

the southern flank still more. Accordingly on 1st September General Montgomery concentrated the three armoured brigades in the area between 44 Division and the New Zealand Division. 1 South African Infantry Brigade was moved from 30 Corps area to the east end of Ruweisat ridge. Early on that morning the enemy resumed the attempt to batter his way on to the west end of Alam el Halfa ridge and again suffered heavily. His tanks first tried another frontal assault on 22 Armoured Brigade; when that failed they attempted to work round either flank of the brigade. After two hours the enemy drew off to the south. He refuelled and reorganised during the middle of the day and returned to the attack in the late afternoon, when he began to probe for soft spots, tapping 23 and 22 Armoured Brigades in turn. This gave him no encouragement and he drew off again without staging a heavy attack.

The first two days of the battle had ended without any decisive success for the enemy and this was already a decisive success for us. On 2nd September, Rommel changed his tactics. Instead of continuing the attack he decided to put himself in a posture of defence and await the counter-attack which he felt confident that we should shortly deliver; he therefore massed the bulk of his armour south of Alam el Halfa and threw out a screen of anti-tank guns in front of them. On the left of the armour 90 Light and Trieste Divisions consolidated their positions to keep open the corridor through the minefield. It was not our intention, however, to gratify him by a frontal attack on the Africa Corps but rather to operate against the two infantry divisions further west in order to close the gap in the minefield behind the main armoured force. Orders for this operation had been issued the previous day and 5 Indian Infantry Brigade and 7 Medium and 49 Anti-tank Regiments Royal Artillery, from 30 Corps were moving south to reinforce 13 Corps. At the same time 2 South African Brigade was drawn into reserve. On request of Eighth Army I sent up 151 Brigade from 50 Division at Amiriya to strengthen the south-western end of Alam el Halfa ridge. Should the plan prove successful the enemy would be so weakened that an immediate advance might be possible; General Montgomery ordered forward H.Q. 10 Corps in case he should need it to command a pursuit force. It was instructed to be prepared to push through to Daba with all reserves available and possibly the Australian Division. Meanwhile the enemy concentrations provided an excellent target to our aircraft and artillery which gave them no respite. Armoured car patrols to the south and east observed the enemy closely and 7 Armoured Division continued to attack his unarmoured vehicles with great success.

Under these various forms of attack, but without provoking our armour to descend from the ridge and give battle, the enemy lay all day of 2nd September. A new and serious crisis in his fuel situation had arisen, for we had been once more successful in our attacks on his tankers, sinking three in two days. As the day wore on it was evident to him that the last hope had failed and, since it was impossible to remain in this advanced position, he would have to withdraw. It was the nearest

the Germans ever got to the Delta. At first light on 3rd September it was reported that they were withdrawing slightly to south and south-west. It was still not clear whether this was the start of a real retreat or another feint to entice our armour into battle; in any case 13 Corps followed up with armoured cars only. By the afternoon there was every indication that the westward movement was developing into a withdrawal. 7 Armoured Division moved westwards to the area between Gaballa and Himeimat to operate against the southern flank of the retiring columns and heavy air action was organised against the concentrations east of the minefield.

At 2230 hours on 3rd September the New Zealand Division, with 132 Brigade of 44 Division under command, began to attack southwards as the first stage in closing the gap. They were opposed by 90 Light Division to the west and Trieste to the east; both fought well and the attack was only partially successful. 5 New Zealand Brigade on the east gained their objective, 28 (Maori) Battalion fighting a particularly gallant action. 132 Brigade were unsuccessful and had heavy losses and to the west 6 New Zealand Brigade also failed to reach their objective. At dawn and again on the evening of 4th September the enemy put in heavy counter-attacks against the three brigades. All were repulsed but during the night the infantry were withdrawn from their exposed positions, leaving mobile troops to operate southwards. Throughout 4th and 5th September the retreating enemy was assailed from the north, east and south by our mobile troops and heavily bombed by our aircraft. It was unfortunate that on 4th September another dust-storm made observation difficult and flying impossible during the afternoon. By the evening of 5th September the enemy's slow and stubborn withdrawal had brought him back to the area of our minefields. Here he turned to stand and it was clear that he intended to make a strong effort to retain this much at least of his gains. Accordingly at 0700 hours on 7th September the battle was called off and Rommel was left in possession of a thin strip of ground which had advanced his positions on the southern flank to a line running from the eastern end of Deir el Munassib to include the peak of Himeimat. The latter was valuable for the excellent observation which it gave as far north as Ruweisat ridge.

This meagre gain of some four or five miles of desert could in no way be set off against the material losses. Forty-two German tanks and eleven Italian, and nearly seven hundred motor vehicles, were abandoned on the field, together with thirty field and forty anti-tank guns. Casualties were more difficult to assess but we estimated that the enemy had lost two thousand Italians and two thousand five hundred Germans in killed and wounded; three hundred were taken prisoner. Our own losses were sixty-eight tanks, one anti-aircraft and eighteen anti-tank guns; killed, wounded and missing numbered sixteen hundred and forty. But the battle of Alam el Halfa was far more important than would appear from any statistics of gains and losses or the numbers involved. It was the last throw of the German forces in Africa, their last chance of a victory before, as they calculated, our increasing strength would make victory for them impossible. It