

of equipment; there is nothing so sure to cause lack of confidence. The soldier who has been forced to retreat through no fault of his own loses confidence in the higher command and the effect of a retreat is cumulative; because he has withdrawn already from several positions in succession he tends to look upon retreat as an undesirable but natural outcome of a battle. It was in any case fairly generally known that, in the last resort, the Army would retreat again, in accordance with the theory that it must be kept in being. My first step in restoring morale, therefore, was to lay down the firm principle, to be made known to all ranks, that no further withdrawal was contemplated and that we would fight the coming battle on the ground on which we stood. General Montgomery, on his arrival, fully concurred in this policy and expressed his confidence in being able to fight a successful defensive battle in our present positions.

At the moment the five divisions which I have already enumerated were the only battle-worthy formations available and with the exception of 9 Australian and 2 New Zealand Divisions they had all been engaged since the battle of Gazala opened at the end of May. We were, however, potentially stronger now than then and in a few weeks I should be able to increase my strength to more than twice that number of formations. I had in reserve four divisions which had not as yet seen action: 8 and 10 Armoured and 44 and 51 Infantry, and two veteran divisions refitting, 1 Armoured and 50 Infantry. These were in the meantime disposed for the defence of the Delta together with other non-divisional forces, including strong elements of the Sudan Defence Force.

When I took over, the plan for the defence of the Delta had been to hold the western edge of cultivation. Along this line the Rosetta Branch of the Nile and the Nubariya Canal, which takes off from it midway between Cairo and Alexandria, form in combination a continuous tank obstacle extending from Cairo almost to Lake Maryut, which covers Alexandria on the south. The defence consisted of denying the three principal crossings at Alexandria, Khatatba and Cairo with infantry and employing armour in the gaps. The Cairo defences were complete and held by the equivalent of six infantry brigades, while another infantry brigade guarded the open southern flank with patrols operating from Bahariya Oasis to give warning of enemy approach to the south of the Qattara Depression. An extensive position was being prepared round the Wadi Natrun to deny the water sources there to the enemy and to act as an advanced position covering the Khatatba crossing. This position had been intended for the infantry of Eighth Army in the event of a withdrawal. 1 and 10 Armoured Divisions were lying at Khatatba itself, engaged in re-equipping, together with 44 Infantry Division, now almost ready for action. The inner defences of Alexandria were complete but the outer defences, consisting of extensive field works, were still unfinished. The equivalent of six infantry brigades were deployed in this area. Two more infantry brigades were held in reserve.

The original intention, based mainly as I have mentioned, on the necessity of preserving our forces to meet a possible threat from the north, had been to withdraw in the last resort

in two directions: eastwards into Palestine with the greater part of the forces and southwards up the Nile valley with the remainder. Command had accordingly been divided between 10 Corps, which was responsible for Alexandria and the Delta, and Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt, which was responsible for Cairo and the Nile valley. Since I had now been relieved of responsibility for the north-eastern front and was in any case determined to stand on the Alamein position I altered this arrangement on 20th August to the extent of making Lieut.-General Stone, commanding British Troops in Egypt, responsible for the defence of the whole of the Delta, and made 10 Corps Headquarters available for Eighth Army. I cancelled the construction of defences at the Wadi Natrun but instructed General Stone to continue working on the outer defences of Alexandria and improving communications between the Nile valley and the Red Sea; I also gave instructions for certain areas round Alexandria, on the banks of the Rosetta Branch and north of Cairo to be flooded. Cairo, Khatatba and Alexandria were to be defended by 51, 1 Armoured and 50 Divisions respectively. These troops would serve to protect vital installations against raids which might penetrate the Alamein position, or against airborne attack, for which the enemy had available both German and Italian parachute formations. They could not have been employed in a more active role at that time: 51 Division had only recently disembarked and was mobilizing and carrying out preliminary desert training and the other two, both of whom had already served over six months in the desert, were engaged in vitally urgent re-equipping. 50 Division had had very heavy losses both at Gazala and Matruh.

I had therefore available, but not all immediately available, four armoured and seven infantry divisions. As against this the Axis forces in Egypt amounted to four armoured and eight infantry divisions, plus five independent regiments or regiment-sized groups. Command was exercised nominally by Mussolini who acted through an Italian Headquarters known as Superlibia, an advanced detachment of the Commando Supremo, under Marshal Bastico. Actual command, however, was exercised by Field-Marshal Rommel. His headquarters bore the name of "German-Italian Armoured Army of Africa,"* and under it came all German and Italian troops in the forward area, organized under four Corps Headquarters, the German Africa Corps and the Italian X, XX and XXI Corps. The former consisted of 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, veterans of the later desert battles. The second of these divisions had come to Africa first, under the name of 5 Light Division, in February, 1941, and 15 Panzer Division followed in the spring of the same year. The reconnaissance battalions of these two divisions were usually brigaded together as a "Reconnaissance Group" under Corps command. 90 Light Division, of motorized infantry, which attained its final form in Africa in January, 1942, was usually employed directly under Army command. 164 Infantry Division had been flown over from Crete at the end of

* Deutsch-Italienisch Panzer Armee Afrika or Armata Corazzata Italo-Tedesca, referred to by the Italians as ACIT