

likely to prove still more valuable when the balance of armour should have turned in our favour and we were able to take the offensive once more. But there seemed to be no alternative but to evacuate it.

The 1st South African Division started to withdraw from Gazala at dusk on the 14th June by the road through Tobruk. This was made possible by the stubborn resistance offered by the garrisons of Acroma and its satellite localities, vigorously supported by what remained of our armour. The enemy began to drive northwards at midday, and in the course of seven hours of furious fighting these troops repulsed enemy tanks three times as numerous as our own, with the loss of only one position. Thus the 1st South African Division was able to reach the frontier practically intact. The 50th Division, which helped to cover the withdrawal of the South Africans, was less fortunate, being obliged to withdraw south-eastwards across the desert through country infested by the enemy. Nevertheless by midnight on the 15th June a large proportion of this division, which had lost the whole of the 150th Infantry Brigade with a regiment of artillery a fortnight earlier, also reached the frontier.

Although we had no choice but to give up our bastion at Gazala, I was determined that the Eighth Army should not yield more ground than was absolutely necessary. I therefore ordered General Ritchie not to allow Tobruk to become besieged but to hold a line through Acroma and El Adem and thence southwards. I believed that in spite of his heavy losses he still had enough troops to hold this reduced front of which the key positions were already prepared and occupied. The enemy himself must surely have sustained heavy losses and was known to be short of ammunition. Moreover we were still superior to him in the air, as we had been throughout. General Ritchie had reached the same conclusions as to the respective capabilities of the enemy and ourselves. In a telegram which crossed mine conveying orders to hold that line, he stated that he hoped to be able to stand on the western perimeter of Tobruk, at El Adem and Belhamed and to keep a mobile force in being to the south.

I had always been determined that Tobruk should not again be besieged, but the circumstances now obtaining were rather different to those I had previously envisaged. Although there was no denying that it had sustained serious losses and although it had been obliged to fall back from the Gazala line in consequence of the heavy defeat of the armoured divisions, the Eighth Army was by no means beaten. Out of the original five infantry divisions and two infantry brigade groups, there remained three divisions and a brigade group practically intact. The 1st and 2nd South African Divisions and the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, had hardly been seriously engaged and the 10th Indian Division had lost one field regiment and a battalion of infantry. Of the other two divisions, the 50th Division still had two brigade groups and the 5th Indian Division one; and a large part of the Free French Brigade Group had survived the attacks on Bir Hacheim and was being reorganised. Moreover, in order to make up for our losses I had arranged for the New Zealand Division to move down from Syria. Of the original three motor brigades, the 201st Guards and 7th Motor Brigades were fighting vigorously and the 3rd

Indian Motor Brigade was being reorganised. The armoured car regiments had naturally suffered casualties, but were still taking their full part in the battle.

The most serious losses had occurred among the armoured brigades. The 1st Armoured Division and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade which were now fighting round Acroma, had been reduced to about thirty and twenty-four tanks respectively. The 4th Armoured Brigade had managed to retain about sixty tanks. On the other hand there were about a hundred and fifty tanks of various types undergoing repair in the Eighth Army's workshops, and the 10th Armoured Division was on its way to the front. The training of that division was not complete, but would not take very long; and, when it was ready for battle, its ninety tanks might well give us the superiority in armour we required.

The Eighth Army was, I considered, still strong enough to provide an adequate garrison for Tobruk and to maintain a mobile field force to the east and south capable of preventing the fortress being permanently besieged. I was prepared to accept temporary isolation, provided the Eighth Army were able to maintain adequate pressure from the south and east. Meanwhile a new striking force was to be built up in the neighbourhood of the frontier. On the 16th June I telegraphed to General Ritchie that I was prepared to accept temporary investment and authorised him to organise the garrison as he thought best.

By this time the process of encirclement had begun. On the 15th June the enemy left Acroma in peace for the time being and turned his attention to El Adem; at the same time he pushed strong patrols forward to Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh. The 90th Light Division, supported by tanks, attacked El Adem three times. But the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade, with the help of columns from the 7th Motor Brigade from the south and from the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade from the north, repulsed all three attacks. Our air forces also gave effective and unstinted assistance.

The enemy then split his armour. The 15th Panzer Division attacked Acroma again on the 16th June; but the garrison, helped by the remnants of the 1st Armoured Division, held firm. At the same time a strong detachment of the 21st Panzer Division slipped past El Adem and formed up to attack one battalion of the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade which was defending Sidi Rezegh, but was dispersed by bombing and artillery fire. Then the main body of the 21st Panzer Division passed down the valley to Sidi Rezegh under cover of a feint made towards El Adem by the 90th Light Division. Columns from Tobruk and from the 4th Armoured Brigade attacked them as they passed, but were not powerful enough to arrest their advance.

I considered it essential to hold El Adem in order to prevent Tobruk becoming permanently isolated, and I ordered General Ritchie to reinforce it without delay. This proved impossible, however, and the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade, except for a detached battalion of infantry and a battery of artillery which fought their way into Tobruk, was withdrawn during the night of the 16th June. On the 17th June our defended locality at Sidi Rezegh was captured.