

force being cut off, the 4th Armoured Brigade was given the order to retire to the southern flank of the Matruh position, where it came under the command of the 1st Armoured Division. The 22nd Armoured Brigade had already been withdrawn, so that by the 23rd June the columns of the two motor brigades above the escarpment, and of the 69th Infantry Brigade below it, were the only troops remaining in contact with the enemy.

Meanwhile changes had been made in the arrangements for fighting a decisive battle round Matruh. On the 22nd June it was decided that the New Zealand Division was more suitable for a mobile role than the 10th Indian Division, and orders were issued for it to pass to the command of the 13th Corps as soon as the 10th Indian Division arrived from the frontier. There was a great shortage of field artillery, and, as a disproportionate amount of infantry were likely to prove an encumbrance, instructions were given for the infantry divisions, or what remained of them, to be organised into battle groups. These battle groups had as their foundation the maximum number of field guns that could be provided for each, and only just as many infantry as were needed to protect them. The idea was that in this way the defence could be kept mobile, the battle groups being moved rapidly to that part of the front where the danger was greatest. Moreover, these groups, being comparatively weak in infantry, were not encumbered with large numbers of vehicles and could therefore be used in the closest co-operation with the armour. I visited Eighth Army Headquarters on the 22nd June and confirmed these arrangements.

The enemy advance began at dawn on the 24th June. Two columns, one consisting of lorried infantry and the other of fifty to sixty tanks, struck north from Sheferzen towards Halfaya, while a third moved on a more easterly axis from Maddalena. Our light columns could do no more than harass the enemy's movement, which progressed with great rapidity. Our forces retired eastwards and by evening were level with Sidi Barrani. On the 25th June the enemy continued to advance very swiftly and by that evening two of his main concentrations had reached points on the railway and on the coastal road some forty miles from Matruh, while a third lay astride the railway twenty miles further west. Our mobile columns, with which there were some forty tanks, were engaging enemy vanguards operating twenty miles in advance of their main bodies.

#### THE STAND AT EL ALAMEIN.

I took over direct control of the Eighth Army from General Ritchie at his headquarters near Bagush on the evening of the 25th June. Major-General E. E. Dorman Smith, my Deputy Chief of the General Staff, accompanied me as my principal staff officer; but no change was made in the staff officers or commanders of the Eighth Army.

The 10th Corps had assumed command at Matruh about twenty-four hours earlier and was organising the defence with the 151st Infantry Brigade and with the 10th Indian Division, which had just arrived. The New Zealand Division was being organised into battle groups and concentrating round Minqar Qaim, about twenty-five miles south of Matruh, for use in a mobile role under the 13th Corps. The 1st and

7th Armoured Divisions were also under command of the 13th Corps. The 1st Armoured Division had taken command of the 4th and 2nd Armoured Brigades which were disposed to the south of Minqar Qaim, while the 7th Armoured Division, with the 3rd Indian and the 7th Motor Brigades, was in touch with the enemy west of El Kanayis. The 69th Infantry Brigade of the 50th Division was withdrawing from Sidi Barrani on Matruh in contact with the enemy.

The 30th Corps Headquarters was organising the defence of El Alamein. The 1st South African Division held the important fortifications round El Alamein railway station and astride the main road, and the 2nd Free French Brigade Group lay further to the south. The infantry made surplus by the organisation of battle groups were being sent back from the forward zone to help in preparing the El Alamein position.

#### *The Withdrawal from Matruh.*

The Matruh position consisted of a fortified perimeter round the town itself, which had been constructed before my arrival in the Middle East, a more recent covering position to the west of the town, and a newly prepared detached strongpoint about twenty miles to the south on the high ground near Minqar Sidi Hamza el Gharbi. A deep minefield ran south in front of the covering position from the coast to Charing Cross and then turned eastward. Two further minefields ran northwards from the high ground about Minqar Sidi Hamza. Between the two groups of minefields there was a gap of about six miles, which the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade had been ordered to close with all speed.

Given an adequate garrison and sufficient armoured forces, I considered the Matruh position to be perfectly defensible. But there were no longer sufficient troops to watch closely the whole length of the minefields, which in consequence would present little or no obstacle to the enemy, and the southern flank was open like that of the Gazala and frontier positions. The enemy was pushing eastwards very rapidly—there was some fear that he might cut off the retreat of the 69th Infantry Brigade, but this proved groundless—and it seemed hardly likely that we should be organised in time to meet him. Realising our weakness in armour and field artillery and that the divisions which had fought round Tobruk had inevitably been disorganised I reversed the decision to make a final stand at Matruh. Instead I decided to keep the Eighth Army fully mobile and to bring the enemy's advance to a halt in the area between Matruh, El Alamein and the Qattara Depression. In no circumstances was any part of the Eighth Army to be allowed to be shut up in Matruh, even if this involved abandoning the position entirely. The 10th and 13th Corps were to provide the mobile element of the Army and to take every opportunity of defeating the enemy without allowing themselves to be encircled or overwhelmed. The 30th Corps was to occupy the El Alamein position.

On the evening of the 26th June, enemy tanks broke through the recently closed gap in our minefields south of Charing Cross and forced back columns of the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade which were too weak to stop them. The next day these enemy tanks engaged the 1st Armoured Division and the New Zealand