

moved southward, heavily engaged by our armoured formations, but again without decisive result.

Belatedly the enemy was able to clear ways through the minefield in the centre of our position, thus greatly easing the supply and repair of his armoured forces lying to the east. He then settled down to achieving by deliberate methods what he had failed to accomplish by lightning attack, and devoted his efforts to forming a bridgehead, strong in anti-tank artillery, to cover the gaps he had made in our minefields. To do this he withdrew some distance to the west, being vigorously attacked by our tanks, artillery and aircraft in the process.

Though his plan went awry, the enemy had succeeded in breaching our front and creating a dangerous salient in our main position. It was essential to rectify this situation and General Ritchie accordingly had made plans for delivering a powerful counterstroke as soon as possible. The armoured formations of the Eighth Army had sustained heavy losses; and General Ritchie considered that this precluded his launching a counter-offensive from some other sector and proceeded to make plans for a direct assault on the enemy salient.

The attack was intended originally to have taken place on the night of the 31st May; but, for various reasons, it was postponed till the night of the 4th June. Meanwhile, the enemy had attacked and destroyed the 150th Infantry Brigade, holding the important defended locality of Sidi Muftah. He had also been able to strengthen considerably his forces in the salient, which it was General Ritchie's object to eliminate so that we could close the gaps in our minefield.

The Eighth Army's counter-attack had some initial success and recovered some important ground from the enemy, but it was then brought to a standstill by enemy counter-attacks with tanks, strongly supported by artillery. Our own armoured forces, which should have exploited the initial success of the infantry, met strong opposition from anti-tank guns and failed to make their presence felt. Finally, the enemy succeeded in overwhelming our forward infantry and, more serious still, in destroying four regiments of field artillery which had been moved up to support the advance of our tanks.

This unsuccessful counter-stroke was probably the turning point of the whole battle, which hitherto had not been wholly unfavourable to us. Nevertheless, the Eighth Army still seemed to have more tanks than the enemy and we were better off than he was so far as tank reserves were concerned. Our tank recovery organisation also was functioning with great efficiency. Time was needed, however, to re-organise our armoured formations which had suffered heavily, and our powers of recuperation in this respect seemed less than those of the enemy.

An attempt to advance from the northern half of our position towards Temrad met strong opposition and failed. General Ritchie, meanwhile, intensified his efforts to interfere with the enemy supply lines to the west of our minefields and attacked them from the north as well as from the south with satisfactory results. Our air forces had been working in the closest co-operation with the Eighth Army from

the beginning of the battle, and continued to make very heavy attacks against the enemy forces in the salient and on his transport passing backwards and forwards through the gaps in the minefields.

Having defeated our counter-attack, the enemy moved his armour forward to threaten Knightsbridge, the key to the northern half of our positions. At the same time he increased his pressure on Bir Hacheim and subjected it to heavy dive-bombing attacks. In spite of strenuous and partially successful efforts made to pass convoys into the stronghold, it became increasingly difficult to supply Bir Hacheim, which was held by the 1st Free French Brigade under General Koenig. General Ritchie also attempted to relieve the pressure on the garrison by taking the investing forces in the rear, but heavy and repeated enemy attacks began to wear down the defence, and on the 10th June General Ritchie found it necessary to order the post to be evacuated. The majority of the garrison withdrew in safety after a heroic defence lasting for nearly a fortnight.

The loss of Bir Hacheim undoubtedly weakened the general position of the Eighth Army, and the enemy quickly took advantage of this to concentrate his forces against El Adem, a most important tactical locality covering Tobruk from the south. Throughout the 12th and 13th June, the opposing armoured forces were heavily engaged round El Adem and Knightsbridge. This action proved to be the culmination of the armoured fighting, which had begun on the 27th May, and was decisive in its results. After it, we could muster only about fifty medium and twenty infantry tanks in the Acroma area while it seems probable that the enemy had twice that number. The enemy, moreover, was left in possession of the battlefield and could recover his damaged tanks and destroy ours. He also gained possession of the escarpment between El Adem and Knightsbridge, a feature of great tactical importance.

The Eighth Army's losses in tanks and field guns forced General Ritchie to revise his plans for the continuation of the battle. The loss of Bir Hacheim left the enemy free to threaten the southern face of the Tobruk defences and the communications of the 13th Corps, which was still holding the front from Gazala to Alem Hamza. General Ritchie consequently decided that he must withdraw these two divisions and, having obtained my agreement, issued orders accordingly on the 14th June.

I was most reluctant to sanction the withdrawal from Gazala. I had always considered it essential to retain this position in order to enable us rapidly to resume our offensive in Cyrenaica, and thus to aid Malta by regaining our forward air bases in the Gebel Akhdar. Moreover, if it were abandoned, the enemy would be free to concentrate all his forces against Tobruk, and the already limited space available to the Eighth Army for manoeuvre would be further greatly reduced. But the weakness of our armoured forces left General Ritchie no alternative. The 1st South African Division was withdrawn along the coast through Tobruk itself and reached the frontier almost intact, but the 50th Division had to withdraw south-eastwards through the enemy and suffered considerably, though it retained its organisation and admirable fighting spirit. The success of these withdrawals was due in great