

late on the starting line as a result. But when the attack did begin, it was executed with great spirit and between them the New Zealanders and Poles captured half the position and took many prisoners. The Indian Division was by no means so fortunate. The 5th Brigade continued to be held up in its frontal attack on Alem Hamza, so the 7th Brigade was ordered to work round to the west of the enemy locality. It had begun to move forward when a battalion of the 5th Brigade, which had occupied a position to the south-west of Alem Hamza two days before and was somewhat isolated there, was heavily attacked and finally overrun. Although only a hundred of the infantry and one battery of the supporting field regiment survived, the defenders offered a sturdy resistance, for the German regiment which had carried out the assault was heard to report that it was unable to exploit its success.

Extremely bad going over the last twenty-five miles of its sixty-mile march retarded the 4th Armoured Brigade which reached its objective four hours late. But it is doubtful whether the brigade would have assisted the progress of the 4th Indian Division, even if it had arrived punctually, since it was not until after daybreak on the 16th that the enemy seems to have become aware of its presence. Decisive results were hoped for from the action of the 4th Armoured Brigade on the 16th December, but these hopes were frustrated by the extreme roughness of the country it had to traverse. As its supply vehicles could scarcely move in the soft sand, the brigade had to go south to replenish, and this operation was not completed until about midday. Brigadier Gatehouse then took his brigade further east than his original objective, towards Sidi Breghisc and Bir Temrad where enemy concentrations were reported to be lying. Although they were still hampered by bad going, our tanks caused considerable damage and much confusion among the enemy in the heavy fighting which followed.

The 4th Indian Division had to reorganise before it could resume its attack and consequently made no progress on the 16th December. The New Zealanders and the Poles, on the other hand, continued to exploit their success taking numerous prisoners.

Rommel now decided not to risk destruction by staying and ordered a further retreat. The withdrawal began, apparently, at about midday on the 16th December and was continued throughout the night. Fearing this development, General Ritchie had already ordered a column of the Support Group to be sent to hold the cross roads at Carmusa which would make it difficult, if not impossible, for the enemy to hold Derna. This column left in the early hours of the 17th December and occupied Carmusa at about midday on the 18th. A far more substantial success might have been scored, however, if we had been able to cut the main road further east. The 7th Armoured Division seemed to be in a position to do this with armoured cars, mobile columns and even the 4th Armoured Brigade, all of which were operating to the west of Gazala. But the difficult country to the south, which made the movement of supply columns slow and on occasion impossible, prevented it. The Eighth Army now devoted all its energies to carrying out a relentless pursuit.

The pursuit to Agedabia.

The enemy divided in his retreat, the remnants of the armoured divisions and the Italian Mobile Corps going by the desert through Mechili and Msus, and the Italian 21st Corps in a very shattered state, by the main roads through the Gebel Akhdar. The troops of the 13th Corps were likewise divided, the 4th Indian Division being sent by the Gebel Akhdar and the 7th Armoured Division by the desert.

The 4th Indian Division set out at once on the morning of the 17th December. The 7th Infantry Brigade on the southern flank travelled at great speed, and within twenty-four hours reached Carmusa where one of its battalions relieved the Support Group column which had been sent on ahead. Another battalion captured Martuba landing ground, and the third the aerodrome at Derna, where a number of aircraft were destroyed and much transport and many prisoners taken. The 5th Infantry Brigade, originally directed to advance on Martuba by a more northerly route, traversed very rough country all the way and fell behind considerably. As the country round Derna appeared to be falling into our hands without great trouble, the objective of the 5th Brigade was altered, and it was instructed to secure the cross-roads at Giovanni Berta and at Lamluda, so as to cut off any enemy remaining in the Derna region. By making a wide turning movement over country the enemy had believed impassable, the 5th Brigade reached Lamluda on the 19th December and took many prisoners there. Giovanni Berta proved more difficult to capture as the enemy had left a detachment to cover it, but by the evening of the 20th that place, too, was in our hands. Derna was occupied on the 19th December, and by the 21st the 4th Indian Division had overrun the whole of the country east of Appollonia, Cirene, and El Faidia. After offering some resistance, Barce was taken during the afternoon of the 23rd. Bengasi itself was taken by a detachment from the 7th Armoured Division. By December 26th all organised resistance in the Gebel Akhdar had ceased, and the 4th Indian Division became responsible for restoring law and order in the hill country up to Bengasi.

The 7th Indian Infantry Brigade then moved forward to take over the region round Barce and Bengasi with instructions to defend it against attack from the south. The 11th Infantry Brigade having been left behind in Tobruk to make good its losses, only the 5th Infantry Brigade remained to occupy the area between Barce and Martuba. The Indian Division then had to give up all but a bare minimum of its transport in order to provide as much as possible for the desert sector, where supply difficulties were already becoming acute. The greater part of its divisional artillery had also to be taken in order to reinforce the rest of the 13th Corps round Agedabia.

The 7th Armoured Division gave chase across the desert and moved with a speed which was remarkable considering the difficulties they encountered. The 17th December had to be spent round Gazala while transport and supplies were assembled for the advance, but the armoured brigade improved the occasion by harrying the enemy's departure. On the 18th the Support Group moved swiftly to Mechili and engaged enemy concentrations to the west of that place. By nightfall practically all the