

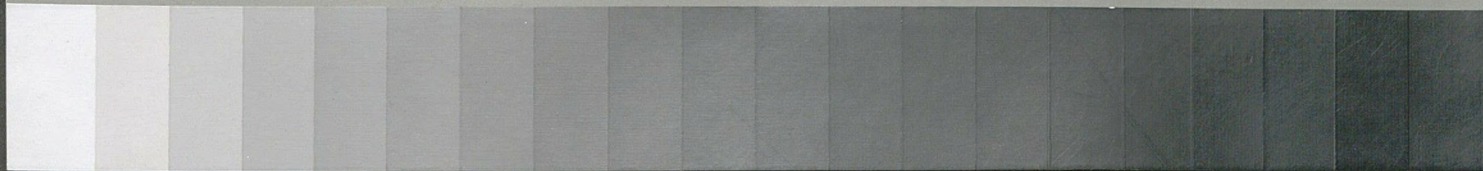
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# THE EIGHTH ARMY





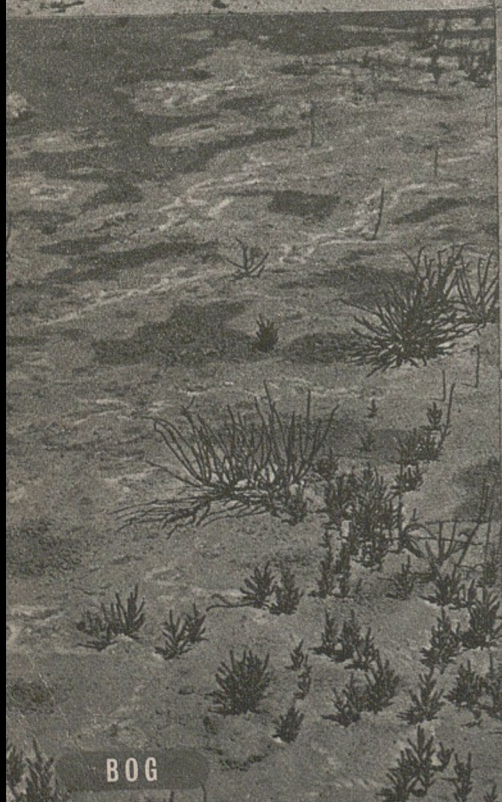
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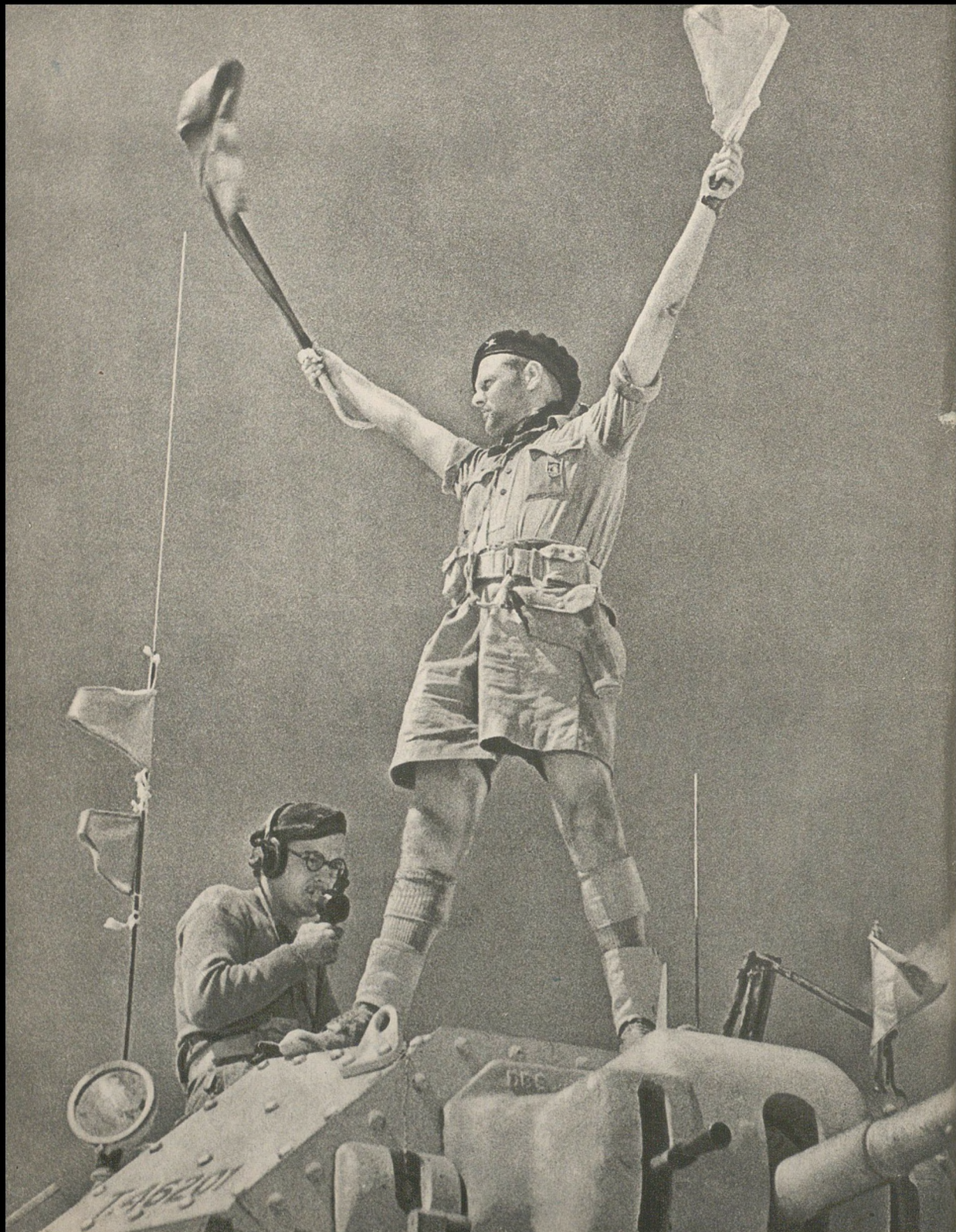


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AMBASADA RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ  
w MOSKWIE  
Nr.

# THE EIGHTH ARMY

SEPTEMBER 1941 TO JANUARY 1943

Prepared for the War Office by the Ministry of Information

AMBASADA RZECZYPOSPOLITEJ POLSKIEJ  
w MOSKWIE  
Nr. 704

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# UNITS OF THE EIGHTH ARMY IN NORTH AFRICA

Formation and training of Eighth Army April—November 1941

18 November—23 November

24 November—20 January 1942

21 January—26 May

27 May—14 June

15 June—28 June

29 June—31 July



1 August—29 August

30 August—7 September

8 September—22 October

23 October—27 October

28 October—3 November

4 November—11 November

12 November—23 January 1943

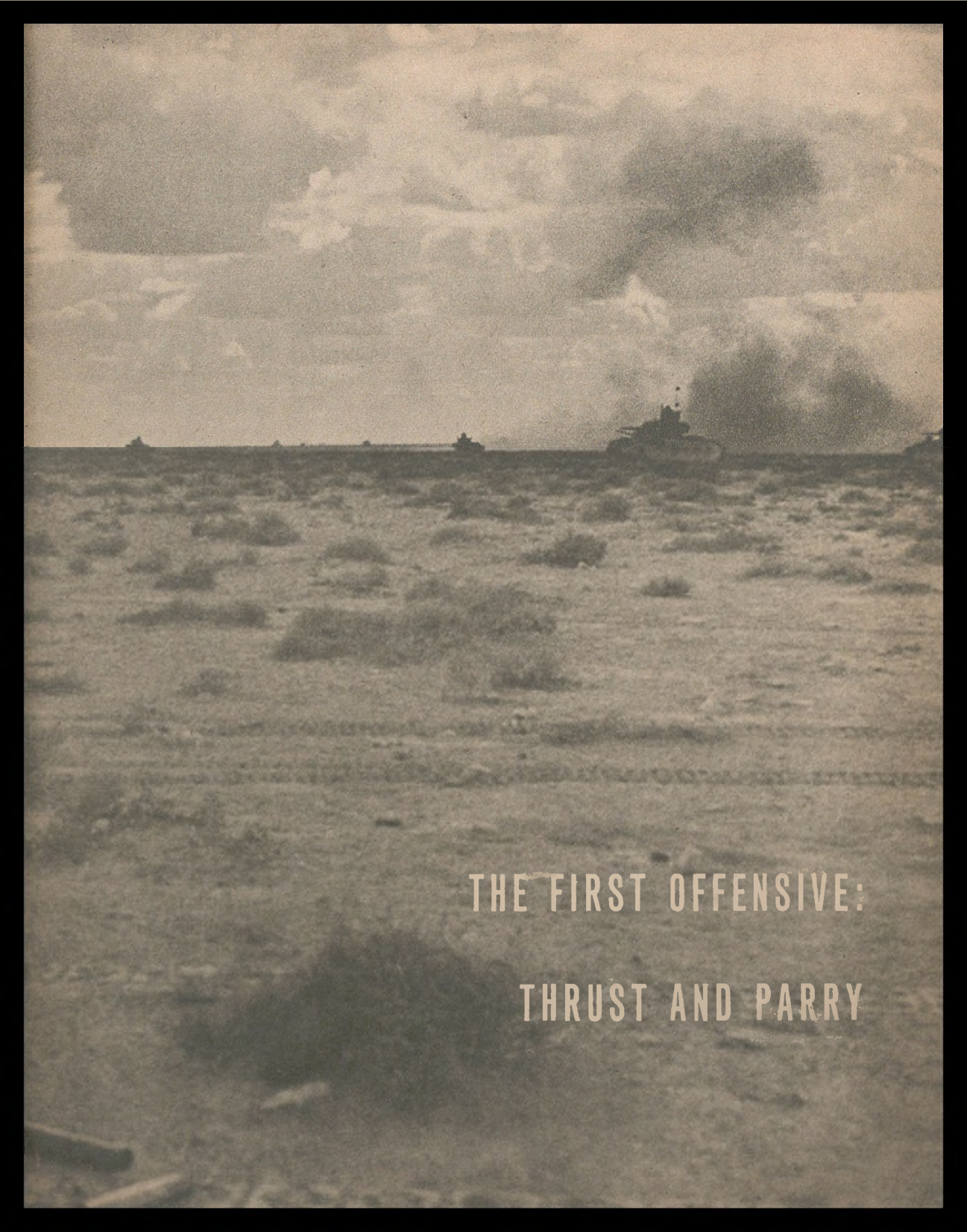
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A black and white photograph of a desert landscape. The foreground is filled with low-lying, scrubby vegetation. In the distance, a large military ship, possibly a tank or a self-propelled artillery piece, is visible on the horizon. The ship is emitting a large plume of smoke or dust that rises into the sky. The sky is filled with clouds. The overall tone is somber and historical.

THE FIRST OFFENSIVE:

THRUST AND PARRY



## FOREWORD

The first occasion on which the name "The Eighth Army" appeared in print was when General Sir Alan Cunningham was appointed as its commander on 18th November, 1941, though it was officially known as the Eighth from 26th-27th September. This book covers the whole of its life history as a completely independent force. After the landing of the Americans and the First Army in French North Africa on 8th November, 1942, there was always a sense of strategic co-ordination of the operations of the two Armies, since the plain strategic purpose was to pinch the Axis out of the continent between them; but there was no direct tactical co-ordination until the amalgamation of the First, Eighth, American, and French Armies into the Eighteenth Army Group on 20th February, 1943, when all had reached Tunisia.

In the construction of this book the aim has been to follow out, so far as possible, the contributions made by the different units, while preserving a consecutive story of the whole Army. From time to time passages have been included from accounts furnished by men who took part in the fighting. They have been selected to show what a desert campaign is like, to illustrate the kind of operation required of different kinds of units, and, very occasionally, to relate some specially outstanding exploit.

No attempt has been made to describe the work of the Navy and of the R.A.F. except in terms sufficient to show that the victory of the Eighth Army would have been impossible without them.

## 1. THE EIGHTH ARMY IS BORN

"The British Eighth Army represents the most modern and most powerful force to be found to-day on the different chess-boards of this world war. The infantry is perfectly trained, shows great fighting spirit and has armament and equipment better than those of any other infantry in the world. The British artillery is well provided with excellent guns and is splendidly organised, and the British armoured units are among the best in the world. Its leaders and staffs are carefully chosen and have proved their worth on the battlefield. Finally, the Eighth Army has some 10,000 motor vehicles and has both a naval and an air fleet at its disposal. The co-operation between the R.A.F. and the land forces can serve as an example for anyone."

This extract from an official Italian report on the battles of Mareth and Akarit gives an opinion of the Eighth Army which modesty would prevent a British writer from inscribing. Though the estimate of the Army's motor vehicles was, in fact, a gross understatement,

the general verdict should be taken with a pinch of salt. Given comparable opportunities and leadership, other British armies have proved to be on the same high level; and the Italian commentator may well have been influenced by the fact that nothing puts a beaten army in a better light than praise of its victorious opponents. But in substance it was true when written in April 1943, and has remained true since; and there is some gratification in noting that the Eighth Army, in the opinion of its adversaries, was a better military instrument than the Afrika Korps.

It was not always so. The Eighth Army was born at a critical moment in Britain's fortunes. It was the child of the Army of the Nile, which, under General Wavell, had utterly destroyed the Italian Army in Libya, only to be brought to the brink of destruction itself by a German counter-offensive launched when it had been greatly weakened to keep the promise given to Greece. The credit for



holding the enemy on the Egyptian frontier and for holding on to the outpost of Tobruk belongs not only to the men on the spot, but to those at home who had the courage and vision steadily to reinforce the Middle East while Britain was still threatened with imminent invasion.

But nothing which could be sent over lines of communication 12,000 miles long could make the Eighth Army into a formidable striking force for many months; and there were distractions which prevented entire concentration in Libya. In the first place, Syria had to be secured against Axis infiltration, and Iraq rescued from a pro-Axis rebellion. Secondly, after the German assault on Russia in June 1941, the road from the Persian gulf to the Caucasus had to be secured and improved. Thirdly, the ever-growing menace of Japan dictated some measure of precautionary reinforcement of the Far East. All these things had to be done at a time when, with the notable exception of the people of the British Empire themselves, most of the world was expecting an early Axis victory; and, human nature being what it is, was not so enthusiastic as its inclinations might otherwise have prompted it to be.

There is another factor which must be taken into serious account in assessing the tasks and achievements of the Eighth Army, namely the very special character of the country in which it had to fight. What may be called the cinema impression of a desert is nothing like the Western Desert. There is much less sand than one expects, and the sandstorms so often mentioned are more frequently choking clouds of dust rather than sand. Vast stretches are hard, firm going (except after rain), and resemble flat rock more than anything else. There are practically no features in the landscape, other than occasional shallow depressions which allow tanks to get into hull-down positions.

Where the Western Desert is true to convention is in its lack of water. A water pipeline had to be constructed all the way from Alexandria nearly to Tobruk, and this

supply eked out with the rather brackish water obtained from local wells. Even so, the normal ration was one gallon a head a day for all purposes, and the amount actually reaching the troops was often not quite as much. Among the more disagreeable features are the flies. They are a filthy, pertinacious, excruciating pestilence. As for the climate, it is not so trying after a time, and most people found it healthy enough, except when the hot winds, or khamsin, were blowing. These winds are completely horrible. Physically, they seem devoid of oxygen. Morally, they make the most placid temperament morose.

It will be seen that everything in the Western Desert was totally unfamiliar; and it follows that troops required weeks of training in local conditions before they could be considered "desert-worthy," that is to say, really battle-worthy. To give only two examples of the special demands made on soldiers by the desert: in a country so devoid of cover most movement had to be made by night, and every vehicle crew had to be able to cook for itself in an area where wide dispersal is the normal formation. Perhaps the best verdict on the peculiarities of the desert was pronounced by General von Ravenstein, the captured commander of the 21st German Armoured Division. "The desert," he said, "is the tactician's paradise, but the quartermaster's hell!"

In these circumstances it was surprising that General Auchinleck could launch the Eighth Army's offensive as early as November, 1941.

Between February and that month the Axis had succeeded in collecting a formidable force in Libya. It consisted of two German Armoured Divisions (the 15th and the 21st), the 90th German Light Division, one Italian Armoured Division (the Ariete), and seven Italian infantry divisions (the 17th Pavia, the 25th Bologna, the 27th Brescia, the 55th Savona, the 60th Sabrata, the 101st Trieste and the 102nd Trento—the last two being motorised). The whole of this formidable army (except the Italian 60th



Division) had been imported between March and May while our fleet was occupied in Greek waters and could not effectively interfere with trans-Mediterranean traffic.

Between May and November no complete enemy formations were brought across. There were many convoys, bringing drafts, supplies, equipment, and ammunition during the summer and autumn but, despite our very serious losses off Greece and Crete, the Navy and R.A.F. succeeded in destroying between one-third and one-half of their cargoes on the way. The measure of success of the interception is that Rommel, after his blitz was stopped in April, could not gather enough strength for a first-class offensive until November. In spite of the immensely greater length of the Eighth Army's lines of communication, it can claim to have won the race for supplies, since General Auchinleck's offensive on 18th November anticipated by five days that planned by Rommel.

This offensive therefore caught the enemy with his dispositions readier for attack than for defence. The best of his troops, including most of his armour, were in the forward areas. Four infantry divisions were concentrated (and could therefore be contained) around the Tobruk lines, and his general reserve, consisting of the Ariete and Trieste Italian divisions only, was on the upper desert plateau.

For its part, the Eighth Army had been organised for the assault into two main formations, namely the XIIIth Corps, under Lieut.-General Godwin-Austin (later under General Gott, at this stage commanding the 7th Armoured Division), and the newly formed XXXth Corps under Lieut.-General Willoughby Norrie. The composition of these Corps was radically different. Units of the XIIIth Corps included the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 4th Indian Division, and the 1st Army Tank Brigade—in fact, the Corps was mainly composed of infantry. The 7th Armoured Division, the 1st South African Division and the 22nd Guards Brigade made up the XXXth Corps. In Tobruk



THE MEN OF THE EIGHTH ARMY came together from







England and Scotland, from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India. Its soldiers were such men as these.





were the 70th Division, a Polish Brigade and the 32nd Armoured Brigade.

At the risk of breaking the thread of this narrative, it is pertinent to describe in rather more detail some features of the armour, since the impression prevailed at the time that it was superior to the armour of the enemy and that the job of wiping out two German armoured Divisions and one Italian should have been achieved without extraordinary exertions.

The 7th Armoured Division, on whom the brunt of this task was to fall, contained three Armoured Brigades besides the famous 7th Support Group under that military Drake, Brigadier Jock Campbell, who won his V.C. in the battle. The three Armoured Brigades contained 455 tanks in all; but, of these, 165 were the light Stuart type, now classed not as a tank but as a good reconnaissance vehicle; the rest were mainly Crusaders. It may be argued that every tank in the Eighth Army, whether in the XXXth Corps or not, should be counted. So be it. This adds to the total 120 Matildas and Valentines of the 1st Army Tank Brigade, and 90 similar tanks of the 32nd Army Tank Brigade in Tobruk.

The Eighth Army therefore had 665 tanks of all sorts, as against 505 belonging to the Axis. But a mathematical count of this kind is utterly misleading, and a correct comparison of the strength of the two armies gives a very different picture. Over half the Axis tanks were German Mark IIIs and Mark IVs, both of which, as will be explained later in summing up the battle, were superior in armament, armour, and reliability to anything opposing them. None of the British tanks had a gun heavier than the two-pounder; whereas those in the German tanks fired nothing lighter than a 4½-lb. shell, and their heaviest gun a shell of 14 lb. Bravery and skill the Eighth Army had in full measure, but not equality in hitting power; and its ultimate success in defeating the enemy's armour was a miracle of human courage and ingenuity.

Again, the XXXth Corps, which was given the job of smashing the enemy armour, had another job as well—to protect the left flank of the largely unarmoured XIIIth Corps. If, therefore, the XIIIth Corps and the Tobruk tanks are left out of account, as they at least ought to be during the earlier stages before they entered the battle, it will be seen that the XXXth Corps had not even numerical equality in tanks to do its double job.

No account of the dispositions for the battle would be complete which omitted the attempt to disorganise the enemy by raiding Rommel's Headquarters more than 200 miles behind the enemy's front. This task was entrusted to Lieut.-Colonel Keyes of the 11th Commando, who had already added lustre to a famous name by his conduct at the crossing of the Litani river in the Syrian Campaign.

Lieut.-Colonel Keyes, Lieut.-Colonel (now Maj.-General) Laycock, five other officers, and 53 N.C.O.s and men, were taken a three-day journey in two submarines (*Torbay*, under Commander Miers, V.C., and *Talisman*) along the coast to the beach selected for landing. The weather was rough, with heavy rain, and it was bitterly cold. Great difficulty was experienced in launching the rubber boats, one of which capsized three times before its drenched and buffeted occupants reached the shore. Fortunately the enemy were not about, and they were met by a British Intelligence Officer with some friendly Arabs who were able to light a fire, screened from the landward side, to dry and warm the soldiers. Colonel Keyes and all but two men, who were injured, got ashore from *Torbay*, but only Colonel Laycock and seven other ranks succeeded in landing from *Talisman*. Colonel Laycock and three men stayed at the rendezvous.

After dark on the night of 15th November, the raiders—now reduced to Colonel Keyes, Captain Campbell, Lieutenant Cook and 25 N.C.O.s and men—began their 18-mile walk to Rommel's Headquarters, reported





**THE MEN OF TOBRUK.** Seventy miles to the west of the frontier where the main armies stood, the fortress of Tobruk was in the eighth month of its siege. This is a post on the outer defences. The men are firing a captured Italian mortar.

to be at Beda Littoria. The weather was horrible, and after a few miles the Arab guides refused to go on. The party therefore went on alone and managed, during the following night, to reach a previously selected spot about ten miles from Beda Littoria, where they made a cache of surplus clothes and food. On the way they ran into a party of Arabs who proved to be friendly but told them that Rommel's Headquarters were not at Beda Littoria, but in a house at Sidi Rafa. Fortunately, Colonel Keyes decided to trust them, and amended his plans accordingly. The next night, the friendly Arabs led them to within a few hundred yards of the house. As they waited for zero hour—one minute

before midnight—some other Arabs in uniform appeared. They seemed suspicious and were certainly hostile, but Captain Campbell, being a first-class German scholar, bluffed them into believing the party belonged to a German unit.

After detailing various covering and diversionary parties, Colonel Keyes, Captain Campbell and Sergeant Terry were left to deliver the attack on the house itself. Colonel Keyes tried to find a way in through the back, but the windows and doors were too securely fastened to be opened without noise. The party therefore walked boldly round to the front door, at which Captain Campbell knocked, crying loudly for admission.



A sentry opened the door, but could not be overpowered without a struggle, and Campbell shot him with his revolver. The hunt was up. Leaping over the body, Colonel Keyes flung open the door of the front room. Any slower manœuvre would have meant that the enemy would have come into the passage, seen that there were only three assailants and easily overpowered them. In the first room, where the lights were on, this method succeeded. The room was crowded with officers and orderlies, and as Keyes emptied his revolver through the doorway, Campbell lobbed in a grenade.

Meanwhile, Terry stood with a tommy-gun at the foot of the stairs and drove back a rush of officers trying to come down from the first floor. A second room on the ground floor was also occupied; though the lights were out, heavy breathing and scuffling could be heard inside. Without a moment's hesitation Keyes flung open the door, but was greeted with a volley of shots and fell back into the passage mortally wounded. Terry emptied his tommy-gun into the room and Campbell threw in two grenades, which burst as he slammed the door. The two men carried Keyes outside, but he died within a few minutes. The covering party then came up and threw grenades through

every window in the house. The enemy was in complete confusion and in the stray firing which followed Campbell's leg was broken by a bullet. He had to be left behind, but not before he knew that the electric plant had been successfully blown up. Though missing for many months, he was finally reported to be a prisoner in Germany.

The main purpose of the raid—to put Rommel himself out of action—failed because by pure chance the German General was away at a birthday party. But the German H.Q. were at least temporarily disorganised. Four high staff officers were killed, and Colonel Keyes was buried with them. His brother, on reaching Sidi Rafa during the following months, found all five graves, and the Italian verger of the local church gave him a photograph of the five coffins lying before the altar. Colonel Keyes was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for this exploit in which he displayed all the qualities required of the highest class of soldier—imagination, organising ability, supreme daring, and self-sacrifice. His last letter home pictures his character better than any account of what he did. "If the thing is a success, whether I get bagged or not, it will raise our stock a bit and help the cause." In that spirit the Eighth Army went to battle.

## 2. THE BATTLE OPENS: TROUBLE AT SIDI REZEGH

The Eighth Army's plan for the battle was therefore even more ambitious than it appeared—and it appeared ambitious enough. The directive given to its Commander, General Cunningham, was to sweep the enemy right out of Cyrenaica. For this purpose, he proposed to launch the XXXth Corps in a wide sweep west from the Maddalena area and then north towards Tobruk. The Corps was to trail its coat for the enemy armour,

which, it was hoped, would sally out to battle and be smashed. When the enemy had revealed what he intended to do with his armour, the XIIIth Corps was to attack northwards and isolate Bardia and Sollum.

After the hoped-for armoured victory, the XXXth Corps was to relieve Tobruk, whose garrison was simultaneously to make a sortie on receipt of an arranged code word from the XXXth Corps Commander. Caught





**AS THE EIGHTH ARMY STRIKES WEST** across the frontier, the Tobruk garrison prepares to break out eastward to join it. Above, the first troops pass through the frontier wire. Below, men of the tanks and armoured cars of Tobruk wish each other well before setting out.





between the three hammers of the two Corps and the Tobruk garrison, the enemy was to be annihilated.

At first all went well. Beginning on 18th November, the advance of the XXXth Corps took the enemy by surprise. It is now known that for nearly 48 hours Rommel thought he had to deal only with a reconnaissance in force. This mistake did not, however, work out wholly to his disadvantage, because it meant that he did not at once accept the challenge to fight a great armoured battle. It had been hoped that a swift advance of 90 miles to Gabr Saleh would be sufficient to provoke him, but in point of fact the ground thus occupied was not vital to him, and it might have been better had the Eighth Army gone straight through to El Adem or Sidi Rezegh when he would have been forced to fight at once. The first day's advance, therefore, though carried out without incident and under a fighter cover which kept the enemy completely out of the sky, afforded few indications about what to do next.

Early next morning, the Army Commander who had moved with the XXXth Corps H.Q. decided that the armour should resume its advance north-west. As a result, the 4th Armoured Brigade found and engaged some 60 enemy tanks north of Bir Gibni, and the 2nd Armoured Brigade fought a fierce battle near Bir el Gubi, destroying 45 tanks, most of which were Italian, and taking 200 prisoners.

About noon the 1st South African Division started to move north in the direction of El Duda. In the afternoon the 7th Armoured Brigade made a swift and successful dash for Sidi Rezegh, and the 6th Royal Tank Regiment surprised and captured the airfield. They destroyed 19 out of 21 aircraft found there, the other two just getting off in time, like pheasants rising from cover just as a dog reaches them.

These engagements were enough to make Rommel realise that the XXXth Corps' attack was a major offensive. He therefore decided to effect a junction between the 21st Panzer

Division and the Ariete Division west of Bir el Gubi and with them to attack eastwards, while a westward sweep by the 15th Panzer Division from the Sidi Omar area would join in annihilating the advanced troops. The result of these movements was the first battle of Sidi Rezegh.

While the enemy was thus making up his mind on 20th November, the XXXth Corps was busily strengthening its hold on Sidi Rezegh. The 7th Armoured Brigade and the Royal Horse Artillery repulsed an enemy counter-attack on the airfield early in the morning, and a few hours later the 7th Support Group arrived. The enemy was found to be in some strength on the escarpment, but it was confidently expected that his defence could be broken, and the word was therefore flashed to the Tobruk garrison to begin their sortie next morning. The 5th South African Brigade was on its way up, though delayed by air attack and by the difficulty it found in moving by night, and everything seemed set for the relief of Tobruk.

When next morning broke, however, there were ominous signs that very large enemy forces were moving up from the south to attack Sidi Rezegh. Nevertheless, Brigadier Campbell's men held to their purpose of clearing the northern escarpment and advancing across the Trigh Capuzzo to meet the Tobruk force at El Duda. The 60th Rifles and a company of the Rifle Brigade carried the escarpment, and the 6th Royal Tank Regiment made a gallant attempt to cross the track. But all the tanks that did so were knocked out, and only the escarpment could be held. Meanwhile, the enemy was advancing rapidly from the south. All day he was held off with great gallantry and difficulty by the 7th Armoured Brigade (which was reduced at nightfall to 20 tanks) and by Brigadier Campbell's Support Group. He was finally checked by an extraordinary feat of arms when Brigadier Campbell in an open car led the remaining 12 tanks of the 6th Royal Tank Regiment, supported by a few mobile anti-tank guns, in a counter-attack. This brave





**MAPS AND PLANS** are spread on the sand as the Brigadier takes his decisions and gives his orders. It is the fourth day of the offensive, and the situation does not look bad. Next day, 22nd November, trouble began.

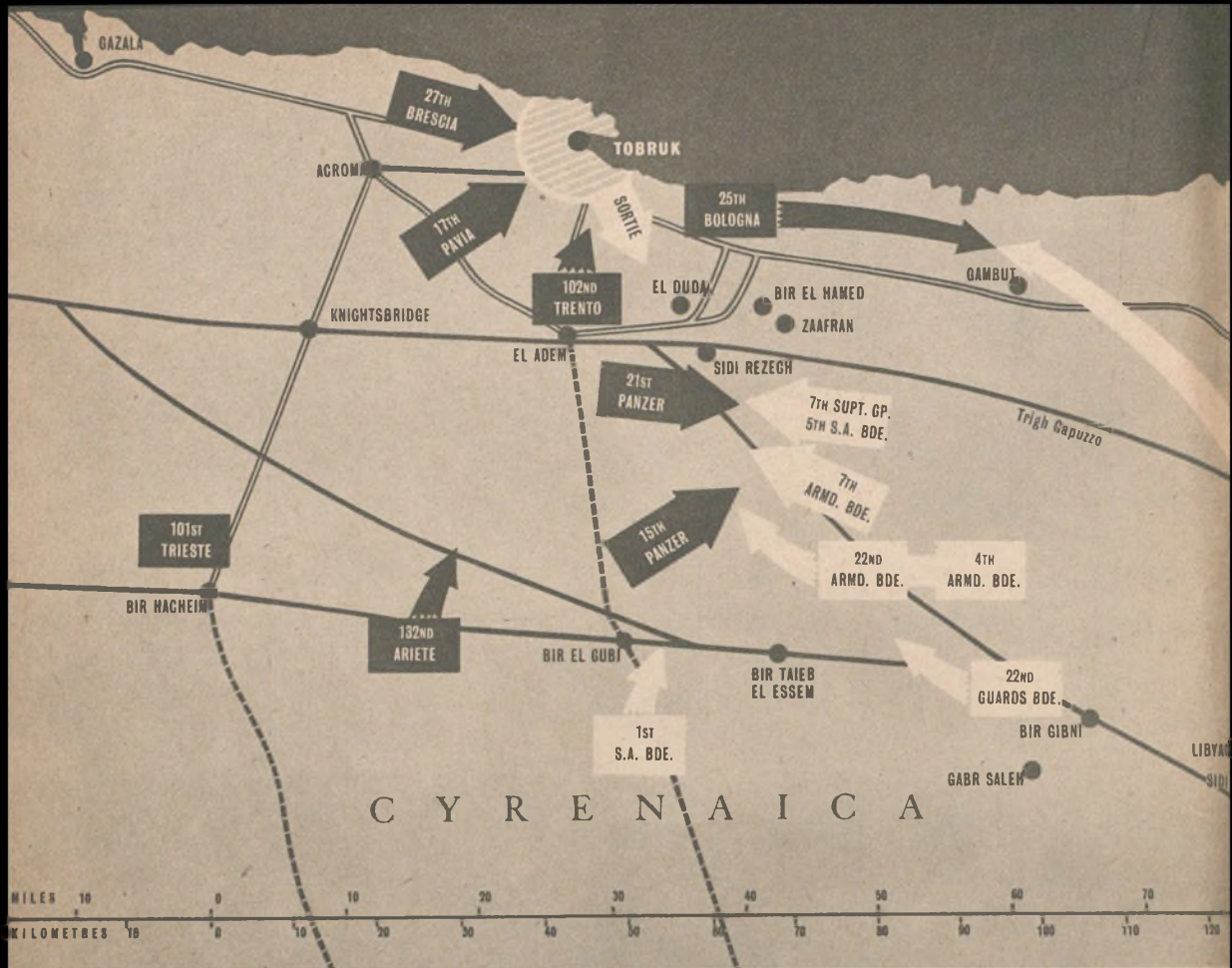
show kept our positions intact for the moment.

Not, unhappily, for long. On the morning of 22nd November, the situation appeared temporarily brighter. The 22nd and 4th Armoured Brigades were up, and about mid-day General Gott was able to get them into position to help the Support Group. Just previously the Transvaal Scottish of the South African Brigade carried the southern escarpment and came in view of Sidi Rezegh airfield. Early in the afternoon a very heavy tank battle developed, with the enemy trying to reach the Support Group, and the 22nd Armoured Brigade, supported later by the 4th Armoured Brigade, holding them off by magnificent fighting in a synthetic dust storm caused by charging tanks and bursting shells.

Until dusk the enemy was held ; but he then massed his remaining tanks and in a sustained attack, with the setting sun behind him, forced the 7th Support Group off the airfield. No praise can be too high for the men of this group who had held off constant attacks for three days and succumbed finally only to sheer weight of numbers, with their guns firing until the enemy reached their muzzles, and their units, particularly the 60th Rifles, enduring heavy casualties without flinching.

Meanwhile, the 5th South African Brigade was concentrated and digging in on the southern escarpment, supported by what was left of the 22nd Armoured Brigade. During the morning of the 23rd two small

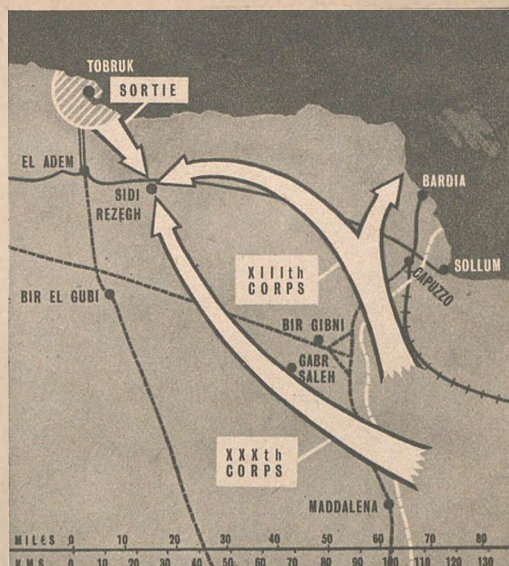
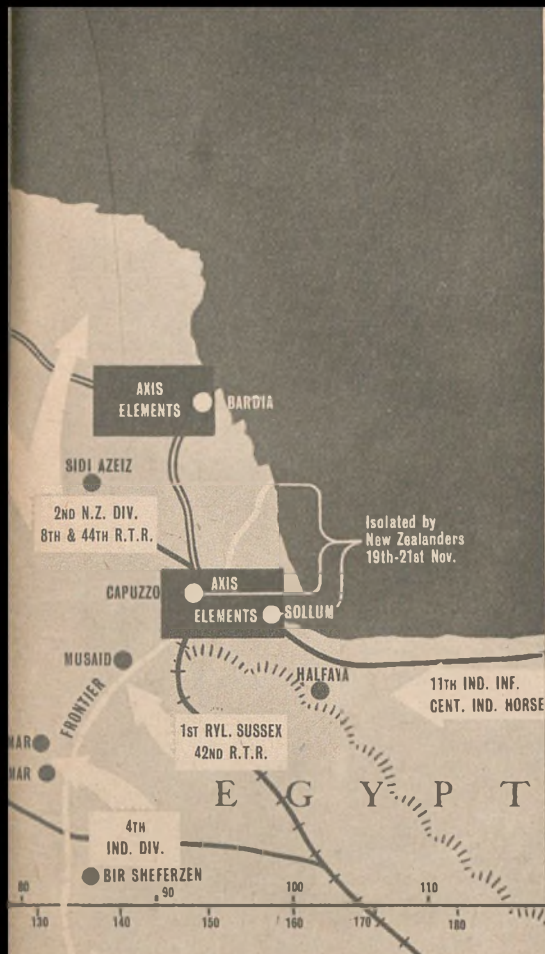




tank attacks were easily repulsed, but early in the afternoon very heavy infantry and tank attacks were launched against the northern flank of the Brigade under cover of an artillery barrage. These attacks also were repulsed, but just as the South Africans were beginning to think the enemy had had enough for the day, a mass of 108 tanks, supported by lorried infantry and artillery, appeared. This avalanche fell on the South African Irish, the Transvaal Scottish, the Botha Regiment, the relics of the

22nd Armoured Brigade and the South African Brigade artillery. All of them put up a fine fight. Firing at point-blank range with all they had, they knocked out 52 tanks, and there is little doubt that this resistance had a profound effect on the subsequent course of the battle. But it was apparent when the dust and clamour of the engagement died down that the 5th South African Brigade had virtually ceased to exist and that no junction could be effected by the XXXth Corps with the sortie from Tobruk.





ABOVE, THE PLAN. LEFT, STUCK AT SIDI REZEGH. The goal of the Auchinleck offensive of November 1941 was the junction around El Duda of the Tobruk garrison, the XIIIth and XXXth Corps, and the crushing of the Axis forces between them. But on 23rd November the Tobruk sortie and the two Corps were all stuck. The XXXth Corps, striking upwards from Maddalena, took Sidi Rezegh but could not hold it. The advanced troops of the XIIIth Corps were held at Gambut, and the Tobruk garrison could not pass the half-way point to El Duda.

Gallantly begun by the Polish Brigade, which drew the enemy's attention to the western end of the perimeter, the sortie was made, by the 70th Division, at the eastern end early on 21st November. Headed by the Black Watch and the machine-gun battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers, and supported by some tanks, the garrison, at the cost of heavy casualties, got half-way to El Duda, taking 1,100 prisoners en route.

It is now time to revert to the operations undertaken by the XIIIth Corps, which was

attacking northwards from the Egyptian frontier with the aim of isolating the large enemy forces round Bardia and Sollum. The blow was to be delivered after the XXXth Corps had got well on with its task, but the preliminary deployment involved some brisk actions. At night on the 19th-20th, some of the New Zealanders took Fort Capuzzo and occupied Sidi Azeiz; others, with the 8th and 44th Royal Tank Regiments, cut the road and water pipeline on the escarpment between Bardia and Tobruk and took nearly 400



prisoners. Another detachment took Musaid and Sollum barracks on the night of 20th-21st November.

At midday on the 22nd, the 7th Indian Brigade of the 4th Indian Division attacked the Sidi Omar forts on the frontier. The Royal Sussex Regiment took Omar Nuovo; but when the 16th Punjab Regiment went through to attack Libyan Omar, the accompanying tanks suffered heavily from anti-tank guns and mines, and the infantry only succeeded in taking the eastern part of the position. Ten days later the 1st and 16th Punjabis finished the job.

On the 21st the XIIIth Corps began its major part in the operations. The New Zealanders captured Gambut, but thereafter were held up by Axis troops dispatched from the Tobruk investment lines to hold the Bardia road. That meant that no junction with the sortie could be effected by the XIIIth Corps.

On the evening of the 23rd, therefore,

the battle had reached a critical and far from encouraging phase. The sortie was stuck; the New Zealanders were stuck; Sidi Rezegh and Bir el Hamed were lost, together with the 5th South African Brigade, and most of the mauled but still indomitable 7th Support Group. Rommel had made the junction between the 21st and Ariete armoured Divisions south-east of Tobruk and was well placed to destroy our advanced troops in detail. The lesson of the five days' fighting was that infantry, unless much better equipped to deal with armour, is an embarrassment in this kind of desert fighting. Captured positions could not be consolidated and held by men equipped with only a few two-pounder anti-tank guns to each battalion, particularly when, as in some units, they had had no opportunity for any serious desert training. In consequence, the Eighth Army's tanks were anchored to the infantry, whom they had to protect from being overrun by

**SEVERE PROBLEMS FACED THE TANK CREWS.** The German Mark III was greatly superior in fire power. The balance could be redressed only by thought and skill.





the enemy armour, and could not be released for their proper job.

Later, the infantry showed what they could do when properly equipped. When they were not, they could do nothing except fight gallantly against great odds. It may appear from this account that the enemy's armour had been decimated. It was thought that he started the battle with about 500 first-line tanks, and over 200 had been knocked out. Not all, however, had been destroyed. The later technique of wrecking all temporarily abandoned enemy tanks was already appreciated, but since the enemy's gun power too often gave him temporary command of a battlefield, it could not be fully applied, with the result that the enemy's carefully prepared system of recovery and repair had enabled him to salvage many of his machines. Moreover, the Army had its first experience of a factor which later was to prove extremely weighty. The Germans had two main types of tanks, the Mark III, armed with a 50 mm. gun, and the Mark IV, with a 75 mm. gun. The former was the machine most prominent in tank and tank clashes, the Mark IV being a supporting tank used mainly against infantry. The Mark III, with its 50 mm. gun, proved far superior to the two-pounder gun with which the British tanks were equipped. It could and did knock them out at nearly a mile range. The British armour made mincemeat of the lighter tanks; but most of the enemy's surviving armour was composed of these heavier machines which were more than a match for it.

These serious considerations were very present to the mind of General Cunningham, the Commander of the Eighth Army. He had won a tremendous and well-merited reputation for drive and daring in the Abyssinian campaign when he had commanded the Army in its startling rush from the Juba to Addis Ababa, and his appointment to command the Eighth Army had been particularly welcome to the South Africans. By a curious coincidence his

brother was in command of the Fleet, and the commander of the air forces was called Coningham, so that a Low cartoon at the beginning of the battle showing a van labelled "Cunningham, Cunningham and Coningham—Removal Contractors" was a neat summary of Allied hopes. General Cunningham was certainly not a man to cry halt without good reason. He had tried resolutely to carry out General Auchinleck's plan of campaign. But he now reached the conclusion that it could not be done, that the operation should be abandoned, and all troops withdrawn for re-grouping.

Nothing is more fatal than to entrust the conduct of a battle to a commander who does not think he can win it. Lee might have won at Gettysburg if he had replaced Longstreet after the latter had declared that Cemetery Ridge could not be carried. In the circumstances, General Auchinleck, after a personal visit to advanced H.Q., decided to entrust the command of the Eighth Army to his own Deputy Chief of Staff, Major-General Ritchie, who had taken part in all the original planning and was intimately acquainted with his views and processes of thought.

The continuation of the battle, if there was still the slightest chance of military success, was dictated by every other consideration. The whole of the Middle East had been keyed up to expect a resolute trial of strength. The troops had started the battle convinced that at long last they were to fight the enemy on more or less equal terms. Malta's supplies at this hour were low, and the possession of the Cyrenaican airfields, from which cover could be given to convoys, was an essential objective, apart from anything more ambitious. The political and military consequences of recoil would have been appalling. The event proved that General Auchinleck was right in thinking that victory could still be won, and afforded an interesting example of how the personality of a commander can still permeate a modern army.





**AS THE OFFENSIVE WAS RESUMED,** flying columns of Indian infantry and South African armoured cars swept down on Jalo and Aujila oases. Heavy fire was sweeping the approach to Jalo as the Indian troops attacked.





### 3. THE ATTACK PRESSED HOME: TOBRUK RELIEVED



AT EL GUBI, southern end of the main position, tanks, trucks and armoured cars streamed forward.



It took exactly three weeks to defeat the enemy decisively, but that was finally done in one practically continuous battle. At the outset—on 24th November—the enemy himself was quite hopeful of victory. Faced with renewed and fairly successful attacks by the XIIIth Corps and the Tobruk garrison, Rommel staged a dramatic movement on the lines of, but on a very different scale from, an Eighth Army diversion far to the south, where a flying column of the 2nd Punjab Regiment and the 6th South African Armoured Car Regiment, composing a body known as “E” force, took first Aujila and then Jalo.

Rommel's object was to disrupt the Eighth Army's rear and thus stop the offensive altogether. Collecting all he had to spare, he sent many columns of tanks, vehicles, and guns dashing through the British lines on the morning of 24th November. These columns made for the Egyptian frontier, and then turned north on a wide front, shooting up everything they encountered. Friend and foe were mixed up in the vast spaces of the desert, and there was at least one case at twilight where a British military policeman was directing German transport in mistake for our own. The H.Q. of the 1st South African Division were shot up by tanks at short range. The H.Q. of the 7th Armoured Division, with which was the Commander of the XXXth Corps, were surrounded and had to fight their way out in the dark. Supply columns near Bir Sheferzen and Maddalena were dispersed. For two days it was an exciting and anxious



time, but by standing fast, and dashing in on the enemy columns wherever they were found, the Army, supplementing ceaseless bombing by the R.A.F., gradually defeated the enemy's purpose. Two notable actions were the stands of the 1st South African Brigade at Bir Taieb el Essem, and of the 1st Field Regiment covering the 11th Sikhs, east of the Omars. The work of the Armoured Car Regiments—the 11th Hussars, and the 4th and 6th South Africans—was also outstanding. As a result, the raiding columns did not succeed in disorganising the Army; finally they collected themselves and moved north-west to strike in upon the rear of the New Zealanders who were now pushing along the Trigh Capuzzo.

The enemy arrived in the main battle area rather too late for his job, though he picked up a lot of tanks and German infantry from the frontier which would otherwise have been lost. But on the night of the 25th-26th the New Zealanders fulfilled their mission of recapturing Sidi Rezegh, which was taken by the 24th and 26th Battalions, while the 18th and 20th Battalions recaptured Bir el Hamed. Next day, 26th November, the Tobruk garrison burst through the last of the investment lines, destroying most of the Bologna Division, and captured El Duda.

By early next morning contact with the New Zealanders was established and a corridor divided the enemy forces. On the west of it was the 15th Panzer Division with German infantry brought across from the Halfaya area. On the east were the 21st and Ariete Divisions. The raiding column had tried to interfere in the battle to establish the corridor but had been driven off east and south-west by our 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades. On the 28th it tried again, and was again driven off south-east after hard fighting. An upsetting incident during the day of the 27th was the landing of a bomb on a table round which enemy staff officers were gathered on the Trigh Capuzzo. This may have helped in creating the disorganisation noticeable among the

enemy next day. It was on this day that the Army captured its first—but not its last—German General, von Ravenstein, Commander of the 21st Armoured Division.

It was now clearly necessary for the enemy to cut through the corridor, and for the next three days he concentrated everything he had on this purpose. By 1st December he had achieved it, and the 15th Panzer Division with a strong force of lorry-borne infantry of the 90th Light Division had broken through from the west to join the 21st at Zaafran. In this action the New Zealanders suffered very heavily, and the remains of their magnificent Division had to be withdrawn to Bagush to refit. The 5th Brigade, however, went back no farther than Tobruk, and took an outstanding part in subsequent operations. Eighteen months later the New Zealanders had full and ample revenge when the last remnants of the 90th Division surrendered to them in the massif of Zaighouan during the last hours of the Tunisian campaign.

Meanwhile, curiously enough, victory began to declare itself in what seemed to be the hour of defeat. This was not just an accident or a miracle. Apart from the fine fighting qualities of the troops, the development of a tactical instrument, first used in 1940 by the Army of the Nile, had proved extremely successful. This instrument was the "Jock" column, so called after Brigadier Jock Campbell, V.C., who was an expert in its use. His death in a car accident in March 1942 was a heavy blow to the Army.

The "Jock" column consisted of a battery of guns, a detachment of infantry, a few anti-tank guns, and some armoured cars with lavish transport. These columns, of which a number were formed, operated anywhere and everywhere as independent and self-contained units. They were most effective against the enemy's supply lines, and often put up a brave enough show to distract and occupy whole enemy Divisions whose absence from the main battle was an invaluable help. The Eighth Army contained numbers of young and spirited leaders with a natural grasp of



## THE ATTACK PRESSED HOME

tactics. These young men seized their chances with both hands and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Of course, as was found later, there was danger of exaggerating the use of this device. If there were too many "Jock" columns the forces of which they were composed became too dispersed when it was essential that they should be concentrated; but during the battle of November-December 1941 these columns did magnificent service.

They were certainly partly responsible for the hesitation which now became apparent among the enemy. Taking advantage of a bad break in the weather on 2nd December, Rommel began to draw in his infantry and

transport towards the coast and the coast road. This concentration might mean either a new enemy attack or a new retreat. Both sides had been badly hammered, but the enemy seemed to think the British forces had suffered most. At any rate, the first use he made of his concentration was to contain their positions at Bir el Gubi, and send round his mobile forces to cut them off from their base.

They were, however, far too full of fight and far too strong in the air for this plan to succeed. On 3rd December, Rommel's concentrations in the Sidi Rezegh area were most successfully bombed. On 4th December, an Indian Brigade, supported by the 4th Armoured Brigade, took the force containing

**THE MEETING AT EL DUDA.** On 26th November the Tobruk garrison took El Duda. Next morning, when this picture was taken, tank commanders of Tobruk and the New Zealanders from the frontier joined hands, as was first planned. A corridor now divided the enemy forces.



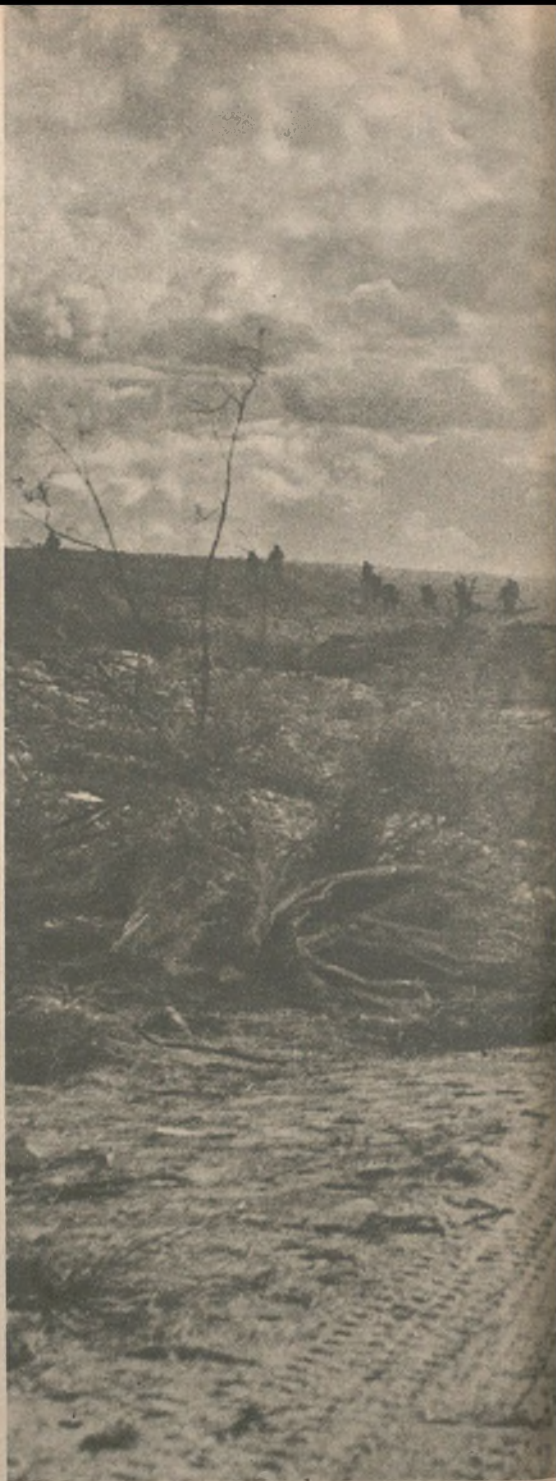


Bir el Gubi in the rear, punished it heavily and drove it away north-west. Other forces broke up other enemy columns, and heavy attacks on El Duda were repulsed or neutralised by counter-attacks. Next day brought the same tale of successful local actions. Rommel had to give up more ambitious plans, and abandon everything east of a line running from west of Bir el Gubi to south of El Adem.

This meant the real relief of Tobruk. On 7th December, patrols from the garrison, belonging to the Border Regiment and the Queen's Regiment, operating south of El Duda, recovered intact all the guns lost on 2nd December, while other patrols from the XXXth Corps rescued 700 wounded New Zealanders left behind by the enemy in the Divisional field-dressing station. In the course of the day patrols made contact with the King's Dragoon Guards and the 11th Hussars and with the 2nd South African Division, which was advancing along the Bardia-Tobruk road. Two days later forces from Tobruk occupied El Adem and joined up with the 1st South African and 7th Indian Brigades. This cleared the whole of the investment except the western sector, where the enemy continued to hold until pinched out a few days later.

It was now clear that he was in full retreat towards Gazala, and by the 12th, under the cover of costly rearguard actions, he had reached a line stretching south-west from Gazala. This position was not a good one. His right flank was in the air. He had only about 50 tanks left with which to screen it, and he was so closely and strongly pursued that he could not disengage. He therefore stood and fought on this position for five days in what may be called the first battle of Gazala. The British troops fought with undiminished energy, and the outflanking movements carried out by the 7th Armoured Division were particularly successful.

It is not, however, invidious to single out for special praise the 4th Indian Division in the central sector of our assault. On the 13th, their 7th Brigade, with the 25th







**UNDER FIRE.** Enemy shells rain on the crest of the hill to the right. The armoured cars swerve and halt. One man crouches behind the car, another flattens himself on the desert track. On the slope to the left, the infantry break for cover. The enemy armoured formation cut off at El Duda is blasting its way back to the Axis lines.





ACROSS THE ROCK AND THORNS OF THE DESERT OUTSIDE TOBRUK INFANTRY ADVANCE THROUGH

Field Regiment, repulsed a ferocious counter-attack, destroying 16 tanks and taking 370 prisoners. On the 14th, as part of a general attack with the 5th New Zealand Brigade and the Poles on the right, they forced a gap in the enemy's centre and repulsed a vicious counter-attack. On the 15th they completed penetration of the centre of the enemy's line. The 5th Brigade was counter-attacked by every available Axis tank, supported by heavy air cover and a large force of infantry, but they held their ground, and the Divisional Commander in the evening reported that the situation was satisfactory.

So indeed it was. Rommel's lines were both pierced and turned. On the battlefield

he probably had left no more than about 30 tanks, 3,000 vehicles and 35,000 infantry, of whom 20,000 were Italians. An armoured force was on his line of retreat at Tmimi, and another was on its way across the Jebel Akbar to cut the road leading out from Derna. He had very little air support, and was himself subjected to constant air attack.

In later days General Montgomery said that Rommel was a good general, but had a tendency to repeat himself. It was at this moment that he began the tactics, afterwards consistently repeated when he was in a tight place, of saving his Germans at the expense of his unhappy Allies.

During the night of 16th-17th December,





ENEMY FIRE TO ENGAGE IN THE RENEWED FIGHTING AT EL DUDA FORCING ROMMEL WEST TO GAZALA.

he began to put this decision into effect, and the 7th Armoured Division reported that a huge column escorted by tanks was moving back on Tmimi. The small force there was by-passed and by midday on the 17th this column was approaching Derna. The Italian screen behind them was in full retreat, and the battle had become a pursuit. While the New Zealand 5th Brigade and the Poles pushed on to Tmimi and the 4th Indian Division to Martuba, the 7th Armoured Division and the Guards Brigade Group were making a great effort to intercept the enemy's retreat by striking at Benghazi via Mekili, Charruba and El Abiar.

We were all too short of motor transport,

and horrible weather first blinded and then bogged lorries and armour. The enemy, therefore, got most of his men away to the Ajedabia area. But the pursuit had some fruitful exploits. For example, the 11th Sikhs surprised Derna airfields, destroyed over 100 machines, and caught 10 out of 12 big transport planes as they came in unsuspectingly to land. The 6th Rajputana Rifles, after a brilliant cross-country dash, cut off and captured 1,000 of the enemy in Giovanni Berta. The Long Range Desert Group, under the leadership of Lieut.-Colonel (then Captain) David Stirling, and the Middle East Commando carried out two remarkable raids on Sirte and Ajedabia air-



## THE EIGHTH ARMY

fields, destroying, in all, 61 machines. But, generally speaking, supply difficulties made it impossible to rub in our victory.

It came within an ace of being rubbed out. Rommel received in the nick of time, on 21st and 22nd December, strong tank reinforcements brought from Tripoli by sea. He proceeded to send away troops no longer battle-worthy and to concentrate those still fit to fight in the Ajedabia area while he organised a counter-stroke. He gave up Benghazi, which was occupied on the afternoon of the 24th December by the Royal Dragoons. But when troops started to close in upon the Ajedabia position, they found the enemy quite as strong as the forces which could be maintained in the forward areas. No discredit, therefore, attaches to the troops who failed to cut off the enemy's main body. On Christmas

Day, the 4th Indian Division was round Benghazi; the 22nd Armoured Brigade, with the 12th Lancers, at Saunu; the Guards Brigade Group in contact with the enemy north and east of Ajedabia; "E" force on his southern flank; part of the 7th Support Group with the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment and the 11th Hussars near Antelat; and the rest of the 7th Support Group near Soluk. These dispositions meant there were practically no infantry near the battlefield, and even the armour was not strong enough for any major attack. The fighting until the end of the year was therefore occasionally very fierce but only local and indecisive.

The supply problem was quite enough to explain the Army's lack of strength on the western front and to ensure that it would be weak at least until Benghazi could be made usable. But it was both practicable

OUTLINED AGAINST THE SMOKE OF BURNING OIL STORES, THEIR WHITE AFRIKA KORPS CAPS PICKED





and useful to concentrate forces far to the east for the destruction of the garrisons which the enemy had left behind at Bardia, Sollum and Halfaya. While the battle and advance were going on, these garrisons were contained by the 2nd South African Division. Bardia was the first to be seriously attacked on the last day of the year, and on 2nd January the garrison, which included another German General, surrendered unconditionally. Sollum and Halfaya fell ten days later and, at a cost of 500 casualties, the South Africans took about 14,000 prisoners, including 4,000 Germans. The South Africans were helped in this action by the Free French under General de Larminat and by the 1st Army Tank Brigade, who delivered a brilliant attack by moonlight.

On the western front, after our inability to envelop the enemy on 28th-30th December, bad weather and petrol shortage reduced

operations to little more than surveillance by patrols. Rommel used this lull to collect and reorganise his forces. But he knew that he could not stay long on the Ajedabia positions. His supply difficulties were just as great as those of the Eighth Army; he lacked adjacent air bases; and as soon as British reinforcements could be got forward to open Benghazi to receive supplies, the Eighth Army should be able to encircle him and prevent the arrival of his reinforcements.

On 5th January he heard of the arrival at Tripoli of nine ships bringing him reinforcements. He knew that other convoys were on the way, and in fact they arrived later in the month, bringing enough Germans and German equipment to make good his losses and to provide him with a new Italian Armoured Division, the 133rd Littorio. The 60th (Sabrata) Italian Division was on its way

OUT BY THE SETTING SUN, THE GERMAN GARRISON OF CAPTURED BARDIA MARCHES TO THE EAST.





up by land from Tripoli. On 6th January, therefore, he decided to return to his lair at El Agheila, and meet these reinforcements. For the first time he employed on a big scale his subsequently favourite and effective device of covering a retirement with intensive minefields.

On the 7th the first convoy of British supplies reached Benghazi, but they were too late to reinforce the pursuit, and Rommel reached El Agheila safely after four days of leisurely retreat. It was an extremely strong position. The left flank rested on the sea east of Ma'aten Bescer, which, with its good water supply, was at Rommel's disposal. This position was covered by salt marshes, the roads through which were heavily mined. The line bulged eastwards to include Bir es Suera, and then ran south-west along the hills fringing the north bank of the Wadi el Faregh until,

at Ma'aten Giofer, it turned due south and covered the Marada road to the oasis of that name. The country on its right flank was most difficult and the enemy might well reckon that it would not be turned by any large force. Close behind was the excellent airfield later known as Marble Arch.

These positions were painfully approached by some of the same gallant units as had fought all the way from the Egyptian frontier for the past six weeks. In the north was the Guards Brigade Group, supported by the 11th Hussars. South-east of this group came the 7th Support Group, flanked by the King's Dragoon Guards and the 12th Lancers. Before the enemy counter-attack developed the 7th Support Group had been relieved by the 1st Support Group, but the advanced forces were no thicker on the ground.

**ROMMEL'S LAIR AT EL AGHEILA.** Fanning out over Cyrenaica, the Auchinleck offensive drives Rommel into his old and strongly defended lair by the Gulf of Sirte.







#### 4. THE LULL AT GAZALA

The enemy's first move forward on 21st January was thought to be only a reconnaissance in force, and the official communiquéés rather incautiously said so. If this was his original intention, he quickly changed it on finding that the El Agheila-Ajedabia road was only lightly held by columns of the 200th Guards Brigade. He pushed rapidly through, and seized both Saunu and Antelat on the 22nd. The 2nd Armoured Brigade came down from the north and the 9th Lancers with "E" force up from the south

to attack him there, and after two days' confused fighting he seemed to be checked. The 10th Royal Hussars fought most gallantly against long odds, and knocked out 12 German tanks. A clue to the enemy's real intentions was the discovery on the 23rd of a large convoy off Misurata. It was attacked from the air, and three cargo vessels and two warships out of a total of 24 vessels were hit. Most of the ships, however, got through. Nevertheless, it was still hoped to hold a line from the coast east to Beda



Fomm, Antelat and Saunu. But on the 25th the forces on this line were so roughly handled that they were in no condition to stop the enemy's advance, and it was decided to evacuate Benghazi.

Next day the plan was changed again. The 4th Indian Division was ordered to strike south from the Benghazi area towards Antelat, the 1st Armoured Division to hold on south-east of Charruba and the Polish Brigade to advance to Mekili, while the 4th South African Armoured Car Regiment patrolled between there and Charruba. The 150th Brigade of the 50th Division, now coming up from the east, was to move forward from Bir Hacheim to Bir Tengeder. But again the enemy's strength was miscalculated.

In two days' fighting he cut the 4th Indian Division in two, isolating the 7th Brigade in Benghazi. By a magnificent feat of arms the Brigade, forming itself into three columns, burst through the enemy's lines and joined the armour at Mekili, bringing prisoners taken on the way. They lost much equipment, however, and could not bring the engineer units left in Benghazi for demolition work. There was nothing for it but a further general retreat to a main line of resistance which had been chosen. It was arrived at on 4th February. The 1st South African Brigade, with the Poles and French, held Gazala and the country to the south. Between them and the Trigh el Abd was the armour. The 150th Brigade was at Bir Hacheim, and the 4th Indian Division in reserve at Acroma, where its 5th and 11th Brigades had arrived after gallant rearguard actions by the Camerons and the 5th Mahratta Light Infantry. The Royals with some South African cars patrolled the desert to the south.

The enemy followed up and for the next ten days appeared to be concentrating for a serious attack on the northern sector of this line. By the 14th he had gathered a striking force consisting of most of his Germans in this sector. But the air support on which he had counted was virtually destroyed the same day by a formation of Kittyhawks which

wiped out 20 and probably 30 dive-bombers and fighters in a single action. He continued his deployment and moved forward on 15th February but the attack was not pressed. Temporary equilibrium had been reached and both sides sat back to pile up reinforcements. It was at about this time that General Gott succeeded General Godwin-Austin in command of the XIIIth Corps.

Thus ended General Auchinleck's offensive. It was acclaimed at the time as a victory, for success had been snatched from the jaws of stalemate. Over 36,000 prisoners had been taken, in addition to the infliction of considerable losses in men and material, and the lines finally settled down half-way across Cyrenaica instead of on the frontier. If, in retrospect, the results seem to have fallen short of expectations, that was not the fault of the officers and men concerned. Indeed, the swift swing back of the pendulum in the enemy's favour caused an unfair swing over of opinion about the battle.

The Eighth Army has never had full credit for what it achieved by its dogged determination and fine fighting of its officers and men against a better-equipped enemy. No doubt it was hoped that if his armour could be destroyed, his whole Army would be easy meat, but the Eighth Army which advanced to the assault on 18th November was not strong enough for the job. For example, the motor transport, which might have been enough for a short battle, was insufficient for so long and fierce a tussle. The repair and replacement organisation could not be made big enough. When Rommel reached Agheila, all that could be kept in action in the front line was the equivalent of one armoured and one infantry brigade. Even more serious weaknesses were revealed in some of the Army's equipment. The German tanks were better than any to which they were opposed, and the British two-pounder anti-tank gun had not sufficient range or punch. Even the German 50 mm. gun could penetrate tank armour at a range 1,000 yards greater than that of the two-pounder. A quicker rate of



fire was no compensation in such open country. In a terrain favouring engagements at short range, it might have been a different story. Despite all this, the Eighth Army did feel itself after the battle to be an Army, and it was this *esprit de corps* that saved it in the days to come. As an officer wrote at the time, "To be in the Eighth Army is a matter for pride deep beyond casual understanding."

The lull lasted for over three months, until 27th May. Lull is, perhaps, a misleading word. There was one quite considerable operation on 21st March, when several columns carried out raids both near and far to distract the enemy's attention from a vital convoy passing through to Malta. There was as much concealed activity on both sides as in a beehive before the swarm.

Since equilibrium had been reached, the race became one to establish superiority in quality and quantity of supplies, and in this Rommel had a distinct advantage. His types of tanks and guns, notably anti-tank guns, were good enough. His Germans were good and experienced soldiers, and his Italians, contrary to reports far from the battlefield, were by no means negligible. Geographically, his supply lines were short. He had only to get men and supplies across the Mediterranean to Benghazi or Tripoli, to be able to wheel them up to the front. His main task, therefore, was to neutralise Malta as a focus of interruption. That is why, all through the spring, huge Axis air forces based on Sicily pounded the island without respite. The defence was beyond praise, but there could be no effective offensive either by sea or air. From R.A.F. airfields behind the Gazala lines, it was much more difficult, because of the distances involved, to organise interruption of the enemy's sea lanes by air attack. Naval bases were also too distant. For all these reasons and despite the continuous depredations of the Navy's submarines, Rommel was able to get supplies through.

The problems facing the British were much more complicated. Every man and every scrap of material, apart from what the trans-

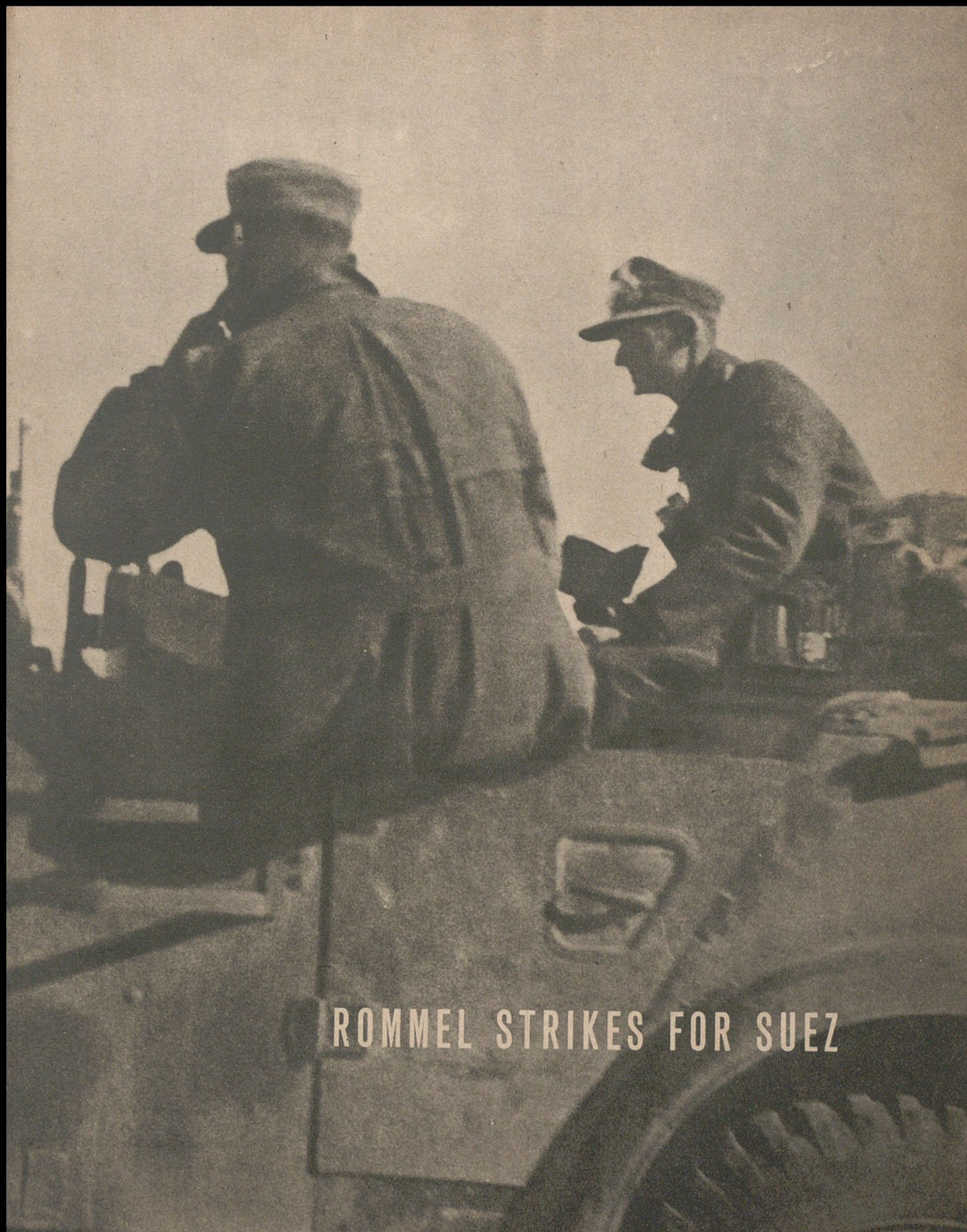
African air route could carry, had to be sent 12,000 miles by sea round the Cape. A tank had to be found to match the German Mark III and as yet no such tank was being produced in quantity. The Americans, however, who were making General Grant tanks started sending them over. They were good tanks, but their big guns had a limited traverse, and it was a distinct achievement for their crews to match, as they did, the German armour. Moreover, there were not enough Grants by the time the real battle opened. As for guns, there was nothing to say against the 25-pounder field gun, except possibly that too few of them were self-propelled. But a bigger anti-tank gun was needed. The Germans had solved this problem by using an 88 mm. gun, originally designed as an anti-aircraft weapon. The projected answer to this was the six-pounder anti-tank gun. Large quantities of them were on the way, but very few were actually in the battle line by the end of May; and there had not been time to complete the training of all crews in their use. As for the air, reinforcement in machines by the trans-African route was easier, and co-operation with the ground forces had been worked out in detail, but for all the tasks required of it, the R.A.F. was still perilously weak in aircraft.

It must not be forgotten that during this lull there was a drain away from, as well as a feed pipe into, the pool of men and supplies. The Japanese offensive was in full blast. Apart from all that was diverted from the Middle East to the Far East, many troops, including a complete Armoured Brigade, were sent from the Middle East to Ceylon, India and Burma; and all the Australians except some H.Q. and base units and one Division (not with the Eighth Army until later) had had to return to ward off what seemed like an imminent invasion of Australia itself. Though the Eighth Army could expect and did gradually receive large reinforcements from home and the United States, it was always likely that Rommel would be ready to attack first. This proved to be the case.









ROMMEL STRIKES FOR SUEZ



## 5. DISASTER AT KNIGHTSBRIDGE

Early in May the enemy started to work forward and narrow no-man's-land. The enemy High Command was also reorganised, General Nehring arriving to take command of the Afrika Korps, and General von Bismarck being appointed to command the 21st Armoured Division. These facts pointed to the arrival of large reinforcements. An attack was clearly imminent, and it seemed pretty certain that its first objective would be Tobruk.

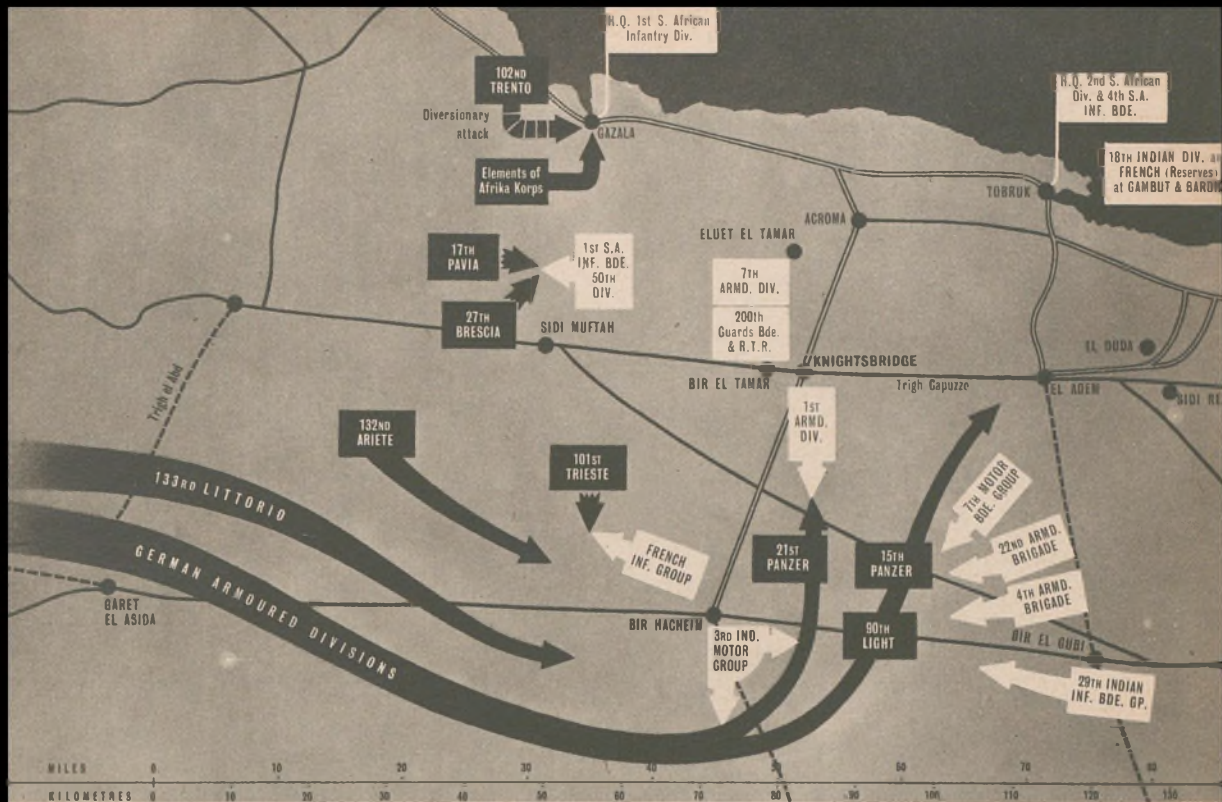
Rommel's attack on 27th May was dictated by his knowledge that the longer he waited the weaker, relatively speaking, he would become. He chose the moment in the race for supplies at which he was the strongest. The British High Command was, of course, perfectly aware that the attack was impending. They correctly anticipated that Rommel's first main objective would be Tobruk, because the garrison left there after Wavell's retreat had seriously inconvenienced him. It was uncertain, however, whether he would thrust directly at Tobruk or not. The Eighth Army's dispositions seemed to be based largely on the assumption that he would; and its infantry reserves, the 5th Indian Division with some of the Free French, were stationed at Gambut and Bardia. The 200th Guards Brigade and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade were also brought up from Cairo to the northern sector of the front. In the line were the 1st South African Division, with a Brigade of the 2nd South African Division in close reserve, and the 50th Division, with the 150th Infantry Brigade which was detached to hold a strong-point farther south at Sidi Muftah. On the extreme southern flank Bir Hacheim was held by a French garrison assisted by some of the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, which, however, arrived only two days before the battle. In view of the gallantry of this

garrison, which sowed the seeds of French military revival, its composition should be stated. It consisted of the Bataillon du Pacifique, two battalions of the Foreign Legion, and some French marines, the whole under the command of General Koenig with General Cazaud as his second-in-command.

The defence was by no means a continuous line. It consisted of a number of irregularly spaced strong-points or "boxes," linked by deep minefields. These boxes were not confined to any one alignment. Those nearest the enemy were held by infantry garrisons; those farther back served not only as reserve static positions, but also as areas round and from which the armour could operate to engage any enemy which passed the forward bases and minefields. Most of the armour was, in fact, placed behind the northern sector, and the chief box was round a junction of tracks known as Knightsbridge, about 17 miles west of El Adem.

Knightsbridge was the key to the Gazala position and had been chosen as such because, so long as it was held, the enemy could win no strategic success. If he were to break through the centre by a frontal attack, Knightsbridge lay directly in his path; and he must either be destroyed on the spot or shepherded away northwards by the armour. In that case he would run on to the Acroma box and the armour in that area. If he effected a breakthrough farther north, the right flank of his advance would come under destructive fire from the ridge north of Knightsbridge. If he came round south he could be attacked on his left flank, and his own communications could be cut. Lastly, Knightsbridge commanded all the tracks by which supplies came up to the front. If it were to fall, the whole line from Sidi Muftah to Bir Hacheim would be untenable. This key position was entrusted





**THE BATTLE OF KNIGHTSBIDGE.** The map shows what happened on the 27th and 28th May, the first and second days of Rommel's big offensive. Rommel had hoped by this time to have taken Bir Hacheim and reached the coast east of Tobruk. He was checked by the British armour at Knightsbridge.

to the Guards Brigade and the R.H.A. Throughout the battle it was the pivot on and around which the armour manœuvred.

This armour consisted of the 7th Armoured Division, which had earned the proud title of the "Desert Rats," thanks to its scurrying and biting proclivities. At this moment it consisted of the 3rd and 5th Royal Tank Regiments, the 8th Hussars, the 7th Motorised Brigade, two battalions of the 60th and one battalion of the Rifle Brigade. This Division had relieved the 1st Armoured Division in the forward areas about a month before the battle opened; but the latter had been re-equipped and brought back into the line, so that it was available in addition to the smaller armoured formations already mentioned. It consisted of the 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades and the 200th Guards

Brigade. The two Armoured Divisions, together with an armoured car screen of the 12th Lancers, the King's Dragoon Guards, the 4th South African Armoured Car Regiment, and the Bir Hacheim garrison, composed the XXXth Corps. The infantry, in line together with the 1st and 32nd Army Tank Brigades, formed the XIIth Corps. The two remaining Brigades of the 2nd South African Division held Tobruk. With these dispositions, the Eighth Army, while itself getting ready to attack, awaited any attack by the enemy with great confidence.

Rommel's object was to capture Tobruk in a 24-hour rush. To achieve it he planned to secure air superiority and, under cover of his air force, pass the whole of his German armour (less one battalion), and about half the Italian armour with some infantry



## THE EIGHTH ARMY

support, round the south of the line. He hoped to capture Bir Hacheim on the way, and occupy the Eighth Army's advanced fuelling stations and airfields at Acroma, El Adem, El Duda, Sidi Rezegh and Gambut on the first day, thus encircling Tobruk.

On the second day all his armour was to drive from the east against the rear of the Gazala positions, while his Italian infantry was to deliver a frontal attack from the west. This would crush the British infantry to powder. On the next night Tobruk was to be attacked by the whole Axis Army, and was to fall on 30th May. There is some reason to think that Rommel was expecting the help of forces from Crete in the attack on Tobruk.

This plan completely miscarried. Early on the 27th, part of the Ariete Division

attacked Bir Hacheim but was repulsed with the loss of 48 tanks. The rest of the enemy's main column, after making a wide detour during the night, struck north behind Bir Hacheim at daylight. The 3rd Indian Motor Brigade first met the rush but could not hope to hold two armoured divisions in the open field. Nevertheless it exacted a toll of more than 50 tanks before being finally overrun. The 21st German Armoured Division then made for Acroma, but was met and held by our 1st Armoured Division pivoting on the Knightsbridge box. The 15th German Armoured Division made for El Adem itself, detaching fractions to seize El Duda and Sidi Rezegh. All these parties were met and driven back by the 22nd and 4th Armoured Brigades, whose

**MOTORISED INFANTRY MOVE FORWARD INTO THE KNIGHTSBRIDGE BATTLE. THE CONVOYS ARE**





units, notably the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars, the 3rd County of London Yeomanry, the 8th Hussars and the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, were the first to meet the full onslaught of the German armour. The feint attack on Gazala from the west took place as scheduled, but was, of course, not pressed.

This complete check was not the end of Rommel's troubles. The R.A.F. had refused to be mastered, and had given his motor transport a very bad time. They were certainly capable, in conjunction with the Navy, of frustrating any invasion from Crete which may have been arranged. Rommel's columns were only carrying supplies for five or six days, and before that period expired he would have to renew them somehow or meet with disaster.

#### SCATTERED AGAINST DIVE-BOMBING ATTACK.



Here is the proper place to interpolate the remarkable story of the experiences of General Messervy, Commander of the 7th Armoured Division. In the first series of armoured clashes on 27th May, the General had held on to his original H.Q. just a little too long, in the very proper desire not to lose touch with his units for a moment. As the H.Q. party moved off, they were overtaken by a German Battle Group, and after fighting until their weapons were silenced and their cars on fire, they surrendered — temporarily. The surviving officers were wearing only shorts and shirts without rank badges; and the General, who was determined from the very first moment to escape, managed to tear off his badges before yielding. The prisoners were all bundled into the back of a lorry, and the Germans pushed on. Soon they ran into a group of the General's own Division, which gave battle. After the first dash there was a lull, and the General took his wounded Staff Captain to a German doctor for attention. He was alarmed to see that the doctor looked at him curiously.

"You look an old man to be serving in the desert," said the German.

"I am no longer a boy," replied the General nonchalantly, "but I'm a good fatigue man."

"You must be older than I am," pursued the doctor, "and I am thirty-five."

"Yes, yes," said the General, who was nearly fifty, "just a year or two older." Fortunately at that moment the battle broke out again and ended this embarrassing conversation. The Germans moved on and General Messervy and two of his officers were alone in a lorry driven by a young German officer, who had improvidently left a hammer lying on the back seat. It can be imagined how fingers itched and eyes travelled from hammer to head. But after a hurried consultation, in which an officer got well cursed for calling the General by his rank, it was decided to wait until dark.

But before this another chance came.



The British attacked again, and in the confusion the party managed to nip out of the lorry and scoot for an old gun emplacement about 400 yards away. Yells and threats followed them, but the Germans were too busy with the battle to pursue, and the party burrowed under an old tarpaulin in the emplacement. They soon had evidence that it was already tenanted by a native South African pioneer, also intent on escape. For three hours until it was dark they crouched in growing hope and discomfort. Finally, they knew their original captors had given them up. They crept out, found some water, and set off on an arduous walk towards where they thought the British troops might be found. They crept through several enemy parties, but just before dawn, after 16 miles of it, a Scottish voice challenged them and they knew they were safe. Thus, after an interval of only some 18 hours, the 7th Armoured Division had a staff again, including the wounded Staff Captain, who had got away later, though unable to take part in the sprint.

This was the spirit which helped to put the enemy in the predicament in which he found himself on 28th May.

His only chance of avoiding an ignominious scuttle back the way he had come was to make gaps through the British minefields by which he could pass supplies from west to east and, if necessary, retire from east to west. On the 28th he did succeed in clearing two channels, one near the Trigh el Abd and the other near the Trigh Capuzzo, just north of the box held by the 150th Infantry Brigade. These gaps he protected by heavy screens of anti-tank guns. His first intention seems to have been to use these tenuous life-lines for a withdrawal. The great armoured battle which raged for the next four days in the Knightsbridge area seemed designed to extricate his armour from their unenviable isolation east of our lines.

The 29th May was a day of most desperate fighting, with heavy tank casualties on both sides. But there were moments on the

following days when the Eighth Army seemed to be on the brink of complete victory. It became evident that the Grant tank was a much better match than its predecessors for the Mark III, though it was really not until the Sherman reached the Eighth Army six months later that there was full armoured equality.

As time went on, apart from battle casualties, much of the enemy's motor transport seemed to be immobilised for want of petrol, and on the 30th a French "Jock" column sallying from Bir Hacheim and joining up with British columns, destroyed 25 tanks also stuck for this reason. The 4th Armoured Brigade, which provided these columns, went on to do tremendous damage to the enemy's lines of communication. It was, however, disquieting that the gaps were still open, and on 1st June they became a wide gash. After being heavily attacked from several sides for 36 hours, the 150th Infantry Brigade holding the Sidi Muftah ridge was overwhelmed, and a gap ten miles wide was open through the British lines.

It was still expected, according to intelligence reports from different quarters, that Rommel would withdraw, though neither the Commanders on the spot nor the C.-in-C. shared this opinion. They were right. He called up from the west the whole of his reserves, which had been facing the Gazala lines, and made another bid for victory. As a preliminary move, he concentrated the bulk of his armour and the Italian 20th Corps in a bulge east of his corridor and south of the positions held by the 50th Division. But he dared not launch a full-scale attack until he had eliminated the bastion of Bir Hacheim to his south. The second phase of the battle, therefore, was marked by a twofold effort on our part, first to hold Bir Hacheim, and second to puncture the bulge by counter-attacks.

The British High Command had earlier planned a diversionary offensive from the northern sector west and south-west. But the fighting in the Knightsbridge area was too





**GREAT ARMoured BATTLES** raged around Knightsbridge for the four days following 28th May with the issue still uncertain. These battlefield scenes show British troops searching a destroyed German tank, and, below, ambulance men with a wounded anti-tank gunner.







THE MAN FROM ITALY.

"TO-MORROW THE WORLD IS OURS."





absorbing; here the 2nd Royal Horse Artillery and the Coldstream Guards were under continuous fire from 17 enemy batteries at the same time. This, and then the loss of Sidi Muftah, caused the plan to be called off.

Bir Hacheim held magnificently. All through 2nd June it was assailed from the north and east by the whole of the 101st (Trieste) Division, parts of the 17th and 27th Divisions and over 50 tanks. The French garrison repulsed all attacks. They were helped by forces operating in the enemy's rear, notably the 7th Motorised Brigade. On the 3rd the attacks were renewed, strongly supported by German tanks and dive-bombers, but with no better success. On this day, in an engagement near Tamar, the 1st Royal Horse Artillery put up a fine show, knocking out 17 German tanks. But this fighting in the north did not check the attack on Bir Hacheim. The 4th June witnessed the same story, and the R.A.F. during these three critical days destroyed 30 machines including most of the dive-bombers available. The garrison was greatly heartened by this air support and wirelessed their thanks. They received from Air-Marshal Coningham the reply, "*Merci pour le sport*".

They had indeed achieved much more than a local defensive victory. To support his attack, the enemy had been obliged to thin out his forces west of Gazala, and the divisions there (the 1st South African and two remaining Brigades of the 50th) were correspondingly more free to take the offensive. The enemy, on the other hand, found his forces becoming gradually more tied up, and he was further than ever from being able to resume his advance towards Tobruk. An attempt to break through towards Tobruk would need the whole of his armour, and his infantry would be left at the mercy of surrounding forces to the north, west and south. Retreat had become almost as difficult. All his armour and artillery would be needed as a rearguard, and his infantry and supply columns would have to run the gauntlet of British columns in

no-man's-land. In short, the initiative seemed to be fluttering over to the Eighth Army.

The time had come for a furious counter-attack. It might even be passing if Rommel was massing for a renewed assault (as in fact he was) and not for withdrawal. Three alternatives were considered by General Ritchie. He might launch the 1st South African Division and the 50th Division west from their positions and then south across the enemy's rear. He might send the 5th Indian Division with some armour in a wide sweep south of Bir Hacheim and round to take the assailants of that position in the rear. Lastly, he might attack the German bulge itself from several sides simultaneously and pinch it out. The third course was finally chosen and to some—particularly in the 50th Division—it must have borne a sinister analogy to the "Weygand plan" in the Battle of France.

General Ritchie's plan did at least materialise. On the night of 4th-5th June two battalions of the 50th Division, supported by the 32nd Tank Brigade, attacked from the north, and two brigades of the 5th Indian Division, supported by the 22nd Brigade and four regiments of artillery, from the east. The northern attack failed. Its infantry was broken up by artillery before it got under way and its tanks ran first on to an uncharted minefield and then on to a line of German tanks and guns. The attack from the east got some way forward to Bir el Tamar, but was there held up, heavily counter-attacked next day and practically wiped out. All the artillery was lost, including the 107th Royal Horse Artillery, which fought its guns until hardly an officer or man survived. The Highland Light Infantry and the 10th Baluch Regiment here also fought to the last man.

June 5th and 6th were altogether unhappy days, and the failure of the attack was the beginning of a more general defeat. Rommel had undoubtedly scored a defensive victory. He had held his bulge virtually intact, and he was not even forced to slacken the assault





THIS IS THE CAULDRON. BENEATH ITS PALL OF SMOKE THE EIGHTH ARMY IS BEGINNING TO

on Bir Hacheim. This place was heavily attacked on the 6th, 7th and 8th and, though local inroads were successfully corrected by counter-attacks, it was clear that the garrison was getting into difficulties. Up to 9th June occasional convoys had reached them overland, and they were never without the help of the R.A.F. and of columns operating from outside; but on that day it was found necessary to drop supplies by air.

Thirty-six hours later, during the night of 10th-11th June, lack of supplies and sheer physical exhaustion of the garrison

dictated its withdrawal. General Ritchie, therefore, ordered them to evacuate the place. Helped by the 7th Motorised Brigade, the vanguard of 2,000 men got away to the east without interference. The rearguard, which was trying to bring out its guns, was intercepted; but about 1,000 men managed to fight their way through to safety. The story that General Koenig was driven out in a car by an English girl is perfectly true. She was Miss Susan Travers. Her car had 11 bullet holes in it by the time it reached safety. The withdrawal was recognised on





LOSE THE GREAT KNIGHTSBRIDGE TANK BATTLE. THE CRITICAL COUNTER-ATTACK HAS FAILED.

both sides as the turning-point of the battle. It marked the failure of the Eighth Army's counter-offensive and lost it the initiative. The enemy could and did at once unite his forces and move north to Acroma, thus cutting the Eighth Army in two. From this point superiority in quality of armoured equipment could be made to tell, and could not be countered by the small number of General Grants available.

During the next two days the enemy rapidly concentrated his forces in the Acroma-El Adem area, though this advance north

of his units from Bir Hacheim was most gallantly contested by the 2nd, 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades, all much reduced in strength. He had received the reinforcement of the 133rd Italian Littorio (Armoured) Division, and this had again brought the tank strength of both sides to numerical equality. There was an imminent danger that the British garrisons scattered in various boxes would be destroyed piecemeal. On the night of 13th-14th June, therefore, the Gazala divisions were ordered to withdraw. The South Africans got out safely due east,



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under cover of the determined resistance of the armoured Divisions at Eluet el Tamar and Acroma, and reached Tobruk. To provide this cover, the 8th Royal Tank Regiment, the Bays, the 4th County of London Yeomanry and the 22nd Armoured Brigade fought magnificently. The 50th Division had a more difficult job, because they had to start from farther south after the South Africans had withdrawn. They cut their way out due west through the Italian infantry, swung south and, after a detour round Bir Hacheim, reached Maddalena late on the 15th. Meanwhile, however, the armoured clashes continued to go badly.

At the time, the impression became current that 13th June was the fatal day for the British armour. It was certainly a bad period, but subsequent information shows that it was no worse than several other days and not so bad as some; and that both before and after this date the Eighth Army suffered severely without being able to inflict comparable casualties on the enemy. This attrition

was the inevitable consequence of trying to fight tank-to-tank battles on ground where the heavier and more powerfully equipped German tanks and anti-tank guns could make their superiority in hitting power tell. Probably the origin of the story of 13th June being the blackest day was that, early on the 14th, Knightsbridge, so gallantly held by the 200th Guards Brigade, had to be evacuated. But it is worth noting that under all the handicaps now revealed, they had held up the enemy there for a full fortnight, and it would not be fair to allow this fine resistance to be obscured by the shadow of its ultimate defeat. The Guards actually got everything out of Knightsbridge except two guns. After this, our isolated boxes were lost one after another. The 12th Frontier Force Regiment was overrun. The Worcesters, after a defence worthy of their reputation, managed to retire into Tobruk. El Adem was only abandoned after the 6th Rajputana Rifles had actually once recovered it in a counter-attack.

**NEARING THE END AT BIR HACHEIM.** A heavy dive-bombing attack is scourging Bir Hacheim. Exhausted and lacking supplies, the garrison was ordered to withdraw during the night of 10th-11th June.





## 6. THE FALL OF TOBRUK: THE FRONTIER CROSSED

General Auchinleck had already made up his mind to do as Rommel had done at Ajedabia, namely, withdraw to a more distant line and meet the reinforcements that were on the way to him. The losses suffered by our armour had forced him to give up all advanced posts except Tobruk; that fortress remained. Its defence in the previous year had meant a heavy cost in ships, and the Royal Navy could not again undertake the task of revictualling the garrison; but this time supplies for three months were already stored there and, although the fortress could be isolated, the isolation would be only temporary.

The troops on the frontier were to be reinforced, and a striking force built up behind the screen which should, in the near future, advance westwards again and join with the Tobruk garrison in clearing the enemy out of Cyrenaica. There was not much time to organise the defences, but these had proved impregnable before, and it was reasonable to suppose that Rommel would have too large a part of his forces engaged in moving forward to the frontier to be able to stage an attack in force upon Tobruk for some little while at least. That expectation was to be falsified by events.

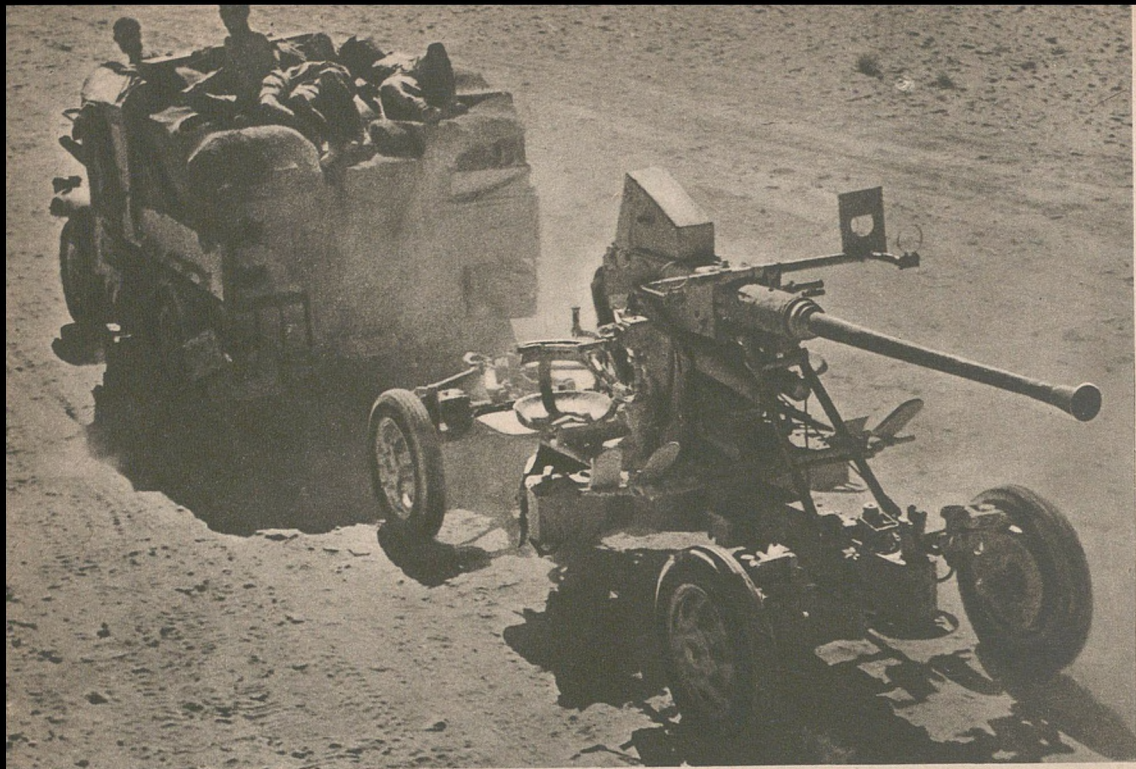
The morale of the Army was unaffected by the adverse turn of the battle. All through the next five days local and successful actions were fought by our retiring troops against the advancing enemy. Those units that had not been detailed to defend Tobruk or to delay the advance were got safely over the frontier, though the South Wales Borderers and the 18th Royal Garhwal Rifles, acting as rearguard to two Indian Brigades, and the 2nd Fighting French Brigade were intercepted and roughly handled by one of the enemy's main columns on the Trigh

Capuzzo. His other main line of advance was along the track from El Adem to Bir Sheferzen. When they had made sure that the forces on the frontier were in no shape to give serious trouble, both these columns turned and made for Tobruk from the west.

In that fortress was now concentrated a garrison which appeared strong, but certainly not too strong to defend a perimeter of 25 miles with which half the troops and most of the artillery were unfamiliar. Besides two Brigades of the 2nd South African Division, there were the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, the Guards Brigade, and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade. The 7th Motorised Brigade, the 6th Royal Tank Regiment, and all remaining tanks of the 2nd and 22nd Armoured Brigades had been in the neighbourhood, covering the retreat to the frontier. This small force, after a fierce battle with the whole of the enemy's armour, was driven off eastwards and was therefore unable to come to the help of Tobruk.

Early on 20th June a heavy artillery barrage was opened on the El Duda sector of the perimeter which was held by the 7th Gurkha Rifles, Mahrattas, and Cameron Highlanders. The shelling was followed by heavy bombing, which helped to blow up the protective minefields, and then was directed against the posts held by the Mahrattas. No air protection could be provided against this bombing because the R.A.F. had at last been forced to retire to airfields beyond effective fighter range. Enemy sappers then filled in a narrow stretch of the anti-tank ditch. Over this bridge an assault was led by two companies of the German 90th Light Division, followed by a large force of tanks with Italian infantry in support. This avalanche overwhelmed the Mahrattas. The tanks swept on, some to run amok in the town,







## THE FALL OF TOBRUK

some to spread out fanwise and take other sectors of the defences in the rear. The British tanks counter-attacked and inflicted some casualties, but late in the afternoon not a single one was left in action. About 8 o'clock in the evening the South African headquarters were surrounded, but the infantry on the perimeter, including the remains of the gallant 11th Indian Brigade, were still fighting on.

As in the case of the comparable disaster of Singapore, it is difficult to disentangle the sequence of events from the terrible confusion inevitable in a breached but battling fortress. During the night of the 20th-21st Major-General Kloppe, commanding the South Africans, who was the senior officer in Tobruk, received but did not succeed in transmitting to all units the order to fight their way out if

they could, and, if not, to resist to the last. At 7 o'clock next morning the enemy demanded surrender. No doubt continued resistance appeared hopeless, and about 9.30 units received the order to burn all transport and capitulate. The order did not reach everybody in the prevailing confusion. Over 200 officers and men of the Coldstream Guards, some 200 South Africans, and 40 artillerymen got away; and some groups on the south-eastern sector continued fighting until the afternoon. But about 25,000 men laid down their arms. Thus the Eighth Army in a few hours had lost a large part of its infantry effectives and of its remaining tanks.

It is only fair to recall that during the earlier eight months' siege of Tobruk there had been but one serious attack with tanks, and that had been delivered against the Medawwa salient,

**RETREAT TOWARDS SUEZ.** The guns and the men go back as the victorious Afrika Korps drives fast behind them. Tobruk and the whole frontier position have fallen.





where alone the defences were in depth. Therefore no comparison can justly be made between holding Tobruk then and losing it now.

Nevertheless, of all the reverses ever suffered by the British arms, few have caused a greater shock than the fall of Tobruk. It was quite unexpected and appeared inexplicable to all who were not there. The former siege had invested the name of Tobruk with special glamour. The Gazala battle had opened so well, and for a fortnight there had been hints and hopes of victory, which were now completely dashed. This was clearly something much more serious than the swing of the pendulum in Wavell's time. The Prime Minister knew it when the news reached him in the White House where he was visiting President Roosevelt. When handed the black telegram, his only remark was the magnificent under-statement: "Rather disconcerting." But he has since revealed that he was in fact "the most miserable Englishman in America since Burgoyne surrendered at Saratoga".

He has himself described the immediate and generous reaction of his host in earmarking all the first batch of Sherman tanks for the Middle East. The humblest worker in the British factories knew it, and asked himself or herself whether the cream of munitions effort since Dunkirk had been spilt. The Axis knew it and exulted; while every quisling found new cause to mask his shame in this evidence of German invincibility. Above all, the Eighth Army knew it. Here is the reaction of one of its officers who heard the news on the wireless while returning in a troopship from England to the Middle East:

"There is a cold hand on my heart. I feel sick and utterly miserable. Tobruk has fallen. Gone! It is hard to believe. I've had the wireless sets frantically searching the air for more and more details; but they are not to be had. All we know is that Rommel penetrated the defences yesterday and that the show there is over now. A

tenseness is creeping into the atmosphere abroad. There are questions, questions, questions—all day long. . . . It is a frightful blow."

Perhaps the worst part of the blow was the enemy's capture of enormous supplies. Tobruk had been used as the main base for the offensive that was being planned from the Gazala positions. The main petrol dump had been burned, but mountains of food, pyramids of shells, masses of other stores fell almost intact into the enemy's hands.

Not the least of the proofs of the Eighth Army's quality is that it rose superior to this trial. But it was not a question of gaining a few weeks for a rally. The difficulty about this Middle East campaign was that at least four months had to elapse between the decision to dispatch this or that reinforcement, either from Britain or from the United States, and its arrival. Mercifully the flow of men and materials had been started long before the disaster. The 44th and 51st Divisions had left England in the last week of May and the first week of June. Many hundreds of six-pounder guns were already on the way, together with numbers of new tanks. The High Command could also scrape up from other parts of the Middle East certain reinforcements, notably the 9th Australian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade and some armoured elements. But the big stuff—two British Divisions, and the American tanks and self-propelled guns—could not be expected before late July or early August. It was going to be a near thing.

The loss of Tobruk and of so many men and so much of the small British armoured strength, meant that the frontier position on which it had been proposed to make a stand was untenable. It was too easily outflanked to be held by infantry lacking a strong mobile reserve. Therefore the order was given to fall back 125 miles eastwards to Matruh, only a delaying force being left in the Sollum area, so as to afford time for the withdrawal of the main body. But at the same time the Commander-



in-Chief decided that Matruh also was indefensible; it had been designed for infantry supported by armour operating on its southern flank, and without such cover it might well prove to be nothing but a trap. But it was a good place at which to fight a rearguard action. So from the frontier the troops were recalled to Matruh.

Rommel determined to strike while the going appeared good, and to use his whole available force against one position at Matruh. In taking this decision he overruled Mussolini and some of his own staff, who thought a halt should be made on the frontier until reinforcements were received. He therefore pressed on in parallel columns along the coast road, along the railway, along the edge of the escarpment and farther south towards Bir Kenayia. In the van were his two German Armoured Divisions and the Ariete Division, with the newly arrived 133rd Littorio Italian Armoured Division, the 90th Light Division and the 102nd Italian Motorised Division

following up. Two days after the fall of Tobruk he had added to these forces four full Italian infantry divisions.

Facing him was an advanced screen consisting of the 7th Motorised Brigade, the 3rd Indian Motorised Brigade and an improvised armoured car brigade (the 12th Lancers, the Royals and the King's Dragoon Guards; a battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps and the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade. Behind them in Mersa Matruh were an Indian Division and the 50th Division (the 69th, 151st and 1st South African Brigades). Farther south were the 5th Indian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division of three Brigades, and an improvised armoured car brigade consisting of remains of the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades. The odds against this combined force were very heavy, and if commanders or men had quailed it would have been all up.

They did not quail. General Auchinleck decided, after it became clear that Matruh

**SET ABLAZE** by the retreating Eighth Army, the accumulated stores of Thalatha, railhead of the branch line from Sidi Barrani, blot out the sky as they burn away to nothing.





could not be held, to stand at El Alamein, where the Qattara Depression would protect his left flank and the sea his right. Here, during the summer, he had had the skeleton of prepared positions constructed, and now reaped the reward of foresight, assisted by the skill and energy which General Willoughby Norrie and the XXXth Corps put into the job of improving the defences. Moreover, he intended to do the enemy as much damage as possible on the way back. The hour was critical, however, and he decided to take on his own shoulders direct responsibility for operations. On 25th June, therefore, he took over from General Ritchie the conduct of the battle.

By the 26th Rommel had concentrated his main forces in the middle of what may be called the Matruh positions. His German divisions were 18 miles south-west of Matruh village, his Italian armour east and west of the Matruh-Siwa track, and his Italian infantry on the coast road west of Matruh. These dispositions resembled those in the

early stages of the Gazala battle, except that the enemy had reached the middle of the position by direct penetration. He clearly hoped for a second Tobruk at Matruh. On 27th June, therefore, while the Italians closed in from the west, the Germans continued to by-pass Matruh, and collected in the Mingar Qa'aim area, where they were well placed to strike north and take some of the British forces in the rear. Next day they tried this manœuvre. The New Zealanders were furiously attacked five times, but yielded not an inch either to tanks or infantry. After nightfall they fixed bayonets and charged out eastwards through the enemy, reaching Alamein on the evening of the 29th after a magnificent feat of arms. They were greatly helped by the Bays, who reached the front after re-equipping in time to render essential service. Three Indian Brigades also broke out with equal gallantry, the Essex and 10th Baluch Regiments and the 6th Rajputana Rifles fighting their way back through four enemy divisions.

## 7. THE LAST DITCH

The enemy's best chance now was to attack before the Eighth Army could settle down after its long and difficult retreat and before reinforcements could come up. He therefore pressed on furiously all through the 29th and 30th and arrived in front of the El Alamein positions early in the afternoon of the 30th. Next day his 90th Light Division, supported by the Trento Division and 20 tanks, repeatedly attacked the South Africans' sector. In spite of dive-bombing, all these attacks were repulsed. To the south the position at Bir el Shein, held by the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade, was subject to a similar ordeal. During the day all assaults were repulsed or neutralised by counter-attack; but in the

night the positions were overwhelmed in a renewed attack and a gap was opened in the British lines.

The next three days were extremely critical. On 2nd July, in an attempt to enlarge the gap, Rommel flung the 90th Division, most of his Italian infantry, and three armoured divisions at the 1st Armoured Division and South Africans. The battle ebbed and flowed throughout the day, and the 1st Armoured Division received the special congratulations of General Auchinleck for its superb work. At one moment the enemy certainly thought they were through and issued a communiqué about pursuing the beaten British towards Alexandria. Like Molas's first dispatch from





GENERAL AUCHINLECK DECIDES:  
THE ARMY WILL STAND AT ALAMEIN.



Marengo, these shouts of victory were premature. Emulating the charges of Desaix and Kellerman, which snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades, advancing west and north, counter-attacked the enemy's flank, while the New Zealanders with the 7th Motorised Brigade engaged 40 of his tanks. The South Africans in their turn went over from defence to attack, and by the evening the enemy had to withdraw, leaving all the British positions intact.

Next day Rommel tried again. This time the New Zealanders north-west of Bab el Qattara sustained the main shock in the morning, and the 1st Armoured Division met the other main thrust against a ridge ten miles south of Alamein station in the afternoon. The enemy was everywhere repulsed, and lost during the day 21 tanks, 44 guns, 400 prisoners and 16 Stukas. It was the turn of the tide, and the C.-in-C.'s purpose of regaining the initiative had been achieved. From that moment the vision of a triumphal entry into Alexandria faded. The victors of Gazala were more exhausted than the vanquished. They were thrown back by wearied troops, who, in spite of bewilderment at their earlier defeat, had found the strength to hold the last ditch.

This is primarily the story of the Eighth Army, and no attempt has been made to describe the doings of the R.A.F. There is not the slightest doubt that but for its magnificent achievements the Army would never have been extricated at all. When things were going back so rapidly, squadrons would have to take off from one airfield and alight on another far to the rear because during the few hours of their sortie their original landing place had gone. "During the whole of that long and awful retreat," writes an Army officer, "nobody even bothered to look up when aircraft were heard, such was the certainty that they were our own machines."

Thus the Eighth Army survived its darkest hour. Including the losses at Tobruk, it had lost some 80,000 men in battle and was still

unbroken. On the contrary, with the help of reinforcements which were now moving up rapidly and in strength, it proceeded to break the enemy.

A symptom of the change occurred when fighting was resumed on 4th July. About 600 German infantry offered to surrender to the 1st Armoured Division. A British officer dismounted from his tank to receive them but both he and they were heavily fired on by their friends behind, and all but about 60 were killed. In this sector—south of Alamein railway station—the enemy were also heavily attacked from the air, and by the afternoon were in full retreat. Farther south, the XIIIth Corps drove in the enemy's right flank, and by early next morning the 5th New Zealand Brigade had cleared the Bir el Mukheisin area, inflicting large casualties at very little cost to themselves.

The enemy now began to accept his check. On 5th July he started to set up an anti-tank screen of infantry and 88 mm. guns running north-east and south-west through the rising ground of El Mereir, and then prolonged, due west beyond Bir el Harra and El Qarir. On this day the first of the Australian 9th Division reached the line, and the enemy heard the strains of "Waltzing Matilda" for the first time in this battle. The 24th Brigade came into line in the central sector and two nights later tasted blood in a highly successful raid. Not to be outdone, a New Zealand column made a dash round the enemy's position, reached Fuka airfield and destroyed 40 machines on the ground. They got back, having suffered only seven casualties.

On 9th July the whole of the Australian Division and the 1st South African Division made a bigger attack. They reached their objectives—Tel el Eisa and El Makh Khad—and held them against counter-attacks. The operation, which was completed by 11th July, secured the whole of Tel el Eisa ridge, together with over 2,000 prisoners, most of whom were Italians, 18 tanks and 15 guns. But an attempt by the armour to exploit this success failed.



A position of virtual equilibrium had now been reached and this lasted until the enemy's big offensive on 30th August. But neither side was very willing to accept the fact and there were some fierce battles for position. Three substantial British attacks were delivered. The first, between 14th and 17th July, gained most of the Ruweisat ridge, but Tel el Eisa changed hands three times and finally (with the exception of a valuable salient north of the railway cutting) remained in the enemy's possession, though on the 16th, in one of his counter-attacks, 25 of his tanks were knocked out for the loss of none.

The second attack was an even more serious affair, designed to break through the defences which the enemy was building up. The attack opened on the night of 21st-22nd July. After 24 hours' fierce fighting by the 5th Indian Division, the 5th and 6th New Zealand Brigades, and British armour (the 23rd and 2nd Brigades), an attempt to reach the eastern edge of the Deir el Shein depression and to clear the Ruweisat ridge definitely failed; and German counter-attacks caught two battalions of the 6th New Zealand Brigade. In the north the Australians again recaptured Tel el Eisa, but were driven off the ridge again on the 23rd. On the southern flank, the 69th Infantry Brigade overran the Taqa plateau, but were forced off most of it in the morning. The general result of these actions was disappointing. Two thousand four hundred men and 60 tanks had been lost, and though the enemy had lost heavily too (25 of his tanks and 600 prisoners, mostly Germans, had been captured), there had been no material advance and the enemy had been found too strong.

On the night of 26th-27th July another attempt was made. The plan was to carry Sanyet el Miteirya and the ridge running north-west from it and clear a passage for the British armour through the minefields east of Deir el Dhib. In the centre a feint attack was to hold the enemy.

Two South African battalions lifted the

mines, and the Durham Light Infantry and East Yorkshires of the 69th Brigade passed through and virtually annihilated the German 361st Infantry Regiment in repeated bayonet charges. Farther north, however, the 24th Australian Brigade ran into bad trouble. They took Sanyet but were cut off and with difficulty got out under cover of the 50th Royal Tank Regiment. This check exposed the flank of the 69th Brigade which had to be recalled under cover of the 1st Armoured Division. Casualties were heavy. A thousand Australians were missing and 70 tanks destroyed or disabled.

Both sides now sat down to lick their wounds. But all these abortive attacks had illustrated new tactical truths which we were quicker to grasp than Rommel. All had been designed to renew fighting in a fluid form, but none had been able to get through the defensive skin. What was the lesson? No less than that the character of fighting in the Western Desert must be changed. The gun, the mine and the infantryman had come into their own, and the tank was no longer queen of the battlefields.

This did not suit Rommel's character or qualities at all, and it was fatal to the armies he led. He had entertained and imparted the most extravagant hopes. Mussolini himself had hurried to Africa in order to head a victory parade into Alexandria and Cairo, and there was some difficulty in explaining that he had only come on a visit of inspection to Benghazi and Derna. The brass bands specially imported had to be hushed and hidden. Italian bridging units sent out in readiness to throw pontoons over the Nile had to be turned into ordinary sappers and lay mines. All the hopes of which these things were symptoms had to be revived, not least because Goebbels had puffed Rommel into a kind of military deity—ruthless, strong, hard, invincible. But in point of fact he had his limitations as a general, and one of them was to repeat his tactics. It was thus much easier to guess what he would try to do.



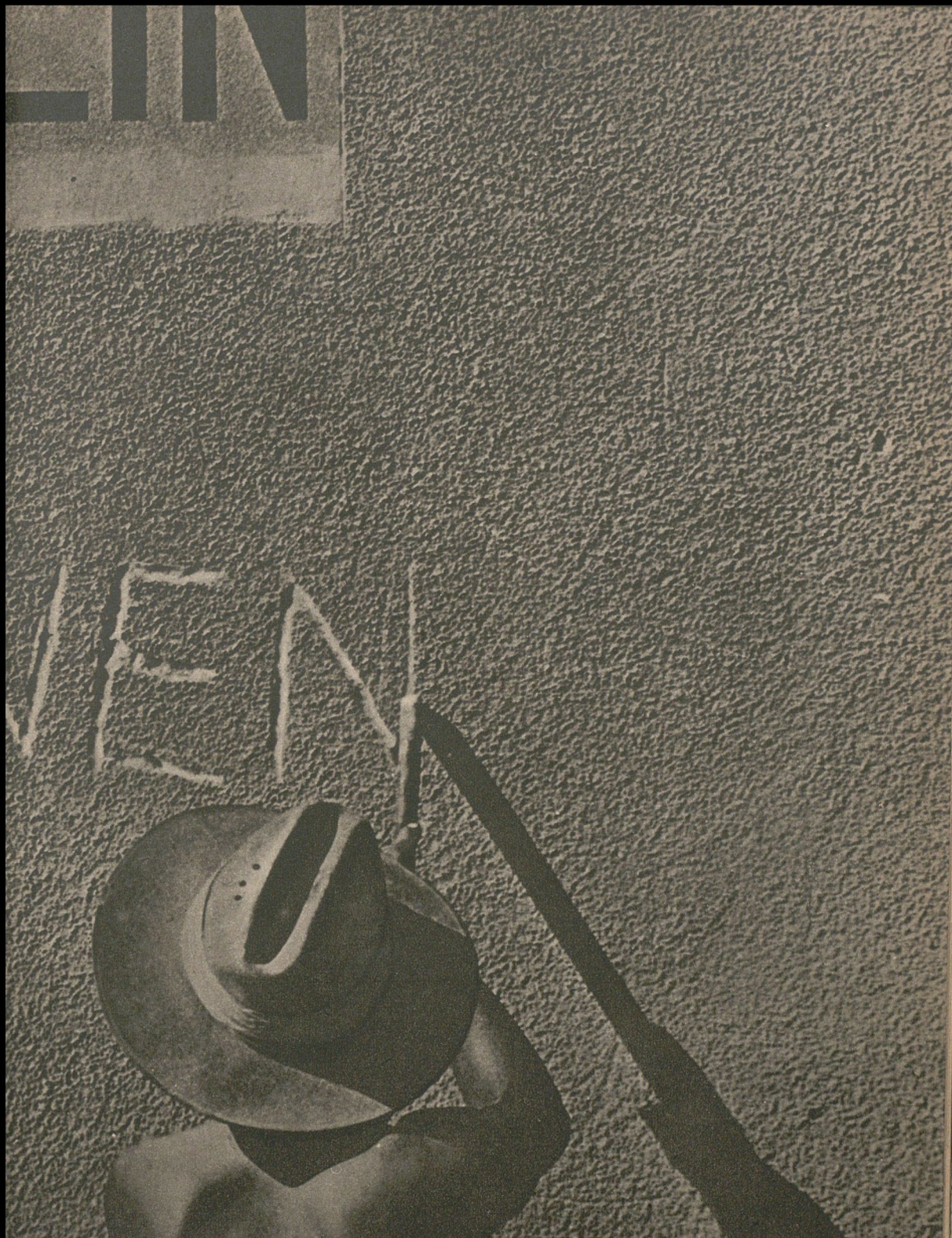
ALAMEIN



HEAVEN

THE STAND AT EL ALAMEIN







## 8. "NO WITHDRAWALS—NONE WHATEVER—NONE"

All through August both sides were hard at work reorganising, regrouping, extending their minefields, probing for information, and collecting reinforcements. On 5th August the Prime Minister visited the Eighth Army, accompanied by Field-Marshal Wavell and Smuts. It is perhaps permissible to break away from the prosaic recital of events and to incorporate an eye-witness account of Mr. Churchill among the troops.

"The desert stands where the desert stood. Nothing much is changed. The flies are bad about here, and netting is essential if one is to get any peace at all—or any food. Lizards sit tightly on the sunny sides of rocks contemplating heaven alone knows what in such desolation. Scavenger beetles go about their eternal tasks, performing impossible feats of strength and cunning in hiding bits of refuse and rubbish. Dogs of all shapes, sizes and colours amble furtively about the camp, instantly ready to yowl and run with their tails between their legs at any sign of displeasure. There are a lot of Bedouins about, and they stalk majestically around, clasping a few eggs in lean brown hands and seeking to trade them for tea or sugar. A few donkeys crop non-existent grass and appear to like it—one of the *real* mysteries of the East.

"The road runs along the top of a ridge parallel to the sea and separated from it by low sand-hills that are of purest white. The sea is always incredibly blue. Something must have happened to it since the ancient Greeks called it 'wine-coloured.' There are no clouds in the sky. The sun burns more and more brassily as it climbs, and the desert stretches away south, east and west, to lose itself in dancing heat-waves.

"In this setting Mr. Churchill came to see the men of the Eighth Army. We all

thought he had rather the air of a pleasant headmaster who had come along to see how his pupils were getting on; only one wasn't too sure that he hadn't a birch concealed somewhere. Perhaps it was the fly-whisk he carried which fostered this idea.

"The little procession of cars churned up great clouds of dust as they bumped over the road. Troops already at work scarcely bothered to raise their heads. A few did, and saw the P.M. smiling at them and prodding two fingers in the air in the 'V' sign. They stared and scratched their heads and peered questioningly at the following cars. We nodded vigorously in answer to their unspoken question.

"On again until, near to the forward positions held by the Australians, the scene changed. Word of his coming had in some way outpaced the cars. So everywhere troops were running to the road, lorries were stopping and men were tumbling out of them.

"Away to the west, the guns banged away sullenly and grumbled in the heat. Up north, tiny planes glinted in the sun as they dived and twisted, and the rattle of their fire came to us briskly but softly on the breeze. It was a normal sort of morning on the Western Desert front.

"For hours in the evening we sat discussing this visit and discovering hundreds of hidden and contradictory meanings. Churchill—Wavell—Smuts! What *does* it all mean? There are great days ahead."

There were indeed. The first sign of it was the reorganisation of the command and the Army. One of the most difficult tasks in the world is to act upon the conviction that one leader should give way to another; but that conviction had been reached. There was no lack of apprecia-





FORTY MILES FROM ALEXANDRIA.



tion or indeed of admiration for the way in which General Auchinleck had averted imminent disaster. But it seemed possible that in the more or less haphazard distribution of commands which is always forced upon the enormously expanded edition of Britain's small Army in time of war, the best man had not been found for this place.

It was therefore decided that General Alexander, who had been the last man to leave Dunkirk, and had subsequently brought our small forces practically intact out of Burma, should be the new C.-in-C., Middle East. General "Strafer" Gott, the famous and trusted leader of the XIIIth Corps, had been designated to command the Eighth Army. Unhappily, he was killed when two enemy fighters attacked the transport plane in which he was travelling back to Cairo. The Army was therefore entrusted to General Montgomery, who, while holding an appointment in England, had achieved a great reputation for force of character and for insistence upon physical fitness in every officer and man under his command.

Thus began the fertile association between Generals Alexander and Montgomery which was to win the second wholly irrevocable victory of the war—the first being the liberation of East Africa—to outthink and outmanœuvre the Germans, and to explode the illusion that British leadership is unimaginative, unoriginal, and unenterprising.

It would be more accurate to include in this association Air Chief Marshal Tedder, who as Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Middle East, in co-operation with Air Vice-Marshal Coningham, A.O.C. Western Desert, contributed the principle of 100 per cent. army-air co-operation and many new operational tactics; and also Admiral Harwood, who fitted so admirably into the general plan the work of the Navy. There are two other candidates for inclusion in the constellation, namely, General Lindsell and Brigadier Sir Brian Robertson, who organised the Eighth Army's supplies, and thus made possible the follow-through

**AUGUST AT ALAMEIN.** The Prime Minister comes to see the men of the Eighth Army. He is with General Freyberg, New Zealand Commander.









**GENERAL ALEXANDER** was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East Forces, following the Prime Minister's visit.

after every blow which in war is the secret of full success. "Co-operation" is really a misleading word to use about this team. Their work was better than co-operative. As General Montgomery himself said, there was no question of combined operations; there was one single but composite entity. "The astonishing number of new boys around the place quite takes the breath away", wrote an old Eighth Army fan at that time.

There were other things which encouraged confidence. Two fine Divisions arrived from England—the 44th and the 51st. The former

had made a fine defence of Cassel in the Dunkirk campaign, and the latter had the dark days of the Bresle and of St. Valéry to avenge upon their old enemies, the German armoured divisions. In addition, two new Armoured Divisions, the 8th and 10th, were available. Tank losses had been made good. Anti-tank gunners licked their lips over long lines of newly arrived six-pounders. The face of the desert changed daily under the impact of bulldozers and road-making gangs. All these things had their effect on the Army.

"The Eighth Army," wrote a competent observer at this time, "has occasionally felt



that it was battling on alone; and that its trials and tribulations, its successes and failures, were not sufficiently appreciated at home. Now, we feel someone is really taking an interest in us. Of course, this feeling is grossly unfair in many ways, but at the same time it is there—or it was there. It is just that we've felt a bit lonely and that having to come back from Ajedabia twice bit deeply into our souls. The Army had always thought, 'What will they think about this at home?' and the notion that at home they would think we were not what we know we are—a great Army—had been hard to bear."

Rommel had also been receiving reinforcements. Identification raids established the presence of a new German Division (the 164th) and the 125th German Infantry Regiment from Crete, together with considerable formations of German and Italian parachutists being used temporarily as infantry. Using self-propelled barges on a large scale, he also brought up quantities of tanks, and masses of new artillery, including many captured Russian guns which, as one who experienced their fire remarked, have "the devil of a punch." He also had in line a number of 25-pounders which he had captured during his advance. But in spite of this powerful armament, his position and dispositions had weaknesses, some being of his own creating. Rommel had talked too loudly about having in his grasp "the handle of the door." He was bent on attack to the virtual exclusion of all other considerations. Practically everything he had was right forward, and his minefields, though many and thick, were not always well sited. It looked a little as though the poisonous Spirit of Wishful Thinking had changed sides.

He was in grave difficulties with his supplies. All through the last two weeks of August the Navy and the R.A.F. took a heavy toll of the men and material sent him. On the night of 17th-18th August two petrol installations at Tobruk were burned

out. The day before a 7,000-ton ship with a cargo of lorries had been sunk. On 21st August a tanker was wrecked by aircraft from Malta; another tanker was hit on the night of the 26th-27th, and yet a third on the night of the 29th-30th. On the 28th four merchantmen were torpedoed, and ships and aircraft bombarded petrol dumps at El Daba. Four more ships were destroyed on the 31st and all this time there were attacks upon coasting vessels.

Prisoners taken by Eighth Army patrols had said that an attack was planned for 25th August, but it did not come off, and on the succeeding night the New Zealanders made a highly successful raid on the Italians in the Deir el Mereir depression. It became pretty clear that the enemy was short of supplies and particularly of petrol. Probably he had just enough to try a hurricane attack and hoped to capture or to be sent enough to carry on. If this guess is true—and certainly his attack *was* crippled when he failed to secure more petrol—the sinking of his tankers must rank high among the causes of his defeat. It was not the only cause, and nothing should deprive the High Command of the credit for organising so effective an anti-tank defence and the timely delivery of harassing counter-attacks.

All this space has been devoted to the interval between the big battles at Alamein, because during that time the Eighth Army was virtually reborn. On 28th August General Montgomery held a conference of his officers as a prelude to the attack which the enemy was then clearly about to deliver. "There will be no withdrawals," was the gist of an abrupt but galvanising address, "absolutely none—none whatever—NONE!" He proceeded to give his own estimate of Rommel: "a very able commander, but he has his weaknesses. He has a tendency to repeat his tactics. He has rather a one-track mind."

This forecast proved absolutely accurate when Rommel struck on the night of 30th August.





**THE THROW FOR ALEXANDRIA.** On the night of 30th August, Rommel sent out the full strength of the Afrika Korps to finish the Eighth Army and open the road to Suez. After three days' battle, the enemy fell back, leaving behind a trail of burning tanks and armoured vehicles.



## 9. THE LAST BLOW OF THE AFRIKA KORPS

His tactics were a repetition of those successful at Gazala. His striking force comprised practically the whole of his armour (about 580 tanks) and the best of his infantry. He used between 3,000 and 4,000 lorries, and enormous numbers of guns. This striking force was to pierce the Eighth Army's position in the south, strike north behind its lines, destroy or drive off its armour, and then crush the isolated infantry. If he did not reach the coast at the first rush, he would lure the Army into a counter-attack which would be disastrously smashed by his heavy anti-tank artillery.

The High Command's plans were formed on the expectation that his would be precisely what they were. Elements of the 7th Armoured Division and the 4th Light Armoured Brigade were to delay the main encircling movement. They were not to run their heads against his armour, but to withdraw, let his tanks through and then concentrate on destroying the motor transport which would be following up. Entrenched infantry and gunners would meanwhile take the main weight of his armoured attack, and the rest of the British armour, occupying favourable hull down positions, would operate as mobile artillery.

Shortly before midnight on 30th August the West Yorkshires of the 5th Indian Division were attacked by infantry and artillery on the Ruweisat Ridge. The enemy reached the forward positions but were ejected with the help of a battalion of the Essex Regiment. The South Africans in the Deir el Shein area had a similar experience and success. These attacks were clearly only a diversion. At 2 a.m. the 7th Armoured Division reported that strong forces were lifting the minefields round Himeimat. This was the main business. The Afrika Korps were off on the journey

to Cairo, which, according to prisoners, Rommel had promised them.

By midday the main enemy columns had percolated through the outer minefields. They were greatly harassed by the 4th Light Brigade, which claimed to have knocked out 24 tanks. One enemy column halted outside the inner minefields. Another, farther north, advanced to Deir el Muhafid, hence the 90th Light Division started to dig in south of the New Zealanders' position. The better part of the Italian armoured divisions accompanied them, and their purpose was to contain the Eighth Army forces to the north, thus keeping open for the German armour the passage between Deir el Muhafid and the Qattara Depression.

About 5.30 p.m. the enemy halted in an attempt to provoke a counter-attack. When this expectation was disappointed he pushed on north and delivered a dangerously powerful attack on the 22nd Armoured Brigade. It was finally repulsed with the help of the 23rd Armoured Brigade and the enemy withdrew, having lost 41 out of 100 tanks. He was in some confusion, and in his retirement left a gap between two groups of his armour of which the 7th Armoured Division took advantage to poke at his flanks. There was some desultory fighting, in which the 7th Motorised Brigade, the Rifle Brigade, and the King's Royal Rifle Corps distinguished themselves; this cost the enemy 30 more tanks. His air force attempted to co-operate, but lost 15 machines while the R.A.F. lost only three.

Great satisfaction was felt as the result of this first day's fighting. By repeating his tactics of encirclement, without regard to the fact that the terrain, unlike the battlefield of Gazala, did not lend itself to wide manœuvre, the enemy had got himself





SO NEAR TO SUEZ.

into difficulties. He could not disperse his forces to lessen casualties from bombing, and R.A.F. squadrons were over him all day, arriving with the frequency of Tube trains, dropping their loads and going back for more. The medium artillery also found some grand targets in the forces massed solidly between Himeimat and Bare Ridge. An officer in a forward observation post on the ridge had a bird's-eye view of the whole scene.

"There," he writes, "stretching away to the south, was the black mass of the Afrika Korps. Here, on the left, tucked into folds of the ground, was a mass of our tanks. About 30 of theirs with a couple of self-propelled guns nosed up to the very edge of the minefields below the ridge. They

had no sooner reached it than our 25-pounders, which had been impatiently waiting, opened up with a crash. As they did so, a bunch of our tanks" (they belonged to the 8th Armoured Brigade) "came streaking in from the flank and there was a fierce and bloody battle. Fifteen German tanks are still burning below, and seven of ours are burning or stopped. One of the self-propelling guns went for six, and the other sheered off."

The enemy added to his own embarrassment by getting many of his tanks and lorries bogged in patches of soft sand, and having to use unexpected quantities of petrol to get them out.

The importance of this on the course of the battle was that the enemy had started



it short of petrol, the supplies he had expected had been sunk on the way, he had not captured a single gallon, as he had hoped to do, and was therefore faced with immobilisation and disaster unless he retreated quickly.

Those in the Eighth Army who possessed British diaries found noted under the date of 1st September "Partridge Shooting begins." It began on that date in this battle with some excellent shooting at enemy convoys. All day the enemy tanks and lorries were heavily bombed and shelled, and attacks were carried as far as the target of transport between Gamut and Sidi Barrani. Many petrol carriers were thus destroyed. The enemy sat quiet under this fire all that day and the next, either because he could not help it or because he still hoped to provoke a counter-attack. The bulk of the British armour used nothing but its artillery; but the 4th Light Armoured Brigade and the 11th Hussars were out on the lines of communication west of Himeimat, and the 4th Hussars with the City of London Yeomanry were busy in the Gaballa area.

On the morning of 3rd September, it was apparent that British strategy and tactics had succeeded. The enemy had fallen back during the night to Deir el Ragil behind a protective screen of guns. All day the shelling and bombing were redoubled, two ships coming from Crete were sunk by torpedo-carrying Wellingtons, and a tanker was set on fire.

Odd little scraps of the enemy's original plans continued to function. On the night of 3rd-4th September a party of 14 Italians, who had landed from a rubber boat to blow up the railway west of the Maryut lake, were captured. Moreover, he was still clinging on to some of the ground taken when he came round Himeimat. A Brigade of the 44th Division with the 5th New Zealand Brigade therefore put in an attack that night to clear the Deir el Muhafid depression. They had heavy casualties, partly because an ammunition lorry caught

fire going over some rising ground and the attacking troops were silhouetted against the blaze; but the objective was secured, and four enemy counter-attacks next day failed.

Meanwhile, the 10th and 7th Armoured Divisions were slowly driving the enemy back towards the outer minefields. He went back in good order but with considerable losses. Next day he admitted defeat by announcing in his official communiqués that he had intended only a reconnaissance in force. Unfortunately for him, his Order of the Day, issued just before the advance, had fallen into our hands. Its salient sentence was, "To-day the Army, reinforced by new Divisions, will launch a new attack in order finally to destroy the enemy." He had meant real business, and he had lost.

Rommel's last bid for Alexandria was now petering out. The best that he could put against the Eighth Army had not been good enough. Fifty-three of his tanks had been permanently destroyed, apart from the very large number damaged and got away for repair. General Freyberg, in the course of a later report on the battle, gives a second main reason, besides lack of petrol, for the enemy's failure. Blitz tactics had caused his infantry and artillery to lose the power of independent offensive action. They had, he said, become "tank followers" and had "lost their old skill in handling their personal weapons."

The Eighth Army had lost about 100 tanks, including 30 Grants, but its repair organisation was now so good and reinforcements so great that a fortnight later 860 tanks were in running order, including 180 Grants and 108 Shermans. There were also more than 500 25-pounders and nearly 400 six-pounder guns among the artillery.

By 7th September the enemy appeared to have completed his withdrawal and his forward positions followed the line of Deir el Angar—Deir el Munassib—Himeimat. There was no attempt to disturb him unduly because the Eighth Army's job was to pile up strength for a big offensive of its own.



## 10. MONTGOMERY PREPARES TO STRIKE

The first real pin-pricks were experimental raids carried out by sea-borne landing parties assisted by raiding parties operating overland on the night of 13th-14th September. They were not a success. The main attack was on Tobruk. Overland went a column of the Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry, anti-aircraft and coastal defence gunners, and a patrol of the Long Range Desert Group. Shortly after midnight this party attacked and carried a strong-point on the north side of Tobruk harbour.

Meanwhile, the sea-borne party, consisting of a company of the Argylls, a platoon of the Northumberland Fusiliers, with Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers details, embarked on M.T.B.s. The speed and low freeboard of these craft make it difficult for them to keep in touch at night. They lost touch on this occasion, arrived independently, and, owing to the failure of recognition signals, were fired on by British troops. Only two succeeded in landing troops. Some destroyers, in the face of strong opposition, succeeded in landing a party of Royal Marines and attached troops at Mersa Matruh. The destroyers were then caught by searchlights and though they hung on most gallantly, two were lost, together with four M.T.B.s and two motor launches. The Army losses alone were 38 officers and 419 men. An overland party, designed to raid Benghazi, was caught by bombers and had to withdraw towards Jalo. Another party, in spite of heavy air attack, reached Barce airfield and did a lot of damage. Both these parties later joined up and attacked Jalo itself, but after five days' hanging on to one end of the oasis, were forced, by the arrival of strong enemy reinforcements, to retreat to Kufra.

On the main front, September passed quickly enough after Rommel's repulse;

but though there was no big-scale fighting, both sides were feverishly active. As part of the Eighth Army a new Corps—the Xth—was being formed in the greatest secrecy, since it was designed to deliver the *coup de grâce* in the projected offensive. But this Corps was not the only part of the Army which used the lull for intense and continuous training. Tactics are never static, and a self-satisfied army which remains content with “tried methods” is half-way to being beaten. The mighty Prussian Army, formed and trained by Frederick the Great, was soundly beaten a few years after his death by a rabble at Valmy, largely because it was shackled to a certain kind of tactics which was upset by the unexpected. The Eighth Army made no such mistake. Between operations and even during operations it was ceaselessly applying new lessons to itself.

The enemy was far more content to rest on his laurels. During the lull he concerned himself chiefly with fortifying his positions, and his minefields spread over the desert like oil rings expanding on water. He seemed to have an inkling of what was coming, and Rommel himself went to Berlin for consultations. He was lionised—at least by the Press, to which he gave a confident, not to say boastful, account of the position. “I have not advanced to El Alamein,” he said, “with any intention of being flung back sooner or later. You may rely on our holding fast to what we have got.” Reports which were not published, however, indicated that he took a different line with the General Staff, that he implored them for reinforcements, and formally refused to resume his attacks unless all his requests were granted. There were yet other reports that he was wholly subservient in the presence of Hitler himself. That is the trouble, of course, with German commanders





**THE PLANS ARE PERFECTED.** The Eighth Army is entrusted to General Montgomery. Here, wearing his borrowed Anzac hat, he confers with officers of the 9th Australian Division.

in this war. It is as much as their careers are worth to be other than "Yes-men" to the intuitions of the Master Mind. Rommel therefore had to be content with the promise of one new division (apart from the usual replacements). This was the 20th from Crete; but the promise never materialised and rather less than a battalion actually reached him during October.

The main reason for this lag in his reinforcements was the increasing peril of the Eastern Mediterranean crossings. Thanks to the establishment of Allied air superiority, very little could get through to any port east of

Benghazi. In the first three weeks of October three-quarters of the Axis sea transports were lost, and between 10th and 23rd October, 27 ships were sunk or badly damaged. Rommel tried his old game of protecting the Tripoli route by violent air attacks on Malta, but these were not renewed until the 11th, and there was not time for much to get across before the Eighth Army's offensive.

On 30th September the lull on land was broken by a sharp action against Deir el Munassib by battalions of the Queen's Royal Regiment. One battalion took and held the northern tip of the depression, while





THE TANK CREWS PREPARE . . .

another, though they ran into mines and wire, reached a line 1,000 yards south of the depression and held on there. The enemy belonged mostly to the Folgore Italian Division, who were fairly recent arrivals. They were parachutists serving for the time being as infantry. They were tough troops, and gave the Eighth Army a new idea of the fighting qualities of the Italians. On 5th October a company of the Royal Sussex wiped out an enemy post on the Ruweisat ridge, and next night the Greek Brigade, which had been forming and training in Egypt since the gloomy spring of 1941, fought a successful patrol action.

These actions are familiar in title through the communiqués, but only those who have been on patrol can realise what it means. It is an essential if undramatic part of an army's work, and the following account of a patrol by one who took part in it shows

what this routine work is like.

"It took about three hours to reach the enemy lines, and then we lay up for a while in what was only too perceptibly a very foul piece of old battle-ground. There were a lot of graves, many of them scooped out in the most slip shod way, and some burned-out tanks and lorries. It was very dark. The moon had long since set; but after a time, by the starlight, we were able to make out the enemy's wire and some dim shapes which might have been anything, though I think they were vehicles.

"We could hear two fairly large working parties chip-chipping away at the hard ground with picks and spades; and away over to the right an Italian was singing in a lovely tenor voice. He wasn't a very hard worker; from time to time somebody would shout to him that a spade was better than a song. I am afraid we were glad he was undisciplined,



because his voice gave us a good pin-point.

"After a whispered conference, the youngster leading the patrol crept off with half the party, while the rest of us positioned ourselves to cover their progress and withdrawal. The wait seemed interminable and it was very cold. The working parties carried on all unconscious of the impending blow. Suddenly it came. There was a hair-raising shriek, confused yells, and then the familiar hell of every kind of weapon being loosed off. The darkness was stabbed with flashes and the earth shook to the explosion of mortar bombs. Machine-guns firing on pack lines sent streams of coloured full-stops gushing through the night. One always forgets that between each of these tracer bullets there are two invisible rounds of non-tracer.

"So far as we were concerned it was all much ado about nothing. Nobody was hit and the patrol ambled quietly home to a cup

of water, some biscuits and chocolate, and an hour's nap in the bottom of a slit trench."

In these and kindred activities the days and nights passed until 20th October. On that date a special message to the R.A.F. from Air Vice-Marshal Coningham announced that the Allied Air Forces had begun what was to be a decisive battle. "You are very strong," he said, "and can exercise real air power." During the next three days they did, with ever-increasing intensity. On the day of the 23rd the attack rose to a high pitch of concentrated fury, embracing advanced air-bases, lines of communication, gun positions, and concentrations of motor transport. As darkness fell the Navy joined in by shelling dumps and communications at Mersa Matruh; and the Eighth Army stood to for the assault in preparation for which every man had received a personal message from the Army Commander.

... AND THE GUNNERS WAIT.









# THE BREAKING OF THE AFRIKA KORPS





## 11. THE BATTLE OF EGYPT: THE INFANTRY GOES IN

All through the preceding fortnight Eighth Army patrols had been lifting mines in the northern sector between Bir Qusur el Atosh and Bir el Maqtuq, so that the minefields should not impede the advance. By 23rd October they had cleared two good passages in this area. It was here that the main attack was to be delivered. Preparations for this offensive had been made for two long months in the light of past experience. This showed that at least locally and in the initial stages of an attack it was useless to throw armour against prepared positions. The Army's tactics were, therefore, to nibble through these positions in a series of infantry attacks supported by a very powerful barrage from the ground and the air.

A few armoured units were well up with the infantry for local exploitations; but the bulk of the tanks were behind, ready to go through after the infantry and guns had cleared the way. There were, therefore, collected in the north the XXXth Corps, composed of 14 Infantry Brigades and one Armoured Brigade, supported by about 800 guns. South of the XXXth Corps came the XIIIth Corps, of seven Infantry Brigades, two Armoured Brigades and a French flying column. The Xth Corps, comprising two Armoured Divisions, was coming up behind the XXXth Corps. Two New Zealand Brigades and an Armoured Brigade were also in the offing as a separate formation. This Xth Corps was intended to be, and was, the big surprise of the battle. It had been concentrated for training 50 miles back, and at the critical moment it moved up by night.

The enemy was undoubtedly deceived about the time, the place, and the strength of the attack. Moreover, the Corps had had a rehearsal of the battle over an area arranged, so far as possible, to be exactly like the

prospective battlefield. It is less confusing to give the dispositions in this way rather than by specifying Divisions, because the Divisional organisation varied very much. Thus, the 23rd Armoured Brigade was split up between the infantry divisions of the XXXth Corps, the Greek Brigade with the 50th Division (one of whose Brigades was reckoned with the 4th Indian Division), and the 1st Fighting French Brigade with the 7th Armoured Division.

Rommel had not returned to his Army when the battle opened. He had left General Stumme in command; but Stumme was killed during an air-raid on his H.Q., and von Thoma took over; but there is little doubt that the enemy's dispositions were Rommel's responsibility. They were faulty, and based on the assumption that the main attack would come in the centre on the Ruweisat sector. He would have welcomed an attack there; and his plan was to delay it only so much as a single Italian division (the Bologna) could, and then counter-attack from both flanks. He had massed nearly all his German infantry, two motorised Italian Divisions and about half his tanks in the north. The rest of his tanks, some German parachutists and four Italian Divisions were in the south. After General von Thoma had been captured, he blamed Rommel for two tactical mistakes. His armour and anti-tank guns in the north were massed so close to the line that they suffered heavily and needlessly from artillery fire. In the second place, his minefields were badly arranged. Large sections of them were not under observation of the German artillery, and therefore could be lifted with less than the expected casualties and delay.

"Lifting mines" sounds such a simple business. Men of the Eighth Army often



wondered what the readers of communiqués thought when they saw the phrase: "A path was cleared through the enemy's minefields." That phrase covers, in fact, an extremely complicated operation. Look at this mine-clearing party going out. The men in front are a reconnaissance section, rather like the bayonet men in the old grenade fighting in trenches. The two men on their flanks are tommy-gunners. Their job is to make any enemy encountered by the reconnaissance section keep their heads down. The party behind them, carrying what look like sections of gaspipe, are the torpedo party; and their gaspipes are Bangalor torpedoes to blast a path through barbed wire. The dusty tramp just behind them, carrying a revolver, is the section officer, and the men on either side of him are carrying rolls of tape to mark the cleared channel.

The next party, looking like housemaids with Hoovers, are the men working the mine-detectors—not the least contribution to the victory was the timely arrival of enough of these instruments, which were turned out by British factories as a rush job. These Hoover men actually locate the mines. The party behind mark the mines with little flags. The next party render them innocuous—"delousing" is the Army name for their job. Behind them comes the section N.C.O., and, last of all, the men to mark the entrances to the gaps with notice-boards and special lamps, visible only to oncoming troops.

The job is difficult as well as elaborate. For example, during the battle one section officer had three trucks blown from beneath him in eight minutes. The parties were nearly always exposed both to close-range and long-range fire, and often had to improvise methods other than those of the drill-book. Here is a veteran Australian mine-lifter demonstrating his methods to a visitor. "I walk along like this, and I give a kick here and a kick there. Now, if you look, you'll see I've got one." And indeed, with his second gentle kick, he had uncovered a French-made mine. He proceeded to "de-

louse" it. Meanwhile he talked. "Yes, I've been doing this since Tobruk—the time when we held it. No, my lot have never had any casualties from mines or booby-traps. You get a sense for them, I suppose. I've pulled up thousands.

"Now the other night when we began this attack, we had a fair job to do. They were as thick as thieves, these mines, and booby-traps in between them. Then there was that barrage going on; but, best of all, there was a bright moon. We had a bit of shelling, of course, but that's not the trouble you think it is. No; it's machine-guns on fixed lines. They're unhealthy."

The Australian and his section had cleared a wide path through the minefield, and the casual way they moved about and the lack of respect they showed for mines and booby-traps alike were a little worrying to the observer. As they worked some enemy 75's began shelling, and some of the bursts were only ten or twenty yards away.

It is not surprising that no men more fully gained or more amply deserved the admiration of their comrades than the sappers and military police whose job it was to clear and mark the mines.

As darkness fell on 23rd October, the Eighth Army stood to for a battle which their General had warned them would be decisive. Up to 9.40 p.m. there was only the normal desultory shelling. A brilliant moon had risen, but its light proved of little use to the troops because the dust and smoke of the barrage reduced visibility to a few yards. This had been foreseen, and Brigade boundaries in the action were marked by Bofors guns firing tracer ammunition along the dividing lines.

At 9.40 precisely the guns opened up. For 15 minutes they concentrated their fire on the enemy's artillery, whose positions had been carefully pin-pointed for weeks, and at least 20 guns fired upon every one of the enemy's. Then the gunners switched to the support of the advancing infantry. The barrage was most intense in the northern sector, where there was one gun to every





23rd OCTOBER, 1942, 2140 HOURS. THE INFANTRY WAIT TO ADVANCE THROUGH THE DUST AND SMOKE

23 yards of front, but it was heavy everywhere. There can be no doubt of its effect. As they passed over the ground next day, the troops saw how well the guns had done their work. "Whole gun crews," writes one man, "were lying dead round their guns. Even in the slit trenches and dug-outs many had been killed. We found one signal officer dead with the telephone still at his ear, and a man, who had been about to light a cigarette, dead with a cigarette in one hand and a box of matches in the other." Twenty minutes later the infantry started.

In the extreme south, two battalions of the Foreign Legion and a flying column of Spahis under the command of Colonel Amilakvari staged an attack south of Himeimat. They penetrated two and a half miles beyond the hill and next morning repelled two counter-attacks. Having done their job of immobilising considerable enemy forces, and being again attacked by tanks, they then withdrew.

North of Himeimat the 44th and 50th Divisions penetrated the first belt of mine-fields in four places and the Greys, followed





THE GREAT BARRAGE THUNDERS AT ALAMEIN. BY MORNING THEY WERE FOUR MILES FORWARD.

by the 5th Royal Tank Regiment, passed through. They got into some trouble in the second minefield, and it was decided to postpone further attempts at penetration until some annoying anti-tank and machine-gun posts still holding out behind them had been cleaned up. Meanwhile on the Ruweisat ridge the 4th Indian Division took and held a point near the west end of the ridge. A naval operation off Ras el Kenayis made the German 90th Light Division think a landing behind their lines was being attempted, and kept them off the main battlefield for some vital

hours. All these were essentially holding attacks.

The main blow was delivered in the northern sector, where, as already stated, patrols had cleared two gaps in the outer minefields. Three Infantry Divisions (the 51st, 1st South African, and 2nd New Zealand) poured through the southern gap with two Armoured Brigades in close support, and the 10th Armoured Division following on behind. The 1st Armoured Division went through the gap made in the outer minefields behind the 51st Division and the 9th



## THE EIGHTH ARMY

Australian Division ; then, clearing a gap for themselves, they went ahead.

By 10 a.m. these forces had driven a wedge into the enemy's position four miles beyond his outer minefield. It was a narrow wedge, about six miles at its broadest point and narrowing to an apex of little over half a mile, and the enemy seemed at one time inclined to counter-attack with his armour. But he had been taken by surprise—some prisoners were taken still wearing pyjamas—and finally decided to hold his hand for a little longer. However that may be, he left the 164th and 90th German Divisions, the Italian Trento Division and the 15th Armoured Division to deal with the northern attack as best they could in the opening stages. Not until 25th October did he begin to move the 21st Armoured and the Ariete Divisions to the north. The attacks in the south had fulfilled

their purpose of containing the enemy's armour during a period when it would have been much more usefully employed elsewhere.

Many very gallant deeds were done during the early stages of this attack, and it is worth while pausing in this narrative to recount a few of them.

The first is from an observer with the Australians.

"Two diggers came up behind me. I could see more of our infantry away to the left and right. A fair number of German shells were falling around us, and I kept low. A Spandau (German machine-gun) opened up directly in front of us. It was sending lines of tracer at us. The bullets were screaming round. One of the diggers said, very quietly, 'Come on, Jim. We had better go in. We'll get that bastard.'

"'God!' I thought. 'Fancy going into

**CLOSE-UP OF A GREAT BATTLE.** Along the 40-mile line from Qattara to the sea, the Battle of Egypt is being fought. The first enemy strongholds have been overrun. From one of them these Australians are bringing in a wounded prisoner.





that!' But they went in quite steadily, as if they were using the lines of tracer as guiding tapes. They disappeared in the direction of the Spandau. I don't know what happened to them."

The second is a glimpse which another observer had of a South African corporal.

"I never saw such cold courage. The platoon commander was knocked out right away by the heaviest sort of mortar fire the enemy could bring down. The corporal at once took charge and led the platoon on to the final assault. The last fifty yards were over absolutely open ground strewn with booby-traps and mines. Men were going up and being flung into the air like rag dolls. That corporal rushed straight on. I saw him hit twice, but he didn't falter. The platoon took the position."

The third is the story of two men of the Royal Corps of Signals.

"They came slowly, their eyes cast down, over a piece of ground like a stage setting of a lunar landscape with a backcloth of shell bursts. Now and then they would stop, stoop, fiddle with something on the ground, rise and plod on again. When they came abreast, I called over to find out who and what they were. They said, 'We're Linesmen, Sir.' Their eyes were red-rimmed, dust was thick on them, caked on their faces, and leaving their lips unnaturally red and their teeth staring white. We shared a tin of bully. I never ate with better men."

During the day of 24th October a rather tentative counter-attack against the left of the Australians was broken up before reaching their positions. South of the Australians, the Seaforths of the 51st Division did a lot of successful mopping up, and the rest of the 51st reached and occupied all its final objectives. At night, the Xth Corps started to push its armour through the minefields still stretching in front of the infantry. It encountered much bombing and suffered losses from long-range fire by heavy artillery, but soon after dawn on the 25th, one Armoured Brigade, the 8th, got through and established

touch with the 1st Armoured Division. The 7th Motorised Brigade followed and linked this armour with the 51st Division; later, the lorried infantry attached to the 10th Armoured Division took over the Miteirya position, thus freeing the 8th and 9th Armoured Brigades and the 5th New Zealand Brigade for possible exploitation. In the afternoon there was a good deal of small-scale and inconclusive tank scrapping on this northern sector. Kidney Ridge strong-point could not be taken, but neither could the enemy make any impression on the gains that had been made.

Meanwhile, in the south where, as already described, there had been a hold-up after an initial advance, the mopping up of strong-points in the outer minefields was completed and two passages cleared by hand through the next belt of mines. Two battalions of the Queen's went through and established a bridgehead, but the 22nd Armoured Brigade in an attempt to exploit this advance came under very heavy gunfire from Himeimat and from German tanks. They were ordered to draw off and come north and returned, bringing with them many prisoners.

Up to 6 p.m. on 25th October the Eighth Army had taken over 1,400 prisoners, nearly half of whom were German. The 25th had been, on the whole, rather a sticky day, but the enemy had been hit harder than was known. The reason why his counter-attacks had not been more violent was that he had always attacked with only a fraction of his total armour, and that every time he had concentrated for an attack, the R.A.F. had been over him delivering heavy loads of bombs. Any attacks which did develop had suffered badly from the artillery and from the guns of the tanks. It has been discovered since that Rommel did not like the look of things at all and wanted to retire to positions west of El Daba. There is no doubt that this would have paid him handsomely, but Hitler came to the rescue by ordering him to stand and fight where he was. This order was ultimately fatal. His troops, exposed to ever fiercer



artillery fire, became shaken. In tank engagements the Sherman "shone like a beacon," to use the phrase of one who saw it work. Victory was therefore certain, provided the enemy stayed to be beaten; and thanks to Hitler he stayed.

On the night of 25th-26th October, the 26th Australian Brigade attacked northwards from the salient with great dash and by dawn had secured a line running west-north-west from Tel el Eisa for a distance of three miles. They were much helped by a German map which had been captured by one of their patrols. Simultaneously the 51st Division widened the salient to the south by taking two points from Ramcke's German paratroopers. Farther south the 69th Infantry Brigade carried part of the Deir el Munassib depression. On the following night the obstinate Kidney Ridge was carried by the 7th Motorised Brigade, but an attempt by the armour to advance farther met heavy gunfire and was stopped.

On the 27th there were some more attempts by the Eighth Army to advance and two strong but ineffective counter-attacks by the enemy at Tel el Eisa and Kidney Ridge. It was at the latter position that the 2nd Battalion of the Rifle Brigade fought the memorable action in which their Commanding Officer, Lieut.-Colonel V. B. Turner, won the Victoria Cross. The following is the official account of what he and his men did:

"Lieut.-Colonel Turner led his men in a night attack over 4,000 yards of difficult country, and captured his objective, together with 40 prisoners and two 88 mm. guns. He then reorganised the position for all-round defence against the counter-attack. This position was so isolated that replenishment of ammunition was impossible and no support could reach the battalion owing to the heavy concentration and accuracy of the enemy's fire.

"From early morning until late in the evening the battalion was subjected to repeated attacks by nearly 100 German tanks, which advanced in successive waves, all of



which were repulsed with heavy losses to the enemy, 35 tanks being burned out and another 20 immobilised.

"Throughout the action Lieut.-Colonel Turner never ceased to move in turn to each part of the front as it was threatened. Wherever the fire was hottest and the fighting fiercest, he was to be found, bringing up ammunition, encouraging his men and directing the fire of his guns. Finding a six-pounder in action alone of its platoon, the others having been knocked out, he himself acted as loader and destroyed five enemy tanks at point-blank range. While manning his gun he was wounded in the head by a machine-gun bullet; but he refused all aid until the last remaining tanks had been destroyed, when only one shell for his gun was left.





**WOUNDED MEN OF THE HIGHLAND DIVISION** are tended at an advanced dressing station. In heavy fighting their comrades have taken the first objectives.

"His superb bravery and complete disregard for danger resulted in the infliction of a severe defeat on the enemy's armour in one of the finest actions of the war, and set an example of courageous leadership which was an inspiration not only to the whole battalion, which fought magnificently, but also to the entire Eighth Army in the critical opening days of the offensive."

The enemy was apparently so astonished at the result of this action that he could not believe it and in his communiqué made the completely false claim that he had recovered his entire original defensive line. The lie was given him again next day, when he concentrated all his armour on the south side of the salient, but it was so heavily bombed that no attack developed.

At 10 o'clock that night, the 20th and 26th Australian Brigades attacked again, reaching Bir Menei Abu Afash, but being held up about a mile south of the coastal railway.

It was now becoming clear that a breakthrough and victory would not be secured without a further more general and carefully prepared attack. Though the Eighth Army had taken over 3,000 prisoners, knocked out a large proportion of the enemy's tanks and anti-tank guns, and made some useful advances, on the whole the enemy had been able to seal off penetrations with a screen of artillery; against this it would have been folly to repeat the Gazala mistake and dash the armour. "The strain of this terrific battle is telling on everybody," wrote one observer, "but there can be no let up."







## 12. EL AQQAQIR: TRIUMPH OF THE ARMOUR

From the 27th onwards, the British Command was organising a new and heavy blow which was to prove successful. It had become necessary to force a real breach at all costs. For this purpose a composite force was formed under General Freyberg, the G.O.C. the New Zealand Division. It consisted of the 5th and 6th New Zealand Brigades, the 151st Infantry Brigade (the 6th, 8th and 9th Durham Light Infantry), an Infantry Brigade from the 51st Division, the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, an Armoured Brigade with the 31st New Zealand Anti-tank Battery, the 23rd Armoured Brigade, supported by the 121st Field Regiment, with self-propelled field guns, the 168th L.A.A. Battery, and the 29th Field Park Squadron, three Regiments of New Zealand Field Artillery with a New Zealand Anti-tank and L.A.A. Regiment, four companies of New Zealand Engineers and one of Sappers of the 51st Division. Finally, attached to the British infantry Brigades were two British anti-tank batteries and three machine-gun companies.

This formidable force was to be supported by the greatest artillery concentration yet organised in Africa firing a creeping barrage and instructed in every detail of its task. The attack was to be pushed home at all costs; and if pockets of tough resistance were encountered, the infantry were to by-pass them in order to keep up with the barrage. If by chance the barrage went too fast, the tanks were to keep up with it and the infantry follow as fast as they could. So carefully prepared an attack took time to organise. Originally timed for the night of 31st October, it was postponed until the early morning of 2nd November. While it was being mounted the enemy was to be allowed no respite. The Australians were to keep him busy and themselves attack on

the right flank of the big offensive.

The Australians' job was nobly done. On the night of the 30th, having repulsed two enemy attacks during the day, their 26th Brigade, supported by United Kingdom tanks and by the New Zealand divisional artillery in addition to their own, carried their line forward north of the railway. The 24th Brigade also advanced and the tip of their salient nearly reached the sea. This resulted next day in the cutting off of an enemy group in Thompson's Post, so called after an Australian officer who had made a habit of patrolling the locality. They were not attacked immediately, and a few German tanks infiltrated along the shore to join them. In view of what was about to happen no objection was taken to this manœuvre.

On 1st November there was some evidence that the enemy thought the attack in the north had shot its bolt. He pulled back into the southern sector some German reconnaissance groups which had been moved up to reinforce his troops in the north; and was thus less able to resist the new offensive. The Thompson's Post garrison made three attempts to break out, which were foiled, though some individuals got away. As had been expected, the post fell into the hands of the Australians without much further trouble after the main attack had got under way.

Launched just after one o'clock on 2nd November, this attack was highly successful. By half-past five the Brigade on the left reported that they were reorganising on their final objective after an advance of three miles; their casualties were very light, and there was a clear lane right through the enemy's lines. Half an hour later the 151st Brigade reported that they also were through, and the armour advanced to exploit the victory.





**THESE TANKS ARE IN ACTION** against an enemy armoured formation on Miteirya Ridge during the opening phase of the Alamein offensive. Beyond the Shermans on the false horizon the ground continues to rise. The tank gunners are firing over this rise at the enemy tanks sheltering behind the next slope in the desert. The tank commanders, silhouetted against the sky, stand on the turrets to direct the guns.

The brunt of the enemy's first reaction fell on an Armoured Brigade. The 3rd Hussars had heavy casualties from shell-fire but reached the Rahman track. So did the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry. The Warwickshire Yeomanry also got well forward but were too far south to be in touch with the other units of the Brigade. All three were exposed at dawn to fire from dug-in tanks and anti-tank guns at short range. Squadron leaders' tanks were knocked out, wireless control was lost, and the tanks

fought individual actions all day. The 3rd Hussars had twelve tanks left, the Warwicks seven, and the Wilts none at all; but the enemy had lost 71 more tanks and his gun line was destroyed. It was a memorable action.

The enemy was now absolutely forced to counter-attack; but he had been over-nervous about the coastal sector, and had to spend precious time in moving his two Armoured Divisions. This gave the 2nd and 8th Armoured Brigades time to move forward, and when the enemy did attack





The tanks on the left of the picture are moving through their own dust to take up a position to the right of those on the skyline, where another cloud of dust created by bursts from the guns drifts away over the desert. Almost all the vehicles in this picture are Sherman tanks. There are a few armoured cars with them. Most tank battles are impossible to photograph, and this picture is probably unique of its kind.

early in the afternoon of 3rd November, they were ready for him. His onset carried him clear across the bulge, but he could not hold on, and had to go back again. This double running of the gauntlet cost him very dear, the 2nd Armoured Brigade alone destroying 25 of his tanks.

This heavy defeat was rubbed in in great style by the R.A.F. Rommel had asked the Luftwaffe for a special effort, and a large number of Stukas and fighters came over. American and R.A.F. fighters were waiting

for them, and shot down seven Stukas without loss. The rest dropped their bombs on their own people—a particularly demoralising experience. Judging by the prisoners taken on this day demoralisation was certainly growing. Many had not been able to leave their dug-outs for almost 24 hours because of our bombing and shelling and some had had no water for 36 hours.

An attack in the evening by the 50th Division's infantry, supported by the 50th Royal Tank Regiment, widened the bulge





**THE RAIDERS.** South Africans listen to their orders for the dangerous raid through the enemy lines to El Daba on 3rd November.

to the south with very little trouble. At dusk the 7th Motorised Brigade and the King's Royal Rifle Corps got across the Sidi Rahman track, and during the night the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, attacking south-west between the 51st and 1st South African Divisions, made a final break-through more than four miles deep. Through this gap our armour poured, to demolish the rest of the enemy's armour at El Aqqaqir.

On this day the British forces in the south, which had kept most of the Italian infantry

and many Germans pinned down by diversionary operations, found resistance opposite to them slackening. The French occupied Deir el Munassib, patrols from the 44th and 50th Divisions advanced towards the Sidi Rahman track and reported the forward areas all clear. The 4th-6th South African Armoured Cars went through the gap in the inner minefields and made towards El Daba to effect a junction with the Royals, who were engaged on the most spectacular raid of the campaign. The following account



of it, by an officer who took part, illustrates so brilliantly some of the extraordinary features of a desert battle that, at the risk of breaking the thread of this narrative, it must be interpolated.

"Let me say," the officer began, "that we attribute the luck which attended our initial break-through to the splendid work of the infantry and the artillery, which paved the way.

"We left our location and passed through the minefields in single file. No shot was fired at us. The only impediment to our progress occurred when the first car ran into an 88 mm. gun pit filled with dead Germans. One or two more cars, including three petrol replenishment lorries, got stuck in slit trenches, but most of them pulled out when dawn broke and fought their way up to us.

"The enemy was too astounded to do anything as we came through, or else the Italian section thought we were Germans and the German section thought we were Italians. They waved Swastika flags at us with vigour and we replied with 'Achtung!' and anything else we could think of which, with an answering wave, would get us through their lines.

"As it grew lighter they stared and blinked at us. Although a warning artillery barrage had been going on all night, they couldn't believe their eyes. They would goggle at us from short range, see our berets, bolt away a few yards, pause as if they didn't think it was true, and come back to take another look.

"We passed within ten yards of the muzzles of an entire battery of field artillery. Right down the column we went, with Germans standing by their guns and, fortunately, failing to let them off.

"As dawn broke we passed a man in bed. From the mass of vehicles and equipment surrounding him he was obviously an Italian quartermaster. We woke him up by tossing a Verey light into his blankets. He broke the record for the sitting high jump.

"Into one of his lorries we heaved a hand grenade. The results on the lorry were most satisfactory but they scared the second-in-command, who, following in his armoured car, had failed to see us toss the grenade.

"Picking our way through trenches and gun positions, we came upon what was evidently a 'permanent' headquarters. Lorries were dug in, men were asleep everywhere. They were surprised to wake up and see their lorries go up in smoke one by one.

"In the first quarter of an hour the two squadrons destroyed forty lorries simply by putting a bullet through the petrol tanks and setting a match to the leak. The crews of lorries which had got bogged in the break-through transferred themselves to German vehicles holding petrol. Spare men climbed aboard Italian vehicles mounted with Breda guns and on we pushed.

"Germans panicked from their lorries into slit trenches. We had no time to take prisoners. We just took their weapons, and told them to commence walking east. Few refused. The majority were most anxious to oblige us in every way, and readily assisted in draining vehicles we thought fit to immobilise.

"The Italians asked for far greater consideration. They wanted to come with us, clinging to the sides of our armoured cars as they fought each other to come aboard. To stop these poignant scenes a troop leader asked for one of their officers. Half a dozen men stepped forward.

"We explained we couldn't take them all and, skimming off the cream, pushed on with a colonel and two majors clinging for dear life round the muzzles of our two-pounders.

"The columns of smoke climbing up from the lorries we burned attracted the attention of tanks and aircraft. We managed to dodge the tanks but the aircraft pestered us throughout the next four days.

"One German pilot adopted a novel



form of bombing. He had probably grown tired of aiming at the small target offered by an armoured car and, attaching a bomb to a piece of rope suspended from his Me.109, flew over us, hoping to bump the bomb into our turrets. After twenty-four unsuccessful attempts the bomb hit the ground and exploded, causing irreparable damage to his piece of rope.

"The armour of our cars was excellent and the only casualties inflicted from the air were on the German lorries we shanghaied to come along with us. We had one personal casualty—one of the Italian majors swinging round a turret was shot off by one of his own planes.

"Then the two squadrons parted, one continuing due west, the other going south-west. In the south we cut the Axis telephone lines connecting the left and right flanks of their Alamein line, and added a little more to the general confusion.

"For the remainder of the first day we sat astride their lines of supply, holding up and destroying lorries as they arrived to supply front line troops. This highway robbery continued for another three days without variation, except that instead of burning vehicles and attracting the attention of aircraft we merely rendered them useless.

"Ever since we raided the headquarters we had had reprisals sent out after us. Slow flying reconnaissance Storchs came after us. We shot one down. We also came across some aircraft, a marvellous target for our bombers, and sent back the information that they were waiting on the airfield to be destroyed. In an astonishingly short space of time our bombers were over—and so were their aircraft.

"There was an amusing incident when we came across a South African pilot who had been ground strafing. He was shot down practically under the wheels of one of our armoured cars. Expecting to be manhandled so far behind the enemy lines, he couldn't believe his eyes when he realised we were British.

"And so we stayed fifteen miles behind Rommel's lines. The only real battle we had was on November 5th, when our breakthrough took place. We heard later that when told the British tanks had broken through, Rommel's reply had been, 'Oh, yes. I know about that'—in reference to our armoured cars. At the time our tanks really had broken through.

"On the 5th, having waylaid a number of vehicles containing retreating German troops, we met up with several 50 mm. anti-tank guns. Things looked black for us when we met the Fighting French coming west.

"Fortunately for us mutual recognition came quickly and together we compelled the enemy to leave behind anti-tank guns and some field guns which he had on tow.

"With this our job was over. There was no need to return. The Eighth Army had come out to meet us."

The results of this extraordinary raid were:

*For:* Two hundred vehicles destroyed. At least thirty guns captured or destroyed, counting nothing of smaller bore than 30 mm. Prisoners nil—eastward-walking Germans and Italians, with astonished expressions still on their faces when picked up by other units, were far too many to be counted.

*Against:* Seven armoured cars and three lorries. Three men killed, twelve wounded.

It is time to return to the narrative of the battle. The Royals were not the only unit to have this kind of gay adventure. On similar but shorter raids there moved out on this day the South African Armoured Cars, as already mentioned, and the 11th Hussars. Meanwhile, just south of the main battle the 8th Armoured Brigade, in spite of meeting some shelling, reached the Sidi Rahman track by 11 a.m. on 2nd November. In the main battle area itself, the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry found that the enemy were moving back from the north of the salient. As they passed over no-man's-land they found a thick litter of destroyed tanks, jettisoned equipment



and German dead. The tank battle had gone definitely in the Eighth Army's favour. Though losses had been heavy in the armoured units, they constituted only a small proportion of the armour and there was plenty left. Rommel had flung most of his armour into the battle and had lost at least sixty per cent. of it. Moreover, his losses were permanent because without control of the battle area, his recovery service could not operate. By the afternoon of the 3rd, General Montgomery was able to sum up the position in a message issued to the Eighth Army next morning.

"The present battle," he said, "has now lasted twelve days, during which all troops

have fought so magnificently that the enemy is being worn down.

"He has just reached breaking point, and he is trying to get his army away. The R.A.F. is taking heavy toll of his columns moving west on the main coast road. . . .

"I call on all troops to keep up the pressure and not relax for one moment. We have the chance of putting the whole Panzer Army in the bag, and we will do so.

"I congratulate all troops on what has been achieved. Complete victory is almost in sight.

"On your behalf, I have sent a separate message to the R.A.F. thanking them for their quite magnificent support."

**STRIKING FIFTEEN MILES DEEP** through the crumbling enemy defences, armoured cars cut his rear communications, destroyed his supplies, and smashed his transport.





### 13. THE FLIGHT OUT OF EGYPT

The night of the 3rd-4th November is therefore the dividing line between the battle and the pursuit. By this time the Xth Corps alone had knocked out 253 tanks and 222 guns. On the 4th the only question was how much the enemy could get away. The answer in the south was nothing. The day before the Italian Divisions there had received orders to retreat. They waited all night for transport, but none arrived; and next morning they received the order to resist to the last. A few pockets tried to obey, but on the whole the enemy was far too short of supplies and water, and all day the 44th Division, with Greek and French Brigades, were mopping up Italians by the thousand. Rommel's denial of transport to these poor men for the benefit of his Germans profited him very little.

During the night of the 3rd-4th, the Australians wiped out Thompson's Post, and at dawn the effort to break and outflank Rommel's screen of guns, tanks, and elements of his 90th Light Division began. The 1st Armoured Division moved in behind the Sidi Rahman track. The Royals and the South African Armoured Cars were south of Gazala. The 10th Armoured Division, supported by the 7th farther south, was advancing on Fuka. As the enemy retreated along the coast road, they were outflanked by tanks and artillery waiting in a hollow south of the road and railway. The men of the 8th Armoured Brigade held their fire until the enemy came within point-blank range, and then opened up with devastating effect. Fifty-four German tanks were destroyed, together with enormous numbers of lorries, and 1,000 prisoners were taken. The Brigade suffered no losses at all. It was a kind of land Matapan.

An immediate consequence of this battle

was the capture of General Ritta von Thoma, commander of the Afrika Korps. The General had undertaken a personal reconnaissance in a Mark III tank towards El Aqqaqir in order to convince an incredulous Rommel that a British force was outflanking him. Arriving at the tail end of the battle, he met a scout car commanded by Captain Grant Singer of the 10th Hussars. The German tank put a shot right through the back of the driver's seat, and, his attention having thus been called to its presence, Captain Grant Singer directed the fire of a supporting British tank—appropriately enough it was a General Grant—against it. The German tank was disabled, and the crew baled out. The scout-car at once advanced towards it and was met by a tall, dusty figure emerging from a slit trench. In Singer's own words, "I thought I might as well collar him. He shouted out that he was a General, and then I noticed rather a lot of gold about him, so I had him come aboard." Unhappily, this gallant officer, who had been General Norrie's A.D.C., was killed while on a further reconnaissance.

Von Thoma had commanded the German tank forces in Spain during the Civil War in the days of non-intervention. He had fought at Louvain in May 1940, and, as General Montgomery said after interviewing him, had captured at Dunkirk some intelligence papers giving most accurate details about himself. He told General Montgomery that the Germans had a similar personal sketch of the character of the Eighth Army's Commander, in which the conclusion was reached that some new tactics could be expected from so "hard" a soldier. General Montgomery asked, "Well, did you get them?" "Yes," von Thoma replied, "and they were too much for us."





**THE ENEMY BREAKS.** Burning tanks, the foremost with its track laced around it, mark the site of a rearguard action fought as the Afrika Korps made for the frontier. As Eighth Army transport streams west along the road towards Halfaya Pass, long lines of prisoners march by to the east.





As the day wore on, the pursuit became faster. Enemy columns were heavily bombed all through the night, and by early on the morning of the 5th, the 1st Armoured Division had reached the railway west of El Daba. The 9th Australian Division, in hot pursuit along the coast road, reached Bir Qatiabi, and the 51st Division El Daba landing grounds. Here the R.A.F. gave the first instance of the phenomenal rapidity with which they advanced their bases and which made it so difficult for the enemy to rally. These landing grounds were in operation within a few hours.

Meanwhile, General Freyberg's force, having reorganised itself for mobile operations and received the addition of the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, started to move forward on 4th November. Its job was interception in a series of left-handed scoops. The first objective was the escarpment south of Fuka, and on the way it surprised and destroyed eight German tanks, besides taking prisoner the G.O.C. Trento Division. The South African Armoured Cars and the Royals were already raiding farther west as far as the escarpment south of Mersa Matruh, and the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions were thundering along due west across the desert south of the New Zealanders.

There were both grim and gay touches during this first stage of the pursuit. Here the tanks had charged anti-tank guns flat out. There—notably on the slopes of El Aqqaqir—were cemeteries of Axis tanks. Everywhere the litter was indescribable. At one point huge bundles of maps of the Nile Delta had spilled out of an overturned German lorry. Who was the optimist who had thought of carting them away? Large and small groups of downcast prisoners trudged eastwards. But the main impression made by the enemy's positions was that he had had some reason to think them impregnable. Apart from the mines, there were 88 mm. anti-tank guns in great numbers dug in, with their muzzles no more than clearing the ground, and masses of strongly fortified machine-gun posts,

surrounded by wire, booby-traps, and more mines. These were only the static defences. In addition, the enemy had his four armoured divisions, the 90th Light Division, and a great assortment of oddments which could be rapidly moved to any part of the front.

By 5th November, it was clear that Rommel had no other thought than to get away the remains of his armour, his two German Infantry Divisions, and part of the 101st and 102nd Italian Motorised Divisions. The whole of the Italian infantry in the south was left without transport or water, and was being mopped up by the 44th and 50th Divisions, while the 10th Armoured Division lay across the path of any possible retreat. In the north, the enemy tried to make a stand on the Fuka escarpment. It was quite a serious business, and the 7th and 1st Armoured Divisions turned north to help in dealing with it. They broke the enemy rearguard early on the 6th, then resumed their flanking movement, and by the evening had reached the escarpment south of Matruh, with the 11th Hussars and the South African Armoured Cars still farther west. The 3rd Battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment were the first troops to enter Matruh itself.

At this moment, when, if the fine weather had continued, the enemy's army might well have been totally destroyed, heavy rain started to fall. It was an outrageous piece of luck. Men, straining to get themselves and their vehicles out of a quagmire, looked up at the pelting skies and remembered how often they had prayed for rain to drive off the flies, screen the sun, and moderate the throbbing heat. It was an unseasonable answer to their prayers. By 7th November, the New Zealanders had to report that they were bogged, and the flanking movements of the armour were similarly stopped. Movement was practically restricted to the coast road, and even the R.A.F. could not see to bomb.

Along the road the traffic was not only one way. Some was going east. It was composed of Germans and Italians driving their own transport into captivity. Later,



the same sight in Tunisia aroused great comment as a proof of the complete breakdown in enemy morale; but as the reader now knows, it had occurred seven months before at Alamein. The fact that the Germans collapse readily enough when they are in a tight place is no new discovery. It had been obscured by the overwhelming superiority in numbers and equipment possessed by the German Army and Air Force in its Western European and Balkan campaigns. Alamein revealed it; and revealed also that the superiority of German leadership is quite as great a myth as the superiority of German fighting qualities.

By the time the weather cleared on 8th November, the enemy had made good use of his respite. An officer, who had managed to struggle forward in a car as far as the old Matruh perimeter defences the evening before, found another small rear-guard there, but when the 4th Light Armoured Brigade got up about 4 p.m. next day they found Matruh evacuated and the Navy floating petrol barrels ashore in a nearby cove. A few British were found wounded in the hospital and some numbers of a Cape Pioneer Battalion in the prisoners' cage. The enemy had treated the wounded well; but the coloured labourers had been forced to work like slaves at the docks and had been left without shelter from air or sea attack.

Pressing on, the 4th Light Armoured Brigade broke another rearguard at Sidi Barrani, and by the 9th, New Zealanders were approaching Halfaya, the 11th Hussars Capuzzo, and the 22nd Armoured Maddalena—all as part of another attempt at a left-hand scoop. The R.A.F. had a wonderful target in massed transport between Sollum and Halfaya, where an ammunition lorry had blown up and blocked the road with a huge crater. By the evening of 10th November the 4th Light Armoured Brigade and General Freyberg's men were in position to attack the pass itself. After dark 110 men of the

21st New Zealand Battalion walked up the pass without artillery or mortar support and caught the enemy completely by surprise. At the cost of two casualties they took 612 prisoners; some were Germans, but they were mostly Italians of the Pistoia Division, which had moved out of Tobruk and had been left stranded when Rommel repeated his practice of commandeering his Allies' transport. In a brilliant attack at dawn, the 4th Light Armoured Brigade completely cleared the pass, taking 800 more prisoners and 40 guns.

Though there were still parties of the enemy wandering about in the desert to the south, 11th November may be said to be the date of the final clearance of the Axis out of Egypt. It may well be that the anniversary of complete victory in the first world war will prove to have been the date of the beginning of complete victory in the second. The Eighth Army themselves were, however, not over-conscious that they were making history on this particular day. In the diary of one of its officers the main entry is: "11th November. A rotten night. Cold and bitten to death by mosquitoes." He was, nevertheless, moved by the spectacle of our armour rushing on in pursuit.

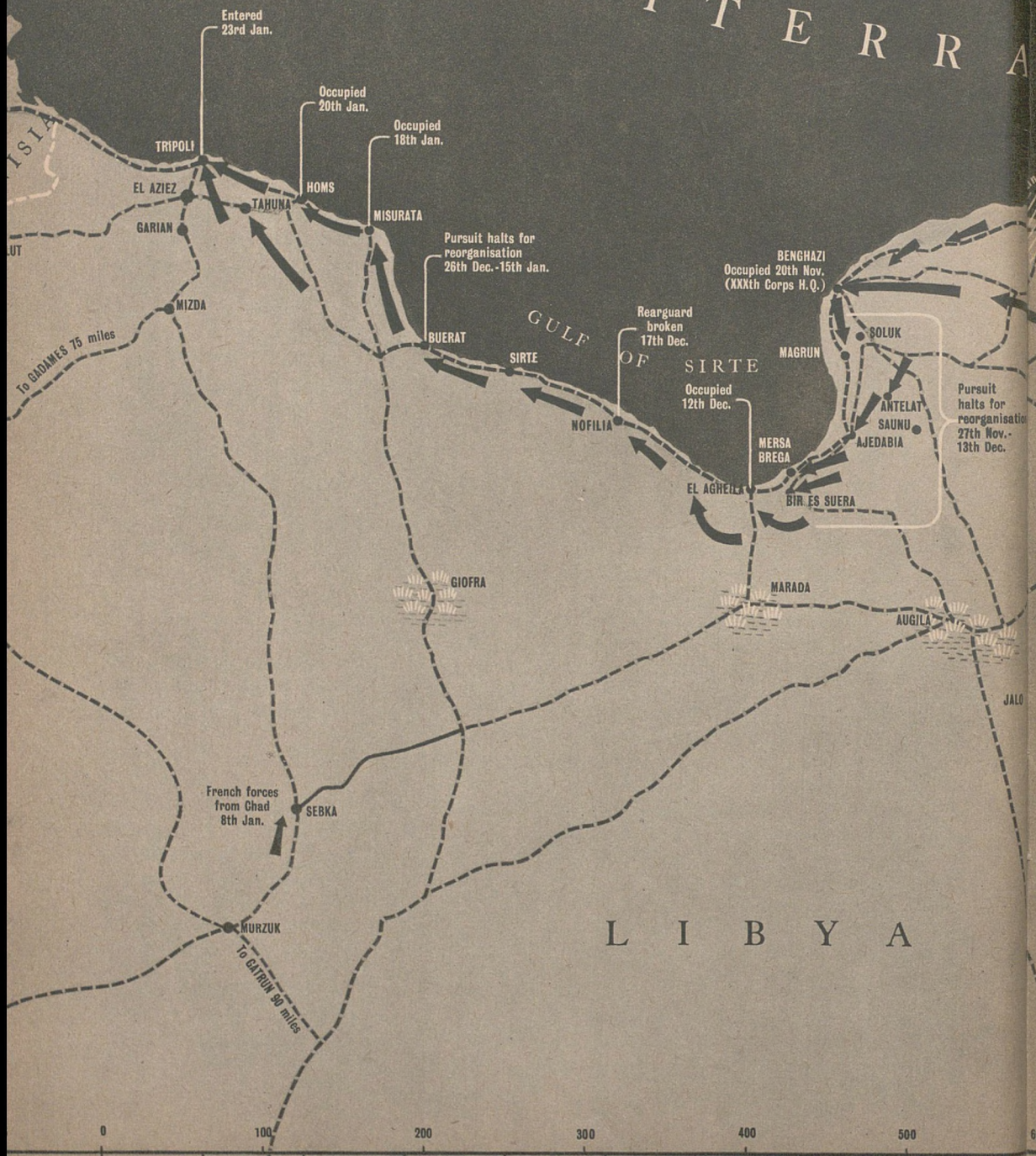
"Each tank tore for itself a bow wave and a wake of streaming dust that the sun caught and tipped with an airy brush of crimson. They spread out towards the sea and in towards the desert—a racing, roaring army of steel straining their petrol guts in rocking, thunderous motion."

Not a bad coda to the story of the Battle of Egypt.

As the Army Commander said in a special message next day, there were no German or Italian soldiers left on Egyptian territory, except prisoners, and the Eighth Army had advanced 300 miles in three weeks, destroying in the process "as effective fighting formations" four German and eight Italian divisions.

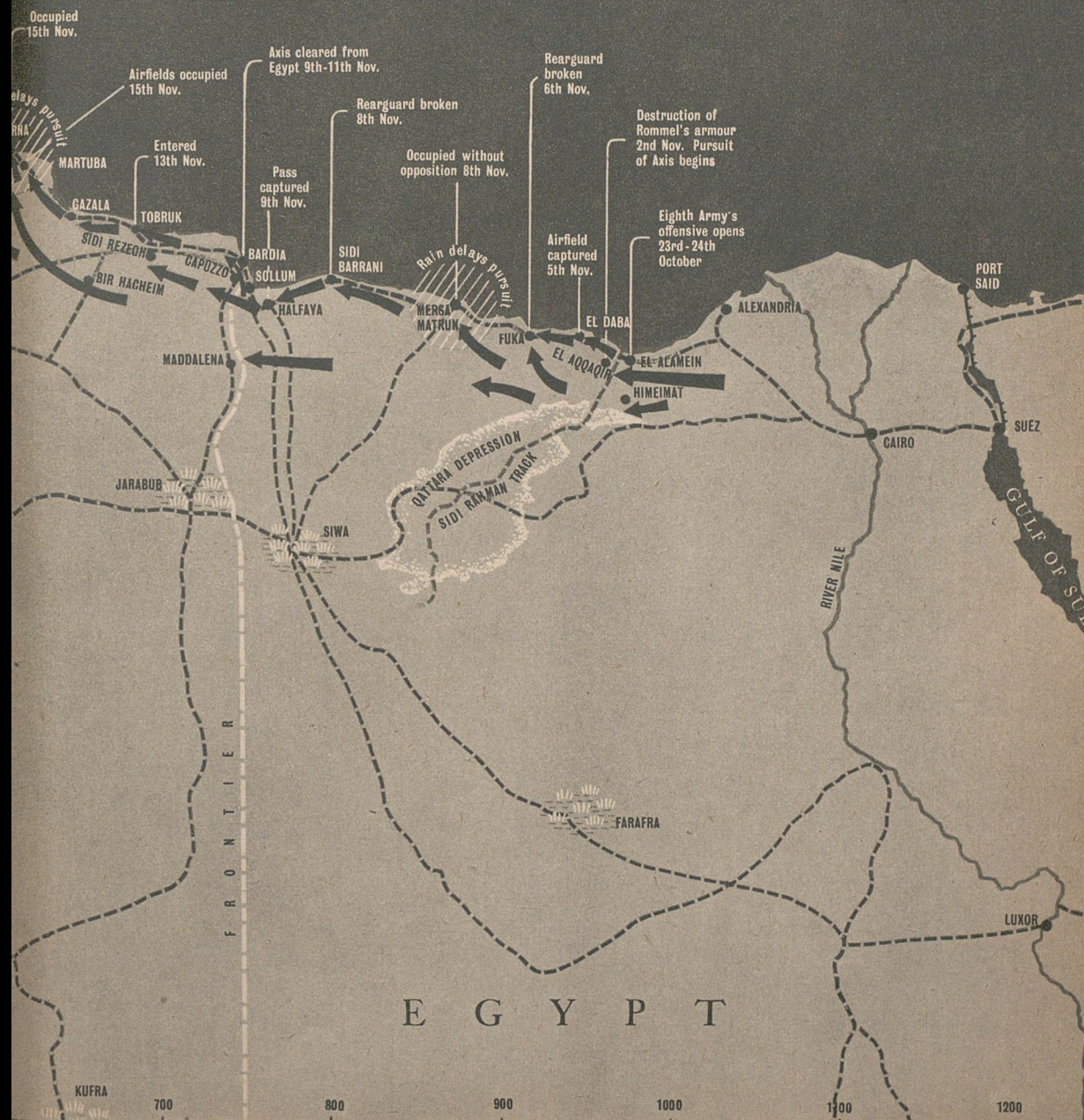


## MEDITERRA





# NEAN SEA





## 14. "THIS TIME WE SHALL NOT COME BACK"

"This time," said General Montgomery, "having reached Benghazi and beyond, we shall not come back." The Eighth Army now set itself to make good his words. Already on the 11th its advanced troops were far into Cyrenaica. The 7th Armoured Division with the New Zealanders cleared the area between Sollum and Bardia, where the New Zealanders paused to refit. The ubiquitous 11th Hussars and the South African Cars shot up Sidi Rezegh landing ground while the enemy was trying to evacuate it. The R.A.F. and an American Squadron devastated Gambut airfield, shot down 11 dive-bombers, and made a mess of the enemy columns on the Bardia-Tobruk road. Here is what the Army found when they followed up: "On the sides of the road were huge, deep-riven wheel tracks where panic-stricken drivers had charged off to get out of the way of the deadly storm. They had run into one another. They had toppled over. Cannon shells and bullets had ripped through them. Bombs had torn them to shreds."

The wheel had gone full circle since the roads of France and Greece had witnessed similar scenes. Not only the enemy "soft" transport was affected. Near Buq Buq, 80 tanks of the Italian Littorio Division were found deserted and mostly intact.

Rommel was now going back as fast as he could. His optimism had caused him to bring a lot of stuff up to forward bases, and he was now using all sorts of small craft to evacuate it from Tobruk, Derna and Benghazi. Many of them were sunk; but he did get a lot away, and when the South African Cars entered Tobruk at 9.30 on the morning of 13th November they found only a few Germans to take prisoner.

By that evening none of the enemy was left east of Gazala. The 12th Lancers,

pushing on south of Bir Hacheim, discouraged all loitering in his old positions at Gazala, and by the morning of the 15th the Lancers reached Martuba landing grounds from the west simultaneously with the 4th Armoured Brigade from the east. These landing grounds were of special use to provide air cover for convoys to Malta. The 12th Lancers were ordered to make for Martuba as part of a further scoop. But though the enemy was going faster, he was getting stronger. He had picked up about 50 reserve tanks and received about 50 more ferried across in haste from Italy. The Spezia Division and the Centauro Armoured Division had disembarked at Tripoli and were moving up to the Libyan frontier. If, therefore, he could evade or fight off our scoops he could hope to make a stand in his old lairs at Ajedabia and El Agheila. Helped by more torrential rain on the 15th, and by the mines which he sowed thickly behind him, he did manage to avoid further serious interception. By the 19th his main column had got beyond the dangerous Benghazi bulge where Wavell's men had intercepted the Italians at Beda Fomm, and he withdrew his protective screen to Ajedabia.

The 11th Hussars, who were to make such a habit of being first into former enemy strongholds, occupied Benghazi on the 20th and released a number of British prisoners. But for the next week it was no longer a question of interception but of how fast the Eighth Army could close up. Once again this time miracles were accomplished. By 1st December the railway was open as far as Tobruk. By 19th November two ships got into Bardia. Shipping was using both Tobruk and Derna on the 27th, and by the 24th a ship got into Benghazi, where the water supply was being rapidly





**BENGHAZI AHEAD.** The Army and the Air Force advanced hand in hand. Here a Honey tank, outdistancing its own supply vehicles, draws petrol from an R.A.F. bowser.

restored. The supply of other than material things was not neglected. It may interest the millions who have seen the film *Desert Victory* to know that its making was first discussed over a smoky wood fire at Giovanni Berta on the night of 16th November between a Public Relations Officer and Major David MacDonald, head of the Army Film Unit.

Thanks to the work of the supply services, fairly strong forces were up in positions to contain the enemy by 27th November, when he had completed his retreat to the El Agheila lines. The Royals were patrolling in front

of Bir es Suera; the 22nd Armoured Brigade was east of Mersa Brega; the Greys at Ajedabia; the 7th Armoured Division at Antelat; the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, an Infantry Brigade, and the 11th Hussars south of Magrun. The XXXth Corps H.Q., with the South African Cars and part of the 51st Division, were at Benghazi; the rest of the 51st Division, with the 8th Armoured Brigade, were coming up; and the Xth Corps H.Q. were at Tmimi.

It was pretty clear that Rommel could not hope to stage another successful comeback; on the other hand, the El Agheila





**ON THE TRIPOLI ROAD.** The gun is firing at an enemy strong-point delaying the advance. In the foreground a wounded gunner is tended by one of his comrades.

position was very strong. From Gareet el Hamud on the coast to Ma'aten Giofer, the line ran behind impenetrable marshes with an anti-tank ditch cutting across the coastal road. From Ma'aten Giofer to Sidi Tabet was a continuous line of strong-points, and thence to Marada large minefields and wire. Bir es Suera was covered by mined salt flats up to Mersa Brega, where there was a dug-in position covered by minefields.

A strong position has always an irresistible attraction for a weak commander—the classic instance is Bazaine's obsession about Metz in the 1870 campaign—and if Rommel ever

thought about abandoning El Agheila, Hitler could be counted upon to come to our assistance. This he did. On the last day of November, Rommel received the order to hold El Agheila to the last man. The order was probably a consequence of Hitler's other welcome decision to pour troops into Tunisia. He did not want his bridgehead there to become too constricted. Three weeks later the decision to stand at El Agheila was cancelled. The reason was that Axis shipping losses made concentration of all the forces in Africa essential. During the first fortnight of December submarines and air-



craft destroyed one-third of all shipping sent to Bizerta and four-fifths of that sent to Tripoli. The Libyan armies must, therefore, be brought where they could be supplied by the less ruinous route. *Ordre, contreordre, desordre*, says the French proverb, and so it proved. If Rommel had continued his retreat on 27th November, he could have got his whole force away. Not even General Lindsell by that date could have got his supplies forward; not even the R.A.F. could have got advanced landing grounds into use; and, therefore, not even the Eighth Army could have conducted a serious pursuit. But by 13th December, when the enemy started to retreat again, armour, army and air forces were all up and on their toes.

Already on the night of 11th December patrols of the 51st Division had found no opposition during deep penetration of the enemy's lines; and though a reconnaissance in force next day towards Bir es Suera was counter-attacked, the enemy evacuated the place and also Mersa Brega during the 13th. The Highlanders followed up along the coast road, organised a pursuit force to push through farther south, and occupied Bir es Suera, while the 8th Armoured Brigade with the 11th Hussars moved round the enemy's flank and advanced north towards El Agheila.

Next day the New Zealanders resumed their old job of trying to intercept enemy columns. By the following evening, 15th December, after a wide detour to the south and then due north, the 5th and 6th Brigades reached the Wadi Matratin and planted themselves across the line of retreat. The New Zealanders had thus made a remarkable left-hook over country previously considered impassable, but which they crossed by using bulldozers to bridge a succession of wadis. They had cut off the enemy's rearguard, which included the remains of his 15th Armoured Division and a mass of lorries. The armour with infantry of the 44th and 51st Divisions were pressing as hard on the enemy's heels as his minefields

allowed, and it looked for some hours as though his rearguard would be caught. There was, however, too little time for the New Zealanders to prepare a really effective block. The enemy simply charged through their screen, and most got away, though 500 prisoners, 20 tanks, and 30 guns were left behind.

On the 17th there was another sharp action at Nofilia, where the 5th New Zealand Brigade and the 4th Light Armoured Brigade took more prisoners. The enemy army was like a tyre with a slow puncture. At every stage, a little more air leaked out. Sometimes he stopped and pumped it up a bit. Thus it never became quite flat and never burst, but the journey was distinctly uncomfortable.

After Nofilia the first real check was at Buerat, which Rommel reached on the 26th and where he stayed until 14th January for no very good reason. Since leaving Agheila he had received no reinforcements, the Buerat position could be outflanked to the south, and his goal was certainly Tunisia. The halt did him no good, though it did not cost him much. The reason was that the Eighth Army had once again to organise its supply lines over several hundred more miles of difficult and practically waterless country, and that enemy mines were both numerous and troublesome. For example, over 2,000 had to be lifted from the Marble Arch airfield alone. The enemy was not left quiet in spite of these difficulties. During the second half of December the Long Range Desert Group and the Surrey and Sussex Yeomanry were raiding his communications as far west as Tripoli. The French from the Chad territory were also beginning to take a hand in the campaign. Under General Leclerc, they formed a base in the Fezzam at Gatrún, and had advanced north to Sebka by 8th January, taking over 500 prisoners, 18 tanks, and a number of guns.

It may be convenient to conclude here this summary of a remarkable exploit carried out by a force operating 1,500 miles from its home territory. General Leclerc's men contacted



the British at Garian on 24th January. About the same time they joined up with General Giraud's force of camelry, and together took Gadames on 28th January. It is unnecessary to stress this first junction since June 1940 between Frenchmen who had escaped and Frenchmen who had been liberated from the Axis yoke.

To return to the Buerat position, Rommel had never intended to persist in his purposeless stand, and by 7th January he began to withdraw his Italian infantry north-westwards. All the remains of his German units and of the Italian armour remained in position. By the 15th the Eighth Army had closed up enough to resume its general advance, before which the enemy retired slowly under cover of strong rearguards. He was, however, too weak and too wise to attempt to hold even the strongest natural positions, such as the deep gullies of the Wadi Zemzem and the Wadi Safejin, for any length of time. Essentially he was in full cry for Tunisia, and merely attempting to delay our advance without loss to himself. Misurata was occupied by infantry of the 51st Division on the 18th and Homs on the 20th. On the same day, inland, the 7th Armoured Division reached Tahuna. The enemy's retirement was by no means unmolested, and there was hard fighting in the Um Raml hills, where the Greys, as the fist of another left-hook by the New Zealanders, had quite heavy casualties.

By the 22nd all attempts to delay our occupation of Tripoli came to an end, and at 5 o'clock on the morning of the 23rd the New Zealand Division entered the town from the south simultaneously with the 51st Division from the east. Both were preceded by elements of the 7th Armoured Division. The honour of being the first unit to enter was once again achieved by the 11th Hussars, closely followed by the 3rd Battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment. This unit's record closely rivalled that of the Hussars. It had fought itself to a standstill in the defence of Calais, at Corinth in the Greek campaign, in the Auchinleck offensive

and around Knightsbridge. Jeanne d'Arc said of her standard, "Il avait été à la peine. Il fallait bien qu'il soit à l'honneur". That applies to the whole of the veterans of the dark days.

The fall of the city three months to the day after the attack was opened at El Alamein is a convenient moment at which to close this part of the story of the Eighth Army. It is true that another fortnight elapsed before the last enemy soldier was cleared from the last inch of the Italian African Empire, but the Eighth Army's independent mission really ended with the fall of the only place which had retained some of the glamour and importance possessed by these provinces in classical times. The Army had still much heavy and successful fighting, such as the Battles of Mareth and Wadi Akarit, before it; but from 20th February it fought as part of the 18th Army Group, and its strategy was controlled from Algiers instead of Cairo.

The campaign here described, however, has conferred upon it imperishable laurels. As an Army it gained the same sort of reputation as has been gained by a few regiments, in that every schoolboy knows it by its number. It is difficult to recall any other British Army of which this can be said, with the possible exception of the Fifth Army, which likewise became a household word in 1918, largely because it was then most unjustly slandered and has since been triumphantly vindicated.

Let us try in a few sentences to summarise how this reputation was achieved. Within three and a half months of sustaining a shattering defeat, this small force gained an even more shattering victory. In three months, twelve days of which were spent in body-to-body battle over a few square miles of desert, it advanced 1,400 miles over terrible country, inflicting some 75,000 casualties on the enemy, and destroying not only his armies but also an Empire and many reputations—chief among them Rommel's. The Eighth Army also made history by solving the terrible problem of how to supply a mass



of rapidly advancing and battling men in arid country possessing only one decent road. On the whole, it is accurate to say that during the whole of the period covered by this account the Army was never short of water, food, petrol, ammunition, or even replacement tanks.

It bettered the enemy's best in three major points of military tactics—the first being the use of armour, the second the combined use of land and air forces, and the third the use of artillery. Even at this distance from the campaign no precise details should be given of the use and control of massed batteries; but there was something new in artillery tactics, and it does far less than justice to the British Command to suggest, as was done at the time, that they "reverted to the tactics of 1914-18". What they did was to think out and apply the principles of war to modern weapons by using methods which, whatever their links with the past, were new in this war. As a result, the myth of

the supremacy of German military genius, already attenuated in Russia, was dissipated into thin air. The best tribute to the Eighth Army's exploits, material and moral, is the fact that when Marshal Messe, the Italian C.-in-C., had to surrender in Tunisia, he insisted on surrendering to the Eighth Army and nobody else.

"You are entitled to dwell upon these things," said Mr. Churchill in an address to the troops in Tripoli on 3rd February, "with that satisfaction which men, in all modesty, feel when a great work has been finally done.

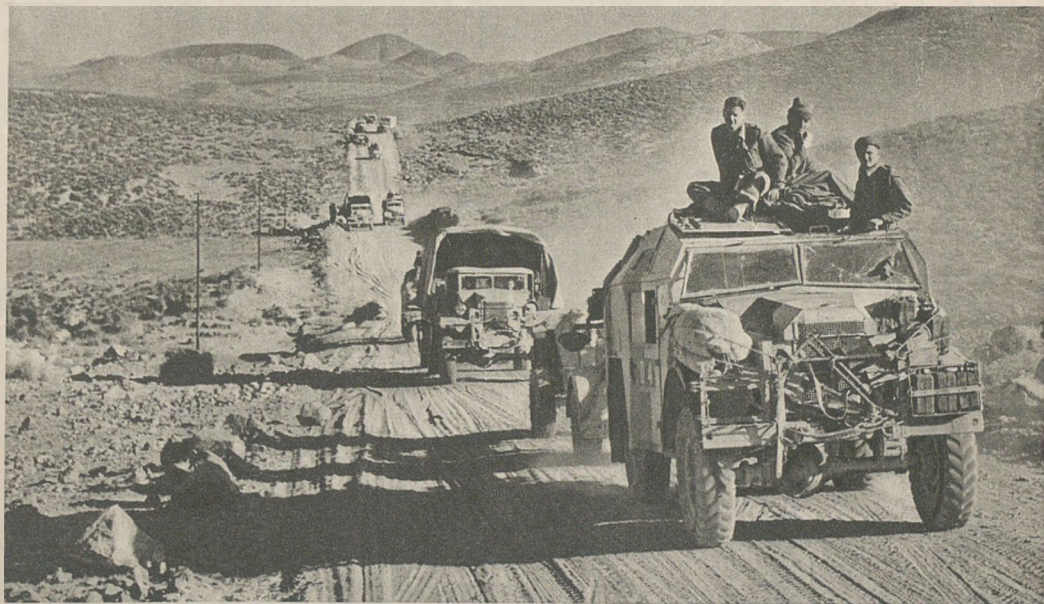
"You have rendered a high service to your country and the common cause.

"In the words of the old hymn, you have 'nightly pitched your moving tents a day's march nearer home.'

"The achievements of the Eighth Army will gleam and glow in the annals of history.

"The days of your victories are by no means at an end."

So be it, and so it has been.







'A DAY'S MARCH NEARER HOME'









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