

*Matruh Fortress.*

2nd South African Infantry Brigade Group.

4th South African Infantry Brigade Group.

Plans for continuing the offensive now centred on El Adem, an area which very much resembles that of Sidi Rezegh, in that the main communications between east and west pass through a valley under observation from ridges to north and south. If we could continue to deny the enemy access to Bardia and to his supply dumps west of it, and at the same time sever his communications again by securing El Adem, his tanks would be forced to leave the valley between Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed, where they were protected by a screen of formidable anti-tank guns, and fight in the open. Both corps were to take part in the operation. The 13th Corps was to push forward from Ed Duda along the El Adem ridge as far as the Tobruk—El Adem road, while the infantry of the 30th Corps, having captured the strong point at Bir el Gubi, were to move northwards and secure first the southern ridge, and then the western end of El Adem ridge. Meanwhile the Armoured Division was to stand off to the east ready to engage the enemy tanks when they emerged.

It was inevitable that there should be a short delay on account of the reorganisation which was necessary. The 11th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 1st South African Infantry Brigade were ready, and it was hoped that it might not even be necessary to wait for the whole of the Indian Division to arrive; but General Norrie feared that the operation might miscarry if it were mounted in haste, and the resistance subsequently encountered at Bir el Gubi proved that he was right. Meantime armoured cars were to raid the Acroma area, where one such raid had already proved successful and had drawn much attention from the enemy air forces.

*The Enemy Again Thrusts Eastwards.*

While the Eighth Army was getting ready to attack El Adem, the enemy made a final thrust towards the frontier. On the 3rd December two strong fighting patrols set out for Bardia, one taking the coast road, and the other the Trigh Capuzzo. The 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade opposed the one north-east of Gambut and a detachment of the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade engaged the other near Sidi Azeiz. Both patrols were completely routed and suffered heavy losses. The next day a third and more powerful column, containing about fifty tanks, left the main leaguer at Sidi Rezegh and set off down the Trigh Capuzzo. It was bombed by our aircraft and attacked by the Support Group; and, on encountering troops of the 2nd South African Division, which had just arrived, the column turned back without making any further effort to reach Bardia.

These raids may have been a final effort on the part of the enemy to obtain supplies from Bardia and, perhaps, to rescue some of the troops besieged there. They may also have been intended to provide cover for a heavy assault on the Tobruk salient which was launched at dawn on the 4th December. Troop reliefs had just taken place in the salient preparatory to the attack on El Adem, when heavy shelling broke out heralding a day of attack and counter-attack. Every side of the salient was attacked. The garrison held the enemy off

throughout the morning, but in the afternoon heavy anti-tank guns were brought up within close range and smashed a number of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade's few remaining tanks. The enemy made deep inroads into the salient and, although our troops counter-attacked to some purpose, they could not recapture all the posts lost. They were preparing to continue their efforts by night, when it was discovered that the enemy had withdrawn.

Under cover of this fighting, the Bologna Division began a disorderly evacuation of the eastern sector of the siege lines, and the retreat went on through the night. The Germans attached to the division and some of the Italian officers seized what vehicles there were, leaving most of the rank and file to walk; many of them preferred to give themselves up. The next day the Afrika Korps and the Italian Mobile Corps, which had concentrated round Sidi Rezegh, began to withdraw. Well covered by artillery sited on the southern escarpment, they fell back in good order to the new line running from El Adem to Bir el Gubi which General Rommel had decided to occupy.

*The End of the Siege of Tobruk.*

The Eighth Army embarked on the second stage of the offensive at dawn on the 4th December. Reconnaissance had shown Bir el Gubi to be more strongly held than we had first supposed, and, in order to avoid the risk of the timing of the main operation being upset General Norrie decided to capture it by a separate preliminary operation. The defence of Bir el Gubi turned out to be surprisingly stubborn. The enemy were well entrenched, strongly supported by field and anti-tank guns and some tanks, and the Italian garrison was full of determination. The 11th Indian Infantry Brigade fought courageously, but at the end of two days they had been driven off the few positions they had been able to capture. Having lost nearly a third of their strength, they were ordered to withdraw. They had great difficulty in disengaging, but eventually managed to retire through the Guards Brigade, which had taken up a position to the south-west.

While the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade were trying to reduce Bir el Gubi, a light column from the 1st South African Brigade carried out a particularly valuable raid in rear of the enemy. They located a large enemy dump of supplies about fifteen miles north-west of Bir el Gubi and destroyed fifty thousand gallons of petrol and ten thousand gallons of diesel oil.

It was the general belief that the enemy was playing for time and intended to withdraw further, and General Ritchie was anxious for the attack on El Adem to begin as soon as possible. The numerous moves taking place in the frontier area called for a nice adjustment of transport, and difficulties had arisen over the provision of vehicles to lift the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade. But by the 5th December the 4th Indian Infantry Division was assembling, and General Norrie intended to start the operation on the evening of the 6th December. During the morning of the 6th, however, General Norrie heard that the two German Panzer Divisions were lying on the rising ground north-west of Bir el Gubi, astride the Indian Division's intended line of advance.

The time was clearly not yet ripe for the infantry brigades to move forward, and General