

isolated the much stronger fortress of Qaret el Abd, held by the New Zealand Division, and the latter had therefore to be abandoned; as a result the position on the Taqa plateau had also to be evacuated, largely owing to the fact that there was no source of water within the position and even a temporary isolation would have meant inevitable surrender from thirst.

The line, therefore, on which the enemy was finally halted was not the Alamein line as it originally existed; only in the extreme north did we occupy the prepared defences. More serious to all appearance was the fact that our left flank no longer rested on the Depression; instead it had been taken back to a point just north-west of Qaret el Himeimat, a conspicuous peak from the neighbourhood of which a track, known as the "Barrel Track", led direct to Cairo. This track had been reconnoitred before the outbreak of hostilities in the desert and, before the construction of the desert road from Cairo to Alexandria, it had been the principal route from Cairo to the Western Desert. Fortunately its surface proved worse than had been expected and it was badly cut up by the large numbers of supply vehicles which had used it during the operation so that our left flank though not so impressively protected as had been intended, proved firmly based. Between the sea and the Barrel Track the country over which our defended line ran was a bewildering mixture of ridges and depressions with many patches of soft sand providing some of the worst going our forces ever encountered in the desert. The shore line was fringed with salt marshes inland from which, in a narrow strip of less than two miles, the road and railway from Alexandria to Mersa Matruh ran parallel to each other.

Just south of the railway we had extended our front in July beyond the original line by a westward thrust which had captured the two small ridges of Tell el Eisa and Tell el Makhkhad. From this salient the line bent back south-easterly to the perimeter of the Alamein position. Twelve miles south of the shore line rise the slopes of the Ruweisat ridge, a long, narrow elevation about two hundred feet above sea level; at its western end it runs almost due east and west but as it extends eastwards it increases in height and alters its course slightly to north-east, pointing towards El Imayid station, fifteen miles east of El Alamein. It offers an avenue of reasonably firm going, outflanking the Alamein position, and it was here that the decisive battle of 2nd July had been fought; as a memento of that battle the enemy still held the western end. From here to the south our line trended roughly south by west over ground mainly flat but interrupted here and there by steep-sided depressions of which the Deir el Munassib was the most important. In rear of this part of the front, south-east of the Ruweisat ridge, was a second and higher ridge trending in a north-easterly direction called, from the cairn on its highest point (four hundred and thirty feet), the Alam el Halfa ridge. A strong position for a brigade had been built on the ridge in July defended by wire and minefields. From this position we could command the country to the south, if the enemy, however, succeeded in occupying it, it offered him another corridor of good going by which he could outflank all our positions to the north and drive direct on Alexandria.

In July the initiative had passed to Eighth Army and three attacks on various parts of the line had caused the enemy to disperse his forces and gained us time to improve our own defences. This was the more vital since when these attacks failed it became obvious that the enemy would take the offensive once more. He was quick to recover from the disorganization caused by the rapid advance from Gazala and the scrambling and incoherent battles of July and for the moment his build-up, particularly in tanks, was faster than ours, the construction of defences was therefore our main preoccupation. The front was covered by a triple minefield from the coast almost to the Taqa plateau. A number of positions were built behind this but their weakness was that, except in the north where we still retained part of the old line, they had been hastily prepared and were not dug deeply enough. More serious was the fact that our mobile reserve was small. In the desert a string of positions, however strong, can be rendered useless unless the defence possesses a mobile reserve strong in armour which can manoeuvre round these fixed positions and engage any enemy who may penetrate between or round them; when I arrived in Egypt, our armour had been so reduced that there was only 7 Armoured Division available with one medium armoured brigade, below strength in tanks, a light armoured brigade of "Stuart" tanks and armoured cars, and a motor brigade.

The plan was to hold as strongly as possible the area between the sea and Ruweisat ridge and to threaten from the flank any enemy advance south of the ridge from a strongly defended prepared position on the Alam el Halfa ridge. General Montgomery, now in command of Eighth Army, accepted this plan in principle, to which I agreed, and hoped that if the enemy should give us enough time, he would be able to improve our positions by strengthening the left or southern flank. At the moment the northern area, down to and including Ruweisat ridge, was held by 30 Corps with under command from north to south 9 Australian, 1 South African and 5 Indian Divisions, reinforced by 23 Armoured Brigade in an infantry support role. These forces I judged to be adequate, the more so as our defences in this sector were stronger than elsewhere. 13 Corps, in the southern sector, consisted of 2 New Zealand and 7 Armoured Divisions, the former of only two brigades. In the prepared positions on Alam el Halfa ridge there was one infantry brigade, and a second brigade occupied the reserve positions on Ruweisat ridge.

In my visits to the front to inspect our positions and prepare for the coming battle I paid particular attention to the morale and bearing of the troops. I found Eighth Army, in Mr. Churchill's phrase, "brave but baffled." A retreat is always a disheartening manoeuvre and the feeling of frustration which it naturally engenders was made the stronger by the fact that many of the troops, particularly in the infantry divisions, could not fully understand the reasons why they had been forced to withdraw from positions which they had stoutly and successfully defended; in many cases the reason had been a battle lost by our armour many miles from those positions. A more serious cause of discouragement was the knowledge that our defeat had been due in part to inferiority