

artillery on its way across the Mediterranean. With these and the relics of the other Italian divisions he had little more than twenty-five thousand Italians to eke out his ten thousand German survivors. Tank strength was calculated at between sixty and seventy. In spite of the strength of the position these forces were not enough to defend it; the enemy decided therefore to hold Agheila only long enough to force us to deploy in front of it and then to retire, before we could attack, to a position at Buerat, covering Tripoli.

On our side the problem was almost entirely one of maintenance. The enemy had carried out heavy demolitions of certain sectors of the desert railway and of the pipeline from Alexandria; the main road had been blown up at Sollum pass and many places in the Gebel; the water supplies at Bardia, Tobruk and Benghazi had been destroyed; very great damage had been caused at Benghazi and Tobruk by our own bombing and by enemy demolitions. Nevertheless we had allowed for all this; our assessment of probable damage had been conservative and the arrangements for repair proved entirely satisfactory. Railhead was opened at Capuzzo on 21st November and at Tobruk on 1st December. By the latter date three thousand tons of Nile water were being delivered daily twenty-five miles west of Matruh and the water sources at Tobruk and Bardia were rapidly put into commission. The Sollum road was repaired within forty-eight hours, and in the Gebel deviations were constructed fast enough to avoid delay to supply columns. The first ships entered Tobruk and Benghazi four days after capture, in two weeks Tobruk was operating to its full capacity of a thousand tons daily and in three weeks twice that amount was being discharged at Benghazi. Within a very short time sufficient supplies were pouring into Cyrenaica to enable the air forces to continue uninterrupted their heavy attacks on enemy ports and shipping, to allow troops and reserves to be gathered in readiness for a further advance, and strong forces to be maintained in the forward area to ensure an impenetrable screen of observation. The exceptionally long road haul to the forward area and the availability of motor transport, however, were the limiting factors and General Montgomery calculated that it would be the middle of December before we would be able to resume the advance.

The two weeks which elapsed were fully occupied with preparations and reconnaissance for the attack and with reorganisation. Headquarters 30 Corps assumed command of the forward area from 10 Corps on 26th November. On 3rd December the Corps moved forward to gain close contact with the enemy; 51 Division took over the northern sector with orders to carry out active patrolling and to maintain pressure on the enemy while 7 Armoured Division, stationed farther to the rear, was given the task of observing and harassing the southern flank. At the same time 8 Armoured Brigade relieved 22 Armoured Brigade, which badly needed an opportunity to refit after a continuous advance of over eight hundred miles. By the 9th the New Zealand Division was concentrated round El Haseiat. This is a track junction down in the desert south-east of Agedabia and well back from the enemy positions; the intention was to pass the New Zealanders round the enemy's

inland flank, well to the south in the hope of avoiding observation, and strike north to the main road well west of Agheila. By 12th December 30 Corps was ready to advance. In the north the direct blow was to be given by 51 Division both along the road and south of the Sebkha es Seghira; 7 Armoured Division was to follow up the latter blow and the only reserve was 23 Armoured Brigade south of Agedabia.

It had been General Montgomery's intention to launch the attack on 16th December but by the beginning of the month we were already getting clear indications that the enemy was not going to hold.* The Italian infantry was the first to go; they had no transport and if their evacuation were delayed they might share the fate of X Corps at El Alamein. The defence of the position was thus left to the German mobile forces, who could delay their departure without undue risk until our attack appeared imminent. There was still a chance, however, that the outflanking movement of the New Zealand Division might be able to catch some of his rearguards and the greater the losses we could inflict on his German troops the less chance there was of his being able to stand on his next position. Accordingly the date of the attack was advanced as much as possible; the New Zealanders started off from El Haseiat on 12th December, 51 Division starting active raiding against the positions north and south of the Sebkha on the 11th to distract attention from the move, and the frontal attack was planned for the 14th.

During the night of 12th December the enemy began to withdraw. He relied principally on mines, booby-traps and demolitions to cover the road, a most effective policy for it was not until the evening of the 15th that 152 Brigade had covered the thirty miles from Mersa Brega to Agheila fort. In view of this slow advance 7 Armoured Division, with 8 Armoured Brigade in the lead, was passed through 153 Brigade round the south end of the Sebkha. Having fought a successful engagement with the enemy rearguard on the Marada road to the south of Agheila the armoured brigade followed hard on the heels of the rearguard until it was held up by an anti-tank ditch running across the main road about twenty miles west of Agheila. This obstacle could not be crossed until the morning of the 16th when the enemy retired and 7 Armoured Division pressed on to chase him, it was hoped, on to the guns of the New Zealand Division which had taken up its position to the west.

The New Zealanders had fetched a wide circuit round the main position. Their objective was the Wadi Matratin, some sixty miles west of Agheila, and they reached it after a most difficult march just as night was falling on 15th December. A large part of the enemy rearguard was still to the east and, as the wadi, though not a complete obstacle, is crossed easily only in the neighbourhood of the road, it seemed that the manoeuvre had succeeded. The division, however, had some difficulty in deploying in unknown country by moonlight and in registering its guns. Next morning, therefore, the enemy, fully aware of his desperate predicament, was able to break up into small

* From the Ciano Diaries it appears that the decision to evacuate had been taken at least by 8th December