

99. The length of my line of communications, 120 miles from Matruh to the Egyptian frontier across waterless desert, limited the size of the force it was possible to employ. In any event it was obvious that the battle would be decided mainly by the respective armoured forces, and I put into action the largest armoured force I could make available by this date. The 7th Armoured Division consisted of the 11th Hussars (Armoured Cars), the 7th Armoured Brigade of two Cruiser regiments and 4th Armoured Brigade of two "I" tank regiments, and a Support Group comprising two regiments of 25-pounders, one anti-tank regiment, one motorised infantry battalion and some light anti-aircraft artillery. Each armoured brigade was thus short of one regiment, but it would not have been possible to complete the brigades to their full complement of three regiments till the end of June or early in July. The pace and radius of action of the two armoured brigades was so widely different that it would obviously be extremely difficult to combine them. The Cruiser tanks had a speed of 15-20 miles an hour and a radius of action of 80-100 miles, whereas the "I" tanks had a radius of action of only 40 miles and a speed of no more than about 5 miles an hour in action.

100. The course of operations on or near the Egyptian frontier is largely conditioned by the escarpment which runs south-east from Sollum. It is steep and about 200 ft. high, impassable to tanks or vehicles for about 50 miles from Sollum except at Sollum itself and at Halfaya Pass. An advance along the coast therefore would have to find its way up one of these steep routes, while an advance south of the escarpment involved the exposure of the line of communications to a flanking attack from the south.

The plan drawn up by Lieut.-General Sir Noel Beresford-Peirse, which I approved, was to advance in three columns. The right column, along the sea coast, consisted of the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, Central India Horse, one field regiment and one field company; it was to advance to Sollum, assisting the centre column to capture Halfaya. The centre column, to move south of the escarpment, consisted of the 4th Armoured Brigade (two "I" tank battalions), two field regiments, one medium battery, one anti-tank regiment, and the 22nd Guards Brigade. It was to advance south of the escarpment, cross the frontier well to the south of Sollum, thus avoiding the enemy's prepared defences, and then turn north and capture Musaid, Bir Waer and Capuzzo. A detachment was to capture Halfaya. The left column, 7th Armoured Division less 4th Armoured Brigade was to advance further south of the escarpment to protect the left flank of the centre column and to attack the enemy tank forces wherever encountered. It was anticipated that the attack of the right and centre columns on the enemy defended areas, while the left column threatened the enemy's rear and supplies, would lead to reaction by the enemy armoured forces and bring on a tank battle either east of the frontier during the attack on Halfaya or west of the frontier after our capture of Capuzzo.

If the first stage of the attack was successful and the enemy forces on the frontier were defeated, it was intended to continue the

advance to the Tobruk-El Adem area, and to engage the enemy there in conjunction with a sortie in force by the Tobruk garrison.

101. It was estimated that there were in the forward area Bardia-Capuzzo-Sollum about 5,700 Germans with about 100 medium tanks and 50 armoured cars, 20 field guns and 70 anti-tank guns. The Italian forces in the same area were estimated at 7,500 with about 50 guns and 20 anti-tank guns. In the Tobruk-El Adem area there were over 11,000 Germans, with 120 medium and 70 light tanks, about 36 field guns and 80 anti-tank guns; there were about 16,000 Italians with 120 field guns, 32 anti-tank guns and a few tanks. Altogether, if he brought up his tanks from the Tobruk area, the enemy could concentrate 300 against our total of approximately 200.

102. The air forces available to support the attack consisted of six fighter squadrons, four medium bomber squadrons, and four squadrons (less detachments) of heavy night bombers. This force owing to other demands only became available just before the attack; in the week or ten days preceding the attack very little preparatory air action had been possible. Owing to the lack of equipment and some technical failures in the equipment available, photographic reconnaissance of the enemy positions before the battle had been scanty and disappointing. There was a great shortage of trained pilots for tactical reconnaissance.

103. During 15th and 16th June the attack progressed fairly satisfactorily. The 22nd Guards Brigade occupied Capuzzo and Bir Waer taking several hundred prisoners and some guns, and the Cruiser tanks of the 7th Armoured Division inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy tanks. The enemy, however, still held out at Halfaya and Sollum, one squadron of Cruiser tanks had lost practically all its vehicles in an attack west of Capuzzo by running on to a concealed enemy anti-tank gun position; and we had suffered considerable casualties in "I" tanks from enemy minefields and some enemy high velocity guns at Halfaya. On the evening of 16th June a strong force of enemy tanks attempted an outflanking movement to the south and was engaged by the 7th Armoured Brigade near Sidi Omar. Our Cruiser tanks inflicted casualties on the enemy but found themselves at the conclusion of the engagement heavily outnumbered and were compelled to withdraw.

104. The situation on the morning of 17th June was that the 22nd Guards Brigade was still in position at Capuzzo, Musaid and Bir Waer, with the 4th Armoured Brigade protecting its left flank. Enemy detachments still held out in Sollum and at Halfaya and strong enemy columns with a large number of armoured fighting vehicles were advancing south from Bardia and eastwards from southwest of Capuzzo. To the south the 7th Armoured Division had been forced back from Sidi Omar and was in the Sidi Suleiman area. An enemy column containing artillery and some 75 tanks had advanced east from Sidi Omar towards Halfaya and was threatening to cut off our troops in the forward area. The 7th Armoured Brigade had only some 20 Cruiser tanks remaining in action. During the night of 16th/17th June General Creagh had asked General Messervy who was commanding the troops in