

were safeguarded. Preparations were made to move General Headquarters from Cairo, if necessary, and to carry on the direction of the campaign from a field headquarters.

I was prepared, in the last resort, to continue the fight even if we had to abandon Northern Egypt altogether, by withdrawing southwards along the Nile with part of my forces while the remainder blocked the enemy's advance across the Suez Canal towards Palestine and Syria. Our bases on the Red Sea and our communications down the Nile Valley would have made this possible and plans were laid accordingly.*

I myself was fully occupied in directing the operations of the Eighth Army and the burden of planning and co-ordinating these complicated measures fell on my Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Corbett. He was ably seconded in his task by the Commanders charged with the execution of the work, Lieutenant-General Holmes, commanding the Delta Force and Lieutenant-General Stone, General Officer Commanding the British Troops in Egypt. The speed and thoroughness with which the work was done reflected the greatest credit on these officers.

The 9th Australian Division began to arrive behind El Alamein on the 4th July, and pursuing my policy of wresting the initiative from the enemy and of seizing important tactical points so as to prepare the ground for a decisive attack later, I launched this division on the 10th July against the Tel el Eisa mounds west of El Alamein. The attack was supported by tanks and a strong artillery and was carried out with skill and determination. The mounds were secured and remained in our possession, as a valuable bastion constituting a permanent threat to the enemy positions to the south of it.

Once again the enemy was obliged to weaken his centre to reinforce his flank, and to detach German troops to stiffen the Italians entrusted with the defence of this sector. From the series of determined, but unsuccessful counter-attacks launched against the Australians holding the position, it was evident that the enemy was deeply concerned at the loss of Tel el Eisa.

Although we had arrested the German advance on the Delta and had begun to lay the foundations for a further offensive, developments on the Northern Front made it necessary to consider afresh the general strategy of the Middle East. In order to fight in Cyrenaica at all, we had to concentrate all our armoured forces and practically the whole of our air forces on that front. The losses suffered by the Eighth Army in June had compelled me to withdraw most of the remaining troops from our Northern Front. The Ninth and Tenth armies had thus been denuded of troops and transport, and were not even in a position to impose any serious delay on the enemy should he attack. The final outcome of the battle of El Alamein was still in the balance, and it seemed very doubtful whether we should be able to spare troops from the west to reinforce the north.

The necessity might very well arise in the near future. For, while the battles for Egypt were in progress, the German armies had been advancing swiftly in Southern Russia. By the middle of July the German vanguards had reached the foothills of the Caucasus, and it

seemed that only the fact of Stalingrad holding out and threatening their flank would prevent them from pushing into Persia.

Very shortly we might have to take a decision whether to continue to concentrate all our efforts on defending Egypt from the west or to divert the greater part of our resources to protect the Persian oil-fields against attack from the north. It was obvious that with the resources available, we could not do both simultaneously. The Middle East Defence Committee therefore represented the situation to the Defence Committee in London and asked for guidance.

The Prime Minister could hold out no hope of providing the reinforcements we required before the end of October. He added, however, that there was no need to assume that the enemy could invade Persia in force before that date. The only way to ensure that sufficient strength could be gathered to secure the Northern Front in time, he said, was by inflicting a decisive defeat on the enemy in the west. We therefore continued to concentrate all our efforts on achieving this object and left the Northern Front to fend for itself for the time being. Early in August we received from the Chiefs of Staff a comprehensive review of the situation in Russia from which it appeared that no attack in force through the Caucasus was likely to occur before the spring of 1943, although in the event of the collapse of Russian resistance, light enemy forces might penetrate into Persia early in the coming November.

Having assured myself that it was fully realised in England that in the event of the Russian front breaking, we should be unable to reinforce Persia either in time or in sufficient force, I continued to concentrate all our resources in an attempt to defeat the enemy in the west. The capture of the Tel el Eisa salient on the 10th July had caused the enemy to extend his line and to disperse his strength still more and I determined to try to break through his centre and strike at his communications. Accordingly on the 21st July, taking advantage of the arrival of the 23rd Armoured Brigade which had lately come from England, I ordered an attack along the Ruweisat Ridge and to the south of it, against the enemy positions in that sector. The attack started well and breached the enemy's forward defences, enabling our tanks to pass through. Thereafter the attack lost momentum, partly, it seems, owing to loss of control and direction amongst the leading troops, inexperienced in desert fighting, but also because of the lack of reserves with which to sustain it. Nevertheless, the enemy was thrown into some disorder and suffered considerable loss, and we gained valuable ground.

I then decided to try to break through the enemy's positions to the south of the Tel el Eisa salient. To do so I had to withdraw troops from my southern flank, leaving it very weak, in order to strengthen the 30th Corps in the north with infantry and armoured formations. The main object was the same as before, to make a breach through which the armour could pass to disrupt and destroy the enemy in rear. Once again the infantry broke through, but the enemy had greatly extended and strengthened his minefields, and delay occurred in clearing a passage for the tanks. In consequence, the infantry were left unsupported and had to give way in the face of heavy enemy counter-attacks. With stronger and more numerous

* G.H.Q., M.E.F. Operation Instruction No. 134, 22nd July 1942—Appendix 20.