

forced its way past late in the evening and by midday on 6th November had reached Baqqush, about thirty miles from Mersa Matruh. There they were joined later by the rest of the division and by 8 Armoured Brigade which had broken through the enemy rearguard on the road and captured over a thousand more prisoners, including the headquarters of the Folgore Division. Meanwhile 7 Armoured Division struck across the desert to the south of the Fuka escarpment and attacked another party of the enemy near Sidi Haneish, on the main road just west of Baqqush. In this action we destroyed fifteen tanks and seven heavy guns and took two thousand prisoners. The enemy's tank strength was now down to about thirty.

By the evening of 6th November we had cleared the road up to a point less than thirty miles east of Matruh with our main forces, and 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment was operating with great success on the road west of Matruh where it had taken two thousand prisoners and captured or destroyed numerous vehicles. 1 Armoured Division, advancing through the desert, had drawn level with Matruh to the south and was well on the way to cutting the road beyond it. At this point, however, the pursuit was brought abruptly to a standstill. Light rain had begun to fall during the afternoon of the 6th and during the night it turned into a downpour. The desert became a morass in which tanks could move only very slowly and wheeled transport was completely bogged. This at once stultified the whole conception of the pursuit which consisted in continuously out-flanking through the desert the enemy retreating up the road. The New Zealand Division, being lorry-borne, was stuck for thirty-six hours and the motor brigades and the supply echelons of 1 and 7 Armoured Divisions were in a similar predicament. Only the South African armoured cars and the elements of 4 Light Armoured Brigade that were within easy reach of the road were able to move: the latter were too weak to overcome the strong rearguard covering the evacuation of Matruh and a single armoured car regiment was powerless to prevent the escape of the main body of the enemy.

As soon as this state of affairs became known 10 Armoured Division, which had been halted at Fuka for administrative reasons, was ordered to push on to Matruh by the road. This turned the pursuit into a direct following up of the enemy and gave the enemy rearguards every advantage. The armour did not reach the outskirts of the town until shortly before dusk on the 7th and, having launched one unsuccessful attack, could do no more until daylight. Next morning, after a brief engagement, we entered the town to find it evacuated. At the same moment, two thousand miles further west, the first assault waves were coming ashore on the beaches of French North Africa.

Although we had inflicted very heavy damage on the remnants of the enemy during the first two days of the pursuit they had been saved by the rain from complete encirclement at Matruh. The opportunity was unlikely to occur again until Agheila, and our prospects of being able to fight a decisive battle there depended upon our ability to assemble and maintain a sufficiently powerful force to take

the offensive before the enemy had organized the position thoroughly and received reinforcements. The principal object of the next phase of the pursuit was therefore to capture the two ports of Tobruk and Benghazi and develop them to their full capacity in as short a time as possible. This was the task of the pursuit force, which had to be reduced in strength as the advance went on, owing to the increasing difficulties of supply. The pursuit force seized any opportunity of rounding up the enemy that occurred, but the task of striking at the enemy's retreat was entrusted mainly to the air forces, operating from landing grounds well forward—often, in fact, in advance of the main body and protected only by armoured cars.

The pursuit force, consisting of 7 Armoured Division and the New Zealand Division (5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade, 9 Armoured Brigade composite regiment and 4 Light Armoured Brigade), under command of 10 Corps, set out at dawn on 8th November with the frontier as the first objective and Tobruk as the next. The pace of the advance was hot. On the coast road the New Zealand Division was opposed east of Sidi Barrani and on the line of our old minefield at Buq Buq. This opposition, however, was swiftly overcome and, after a company of infantry had captured Halfaya Pass, and six hundred prisoners from the Pistoia Division, in a surprise night attack, the division climbed the escarpment on the 11th and occupied Capuzzo, Sollum and Bardia. Meanwhile 7 Armoured Division crossed the frontier on the 10th, after a march across the desert of a hundred and sixty miles by the classic route on top of the escarpment, and swung northwest to join the New Zealanders at Capuzzo. On 12th November, 4 Light Armoured Brigade pressed on and captured Gambut and El Adem and at 0900 hours on the 13th 131 Lorried Infantry Brigade, followed by the main body of 7 Armoured Division, entered Tobruk without opposition.

The main body could proceed no farther until the port of Tobruk was open, but it was essential to secure the landing grounds at Tmimi, Martuba, Derna and Mechili, so as to bring our fighter aircraft within range of the Gebel Akhdar and Benghazi. There was an even more pressing reason for capturing the coastal group of landing grounds. No convoys had sailed to Malta since the previous April owing to the impossibility of providing air protection and the garrison and people of the island were now on the verge of starvation. The situation would be beyond control unless a convoy putting out from Alexandria on 16th November arrived safely and of that there was little hope without strong fighter protection from the coast of Cyrenaica. It might very well have proved impossible to supply any further advance, seeing that 10 Corps had advanced two hundred and twenty miles in six days and that heavy demolitions had been carried out both on the road and the railway. But the administrative arrangements stood the strain, stores were landed at Sollum and the harbours of Matruh and Bardia were opened within two days of their capture so that enough supplies were available to allow 4 Light Armoured Brigade to continue. While the main body hastened down the road and secured Tmimi on 14th November another column moved across the desert via Bir