

thrown into the scale against them, the advantage rested with us. Moreover the enemy spent much of his strength and used up most of his reserves in this desperate counterstroke. But it might have succeeded, had the 4th Indian Division shown less determination and the mobile columns less offensive spirit, or had the Royal Air Force not bombed the enemy's principal concentrations so relentlessly. Nevertheless the attempt came as a rude shock, and it was with relief that I heard on the 27th November that the enemy was on his way back towards Tobruk.

#### *The Battle of Sidi Rezegh—Second Phase.*

The enemy's thrust failed in its main object of wresting from us the initiative; for, while it was in progress, the New Zealand Division and the Tobruk garrison were making fresh gains in the vital area of Sidi Rezegh, fifty miles to the westward. From Point 175 the 4th New Zealand Brigade struck north and took Zafraan without great difficulty at dawn on the 25th November. The same night by a skilfully planned bayonet attack they captured Belhamed. Simultaneously the 6th Brigade advanced along the ridge from Point 175 towards Sidi Rezegh. They met stiffer opposition, but by the morning of the 25th they had drawn level with the 4th Brigade on the ridge itself and on the eastern edge of the landing ground. Then the 6th Brigade made to capture Sidi Rezegh to conform with the 4th Brigade's attack on Belhamed. Although they pressed the attack with great determination and made considerable progress, they failed to dislodge the enemy from the high ground above the mosque at Sidi Rezegh. The following night, despite the heavy losses they had suffered, they reorganised and in a final spirited effort reduced this last enemy strongpoint.

At midday on the 26th November, the Tobruk garrison opened the long-deferred final phase of its sortie. By dusk they had captured Ed Duda in the face of determined resistance. That night saw the first contact between Tobruk and the Eighth Army, when General Freyberg moved his reserve battalion by the south of Belhamed to join the infantry consolidating on Ed Duda.

It remained to clear the enemy still holding out in the valley, who had closed in after the New Zealand battalion had passed through to Ed Duda. This was undertaken on the 28th November. With the help of tanks and armoured cars New Zealand infantry swept the valley taking numerous prisoners and much booty, while the 70th Division dislodged parties of the enemy from the edge of the escarpment between Ed Duda and Belhamed. The corridor now offered a safe passage, and the 13th Corps Headquarters and the administrative echelon of the New Zealand Division were able to move into Tobruk. At the same time a supply convoy from Tobruk reached the division, which by then had run very short of supplies and ammunition. Next day another convoy arrived from the 30th Corps under tank escort.

The enemy reacted immediately to the capture of Ed Duda, Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh, and on the 27th November wireless messages for the enemy armoured divisions to return from the frontier were intercepted. Appreciating that the New Zealand Division, which had gone forward without its third

Brigade and which had suffered serious losses, would need help, General Ritchie ordered the 1st South African Infantry Brigade to join the 13th Corps.

The Panzer Divisions began to return immediately and by the afternoon of the 28th, a heavy assault on the positions held by the 13th Corps was clearly impending. The 7th Armoured Division, which had been reorganised and now consisted of the Support Group and the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades with a hundred and twenty tanks altogether, attacked the Panzer Divisions several times on their way back; but, far from doing the enemy sufficient damage to deter him from attacking the 13th Corps, they themselves suffered heavy losses which left them powerless to intervene effectively to save the infantry next day. Our armoured brigades could not prevail against an enemy possessing, in all probability, an equal number of tanks, better armoured and mounting better guns.

On the 29th November violent assaults began on both flanks of the corridor. After several heavy, but unsuccessful attacks on Ed Duda, the enemy at length penetrated between Ed Duda and Belhamed, and secured a foothold on the crest of the position. The garrison launched a counter-attack, and by daybreak the whole position was once more in our hands. Meanwhile the enemy succeeded in making a permanent breach on the southern flank. The New Zealand troops holding Point 175 drove off two attacks in the morning, but eventually fell victims to a ruse, mistaking German tanks for the advanced guard of the South African Brigade. Next day the enemy captured the rest of Sidi Rezegh Ridge. During the afternoon of the 30th November the 6th New Zealand Brigade, reduced to barely one-third of its fighting strength and with only two support tanks left, was assailed by fifty tanks from the west and large numbers of infantry from the south, and after a gallant resistance was overwhelmed.

Although reinforcements were received during the night so that they now numbered a hundred and twenty again, our tanks could not go to the assistance of the New Zealanders. The enemy had shielded his eastern flank with anti-tank artillery; and, if our tanks, which had been concentrated into one brigade under Brigadier Gatehouse, had attempted either to penetrate the enemy screen or to outflank it, they would have become too deeply committed to attend to the task which had been assigned to them, that of covering the advance of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade.

Had the 1st South African Infantry Brigade arrived at the time it was expected on the morning of the 29th November, its presence might have turned the scale, and our armour might have been freed to intervene at Sidi Rezegh. But there were several reasons why it was delayed. The 1st South African Division was new to the desert, and its training in desert movement had been cut short. The advance of its 1st Brigade was hampered, therefore, by the large number of vehicles it had to marshal and control. The brigade had frequently to halt, change direction and start again, and the general pace of its movement was slow. It was still some twelve miles south of Point 175 on the 28th November when the 30th Corps Commander halted it on receipt of a message purporting to come from the 13th Corps. Although