

had a hard fight before capturing Palmyra; and the 6th Division met strong resistance on the road to Rayak; on 9th July the Australians assaulted and captured the French defences at Damour, with the assistance of bombardment from the sea by a naval squadron. Under pressure of these attacks the French asked for an armistice on 11th July. Terms were finally signed on 14th July, and Syria passed into Allied occupation.

94. The French in Syria put up an extremely stout fight on ground which was eminently favourable to the defence, and casualties on both sides were heavy. The feeling between the Vichy French and Free French was extremely bitter, and the French professional soldiers were also undoubtedly fighting with a view to preserving their professional honour.

General Wilson handled a difficult problem with his usual skill and imperturbability. General Lavarack commanded the 7th Australian Division, and later, the whole of the forces in Syria, most ably. The 7th Australian Division, most of whom were engaged for the first time, had a hard fight and acquitted themselves with great credit. A particular word of praise must be said for Brigadier Lloyd's 5th Indian Brigade, to whose determination and self-sacrifice the capture of Damascus is mainly due. The Free French fought stoutly in most unpleasant circumstances, their Commander, General Legentilhomme, carrying on in spite of a wound which broke his arm early in the operations.

We must be again considered fortunate in achieving our objective with forces which were really insufficient for their task. It was only skilful handling and determined fighting that brought about success.

Operations in the Western Desert.

95. During May and the early part of June, while the operations already described in Crete, Iraq and Syria were in progress, preparations were being made to re-form the 7th Armoured Division with the tanks sent from home and tanks which had been repaired in the workshops in Egypt, and to undertake operations against the enemy on the western frontier of Egypt with the object of driving him back and recovering Cyrenaica, at least as far as Tobruk.

On 1st May I had instructed Lieut.-General Sir Noel Beresford-Pearse, commanding in the Western Desert, to prepare an offensive operation as soon as our armoured strength permitted. It was hoped that it might be possible to re-equip the 7th Armoured Division before the end of May and to assume the offensive at the beginning of June. Meantime, however, the enemy was also being reinforced and was expected to bring forward an additional German armoured division by the middle of May. There was always the possibility that the enemy might forestall us and advance on the Delta before we were in a position to take the offensive ourselves. Defensive preparations in the Matruh area had therefore to be made at the same time.

96. In the middle of May, before the reinforcements from the United Kingdom could be unloaded, there seemed to be a fleeting opportunity of attacking the enemy forward troops on the Egyptian border near Sollum in favourable circumstances. Our intelligence seemed to show that the enemy strength in armoured

fighting vehicles in the forward area was small and that he was in difficulties with his supplies. I decided to make a limited attack with the small number of tanks I had available, about 30 Cruisers and 25 "I" tanks, in the hope of recovering Sollum and Capuzzo and thus securing a good jumping off place for an attack on a larger scale as soon as my reinforcements were available.

The attack was made on 15th May and was at first successful, Sollum and Capuzzo being captured and considerable losses inflicted on the enemy. Next day, however, the enemy succeeded in bringing up a large force of tanks from his reserve and we were compelled to retire. The enemy tanks showed a disinclination to engage closely, although in superior numbers, and we were able to withdraw with little loss.

97. The process of unloading the tanks from the United Kingdom and carrying out the necessary fittings and adjustments proved a longer and more difficult job than had been expected. In spite of every effort it was impossible to get all the tanks ready by the end of May. One of the ships had to be sent to Port Said for unloading since the cranes in Alexandria harbour were unable to lift the tanks from the hold. Many of the tanks required considerable overhaul, besides the fitting of sand filters and desert camouflage, and some of them were of a pattern which had not previously been in the Middle East. It was not until the first week in June that all the tanks were available, and then the state of training and readiness for battle of the 7th Armoured Division caused me considerable anxiety. The personnel of the Division had been without tanks since February, and so short had equipment been that there had not even been sufficient tanks or wireless sets available for them to continue their training while waiting to be re-equipped. Apart from normal wastage, detachments had been sent to Tobruk and to Crete, as well as to the Sudan. The units were, therefore, in no state to take over new equipment and immediately to be put into battle. Many light tank drivers and crews had to be put to man Cruisers or "I" tanks, the crews were as strange to one another as they were to their machines, and no high standard of driving, gunnery or maintenance could be looked for without at least a month's hard training. I was, however, being urged to attack with the least possible delay, and was myself anxious to forestall, if possible, the arrival of more German reinforcements.

10th June was the earliest possible date by which a sufficient force was available to take the offensive with any chance of success, but the Commander of the 7th Armoured Division, Major-General Sir Michael O'Moore Creagh, asked for at least five days to enable his crews to fire their guns and obtain some working knowledge of the new machines they were to take into action, as well as to allow staffs and commanders, many of whom were new since the Division had last been a formation, to settle down and become acquainted with each other. I therefore decided to attack on 15th June.

98. Meanwhile the enemy, on 27th May, had made a short advance in considerable strength and had driven my light covering forces back from the Halfaya Pass, which he occupied and began to prepare intensively for defence,