

enemy had dispersed westwards. The 4th Armoured Brigade followed and swung south in an attempt to cut off the enemy's retreat. A broad expanse of waterlogged country forced them to make a wide detour which took them over extremely broken ground; their advance was greatly slowed down and they arrived to find the last of the enemy vanishing.

The Armoured Division's supply difficulties now became acute and, until a field maintenance centre had been established, General Gott could employ only the Support Group and two armoured car regiments. He therefore sent one armoured car regiment towards Msus to keep contact with the enemy and another towards Charruba to watch the tracks leading out of the Gebel Akhdar. The Support Group he ordered to advance on Bengasi to repeat the successful manoeuvre of the previous winter by cutting off the retreat of the 21st Italian Corps. Brigadier Renton was ordered to send a column ahead to press on with all speed, and to follow with the main body as soon as it had replenished. The 4th Armoured Brigade had to be withheld at Mechili until sufficient petrol was forthcoming.

While the armoured brigade was at Mechili the headquarters of the 22nd Armoured Brigade, which had been reorganised, took over from that of the 4th Armoured Brigade. The individual regiments had already been relieved in the course of operations, as and when regiments of the original 22nd Armoured Brigade were re-equipped, for the most part with damaged tanks which had been repaired.

The landing grounds at Mechili were reported safe during the afternoon of the 19th December, and next morning squadrons which had followed close behind our forward troops began to use them. The speed with which aircraft began to operate from landing grounds immediately in rear of our foremost troops helped to compensate for our inability to send large land forces in pursuit of the enemy.

Our hopes of reaching Bengasi in time were soon dashed. The recent rains had been unusually heavy and many parts of the southern slopes of the Gebel Akhdar, which the Support Group had to traverse, were under water. Their own progress was greatly retarded, and that of their supply echelons was rendered even more difficult, with the result that in a short while they were held up for lack of petrol. On the 21st December, therefore, General Gott decided to abandon the attempt and ordered the Support Group to advance on Antelat instead, leaving only a small column to press on to Bengasi.

The maintenance difficulties which the 13th Corps encountered did not come as a surprise. It had been appreciated when the operation was being planned that the difficulties of supply would increase enormously in Western Cyrenaica, and it was for that reason that I had been so anxious to destroy the enemy as far east as possible. Now we had to accept the fact that the size of the forces employed in pursuit would be very much restricted, until the port of Bengasi could be developed and brought into use. Meanwhile we should have to resort to every shift and device to overcome the handicap.

The Oases Force under Brigadier Reid had captured Gialo on the 24th November and squadrons of aircraft based on the landing

ground in the Oasis had been attacking enemy supply lines and communications ever since. The Oases Force had fulfilled its mission admirably, but it was not of a size to meet the enemy forces which were now fleeing from the Gebel Akhdar and across the desert. Realising the inability of the weak Oases Force even to impede the enemy's retreat, General Ritchie had sent the Guards Brigade Group with supporting air squadrons straight to Antelat. He had hoped to be able to despatch them some time before the enemy broke at Gazala; but the acute shortage of supply vehicles and the unexpectedly strong resistance encountered at Gazala had compelled him to postpone their departure until the 20th December.

When the Guards Brigade reached Antelat on the 22nd December, they found a hostile force including thirty tanks lying around Beda Fomm, covering the Axis withdrawal down the coastal road. One of its battalions, which occupied Antelat, was driven out again on the 23rd by a strong detachment of this force. By that time the Support Group had reached this neighbourhood and had been sent north-westwards to interfere with whatever the enemy had in hand at Carcura, off which seven ships were lying. When the news reached him that the Guards Brigade had been attacked at Antelat, General Gott ordered the Support Group to turn about and move at once to their assistance. At the sight of both brigades assembled to attack him the enemy withdrew from Antelat towards Agedabia. The pursuit of this force would have been an excellent task for the armoured regiment which had arrived during the morning, but after a brief engagement with enemy tanks it had no fuel left with which to give chase.

While the 13th Corps was struggling to overcome its maintenance troubles, the enemy completed the evacuation of Bengasi. Our armoured cars, ordered to reconnoitre up to the coastal road south of Bengasi on the 22nd December, had found the passes down the escarpment at Sidi Brahim, Sceleidima and to the south held by enemy detachments. But on the 24th a squadron of armoured cars, entering Bengasi by the road from El Abiar, found the town evacuated and the harbour empty.

An enemy flankguard remained round Beda Fomm and to the west of Antelat during the next two days. Columns from the Guards Brigade made several attempts to dislodge them, but the enemy was strong in artillery and the brigade could make little headway. Meanwhile the Support Group finished clearing the coastal area further north. On the 26th December the last of the enemy, harassed as they went by columns from the Guards Brigade, retired to Agedabia.

Operations round Agedabia.

For the next ten days the 13th Corps was held up at Agedabia, where the enemy had left a considerable force to cover his preparation of positions in the marshes round El Agheila. The country round Agedabia is well suited to defence, and the enemy exploited its natural advantages with admirable skill. The strip of land between the main road and the coast is swampy, and soft sand dunes make the few dry patches practically impassable for vehicles. The ground to the east and south is also covered with soft sand and is bounded by the