartaga and Slonta during the night of the 31st January.

The 4th Indian Division then reverted to the command of the 13th Corps. General Godwin-Austen was preparing to stand on the line Lam-luda—Mechili—Bir Tengeder, but intended, in the event of an enemy attack in force, to retire to a line running southwards from Gazala, and, if need be, to a line running south from Acroma. He had ordered the 1st South African Division to prepare defensive positions immediately south of Gazala.

On the 1st February the enemy columns, which until then had only felt their way, made contact with the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade at Slonta. General Tucker had previously obtained permission to withdraw further to Cirene and El Faidia, and the 4th Indian Division retired to that line without delay. At El Faidia the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade was once more heavily attacked by lorried infantry and suffered a number of casualties, but held its ground. The 4th Indian Division completed its withdrawal to the Derna line during the same night.

There was every sign that the enemy was intending to follow our retirement through the Gebel in considerable force, and a fresh assessment of the enemy's supply situation revealed that it was much better than we had supposed and that he might shortly be able to send an armoured division to attack us at Mechili. As our own armoured forces had been so reduced, it was decided not to invite disaster by attempting to stand on a line which would require more troops and armour than we possessed to hold it against attack on the scale that now seemed probable. It would be better to place more distance between the enemy and ourselves and to secure a line which was shorter and easier to defend. Accordingly orders were given for Derna to be evacuated and the installations there to be demolished, and for a general deliberate withdrawal to the line of Gazala and Bir Hacheim. Derna, Mechili and Bir Tengeder were, however, to be held as outposts from which mobile columns were to operate.

The enemy pressed on along both roads through the Gebel on the 2nd February, but our offensive patrols held him up whilst the main body of the Indian Division completed the occupation of the Derna line. Later in the day, however, our troops were forced off their positions in the centre of the line and a detachment at Carmusa was overrun by a force of tanks and lorried infantry using captured transport. As the enemy were penetrating between the 4th Division and our troops round Mechili, General Godwin-Austen gave permission to General Tucker to withdraw on Tmimi and El Ezzeiat at his discretion, while Free French mobile columns struck at the enemy forces moving south from Carmusa. Shortly after, since the pressure on the 4th Indian Division was increasing, General Godwin-Austen gave orders for the withdrawal to be accelerated and to continue by

daylight on the 3rd February. The 4th Indian Division having fought several rearguard actions during the day reached Acroma that night.

Except for sending patrols forward, the enemy pressed the withdrawal no further and made no move across the desert from Msus. By the 4th February all our forces had fallen back to the Gazala line.

During the withdrawal the 1st Armoured Division lost over one hundred tanks out of an original total of about one hundred and fifty, thirty field guns, thirty two-pounder anti-tank guns and twenty-five Bofors light anti-aircraft guns. The enemy's losses do not appear to have been heavy, but about thirty of his tanks were probably destroyed. The number of tanks the enemy employed in these operations is difficult to determine, as reports of his tank strength varied greatly, but it is probable that he did not employ more than one hundred, some of them certainly light tanks. The number of tanks employed forward of Msus and Bengasi was considerably less than in the initial stages, owing no doubt to difficulties of supply.

When the withdrawal of the Eighth Army came to an end, the Gazala—Bir Hacheim line was not held in great strength. The 1st South African Infantry Brigade held positions round Gazala and to the south of it, and was about to be reinforced by the Polish Brigade Group on its left above the escarpment. The Free French Brigade Group held Alem Hamza. Bir Hacheim was occupied by the 150th Brigade Group and the Guards Brigade. The 1st Armoured Division was watching the gap between Alem Hamza and Bir Hacheim with orders to counter-attack any enemy who might penetrate the position. The 4th Indian Division was given orders to prepare defences on a line through Eluet et Tamar and Er Rigel and thence southwards, to give depth to the Gazala position.

Having regard to the weakness of our armour, I was doubtful, when I returned to Cairo on the 1st February, whether the Eighth Army would be able to hold this line. If the enemy came forward again, it might well be necessary to withdraw to the frontier where I had given orders for positions to be prepared. But I found on my return that our own prospects of re-equipping the Army with tanks were better than I had supposed and that the enemy's supply situation might not permit him to advance further. On the 2nd February, therefore, I ordered General Ritchie* to stand at Gazala so as to preserve Tobruk as a forward supply base for the renewal of our offensive.

Fortification and Re-organisation.

As soon as I had decided that Tobruk was to be held and the enemy stopped on the Gazala—Bir Hacheim line, General Ritchie began to plan and construct a series of strong defensive positions in the triangle lying between Gazala, Tobruk and Bir Hacheim. The Gazala line itself consisted of a series of strongpoints extending from about Gazala to Alem Hamza; a detached strongpoint some twenty miles south of the coast near Sidi Muftah; and a second detached strongpoint at Bir Hacheim. The positions in the north were mutually supporting and well covered by minefields. They were so sited as to bar the direct approach to Tobruk

* G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. III, 11th February 1942—Appendix 9.