

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[FRONTISPIECE]



On to Tunis

On to Tunis

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[TITLE PAGE]



Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45
Bardia to Enfidaville

Major-General W. G. STEVENS

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PREFACE

Preface

AFTER the Battle of **El Alamein** late in 1942 and the enemy's flight from Egypt it was inevitable that events in North Africa would move westwards. Thus it was that the 2nd New Zealand Division continued its march with Eighth Army in pursuit of *Panzerarmee Afrika*. It was just as inevitable that Field Marshal Rommel, so directed by **Hitler** and **Mussolini**, would impede his pursuers with the determination and skill for which he was renowned, notwithstanding the fact that Anglo-American forces had successfully landed in North-West Africa. The Division's journey from **Bardia** to **Enfidaville** was long, tiring, and in places hard, but nowhere harder than at the finish when *Panzerarmee Afrika*, joined by numerous additional formations from **Europe** and contained in the mountains about **Tunis**, fought its last stand against Eighteenth Army Group and finally capitulated. This journey and its vicissitudes are the substance of this volume.

During its preparation I lived in England. In most ways this was an added difficulty for it meant a protracted and extensive exchange of letters and of views between **War History Branch** in **Wellington** and myself. I owe a great deal to the forbearance of the Editor-in-Chief, **Brigadier M. C. Fairbrother**, and to **Mr R. L. Kay** and **Mr I. McL. Wards**, who did the research for and who each compiled a section of the excellent narrative on which the volume is based.

My presence in England, however, gave me ready access to the Historical Section of the British Cabinet Office in **London**. Here I was able to study the appropriate British narratives and war diaries. The Enemy Documents Section of that office also gave me invaluable help, providing material from the 'other side of the hill' which was fascinating. I had to resist the temptation to include an excessive amount. I cannot speak too highly of the help thus given me by

Brigadier H. B. Latham, the head of the office, by Brigadier C. J. C. Molony, the army author for the period of this volume, whose help was limited only by the fact that detailed study had not proceeded further than the early stages of the period, and to Mrs N. Taylor of the Enemy Documents Section.

Various gentlemen gave me assistance on general and specific points. In England Lieutenant-Generals Sir Oliver Leese and Sir Brian Horrocks answered letters and gave valuable help in personal interviews. Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand and Brigadier C. B. C. Harvey provided answers to queries and the former gave ready permission to quote from *Operation Victory*. From New Zealand Major-General Sir William Gentry and Brigadiers R. C. Queree and S. H. Crump gave their views on special points, and Captain Lawrence Wright of the **NZMC wrote an account of air evacuation at Tebaga.**

Much is due to **Mr W. A. Glue who prepared this volume for printing, to Mrs M. M. Fogarty who compiled the index, and to the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department who produced the maps and sketches.**

To all these, and to many others who in various ways have given assistance, I owe my grateful thanks.

The work on this volume has been a real stimulant to me. I am glad to have played some small part in keeping alive the memories of those years when the 2nd New Zealand Division brought lasting honour to its homeland.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[CHAPTER]



The Mediterranean Theatre

The Mediterranean Theatre

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 1 – THE PAUSE AT BARDIA

CHAPTER 1

The Pause at Bardia

WHEN Mr Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, addressed the men of the 2nd New Zealand Division outside **Tripoli** on 4 February 1943, he alluded to the Battle of **El Alamein** and its sequel. 'By an immortal victory, the Battle of Egypt,' he said, 'the Army of the Axis Powers ... was broken, shattered, shivered, and ever since then, by a march unexampled in all history for the speed and force of the advance, you have driven the remnants of that army before you until now the would-be conqueror of Egypt is endeavouring to pass himself off as the deliverer of **Tunisia**.'

The march 'unexampled in all history' began on 4 November 1942, when General Montgomery's Eighth Army, after a battle which had lasted eleven days, broke through the German-Italian *Panzer Army's* **Alamein** defences and set off in pursuit of those troops, mostly German, whom Field Marshal Rommel had managed to extricate from the battlefield. The New Zealand Division, which had played a distinguished part in the battle, had joined in this pursuit together with 1 and 7 British Armoured Divisions under the command of **10 Corps**.¹

The Division at that time had only two infantry brigades, those numbered 5 and 6. Fourth Infantry Brigade had gone back to **Maadi Camp** some months earlier to recover from the heavy casualties of the fighting in June and July 1942, and then to reorganise completely and train and equip as an armoured brigade; it took no further part in the fighting in North Africa. Thus the Division had to be strengthened by the attachment of formations from the British Army; and when the pursuit began from **Alamein** these were 4 Light Armoured Brigade, consisting of two armoured car regiments and one armoured regiment, and 9 Armoured Brigade, which had had so many casualties in men and tanks at **Alamein** that it had been reduced temporarily to one composite regiment.

¹ See also Walker, *Alam Halfa and Alamein*, New Zealand official war history, in preparation.

The pursuit was exhilarating but unfortunately also frustrating. At a critical stage just short of **Mersa Matruh**, when there might have been an opportunity of encircling the retreating enemy, heavy rain turned the desert into a quagmire. On 7 November this halted the New Zealand Division and other formations travelling across the desert and allowed the enemy to escape by the one road. By the time the advance could be resumed, the enemy had evacuated **Matruh**, which 6 Infantry Brigade occupied on 9 November as a firm base for **10 Corps**. Next day 9 Armoured Brigade dropped out of the pursuit, and the Division carried on towards the Libyan frontier with only 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 5 Infantry Brigade.

Westwards from **Matruh** the escarpment south of and parallel to the road gradually encroaches on the flat coastal plain until the escarpment and coast converge at **Sollum**, near the frontier. This compelled the pursuit forces, after they had passed **Sidi Barrani**, to make increasing use of the road. As a result, the congestion of traffic offered a superb target for the **German Air Force**, but mercifully the **Royal Air Force** was in complete control. The 7th Armoured Division, which had made a wide cast to the south earlier in the pursuit, was already on the high ground south of the escarpment, but it was still necessary to find a way up for the New Zealand Division and other troops.

There were only two routes up the escarpment; the enemy had blocked the one near the coast, the **Sollum Hill** road, by blowing a gap in it, and was holding the other, at **Halfaya Pass**, about five miles to the south-east, with Italian troops in some strength. The Division was given the task of clearing **Halfaya Pass**, and in a brief but brilliant assault before dawn on 11 November 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Harding** ¹) stormed the pass, and with the loss of only one man killed and one wounded, killed some sixty or seventy of the enemy and took 600

prisoners. This was the last of the fighting in Egypt.

The Division, using the newly opened **Halfaya** route, crossed into **Libya**. It was almost exactly a year since it had entered **Libya** for the first time at the beginning of the offensive which had led to **Sidi Rezegh**. In the intervening twelve months the Division had survived the violent ups and downs of the campaign in defence of Egypt and had suffered grievous casualties, but now nobody doubted that a decisive victory had been won; this time there would be no withdrawal.

¹ **Brig R. W. Harding**, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, Nth Auckland; born **Dargaville**, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; Auck Regt 1916–19; CO **21 Bn** May 1942–Jun 1943; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 4 Jun–23 Aug 1943; twice wounded.

The Halt at Bardia

After 21 Battalion's capture of **Halfaya Pass** 4 Light Armoured Brigade continued the pursuit, and in the afternoon of 11 November came under the direct command of **10 Corps**. It was now intended that 7 Armoured Division and 4 Light Armoured Brigade alone should advance into **Cyrenaica**, with considerable assistance from the air force, which was having great success against the *Luftwaffe* and the mass of enemy transport on the road west of **Bardia**.

The New Zealand Division concentrated in the vicinity of **Sidi Azeiz**, in the desert south-west of **Bardia**. At first it appeared that it might be moving on almost immediately towards **Tobruk**, but the same day **10 Corps** cancelled this move, and only Divisional Cavalry (Lieutenant-Colonel **Sutherland** ¹) went farther to the west. This regiment reached the roadhouse at **Gambut** by the evening of the 12th, and from there patrolled some ten miles westwards without finding anything of particular interest to report. Divisional Cavalry remained in that area for a week before rejoining the Division.

The units in the **Sidi Azeiz** area were advised on 13 November that

the Division was likely to remain there until the 15th; they were told that day that there would be no move before the 18th, and finally on the 17th that no move was likely in the near future, which as it happened meant not before the first week in December. Difficulties of administration would prevent the assembling of more troops in the forward area until the port of **Tobruk** was open.

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Although it was completely unknown to the New Zealand Division at the time, its own fate was trembling in the balance on the political level. From the middle of November until the beginning of December, coinciding almost exactly with the time the Division spent near **Bardia**, the **New Zealand Government** was seriously considering requesting its return to New Zealand for redeployment in the **Pacific** and was in continuous communication with the United Kingdom Government on the subject. The decision, taken on 4 December, was to leave the Division to finish the campaign in North Africa. ¹

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by Ruweisat and other disasters of the 'hard summer' of 1942 were passing into history.

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Reorganisation

Reinforcements were brought forward from **Maadi Camp** and absorbed into the Division, but their numbers were few because no reinforcement draft had arrived from New Zealand for over a year as a result of **Japan's** entry into the war. The strength of the Division at this time showed a deficiency of about 3600 in an establishment of 16,000, the corps most affected being the infantry, artillery and engineers. Five battalions (21, 23, 24, 25, and 26) were on the average some 250 below their establishment of 735, while the **Maori Battalion** was fifty short. Nevertheless the Division was probably in a better position than the majority of the British divisions and certainly was much stronger proportionately than any enemy formation. The long-term prospects for reinforcements were bright, however, for the Government was about to despatch a draft about 5500 strong (the **8th Reinforcements**), and this was expected to arrive in Egypt in January 1943.

Advantage was taken of the lull in operations to make various changes in organisation, for which purpose the GOC held a series of conferences with the heads of corps and leading administrative officers of 2 NZEF. ² As can be seen from the order of battle, ³ the Division was an assemblage of units drawn from fourteen different corps: cavalry, artillery, engineers, infantry, machine-gunners, signals, army service corps, medical, dental, provost, postal, pay, ordnance, and electrical and mechanical

² Officer in charge of Administration, Military Secretary, and Director of Medical Services.

engineers. ¹ A history which attempted to cover at all stages the activities of all these corps would become an indigestible mass of words. There must be a high degree of selectivity.

Lord Wavell once said, when referring to military planning, 'Sooner or later the time will come when Private Snodgrass must advance straight to his front.' In other words, the culminating point of all planning, even though begun on the inter-governmental level, is the advance of the infantry. That is the yardstick by which success or failure is measured. Thus it may often appear that what is recorded here is not so much the history of the Division as a whole as that of the infantry, but it must not be forgotten that although the infantry were invariably in the spearhead, behind them was a shaft which gave both weight and direction to the thrust. Much work by many hands in a diversity of units made it possible for the infantry to be where they were.

Apart from the infantry this volume is concerned chiefly with those units which came into close contact with the enemy—the cavalry, armour, machine-gunners, and engineers. The artillery is referred to in sufficient detail to show the effect of its fire; the provost occasionally figure in the battle area, either on traffic control or on marking the axis of advance. The remainder of the Division carried out faithfully their normal duties, which generally cannot be described for any particular operation, but a few words must be said about those upon whom was thrown an extra burden.

The success of the campaign turned primarily on movement and supply, which broadly were the functions of the army service corps, ordnance, and electrical and mechanical engineers. The NZASC at this stage comprised one ammunition company, one petrol company, one supply company, and two reserve mechanical transport companies, each with its own workshops. Each platoon in any of these companies consisted of thirty 3-ton lorries and a few administrative vehicles, and

could carry the marching infantry of one battalion when not being used for its normal duties. But despite their distinctive titles the NZASC companies together were a large pool of vehicles and formed one comprehensive transport organisation of great flexibility. Nevertheless certain weaknesses had been seen during the previous months, so it was decided to add a second ammunition company and to enlarge the petrol company from its

¹ The British Army had split the ordnance corps into two parts: the one retaining the old name was to deal with the provision of equipment, and the other, called the electrical and mechanical engineers, was made responsible for the maintenance of technical machinery and equipment, including all tracked vehicles and all wheeled vehicles except those of the army service corps. This change was now made in 2 NZEF, with the result that the new corps of NZEME appeared, and the care of most vehicles fell to it; but the change was more one of nomenclature than of function, as the workshop units of the new corps had all existed previously in the old undivided ordnance corps.

existing two platoons to five. The second ammunition company did not join the Division until after the end of the campaign in North Africa, but the additional petrol platoons arrived in March 1943, in time to play their part in the last few weeks.

The carrying capacity of the transport of the Division, therefore, was of unfixed limit. The Division carried with it rations, water and petrol for anything up to ten days and 400 miles' travel, and enough ammunition to attack or resist the enemy at the end of a move. Difficulties of supply did not impede any operation. On only one occasion during the campaign, and even then for only one unit in unusual circumstances, was there a miscalculation sufficient to cause delay.

The transport in which the Division set out from **Alamein** already had survived much wear and tear; indeed some of the cars and lorries

were veterans of the 1941 Libyan campaign. Despite the excessive strain imposed on the skill and ingenuity of the workshops staffs in keeping such worn-out or nearly worn-out vehicles in running order, the Division, throughout the many hundreds of miles of desert motoring that lay ahead, maintained a proud record of not abandoning transport on the march.

The contribution of the Divisional Signals should not be ignored, although its work was normally of a routine nature. Almost every activity of the Division involved some form of signal communication, and in effect the corps of signals was the glue that kept the manifold segments of the Division from falling apart.

Two small items of reorganisation may also be mentioned. First, the formation of a mobile field bakery, which joined the Division after about a month and baked fresh bread for the troops. Secondly, the departure of the artillery survey troop from the Division to join **36 Survey Battery at Maadi**, where a more comprehensive artillery survey unit was being formed. Parts of this reorganised **36 Survey Battery** joined the Division from time to time in the months that followed. ¹

In this campaign movements of the Division were carried out almost entirely with 'brigade groups', of which 5 and 6 Infantry Brigades were the nuclei. Under brigade command there normally would be a field artillery regiment, an anti-tank battery, an antiaircraft battery, a field company of engineers, a machine-gun company, and a field ambulance advanced dressing station. (A brigade signals section and a brigade workshops were integral parts of an infantry brigade.) At times, depending on tactical
require-

¹ The Survey Troop of the battery joined the Division on 19 Dec 1942, the Flash Spotting Troop on 14 Jan 1943, Battery Headquarters on 30 January, and the Sound Ranging Troop on 22 March.

ments

, other units or sub-units might be added, such as a squadron of divisional cavalry, extra artillery, extra machine guns, and so on.

It was the custom to affiliate certain units to each brigade, so that the normal constitution was as follows:

5 Infantry Brigade Group

Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade

21 Battalion

23 Battalion

28 (Maori) Battalion

5 Field Regiment

32 Anti-Tank Battery

42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery

7 Field Company

1 Machine-Gun Company

company 5 Field Ambulance

troop-carrying transport of 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company

6 Infantry Brigade Group

Headquarters 6 Infantry Brigade

24 Battalion

25 Battalion

26 Battalion

6 Field Regiment

33 Anti-Tank Battery

43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery

8 Field Company

2 Machine-Gun Company

company 6 Field Ambulance

troop-carrying transport of 6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company

This continued affiliation had obvious advantages. The remaining units of the Division were organised into a Divisional Headquarters Group, a Divisional Reserve Group, and an Administrative Group. The Headquarters Group usually consisted of Headquarters **2 New Zealand Division, the headquarters of the Divisional Artillery, **Divisional Engineers** and Divisional Signals. The Reserve Group included 4 Field Regiment, 5 Field Park Company, 6 Field Company, **36 Survey Battery**, and the headquarters and unattached sub-units of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, and 27 (Machine-Gun) Battalion.**

Sometimes, again depending on the tactical situation, a gun group, consisting of the field artillery units not under brigade command (for example, 4 Field Regiment) and any attached Royal Artillery units, would be formed separately under the CRA.

The Administrative Group consisted of all the units of the Division not otherwise allocated: Headquarters Command NZASC, 1 Ammunition Company, 1 Petrol Company, 1 Supply Company, 4 and 6 RMT Companies less troop-carrying transport, 4 Field Ambulance, 5 and 6 Field Ambulances each less a company, 4 Field Hygiene Section, Mobile

Dental Section, Divisional Workshops, Divisional Ordnance Field Park, Postal Unit, and so on. This group moved under orders issued by the Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General of the Division. Sometimes the group was divided in two, the rear part consisting of those units not likely to be required for some days.

The Divisional Cavalry was usually reconnoitring under the direct command of **Divisional Headquarters and so leading the advance. But if a light armoured brigade was attached, the cavalry acted in concert with the armoured car regiments of that brigade.**

During active operations, and certainly in a pursuit, the GOC generally moved well forward with a small Tactical Headquarters consisting of himself, a 'G' staff officer, an ADC and the Protective Troop of tanks. Normally Tactical Headquarters moved near the headquarters of the reconnoitring force.

None of the above arrangements was invariable; but an organisation of infantry brigade groups and Divisional Reserve Group persisted throughout the campaign.

It was the custom to issue few formal written orders. Conversations, discussions, exchanges of information and conferences went on continually and provided the background necessary for a clear understanding of any impending move or operation. The divisional conferences under the direction of **General Freyberg were an essential part of this procedure; the form they took was no doubt peculiar to the Division, for the General had his own ideas of how to get the best out of his subordinates.**

Before any major operation or move it was necessary to issue a written order stating all the main points; but this was only the culmination of the interchange of ideas during the preceding few days or even weeks. Experience had shown, however, that an operation order for a course of events extending over several days often proved inadequate to cope with the vagaries of fortune, and orders for the later stages had

to be altered; so there was a tendency to issue the formal order for the first phase only and leave remaining phases to be controlled by the usual conference, verbal order or signal.

The pause at Bardia was a welcome one, for pursuit is fatiguing both to the nerves and physically. The Division was able to collect and rest itself before approaching the next hurdle. Nevertheless, for commanders and staff, planning went on without a break.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[SECTION]

WHEN Mr Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, addressed the men of the 2nd New Zealand Division outside Tripoli on 4 February 1943, he alluded to the Battle of El Alamein and its sequel. ‘By an immortal victory, the Battle of Egypt,’ he said, ‘the Army of the Axis Powers ... was broken, shattered, shivered, and ever since then, by a march unexampled in all history for the speed and force of the advance, you have driven the remnants of that army before you until now the would-be conqueror of Egypt is endeavouring to pass himself off as the deliverer of Tunisia.’

The march ‘unexampled in all history’ began on 4 November 1942, when General Montgomery’s Eighth Army, after a battle which had lasted eleven days, broke through the German-Italian *Panzer Army’s* Alamein defences and set off in pursuit of those troops, mostly German, whom Field Marshal Rommel had managed to extricate from the battlefield. The New Zealand Division, which had played a distinguished part in the battle, had joined in this pursuit together with 1 and 7 British Armoured Divisions under the command of 10 Corps.¹

The Division at that time had only two infantry brigades, those numbered 5 and 6. Fourth Infantry Brigade had gone back to Maadi Camp some months earlier to recover from the heavy casualties of the fighting in June and July 1942, and then to reorganise completely and train and equip as an armoured brigade; it took no further part in the fighting in North Africa. Thus the Division had to be strengthened by the attachment of formations from the British Army; and when the pursuit began from Alamein these were 4 Light Armoured Brigade, consisting of two armoured car regiments and one armoured regiment, and 9 Armoured Brigade, which had had so many casualties in men and tanks at Alamein that it had been reduced temporarily to one composite regiment.

¹ See also Walker, *Alam Halfa and Alamein*, New Zealand official war history, in preparation.

The pursuit was exhilarating but unfortunately also frustrating. At a critical stage just short of **Mersa Matruh**, when there might have been an opportunity of encircling the retreating enemy, heavy rain turned the desert into a quagmire. On 7 November this halted the New Zealand Division and other formations travelling across the desert and allowed the enemy to escape by the one road. By the time the advance could be resumed, the enemy had evacuated **Matruh**, which 6 Infantry Brigade occupied on 9 November as a firm base for **10 Corps**. Next day 9 Armoured Brigade dropped out of the pursuit, and the Division carried on towards the Libyan frontier with only 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 5 Infantry Brigade.

Westwards from **Matruh** the escarpment south of and parallel to the road gradually encroaches on the flat coastal plain until the escarpment and coast converge at **Sollum**, near the frontier. This compelled the pursuit forces, after they had passed **Sidi Barrani**, to make increasing use of the road. As a result, the congestion of traffic offered a superb target for the **German Air Force**, but mercifully the **Royal Air Force** was in complete control. The 7th Armoured Division, which had made a wide cast to the south earlier in the pursuit, was already on the high ground south of the escarpment, but it was still necessary to find a way up for the New Zealand Division and other troops.

There were only two routes up the escarpment; the enemy had blocked the one near the coast, the **Sollum Hill** road, by blowing a gap in it, and was holding the other, at **Halfaya Pass**, about five miles to the south-east, with Italian troops in some strength. The Division was given the task of clearing **Halfaya Pass**, and in a brief but brilliant assault before dawn on 11 November 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Harding** ¹) stormed the pass, and with the loss of only one man killed and one wounded, killed some sixty or seventy of the enemy and took 600

prisoners. This was the last of the fighting in Egypt.

The Division, using the newly opened **Halfaya** route, crossed into **Libya**. It was almost exactly a year since it had entered **Libya** for the first time at the beginning of the offensive which had led to **Sidi Rezegh**. In the intervening twelve months the Division had survived the violent ups and downs of the campaign in defence of Egypt and had suffered grievous casualties, but now nobody doubted that a decisive victory had been won; this time there would be no withdrawal.

¹ **Brig R. W. Harding**, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, Nth Auckland; born **Dargaville**, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; Auck Regt 1916–19; CO **21 Bn** May 1942-Jun 1943; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr-14 May 1943, 4 Jun-23 Aug 1943; twice wounded.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE HALT AT BARDIA

The Halt at Bardia

After 21 Battalion's capture of **Halfaya Pass** 4 Light Armoured Brigade continued the pursuit, and in the afternoon of 11 November came under the direct command of **10 Corps**. It was now intended that 7 Armoured Division and 4 Light Armoured Brigade alone should advance into **Cyrenaica**, with considerable assistance from the air force, which was having great success against the *Luftwaffe* and the mass of enemy transport on the road west of **Bardia**.

The New Zealand Division concentrated in the vicinity of **Sidi Azeiz**, in the desert south-west of **Bardia**. At first it appeared that it might be moving on almost immediately towards **Tobruk**, but the same day **10 Corps** cancelled this move, and only Divisional Cavalry (Lieutenant-Colonel **Sutherland** ¹) went farther to the west. This regiment reached the roadhouse at **Gambut** by the evening of the 12th, and from there patrolled some ten miles westwards without finding anything of particular interest to report. Divisional Cavalry remained in that area for a week before rejoining the Division.

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

REORGANISATION

Reorganisation

Reinforcements were brought forward from **Maadi Camp** and absorbed into the Division, but their numbers were few because no reinforcement draft had arrived from New Zealand for over a year as a result of **Japan's** entry into the war. The strength of the Division at this time showed a deficiency of about 3600 in an establishment of 16,000, the corps most affected being the infantry, artillery and engineers. Five battalions (21, 23, 24, 25, and 26) were on the average some 250 below their establishment of 735, while the **Maori Battalion** was fifty short. Nevertheless the Division was probably in a better position than the majority of the British divisions and certainly was much stronger proportionately than any enemy formation. The long-term prospects for reinforcements were bright, however, for the Government was about to despatch a draft about 5500 strong (the **8th Reinforcements**), and this was expected to arrive in Egypt in January 1943.

Advantage was taken of the lull in operations to make various changes in organisation, for which purpose the GOC held a series of conferences with the heads of corps and leading administrative officers of 2 NZEF.² As can be seen from the order of battle,³ the Division was an assemblage of units drawn from fourteen different corps: cavalry, artillery, engineers, infantry, machine-gunners, signals, army service corps, medical, dental, provost, postal, pay, ordnance, and electrical and mechanical

² Officer in charge of Administration, Military Secretary, and Director of Medical Services.

³ See **Appendix II**.

engineers. ¹ A history which attempted to cover at all stages the activities of all these corps would become an indigestible mass of words. There must be a high degree of selectivity.

Lord Wavell once said, when referring to military planning, 'Sooner or later the time will come when Private Snodgrass must advance straight to his front.' In other words, the culminating point of all planning, even though begun on the inter-governmental level, is the advance of the infantry. That is the yardstick by which success or failure is measured. Thus it may often appear that what is recorded here is not so much the history of the Division as a whole as that of the infantry, but it must not be forgotten that although the infantry were invariably in the spearhead, behind them was a shaft which gave both weight and direction to the thrust. Much work by many hands in a diversity of units made it possible for the infantry to be where they were.

Apart from the infantry this volume is concerned chiefly with those units which came into close contact with the enemy—the cavalry, armour, machine-gunners, and engineers. The artillery is referred to in sufficient detail to show the effect of its fire; the provost occasionally figure in the battle area, either on traffic control or on marking the axis of advance. The remainder of the Division carried out faithfully their normal duties, which generally cannot be described for any particular operation, but a few words must be said about those upon whom was thrown an extra burden.

The success of the campaign turned primarily on movement and supply, which broadly were the functions of the army service corps, ordnance, and electrical and mechanical engineers. The NZASC at this stage comprised one ammunition company, one petrol company, one supply company, and two reserve mechanical transport companies, each with its own workshops. Each platoon in any of these companies consisted of thirty 3-ton lorries and a few administrative vehicles, and could carry the marching infantry of one battalion when not being used for its normal duties. But despite their distinctive titles the NZASC

companies together were a large pool of vehicles and formed one comprehensive transport organisation of great flexibility. Nevertheless certain weaknesses had been seen during the previous months, so it was decided to add a second ammunition company and to enlarge the petrol company from its

¹ The British Army had split the ordnance corps into two parts: the one retaining the old name was to deal with the provision of equipment, and the other, called the electrical and mechanical engineers, was made responsible for the maintenance of technical machinery and equipment, including all tracked vehicles and all wheeled vehicles except those of the army service corps. This change was now made in 2 NZEF, with the result that the new corps of NZEME appeared, and the care of most vehicles fell to it; but the change was more one of nomenclature than of function, as the workshop units of the new corps had all existed previously in the old undivided ordnance corps.

existing two platoons to five. The second ammunition company did not join the Division until after the end of the campaign in North Africa, but the additional petrol platoons arrived in March 1943, in time to play their part in the last few weeks.

The carrying capacity of the transport of the Division, therefore, was of unfixed limit. The Division carried with it rations, water and petrol for anything up to ten days and 400 miles' travel, and enough ammunition to attack or resist the enemy at the end of a move. Difficulties of supply did not impede any operation. On only one occasion during the campaign, and even then for only one unit in unusual circumstances, was there a miscalculation sufficient to cause delay.

The transport in which the Division set out from **Alamein** already had survived much wear and tear; indeed some of the cars and lorries were veterans of the 1941 Libyan campaign. Despite the excessive strain imposed on the skill and ingenuity of the workshops staffs in keeping

such worn-out or nearly worn-out vehicles in running order, the Division, throughout the many hundreds of miles of desert motoring that lay ahead, maintained a proud record of not abandoning transport on the march.

The contribution of the Divisional Signals should not be ignored, although its work was normally of a routine nature. Almost every activity of the Division involved some form of signal communication, and in effect the corps of signals was the glue that kept the manifold segments of the Division from falling apart.

Two small items of reorganisation may also be mentioned. First, the formation of a mobile field bakery, which joined the Division after about a month and baked fresh bread for the troops. Secondly, the departure of the artillery survey troop from the Division to join **36 Survey Battery at Maadi**, where a more comprehensive artillery survey unit was being formed. Parts of this reorganised **36 Survey Battery** joined the Division from time to time in the months that followed. ¹

In this campaign movements of the Division were carried out almost entirely with 'brigade groups', of which 5 and 6 Infantry Brigades were the nuclei. Under brigade command there normally would be a field artillery regiment, an anti-tank battery, an anti-aircraft battery, a field company of engineers, a machine-gun company, and a field ambulance advanced dressing station. (A brigade signals section and a brigade workshops were integral parts of an infantry brigade.) At times, depending on tactical requirements-

¹ The Survey Troop of the battery joined the Division on 19 Dec 1942, the Flash Spotting Troop on 14 Jan 1943, Battery Headquarters on 30 January, and the Sound Ranging Troop on 22 March.

, other units or sub-units might be added, such as a squadron of divisional cavalry, extra artillery, extra machine guns, and so on.

It was the custom to affiliate certain units to each brigade, so that the normal constitution was as follows:

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE GROUP

5 Infantry Brigade Group

Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade

21 Battalion

23 Battalion

28 (Maori) Battalion

5 Field Regiment

32 Anti-Tank Battery

42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery

7 Field Company

1 Machine-Gun Company

company 5 Field Ambulance

**troop-carrying transport of 4 Reserve Mechanical Transport
Company**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

6 INFANTRY BRIGADE GROUP

6 Infantry Brigade Group

Headquarters 6 Infantry Brigade

24 Battalion

25 Battalion

26 Battalion

6 Field Regiment

33 Anti-Tank Battery

43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery

8 Field Company

2 Machine-Gun Company

company 6 Field Ambulance

**troop-carrying transport of 6 Reserve Mechanical Transport
Company**

This continued affiliation had obvious advantages. The remaining units of the Division were organised into a Divisional Headquarters Group, a Divisional Reserve Group, and an Administrative Group. The Headquarters Group usually consisted of Headquarters 2 New Zealand Division, the headquarters of the Divisional Artillery, Divisional Engineers and Divisional Signals. The Reserve Group included 4 Field Regiment, 5 Field Park Company, 6 Field Company, 36 Survey Battery, and the headquarters and unattached sub-units of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, and 27 (Machine-Gun) Battalion.

Sometimes, again depending on the tactical situation, a gun group, consisting of the field artillery units not under brigade command (for example, 4 Field Regiment) and any attached Royal Artillery units, would be formed separately under the CRA.

The Administrative Group consisted of all the units of the Division not otherwise allocated: Headquarters Command NZASC, 1 Ammunition Company, 1 Petrol Company, 1 Supply Company, 4 and 6 RMT Companies less troop-carrying transport, 4 Field Ambulance, 5 and 6 Field Ambulances each less a company, 4 Field Hygiene Section, Mobile Dental Section, Divisional Workshops, Divisional Ordnance Field Park, Postal Unit, and so on. This group moved under orders issued by the Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General of the Division. Sometimes the group was divided in two, the rear part consisting of those units not likely to be required for some days.

The Divisional Cavalry was usually reconnoitring under the direct command of **Divisional Headquarters and so leading the advance. But if a light armoured brigade was attached, the cavalry acted in concert with the armoured car regiments of that brigade.**

During active operations, and certainly in a pursuit, the GOC generally moved well forward with a small Tactical Headquarters consisting of himself, a 'G' staff officer, an ADC and the Protective Troop of tanks. Normally Tactical Headquarters moved near the headquarters of the reconnoitring force.

None of the above arrangements was invariable; but an organisation of infantry brigade groups and Divisional Reserve Group persisted throughout the campaign.

It was the custom to issue few formal written orders. Conversations, discussions, exchanges of information and conferences went on continually and provided the background necessary for a clear understanding of any impending move or operation. The divisional

conferences under the direction of **General Freyberg** were an essential part of this procedure; the form they took was no doubt peculiar to the Division, for the General had his own ideas of how to get the best out of his subordinates.

Before any major operation or move it was necessary to issue a written order stating all the main points; but this was only the culmination of the interchange of ideas during the preceding few days or even weeks. Experience had shown, however, that an operation order for a course of events extending over several days often proved inadequate to cope with the vagaries of fortune, and orders for the later stages had to be altered; so there was a tendency to issue the formal order for the first phase only and leave remaining phases to be controlled by the usual conference, verbal order or signal.

The pause at **Bardia** was a welcome one, for pursuit is fatiguing both to the nerves and physically. The Division was able to collect and rest itself before approaching the next hurdle. Nevertheless, for commanders and staff, planning went on without a break.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

AIR POWER

Air Power

THE victory at **El Alamein** had been made possible by the close co-operation between ground and air forces and owed much to the unceasing air attacks on every kind of enemy activity, on sea, on land, or in the air. This invaluable co-operation continued throughout the campaign; but except when direct support for the advancing troops was specifically requested, or when aircraft were visibly attacking the enemy near the foremost troops, the air offensive took place out of sight of the army. Formations of aircraft passing steadily overhead, an occasional dogfight, a column of smoke far behind the enemy lines, or especially at night, the heartening sound of bombs falling on an enemy port—these were all that the land-bound soldier saw or heard of the Air Force, but it was enough to comfort him and to maintain morale.

The decisive air battle had already been won: our air forces had clear superiority throughout. On any day or night they were operating somewhere, attacking enemy transport aircraft or vessels at sea—especially tankers—bombing airfields, dumps and transport concentrations, shooting down enemy fighters and bombers, and making low-level attacks on tank laagers and other targets. The air offensive was unceasing, and forms as it were a perpetual bass accompaniment to the more intermittent fighting on land.

The force directly supporting Eighth Army, known as the **Desert Air Force**, was commanded by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham,¹ a New Zealander serving in the **RAF**. It included **RAF**, **USAAF**, and **South African Air Force** squadrons, flying fighters, fighter-bombers, tank-busters, light and medium bombers, close reconnaissance aircraft, and day and night interceptors.

The **Desert Air Force** was aggressive throughout the campaign.

¹ Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham, KCB, KBE, DSO, MC, DFC, AFC, Legion of Honour (Fr), Distinguished Service Medal (US), Order of Leopold (Bel), Croix de Guerre with Palm (Bel); born **Brisbane**, 19 Jan 1895; **1 NZEF** 1914–16; entered RFC 1916; permanent commission **RAF** 1919; AOC Western Desert, 1941–43; AOC 1st TAF, Nth Africa, **Sicily, Italy**, 1943–44; AOC-in-C, 2nd TAF, invasion of NW Europe and **Germany**, 1944–45; killed when air liner crashed during **Atlantic** crossing, Jan 1948.

To gain the utmost advantage it required to operate from advanced landing grounds as early as possible, especially during a pursuit. The speedy capture of the enemy's airfields, and the clearance of all the obstructions and mines sure to have been left there, were the best ways in which the army could co-operate with the air force. ¹ The provision of advanced landing grounds was a primary objective in almost all the army's operations; and 2 NZ Division was frequently given this task.

¹ Early in 1943, as the result of the need for integration, the Allied air forces in **Algeria** and **Tunisia** and those supporting Eighth Army were grouped together in the Northwest African Air Forces (under the command of Lieutenant-General C. W. Spaatz), which formed part of the Mediterranean Air Command (Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder). General Spaatz's command included the North-west African Strategic Air Force (Major-General J. H. Doolittle), which was responsible for long-range bombing, the North-west African Tactical Air Force (Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham), which gave close co-operation with the ground forces and included the Western **Desert Air Force** in support of Eighth Army, and the North-west African Coastal Air Force (Air Vice-Marshal H P. Lloyd), as well as the North-west African Air Service Command, the North-west African Training Command, and the North-west African Photographic Reconnaissance Wing.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OPERATION TORCH

Operation TORCH

At the Washington Conference in June 1942, attended by President Roosevelt and **Mr Churchill** and their advisers, it was decided that an Anglo-American army would land in French North Africa, and in conjunction with the Eighth Army, would clear the North African coast and open the **Mediterranean** to Allied shipping. The codename chosen for the operation was TORCH. In accordance with this plan Allied forces landed on 8 November (when the pursuit from **Alamein** was at its height) at **Casablanca** on the **Atlantic** coast of **Morocco**, and at **Oran** and **Algiers** on the **Mediterranean** coast of **Algeria**. The United States was still on speaking terms with Vichy France, unlike the **United Kingdom**, and the forces were given an all-American complexion, with an American commander—General Dwight D. Eisenhower. This operation was thus the first venture into true partnership between the forces of the **United States** and those of the British Commonwealth.

The forces landing at **Casablanca**, all American, were brought direct from the **United States**, and so commenced their involvement in the European theatre of operations with an opposed landing at the end of a long ocean voyage; those landing at **Oran**, also all American, came the shorter distance from England. The **Algiers** landing was mainly a British one. The Allied forces as a whole comprised parts of seven divisions—five American and two British.

French resistance to the landings ceased after three days, following orders issued by Admiral Darlan, the Vichy commander of the French armed forces, who was there by chance. **Morocco** and **Algeria** thus became Allied territory *pro tem.*, and the Allied forces were freed to go into action against Axis forces wherever found. A considerable body of French troops, some two or three divisions, now joined the Allies.

The arrangement with Darlan had included **Tunisia** also; but immediately the Allied landings took place the Axis began landing troops in **Tunisia** at a fast rate, helped by the short sea-crossing from **Sicily**. The French Resident-General in **Tunis** was a helpless spectator of this build-up, and could not offer any resistance, so that in a short time there was a considerable German-Italian army in **Tunisia**, under command of a German general, von Arnim.

British forces from **Algiers**, consisting of most of 78 Division and a small part of 6 Armoured Division, began a thrust on **Tunis** on 15 November, and on 28 November were only 12 miles from the city, after an advance of some 450 miles over most difficult country; but the enemy was already strong enough to block the foremost troops and, indeed, to force them back. Great efforts were made by the Allies to reinforce the British spearhead—now constituted as **5 Corps** of First Army—and American combat units, and *ad hoc* supply and transport echelons came forward. The intention was to make another attempt to reach **Tunis** about the middle of December.

At the beginning of December the Allied army in **Tunisia** and Eighth Army in **Libya** were still some 1100 miles apart. The time had not yet come for close co-operation in the tactical field; but it was always in the minds of the Allied Chiefs of Staff that at some point the efforts of the two forces would be centrally controlled.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY RETIREMENT INTO THE AGHEILA POSITION

The Enemy Retirement into the Agheila Position

While 2 NZ Division was resting near **Bardia**, Eighth Army's pursuit of the enemy continued across **Cyrenaica**, employing mainly 7 Armoured Division with 4 Light Armoured Brigade as the spearhead, supported throughout by the **Desert Air Force**. **Tobruk** was entered on 13 November, after an abortive attempt to cut off the garrison by an outflanking attack towards **Acroma**. The garrison got away almost complete, and the enemy continued his withdrawal towards **Benghazi**.

At this point the most urgent task was to obtain possession of the airfields in the **Martuba** area without delay. A convoy, the first for seven months, was to leave **Alexandria** for **Malta** on 16 November, and would have to get through if the defence of the island was to be maintained and the population kept from starvation. To provide air cover for the latter stages of the journey it was essential to have the use of the **Martuba** airfields; and the critical day was 18 November. The landing grounds were in the end brought into use on the 16th, the passage of the **Malta** convoy duly covered and **Malta** in effect relieved.

Meanwhile the enemy continued his withdrawal, making use only of the main coast road through **Gebel Akhdar** and round the Cyrenaican bulge. There was a temptation to repeat the strategy of sending a force direct across the arc of the bulge to cut the enemy off around **Agedabia**. But two previous ventures of this nature, in early 1941 and early 1942, had led to disaster from a swift enemy counter-attack against advanced forces; so this time only light reconnaissance forces went by this route initially, and they were held up by waterlogged ground. It then became known, however, that the enemy's shortage of petrol might well lead to a standstill in his transport. So a second and stronger column was sent across the bulge; but the enemy fought off this threat and retired into the **El Agheila** position. Meanwhile **Benghazi** was occupied on 20

November for the third—and last—time.

Part of the comparative slowness—and the qualifying word ‘comparative’ must be emphasised—of our advance was due to the administrative position. At **Agedabia** the troops were more than 350 miles by road from **Tobruk**, the nearest port functioning, and until **Benghazi** was in working order again it was manifestly unwise to push too great a force in advance of that port.

At one stage two squadrons of Hurricanes operated well inland from a safe airstrip in advance of our forward troops and were maintained entirely by air. Then, in the few days following the enemy retirement to **El Agheila** (24 November onwards), the *Luftwaffe* became unexpectedly aggressive and made a number of attacks on advanced units of 7 Armoured Division. These attacks were all the more noticeable, and the more talked about, because for some time the **RAF** had had almost complete control of the air. But in a day or two the **Desert Air Force** had restored the position and stopped most attacks, or greatly minimised their intensity.

For the moment the enemy's intentions were not clear. The morale of the German troops was apparently still high; but it must have been clear to them that this time they had been hustled back into the **El Agheila** position, whereas on the two previous occasions they had retired there of their own volition with the intention of resuming the offensive—a case of *reculer pour mieux sauter*. But whatever the enemy's intention, Montgomery was determined that the British forces should not be caught again; and not for the first nor the last time he used the word ‘balance’, meaning that formations were to be so placed as to be ready for any eventuality, especially an enemy counter-offensive. Thus, while 7 Armoured Division was pursuing the enemy, 1 Armoured Division and 2 NZ Division, under command of **10 Corps**, were based in the area between **Derna** and **Bardia**, with plans prepared for defence should the enemy launch a major counter-attack. The New Zealand Division's part in this plan was to occupy a position in the **Acroma- Knightsbridge** area.

Towards the end of November, 51 (Highland) Division, which had remained at Alamein, was brought forward to a position behind 7 Armoured Division, so strengthening the first line of defence; and steps were taken to move 50 Division forward from Egypt to take its place. At the same time Headquarters 30 Corps took over responsibility for operations beyond Agedabia, leaving 10 Corps responsible only for the second line of defence.

As the days went on it became clear that the enemy had no thought of counter-attack and that the immediate tactical problem was to eject him from the El Agheila position and then resume the advance to the west. But before discussing this problem and the part played in its solution by 2 NZ Division, it is proposed to say a few words about the opposing commanders, Montgomery and Rommel, and about the enemy.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

MONTGOMERY

Montgomery

There is now available in many publications (including his own *Memoirs*) enough material to cover all the facets of Montgomery's personality, but we are concerned here only with his capacity as a general as known after the victory at **Alamein**. His army was most impressed by his characteristic soundness—which was also, in Lord Wavell's opinion, the chief virtue of **Wellington**. In Montgomery's case it meant that he prepared for his offensives on a rigidly firm foundation of administration, waited for the right moment to attack, and refused to be hurried, even by **Churchill**; he adhered to his basic plan even though there might appear fleeting chances of a more spectacular—but more speculative—victory; he handled his manpower in truly economical fashion, never took risks where failure might lead to disaster, and did not persist with failure; he disposed his forces in depth so that his army could not be overrun if the enemy attacked unexpectedly; he disregarded criticism, especially if it was directed at his apparent slowness; he always planned on the assumption of success (his own words about himself), fought no battle unless he was certain that he could win it (Rommel's words about him), and always planned two battles ahead. Montgomery—and **Wellington**—were both accused of caution, and Rommel considered that Montgomery was excessively cautious, but Rommel touched on the vital point when he went on to say that Montgomery could afford to be cautious because material superiority, and thus time, were definitely on his side.

In an address to the officers of 2 NZ Division on 4 January 1943 Montgomery said: 'In the various battles we have fought out here you may have noticed that we have intervals where we sit still and do nothing, and you may wonder why. The reason is that part of my military teaching is that I am not going to have out here in North Africa

any failures....I definitely refuse to do anything until we are absolutely ready administratively, until we have built up sufficient strength to be certain there will be no failures....'

It was Montgomery's way to issue personal messages to the troops as an aid to morale, and in the early stages of his command something of this nature was sadly needed. They caused comment among the troops, even if this was sometimes cynical and amused. Probably to British troops they held some appeal until the end, even though it may later have diminished, and the same applies to his talks to troops, which were given before any battle. There is evidence to show that Montgomery was aware that his methods of personal approach were regarded differently by New Zealanders and he endeavoured to vary his talks when speaking to them.

In November 1942 the Army knew beyond doubt that they had a commander who could win battles, and on whom they could rely unquestionably.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ROMMEL AND THE ENEMY

Rommel and the Enemy

There had been a period in 1941 and 1942 when Rommel was almost as well regarded by the Eighth Army as by the *Africa Corps*, for the British soldier admires a sterling foe who fights cleanly. By December 1942 Eighth Army probably thought less about him, its emotions being directed more towards the enjoyment of victory and the need for further offensive action. But Rommel remained a respected figure who needed watching, as he was quite capable of retaliating with vigour.

Two points emerge from contemporary German documents. The first is that Rommel operated under the control of higher echelons of command which frequently irked his independent and aggressive spirit. In Germany there was *OKW*,¹ the German Supreme Headquarters, which meant **Hitler**; and in Rome there was the Italian *Comando Supremo*, under **Mussolini**, which in theory was responsible for all operations in North Africa, where the forces, again in theory, were Italian, campaigning with German assistance. Then followed the Italian Command in North Africa, known as 'Super-libia', the senior officer being the Governor of **Libya**, an appointment held in December 1942 by Marshal Bastico.

Running across—or perhaps parallel to—this hierarchy came Field Marshal Kesselring, senior officer of all the German troops in the **Mediterranean**, with no direct operational command at this time, but responsible for the assembly in **Italy** of all German supplies for the forces in North Africa. Rommel often quarrelled with Kesselring, and up to the time he left **Africa** did not think very highly of him; but later reflection caused a change in his opinion, and his final summing up of Kesselring is a high one.

In his days of success Rommel could behave with scant respect for

his Italian superiors; but now that things were going badly they were treading on his heels all the time, and he had repeated visits from representatives of the *Comando Supremo* or *Superlibia*. The Italian authorities held the whip hand in one vital respect. The movement of supplies of all kinds from **Italy** was, with **Hitler's** agreement, under Italian control, and Rommel was dependent upon what they sent him, always a doubtful matter in view of the successful interference of the **Royal Navy** and the Allied Air Forces. Even when spurred on by Kesselring, *Comando Supremo* was inefficient, and Rommel's correspondence about this time is one long appeal—and complaint—about deficiencies in supplies.

While tactically he remained much his own master, any strategical action he intended was often opposed; and owing to the decline in Axis fortunes, there was a tendency for rearward authorities to trespass more and more into details. Rommel had difficulties in getting freedom of action in his **El Agheila** operations, and elsewhere throughout the period covered in this volume. He was harried by sometimes absurd orders from higher authorities, and cramped in his endeavours to make the best use of what troops and supplies he had.

¹ *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW)*—Armed Forces High Command—was supreme and responsible for the co-ordination of the active war effort by the three subordinate branches: *Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH)*—Army High Command; *Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine (OKM)*—Navy High Command, and *Oberkommando der Luftwaffe (OKL)*—Air Force High Command.

The second point that emerges from German documents is that after **Alamein**—the ‘battle without hope’ in Rommel's words—Rommel was firmly of the opinion that the campaign in North Africa was lost, and that the correct thing to do was to evacuate all the troops from **Africa** for use in **Europe**. He says succinctly, ‘If the army remained in North Africa, it would be destroyed’. ¹ He was deeply impressed by the Allies'

superiority in material, and now in numbers too, and he realised that their superiority in both these factors would increase; whereas on the Axis side they were poorly supplied, inferior in the air, and in no position to remedy any weakness. **Alamein** was the decisive battle of the African campaign, and the Germans had lost it. He resisted most strongly the accusation made against him, by Bastico among others, that he was defeatist; but claimed that he was truly realistic and that there were people who 'simply did not have the courage to look facts in the face and draw the proper conclusion'. His one aim became to save his troops and prevent annihilation. But in the end some 250,000 troops went into Allied prison camps.

Rommel's forces were known as the German-Italian *Panzer Army*, constituted as:

German

- **Africa Corps**—15 and 21 Panzer Divisions
- **90 Light Africa Division** ²
- **164 Light Africa Division**
- **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **German Air Force Brigade**

Italian

- **XX Corps**
- **XXI Corps** ³

As it happened, the troops opposing 2 NZ Division were German almost throughout. The main German strength, however, lay in the two panzer divisions, with *90 Light Division* as a strong supporter.

The panzer divisions normally were composed of a reconnaissance unit (a combination of scout cars, armoured cars, and armoured troop-

carriers), a tank regiment of two battalions (each of 84 tanks at full strength), a lorried infantry regiment of three battalions, a field artillery regiment of three battalions, an anti-tank battalion, an anti-aircraft battalion, an engineer battalion, and service units;

¹ *The Rommel Papers*, p. 365.

² The correct title; but, in accordance with contemporary usage, **Africa** is hereafter omitted.

³ These were corps only in name, and comprised only a few thousand troops each. They had under command a varying number of so-called divisions, the allocation being changed from time to time. Divisions were *Trieste*, *Pistoia*, *Spezia*, *Young Fascist*, and *Ariete*, the last-named being armoured and later renamed *Centauro*.

and the light divisions usually comprised a reconnaissance unit, three lorried infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, an anti-tank battalion, an anti-aircraft battalion, an engineer battalion, and service units. In November 1942 the strength of each division was only that of about a regiment (equivalent to a brigade) or less. The reconnaissance units often operated separately as a reconnaissance group. The lorried infantry regiments were known as Panzer Grenadiers, a title accorded them by **Hitler**. It is unnecessary to give the numbers of all the units in the German divisions, but their formations were:

15 Panzer Division

- **8 Panzer Regiment**
- **115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **33 Panzer Artillery Regiment**

21 Panzer Division

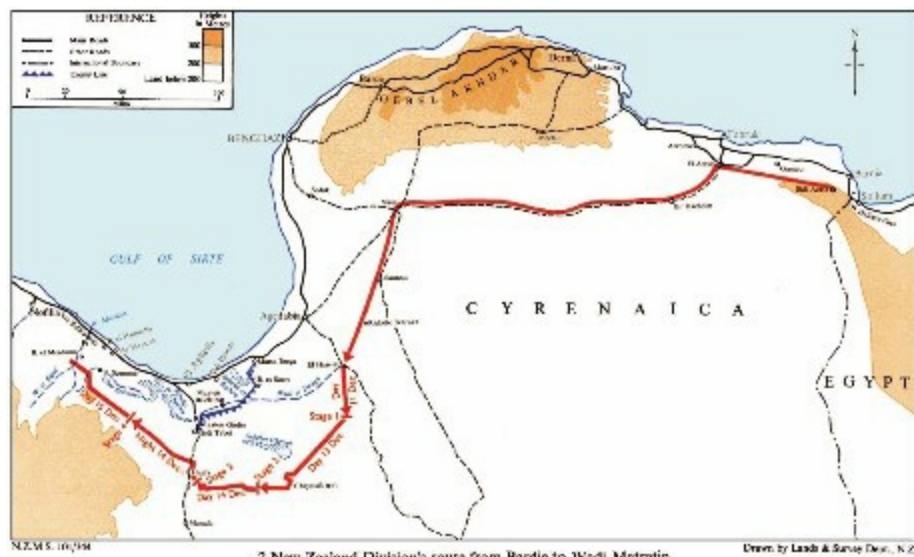
- **5 Panzer Regiment**
- **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **155 Panzer Artillery Regiment**

90 Light Division

- **155 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **361 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **190 Artillery Regiment**

164 Light Division

- **125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **382 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **433 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **220 Artillery Regiment.**



2 New Zealand Division's route from Bardia to Wadi Matratin

Rommel had realised that he could not hope to stop Eighth Army's advance until the **El Agheila** position was reached; and from the middle of November the first steps were taken to withdraw all non-motorised units behind that line, and to organise the defence of the area. Most of the Italians were among the non-motorised troops. The Italian authorities had directed that there must be an orderly withdrawal of the Italian troops—doubtless there were still bitter memories of the aftermath of **Alamein**—and for once Rommel was prepared to comply. Progressively the non-motorised forces, both German and Italian, were withdrawn first into the **El Agheila** defences, where they carried out some work, and then later back to **Nofilia** and **Buerat**. Remaining in the **El Agheila** position were the German motorised troops, with the addition of a tank battle group from *Ariete Division*.

There was a brief moment when Rommel toyed with the idea of a limited counter-attack, and of repeating his performance of previous years by destroying the advanced British forces; but he answered this himself when he said that it was a purely academic discussion, as they had neither the petrol nor sufficient tank destruction units for any such scheme. ¹ The German official narrative says briefly that the petrol and ammunition shortage and the low strength of the motorised and armoured formations made it impossible to carry out any offensive action.

At this point in the war in North Africa—late November—the **German High Command** was concentrating on the defence of **Tunisia**, and the 'eastern front' in **Libya** became secondary. Troops and supplies were being poured into **Tunis**; but there was nothing for Rommel. It is easy to understand his bitterness when it is realised that only a small part of the effort now being made to build up forces in **Tunisia**, if made in the summer of 1942 and directed towards Egypt, might have carried him to the **Suez Canal**.

But all the same the Fuehrer's well-known dislike of giving up any ground prescribed that the **El Agheila** position was to be held at all

costs; and the Duce was a loud-voiced echo of the Fuehrer. It took much effort on Rommel's part, including hurried visits by air to both Fuehrer and Duce, to get this rigid ruling modified—for hard facts soon dictated another course of action.

As early as 20 November Rommel was advocating most forcibly that no stand should be made at **El Agheila**, that there should be a steady withdrawal to an intermediate position on the line **Homs— Tarhuna** (some 60 miles east of **Tripoli**), and that thereafter **Tripolitania** should be evacuated completely, and the main stand made at the **Gabes Gap**, 120 miles west of the Tunisian frontier. He was always in favour of this last position, even in comparison with the more famous **Mareth Line**, for it could not be outflanked.

However, the most he could achieve, and this only after a four-day conference at the Fuehrer's headquarters in East Prussia and after being told initially that every man must be put into the **El Agheila** line to hold it to the last, was that he was given a free hand to withdraw to the **Buerat** position only, which again was to be held to the last. The outcome of these discussions was that as early as 2 December Rommel had decided to retire from **El Agheila**, and had even decided that the first day of withdrawal was to be 5 December, on which day a detached garrison at **Marada** (75 miles south of **El Agheila**) was to start moving out.

¹ *Rommel Papers*, p. 357.

The Germans' shortage of petrol was very nearly vital in the true meaning of the word. The shortage was a persistent theme in the German narrative of these weeks, for there is not a day when it is not alluded to in one way or another. The position was 'very critical', 'catastrophic', 'at the moment the **Afrika Korps** has no petrol', 'the German motorised formations are now completely immobilised', 'supplies brought forward amounted to only about one fifth of the quantity necessary', 'extremely critical', 'by the evening of 5 December the army

would have no petrol at all'—and so on day after day. Every two or three days there is a reference to sinkings, either by submarine or aircraft, sometimes as many as three vessels in one day. In November for instance, while 4879 tons of petrol reached the Axis forces, 8110 tons were lost. The shortage had its effect on the *Luftwaffe* also, which often did not have enough petrol to take the air operationally. Small wonder that the Germans make rueful comments on our apparently limitless supplies.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE EL AGHEILA POSITION

The El Agheila Position

The **El Agheila** position marked in effect the indeterminate division between **Cyrenaica** and **Tripolitania** (the two northern subdivisions of **Libya**), and when occupied by troops could well be a barrier to the passage from the one to the other. Its strength lay in the fact that its eastern, southern, and south-western approaches are covered with salt marshes, soft sand, or exceptionally broken ground unsuitable for manoeuvre, the only clear approach being the narrow strip along the coast road.

The British forces knew it as either the ‘**Agheila**’ or the ‘**El Agheila**’ position; but actually the enemy's line of defences ran from the coast at **Marsa Brega** to the south and then to the west, and the Germans always referred to it as the ‘**Marsa el Brega**’ line. The defences round **El Agheila** itself, some 25 miles behind **Marsa Brega**, formed a second position to the main line. ¹

Whatever its name, the position was known to be strong. From the coast near **Marsa Brega** the line ran behind (i.e., south-west of) the salt marsh **Sebcha es Seghira** as far as **Bir es Suera**, thence south to **Bu Mdeues** on **Wadi el Faregh** (which also was an obstacle), then turned to the west along the wadi to **Maaten Giofer**, and then south again along the **Marada Track** to **Sidi Tabet**, with a detached strongpoint at **Marada**. Minefields were laid at various points in front of the main defended localities.

Nature and the works of man had combined to make venturesome any direct assault on the position, but both sides knew that it could be outflanked. It was also known that the outflanking force would need to make a long cast to the south before turning west and north, and that careful reconnaissance would be necessary to find a practicable line of

advance.

The defences of **El Agheila** village itself included a chain of minefields at about four kilometres radius, touching the coast on both east and west. Some 17 miles to the west of **El Agheila** there was an anti-tank ditch protected by minefields, running from the sea to the tip of **Sebcha el Chebira**, another salt marsh. The narrow gap between sea and marsh, known to the Germans as ‘**El Mugtaa Narrows**’, made this point a bottleneck.

Cognisance had to be taken in planning of the fact that the defences anywhere near the coast—at **Marsa Brega**, at **El Agheila**, and at **El Mugtaa Narrows**—were strong and therefore it would be advisable to avoid a frontal attack. The more quickly the enemy could be turned out of the position the better, as he would otherwise have time to improve his defences, always assuming that he intended to stay and fight.

¹ See map facing p. 19.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PLAN OF ATTACK

Plan of Attack

As long as bulk supplies had to be carried forward almost 400 miles from **Tobruk**, it was not possible for the Eighth Army to advance farther in strength, and there was a limit to the number of troops who could be maintained facing the **El Agheila** position and beyond it towards **Sirte** and **Buerat**. The bulk supplies available at the ports had to maintain not only the army but also the air force, and by mid-December the air force alone would require 1400 tons of stores a day. The offensive of the air force ranked equal with that of the army; and one of the essentials for any advance was that the air force should be able to operate with maximum capacity from advanced landing grounds. The opening up of **Benghazi** harbour thus became top priority; but at best it would be of little use until the latter half of December. In the meantime the build-up of supplies was dependent upon the long haul from **Tobruk**.

Montgomery decided, therefore, that the attack on the **El Agheila** position must be carried out by not more than three divisions, of which one alone would be armoured, and that it could not take place until mid-December. There was a faint hope that the enemy would not pause at all at **El Agheila**, and Montgomery wondered if a few manoeuvres on the southern flank might not be enough to cause him to abandon the position. But this was only a passing thought, and he soon decided, in his own words, to 'annihilate the enemy in his defences' or 'get behind the German forces and capture them'.¹

¹ Montgomery, *El Alamein to the River Sangro*, pp. 35–6.

The general plan was to attack the main position from **Marsa Brega** to **Sidi Tabet** with 51 (Highland) and 7 Armoured Divisions, and to send 2 NZ Division, reinforced by 4 Light Armoured Brigade, on an outflanking

march to the south, west and north-west with **Marble Arch**¹ as the objective; but reconnaissance was necessary before this outflanking move could be definitely ordered. On 30 November a patrol of the King's Dragoon Guards, under Captain P. D. Chrystal, using three armoured cars and three jeeps, started from **El Haseiat** and proceeded south of **Sebchet Gheizel**, thence across the **Maaten Giofer – Marada** track, and north-westwards to the **Marble Arch** area, the object being to find out if there was a suitable route for the passage of a large mechanised force.

The reconnaissance party had difficulties that were only to be expected in such broken country, but in the end found a route with going that was always fair, and usually good, for the whole way to the **Marble Arch**. The only considerable obstacle was a large rift, some eight miles across and with steep or precipitous sides, lying athwart the route. This had to be crossed at right angles at a point about 80 miles from **El Haseiat**, for there did not appear to be any alternative. The crossing was quite feasible but there would need to be considerable detailed reconnaissance and marking of routes. This obstacle was at once known as **Chrystal's Rift**.²

The remainder of the route offered no special difficulty. After crossing the Rift it went roughly west until it reached the **Marada Track** some 25 miles north of **Marada** (or 30 miles south of **Maaten Giofer**), thence along the track northwards for some ten miles and then generally north-west to **Marble Arch**, keeping to the north-eastern edge of **Chor Scemmer**, which was an impassable marshy ravine. A frontage of several miles could be maintained over most of the route, with the exception of **Chrystal's Rift**. There were parts, however, especially west of the **Marada Track**, where low hills and small steep escarpments would make for difficult night driving.

¹ **Marble Arch** (*Arae Philaenorum*), a tall, narrow arch straddling the **Via Balbia** about 40 miles west of **El Agheila**, was built by **Mussolini** on the spot where, in the fourth century BC, the **Philaeni** brothers were said to have given their lives to settle a frontier dispute between the Greek colony of **Cyrenaica** and the

Carthaginian Empire to the west. The boundary was to be fixed where two runners from **Cyrene met the two brothers, who were to set out simultaneously from Carthage. The Cyrenians, who had gone much less than halfway when they met, accused the Philaeni brothers of having got away to a flying start and suggested that they should return farther west, where the Cyrenians would be buried alive. The Philaeni brothers, however, chose to be buried alive where they were.**

² In many places this is referred to as Chrystal's *Drift*, and it was generally so known at the time; but the original reconnaissance report refers to it as a 'rift', which in fact it was, and it is now accepted that 'Rift' is correct.

Chrystal's reconnaissance was carried out without interference from the enemy, although it seemed certain that it had been seen, as on two occasions enemy aircraft flew overhead, once following the patrol for some miles, and once circling round for twenty minutes.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PRELIMINARY MOVES

Preliminary Moves

Having assumed operational responsibility for the forthcoming attack, **30 Corps** began in the first days of December to make closer contact with the enemy. The **51st (Highland) Division**¹ occupied the area opposite **Marsa Brega** and **Bir es Suera**, while **7 Armoured Division** patrolled south and west. On 2 December **2 NZ Division** passed from the command of **10 Corps** to **30 Corps**, and preliminary orders were issued for it to move to the **Agedabia** area. The Division was to leave the **Bardia** area on 4–5 December, and be fully assembled at **El Haseiat**, some 35 miles south-east of **Agedabia**, by 9–10 December. Tracked vehicles would travel on transporters via the main coast road, the remainder of the Division across the desert.

In the morning of 3 December the GOC briefed his formation commanders and heads of services and discussed plans. The Division's part was to be an outflanking march with **4 Light Armoured Brigade** under command along the route reconnoitred by Captain Chrystal. The chief difficulty would be the supply of petrol in the quantities needed to move the Division, and even at this early stage **General Freyberg** stressed the necessity for economy in its use. After reviewing the general strategic position—the enemy's shortages, the lengthening lines of communication of Eighth Army, and so on—he told the conference that **Rommel** had been ordered to hold the **El Agheila** position at all costs.² He ended with instructions to officers to tell their men about the coming advance, and to say that the final of the rugby competition would be played in **Tripoli**—for which purpose sports gear was to be taken!

Orders later issued for the move to **El Haseiat** prescribed the groups and timings:

Formation

Departure

Arrival at Destination

6 Inf Bde Gp	11.30 a.m., 4 December	Not later than 11 a.m., 9 December
HQ and Res Gps	6.30 a.m., 5 December	Not later than 4 p.m., 9 December
5 Inf Bde Gp	11.30 a.m., 5 December	Not later than 11 a.m., 10 December

¹ Usually abbreviated to 51 (H) Division, a contraction used at times in this volume.

² This, although a common belief at the time, was not the case. See p. 20.

The route was west along the Trigh Capuzzo to **El Adem**, thence to **Bir Hacheim**, and along the 7 Armoured Division's marked route to **Msus** – **Saunnu** – **Ridotto Terruzzi** – **El Haseiat**.

The 50th Division took over the engineer tasks in the **Tobruk** – **Bardia** area so that the sappers could move with the Division, and the detached light anti-aircraft batteries similarly were called in, 41 Battery from **Sollum**– **Halfaya** rejoining forthwith and 42 Battery from **Tobruk** rejoining en route. **General Freyberg** had a rooted objection to leaving any part of the Division on detached duties when operations were afoot; and in this case this feeling was augmented by the need for full anti-aircraft protection on a march that might well be taking the Division behind the enemy lines.

Thus, hastily, the pause at **Bardia** ended and the Division, rested and revived, set out again on its long journey westwards. About **El Adem** and **Sidi Rezegh** the survivors of the CRUSADER operations recognised the battlefields of the previous year still littered with wrecks and debris. But morale ran high. There was a feeling that this would not happen again.

The move was uneventful, except that three or four vehicles were damaged on old minefields near **Bir Hacheim**, ¹ and six vehicles a little north of Haseiat. Each group arrived well on time, the Division—less its

tracked vehicles—being complete by the evening of 9 December. Petrol consumption was less than had been expected.

The armoured fighting vehicles, including those of Divisional Cavalry, a total of 32 Stuart tanks and 135 carriers, went on transporters of 6 Company, RASC, by the main road through the **Gebel Akhdar**, and arrived in the **El Haseiat** area to unload before darkness on 10 December.

Thirtieth Corps issued its initial operation order on 4 December for operation **GUILLOTINE**. Briefly, 51 (H) Division was to attack astride the main road to capture the defended localities in and south-west of **Marsa Brega**, codename **SWEAT**; 7 Armoured Division was to attack in the **Bir es Suera** area, create a gap and then pass through, codename **BLOOD**; 2 NZ Division was:

- (To advance from **El Haseiat** and establish a firm base on the tracks
a) north of **Marada**.
- (To destroy enemy posts north to **Giofer** inclusive.
b)
- (To push out patrols towards **Marble Arch** and **Zella**.
c)
- (To contain **Marada** and take every opportunity to occupy it.
d)

The codename for 2 NZ Division's tasks was **TOIL**.

¹ **Bir Hacheim**, held by the Fighting French, had been one of the most famous Allied strongpoints during Rommel's successful offensive in May-June 1942.

These various tasks were given on the assumption that the enemy would stand his ground at least until a major attack developed.

Dates for the operation were communicated to commanders separately. It was intended that 2 NZ Division's advance from **El Haseiat**—task (a)—should commence on 14 December, but no firm date was given for the other objectives, the achievement of which depended

on the general course of operations.

There is a slight degree of mystery about the Division's tasks (c) and (d), for on 5 December **30 Corps** arranged for a party to reconnoitre **Marada** and **Zella**. Drawn from King's Dragoon Guards, one of the regiments of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, the patrol—four armoured cars and three jeeps—went out on 7 December, entered **Marada** during the night 8–9 December and found it unoccupied, and then went on towards **Zella** and a little farther to the north-west. This was duly reported to regimental headquarters on 10 December, but possibly owing to the transfer of 4 Light Armoured Brigade from 7 Armoured Division to 2 NZ Division at this time, does not seem to have fully registered with any superior headquarters. Meanwhile the enemy garrison of **Marada** had moved out on 6 December as the first stage of the thinning out of the **Marsa Brega** position.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

IN THE EL HASEIAT AREA

In the El Haseiat Area

The GOC held a conference on 9 December in the **El Haseiat** area. The domestic situation was good and presented no difficulties. The main doubt remaining was over 'going', and the CRE (Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson ¹) was therefore to co-operate with **11 Hussars** (an armoured car regiment from 7 Armoured Division) and with Captain L. H. **Browne** ² of the **Long Range Desert Group** in selecting a detailed route for the advance, especially at the crossing of Chrystal's Rift. The GOC then reviewed alternative courses of action for the Division in case the enemy got away before the advance began, although he did not think this would happen.

In the flurry of conferences and discussions that took place from 9 December onwards, it took two or three days to determine the actual dates for the moves of the Division. On 11 December, under arrangements made with Headquarters **30 Corps**—there do not appear to have been any formal orders—the Division moved some 30 or 40 miles to the south of **El Haseiat** to an area designated as 'Stage I'. It was then intended that on 14 December it should move across Chrystal's Rift to 'Stage II', on 15–16 December to 'Stage III', a point on the **Marada Track**, and on 16–17 December northwestwards to 'Stage IV', some ten miles west of the **Marada Track**.

On 11 December **30 Corps** issued orders for the period beyond Stage IV, when 2 NZ Division was to seize **Marble Arch** and Merduma, clear landing grounds at both places, and then reorganise and prepare to move to **Nofilia**. The first part of this operation—the seizing of **Marble Arch** and Merduma—was to take place in daylight on the 17th.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade (Brigadier C. B. Harvey, DSO) came under the command of the New Zealand Division on 9 December, but

had not then joined the Division, which was still at **El Haseiat**. At that time the brigade consisted of the following units:

armoured cars

- **King's Dragoon Guards (KDG)**
- **Royal Dragoons (Royals)**

armour

- **Royal Scots Greys (Greys)**

artillery

- **3 Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery (3 RHA)**

one troop 211 Battery, 64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery (211 Med Bty)

one troop 41 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, Royal Artillery

infantry

- **1 Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps (1 KRRC)**

engineers

- **one troop 21 Field Squadron, Royal Engineers**

In addition there were various service units such as RASC and RAMC. Armoured brigades had what can only be called a lavish establishment of vehicles. Their large B Echelon—the vehicles not used for fighting—was divided into B1 and B2, and like all units they found it necessary to have their transport near them. The result often was that between the armoured brigade fighting vehicles leading an advance and the next following combatant group—guns or infantry—would come a long tail, either delaying the troops behind or else ‘cluttering up some one else's area’, as a participant observed, a problem that was never

satisfactorily solved.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade had moved forward to 'Stage I' on 9 December, and was already in that area when 2 NZ Division arrived two days later. The one exception was the Greys, which remained at **El Haseiat**. Only a few days previously this regiment had taken over a fresh issue of tanks, which required servicing and calibrating. These included seventeen Shermans, the first that the regiment had ever had. Consequently the Greys were entering a new campaign with a proportion of fighting vehicles of which the crews had had no previous operational experience. The delay at **El Haseiat** was of greater importance than was realised at the time, and caused certain difficulties later on.

The Greys' total strength in tanks on 12 December was 36–17 Shermans, 4 Grants, and 15 Stuarts (the last also known as Honeys). This was regarded as inadequate by **General Freyberg**, and had been the subject of much discussion at Division, Corps and Army Headquarters. **Freyberg** had made his view clear, that if there was to be any rounding up of the enemy, the outflanking force would need more armour. But for administrative reasons Montgomery decided that he could not allot a much stronger force of tanks to 2 NZ Division, although he partially met the request by allotting A Squadron, **Staffordshire Yeomanry** (with nine Shermans) to 4 Light Armoured Brigade. This squadron joined the Greys on 12 December. It was a case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, for **Staffordshire Yeomanry** was part of 7 Armoured Division, which was then so much the weaker.

When reviewing the events of a few days later, it should be remembered that from the outset no one thought that there were enough tanks with the Division. It was doubly unfortunate that some of the tanks available should start off with the handicap of inexperienced crews and that last-minute training should cause delay.

Between 9 and 12 December the CRE and his party, including detachments from 6 Field Company with bulldozers, prepared a crossing over Chrystal's Rift. At frequent intervals in this depression were rocky

island mounds impassable to vehicles, and between them the sand often was soft, almost as fine as flour and also impassable. The route selected therefore wound about a great deal, adding to the length of the crossing. It required some work with explosives in addition to bulldozing, but was sufficiently good for transport to cross on a three-vehicle front at six miles in the hour.

Desert warfare had something in common with naval warfare because of the extensive area of featureless ground and the ease of movement in all directions. As a result it often was necessary to navigate by nautical methods, that is by celestial observations. The **Long Range Desert Group** was expert in this for its raids, reconnaissances and approach marches to lying-up grounds behind the enemy lines were often across hundreds of miles of unmapped and almost featureless desert. The GOC decided to ask that Captain Browne, a New Zealand LRDG officer skilled in desert navigation, should be made available as navigator for the forthcoming march, and on 12 December part of R1 (New Zealand) Patrol of the LRDG, two officers and 18 men under Browne, joined the Division. The patrol, however, was still operating under orders of Eighth Army, and was given several other tasks, including reconnaissance in the **Buerat** area, a long way ahead at the time, as well as that of navigating for the New Zealand Division.

During this time the Division was steadily accumulating supplies for the move. The NZASC issued enough petrol for 300 miles in unit vehicles, and held enough for another 100 miles in ASC vehicles. Filling unit transport to this scale meant the issue of 180,000 gallons. Rations and water for six days were held in unit vehicles, and rations for another three days and water for another four days in the ASC vehicles.

There was thus great activity, both mental and physical: planning by commanders and staff, discussions of details with subordinates, issues of all kinds of supplies, maintenance and overhaul of vehicles and weapons, movement of supply vehicles back and forth over the desert—all combined with a degree of exhilaration that came from the knowledge that the next move was something new over new country,

with the intention of driving the enemy farther back than ever before.

On 9 December the first signs were noticed that the enemy was beginning to thin out. On three successive nights (9–10, 10–11 and 11–12 December) patrols from 51 (H) Division advanced some 4000 yards from their forward localities and penetrated the enemy's forward positions without meeting other than slight opposition. Air reconnaissance on 10 December showed a clear movement rearwards of transport, and the signs of a general withdrawal were becoming steadily clearer.

¹ **Brig F. M. H. Hanson**, DSO and bar, OBE, MM, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 1896; resident engineer, Main Highways Board; Wellington Regt in 1914–18 War; **OC 7 Fd Coy** Jan 1940–Aug 1941; **CRE 2 NZ Div** 1941–46; Chief Engineer, 2 NZEF, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works.

² **Capt L. H. Browne**, MC, DCM, m.i.d.; born **England**, 8 Jul 1908; accountant; four times wounded.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY IN EARLY DECEMBER

The Enemy in early December

Rommel expected an attack as early as 27 November, in the belief that Montgomery might try to ‘crash’ the **El Agheila** position. Such an attack held no fears for him; but he realised that as time went on Eighth Army would progressively become stronger, and by the middle of December might be able to attack with two armoured and four infantry divisions, thus greatly outnumbering him. He does not seem to have appreciated the restrictions of administration on the number of troops in the forward area.

In early December, before any thinning out had started, the enemy troops in the ‘Marsa el Brega’ position were:

German

- **Africa Corps**—15 and 21 Panzer Divisions
- **90 Light Division**
- **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment**
- **German Air Force Battle Group** (known to us, not entirely accurately, as the **Ramcke Group**)
- **Army and anti-aircraft artillery**

Italian

- **XXI Corps**, comprising remnants of **Pistoia**, **Spezia**, and **Young Fascist divisions**
- **Ariete Battle Group**

By 9 December, when 2 NZ Division was concentrating at **El Haseiat**,

the whole of *XXI Corps* had been withdrawn and was on its way back to the *Buerat* position. About the same time the German *164 Light Division*, which had been refitting in *Tripoli*, came forward again as far as *Buerat*, where it was put in charge of the defence construction work to be done there.

The enemy had identified 7 Armoured and 51 (H) Divisions, but not specifically 2 NZ Division, although on 25 November he had reported it as already moving forward—nine or ten days before it left *Bardia*. But he knew that there were other formations in the forward area. He even mistakenly identified 9 Australian Division, and on another occasion thought that there were four divisions ready to attack. By 10 December Rommel was sure that the attack would include a 'wide encircling movement' round the southern flank; and partly as a counter to this, he slowed down the move of the Italian units towards *Buerat* and held them for a few days at *Nofilia*, as he did not want British troops to arrive there and find it undefended. In a report to *Superlibia* and to Kesselring on 10 December Rommel said, 'unless the army's petrol situation is improved at the earliest possible moment, the danger cannot be avoided of the *Panzer Army* being hopelessly stranded between *Marsa el Brega* and *Buerat*, and then....being sacrificed to the Eighth Army.'

The *El Agheila* position was manned from north to south on 11 December by *90 Light Division* (including a group from the *German Air Force Brigade*), the *Africa Corps* (*15* and *21 Panzer Divisions*), and the *Ariete Group*, the limits being from *Marsa Brega* via *Bir es Suera* and *Maaten Belcleibat* to *Maaten Giofer*. In reserve were *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, and certain detached portions of the *Africa Corps*. The *15th Panzer Division* had 27 tanks, *21 Panzer Division* 26, and *Ariete* 57, the last all Italian. All units were motorised; but there was petrol for only 20 or 30 miles.

It is impossible to ascertain the correct strengths of enemy units but it seems probable that the Germans had altogether about 14,000 men in the area. *Ariete Group* cannot have numbered more than two or three

thousand. One can safely conclude that 30 Corps was very much stronger than the total enemy troops it was likely to meet.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 3 – LEFT HOOK AT EL AGHEILA

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[SECTION]

BY the morning of 12 December Montgomery had come to the conclusion that the offensive against the **El Agheila** position must start at once if the enemy was not to escape altogether. At 11 a.m. that day 2 NZ Division learnt that all timings were advanced by forty-eight hours, and that it therefore would have to cross the **Marada Track** (the move to Stage IV) during the night 14–15 December instead of 16–17 December.

This was not surprising, for in common with other commanders **General Freyberg** had been aware that the enemy was on the move. But while saying that he would make every effort to comply, he had to point out that neither the administrative preparations nor the attachment of units to groups was yet complete, and that there was no spare time to overcome unexpected obstacles.

Needless to say, 12 December was a busy day with the Division. Luckily replenishment with petrol was complete for the first-line vehicles; and those second-line vehicles which still had to fill up would be able to catch up the next day. But there was scant time for all the myriad things that must be done before a long move, and there was considerable bustle. However, the Division was by this time fully battle-worthy and had reserves of knowledge and resource that helped to meet emergencies such as this.

Orders were issued for groups to move as then constituted (i.e., normal groupings) to an area south-west of Chrystal's Rift—Stage II. In fact, 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 6 Infantry Brigade Group set off the same afternoon (12 December), travelling some 30 miles to a point about 25 miles short of the Rift. The rest of the Division was to follow early on the 13th.

But unfortunately the Greys' tank crews were still engaged on maintenance and training problems near **El Haseiat**, and were not ready

to leave with their brigade, which thus had to set off without its strongest component.

Eighth Army's activities on this day convinced Rommel that the offensive had at last begun; and in accordance with what he calls the Duce's instructions, but which was in fact his own wish not to accept a decisive engagement in the **Marsa Brega** position, he issued the codeword which meant that a withdrawal was to commence, but only as far as the area **El Agheila** village — **El Mugtaa Narrows**. For the moment the Italian ***XXI Corps*** remained at **Nofilia**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ACROSS THE RIFT

Across the Rift

Rain fell on 12 and 13 December and laid the dust that might otherwise have betrayed the columns of 2 NZ Division, and low cloud also contributed to the secrecy of the move. In the daytime the temperatures were fresh to cold, and the nights could be quite cold, with even a touch of frost; all in all the desert was a healthy and pleasant place during the winter months.

The Division moved to Chrystal's Rift in desert formation,¹ but while crossing the Rift had to reduce to a narrow front of three vehicles. At one stage the GOC was not satisfied with the progress being made and 'sent people forward and hustled everyone through'.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade, followed by 6 Infantry Brigade Group, led the advance; but by mid-morning Divisional Cavalry caught up and later went into the lead. By the end of the day these leading elements had reached an area some ten to 15 miles beyond the Rift, 6 Infantry Brigade Group having travelled about 56 miles. **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group travelled about 80 miles and reached an area just behind the leading formations. Fifth Infantry Brigade Group halted almost as soon as it had crossed the Rift, but by that time had been travelling for over eight hours.

The divisional operation order for the move, unusually late because of the speeding up of the programme, was issued at 6.15 p.m. on 13 December. It merely confirmed and assembled in one place the results of a series of orders and instructions, both verbal and written, that had been issued during the previous days. The tasks of the Division were defined:

(To block the **Marada Track** south of **Sidi Tabet**.

a)

(To occupy high ground west of the salt marsh area in order to prevent
b) the enemy withdrawing from the **El Agheila** position.

¹ In desert formation units usually dispersed with vehicles 100 yards apart; sometimes they were 150 yards (e.g., during the move from **Wadi Matratin** to **Nofilia**). With 100 yards' dispersal a brigade group might occupy an area nearly a mile wide and a mile and a half long. The arrangement was not always the same, but one battalion might cover the front and one each flank, thus enclosing brigade headquarters, the field artillery, headquarters of the anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery, engineers, machine-gun company, and field ambulance. The anti-tank guns (possibly including some 25-pounders in an anti-tank role) and anti-aircraft guns would be deployed around the perimeter, and a screen of Bren carriers might be some distance to the front and each flank. When the group was travelling at night it closed in to visibility distance between vehicles.

This high ground (called Dor Lanuf) was at the north-western tip of **Sebcha el Chebira**, about halfway between the anti-tank ditch at the **El Mugtaa Narrows** and **Marble Arch**. It overlooked the coast road (called **Via Balbia** by the enemy, its correct Italian name) where it emerged from the Narrows, and was an ideal place to block the enemy.

The Division was to move on 14 December to Stage III, just short of the **Marada Track**, and was to continue during that night along a lighted route to Stage IV, another 25 miles to the northwest. On the 15th it was to reach the final objective, which was given the codename PLUM. The route in the last stage would be along the south-west side of **Sebcha el Chebira** and between the Sebcha and **Chor Scemmer**.

The move to Stage III was to be in normal groupings, but on arrival there a flank guard would be formed as follows under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel **Mitchell** ¹ of 7 Anti-Tank Regiment:

one squadron Royals (armoured cars)

A Squadron, Staffs Yeomanry (Sherman tanks)

one battery 4 NZ Field Regiment
one battery 7 NZ Anti-Tank Regiment
one section 6 NZ Field Company
one infantry company to be detailed by 5 Brigade
one company 27 (MG) Battalion.
light section field ambulance
second-line and B Echelon transport of the above

The Division was to form up at Stage III in the order of march: the armoured cars of 4 Light Armoured Brigade well out in front (Divisional Cavalry was to fall back into Reserve Group), followed by the Flank Guard, and then the remainder of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, 6 Brigade Group, **Divisional Headquarters, Reserve Group, 5 Brigade Group, second-line transport of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, and Administrative Group.**

When the advance was under way during the night of 14–15 December, the Flank Guard was to move off at the appropriate moment to a position astride the **Marada Track on high ground just south of **Sidi Tabet**, ‘to prevent the enemy breaking out from the **El Agheila** position’; it was ordered to hold the position at all costs. Such instructions seem ambitious for a force based on one tank squadron and one infantry company. But the truth was that the GOC's forces were really not large enough for the various duties that might fall to them, especially when one of these duties might be to resist the full strength of the Axis forces in the area.**

¹ **Brig J. M. Mitchell**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Port Chalmers**, 29 Jun 1904; public servant; CO 7 A-Tk Regt Dec 1941–Dec 1943, May–Oct 1944; OC NZ Tps in Egypt 1945–46.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade was to report at the earliest opportunity on 15 December on an intermediate objective, APPLE, 15 miles short of PLUM, and then on PLUM itself; and when 6 Brigade had occupied PLUM, 4 Brigade was to provide flank protection to the west for the Division. In addition to occupying PLUM, 6 Brigade was to assist,

with the advice of the **RAF** liaison officer travelling with the Division, in clearing grounds at **Marble Arch** and around **Bir el Merduma**.

Strict wireless silence was to be observed within the Division until contact was made with the enemy, or until 9 a.m. on 15 December, whichever came first.

When **General Freyberg** conferred with his formation commanders in the evening of 13 December, the Division had reached the most southerly point of its move, and had met only the problems of an ordinary desert march. From now on they would be heading towards the enemy and the prospect of active operations. The GOC, therefore, after discussing timings and details of the next moves, arranged for Divisional Cavalry with its Stuart tanks to join 4 Light Armoured Brigade if the Greys had not caught up. At that moment the Greys had in fact only just crossed Chrystal's Rift.

The frontal attack on the **Marsa Brega** position by 51 (Highland) and 7 Armoured Divisions was much impeded by mines, in the use of which the enemy had been prodigal—a foretaste of the difficulties to be faced throughout the campaign. The enemy had succeeded in slipping away unnoticed during the night of 12–13 December, and next morning the Highland Division carried out intensive shelling against positions that had been vacated. By evening this division was in occupation of **Marsa Brega**, and 7 Armoured Division had patrolled through Giofer towards **El Agheila** without making contact with the enemy. By nightfall British troops were in the vicinity of Sidi Hmuda on the **Via Balbia**. The air forces had had a good day against transport on the road.

At that stage *90 Light Division* was a few miles east of **El Agheila** itself, and *Ariete Battle Group* some ten miles to the south. *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* and *580 Reconnaissance Unit*, the latter from *21 Panzer Division*, were about ten miles farther back, still east of the Narrows. The bulk of ***Africa Corps*** was in defensive positions in the Narrows, to the east of 2 NZ Division's objective PLUM. The *33rd Reconnaissance Unit* (from *15 Panzer Division*), with a few Italians, was

away to the west of **Marble Arch**. A battle group made up of vehicles from the *Army Headquarters Protective Unit* was some 15 miles south of **Marble Arch**.

In the enemy's appreciation for this day there is no mention of the outflanking march of 2 NZ Division, probably because bad weather stopped any German long-range reconnaissance. Thus while Rommel was always conscious of the chance of a flank attack, he did not so far appreciate this danger; moreover, he had been thinking of a flank attack of lesser range. However, he still retained some Italian troops round **Nofilia**, despite urgings from *Superlibia* to get them back to **Buerat**.

The enemy situation was known fairly accurately to **30 Corps**; as early as 11.30 a.m. a message was sent to 2 NZ Division giving up-to-date information, which radically changed the situation. For some reason which cannot be elucidated, this message was not received at **Divisional Headquarters** until 8 p.m. It read: 'Enemy now evacuated **Marada** and will be around **Zella**. Send patrols **Zella** simulate this deception [sic] while your forward move continues maximum speed. **Marsa Brega** evacuated. Suera still held. Enemy transport streaming west through **El Agheila** and north from Giofer. All RAF on this. 15 Panzer Division now 40 miles west **Agheila**. Good luck and good hunting.'

A **30 Corps** intelligence report on the same lines, sent at 11.30 a.m., was not received until 8.35 p.m. About 9 p.m. further situation reports received at **Divisional Headquarters** showed, among other things, that **8 Armoured Brigade** of 7 Armoured Division was approaching the **Marada Track** in the direction of Maaten Giofer.

The message from **30 Corps** reads rather breathlessly. While the main instruction—to push on fast—was of the first importance and was to be carried out, no action seems to have been taken about sending the patrols to **Zella**. It will be remembered that a party from the King's Dragoon Guards had set off to **Marada** and **Zella** on 7 December, occupied the former on the 9th and reported this to its regimental headquarters. Information on 13 December that **Marada** was empty

therefore appears to be belated. This KDG patrol rejoined its regiment that very evening, having incurred casualties to men and vehicles by running on to an enemy minefield some 20 miles short of **Zella**. Presumably the GOC thought this information sufficient. In the end **Zella** was occupied by the LRDG on 20 December; it must have been evacuated by the enemy some days earlier.

The instructions to other formations in **30 Corps** on 14 December were that **7 Armoured Division** was to clear the road around **El Agheila** and patrol southwards so as to make contact with **2 NZ Division** at **Sidi Tabet**, and **51 (H) Division** was to pass through **7 Armoured Division** and advance to the anti-tank ditch at the Narrows.

The moves prescribed for **7 Armoured Division** made it unnecessary for **2 NZ Division** to go on with the proposed flank guard, and the GOC cancelled this at once, before the guard had even assembled. It then became an urgent matter to decide just how soon the Division could resume the advance, and how fast it could move once it started. The GSO I (Colonel R. C. **Queree**¹) advised the GOC that to be properly organised for the next stage, the Division would have to remain where it was until daylight. Moreover, at some time on 14 December there would have to be a pause to replenish with petrol, for undoubtedly there had been a miscalculation of the mileage per gallon to be expected from heavily-laden vehicles in rough going. Normally vehicles might have been able to last out until 15 December. The upshot of these factors was, first, that there could be no question of a night march, and secondly, that it would not be possible to go right through to the coast road on 14 December.

In conversations with his brigadiers over the telephone, however, the GOC still conveyed the hope that there might be some movement during the night, and suggested to **4 Light Armoured Brigade** that it might move by moonlight—the moon was already well up—perhaps even as far as Stage III. But it then transpired that the Shermans of the Greys were still in **5 Brigade's** area, a long way behind their own brigade. The most that could be hoped for was that everyone would get off at first light,

which would be about 7 a.m.

Thus it transpired that by 9 p.m. on 13 December the course of events had made the Division's plan, issued only a few hours before, already in need of amendment.

¹ **Brig R. C. Queree, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; London; born Christchurch, 28 Jun 1909; Regular soldier; Brigade Major, NZ Arty, Oct 1940–Jun 1941; GSO II 2 NZ Div Jun–Aug 1941, Jan–Jun 1942; GSO I 2 NZ Div Sep 1942–Jun 1944; BGS NZ Corps 9 Feb–27 Mar 1944; CO 5 Fd Regt Jun–Aug 1944; CRA 2 NZ Div, Aug 1944–Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, 1948–50; Adjutant-General 1954–56; Vice-Chief of General Staff 1956–60; Senior Army Liaison Officer, London.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PUSHING ON—14 DECEMBER

Pushing on—14 December

Before setting off in the morning of 14 December the Division was replenished with two days' rations and water from a dump built on the western side of Chrystal's Rift on the 13th by an RASC third-line convoy. It was then decided that there should be an issue of petrol for 100 miles' travel at 2.30 p.m. at a point at Stage III just east of the **Marada Track**; and instructions were issued accordingly.

It was now intended that 4 Light Armoured Brigade, still without the Greys, but strengthened by Divisional Cavalry, should get away as soon as possible; and that the rest of the Division, with 6 Brigade Group leading, should leave early, travel all day, halt in the evening for a meal, and then continue all night. If all went well the Division should cover 100 miles in the twenty-four hours following daybreak on 14 December, and should be approaching the road at PLUM. But the actual objective had now become fluid, as it appeared likely that the enemy would have passed PLUM before the Division reached it. The GOC was still hopeful of getting into position in advance of the retreating enemy, and then carrying out a local 'left hook' and cutting off his rearguard at least. The line of advance of the Division was thus to be moved more to the west; and in effect 4 Light Armoured Brigade now had a task of seeking out the enemy. As the enemy was retreating from **El Agheila**, the GOC decided to dispense with any rearguard, so leaving Administrative Group last in a divisional column that was by now stretching out more and more.

No part of the Division moved before 7 a.m. on the 14th, mainly because of thick fog. Although the broken country made it difficult for groups to maintain desert formation, Stage III was reached in good order.

There was no sign of Petrol Company's vehicles at 2 p.m., and indeed the first platoon did not arrive at the Stage III petrol point until 5 p.m., by which time the leading formations of the Division had been waiting four hours. The explanation was that by early afternoon Petrol Company was anything up to 60 miles from the head of the divisional column, and did not receive instructions about the issue until 3 p.m., half an hour after the time set down for the issue at a point some hours' travel away. Within half an hour of arrival at Stage III the first platoon issued the whole of its 27,800 gallons; but another 20,000 gallons was still wanted, so that the arrival of the next platoon was keenly awaited. But darkness fell, and the second platoon passed right through the delivery area unnoticed; so that it was not until a third platoon reached the petrol point that all demands were satisfied, by which time it was 11 p.m.

In the meantime the Greys, which it will be remembered was the main tank force with the Division, had been stranded without fuel; and as its own second-line transport was many miles behind, **General Freyberg instructed Petrol Company to issue high octane petrol ¹ to the regiment. A figure of 5000 gallons was mentioned, but after drawing 1500 gallons the regiment went on, as it was becoming increasingly desirable that it should catch up with its brigade. Later in the day Petrol Company made an issue to the King's Royal Rifle Corps battalion, which had also run short of petrol.**

Luckily Divisional Cavalry had been able to replenish with high octane petrol the previous afternoon and was not delayed in joining 4 Light Armoured Brigade.

While the leading elements of the Division were waiting at Stage III for petrol, the rear groups were gradually closing up. When the GOC held a conference at 1 p.m. to examine the situation, it was decided to halt until 4 p.m., move for two hours (leaving petrol-carrying vehicles behind to refill), have a meal, and then close into night formation and travel by moonlight until 11 p.m. The advance was to be resumed at first light on 15 December. At the conference the objective was still given as PLUM;

but later in the afternoon the General went forward and instructed 4 Light Armoured Brigade to change the thrust line to one trending farther west and leading to **Bir el Merduma**.

It was fully appreciated at this conference that if the Division did cut off the enemy, his armour would make a fight of it; and the Greys were still well behind. The leading formation, therefore, had no heavy tanks with it, and when the Greys did catch up, they might have little time to prepare for battle.

The advance was duly resumed from Stage III at 4 p.m. in the same order of march as earlier in the day. A halt for an hour for a meal was made at 5.30 p.m., and the advance then continued until 11.30 p.m. along a lighted route, the **Provost Company** working well ahead to erect its lights. The total advance for the day (14 December) was almost 90 miles, so that in effect the confusion over the petrol issue had not in the end caused any real disruption and any time lost at Stage III had been made up.

The troops went to bed for the remainder of the night. At this point 4 Light Armoured Brigade was well ahead, on the northern side of **Chor Scemmer** and some 12 miles west of APPLE, while the head of the New Zealand column was a little short of this bound. Incidentally the original 'Stage IV' had been disregarded, and in fact had been passed during the evening march.

Administrative Group was some 40 miles back and having trouble with the going. During the night its vehicles closed in until they were side-by-side and nose-to-tail, at which point a vehicle loaded with petrol caught fire and could be seen for miles. Luckily there were no enemy aircraft about.

The GOC broke wireless silence at 9.50 p.m. to answer a query from **30 Corps** about locations. He added that he hoped to reach **Bir el Merduma** by 11 a.m. on the 15th. There was probably no object in keeping wireless silence any longer, for twice during the afternoon a

German reconnaissance plane had flown low over the leading elements of 4 Light Armoured Brigade and undoubtedly had seen them.

A further message from 30 Corps that evening directed that A Squadron, Staffordshire Yeomanry, was to revert to the command of 7 Armoured Division. This was surprising and a reply was sent to the effect that the squadron was committed and its release not practicable.

Meanwhile the advance of 51 (Highland) and 7 Armoured Divisions had continued slowly owing to the large number of carefully laid mines and booby traps. In the evening 8 Armoured Brigade had a sharp engagement ten miles south of El Agheila and claimed to have accounted for nine M13 (Italian) tanks. Its opponent was *Ariete Group*, whose stout resistance was praised in the German narrative, an uncommon occurrence. By last light the general line of the foremost British posts was still some five to ten miles short of El Agheila village; and the main road had been cleared of mines only about halfway between Marsa Brega and El Agheila. The Desert Air Force was active as usual, and enemy opposition was slight; but visibility was bad.

¹ Special arrangements had always to be made to carry supplies of high octane petrol for use by armoured units.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ENEMY REACTION

Enemy Reaction

The enemy troops made no special moves until the afternoon of the 14th, but continued to resist the British advance along and immediately south of the **Via Balbia**, and were much heartened by the fight put up by *Ariete Group*. The *33rd Reconnaissance Unit* patrolled south and south-east from Merduma, but by evening had found nothing. The petrol position, especially for *Africa Corps*, was bad: units had barely enough to cover the next stage of withdrawal. The ammunition position was also poor, artillery having only a third of its normal issue.

Then, about 4 p.m., a change came over the situation when air reconnaissance revealed the presence of a strong enemy force including tanks ('probably an armoured division') advancing west and north-west at a point south of Giofer. In other words the move of 2 NZ Division from Stage III was discovered, although its identity was not known. The enemy expected that this move would be continued during the night with the object of penetrating through Merduma towards **Nofilia**—a remarkably accurate forecast. The discovery brought immediate action, for at 4.15 p.m. the codeword was issued for all troops to withdraw at once clear of the **El Mugtaa Narrows**, and for *33 Reconnaissance Unit* to advance south-east towards Bir Scemmer. Rommel considered that if *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* had had enough petrol, there would have been a good chance of a successful counter-attack against the out-flanking force; but such a move was out of the question.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

INTO THE BLUE—15 DECEMBER

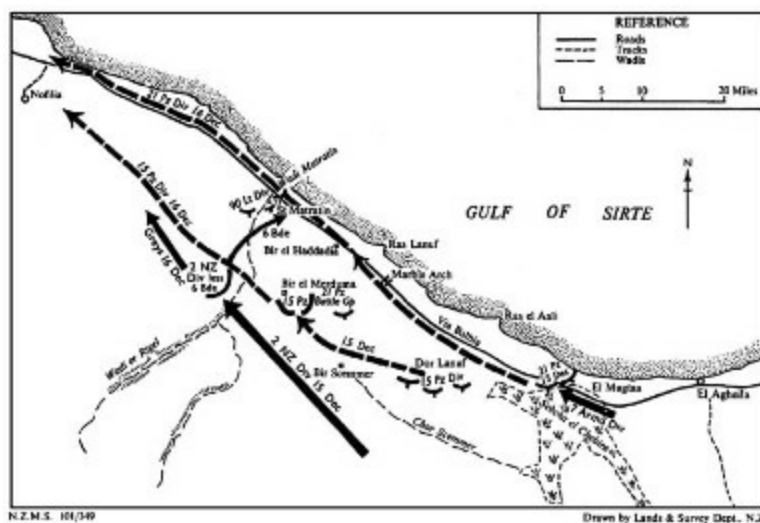
Into the Blue—15 December

Before the Division moved off on 15 December Freyberg informed 30 Corps that he was altering the divisional axis to run through Bir Scemmer to Bir el Merduma, with the intention of then turning towards the coast road and occupying the high ground west of Marble Arch. He estimated that his forward elements would reach the objective by 11 a.m. if there was no opposition. The message then went on to say that the Division held no maps 'west of A.00 easting grid', which meant no maps covering Nofilia and beyond—a surprising revelation, for Nofilia had been prescribed as an objective for the Division as early as 11 December. Whether the deficiency was due to slowness by the Division in asking for maps, or by Corps or Army Headquarters in delivering them, is not known. They were duly dropped by aircraft in the afternoon of 16 December. The message ended by asking that the coast road should be bombed along a stretch running from Marble Arch for some six miles to the south-east.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade, again leading, moved off at daybreak with the armoured car regiments in front. By this time the Greys, still augmented by A Squadron, Staffs Yeomanry, had rejoined; and their services were important now that contact with the enemy was imminent. Unfortunately they were still low in petrol and had to refuel before they could move. This took till mid-morning, and 6 Infantry Brigade Group, which the tanks were to precede tactically, had to mark time until the refuelling was complete. As it turned out, it was a most unfortunate delay. But it is necessary only to quote the Greys' war diary to discover the reason: 'regiment had covered 240 miles since leaving El Haseiat on 12 December. Pace and going had played havoc with the tanks which were getting worn out.'

During the morning 4 Light Armoured Brigade was joined by the

GOC's Tactical Headquarters, which moved with it until evening, a usual practice of **General Freyberg's** when any fighting was likely. Wireless silence was lifted throughout the Division at 8 a.m.; but the GOC still hoped to retain some degree of secrecy, for as he went forward to join 4 Light Armoured Brigade he put under arrest men who had lit fires to cook breakfast. However, the number arrested became so great that he had to declare a general amnesty.



WADI MATRATIN, 15-16 DECEMBER 1942
WADI MATRATIN, 15-16 DECEMBER 1942

With the probability that friendly forces might soon come near the main road, **Air Support Control** Headquarters asked the Division at 9.30 a.m. to nominate a bomblines for the **Desert Air Force**. This request was passed to 4 Light Armoured Brigade, which was to reply direct on its tentacle. The brigade asked that there should be no bombing south of an east-west line through **Marble Arch** and **Bir el Merduma** or east and west of a line running north and south through **Saniet Matratin**.¹ This curious and complicated prescription meant that there could be no bombing of the coast road anywhere south-east of **Saniet Matratin**, which meant in turn that there could be no bombing of **Marble Arch** or of the area immediately south-east and was in conflict with the GOC's request made some two hours earlier for bombing of the coast road. The issue was further confused when 6 Infantry Brigade (which intercepted the message) joined in with a request for an area of some thirty-six

square miles where the Group was located to be excluded from bombing—an area which was already covered by 4 Light Armoured Brigade's request. It appears to have been sent to ensure that the 6 Infantry Brigade Group was not itself bombed.

The result of all this at Eighth Army Headquarters was a flare-up between the army and air staffs, partly because the hands of the air force were being tied over bombing the coast road, and partly because the air staff said—with some justice—that the army did not know what it really wanted. There was definite room for an improvement in the technique of calling for air support, and there is evidence to show that the lesson was taken to heart by all concerned.

As 4 Light Armoured Brigade went forward it reported from time to time in the best manner of a scouting force. It soon became evident that the enemy had forestalled the Division on objective PLUM— *15 Panzer Division* was in fact already there—and the light armoured brigade was not equipped to drive him off, for at the time, about midday, the Greys' tanks were still in the rear of the brigade. So it veered off to the west and by mid-afternoon reached the vicinity of Merduma, with its leading armoured car regiment (Royals) on the right in sight of the road at *Bir el Haddadia*.

Divisional Cavalry, west of the Royals, also approached the road just west of *Bir el Haddadia* about 4 p.m., and was met there by fire, reported as coming from dug-in tanks and guns; but it appears unlikely that tanks were in this area, for the enemy troops came from either *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* or one of the reconnaissance units. A battery from the RHA attached to Divisional

¹ Saniet= deep well.

Cavalry opened fire, scattered transport moving along the road and knocked out a gun. As no contact had been made by nightfall with 6 Infantry Brigade, which had been expected to strike the road in the

vicinity, Divisional Cavalry laagered where it was for the night of 15–16 December, and in the outcome was isolated from the rest of the Division.

The bulk of 4 Light Armoured Brigade laagered for the night some four to six miles north-west of **Bir el Merduma**, and here at last was joined by the Greys. **General Freyberg** during the evening sent a personal message to the commander 7 Armoured Division apologising for not sending back A Squadron, Staffs Yeomanry, and saying it would rejoin next day (16 December), which it did.

By the evening of 15 December the Sherman tanks of the Greys and A Squadron, Staffs Yeomanry, were down to 17. They had started out with 26.

Sixth Infantry Brigade Group reached the **Bir el Merduma** area in the afternoon, but passed to the south of the Bir itself, and in fact—although this was not then realised—went on to cross **Wadi er Rigel**, followed by **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group. This completed a journey of about 50 miles for the day. Without doubt the whole column missed **Bir el Merduma** by some miles; for there is sufficient detail from German documents to clarify the point. During the day the enemy posted flank guards parallel to the main road and five to ten miles south of it. First **15 Panzer Division** was sent to ‘Point 123’ (the objective PLUM) and stayed there until in the late afternoon it was directed on **Bir el Merduma**—a move some 18 miles farther west—as the first stage of a withdrawal to **Nofilia**. In the early afternoon a battle group from **21 Panzer Division**, including tanks, was sent to Merduma pending the arrival of **15 Panzer Division**. Both these forces reported columns of troops advancing north-west at some distance to the south of them. One report at 4.20 p.m. said that enemy troops were ten kilometres south of Merduma, and there are other reports to much the same effect.

It has been seen that 4 Light Armoured Brigade was trending to the west. Sixth Infantry Brigade followed, and during the day must have

borne off farther to the west, no doubt in the process of selecting good going. There was nothing especially distinctive about **Bir el Merduma**, for the landing ground was some few miles to the north-east; and although a number of tracks converged at the point, the desert at this time was criss-crossed by tracks, all looking much the same in their vagueness. In addition there was no special tactical virtue in **Bir el Merduma**, except for the landing ground. It had been chosen merely because it was a feature that appeared on the map, and so might be easily identifiable, and was suitably placed as a point from which to turn north and advance to the road, where it was hoped that part at least of the enemy would be cut off. But the Division's movements had now assumed a course parallel to the retreating enemy, reducing any hope of interception.

It was fortunate, as it turned out, that the Division did not go to Merduma, for it was subsequently discovered to be heavily mined.

Shortly after halting in the new area Brigadier Gentry, uneasy about locations, visited **General Freyberg** at his Tactical Headquarters, and was assured that they were at **Bir el Merduma**. The GOC's opinion probably was based upon what he believed had been navigation by the LRDG patrol. But the patrol had not been doing the navigation on 15 December; the column had merely followed its nose. When, after dark, Captain Browne took star observations, it was soon discovered that Tactical Headquarters was four miles west of **Wadi er Rigel** and eight miles west from **Bir el Merduma**.

During this visit Brigadier Gentry was instructed to move northwards and cut the road. By this time, 5 p.m., it was getting dusk. The brigade began to move, Orders Group ¹ leading, and still in desert formation. It was not found possible to arrange for a promised squadron of tanks to be detached from the Greys during the hours of darkness.

During the day (15 December) 51 (Highland) Division, on the coast road, was again greatly impeded by mines. By evening the leading troops had only reached **El Agheila**. To the south **8 Armoured Brigade** crossed

the Giofer road south-west of **El Agheila**, but here was hindered by bad going. Finally, at the antitank ditch in the **El Mugtaa Narrows**, it discovered the rearguard of *21 Panzer Division*. The **Desert Air Force** had a good day against concentrated transport to the west and south of **Marble Arch**, but the doubt over bomblines hampered greater efforts.

During the night of 14–15 December nearly all enemy troops withdrew behind a rearguard formed by *21 Panzer Division*, leaving only light forces to oppose the advancing British troops. About midday on 15 December *21 Panzer* was behind the Narrows, *90 Light* was passing through en route to a new rearguard position west of **Wadi Matratin**, *Ariete Battle Group* was on its way back

¹ The Orders Group included the commanders of the units in the brigade group (which might include the three battalions, a field regiment, and sometimes a regiment or squadron of armour) and of the supporting arms (anti-tank battery, anti-aircraft battery, field company, machine-gun company); it might also include staff officers from Brigade Headquarters.

to **Nofilia**, *33 Reconnaissance Unit* was in touch with the foremost troops of *4 Light Armoured Brigade*, *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* and *580 Reconnaissance Unit* were on their way to take up positions on the high ground flanking the road between **Marble Arch** and Matratin, and *15 Panzer Division* was on the high ground south-east of **Marble Arch** (the objective PLUM).

Rommel was fully aware of the danger to be expected from the outflanking move, and had already instructed *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* and *580 Reconnaissance Unit* that they must keep the road open for the withdrawal of *Africa Corps*. During the afternoon *33 Reconnaissance Unit*, farther south, withdrew gradually before the advance of *2 NZ Division*; and finally *Headquarters Africa Corps* asked *Army Headquarters* for permission to withdraw *21 Panzer Division*. This application was at first refused 'on the ground that the petrol situation at the moment would not allow all formations to withdraw to

the next position at **Nofilia**'. The operative word here was 'moment', for literally the parts of the army were living from hour to hour.

However, as we have seen, a group from **21 Panzer Division** and the whole of **15 Panzer** were in the end sent to the Merduma area to relieve the strain on **33 Reconnaissance Unit**, which at the time was the only unit in contact with the outflanking force.

Ultimately the danger to the **21 Panzer Division** rearguard made it necessary to sanction its withdrawal, initially as far as **Marble Arch**, and about 10 p.m. to **Nofilia**. The German narrative says 'the enemy situation made it impossible to hold the present area on 16 December. Army therefore decided to break contact with the enemy on the night 15–16 December and to withdraw to the **Nofilia** area. The petrol brought forward during the day was just enough for this limited move.'

Africa Corps was to withdraw to **Nofilia** forthwith, **21 Panzer** along the coast road, **15 Panzer** along the inland track Merduma— **Nofilia**, each division in co-operation with its detached reconnaissance unit; **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment** was to disengage separately and go back to **Nofilia**; **90 Light Division** was to stay as rearguard in a position west of **Wadi Matratin**. All these moves commenced at nightfall.

But at 8 p.m. **33 Reconnaissance Unit** reported that a strong enemy force, including fifty tanks, had broken through its positions west of Merduma and was advancing on **Nofilia**. Such was the effect, seen from the enemy side, of the advance of 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 6 Infantry Brigade, with the tanks of the Greys and Divisional Cavalry. The result was to speed up the enemy movements, and to some degree to induce a *sauve-qui-peut*, in that **33 Reconnaissance Unit** was told to withdraw at once by itself to a point west of **Nofilia**; and **Africa Corps** and **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment** were told to withdraw without further delay. Nevertheless **21 Panzer Division** had to wait until 1 a.m. on the 16th before it had enough petrol, and **15 Panzer Division** was in an even worse plight.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

6 BRIGADE ADVANCES

6 Brigade Advances

Sixth Brigade Group advanced northwards about 5 p.m., with instructions to block the coast road. When the light began to fail the brigade halted to close up into night formation, while six carriers were sent out on a bearing of 45 degrees to reconnoitre to the road; they had to refuel, so did not get away until 7.15 p.m. Wireless communication with them failed after they had gone about two miles, and Brigade Headquarters lost touch with them. Meanwhile the brigade moved on; the country became more and more difficult to traverse, for it now included a number of small wadis with soft bottoms. Visibility was poor as there was only a half-moon often obscured by clouds.

The carriers actually reached the road close to [Wadi Matratin](#) and heard vehicles passing along it. They came back along what they thought was the brigade axis, and in the dark missed the brigade column, which probably had deviated a little from its first course.

The brigade was by this time tangled up in the network of wadis that finally merge into [Wadi Matratin](#). It had been estimated that the road was only four miles away from the point at which the carriers had been detached; but when the brigade had advanced that distance there was still no sign of the road, so a second carrier patrol was sent forward with a special wireless set and instructions to report at the end of each mile. Because of the earlier error in navigation, the brigade, when it turned to the north, was something like ten miles from the road.

At the end of another three miles' advance the second patrol reported that the road appeared to be about a mile ahead, judging by the sound of traffic, and that a wadi immediately in front of the brigade was impassable to vehicles in the dark. Brigadier Gentry then went forward to reconnoitre, accompanied by the three battalion commanders and the

officers commanding 6 Field Regiment and 8 Field Company. They went a little farther than the carrier patrol had gone previously and ran into an enemy post on a ridge. The leading carrier in which the brigade commander was travelling was knocked out by an anti-tank gun at very close range, but he escaped unharmed although the driver was reported killed. Major **Reid**, ¹ of 8 Field Company, was hit in the arm and was evacuated after some difficulty to the advanced dressing station.

The Brigadier got clear and then reported to the GOC by radio that the brigade was in contact with the enemy and about a mile and a half or less from the road. He was given discretion whether or not to attack, and decided to do so. The time was about 11.30 p.m. but the ridge in front was faintly discernible. In the circumstances it was not the place for any elaborate plan. The **24th Battalion** (Major Webb ²) was ordered to attack silently on the left on a bearing of 45 degrees, and 25 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Bonifant** ³) on the right on a bearing of 94 degrees. They were to capture the enemy position on the ridge, dig in, and get their anti-tank guns sited before dawn. Each battalion was given a troop of anti-tank guns from 33 Battery, and a platoon of machine guns from 2 MG Company. The 8th Field Company was to block the main road and its verges with mines. The **26th Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel Fountaine ⁴) was in reserve.

The attack began at 12.30 a.m. on 16 December, each battalion having two companies forward and two in reserve. The 25th advanced 2000 yards, made no contact with the enemy and took up a position which it thought overlooked the road. So far the battalion had had only one casualty, from shellfire. The 24th, on the left, encountered some sporadic shelling, and then, having advanced about 1000 yards and reached the first crest of the ridge, was resisted by a force estimated to be of about three companies. The battalion pressed its attack and the enemy withdrew by transport in some disorder. The battalion had seven casualties, including the CO, who was wounded by mortar fire and evacuated to the advanced dressing station. Major J. **Conolly** ⁵ took command. Later in the day, while in an ambulance car on the way back

from the advanced to the main dressing station, both Major Reid and Major Webb were captured by the enemy. Major Reid was subsequently found in hospital in **Tripoli**.

¹ **Lt-Col H. M. Reid**, MC and bar, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Auckland**, 21 Mar 1904; civil engineer; OC **6 Fd Coy** Jun–Aug 1942; **8 Fd Coy** Aug–Dec 1942; comd NZ Forestry Group (**UK**) Jul–Oct 1943; attached Air Ministry Dec 1943–Feb 1944; twice wounded; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1942; released, **Tripoli**, 23 Jan 1943.

² **Lt-Col R. G. Webb**, ED, m.i.d.; Pukehou; born Stratford, 5 Aug 1906; schoolmaster; CO **24 Bn** 22 Nov–16 Dec 1942; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1942; headmaster, Te Aute College.

³ **Brig I. L. Bonifant**, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; **Adelaide**; born **Ashburton**, 3 Mar 1912; stock agent; CO **25 Bn** Sep 1942–Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943–Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3–27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan–May 1945; 6 Bde Jun–Oct 1945.

⁴ **Col D. J. Fountaine**, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Westport; born Westport, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO **20 Bn** Jul–Aug 1942; **26 Bn** Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jun–Oct 1944; comd NZ Adv Base Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

⁵ **Lt-Col J. Conolly**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Waihi**, 15 Aug 1908; school teacher; CO **24 Bn** Dec 1942–Apr 1944; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

By 2.15 a.m. 24 Battalion was on its objective, but there was a gap between the two units. The location of the battalions was believed to be about **Bir el Haddadia**, facing north-east, and at 7.30 a.m. this was reported to **Divisional Headquarters**, which seems to show that there was still some doubt about the point where the turn to the road had been made. Had the turn been round **Bir el Merduma**, the road would certainly have been struck near **Bir el Haddadia**; but in fact the battalions were in

the vicinity of **Saniet Matratin**, and were still anything up to two miles short of the road.

Subsequently there was some argument over the 'mistake in navigation'; but provided the road was cut before the main enemy forces passed along it, the place where it was cut did not much matter. **Saniet Matratin** was just as good as **Bir el Haddadia**. From **Bir el Merduma** to the road at **Bir el Haddadia** is about nine miles; from the turning point near **Wadi er Rigel** to the road at **Saniet Matratin** is about ten or eleven miles, and the country is equally rough in either place.

The mistake in navigation, therefore, mattered little. What mattered more was having to advance all the way to the road in darkness. It would have been better to have operated over this unknown country in daylight. Thus the delay in refuelling the Greys in the morning of 15 December, with the consequential delay to 6 Brigade, was unfortunate. But for this delay, 6 Brigade would have had three or four hours' more daylight for the advance and for reconnaissance. The final result of an advance to the road in daylight, with an enemy flank guard already in position guarding it, can only be guessed at, for many 'ifs' and 'provideds' make speculation hopeless; but a few hours' more daylight, and the support of tanks and artillery thus made available, would have helped.

During the hours of darkness that remained on the night of 15–16 December the forward battalions heard the continuous noise of transport moving westwards along the road—an exasperating sound. The engineers from 8 Field Company had difficulty in starting their move, and it was 4 a.m. before they set off. They laid mines near the area occupied by the battalions, but this was unfortunately some distance from the road. It had to be accepted that the road had not been cut.

By the time Main Divisional Headquarters and the Reserve Group paused west of **Wadi er Rigel** it was dark. Reserve Group had become strung out and 5 Brigade fell some way behind; so as darkness was approaching, **Brigadier Kippenberger** went ahead of his brigade to catch

up with the GOC. The first instructions he received were to carry on until he caught up with 6 Brigade, but just before his own brigade arrived (about 7 p.m.) he was told by the GOC not to proceed but to deploy facing east.

There were good reasons for this change of plan. The Division was becoming so spread out as to reduce its value as a fighting force. Divisional Cavalry and 4 Light Armoured Brigade were already distributed over the desert, not to say scattered; and at that moment the course of events for 6 Brigade had yet to be determined. To send 5 Brigade farther north on the heels of the 6th might only lead to confusion in the darkness between the two brigades. The exact location of the enemy was not known, nor yet his intention. And finally there was the imminent arrival in the area south-west of **Divisional Headquarters** of Administrative Group, an enormous collection of soft-skinned vehicles carrying, among other things, the reserve supply of petrol. Protection of soft-skinned vehicles was always a problem in desert warfare, and both sides had had experience of supply columns being overrun. The smallest of enemy fighting forces could cause carnage among such vehicles; one enemy tank was more than the equal of a legion of trucks. It was therefore most desirable that a fighting force should stand between Administrative Group and any likely enemy line of approach.

If the darkness and the fog of war, the unknown and difficult country at the last stage of a rapid advance by a long, widely dispersed column and the lack of definite information about the enemy are taken into account, it is perhaps no wonder that observers at the time noted that they had never known the GOC so worried. The picture is a striking one, with the various senior officers— **Brigadier Kippenberger**, Brigadier Harvey, the CRA (Brigadier Weir ¹), the GSO I (Colonel Queree)— consulting with the GOC either in his caravan or in the darkness outside, while around them there gradually assembled the vehicles of 5 Brigade and of Administrative Group, all travelling without lights, each vehicle guided by the one in front and even then by only a faint light

well underneath it illuminating a white patch on the differential. It remains something to wonder at that all these vehicles could move at night for hours over unknown and broken ground, and yet retain some cohesion.

¹ Maj-Gen Sir Stephen Weir, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; **Bangkok**; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO **6 Fd Regt Sep 1939–Dec 1941**; CRA **2 NZ Div Dec 1941–Jun 1944**; GOC **2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944**; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commander, Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG, Army HQ, 1951–55; Chief of General Staff 1955–60; Military Adviser to NZ Govt, 1960–61; NZ Ambassador to **Thailand**, Oct 1961–.

Fifth Brigade also soon found out the difficulties of night deployment in unknown country; for when the time came to take up dispositions on the ground, the King's Royal Rifle Corps, the infantry battalion of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, was found in the area allotted to 23 Battalion and had to be asked to side-slip off to the right (south) or at least to move away, which it later did after consultation with its own brigade headquarters. The three battalions of 5 Brigade were each given bearings to march on and told to go out for a definite distance, the outcome being that the brigade line ran from north to south in the order of 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Harding), 23 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Romans** ¹) and 28 (Maori) Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel **Bennett** ²). The total frontage was some 9000 yards, about two miles to the east of **Divisional Headquarters** but still west of **Wadi er Rigel**. The 7th Field Company had been intended to prolong the line to the south, but after helping 5 Field Regiment with bulldozers to dig in its guns, the company filled a 600-yard gap that was discovered between 23 and 28 Battalions. The brigade was reinforced during the night and in the early morning by 4 Field Regiment, two anti-tank batteries and two machine-gun companies, all drawn from Reserve Group. Ammunition Company established an ammunition point just west of **Divisional Headquarters**, and 6 Field Ambulance a Main Dressing Station in the same area.

It was soon learnt that there was a gap between the brigades, although not the extent of it. During the night the GOC considered filling this with an armoured car unit of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, but no effective action was taken before daylight; and in any case armoured cars were not the best answer in an anti-tank gun line. It was not until after daybreak that the extent of the gap—at least six miles—was known.

When, some time before midnight, some information about enemy movements was available, it became clear that even a protective line to the east might not be sufficient to guard Administrative Group, and that it would be better to move it well away. The group was sent ten miles back along the divisional axis, and completed the move just after midnight. And then, later still, 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported that enemy vehicles—not identified—were moving south-west from a point to the east of **Bir el Merduma**. If correct, this was a threat to Administrative

¹ **Lt-Col R. E. Romans**, DSO, m.i.d.; born Arrowtown, 10 Sep 1909; business manager; CO **23 Bn** Jul 1942–Apr 1943, Aug–Dec 1943; twice wounded; died of wounds 19 Dec 1943.

² **Lt-Col C. M. Bennett**, DSO; Kuala Lumpur; born **Rotorua**, 27 Jul 1913; radio announcer; CO **28 (Maori) Bn** Nov 1942–Apr 1943; wounded 20 Apr 1943; High Commissioner for NZ in **Malaya**.

Group in its new area, and it was ordered to retire another ten miles south-east. Owing to time lag the move was not started until 6 a.m. on the 16th but it was completed safely. In retrospect there is a touch of macabre humour about the first retirement of the group, for far from being safer it was getting perilously close to the night laager of **15 Panzer Division** near Merduma.

Brigadier Harvey told the GOC that in his opinion enemy columns

moving westwards would bump 5 Brigade. The GOC agreed that Divisional Cavalry should withdraw at dawn from its exposed position east of the Division, where some Sherman tanks were to be left. The rest of the Shermans and armoured cars were to concentrate on the right (southern) flank.

The CRA had reconnoitred towards the road early in the night, and on return reported that it would not be possible to register the guns owing to the combination of darkness and uncertainty of location. It thus appeared that the guns would not be fully ready by first light. Those supporting 6 Brigade had at least the general line of the road as a target, but those supporting 5 Brigade were doubly 'in the dark'.

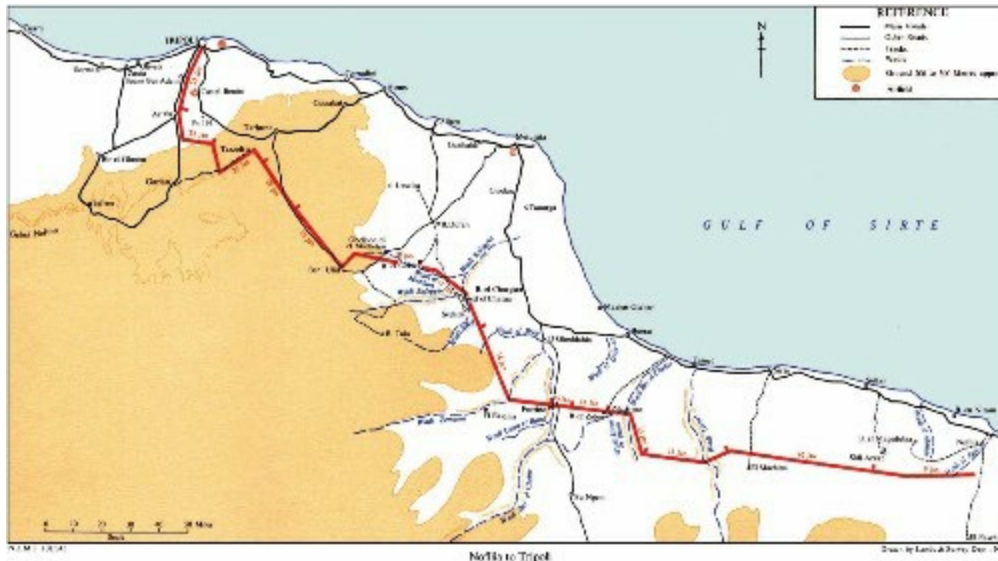
One way and another the situation of the Division left much to be desired. **General Freyberg** intimated as much in a situation report sent to **30 Corps** at 9 p.m.: 'Difficult to fix positions after long fast journey and hard to deploy in moonlight. Could not get in in time to register guns. Will make every attempt stop enemy east of us but with the present difficulties cannot guarantee to succeed.' The message ends with the rueful words, 'we appear to have our hands full at present.'

A belated message from **30 Corps** arrived during the evening saying, 'Delighted your progress. Secure **Marble Arch** and Merduma. Send light forces **Nofilia** landing grounds. Clear road eastwards second priority.' At this stage **30 Corps** had decided to carry on the pursuit with 7 Armoured Division and 2 NZ Division only, leaving 51 Division at **El Agheila**.

It was hoped at **Divisional Headquarters** at this time, about midnight on 15–16 December, that the enemy, if he fought his way through the cavalry and some supporting Shermans, would then find himself confronted by 6 Brigade astride the road, and by 5 Brigade farther south, with the remaining tanks available to assist where needed. This plan, however, was handicapped by the small number of tanks available and the gap between the brigades, the extent of which was yet unknown.

During the night **General Freyberg** visited 5 Brigade on foot, and

caused some anxiety to his staff, who scoured the desert in all directions looking for him. For in darkness in the desert it was quite possible to walk away from a truck for a short distance and then lose all sense of direction, especially if the stars or moon were obscured.



Nofilia to Tripoli

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ESCAPES—16 DECEMBER

The Enemy escapes—16 December

At 5.45 a.m. **30 Corps** advised, 'Elements **21 Pz 90 Lt 33 Recce** believed 1700 hrs [15 December] still east of **Marble Arch**. **15 Pz** directed **Merduma**. Take up suitable positions destroy any forces still trapped. **7 Armd Div** pressing from the east.'

When received, this message was already twelve hours old and enemy locations might well have changed during the night; but **Freyberg** made a firmer plan based on the information to date. All formations were warned that there might be up to a hundred tanks still to the east. The **4th Light Armoured Brigade** was to withdraw **Divisional Cavalry** for use as a mobile reserve and for reconnaissance; the armoured car regiments were to reconnoitre to the south-east and west; **KRRC** was to withdraw to the west for rear protection; ¹ and all the heavy tanks of the **Greys** and **Staffs Yeomanry** were to concentrate for battle. **Fifth Infantry Brigade** was to extend northwards slightly to reduce the gap between the two brigades, with its line facing north-east, east and south-east. The **Reserve Group en bloc** came under command of **5 Brigade** for use in support. **Sixth Infantry Brigade** was to prepare for all-round defence and take every opportunity to shoot up the road and harry the enemy. The divisional artillery, including a troop of medium guns, was to co-ordinate. It seemed possible that the Division had got right round the **Africa Corps**, and it thus made ready to seize its opportunity.

These orders were issued before dawn, but not until 8.10 a.m. was it discovered that the gap between **5 and 6 Brigades** was greater than had been thought, and was reported to amount to **10 ½ miles**, although later the figure was estimated at some six or seven miles.

At this time (8.10 a.m.) enemy troops were still anything but clear of danger. The **33rd Reconnaissance Unit** was safely back at **Nofilia**, and

Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment had retired from its flank-guard position east of Matratin and was also safe. But ***21 Panzer Division*** was still withdrawing along the ***Via Balbia***, and while its head had reached ***Nofilia*** its tail was not yet clear of Matratin. The ***90th Light Division*** was in position at ***Saniet Matratin*** as army rearguard. And ***15 Panzer Division*** had not begun its move from Merduma until about 6.30 a.m. It had been waiting for petrol, and for some hours had been vulnerable. Even then it

¹ But later on KRRC assembled and followed its brigade, as it took some part in the pursuit of ***15 Panzer Division***.

had only enough petrol to get to ***Nofilia***, and was quite aware that it would have to break through to reach safety. It had about twenty-seven tanks, including some from ***21 Division***.

About 7 a.m. 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported soft-skinned vehicles about 12 miles south of ***Bir el Merduma***, which were probably part of Administrative Group. Shortly afterwards it discovered enemy tanks moving north-westwards from Merduma, and kept contact thereafter. About 8 a.m., after recall to the southwest from its overnight laager, Divisional Cavalry ran into part of the enemy at the crossing of ***Wadi er Rigel*** west of Merduma. Both sides were surprised and exchanged fire at close range, but as the enemy column included some seven tanks, which outgunned its own, Divisional Cavalry withdrew westwards until it reached 5 Brigade. It had two officers and three men killed in this brief encounter.

Thereafter events moved swiftly. In the next two hours units of 5 Brigade Group saw and reported enemy vehicles of all natures, well dispersed. Artillery opened fire on tanks and transport at ranges from 5000 to 8000 yards. The three battalions reported almost in succession from south to north that an enemy column was passing across their front, moving rapidly. There were signs that the enemy was making small reconnaissances of the brigade line, and finding opposition, was

swinging away to the north-west, which was the course followed by the inland track from Merduma to **Nofilia**. By the time the enemy was crossing the front of 21 Battalion at the northern end of 5 Brigade's line, enemy tanks came close enough to cause the left-flank company, newly arrived to extend the line northwards, to withdraw some 250 yards. Unfortunately the anti-tank guns, which might have come into action at a reasonable range, had not arrived in time from other positions farther south. The 5th Field Regiment and then 4 Field Regiment opened fire against the column, but the enemy moved out of range very fast. **Brigadier Kippenberger** hastily organised a mobile column from anti-tank and machine-gun units and from carriers of all three battalions; but though this force pursued the enemy for some hours, it did not get within range.

However, 4 Light Armoured Brigade did intercept some of the enemy column, and in a running battle the Greys knocked out two tanks and a few other vehicles and took twenty prisoners for the loss of one tank and a few vehicles. But the enemy was moving too fast for the Greys and by mid-morning the brigade's armoured cars could only report that the enemy was moving away north-west, that the tail of the column was just to the south of 6 Infantry Brigade, and that the head of it was already nearly 20 miles away, moving towards **Nofilia**. The light armoured brigade was then directed towards the road on a wide front, with the object of co-operating with 6 Brigade and shooting up any stray enemy vehicles that might be found.

In a message to **30 Corps** at 9.45 a.m., the GOC had said, 'Gap between 5 and 6 Brigades and many will escape. Will inflict maximum damage we can.' Thus his message sent in at 12.14 p.m. cannot have been unexpected. 'Enemy in small columns incl tanks passed through at high speed and wide dispersion. Most difficult to intercept. Majority escaped around our flanks and through gap. Have given hurry-up but little more....' It was a frank and honest report, albeit bitterly disappointing.

The German narrative says briefly, '... 15 Panzer Division, which had

been caught between the advance guard and the main body of an enemy force succeeded in breaking through the advance guard from the rear under a protective screen and in storming its way out towards **Nofilia**’; and while the description of the layout of our troops is defective, the ‘storming’ is accurate. ¹ *Africa Corps*’ diary merely notes that *15 Panzer Division* reached certain points from time to time, and that at 11.45 a.m. the head of the division was at **Nofilia**, with British troops following up the rearguard. The *15th Panzer Division* accurately reports the encounter with Divisional Cavalry and then says ‘the main body of the enemy stayed south of the division as it moved on, and contented itself with harassing us with shellfire’. Apparently during its withdrawal *15 Panzer Division* was not aware of the presence of 6 Brigade to its north. Neither *15* nor *21 Panzer Division* had any petrol left when it arrived at **Nofilia**.

When daylight came that morning, the outlook was not as comforting as 6 Infantry Brigade Group would have wished, for as they had rather expected, neither 25 nor 24 Battalion was close to the road. The promised Sherman tanks had not yet arrived, and it was found that 24 Battalion's view was obscured by a ridge in front, later known to be Point 73 at **Saniet Matratin**. Both the enemy and our own troops advanced to occupy this ridge at much

¹ In a letter to the author the late **Sir Howard Kippenberger** referred to the escape of the enemy: ‘They were pretty wary, didn't mean to get caught and got out in time. **Monty [Fairbrother]** and I both remember an intercept we heard of at the time—it isn't in any records we have. Panzer-Gruppe Afrika [Rommel's H.Q.] told either 15 or 21 Pz Divs that N.Z. Div was moving round and threatening the road. We were pleased with his reply—“That's alright. We've got our petrol, the chaps are in good heart and we'll get away all right”. Which is our recollection of the translation of the intercept.’

The commander of *15 Panzer Division*, Major-General Borowietz, was distinguished by his *élan* in the field and his skilful handling of armour. In a post-war publication Marshal Messe, who later had Borowietz under his command, expresses a high

opinion of him.

the same time. The enemy arrived first, but was dislodged by a quick attack by Lieutenant **Masefield**¹ with part of his platoon from B Company, and the road was then in full view. But before a forward observation officer could get there, the ridge had been lost in a counter-attack. It appeared to our troops that the enemy had tanks; but the war diary of *90 Light Division* explicitly mentions the lack of tank support, and continues that its troops on Point 73 came under terrific fire from 'enemy heavy weapons, carriers, and tanks in reverse slope positions'. This inclusion of tanks was also incorrect. It was not the first, nor the last time, that other vehicles had been mistaken for tanks—by both sides.

The foremost positions of 25 Battalion were anything up to two miles from the road, and the unit carriers confirmed an earlier report that the enemy was retiring in three columns on and parallel to the road. Both 6 Field Regiment and 2 Machine-Gun Company opened fire, but the only result was to speed up the enemy withdrawal. It was soon obvious that most of the enemy transport had already passed, and that only the tail was passing now; and by 12.15 p.m. movement on the road east of **Wadi Matratin** had ceased.

During the morning the enemy west of 6 Brigade, on high ground overlooking many of the brigade vehicles, caused some trouble by opening fire with anti-tank guns, mortars, and small arms. C Company, 26 Battalion (Captain **Sinclair**²), with supporting fire from a troop of 25-pounders, two-pounders, mortars, and Vickers guns (including one Captain **Moore**³ had mounted in the back of a jeep), attacked a hill from which the enemy fled, leaving two scared Germans, five anti-tank guns and some other equipment.

This flurry was the last engagement of the morning, and not long afterwards the enemy withdrew. The *90th Light Division* reported that it started its withdrawal at 2 p.m. and that it was not pursued.

Sixth Infantry Brigade during the night and morning captured some 34 prisoners, eight 50-millimetre guns, 25 machine guns, seven small cars, and other odd vehicles. The prisoners were from *200 Panzer Grenadier Regiment of 90 Light*; but all of them either escaped in the darkness or were recaptured by the retreating *15 Panzer Division*, which claimed to have knocked out or captured

¹ **Lt R. T. Masefield, MC; Hamilton; born NZ 1 Jun 1918; clerk; wounded 16 Dec 1942.**

² **Maj J. J. D. Sinclair; Christchurch; born Blenheim, 21 Dec 1908; school teacher; wounded 26 Apr 1943.**

³ **Maj I. S. Moore, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 11 Aug 1909; dairy farmer; wounded 21 Apr 1943.**

various vehicles. One odd, and to the enemy surprising capture, was the American Field Service driver of the ambulance car in which Majors Webb and Reid were taken prisoner.

The New Zealand Division's total casualties were 11 killed, 29 wounded, and 8 prisoners.

General Freyberg visited 6 Brigade at 3 p.m. and discussed the next moves. Later in the afternoon he reported to the Corps Commander in a personal message: 'Just returned from the vicinity of main rd [road]. Country even in single file by daylight most difficult. Neither tanks nor armd Cs [armoured cars] could get through last night. Inf on foot did after midnight but were counter attacked. Unable to harass rd until after daylight this morning. Enemy still in position and contesting ground overlooking road. Traffic being shot up by guns and forced from desert tracks to rd. Armd Cs and Div Cav harassing rd further west. Enemy in strength and morale of PWs high.'

So ended the first phase of the new campaign. The high hopes of

cutting off even some of the retreating enemy had come to nothing, partly because greater speed was possible along the road than across the desert, partly because the enemy was well seasoned and adopted the orthodox safeguards of flank and rear guards, and partly because of the difficulties of deploying by night in unknown country at the end of a long and tiring move.

Nevertheless the Division had moved far and fast, certainly faster than the enemy had expected. The enemy was on the alert, started his withdrawal sooner than anticipated, and had such an effective scheme of minefields, booby traps and demolitions that he could withdraw his troops at his own speed and had removed many of them before 2 NZ Division appeared on the scene. It was an achievement, however, to have tipped the enemy out of the [El Agheila](#) position in a matter of three or four days, and to hustle and even rattle him in the process. As long as air reconnaissance was available to the defender, complete surprise could not be achieved by an outflanking force. The enemy soon became aware of the Division's march, but was deceived by its speed.

To have succeeded, the Division would have needed more tanks, which could have been provided only at the expense of 7 Armoured Division and would have necessitated a greatly enlarged administrative group. It is probable, however, that tanks operating with 2 NZ Division would have achieved more than with 7 Armoured Division, where the ground and the enemy's delaying measures made any advance a slow one.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 4 – NOFILIA

CHAPTER 4

Nofilia

Tidying Up

IN the afternoon the GOC issued instructions for the Division to concentrate. Sixth Brigade Group was to join the rest of the Division, a move back of some ten miles, as 5 Brigade Group would take over the lead when movement resumed. The advance, however, was not to commence until early on 17 December.

At first sight it seems a strange manoeuvre, not only to halt, but to withdraw the foremost troops. The only follow-up was from 4 Light Armoured Brigade, its tanks for some 15 miles and the armoured cars to within a few miles of **Nofilia**. There was no other attempt to hustle the enemy after the excursions of the morning. In **Brigadier Kippenberger's** words, 5 Brigade and no doubt most of the Division 'spent that day, 16 December, thinking things over'. ¹

The German war diaries all remark on the pressure exerted on their units in the early morning. The *15th Panzer Division* was shaken by its breakthrough, and went straight to **Nofilia**, disregarding instructions to make an intermediate stand. But all diaries comment on the lack of pressure during the afternoon. The *15th Panzer* says, 'for some inexplicable reason the main body of the enemy column remained stationary and did not attack'. The *90th Light Division* 'was enabled to hold its present positions until nightfall', and 'the enemy did not pursue'. After reading the German accounts, it seems that a quick follow-up would have kept the enemy on the move and driven him out of **Nofilia** before he had a chance to consolidate; but he was given nearly twenty-four hours to prepare.

It was fully midday, however, before it was known that the whole of the enemy had escaped, and it would have been unwise to move before this knowledge became certain. An enemy tank force at large in the rear of the Division, while it was attenuated and on the move, might have

proved more than troublesome. The decision, therefore, was to make haste slowly, revive the troops who were in need of rest and concentrate the Division for an early start on the morrow.

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 252.

Arrangements for 17 December were, then, that 4 Light Armoured Brigade, with Divisional Cavalry under command, would lead the advance, followed by 5 Brigade Group, Divisional Reserve Group and **Divisional Headquarters**, 6 Brigade Group and Administrative Group. The head of 4 Light Armoured Brigade—less its armoured cars already out in front—was to pass the starting point at 7 a.m. This point, near **Divisional Headquarters**, would be indicated by a column of black smoke. In view of the muddled navigation on 15 December, it was made clear that the LRDG patrol would be responsible for leading the column, moving with the route-marking detachment of the **Provost Company**.

The Air Force had difficulties in the morning of 16 December owing to the confused form of the ground operations, and the uncertainty as to just who was who in the mass of swirling vehicles, but later in the day attacked the enemy round **Nofilia**. The 7th Armoured Division reached **Marble Arch** at midday, and armoured cars from the two divisions were in touch with each other in the afternoon. The enemy had left so many mines, booby traps and demolitions that 7 Armoured Division made no contact with his troops on 16 or 17 December. Booby traps were so various in type that Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson has said ¹ that at this stage the sappers became suspicious of everything, and even if a gold watch had been lying on the desert no one would have touched it.

Behind 7 Armoured Division came 51 (H) Division clearing the road, again a slow task. By evening it was fully cleared only as far as the junction with the track to **Marada**, 40 miles behind.

Originally 2 NZ Division was to have been responsible for clearing landing grounds at both **Marble Arch** and Merduma, and engineers had

travelled with 4 Light Armoured Brigade for early reconnaissance, but the course of events had taken the Division farther to the south and west, while 7 Armoured Division had now reached **Marble Arch**. So 2 NZ Division was made responsible for Merduma, and for **Nofilia** later. A detachment from 6 Field Company (Major **Anderson** ²), with an escort of anti-tank guns and machine-gunners, started work on Merduma at 3 p.m. on 16 December. The ground had been heavily mined and booby-trapped, but one runway was cleared by 4 p.m. next day, and aircraft were able to land successfully shortly afterwards. The New Zealand party then handed the work over to the **Royal Engineers** and rejoined the Division.

¹ In a report to **War History Branch**.

² **Lt-Col J. N. Anderson**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Te Awamutu**; born Okaihau, 15 Apr 1894; civil engineer; OC 5 Fd Pk Coy Sep 1941–Oct 1942; **6 Fd Coy** Oct 1942–Aug 1943; CRE **2 NZ Div** Apr–Nov 1944; OC Engr Trg Depot 1945.

Sixth Brigade Group duly returned from its forward position and took post towards the rear of the Division, while 5 Infantry Brigade Group assembled and moved two miles north. In the evening the Corps orders for the next day's move arrived, but contained nothing new except that 7 Armoured Division, after clearing the airfield at **Marble Arch** and the road west, was 'to assist 2 NZ Division as required' in the performance of its engineer tasks. As the armoured division was to concentrate in an area behind **Marble Arch**, it was clear that 2 NZ Division alone was to carry out the pursuit.

Meanwhile, during the afternoon of 16 December, the enemy concentrated round **Nofilia**. The *15th Panzer Division* went back in one bound and joined *21 Panzer*, which had reached there in good order. It was Rommel's intention, while work went on in the **Buerat** position, to hold another rearguard position here, on a line running from the sea north-east of **Nofilia**, behind the Wadi el Agar, including **Nofilia** village,

and then to the west and northwest towards Point 121. The *21st Panzer Division* was to hold the stretch from the sea to **Nofilia**—the ‘eastern face’—and *15 Panzer Division* from **Nofilia** to Point 121—the ‘southern face’. Then, in succession as flank guards to the main road, came *33 Reconnaissance Unit* 12 miles west of **Nofilia**, *580 Reconnaissance Unit* 20 miles west, and *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* 30 miles west. The *90th Light Division*, the rearguard on 16 December, in the end did not leave the area round Matratin until nightfall, and then moved well to the rear to a point about 40 miles west of **Nofilia**. It took no part in the later fighting in that area.

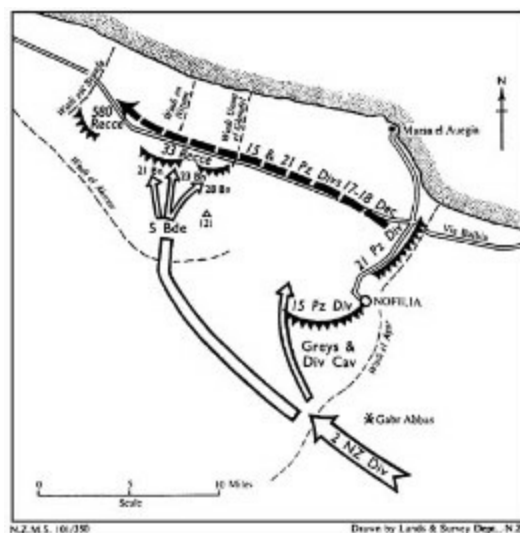
The New Zealand Division spent a quiet night, and was allowed to light fires to cook breakfast before dawn on 17 December. The Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General (Lieutenant-Colonel **Barrington**¹) remarked sadly that the Division thereby consumed enough petrol to move it for some miles.

¹ **Brig B. Barrington**, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born Marton, 2 Oct 1907; insurance inspector; SC 6 Bde Mar 1940–May 1941; BM 6 Bde May 1941–Jan 1942; DAQMG **2 NZ Div** May–Nov 1942; AA & QMG Nov 1942–Dec 1944; DA & QMG NZ Corps Feb–Mar 1944; died **Wellington**, 17 Apr 1954.

Attacking Nofilia

Before moving off in the morning of the 17th the Division requested that the approaches to **Nofilia** and the strongpoint itself should be bombed until 3 p.m., as it proposed to attack from the south-west. It will be noticed that **Nofilia** was alluded to as a ‘strongpoint’, so that it was expected that it would be strongly held. It must have become apparent during the advance that to, bomb the approaches until 3 p.m. meant that any attack must be delayed until that hour, for the Division, with only about 30 miles to go, would arrive long before then. The bomblines were therefore changed from time to time until the line ran clear to **Nofilia** to the west; except that towards evening a request was made for

the fort at **Nofilia** itself to be bombed. Records show some difference of opinion about whether **Nofilia** was in the end ever bombed at all. The **Desert Air Force** reported being unable to do any light bombing owing to rain and low cloud, and that its efforts were confined to two tactical reconnaissances. On the other hand, 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported bombs on **Nofilia** at 9.15 a.m. The weather in the divisional area was patchy, with bright periods; but there could have been rain and low cloud at the airfields.



OUTFLANKING NOFILIA, 17-18 DECEMBER
OUTFLANKING NOFILIA, 17-18 DECEMBER

The advance was resumed at 7 a.m. It took some time for the whole column to deploy into desert formation. Fifth Infantry Brigade Group, second in the order of march, blamed the B Echelon vehicles of 4 Light Armoured Brigade for holding them up, and **Divisional Headquarters** did not move off until 10 a.m., but the GOC moved as usual with his Tactical Headquarters well in front. In the early morning it appeared briefly from armoured car reports that **Nofilia** was clear, but very soon the enemy was located, and the information sent back by 4 Light Armoured Brigade gave a picture that was in fact accurate: a strong rearguard from the sea through **Nofilia** and then to the west, with a number of tanks estimated at twenty to twenty-five.

The Division carried out the advance without halts, in the hope of capturing the place that day. About midday 4 Light Armoured Brigade

closed up in strength to the enemy's advanced posts, with the Royals to the north-east of **Nofilia**, and the KDGs moving away to the north-west and west. The guns of 3 RHA were active against the village, and both 4 Field Regiment (from Reserve Group) and the troop from **211 Medium Battery** came into action against tanks and guns west of **Nofilia**.

About midday the Greys (which now had only five Grants and ten Shermans), accompanied by Divisional Cavalry, stormed into the enemy position west of **Nofilia** village, effected complete surprise, and captured about 250 prisoners from *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of **15 Panzer Division**. There followed some prolonged and lively exchanges between our tanks and those of the enemy, in which both the Greys and Divisional Cavalry accounted for enemy tanks. Honours in tank losses appear to have been about even. The Greys lost four, of which two were recovered; *15 Panzer* reported losing four also, but made a fantastic claim that they had knocked out twenty-one British tanks. In this engagement the commanding officer of the Greys, Lieutenant-Colonel Fiennes, was wounded and evacuated.

Subsequently this break-in on our part led to a special investigation by **Africa Corps**, with the usual numerous reports and with some censure on one or two people. It might have been some small consolation for 2 NZ Division to have known that an 88-millimetre anti-tank troop was not on the spot owing to a mistake in navigation.

This engagement held the enemy's attention while the Division passed round the south of **Nofilia**. The attack caused perturbation in **Africa Corps**, for at midday *15 Panzer* reported that it was being outflanked on its right near Point 121, and that its panzer regiment was being sent there with thirteen runners. About 12.30 p.m. **Africa Corps** ordered *21 Panzer* to send all its tanks and some anti-tank guns to the vicinity of Point 121; and half an hour later ordered the division to move complete to that area to restore the situation, leaving only rearguards on the eastern face. **Africa Corps** states clearly that it had a hard fight to prevent a breakthrough. The *15th Panzer Division* was so

disorganised that the command of the front west of **Nofilia** had for a while to be given to *21 Panzer Division*; and there were one or two minor reorganisations during the afternoon. And running through all this was the persistent cry for petrol. Round about midday *Africa Corps* could not have retired if it had wanted to, as it had only enough petrol for movements within the battlefield. Dribblets of petrol were being sent up throughout the day.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade and Divisional Cavalry had thus caused the whole armoured strength of *Africa Corps* to be committed. The number of enemy tanks involved is not known accurately. On 16 December the *Africa Corps* had a total of fifty-three, and on 19 December thirty-eight; so perhaps the fighting on 16 and 17 December reduced their strength by anything up to fifteen, although many of these may have been only slightly damaged and were recoverable.

One interesting point of tactics is exemplified by the fighting round **Nofilia** village. The pressure exerted by 2 NZ Division was against the southern face only. The advance of 7 Armoured Division had been curtailed and it was now out of contact with the enemy. The New Zealand Division was therefore making a left hook without the necessary concomitant of a holding attack against the enemy's front, the eastern face in this case. This was unavoidable, as the Division did not have sufficient troops to attack all along the enemy's line. So when the need arose, the enemy thinned out his troops on the eastern face without danger, and moved them to the threatened sector. When referring to another incident in his long retreat from **Alamein**, but speaking in general terms, Rommel says, 'there is never any point in attempting an outflanking movement round an enemy force unless it has first been tied down frontally, because the defending force can always use its motorised forces—assuming it has petrol and vehicles—to hold up the outflanking columns while it slips out of the trap.'¹

¹ *Rommel Papers*, p. 345

Outflanking Nofilia

In the early stages of the engagement, the rest of the Division halted; but about 12.45 p.m. the GOC ordered 5 Infantry Brigade Group to advance westwards, watching closely the northern flank, and to be prepared to form a gun line (i.e., a defensive line of battle) facing north. **Brigadier Kippenberger** went forward immediately, leaving orders for the group to follow below the skyline so that they would not be seen from the road, which here ran on the northern side of a low escarpment about three miles from the sea. The group moved forward with 23 Battalion leading on a broad front, 28 (Maori) Battalion on the right, and 21 Battalion on the left, with headquarters and attached troops in the centre. At the outset they had difficulty in passing through the mass of transport to the south of **Nofilia**, and were delayed for some time.

This was the second occasion that day that 5 Brigade had been delayed by transport in front, most of it from B Echelon of 4 Light Armoured Brigade. The cumulative effect of these two delays, according to the British narrative of operations, 'seriously affected the conduct of operations later in the day'. Whether these words are fully justified or not, it is a fact that the brigade did not turn towards the road until 3 p.m. and that it was dark before full pressure could be achieved. As with 6 Brigade in the afternoon of 15 December, a couple of hours' more daylight might have made a great deal of difference.

At 2.30 p.m., when the brigade was about ten miles west of **Nofilia**, **General Freyberg** ordered **Brigadier Kippenberger** to swing due northwards immediately, sooner than the brigadier had expected. The group was now approaching the road between **Wadi Umm el Ghindel** and **Wadi en Nizam**, some 11 miles west of the **Nofilia** crossroads. It had already been reported that there were enemy troops in that area, and it was soon confirmed that an enemy flank guard was in position. This was *33 Reconnaissance Unit*.

The brigade commander decided that there was no time to delay or to make formal reconnaissance. His orders group was at hand, and he

gave instructions at once for a right wheel, for 23 Battalion to push on and cut the road, for 28 Battalion to cover the right flank—the activities west of [Nofilia](#) were not so very far away—and for 21 Battalion to advance to the road on the left of 23 Battalion and then swing round facing right to complete the block. Each battalion had under command a machine-gun platoon and an anti-tank troop.

The [23rd Battalion](#) was still in the lead after the turn, and after travelling seven miles slightly east of north, and while still embussed, crossed over the low escarpment and came under artillery fire from both field and anti-tank guns. The road was fully visible three miles away, and along it enemy transport was streaming, well spaced out and moving fast. Between the top of the escarpment and the road was a series of gradually descending ridges and hollows, with ‘going’ of soft sand covered with tussock; and while the sand blanketed the shellbursts and so saved casualties, it slowed down the speed of the transport until it was only a low-gear crawl slower than walking pace. The progress of all vehicles, even that of the brigade commander in his scout car, had a nightmarish quality in which everyone strained hard to move faster but had leaden weights dragging behind him. So despite [Kippenberger's](#) eagerness and his hurry-up messages to units—not that Lieutenant-Colonel Romans needed urging—the advance could not be made any faster; but in due course 23 Battalion reached a patch of covered ground and debussed. The carriers and anti-tank guns pressed forward to silence enemy weapons on a ridge ahead, and infantry followed up smartly and captured the ridge. The road was now only 1600 yards away, but the enemy flank guard could still sting sharply and showed no sign of withdrawing farther. Most unfortunately, it was now about 6 p.m. and becoming dark, an indication of the difficulties in carrying out this advance. The most that had been achieved was that enemy transport appeared to have stopped using the road for the time being. Some observers thought that it had changed to a parallel track along the beach out of sight; but while this is possible, there is no confirmation from German accounts.

The 21st Battalion, on the outside of the big wheel, had a hard struggle through very heavy going to catch up. Under fire from enemy weapons of all kinds, the battalion finally debussed about 5 p.m. and advanced to some 3500 yards from the road, but was unable to continue during daylight.

The 28th Battalion had less trouble, although it too came under fire while still in vehicles. It debussed as soon as it passed the escarpment, went forward on foot and took up a flanking position. Once it was dug in it attracted little attention as the enemy was concentrating on 23 Battalion.

Luckily, owing to the nature of the ground, and probably because of some rather wild shooting by the enemy, casualties throughout were low, even though vehicles had advanced through a hail of shellbursts.

The 5th Field Regiment sent observers forward with all three battalions and went into action against enemy transport on the road and the enemy flank-guard position. Brigade Headquarters asked for more artillery support at 4.45 p.m., and observers from 4 Field Regiment and B Troop, **211 Medium Battery**, came forward, and also 34 Anti-Tank Battery, the first two opening fire against the road. But it was a difficult target, being only a fine line at right angles to the line of fire. In addition, it was late in the afternoon and the light soon failed. Only one firm hit was claimed.

Artillery units report that among other targets was the covering force of 'enemy guns and tanks'; and there was a general belief among the infantry that they were opposed by armour. Judging from enemy reports, it is doubtful if tanks were in that particular area at that time, for the imbroglio between **Nofilia** and Point 121 had not been cleared up when the 5 Brigade attack started; and **15 Panzer Division**, the first to withdraw, did not start thinning out from the southern face until about 5 p.m., with the clear intention of retiring well back without delay.

Thus the road had not been reached by dark, but the threat there

and round Point 121 compelled the enemy to withdraw, and at 4.30 p.m. 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported that enemy troops, including tanks, were moving away to the north.

Two aspects of 5 Brigade's attack merit some attention. When **General Freyberg** told **Brigadier Kippenberger** to turn north the brigade commander was slightly taken aback, as he had intended to go some miles farther west. This view was shared by the enemy, for an intelligence report compiled later by *15 Panzer Division*, referring to the **Nofilia** operation, says 'again the enemy had apparently committed the error of allowing himself to be involved in an attack instead of making a bold wide outflanking move'. Nevertheless, if 5 Brigade had gone a short distance farther west before turning north, it would have bumped another flank guard (*580 Reconnaissance Unit*) and would have been little better off, or not at all, especially as there would have been even less daylight left; and 2 NZ Division could not attempt a 'bold wide outflanking move' with its existing resources.

Secondly, when one considers the results of the brigade attack, it is somewhat surprising that a brigade of three battalions, with progressively increasing artillery support, could not dislodge a reconnaissance unit and elements of an infantry battalion. ¹ But it must be taken into account that *33 Reconnaissance Unit* arrived in its position about 9 a.m. on 16 December and so had thirty hours to prepare, during which time pits were dug, mortar and anti-tank positions prepared, and the unit in every way made ready. The exceptionally bad going reduced 5 Brigade's advance to a crawl, and the enemy could watch it all and oppose it with everything he had. By the time a full brigade attack with artillery support could be properly organised, it was dark. The thought that somewhere not far away were enemy tanks, while the brigade had no armour with it, probably caused some justifiable caution. Fifth Brigade's attack came one or two hours too late.

While 5 Infantry Brigade was engaged, the uncommitted groups of the Division south of **Nofilia** village continued to advance westwards and

north-westwards. **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group halted at 4 p.m. some nine miles west of **Nofilia**, while 6 Infantry Brigade Group took up positions nearer the village to act, if needed, in support of 4 Light Armoured Brigade in keeping pressure on the garrison. The Administrative Group stopped about seven miles to the south of Headquarters; but **General Freyberg** later ordered it to move back. It retired 16 miles along the divisional axis, and remained there for the night of 17–18 December.

The enemy fared not too well during the afternoon, as a result of **15 Panzer Division's** reverses in the fighting between **Nofilia** and Point 121. While the tanks of **21 Panzer Division**, and later the whole division, less a rearguard, were moving towards **15 Panzer**, there came a cry for help from **33 Reconnaissance Unit**, which reported that it was being heavily attacked. (This was 5 NZ Brigade's attack.) So **21 Panzer**, minus its armour, was diverted farther west and moved behind **15 Panzer Division** and **33 Reconnaissance Unit** to extend the latter's line to the west. Unarmoured elements of **21 Panzer** (from **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**) co-operated with **33 Reconnaissance Unit** and checked 21 NZ Battalion in its initial attack. The reports of **Africa Corps** and the panzer divisions make no mention of tanks being used in this area; all the evidence indicates that they remained between **Nofilia** and Point 121.

In the broader picture **Panzer Army Headquarters** had already decided that the army would have to move back at once into the **Buerat** position. The plan in general was for **15 Panzer Division** to disengage and move back, followed by **21 Panzer Division**, while **33 Reconnaissance Unit** and **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** formed the rearguard until the whole of **Africa Corps** was clear. The enemy at this stage feared another attack on the road still farther west, and warned **580 Reconnaissance Unit** to be on its guard.

¹ Part of **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** was sent round to help.

Night Operations

During the late afternoon 4 Light Armoured Brigade and Divisional Cavalry observed enemy movement in and around **Nofilia**, until at 5.20 p.m. the GOC ordered the brigade to clear the village; but by that time the light was going, and Brigadier Harvey did not consider that the attack was feasible, particularly as it was more than probable that the place was still strongly held. As darkness fell most of 4 Light Armoured Brigade and Divisional Cavalry laagered to the west of **Nofilia**, while still watching the place closely; but the KDGs had patrols as far west as Wadi el Ahmar, 30 miles from **Nofilia**, and found the road there well guarded. Sixth Infantry Brigade Group was some six miles south-west of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, and units of 5 Brigade Group were from 1600 to 3500 yards from the road some ten to twelve miles north-west of **Nofilia**.

During the evening there were reports of movement out of **Nofilia**, and also the sound of transport in the village; but in view of what we know today, the belief that there was 'considerable transport' there, together with tanks, was incorrect. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade was finally given the specific task of hampering any attempt of the garrison in **Nofilia** to break out through the Division, i.e., across the desert instead of along the road. This task meant in effect that 4 Light Armoured Brigade was to fill the gap between 5 and 6 Brigades. The chance of the enemy trying to escape in this way was not great owing to his petrol shortage, a deficiency that was only vaguely known to 2 NZ Division.

Fifth Brigade took full precautions against an attempt to break out from **Nofilia** through the brigade, although it was obvious that the going immediately south of the road was bad. Battalions sited their anti-tank guns accordingly. From the forward posts could be heard the exasperating sound of transport moving along the road.

At 7 p.m. 21 Battalion, held up 3500 yards from the road, noted that

it was opposed by tanks and 88-millimetre guns, but it is most unlikely that there were tanks in that area. At that time *21 Panzer Division*, which had temporarily lost its tanks, located them not far from Point 121, halted and almost out of petrol. The *15th Panzer Division* was to precede it in the retirement, but had only one idea, to get clear without delay. There was certainly no thought of placing tanks in a defensive position.

Communication between Headquarters 5 Brigade and 21 Battalion was not established until 8.30 p.m. because telephone lines were cut by vehicles crossing them and the unit wireless set had been put out of action by shellfire. The battalion was then ordered to try to reach the road so as to have it under small-arms fire in the morning. It advanced without artillery support, and shortly after midnight, when within 1000 yards of the road, was held up by machine-gun and mortar fire, some of the former again believed to come from tanks. The report of *21 Panzer Division* mentions only *104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* as being in this area; but about midnight some petrol arrived for the stranded tank group, and it soon moved back along the road. As it reports being fired on, it may have returned the fire. The battalion commander realised that he could not reach his objective, a ridge overlooking the road, and his present position being untenable, he withdrew. This attack was really rather venturesome and might have led to heavy casualties if the battalion had reached the road. It does not seem to have registered with the enemy, for there is no special mention of it. To him it apparently merely formed part of the attempts against the road, although it is likely that it helped in keeping him on the move.

This was 5 Brigade's last attempt to get one of its battalions to the road; but an effort was made before dawn on 18 December to obstruct it with mines, and for this purpose two detachments were sent out by 7 Field Company, each of a sub-section (about ten men), one escorted by C Company from 23 Battalion and the other by D Company of 28 Battalion. The 23 Battalion company (Captain F. S. R. [Thomson](#)¹) fought its way north to within 400 yards of the road despite enemy

opposition, and brought the road under machine-gun fire. Under its protection the engineers succeeded in laying 160 mines on and alongside the road. It was then between 4 and 5 a.m. During all this activity the company knocked out various vehicles and returned safely with no casualties.

The 28 Battalion company (Major **Logan**²) advanced some seven miles north-east from the battalion area, and after evading various enemy vehicles, reached the road without interference at a point where a concrete bridge crossed the **Wadi Umm el Ghindel**. Owing to the rough going the mine-carrying vehicles did not arrive until 3.30 a.m., and the engineers had time to lay only forty mines, all at the **Nofilia** end of the bridge. D Company had no casualties, but two engineers were killed by the explosion of an enemy booby trap in the centre of the road. No enemy transport was seen during the time the company was there—the enemy had already gone.

¹ **Maj F. S. R. Thomson**, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 25 Aug 1912; draper; twice wounded; died of wounds 28 Mar 1943.

² **Maj F. R. Logan**, m.i.d.; Hastings; born Hastings, 3 Jul 1916; farm cadet; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

Gone Away

During the night patrols heard the noises of activity in **Nofilia** village and to the west; and at first light it was believed that the enemy was still there, and **30 Corps** was so advised at 7 a.m. This was followed by a personal message from the GOC saying that **Nofilia** was still strongly held and should be bombed, and asking that A Squadron, Staffs Yeomanry, be sent to the Division again to augment the low number of effective tanks with the Greys. Sixth Infantry Brigade Group made ready to send out a mobile column to attack the village from the west, and 4 Light Armoured Brigade prepared to sweep widely round 5 Brigade and then back along the road towards **Nofilia**.

But soon patrols approached the village, reported that they could see no movement, and then at 8.43 a.m. that it was clear. It had to be accepted that the enemy had got away intact. The **21st Battalion**, the unit farthest to the west, reported that there had been spasmodic enemy fire until just before dawn; but at full daylight the ground between the battalion and the road was found to be empty. The newly laid mines were lifted later in the morning.

The enemy plan for this successful withdrawal was a simple one: **33 Reconnaissance Unit** and **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** were to stay in position until **Africa Corps** was clear, and then in turn retire through **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment**, which was the final rearguard. In fact the only hitch came from lack of petrol which, amazing though it may seem, was literally being issued a few hundred gallons at a time. There were occasions during the night when units reported that they had come to a stop until more petrol was received. The **15th Panzer Division** disengaged from the area round **Nofilia** shortly after 8 p.m. and had travelled 30 miles along the good tarmac road by first light. The segments of **21 Panzer Division** followed, and then **33 Reconnaissance Unit** and its supporter.

In the morning of 18 December patrols from **4 Light Armoured Brigade** reported enemy transport immediately east of **Sultan**, where there was a steady stream of vehicles moving west. The KDGs kept contact as far as **Sirte**, and the rest of the brigade accompanied by **Divisional Cavalry** moved out on the 18th for some 25 miles westwards across the desert to the vicinity of **Bir el Magedubia**. For the moment contact with the enemy had been broken except for the armoured car patrols.

So for a second time the enemy had merely been hustled; he had withdrawn from **Nofilia** itself despite the nearness of our troops. But, as Rommel has recorded, it is extremely difficult to surround a retiring force. Previously the **New Zealand Division** had withdrawn from **Sidi Rezegh** and from **Minqar Qaim**, so escaping what at times had looked

like certain encirclement. The German-Italian forces had avoided encirclement at **Fuka, Tobruk, Benghazi** and **Agedabia**, and were to repeat the performance. It was not until the end in North Africa, against overwhelming superiority and with the sea at his back, that the enemy was captured complete. Battles like Cannae or Sedan are rare.

After Nofilia

During the previous evening the tasks for 18 December had been received: 2 NZ Division was to maintain contact with the enemy, secure and clear the **Nofilia** airfield, and clear the main road eastwards until meeting 7 Armoured Division which was working westwards. The instructions also gave traffic priorities on the road forward of **El Agheila** for two days ahead, indicating that administration would restrict the forces in any immediate further advance. It is of interest that first priority was given to an **RAF** convoy to **Marble Arch**.

The GOC suggested that 2 NZ Division should advance direct from **Nofilia** across the desert, where the LRDG reported that the going was the best in North Africa. **General Freyberg** had in mind a flanking attack on **Tamet** airfield; but he would want a full regiment of heavy tanks with an additional squadron. The plan was accepted provisionally, and a regiment from **8 Armoured Brigade** was nominated to come under command. Orders were prepared for movement that day (18 December) to **Bir el Magedubia**, and for a further advance on following days.

However, other plans were in view. At 1 p.m. the corps commander (Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese) met the GOC by arrangement some three miles east of **Nofilia**, after sappers working in the area had prevented **General Freyberg's** party from running into a minefield nearby. As a result of this conference the move was cancelled and it now seemed likely that the Division would remain in the **Nofilia** area until after Christmas. The GOC was very pleased with words of praise that had come from both army and corps commanders. He had pointed out, doubtless taking a legitimate advantage of the receptive atmosphere, that if there were to be any more operations of a similar nature he must

have more tanks—‘two full regiments’.

As a last measure 5 Infantry Brigade established blocks on the road and coastal track to prevent the withdrawal of any stray parties of Germans. By the next day fourteen prisoners had been taken in this way.

The Division now took steps to maintain contact with the enemy and to dispose remaining troops in depth. Fifth Infantry Brigade remained north-west of **Nofilia; and on 19 December a special force was formed, of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, one troop from 5 Field Regiment, one troop from 34 Anti-Tank Battery and a detachment from 7 Field Company. This force, under the command of 5 Brigade, moved out to patrol a general line running south-eastwards for some 18 miles from **Sultan**, to watch for any enemy advance from the west, protect the engineer detachment while it cleared the road from **Nofilia**, and report on the condition of the airfields at **Sultan**. B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, took up a linking position some 25 miles farther back, and a link was also maintained with 4 Light Armoured Brigade round **Sirte**. This little force cleared the airfield at **Sultan** but saw nothing of the enemy. Sub-units were relieved from time to time, and the force remained out until after Christmas, when 2 NZ Division was relieved of operational duties.**

During the next two or three days the Division settled down into semi-permanent bivouacs alongside the road north of **Nofilia, with 5 Brigade Group the farthest to the west. One armoured car regiment remained on constant patrol in the **Sirte** area; the engineers continued clearing the road both east and west, and the main airfield and other landing grounds near **Nofilia**. Junction was made with the engineers of 7 Armoured Division on 20 December at a point ten miles east of the crossroads. It will be noticed that frequently while much of the Division was, comparatively speaking, at rest, the engineers went steadily on with work that required courage and steady nerves, without the excitement of battle to exalt them.**

For the time being there was no offensive action in sight, and some thought could be given both to the past and the future, coloured always by the approach of Christmas. On 19 December **General Freyberg** held a conference and discussed plans for the future, but there was also some soul-searching about the immediate past. Referring to the possibility of another outflanking move, he said: ‘...if we do it quickly enough and differently from the way we have carried out the last two, that is with greater punch, we may be able to bottle a certain number of his troops. We have missed two chances of bottling him as our technique was imperfect.... there was uncertainty as to our position.... A brigade commander must have a battalion of heavy tanks to push in so that the blow goes in hard and goes right home.... The four hours' delay due to lack of petrol in the first movement allowed the whole of the Panzer Armee to escape. The enemy could move faster along the road and he was able to put a gun line and infantry positions and tanks on the escarpment to hold off our attack to command the road.’

Mistakes in navigation and shortage of tanks were not to trouble the Division in the future, so something had been gained from the experience of **El Agheila** and **Nofilia**. It was something of an error to blame the late refuelling on 14 December for lack of progress on the evening of the 15th, which was due more to the delay in refuelling the Greys in the morning of that day.

The enemy nevertheless had handled his troops skilfully and had effected his withdrawal without serious loss, but he was forced to retire and was definitely on the defensive. The New Zealand Division had played its part, but there was a natural measure of disappointment at the enemy's escape. Later reflection, however, assesses the Division's part quite highly, for the fighting at **Nofilia**, in the eyes of the post-war Battle Nomenclature Committee, merited classification as a ‘separate engagement’, and was held to be the sharpest action of the whole **El Agheila** operation. The Division's casualties were 7 killed and 35 wounded, nearly all of them in 5 Brigade.

The casualty list for the fighting on 16, 17 and 18 December was mercifully a small one. The Division had 18 killed, 64 wounded and eight taken prisoner. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade had 13 killed, 17 wounded and two missing. Enemy material captured was not great, although any captures were good for morale. It amounted to about 15 vehicles, 14 guns, mostly 50-millimetre, and 33 machine guns. Four tanks were knocked out by anti-tank guns. This does not include the tank losses of the enemy in the action west of [Nofilia](#) on 17 December, where the losses on both sides were about the same, four or five.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

TIDYING UP

Tidying Up

IN the afternoon the GOC issued instructions for the Division to concentrate. Sixth Brigade Group was to join the rest of the Division, a move back of some ten miles, as 5 Brigade Group would take over the lead when movement resumed. The advance, however, was not to commence until early on 17 December.

At first sight it seems a strange manoeuvre, not only to halt, but to withdraw the foremost troops. The only follow-up was from 4 Light Armoured Brigade, its tanks for some 15 miles and the armoured cars to within a few miles of **Nofilia. There was no other attempt to hustle the enemy after the excursions of the morning. In **Brigadier Kippenberger's** words, 5 Brigade and no doubt most of the Division ‘spent that day, 16 December, thinking things over’.¹**

The German war diaries all remark on the pressure exerted on their units in the early morning. The *15th Panzer Division* was shaken by its breakthrough, and went straight to **Nofilia, disregarding instructions to make an intermediate stand. But all diaries comment on the lack of pressure during the afternoon. The *15th Panzer* says, ‘for some inexplicable reason the main body of the enemy column remained stationary and did not attack’. The *90th Light Division* ‘was enabled to hold its present positions until nightfall’, and ‘the enemy did not pursue’. After reading the German accounts, it seems that a quick follow-up would have kept the enemy on the move and driven him out of **Nofilia** before he had a chance to consolidate; but he was given nearly twenty-four hours to prepare.**

It was fully midday, however, before it was known that the whole of the enemy had escaped, and it would have been unwise to move before this knowledge became certain. An enemy tank force at large in the rear

of the Division, while it was attenuated and on the move, might have proved more than troublesome. The decision, therefore, was to make haste slowly, revive the troops who were in need of rest and concentrate the Division for an early start on the morrow.

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 252.

Arrangements for 17 December were, then, that 4 Light Armoured Brigade, with Divisional Cavalry under command, would lead the advance, followed by 5 Brigade Group, Divisional Reserve Group and **Divisional Headquarters**, 6 Brigade Group and Administrative Group. The head of 4 Light Armoured Brigade—less its armoured cars already out in front—was to pass the starting point at 7 a.m. This point, near **Divisional Headquarters**, would be indicated by a column of black smoke. In view of the muddled navigation on 15 December, it was made clear that the LRDG patrol would be responsible for leading the column, moving with the route-marking detachment of the **Provost Company**.

The Air Force had difficulties in the morning of 16 December owing to the confused form of the ground operations, and the uncertainty as to just who was who in the mass of swirling vehicles, but later in the day attacked the enemy round **Nofilia**. The 7th Armoured Division reached **Marble Arch** at midday, and armoured cars from the two divisions were in touch with each other in the afternoon. The enemy had left so many mines, booby traps and demolitions that 7 Armoured Division made no contact with his troops on 16 or 17 December. Booby traps were so various in type that Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson has said ¹ that at this stage the sappers became suspicious of everything, and even if a gold watch had been lying on the desert no one would have touched it.

Behind 7 Armoured Division came 51 (H) Division clearing the road, again a slow task. By evening it was fully cleared only as far as the junction with the track to **Marada**, 40 miles behind.

Originally 2 NZ Division was to have been responsible for clearing

landing grounds at both **Marble Arch** and Merduma, and engineers had travelled with 4 Light Armoured Brigade for early reconnaissance, but the course of events had taken the Division farther to the south and west, while 7 Armoured Division had now reached **Marble Arch**. So 2 NZ Division was made responsible for Merduma, and for **Nofilia** later. A detachment from 6 Field Company (Major **Anderson** ²), with an escort of anti-tank guns and machine-gunners, started work on Merduma at 3 p.m. on 16 December. The ground had been heavily mined and booby-trapped, but one runway was cleared by 4 p.m. next day, and aircraft were able to land successfully shortly afterwards. The New Zealand party then handed the work over to the **Royal Engineers** and rejoined the Division.

¹ In a report to **War History Branch**.

² **Lt-Col J. N. Anderson**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Te Awamutu**; born Okaihau, 15 Apr 1894; civil engineer; OC 5 Fd Pk Coy Sep 1941–Oct 1942; **6 Fd Coy** Oct 1942–Aug 1943; CRE **2 NZ Div** Apr–Nov 1944; OC Engr Trg Depot 1945.

Sixth Brigade Group duly returned from its forward position and took post towards the rear of the Division, while 5 Infantry Brigade Group assembled and moved two miles north. In the evening the Corps orders for the next day's move arrived, but contained nothing new except that 7 Armoured Division, after clearing the airfield at **Marble Arch** and the road west, was 'to assist 2 NZ Division as required' in the performance of its engineer tasks. As the armoured division was to concentrate in an area behind **Marble Arch**, it was clear that 2 NZ Division alone was to carry out the pursuit.

Meanwhile, during the afternoon of 16 December, the enemy concentrated round **Nofilia**. The *15th Panzer Division* went back in one bound and joined *21 Panzer*, which had reached there in good order. It was Rommel's intention, while work went on in the **Buerat** position, to hold another rearguard position here, on a line running from the sea

north-east of **Nofilia**, behind the Wadi el Agar, including **Nofilia** village, and then to the west and northwest towards Point 121. The *21st Panzer Division* was to hold the stretch from the sea to **Nofilia**—the ‘eastern face’—and *15 Panzer Division* from **Nofilia** to Point 121—the ‘southern face’. Then, in succession as flank guards to the main road, came *33 Reconnaissance Unit* 12 miles west of **Nofilia**, *580 Reconnaissance Unit* 20 miles west, and *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* 30 miles west. The *90th Light Division*, the rearguard on 16 December, in the end did not leave the area round Matratin until nightfall, and then moved well to the rear to a point about 40 miles west of **Nofilia**. It took no part in the later fighting in that area.

The New Zealand Division spent a quiet night, and was allowed to light fires to cook breakfast before dawn on 17 December. The Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General (Lieutenant-Colonel **Barrington** ¹) remarked sadly that the Division thereby consumed enough petrol to move it for some miles.

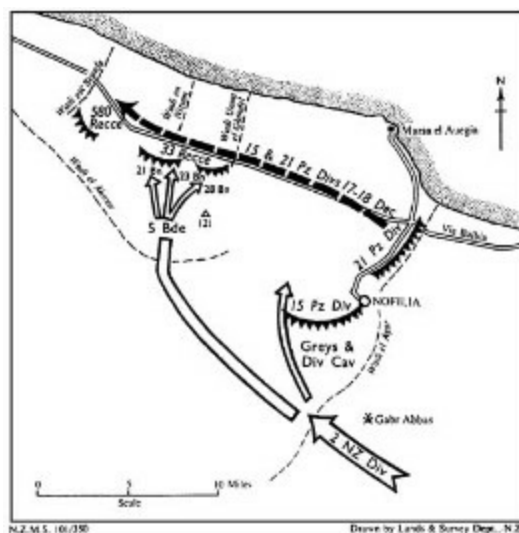
¹ **Brig B. Barrington**, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born Marton, 2 Oct 1907; insurance inspector; SC 6 Bde Mar 1940–May 1941; BM 6 Bde May 1941–Jan 1942; DAQMG **2 NZ Div** May–Nov 1942; AA & QMG Nov 1942–Dec 1944; DA & QMG NZ Corps Feb–Mar 1944; died **Wellington**, 17 Apr 1954.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ATTACKING NOFILIA

Attacking Nofilia

Before moving off in the morning of the 17th the Division requested that the approaches to **Nofilia** and the strongpoint itself should be bombed until 3 p.m., as it proposed to attack from the south-west. It will be noticed that **Nofilia** was alluded to as a 'strongpoint', so that it was expected that it would be strongly held. It must have become apparent during the advance that to, bomb the approaches until 3 p.m. meant that any attack must be delayed until that hour, for the Division, with only about 30 miles to go, would arrive long before then. The bomblines were therefore changed from time to time until the line ran clear to **Nofilia** to the west; except that towards evening a request was made for the fort at **Nofilia** itself to be bombed. Records show some difference of opinion about whether **Nofilia** was in the end ever bombed at all. The **Desert Air Force** reported being unable to do any light bombing owing to rain and low cloud, and that its efforts were confined to two tactical reconnaissances. On the other hand, 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported bombs on **Nofilia** at 9.15 a.m. The weather in the divisional area was patchy, with bright periods; but there could have been rain and low cloud at the airfields.



OUTFLANKING NOFILIA, 17-18 DECEMBER

The advance was resumed at 7 a.m. It took some time for the whole column to deploy into desert formation. Fifth Infantry Brigade Group, second in the order of march, blamed the B Echelon vehicles of 4 Light Armoured Brigade for holding them up, and **Divisional Headquarters** did not move off until 10 a.m., but the GOC moved as usual with his Tactical Headquarters well in front. In the early morning it appeared briefly from armoured car reports that **Nofilia** was clear, but very soon the enemy was located, and the information sent back by 4 Light Armoured Brigade gave a picture that was in fact accurate: a strong rearguard from the sea through **Nofilia** and then to the west, with a number of tanks estimated at twenty to twenty-five.

The Division carried out the advance without halts, in the hope of capturing the place that day. About midday 4 Light Armoured Brigade closed up in strength to the enemy's advanced posts, with the Royals to the north-east of **Nofilia**, and the KDGs moving away to the north-west and west. The guns of 3 RHA were active against the village, and both 4 Field Regiment (from Reserve Group) and the troop from **211 Medium Battery** came into action against tanks and guns west of **Nofilia**.

About midday the Greys (which now had only five Grants and ten Shermans), accompanied by Divisional Cavalry, stormed into the enemy position west of **Nofilia** village, effected complete surprise, and captured about 250 prisoners from *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of **15 Panzer Division**. There followed some prolonged and lively exchanges between our tanks and those of the enemy, in which both the Greys and Divisional Cavalry accounted for enemy tanks. Honours in tank losses appear to have been about even. The Greys lost four, of which two were recovered; *15 Panzer* reported losing four also, but made a fantastic claim that they had knocked out twenty-one British tanks. In this engagement the commanding officer of the Greys, Lieutenant-Colonel Fiennes, was wounded and evacuated.

Subsequently this break-in on our part led to a special investigation by *Africa Corps*, with the usual numerous reports and with some censure on one or two people. It might have been some small consolation for 2 NZ Division to have known that an 88-millimetre anti-tank troop was not on the spot owing to a mistake in navigation.

This engagement held the enemy's attention while the Division passed round the south of *Nofilia*. The attack caused perturbation in *Africa Corps*, for at midday *15 Panzer* reported that it was being outflanked on its right near Point 121, and that its panzer regiment was being sent there with thirteen runners. About 12.30 p.m. *Africa Corps* ordered *21 Panzer* to send all its tanks and some anti-tank guns to the vicinity of Point 121; and half an hour later ordered the division to move complete to that area to restore the situation, leaving only rearguards on the eastern face. *Africa Corps* states clearly that it had a hard fight to prevent a breakthrough. The *15th Panzer Division* was so disorganised that the command of the front west of *Nofilia* had for a while to be given to *21 Panzer Division*; and there were one or two minor reorganisations during the afternoon. And running through all this was the persistent cry for petrol. Round about midday *Africa Corps* could not have retired if it had wanted to, as it had only enough petrol for movements within the battlefield. Dribblets of petrol were being sent up throughout the day.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade and Divisional Cavalry had thus caused the whole armoured strength of *Africa Corps* to be committed. The number of enemy tanks involved is not known accurately. On 16 December the *Africa Corps* had a total of fifty-three, and on 19 December thirty-eight; so perhaps the fighting on 16 and 17 December reduced their strength by anything up to fifteen, although many of these may have been only slightly damaged and were recoverable.

One interesting point of tactics is exemplified by the fighting round *Nofilia* village. The pressure exerted by 2 NZ Division was against the southern face only. The advance of 7 Armoured Division had been

curtailed and it was now out of contact with the enemy. The New Zealand Division was therefore making a left hook without the necessary concomitant of a holding attack against the enemy's front, the eastern face in this case. This was unavoidable, as the Division did not have sufficient troops to attack all along the enemy's line. So when the need arose, the enemy thinned out his troops on the eastern face without danger, and moved them to the threatened sector. When referring to another incident in his long retreat from [Alamein](#), but speaking in general terms, Rommel says, 'there is never any point in attempting an outflanking movement round an enemy force unless it has first been tied down frontally, because the defending force can always use its motorised forces—assuming it has petrol and vehicles—to hold up the outflanking columns while it slips out of the trap.' ¹

¹ *Rommel Papers*, p. 345

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OUTFLANKING NOFILIA

Outflanking Nofilia

In the early stages of the engagement, the rest of the Division halted; but about 12.45 p.m. the GOC ordered 5 Infantry Brigade Group to advance westwards, watching closely the northern flank, and to be prepared to form a gun line (i.e., a defensive line of battle) facing north. **Brigadier Kippenberger** went forward immediately, leaving orders for the group to follow below the skyline so that they would not be seen from the road, which here ran on the northern side of a low escarpment about three miles from the sea. The group moved forward with 23 Battalion leading on a broad front, 28 (Maori) Battalion on the right, and 21 Battalion on the left, with headquarters and attached troops in the centre. At the outset they had difficulty in passing through the mass of transport to the south of **Nofilia**, and were delayed for some time.

This was the second occasion that day that 5 Brigade had been delayed by transport in front, most of it from B Echelon of 4 Light Armoured Brigade. The cumulative effect of these two delays, according to the British narrative of operations, 'seriously affected the conduct of operations later in the day'. Whether these words are fully justified or not, it is a fact that the brigade did not turn towards the road until 3 p.m. and that it was dark before full pressure could be achieved. As with 6 Brigade in the afternoon of 15 December, a couple of hours' more daylight might have made a great deal of difference.

At 2.30 p.m., when the brigade was about ten miles west of **Nofilia**, **General Freyberg** ordered **Brigadier Kippenberger** to swing due northwards immediately, sooner than the brigadier had expected. The group was now approaching the road between **Wadi Umm el Ghindel** and **Wadi en Nizam**, some 11 miles west of the **Nofilia** crossroads. It had already been reported that there were enemy troops in that area, and it was soon confirmed that an enemy flank guard was in position. This was

33 Reconnaissance Unit.

The brigade commander decided that there was no time to delay or to make formal reconnaissance. His orders group was at hand, and he gave instructions at once for a right wheel, for 23 Battalion to push on and cut the road, for 28 Battalion to cover the right flank—the activities west of **Nofilia** were not so very far away—and for 21 Battalion to advance to the road on the left of 23 Battalion and then swing round facing right to complete the block. Each battalion had under command a machine-gun platoon and an anti-tank troop.

The **23rd Battalion** was still in the lead after the turn, and after travelling seven miles slightly east of north, and while still embussed, crossed over the low escarpment and came under artillery fire from both field and anti-tank guns. The road was fully visible three miles away, and along it enemy transport was streaming, well spaced out and moving fast. Between the top of the escarpment and the road was a series of gradually descending ridges and hollows, with 'going' of soft sand covered with tussock; and while the sand blanketed the shellbursts and so saved casualties, it slowed down the speed of the transport until it was only a low-gear crawl slower than walking pace. The progress of all vehicles, even that of the brigade commander in his scout car, had a nightmarish quality in which everyone strained hard to move faster but had leaden weights dragging behind him. So despite **Kippenberger's** eagerness and his hurry-up messages to units—not that Lieutenant-Colonel Romans needed urging—the advance could not be made any faster; but in due course 23 Battalion reached a patch of covered ground and debussed. The carriers and anti-tank guns pressed forward to silence enemy weapons on a ridge ahead, and infantry followed up smartly and captured the ridge. The road was now only 1600 yards away, but the enemy flank guard could still sting sharply and showed no sign of withdrawing farther. Most unfortunately, it was now about 6 p.m. and becoming dark, an indication of the difficulties in carrying out this advance. The most that had been achieved was that enemy transport appeared to have stopped using the road for the time being. Some

observers thought that it had changed to a parallel track along the beach out of sight; but while this is possible, there is no confirmation from German accounts.

The **21st Battalion**, on the outside of the big wheel, had a hard struggle through very heavy going to catch up. Under fire from enemy weapons of all kinds, the battalion finally debussed about 5 p.m. and advanced to some 3500 yards from the road, but was unable to continue during daylight.

The 28th Battalion had less trouble, although it too came under fire while still in vehicles. It debussed as soon as it passed the escarpment, went forward on foot and took up a flanking position. Once it was dug in it attracted little attention as the enemy was concentrating on 23 Battalion.

Luckily, owing to the nature of the ground, and probably because of some rather wild shooting by the enemy, casualties throughout were low, even though vehicles had advanced through a hail of shellbursts.

The 5th Field Regiment sent observers forward with all three battalions and went into action against enemy transport on the road and the enemy flank-guard position. Brigade Headquarters asked for more artillery support at 4.45 p.m., and observers from 4 Field Regiment and B Troop, **211 Medium Battery**, came forward, and also 34 Anti-Tank Battery, the first two opening fire against the road. But it was a difficult target, being only a fine line at right angles to the line of fire. In addition, it was late in the afternoon and the light soon failed. Only one firm hit was claimed.

Artillery units report that among other targets was the covering force of 'enemy guns and tanks'; and there was a general belief among the infantry that they were opposed by armour. Judging from enemy reports, it is doubtful if tanks were in that particular area at that time, for the imbroglio between **Nofilia** and Point 121 had not been cleared up when the 5 Brigade attack started; and **15 Panzer Division**, the first to

withdraw, did not start thinning out from the southern face until about 5 p.m., with the clear intention of retiring well back without delay.

Thus the road had not been reached by dark, but the threat there and round Point 121 compelled the enemy to withdraw, and at 4.30 p.m. 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported that enemy troops, including tanks, were moving away to the north.

Two aspects of 5 Brigade's attack merit some attention. When **General Freyberg** told **Brigadier Kippenberger** to turn north the brigade commander was slightly taken aback, as he had intended to go some miles farther west. This view was shared by the enemy, for an intelligence report compiled later by *15 Panzer Division*, referring to the **Nofilia** operation, says 'again the enemy had apparently committed the error of allowing himself to be involved in an attack instead of making a bold wide outflanking move'. Nevertheless, if 5 Brigade had gone a short distance farther west before turning north, it would have bumped another flank guard (*580 Reconnaissance Unit*) and would have been little better off, or not at all, especially as there would have been even less daylight left; and 2 NZ Division could not attempt a 'bold wide outflanking move' with its existing resources.

Secondly, when one considers the results of the brigade attack, it is somewhat surprising that a brigade of three battalions, with progressively increasing artillery support, could not dislodge a reconnaissance unit and elements of an infantry battalion. ¹ But it must be taken into account that *33 Reconnaissance Unit* arrived in its position about 9 a.m. on 16 December and so had thirty hours to prepare, during which time pits were dug, mortar and anti-tank positions prepared, and the unit in every way made ready. The exceptionally bad going reduced 5 Brigade's advance to a crawl, and the enemy could watch it all and oppose it with everything he had. By the time a full brigade attack with artillery support could be properly organised, it was dark. The thought that somewhere not far away were enemy tanks, while the brigade had no armour with it, probably caused some justifiable caution. Fifth Brigade's attack came one or two hours too

late.

While 5 Infantry Brigade was engaged, the uncommitted groups of the Division south of **Nofilia** village continued to advance westwards and north-westwards. **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group halted at 4 p.m. some nine miles west of **Nofilia**, while 6 Infantry Brigade Group took up positions nearer the village to act, if needed, in support of 4 Light Armoured Brigade in keeping pressure on the garrison. The Administrative Group stopped about seven miles to the south of Headquarters; but **General Freyberg** later ordered it to move back. It retired 16 miles along the divisional axis, and remained there for the night of 17–18 December.

The enemy fared not too well during the afternoon, as a result of **15 Panzer Division's** reverses in the fighting between **Nofilia** and Point 121. While the tanks of **21 Panzer Division**, and later the whole division, less a rearguard, were moving towards **15 Panzer**, there came a cry for help from **33 Reconnaissance Unit**, which reported that it was being heavily attacked. (This was 5 NZ Brigade's attack.) So **21 Panzer**, minus its armour, was diverted farther west and moved behind **15 Panzer Division** and **33 Reconnaissance Unit** to extend the latter's line to the west. Unarmoured elements of **21 Panzer** (from **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment**) co-operated with **33 Reconnaissance Unit** and checked 21 NZ Battalion in its initial attack. The reports of **Africa Corps** and the panzer divisions make no mention of tanks being used in this area; all the evidence indicates that they remained between **Nofilia** and Point 121.

In the broader picture **Panzer Army Headquarters** had already decided that the army would have to move back at once into the **Buerat** position. The plan in general was for **15 Panzer Division** to disengage and move back, followed by **21 Panzer Division**, while **33 Reconnaissance Unit** and **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** formed the rearguard until the whole of **Africa Corps** was clear. The enemy at this stage feared another attack on the road still farther west, and warned

580 Reconnaissance Unit to be on its guard.

¹ Part of 104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment was sent round to help.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

NIGHT OPERATIONS

Night Operations

During the late afternoon 4 Light Armoured Brigade and Divisional Cavalry observed enemy movement in and around **Nofilia**, until at 5.20 p.m. the GOC ordered the brigade to clear the village; but by that time the light was going, and Brigadier Harvey did not consider that the attack was feasible, particularly as it was more than probable that the place was still strongly held. As darkness fell most of 4 Light Armoured Brigade and Divisional Cavalry laagered to the west of **Nofilia**, while still watching the place closely; but the KDGs had patrols as far west as Wadi el Ahmar, 30 miles from **Nofilia**, and found the road there well guarded. Sixth Infantry Brigade Group was some six miles south-west of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, and units of 5 Brigade Group were from 1600 to 3500 yards from the road some ten to twelve miles north-west of **Nofilia**.

During the evening there were reports of movement out of **Nofilia**, and also the sound of transport in the village; but in view of what we know today, the belief that there was 'considerable transport' there, together with tanks, was incorrect. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade was finally given the specific task of hampering any attempt of the garrison in **Nofilia** to break out through the Division, i.e., across the desert instead of along the road. This task meant in effect that 4 Light Armoured Brigade was to fill the gap between 5 and 6 Brigades. The chance of the enemy trying to escape in this way was not great owing to his petrol shortage, a deficiency that was only vaguely known to 2 NZ Division.

Fifth Brigade took full precautions against an attempt to break out from **Nofilia** through the brigade, although it was obvious that the going immediately south of the road was bad. Battalions sited their anti-tank guns accordingly. From the forward posts could be heard the exasperating sound of transport moving along the road.

At 7 p.m. 21 Battalion, held up 3500 yards from the road, noted that it was opposed by tanks and 88-millimetre guns, but it is most unlikely that there were tanks in that area. At that time *21 Panzer Division*, which had temporarily lost its tanks, located them not far from Point 121, halted and almost out of petrol. The *15th Panzer Division* was to precede it in the retirement, but had only one idea, to get clear without delay. There was certainly no thought of placing tanks in a defensive position.

Communication between Headquarters 5 Brigade and 21 Battalion was not established until 8.30 p.m. because telephone lines were cut by vehicles crossing them and the unit wireless set had been put out of action by shellfire. The battalion was then ordered to try to reach the road so as to have it under small-arms fire in the morning. It advanced without artillery support, and shortly after midnight, when within 1000 yards of the road, was held up by machine-gun and mortar fire, some of the former again believed to come from tanks. The report of *21 Panzer Division* mentions only *104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* as being in this area; but about midnight some petrol arrived for the stranded tank group, and it soon moved back along the road. As it reports being fired on, it may have returned the fire. The battalion commander realised that he could not reach his objective, a ridge overlooking the road, and his present position being untenable, he withdrew. This attack was really rather venturesome and might have led to heavy casualties if the battalion had reached the road. It does not seem to have registered with the enemy, for there is no special mention of it. To him it apparently merely formed part of the attempts against the road, although it is likely that it helped in keeping him on the move.

This was 5 Brigade's last attempt to get one of its battalions to the road; but an effort was made before dawn on 18 December to obstruct it with mines, and for this purpose two detachments were sent out by 7 Field Company, each of a sub-section (about ten men), one escorted by C Company from 23 Battalion and the other by D Company of 28

Battalion. The 23 Battalion company (Captain F. S. R. Thomson ¹) fought its way north to within 400 yards of the road despite enemy opposition, and brought the road under machine-gun fire. Under its protection the engineers succeeded in laying 160 mines on and alongside the road. It was then between 4 and 5 a.m. During all this activity the company knocked out various vehicles and returned safely with no casualties.

The 28 Battalion company (Major Logan ²) advanced some seven miles north-east from the battalion area, and after evading various enemy vehicles, reached the road without interference at a point where a concrete bridge crossed the Wadi Umm el Ghindel. Owing to the rough going the mine-carrying vehicles did not arrive until 3.30 a.m., and the engineers had time to lay only forty mines, all at the Nofilia end of the bridge. D Company had no casualties, but two engineers were killed by the explosion of an enemy booby trap in the centre of the road. No enemy transport was seen during the time the company was there—the enemy had already gone.

¹ Maj F. S. R. Thomson, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 25 Aug 1912; draper; twice wounded; died of wounds 28 Mar 1943.

² Maj F. R. Logan, m.i.d.; Hastings; born Hastings, 3 Jul 1916; farm cadet; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

GONE AWAY

Gone Away

During the night patrols heard the noises of activity in **Nofilia** village and to the west; and at first light it was believed that the enemy was still there, and **30 Corps** was so advised at 7 a.m. This was followed by a personal message from the GOC saying that **Nofilia** was still strongly held and should be bombed, and asking that A Squadron, Staffs Yeomanry, be sent to the Division again to augment the low number of effective tanks with the Greys. Sixth Infantry Brigade Group made ready to send out a mobile column to attack the village from the west, and 4 Light Armoured Brigade prepared to sweep widely round 5 Brigade and then back along the road towards **Nofilia**.

But soon patrols approached the village, reported that they could see no movement, and then at 8.43 a.m. that it was clear. It had to be accepted that the enemy had got away intact. The **21st Battalion**, the unit farthest to the west, reported that there had been spasmodic enemy fire until just before dawn; but at full daylight the ground between the battalion and the road was found to be empty. The newly laid mines were lifted later in the morning.

The enemy plan for this successful withdrawal was a simple one: **33 Reconnaissance Unit** and **104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment** were to stay in position until **Africa Corps** was clear, and then in turn retire through **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment**, which was the final rearguard. In fact the only hitch came from lack of petrol which, amazing though it may seem, was literally being issued a few hundred gallons at a time. There were occasions during the night when units reported that they had come to a stop until more petrol was received. The **15th Panzer Division** disengaged from the area round **Nofilia** shortly after 8 p.m. and had travelled 30 miles along the good tarmac road by first light. The segments of **21 Panzer Division** followed, and then **33 Reconnaissance**

Unit and its supporter.

In the morning of 18 December patrols from 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported enemy transport immediately east of Sultan, where there was a steady stream of vehicles moving west. The KDGs kept contact as far as Sirte, and the rest of the brigade accompanied by Divisional Cavalry moved out on the 18th for some 25 miles westwards across the desert to the vicinity of Bir el Magedubia. For the moment contact with the enemy had been broken except for the armoured car patrols.

So for a second time the enemy had merely been hustled; he had withdrawn from Nofilia itself despite the nearness of our troops. But, as Rommel has recorded, it is extremely difficult to surround a retiring force. Previously the New Zealand Division had withdrawn from Sidi Rezegh and from Minqar Qaim, so escaping what at times had looked like certain encirclement. The German-Italian forces had avoided encirclement at Fuka, Tobruk, Benghazi and Agedabia, and were to repeat the performance. It was not until the end in North Africa, against overwhelming superiority and with the sea at his back, that the enemy was captured complete. Battles like Cannae or Sedan are rare.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

AFTER NOFILIA

After Nofilia

During the previous evening the tasks for 18 December had been received: 2 NZ Division was to maintain contact with the enemy, secure and clear the **Nofilia** airfield, and clear the main road eastwards until meeting 7 Armoured Division which was working westwards. The instructions also gave traffic priorities on the road forward of **El Agheila** for two days ahead, indicating that administration would restrict the forces in any immediate further advance. It is of interest that first priority was given to an **RAF** convoy to **Marble Arch**.

The GOC suggested that 2 NZ Division should advance direct from **Nofilia** across the desert, where the LRDG reported that the going was the best in North Africa. **General Freyberg** had in mind a flanking attack on **Tamet** airfield; but he would want a full regiment of heavy tanks with an additional squadron. The plan was accepted provisionally, and a regiment from **8 Armoured Brigade** was nominated to come under command. Orders were prepared for movement that day (18 December) to **Bir el Magedubia**, and for a further advance on following days.

However, other plans were in view. At 1 p.m. the corps commander (Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese) met the GOC by arrangement some three miles east of **Nofilia**, after sappers working in the area had prevented **General Freyberg's** party from running into a minefield nearby. As a result of this conference the move was cancelled and it now seemed likely that the Division would remain in the **Nofilia** area until after Christmas. The GOC was very pleased with words of praise that had come from both army and corps commanders. He had pointed out, doubtless taking a legitimate advantage of the receptive atmosphere, that if there were to be any more operations of a similar nature he must have more tanks—'two full regiments'.

As a last measure 5 Infantry Brigade established blocks on the road and coastal track to prevent the withdrawal of any stray parties of Germans. By the next day fourteen prisoners had been taken in this way.

The Division now took steps to maintain contact with the enemy and to dispose remaining troops in depth. Fifth Infantry Brigade remained north-west of **Nofilia; and on 19 December a special force was formed, of C Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, one troop from 5 Field Regiment, one troop from 34 Anti-Tank Battery and a detachment from 7 Field Company. This force, under the command of 5 Brigade, moved out to patrol a general line running south-eastwards for some 18 miles from **Sultan**, to watch for any enemy advance from the west, protect the engineer detachment while it cleared the road from **Nofilia**, and report on the condition of the airfields at **Sultan**. B Squadron, Divisional Cavalry, took up a linking position some 25 miles farther back, and a link was also maintained with 4 Light Armoured Brigade round **Sirte**. This little force cleared the airfield at **Sultan** but saw nothing of the enemy. Sub-units were relieved from time to time, and the force remained out until after Christmas, when 2 NZ Division was relieved of operational duties.**

During the next two or three days the Division settled down into semi-permanent bivouacs alongside the road north of **Nofilia, with 5 Brigade Group the farthest to the west. One armoured car regiment remained on constant patrol in the **Sirte** area; the engineers continued clearing the road both east and west, and the main airfield and other landing grounds near **Nofilia**. Junction was made with the engineers of 7 Armoured Division on 20 December at a point ten miles east of the crossroads. It will be noticed that frequently while much of the Division was, comparatively speaking, at rest, the engineers went steadily on with work that required courage and steady nerves, without the excitement of battle to exalt them.**

For the time being there was no offensive action in sight, and some

thought could be given both to the past and the future, coloured always by the approach of Christmas. On 19 December **General Freyberg** held a conference and discussed plans for the future, but there was also some soul-searching about the immediate past. Referring to the possibility of another outflanking move, he said: ‘...if we do it quickly enough and differently from the way we have carried out the last two, that is with greater punch, we may be able to bottle a certain number of his troops. We have missed two chances of bottling him as our technique was imperfect.... there was uncertainty as to our position.... A brigade commander must have a battalion of heavy tanks to push in so that the blow goes in hard and goes right home.... The four hours' delay due to lack of petrol in the first movement allowed the whole of the Panzer Armee to escape. The enemy could move faster along the road and he was able to put a gun line and infantry positions and tanks on the escarpment to hold off our attack to command the road.’

Mistakes in navigation and shortage of tanks were not to trouble the Division in the future, so something had been gained from the experience of **El Agheila** and **Nofilia**. It was something of an error to blame the late refuelling on 14 December for lack of progress on the evening of the 15th, which was due more to the delay in refuelling the Greys in the morning of that day.

The enemy nevertheless had handled his troops skilfully and had effected his withdrawal without serious loss, but he was forced to retire and was definitely on the defensive. The New Zealand Division had played its part, but there was a natural measure of disappointment at the enemy's escape. Later reflection, however, assesses the Division's part quite highly, for the fighting at **Nofilia**, in the eyes of the post-war Battle Nomenclature Committee, merited classification as a ‘separate engagement’, and was held to be the sharpest action of the whole **El Agheila** operation. The Division's casualties were 7 killed and 35 wounded, nearly all of them in 5 Brigade.

The casualty list for the fighting on 16, 17 and 18 December was mercifully a small one. The Division had 18 killed, 64 wounded and

eight taken prisoner. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade had 13 killed, 17 wounded and two missing. Enemy material captured was not great, although any captures were good for morale. It amounted to about 15 vehicles, 14 guns, mostly 50-millimetre, and 33 machine guns. Four tanks were knocked out by anti-tank guns. This does not include the tank losses of the enemy in the action west of [Nofilia](#) on 17 December, where the losses on both sides were about the same, four or five.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 5 – PREPARING TO HURRY TO TRIPOLI

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

TUNISIAN FRONT

Tunisian Front

WHILE the operations at **El Agheila** and **Nofilia** were running their course, westwards in **Tunisia** matters had not been going well for the Allies. Increasing German pressure, mostly from tanks and dive-bombers, gradually forced the British troops back to **Medjez el Bab**, some 35 miles from **Tunis**. The Allies still had the equivalent of only two divisions, while the Axis had four (three German and one Italian). This withdrawal caused a delay in the Allied plans for a counter-offensive, which was finally launched on 22 December. The British **5 Corps** (6 Armoured and 78 Divisions) commenced attacks on a pronounced feature, **Djebel Ahmera**—later known as **Longstop Hill**—near **Medjez**; and it was intended that both **United States** and French troops should join in. But there had already been heavy rain, later becoming torrential,¹ and this interfered drastically not only with the fighting but with the movement of supplies.

Between 22 and 24 December General Eisenhower toured the forward area, and as a result postponed the offensive indefinitely, ordering his forces to reorganise and settle down for the winter. The line then ran from **El Aouana** to **Medjez el Bab** and **Bou Arada**, with scattered bodies of troops on a line running south to **Pichon**. **Longstop Hill** remained in German possession. The gallant attempt to carry **Tunis** by storm had failed, albeit by very little. The Allied forces, now in a state of some disorganisation as a result of having been sent into battle piecemeal, needed a period of some months before they would be ready for further offensives.

Towards the end of January 1943 the Allied line from north to south was held by the British **5 Corps**, now consisting of 46 and 78 Divisions and a composite division known as 'Y', the French **19 Corps** of two divisions, and **2 United States Corps** of two divisions (but being built up

to four). There had been some confusion within the Allied line owing to the intermingling of nationalities and to the reluctance of the French to place their troops under British command; but on 26 January General Eisenhower issued firm orders that Lieutenant-General K. A. N. Anderson, commanding the First Army, would take over tactical command of the whole front. The final arrangement thus gave First Army three corps, 5 British, 19 French and 2 United States. The Axis strength was by that time the equivalent of five German divisions, including two armoured, and one and a half Italian.

So for a period there was stalemate in the north; but in the south the front was more fluid and allowed of some movement. The gradual build-up of **United States** troops in this area, based on **Tebessa**, was sufficient even as early as mid-January to make the Axis nervous about an Allied offensive towards **Gabes** and **Sfax**; and for this reason **21 Panzer Division** was later sent from **Tripolitania** to that area.

¹ In November 1957 the author represented New Zealand at the unveiling of the War Memorial at **Medjez el Bab**, which commemorates all those reported 'Missing' anywhere in **Tunisia**. But on the day arranged for the ceremony the rain came down in torrents, in a matter of hours the wadis between **Tunis** and **Medjez** were running bank high, and the ceremony had to be postponed after many of those attending (who had all come out from **Tunis**) had been marooned on the side of the flooding farthest from **Tunis**. All those present from the First Army — in the majority — were able to say to old Eighth Army types, 'Now you know why we couldn't get on in December 1942'.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE GENERAL SITUATION ON EIGHTH ARMY'S FRONT

The General Situation on Eighth Army's Front

For some time it was believed that the enemy would make his next stand on the **Buerat** position, a line running roughly south-westwards from the coast near **Buerat**. There would be no great difficulty in turning this position, which had an open southern flank, but between **Buerat** and **Tripoli** another and much stronger line extended from **Homs** to **Tarhuna**.

Buerat was 600 miles from **Tobruk**, from which, even at the end of December it was still necessary to despatch some hundreds of tons of stores a day to Eighth Army. The distance to **Benghazi** was 400 miles, and as this was a lesser burden on the supply echelons, every effort was made to speed up the daily rate of unloading there. But no port, other than small anchorages, existed between **Benghazi** and **Tripoli**, a distance of 675 miles, too far to maintain the army by road for any length of time. No reasonably sized force could remain in **Tripoli**, much less advance beyond it, without the use of that port, and the time it would take the navy to make it workable after the enemy's expected demolitions could only be estimated. A period of one or two weeks after capture seemed reasonable. A force advancing on **Tripoli** would therefore have to carry enough supplies of all kinds—petrol, rations, water and ammunition—to overcome both the **Buerat** and the **Homs– Tarhuna** lines, reach **Tripoli** and capture it, and maintain itself for a period. Prolonged maintenance from **Benghazi** was impossible. Moreover the force could make no measured advance to **Tripoli**, but would have to reach it within a limited time.

Thus it would have to go right through to **Tripoli** in one continuous advance of so many days; which after the complicated calculations necessary to solve the problem, was fixed at ten days after the initial attack on the **Buerat** line. If the advance took longer, the army could not be maintained at **Tripoli** even until the port was open, and

consequently some of its formations would have to be withdrawn and any further advance became doubtful. It was a fascinating problem in logistics, but one of more than academic interest to the Army Commander and his staff.

It was sincerely hoped that the enemy would not move back from **Buerat** before the attack started, for if he withdrew to the **Homs-Tarhuna** line, making use of all the skill he had already shown in delaying actions and with mines and demolitions, then again the maintenance of the attacking force would be difficult. All supplies still would have to come forward by the long road haul from **Benghazi**, and a considerable part of the load of every vehicle would be the petrol for its own consumption on the round trip.

So while administration dictated that Eighth Army should go no farther for the moment, but should pause while supplies were built up as far forward as possible, strategy dictated also that formations should stay where they were so as not to alarm the enemy. There was to be no feeling forward to make contact, followed by probing attacks and preliminary bombardment. The army was to go straight into action from its present locations and would deliberately seek an 'encounter battle' for which it would be fully prepared.

So for the present **30 Corps** was stretched out from **Sirte** back to **El Agheila**, but 4 Light Armoured Brigade alone kept watch on the enemy. It was under command of 2 NZ Division until 22 December and thereafter under 7 Armoured Division.

The Army plan was that **30 Corps** should attack with four divisions (50, 51, 7 Armoured, and 2 NZ) and two extra armoured brigades (22 and 23), the number of tanks in all armoured regiments being made up to establishment by drawing on the tanks of 1 Armoured Division, now back near the Egyptian frontier. The 50th and 51st Divisions and 23 Armoured Brigade were to attack along the coast road, while 7 Armoured and 2 NZ Divisions, the latter with the Greys under command, were to sweep round the enemy's flank and cut in behind him. The 22nd

Armoured Brigade was to be centrally placed in **Army Reserve**. Initially the attack by **50 and 51 Divisions** was not to be pressed, but as soon as the outflanking movement began to make itself felt, the pressure was to be increased and the attack conducted ruthlessly. The objectives of the outflanking formations were to be first **Sedada** and **Tmed el Chatua** (about 60 miles west of **Buerat**), and thence as circumstances required—either north-eastwards against the rear of the enemy's line, or northwards to cut off retreating columns, or north-westwards direct on **Tripoli**.

At the appropriate time **Headquarters 10 Corps**, brought forward from **Tobruk**, would take over command of the coastal attack, leaving **30 Corps** to command the outflanking move. The army's operations would be covered and supported by the full power of the **Desert Air Force**; and for this purpose more airfields were to be prepared in the present forward areas. The preparation of advanced landing grounds was an important task of the outflanking formations.

The building up of supply dumps for the advance would take until 14 January 1943, which was fixed as 'D' day; but if the enemy remained in the **Buerat** position in force and had not thinned out, the attack would not commence until 20 January.

This plan suffered a severe setback. A gale that raged from 4 to 6 January wrought havoc in **Benghazi** harbour, breaching the breakwater and sinking several ships, one with 2000 tons of ammunition, and the intake dropped from 3000 to 1000 tons a day. The army was again forced to use **Tobruk**. After reviewing the position **Montgomery** decided to adhere to the date fixed, but to reduce the coastal attack by one division (**50 Division**) and to use the transport of **10 Corps** as a whole to ferry stores from **Tobruk**. No part of **10 Corps** would come forward, and **Montgomery** was conscious that he was losing correct balance by having his second echelon of formations so far behind; but by that time indications were strong that the enemy contemplated no debouchment eastwards. In the end **50 Division** was brought forward to **El Agheila**. The

only real risk was nothing new—that the force might not get to **Tripoli** in ten days.

As Headquarters **10 Corps** would not be available, Montgomery decided to command the coastal thrust himself from his Tactical Headquarters, leaving the outflanking operations to be controlled by **30 Corps**. It was admittedly too much to give one Corps Headquarters command of both attacks; but there were mixed opinions at the time whether the army commander should act as corps commander also.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

FROM THE ENEMY'S SIDE

From the Enemy's Side

The many arguments over the withdrawal from the **El Agheila** positions to **Buerat** were now to be repeated with even greater force, but in the end Rommel was able very largely to get his own way. The last Italian overseas possession was now slipping from **Mussolini's** grasp. It is small wonder that he was desperately trying to stave off what was now rapidly becoming the inevitable. Moreover, there were still bitter thoughts about the way in which the Italians had been sacrificed when Rommel withdrew from **Alamein**, and a grim determination—if the adjective 'grim' is applicable in such a state of indecision—that there should be no repetition. These two factors were in conflict, for if there was to be a desperate resistance to hold the remnant of the Italian empire, it was surely not fitting that the Italians should be sent away first.

Rommel had never regarded the **Buerat** line as more than a temporary one, and much preferred the **Homs- Tarhuna** line, although in his opinion any position on the way back to the **Gabes Gap** could be only temporary. During the fighting at **El Agheila** and **Nofilia**, however, all troops except the motorised units of **Africa Corps** and several other small German units were at work improving the **Buerat** line, which **Mussolini** (*Comando Supremo*) had instructed Rommel to hold at all costs. Rommel's immediate superior, Marshal Bastico (*Superlibia*), was in sympathy with his views, but to put it bluntly was frightened of the Duce. On 17 December they sent a combined appreciation to Rome and sought permission at least to thin out on the **Buerat** line. The answer to this was 'Resist to the uttermost I repeat resist to the uttermost with all troops of the German-Italian Army in the **Buerat** position'.

This was completely unrealistic, and Rommel asked what he should do if Eighth Army merely outflanked him to the south and did not

attack frontally. Moreover, he expected continued pressure from Eighth Army and an attack about 20 December and was surprised at the unexpected lull. Throughout he maintained that he could not guarantee to hold the enemy off, and that his forces had to retire into **Tunisia** and the **Gabes** line.

A series of conferences followed between Rommel, Kesselring and Bastico, with the outcome that permission was given to commence withdrawing the non-motorised troops, mainly Italians, to the **Homs-Tarhuna** line. Bastico said, doubtless with emphasis, that on no account were the Italians ever to be left behind, to which Rommel replied that he could either save them by withdrawing them forthwith, or lose them by remaining, and asked which should he do. He also wanted to withdraw the garrison of **Bu Ngem**, 60 miles south of **Buerat**, but for the moment this was refused. On 24 December one of many messages he sent to *Superlibia* pointed out that daily requirements of petrol during static periods were 200 cubic metres, and during active operations 400, but during December he had received only 100. Ammunition stocks were between one-third and one-half of requirements. Rommel's messages at this time must have been a source of constant trepidation to his superiors. **Tripoli**, however, was now very little use to the Axis, owing partly to bombing and partly to the rate of sinkings of vessels destined for that port. A high proportion of Rommel's supplies were coming from Tunisian ports, and thence by a combination of an indifferent railway and a long road haul.

Finally Rommel obtained a slight relaxation of his rigid orders, and on 29 December withdrew the **Bu Ngem** garrison to **El Faschia**, 45 miles north-west. Then on 31 December came a change of plan. The Fuehrer and the Duce agreed that the main front would be in **Tunisia**, that the Libyan front would be subsidiary, and that Rommel's plan for gradual retirement was accepted; but although he wanted to go back to the **Gabes Gap**, his superiors were firm that he should hold the **Mareth** Line. Further, fixed periods of delay were to be imposed on the enemy, three weeks before reaching the **Homs-Tarhuna** line, and another three weeks

before giving up **Tripoli**. Rommel responded that he must commence moving the Italians back from **Buerat** at once, as with the transport available it would take ten days, and secondly, he could give no guarantee of holding the enemy for any fixed period, as that depended on the weight of attack. The withdrawal of the Italian **XX** and **XXI Corps** began on 3 January; and at the same time *164 Light Division*, hitherto not fully motorised, was made so with vehicles gleaned from other German formations.

Thereafter Rommel was told—the words sound like a plea—that he was to do the best he could to delay the enemy in front of **Tripoli**; but that he must impose two months' delay before reaching the **Mareth Line**. Rommel reiterated that his speed of withdrawal was in the last resort dependent on the weight of British pressure. It was in fact over two months before Eighth Army attacked at **Mareth**; but it may be argued that the delay was due more to Montgomery's careful preparations than to Rommel's delaying tactics.

Bastico then had the unusual experience that Rommel, having agreed with one of his requests, went even beyond what was asked of him. **Sfax**, a small port in southern **Tunisia**, was held to be in danger of attack from **United States** forces in the west, and on 11 January Bastico asked that *164 Light Division* be sent to strengthen the garrison there. Rommel had a high opinion of the potentialities of the **Gabes Gap** position, and moreover was dependent on supplies coming through **Sfax** and was therefore willing to further tighten his belt now in the hope that he could loosen it later. For various reasons he preferred to send **21 Panzer Division**, with *580 Reconnaissance Unit*, rather than *164 Light Division*, which was reorganising. Thus, on 13 January, **21 Panzer** left for **Sfax**. On the same day Rommel detached a small staff, headed by his army artillery commander, to inspect the **Mareth** defences and start work on improvements.

Actually **21 Panzer Division** had travelled no farther than **Tarhuna** when it was ordered to leave all tanks and tank crews behind to be absorbed into **15 Panzer Division** and to re-equip in **Tunisia**. There was

not enough petrol, however, at that time to take the tanks forward again to *15 Panzer Division*, some 40 miles south-west of **Buerat**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE

Christmas Interlude

Meanwhile 2 NZ Division was reorganising near **Nofilia**. At his conference on 19 December, already mentioned, **General Freyberg** had given some indications about the future: there was to be a pause for at least ten days, depending on the rate of build-up of supplies. The GOC praised the Greys for getting their tanks forward over 320 miles of desert going, and added praise to all drivers of vehicles and maintenance staff. He said that he would have to have more tanks for further operations, and that these had been promised. It appeared that the Division would be employed again on a desert march, and the LRDG would be entirely responsible for navigation. Harder living was to be enforced during the move, and there was to be no promiscuous 'brewing up', especially during hours of darkness. The reduction of enemy air activity would allow dispersion in desert formation to be reduced from the existing 150 to 100 yards between vehicles. The GOC concluded by saying that games were to be organised, and that arrangements were being made for Christmas fare.

General Montgomery and General Leese visited the Division on 21 December, and the former addressed formation and unit commanders. He said he was very pleased with the advance which had 'shaken the Boche'; he explained why it had not been possible to give the Division more tanks, and described its outflanking move as a very fine performance. He then spoke of the future and outlined his plan. To relieve the strain on administration, 2 NZ Division was to move back to Merduma.

Following this conference and the receipt of orders from **30 Corps**, divisional orders issued on 22 December foreshadowed the move back, but specified tasks to be carried out in the meantime. These mainly affected 5 Infantry Brigade and Divisional Cavalry, whose responsibility

was extended to within five miles of **Sultan**, including protection of the **Sultan** landing ground. The Divisional Engineers were to clear and maintain the road from the **Nofilia** landing ground westwards to the same limit, in addition to their normal tasks.

The remainder of the Division was to stay in bivouac areas for rest, reorganisation and training, which was to include route marches, musketry, recreational training and sports. Responsibility for the forward area passed to 7 Armoured Division, which thus took over control of 4 Light Armoured Brigade and all activities beyond the limit given to 5 Brigade.

On 23 December, no doubt owing to some slight easing in the administrative position, the move back to Merduma was cancelled, and the Division remained in the **Nofilia** area.

For the next few days the approach of Christmas dominated all activities. For the men of the first three echelons it was the third Christmas spent overseas, and for many it was the second spent in the desert. A year previously the Division had been at **Baggush**, after suffering grievous losses in the CRUSADER battles. Now at Christmas 1942 it was different, there had been successes, morale was high, and there were great hopes for the future. They might even all be home for next Christmas.

The administrative services from Egypt forwards excelled themselves. Unit orders, placed months before with **NAAFI**, arrived in time for distribution; and beer and cigarettes were among the things distributed—but not free! The cost of a bottle of beer and twenty cigarettes was twenty piastres, just over four shillings. The ration included fourteen ounces of pork for each man and a special issue of rum. The field bakery made its first issue of really fresh bread and the postal service delivered Christmas mail, including over 60,000 parcels. On 30 December there was a free issue to each man of a 'Nat Pat' parcel, a tin of tobacco, and fifty New Zealand and fourteen South African cigarettes, and more beer was available at cost price. To collect some of

this largesse a convoy of thirty-five lorries of Supply Company left on 19 December to go to [El Adem](#)—more than 450 miles—and returned to the Division on the 29th.

The Army Commander, in a Christmas message, said that he was anxious that Christmas Day should be kept a day of rest, and that operations, works, and training were to be reduced to a minimum.

The day was fine but cold. Church services in the morning were followed by dinner for other ranks, at which officers waited on the men. Officers had their own dinner in the evening. It was generally agreed throughout the Division that the cooks had excelled themselves. Owing to their wide dispersal, all units could not be visited by [General Freyberg](#), but he sent a message on Christmas Eve giving his best wishes to all ranks. Among the units he did visit was Headquarters NZASC, where he thanked the corps for its remarkable work throughout the campaign. The Maoris had a dinner cooked in true Maori fashion, and learnt that monetary gifts had been received from the Maori people in New Zealand, enough to distribute tobacco to the battalion and to give each man £1 next time he went on leave.

Altogether it was a heartening Christmas, and led the GOC to write to General Headquarters, Middle East Forces, thanking the administrative staff and the [NAAFI](#) for their efforts, a message much appreciated by a staff who, in their own words, ‘usually get more kicks than bouquets’.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

BACK TO BUSINESS

Back to Business

On 26 December 7 Armoured Division relieved 5 Infantry Brigade Group of the responsibility of covering the road, and next day the brigade concentrated nearer the beach with Divisional Cavalry again, as normally, under **Divisional Headquarters'** command. The only unit in the group to carry on its task was 7 Field Company.

This static period at **Nofilia** was a busy one for the engineers, whose tasks included clearing landing grounds, clearing and improving roads and tracks, and repairing water installations, work which required both skill and cold-blooded courage. The landing-ground task, which was the most urgent, meant lifting mines and clearing booby traps for days at a time. In fact, after five days' work on one field, not all of the mines had been lifted. At another field it was estimated that it would take a week to clear the ground and two weeks to clear surrounding areas. All mine-lifting had to be done by hand with the help of mine-detectors; flail tanks ('Scorpions') were tried, but were considered slow and inefficient by the New Zealand Engineers for this type of work.

Mine-lifting was also done on roads and tracks, and on the main coast road west of **Nofilia**. No track was free of mines, and even the local water supply could not be used until an access track had been cleared. The road itself had not only to be cleared but at various points dispersal areas off it had to be made safe. As well as anti-tank and anti-personnel mines there were booby traps, demolitions and obstacles, in the use of all of which the enemy was expert. It is small wonder that during this 'rest' period the engineers lost 13 killed and 25 injured.

For the first few days in the area there was difficulty in obtaining satisfactory supplies of water. Wells in **Nofilia** village had been both mined and blocked with debris and the water was dirty and

contaminated by dieselene. It took some days to clear them, with assistance from a British well-boring section which later found a good fresh supply in the area.

Rommel's appreciation of how much he owed to his engineers during this campaign is shown in his recommendation on 28 February 1943 that his Chief Engineer (Major-General Buelowius) should be promoted to lieutenant-general. He praises the provision of obstacles on a large scale and the great attention to detail, demolitions in specially reconnoitred locations, laying of mines in extra large quantities in deep thick minefields, often over large sectors away from roads, destruction of landing grounds and 'adaptation of engineer methods to North African conditions'; and finally he says, 'It is due in very large measure to the engineers under the Chief Army Engineer that the withdrawals were carried out without heavy losses, and that the Army was able to disengage from the enemy in every case according to plan.' Our engineers probably would have said that Buelowius well deserved his promotion, which incidentally he did receive.

An indication of the close-knit co-operation which had now developed between Eighth Army and the **Desert Air Force** was the further clarifying on 26 December of the area of responsibility of the Division, which now included from the **Nofilia** landing ground westwards to the **Sultan** landing ground. Within this area was a landing strip at **Sidi Azzab**, 35 miles due west of **Nofilia**, which a working party from 6 Infantry Brigade numbering 11 officers and 300 men made fit for operational use in about a week. The rest of the Division carried on with training. Some few reinforcements, recovered wounded and sick, came forward from **Maadi**.

Immediately on arrival at **Nofilia** the NZASC was engaged on the task of building up supplies for the next move. The Division had finished the **El Agheila– Nofilia** operations with petrol for only fifty miles—and with experience enough to lay down that in future five miles to the gallon for each vehicle was to be taken as the basis of issues. By the end of December units held petrol for 350 miles, and thereafter drew only

enough to replace daily consumption. During this period the NZASC made petrol dumps on the east side of **Wadi Tamet**, 100 miles west of **Nofilia**, for the use of both 2 NZ and 7 Armoured Divisions, and also dumped rations and ammunition at various points to accord with the **30 Corps** administrative plan. Included in one petrol dump was a special supply of high octane petrol for the Greys, which was to be under the Division's command. It was steady and unceasing work, but gradually the stocks accumulated to the required quantities.

In the days following Christmas the GOC remarked more than once that the enemy would pull out of **Tripoli** without a fight, and indeed went so far as to say that it would be evacuated in three or four days, an example of a delightful vein of optimism that sometimes coloured his conversation; but one of his customary reports to the **New Zealand Government** on 30 December was less optimistic and gave what in the end was a correct forecast—that the enemy would not fight seriously to hold **Tripolitania**, that Eighth Army would be in **Tripoli** by January, and that **Africa** would be cleared of Axis forces in the next few months. ¹

¹ *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 159–60.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE TERRAIN

The Terrain

The **Buerat** line ran from **Maaten Giaber** on the coast, 15 miles north-west of **Buerat**, to the south-west in front of **Gheddahia**, an important track junction and also the junction of **Wadi Umm er Raml** from the south and **Wadi Zemzem** from the south-west. The line then ran southwards on the western side of the track to **Bu Ngem** and the **Wadi Umm er Raml**, and made good use of the long ridge **Dor Umm er Raml**.² But while the northern flank was reasonably secured by salt marshes north of the road, which here turned inland, the southern end of **Dor Umm er Raml** could easily be outflanked. In the circumstances the detached post at **Bu Ngem** was in a dangerous position, and it is small wonder that Rommel had it removed. Air reconnaissance and the LRDG both reported that the enemy had recently strengthened his line; but the defences seemed to consist of unconnected weapon pits and an unfinished anti-tank ditch, and had little real depth. They were strongest nearest the road, where it was already known that the enemy could fight his most effective delaying action. Any defence south of **Dor Umm er Raml** could be by mobile forces only. It was of course appreciated in Eighth Army that the enemy knew well the weakness of his line, so that a prolonged resistance was not expected.

Between **Nofilia** and the **Buerat** line the going was good away from the coastline, and the only obstacles of importance were **Wadi Tamet** and **Wadi Bei el Chebir**; but even here the upper or southern reaches were reasonably shallow with sloping sides. Crossing would not be difficult; but the wadis formed bottlenecks, as they could not be crossed on a broad front.

West and north-west of the enemy's line was a wide stretch of desert where adequate going was interspersed with numerous wadi systems running across the line of advance. Of these wadis,

² Dor= group of hills.

or wadi systems, the most important were **Wadi Zemzem**, **Wadi Nfed**, and **Wadi Sofeggin**. The first could be easily crossed, but the other two were difficult, the only good area being near their junction at **Sedada** and **Tmed el Chatua**, or alternatively near the main road.

Beyond these wadis the ground rose gradually to the north-west, for the line of advance in that direction in reality ascended the southern slope of a range of hills known as **Gebel Garian** and still farther west as **Gebel Nefusa**. This southern face was gentle in slope and gave the appearance of a plateau, although the word plateau is relative, for the ground was anything but smooth. Where the line of advance crossed the line **Homs- Tarhuna- Garian**, the land was anything from 1400 to 2500 feet above sea-level, with a steady rise in height from north-east to south-west, the trend of the crestline.

From there to the north the level fell very rapidly and the escarpment presented a precipitous face, and indeed from the north looked like a mountain range. Moreover the northern face was a formidable obstacle, deeply incised by long and steep wadis, with grotesque re-entrants and projecting bastions. So deeply cut is this escarpment, and so abrupt its fall, that movement north or south is impossible, except on roads and tracks. Movement east or west on the top of the escarpment, at least for large formations, is almost impossible for some miles back from the northern edge, so deep and so steep are the wadis.

From the foot of the escarpment into **Tripoli**, a distance of 30 to 40 miles, the going was not difficult except for sand dunes. There was fairly intensive cultivation across this strip, which was well watered with springs.

All this was known from pre-war reports; but more detail was needed

and the invaluable LRDG was called on to send out patrols to provide it. Captain Browne, leading a patrol in a jeep, was blown up on a mine at El Machina. A South African officer was killed and Browne wounded, and the patrol returned to **Nofilia**. On 25 December it set out again, led by Second-Lieutenant **McLauchlan**,¹ and reconnoitred to the **Bu Ngem-Gheddahia** track. In spite of an ambush in which several men were lost, it completed its task and returned to report that the going to **Bu Ngem** was not passable by night nor in desert formation by day, but that there was good going between **Pilastrino** and **Fortino**. Another patrol, which included no New Zealanders, also left on 25 December, travelling as far as the line **Homs – Beni**

¹ **Capt K. F. McLauchlan**, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Winton**, 20 Jun 1912; civil engineer.

Ulid. It reported that the area bounded on the north and east by the coast road, and on the south-west by a line **Bu Ngem – El Faschia – Sedada – Tmed el Chatua – Bir Gebira – Beni Ulid** was suitable for a force of all arms. The upper reaches of **Wadi Sofeggin** and **Wadi Nfed** were impassable, but the lower reaches were scarcely perceptible. The terrain would provide no cover from air observation for a force of any size, but there were reasonably good water supplies. Towards the end of December a more detailed reconnaissance of limited range was made by a party of New Zealand engineers headed by the CRE, and directed as far as the crossing of **Wadi Tamet** and the area immediately west and south-west. The result was to select a divisional thrust line towards **Pilastrino** and **Fortino**, as the going farther south was impossible.

Concurrently with these reconnaissances, work started on making and marking tracks forward from **Nofilia**, and again the field companies and the **Provost Company** were kept busy. These tracks were to be used by all formations of the army, the road being reserved for transporters, **RAF** transport, maintenance convoys and staff cars. The New Zealand Division was responsible in part for four parallel tracks, two as far as

Wadi Bei el Chebir, and two directly south of **Sirte**, where 7 Armoured Division took over. The Division finished its task by 12 January.

The **Desert Air Force** still required further airfields in the forward areas; but to avoid attracting enemy attention, minimum use was to be made of transport and machinery. Thus on 30 December 5 Infantry Brigade Group was given the task of clearing a landing ground some 30 miles south-west of **Sirte** and east of **Wadi Tamet**. The group commenced its 100-mile move on 1 January, 23 and 28 Battalions marching for two days on foot, while the remainder moved in transport the whole way. The group was fully assembled by 6 January after the artillery had completed calibration.

The airfield site, some 1200 yards square, had first to be bulldozed level, and the men then picked up by hand thousands of stones, loaded them into trucks and removed them. The work started on 2 January under the protection of 42 Light AA Battery. At the earliest possible date, 6 January, Spitfires operated from landing strips, with pilots waiting in their seats and radar in use. But on the 5th eight Messerschmitts raided the airfield, killing nine New Zealanders and wounding twenty-six. There were further raids during the next three days, when two more were killed and three wounded,¹ and in addition four British soldiers

¹ During the period 18 Dec 1942–8 Jan 1943 the Division's total casualties, mostly among 5 Brigade, the engineers and NZASC, were 31 killed and 77 wounded, more than were sustained in the engagements at **Wadi Matratin** and **Nofilia**.

were killed and twenty wounded. The light anti-aircraft battery and the Spitfires did good work and gradually wore the enemy down; but the warning of a raid was always short, and naturally the only slit trenches were off the airfield. Most of the time a strong cold wind raised much dust, so that **Brigadier Kippenberger** had good cause for saying that it was 'one of the most unpleasant jobs 5 Brigade ever had to do'.¹ In this

test of discipline the group stood up manfully. It remained in the area until 11 January, when it rejoined the rest of the Division, which had moved forward from **Nofilia** and was now close by.



The left hook at El Agheila. The New Zealand Division on its outflanking move

The left hook at **El Agheila. The New Zealand Division on its outflanking move**



A 25-pounder and its limber are winched up a rise

A 25-pounder and its limber are winched up a rise



New Zealand Vickers guns in position near Wadi Matratin



General Freyberg confers with his O Group near Nofilia.
From left: Col S. H. Crump (Commander NZASC), —, Lt-Col A. W. White (Divisional Reserve Group), Brig W. G. Gentry (6 Brigade), Brig H. K. Kippenberger (5 Brigade), Brig C. E. Weir (CRA), Col R. C. Queree (G1), Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant (Divisional Cavalry), —, Lt-Col B. Barrington (AA & QMG), Maj E. W. Hayton (Divisional Provost), Lt-Col F. M. H. Hanson (CRE), Lt-Col A. H. Andrews (CREME), Lt-Col G. L. Agar (Divisional Signals)

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Bypassing a demolished bridge on the Via Balbia near Sirte.
The white tape indicates the path cleared of mines



Bypassing a demolished bridge on the [Via Balbia](#) near [Sirte](#). The white tape indicates the path cleared of mines



Engineers search the roadside for mines

Engineers search the roadside for mines



A sapper removes an S-mine from a landing field

A sapper removes an S-mine from a landing field



An enemy shell bursts among advancing transport to the south of Buerat

An enemy shell bursts among advancing transport to the south of Buerat

The Division, in desert formation, advances from Wadi Zemzem towards Beni Ulid



The Division, in desert formation, advances from Wadi Zemzem towards Beni Ulid



Beni Ulid—from a painting by R. L. Kay

Beni Ulid—from a painting by R. L. Kay

New Zealand engineers clear a track on the route between
Beni Ulid and Azizia



New Zealand engineers clear a track on the route between Beni Ulid and Azizia



A British armoured car near Tarhuna

A British armoured car near Tarhuna



A New Zealand column approaches Tarhuna



On the road to Azizia

On the road to Azizia

New Zealand sappers make friends with an Italian family on the way to Tripoli



New Zealand sappers make friends with an Italian family on the way to Tripoli

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PLANS FOR OPERATION FIRE-EATER

Plans for Operation FIRE-EATER

On 28 December Montgomery issued his plans for FIRE-EATER, the operation to capture **Tripoli**. The object was 'to destroy the enemy now opposing Eighth Army in the **Buerat** position, and to ensure the port of **Tripoli** as a base for further operations'. Different tactical plans were prepared in case the enemy should evacuate the position before Eighth Army reached it (codename **GAME**), or in case he thinned out and left only rearguards (**SET**), or in case he stood and fought (**MATCH**).

Thirtieth Corps issued a series of operation instructions for the offensive, of which the first dealt with the approach march to **Wadi Bei el Chebir**. Orders were issued on 5 January for the action to be taken in the event of **GAME**, **SET**, or **MATCH**; and when it was known that the enemy was indeed thinning out, slightly more detailed orders were issued on the 7th for **SET** only. These said that 2 NZ Division would have under command:

Royal Scots Greys (Lieutenant-Colonel A. G. J. Readman), with 25 Shermans, 4 Grants and 20 Stuarts

211 Medium Battery, RA

One battery 42 Light AA Regt, RA

94 Heavy AA Regt, RA

One troop of Scorpions (which in the outcome were not accepted and not taken)

Before 'D' day the divisions would move forward, prepared to go straight into battle without any pause to square up or reorganise. The start line and bounds were the same for 2 NZ and 7 Armoured Divisions.

The former depended on the distance which 7 Armoured Division had advanced its patrol line (4 Light Armoured Brigade) before the operation commenced, and in the event was roughly the line of the road from Gheddahia to Bu Ngem. The corps axis of advance was Sedada – Beni Ulid – Tarhuna – Tripoli, with bounds at the crossing of Wadi Zemzem and at each of the above places.

No inter-divisional boundary was laid down between 7 Armoured and 2 NZ Divisions, but they were to move on the right and left respectively of the corps axis of advance and cross the start line at dawn on 15 January; thereafter the speed of advance was to be as great as possible, with 2 NZ Division proceeding straight to Sedada and capturing it. The armoured division would then pass through and seize Tarhuna, while 2 NZ Division cleared the route from Sedada to Beni Ulid. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade was to cover the corps front but had considerable freedom of movement. If strong enemy forces were met, it was to swing to the west and make for Tripoli by any way it could.

A detachment from 239 Wing, RAF, using some 175 vehicles, would move with 2 NZ Division; in conjunction with a reconnaissance party accompanying 7 Armoured Division, it was to establish fighter landing grounds at Sedada and Bir Dufan, 30 miles farther north, in order to keep fighter cover in step with the advance, for by the time formations reached Sedada and beyond they would be out of range of the fighters operating from existing landing grounds. The New Zealand Division was allotted three wireless tentacles for communication with the air force, one of whose tasks it was to maintain air supremacy over the flanking column and give close support if required.

For the action to be taken on reaching Tripoli special instructions were issued. Naturally these made broad assumptions about the actual arrival at the gates of Tripoli, and one of these was that the leading infantry brigade would come from 2 NZ Division. This brigade was to determine sectors, allot each sector to a unit, establish guards on vital points, maintain law and order and so on. Sufficient copies of this particular corps order were distributed for each brigade, battalion and

armoured regiment commander, so that all were aware of the general scheme.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE DIVISION MOVES FORWARD

The Division moves Forward

Divisional Headquarters and **Divisional Cavalry** moved some ten miles south from **Nofilia** to new positions on 3 January, and shortly after midday next day the battalions of **6 Brigade** marched past **General Montgomery** and continued on foot to their destination. The brigade then dispersed into desert formation, leaving gaps for **6 Field Regiment** and **8 Field Company** which were away, the artillery calibrating and the engineers engaged on their special tasks. It was a windy day with flying sand, and conditions were unpleasant, as indeed they also were for **5 Infantry Brigade Group** working on the airfield, and doubtless for the enemy working on the **Buerat** line.

Montgomery then visited the Greys. After lunch at **Divisional Headquarters** he addressed an assemblage of officers on the **Battle of Alamein**, the future of the North African campaign, and the situation on other fronts, before visiting **6 Brigade Group** to do likewise. The GOC gave a dinner for him in the evening, about which it is recorded that **Montgomery** retired to bed quite early and the GOC a little later, but that the party then carried on.

The GOC held a planning conference on 5 January on a forthcoming training exercise, and on the two following days went on a reconnaissance of the forward area across **Wadi Tamet**, visiting **Headquarters 30 Corps** (which was west of **Sirte**), **Headquarters 7 Armoured Division**, and **5 Infantry Brigade**.

Divisional orders appeared on 7 January, directing the first of a series of marches towards a bivouac area just east of **Wadi Tamet**. The Division was to carry out a training exercise en route. As **5 Infantry Brigade Group** was still employed on the airfield, it could take no part, but the brigade commander and commanding officers and staff were to

attend. To maintain some element of secrecy no fires were to be lit between 6 p.m. and 7 a.m., and except during the exercise, there was to be wireless silence. The object was to practise 'forming a gun line', or in other words establishing infantry units quickly in defensive positions within well-knit antitank gun defences, supported by artillery and prepared to resist an enemy tank attack.

In the administrative field, after replenishment on 14 January, units would have sufficient rations and water to last until midnight on 22–23 January, and petrol for at least 350 miles for all vehicles. Replenishment thereafter would occur as opportunity offered.

The Division moved westwards at 8.30 a.m. on 9 January in very cold weather. Divisional Cavalry sent back reports of an imaginary enemy, and at 9.40 a.m. **Freyberg** gave verbal orders for a gun line to be formed to meet an unexpected attack from the north. Three hours' hard work by 6 Brigade produced well-dug gunpits and slit trenches with effective camouflage, all of which met with the General's approval; but he would have liked the time to repeat the exercise. Later on he discussed the lessons with Brigadiers **Kippenberger** and Gentry and Colonel Queree, and arrived at an agreed drill for laying out a gun line. The only unsolved point was what to do with transport, for everyone was well aware that transport left 'behind the line' was not necessarily safe.

After a meal the Division continued to advance west in desert formation, until about 40 miles had been covered. It then bivouacked for the night.

The Greys, less one squadron destined to join 5 Brigade Group, had come under command of 6 Brigade on 8 January, and elements of the regiment accompanied the brigade during the exercise; but all tracked vehicles—the tanks of the Greys, of Divisional Cavalry and of the Protective Troop, and all carriers—were between 8 and 11 January loaded on transporters at **Nofilia** and ferried by road to a staging area near **Tamet** airfield. Thus no tracked vehicles of any kind took part in the exercise.

The 'tracked' column had a narrow escape during the 11th, for just after the transporters had moved clear of the staging area twenty enemy aircraft attacked. Luckily there was no damage. The tanks and carriers remained there for the next few days and then rejoined the Division.

On 10 January the advance was over good going to a bivouac area on the eastern side of **Wadi Tamet**, a further 50-odd miles. Full anti-aircraft precautions were taken, including facing all vehicles to the north so that windscreens would not reflect the sun. Camouflage nets were freely used, slit trenches dug, and light anti-aircraft batteries deployed throughout the area.

At Headquarters **30 Corps** the Army Commander addressed all formation and unit commanders. Subordinate officers were to be told the details of the plan forthwith. **General Freyberg** therefore visited both brigades on 11 January and spoke to unit officers. After his visit **5 Brigade Group** moved off from its location near **Tamet** airfield and travelled the 20 miles south to join the Division.

In view of the mass of vehicles now accompanying the Division, Administrative Group was arranged in two parts. Part 1 comprised those units 'wanted on the voyage', for example the ASC companies and **5 Field Park Company**. Part 2 was not wanted for the moment—**Field Cash Office** and **YMCA Headquarters** for instance—and these were to stay with an Administrative Post set up near **Bir el Magedubia**.

The next stage of the Division's advance took it across **Wadi Tamet** on 12 January in daylight, a march of about 25 miles. The crossing was carried out by 'blocks', each of the normal groups crossing at hourly intervals to avoid congestion, for the point had now been reached where enemy interference or at least discovery from the air was possible. The **Desert Air Force** had been asked to provide air cover during the crossing; two light anti-aircraft batteries were in positions on the escarpments, and units took full internal precautions. Complete wireless silence could not be observed, however, because a change of frequencies during the move necessitated some testing. It was another windy, dusty day, and

some of the going, especially west of the wadi, was rough, but the stage was completed in the early afternoon without incident, although it was later realised that the Division was in fact eight miles short of its intended location. The reason for this 'short haul' is not known, but it was not of major importance.

The following stage was to be a night move, so 13 January was a day of rest. The weather continued cold and unpleasant; but rations, water and petrol were topped up during the morning, and in the afternoon information about the forthcoming operations was passed on to all the troops.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

DIVISIONAL ORDERS FOR THE ADVANCE

Divisional Orders for the Advance

In the formal operation order for the advance, issued on 12 January, the 'Intention' paragraph read: '2 NZ Division will capture **Tripoli**, destroying any enemy forces encountered'. This could not be criticised for any lack of thrust. The advance was to be in three stages. Stage I would commence at 7 p.m. on 14 January from a start line just short of **Wadi Bei el Chebir** and end when near **Wadi Umm er Raml**, opposite **Fortino**. As this was a night move it was important to ensure that space between the groups was available at dawn for a dispersal of 100 yards between vehicles. To achieve this groups would move so many miles past a distinctively lit sign on the axis of advance and then halt. These were calculated as nine miles for Divisional Cavalry in the lead, six and a half for 6 Infantry Brigade Group, two and a half for Headquarters and Reserve Group, and nil for 5 Infantry Brigade Group. Administrative Group 1 would move in daylight on 15 January.

Stage II would commence at 7.15 a.m. on the 15th, at which time Divisional Cavalry would cross the **Gheddahia - Bu Ngem** track, named as the start line. All other groups would await verbal orders, but would close up to ensure a cohesive column. The axis of advance, **Fortino - Tueil el Ase - Sedada - Tmed el Chatua**, would be marked with black diamonds, already so well known.

Stage III, for which few details were yet prescribed, was to be the advance on **Tripoli** by the best route on the general line **Beni Ulid - Tarhuna**.

Various tasks were laid down for the specialist arms. The artillery was directed to provide anti-aircraft protection at the crossings of **Wadi Zemzem** and other defiles. The engineers were to clear the road **Sedada - Beni Ulid** of mines and develop water supplies. Divisional Cavalry was to

operate seven miles to the front and flank, especially to the west and south, and was to keep touch with **11 Hussars** of 7 Armoured Division on the right. The regiment was given a series of bounds with codenames, on which it was to report, and was to reconnoitre **Wadi Zemzem** and **Wadi Sofeggin**, where there might be opposition from the enemy in addition to the normal difficulties of passing through a bottleneck.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade would operate as the most advanced scouting force, and the Royals would be on 2 NZ Division's front.

On the morning of 13 January, while the Division rested, **Freyberg** held a conference to give the latest information about the enemy, elaborate on the order, and give details of the movements of 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 7 Armoured Division. He expected that the crossing of **Wadi Zemzem** would be contested, and that fighting might occur at other points, perhaps against a panzer division. His Tactical Headquarters would remain near Divisional Cavalry, and the headquarters of the leading brigade would move there also, so that quick adjustments could be made to the divisional axis. As far as **Beni Ulid 6** Brigade Group would lead, but at that point 5 Brigade Group would pass through. He was pleased with the presence of 94 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment and said that its guns could be used as anti-tank and close-support weapons also. He probably had in mind the value the Germans obtained in that way from their 88-millimetre guns. He ended by saying that while strategical surprise could not be expected—in other words, while the outflanking move could not be hidden—it was still possible to obtain tactical surprise by night moves, wireless silence and other deception measures.

After the conference the GOC reported briefly to the **New Zealand Government**, saying that the Division was adequately trained and equipped for its mobile role. ¹

¹ *Documents*, Vol. II, p. 160.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

The Enemy

Information about the enemy on the whole was accurate. It was known that he did not intend to fight on the **Buerat** line and that one panzer division had been withdrawn, although the reason for this was obscure. It was also known that all units, both German and Italian, were much below strength, but it is unlikely that actual numbers were known, for post-war information reveals that strengths were very low indeed. It was believed that by 15 January all the Italian troops had been withdrawn to **Homs– Tarhuna**, if not farther; but this was not correct.

On 15 January, when the attack started, enemy dispositions from north to south were:

Between **Maaten Giaber** and **Bir Umm er Raml**: (*a*) remnants of *Pistoia Division* with the German *19 Anti-Aircraft Regiment* (fighting as infantry) to strengthen it, (*b*) *German Air Force Brigade*, (*c*) elements of *Spezia* and *Young Fascist Divisions*, (*d*) *164 Light Division* (only 3500 strong).

From **Bir Umm er Raml** to the southern end of **Dor Umm er Raml**: (*a*) *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, (*b*) *Ariete Battle Group* (now renamed *Centauro Battle Group* and with *Nizza Reconnaissance Unit* under command)—57 tanks, (*c*) *15 Panzer Division* (with 3 *Reconnaissance Unit*)—35 tanks.

The *33rd Reconnaissance Unit* was patrolling as far south as **Bu Ngem** and back to **El Faschia**. The *90th Light Division* was in the main in second-line positions behind *Spezia* and *Young Fascist Divisions*, but was also patrolling out in front of these divisions.

The Italian *XX Corps* comprised the Italian troops in the above line.

The **XXI Corps** was at this time at work on the **Homs– Tarhuna** line and on the close defences of **Tripoli**. It comprised the bulk of **Spezia, Pistoia** and *Young Fascist Divisions*, together with *Trieste Division*.

The petrol position had improved comparatively, for units had enough for about 125 miles; but the reserves in the area were only sufficient for another 35 miles, and there was no sign of further supplies.

The enemy information about our troops was exaggerated. He identified the divisions actually assembled, but added **10 Corps** comprising 1 Armoured Division, 50 Division and 4 Indian Division, and moreover included **10 Armoured Division** and 44 Division. Part of this confusion could have been the consequence of his having heard of Montgomery's intention to bring forward **10 Corps** but not of the cancellation. Also, one of the armoured brigades now with 7 Armoured Division had originally been with **10 Armoured Division**, and other rearrangements of brigades may have confused him. Whatever the reason, Rommel expected to be attacked by stronger forces than were actually present.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION CLOSES UP FOR THE ATTACK

2 NZ Division Closes up for the Attack

The **Desert Air Force** was very active in the week preceding the offensive. Fighters destroyed about twelve enemy aircraft in the air and four were shot down by anti-aircraft fire. Two Spitfires were lost, but the pilots were saved. There were 152 fighter sorties on 14 January. ¹ Bombing of enemy positions and landing grounds both by day and night, was stepped up as 'D' day approached, with increasing attention to advanced landing grounds. Here the enemy resisted strongly, and there were many engagements between enemy fighters and our fighter escorts; but our attacks fulfilled their purpose, for on 'D' day few enemy planes were seen.

On 13 January 2 NZ Division rested after crossing **Wadi Tamet**, and prepared for the night move to **Wadi Bei el Chebir**. This was to start at 7 p.m., but in order to compensate for the 'short haul' of the previous day, and because the going proved rougher than had been expected, an afternoon move of about 17 miles was begun at 3.30 p.m. and took about two hours. Towards the end vehicles closed up to twenty yards' distance to maintain visibility between them after dark. The night march, now only 16 miles, was made with the advantages of a half-moon and freedom from wind. Sixth Brigade Group reached its destination near **Pilastrino** between 9 and 10 p.m., and about the same time **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group halted near **Wadi Umm er Rtem**, with 5 Brigade Group a few miles behind.

In the evening of 13 January there was still no sign of a general enemy withdrawal, so **30 Corps** was impelled to inform both 7 Armoured and 2 NZ Divisions that the enemy might make a stand at **Gheddahia**, in which case the 'inland column' would wheel round the enemy's southern flank, directed on the main road some 20 miles north of **Gheddahia** with 4 Light Armoured Brigade making for **Tauorga**. This message was not

received by the GOC until the early hours of 14 January. He met the corps commander and the Commander of 7 Armoured Division (Major-General Harding) early next morning and discussed this new possibility; but later air reconnaissance showed that there was a steady movement of enemy transport to the north-west, while that in the forward area had lessened. The need for this new left hook thus diminished.

The armoured fighting vehicles, including the Greys, rejoined the Division during the 14th from a laager near **Wadi Tamet** airfield, and 150 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, RA, and the Flash Spotting Troop of **36 Survey Battery** also joined, completing the troops under command.

In view of the nature of the going and because of the congestion of vehicles, the GOC again decided to carry out part of the next advance (Stage I of the operation order) by daylight. Divisional Cavalry, starting therefore at 3 p.m. instead of 7 p.m., moved as far as Bir ez Ziden (just west of **Wadi Bei el Chebir**), halted there for the evening meal, moved again at 6 p.m. (by which time it was dark), and finally laagered on the divisional axis four miles east of the **Bu Ngem** track. Other formations 'followed at first in open order, but closed up at nightfall into night order for the last part of the move. Stage I, a distance of about 20 miles, thus had been completed without incident. The Division now extended from the Divisional Cavalry laager as far back as Bir ez Ziden, in the order of Divisional Cavalry, 6 Infantry Brigade Group, Headquarters 2 NZ Division, Reserve Group, 5 Infantry Brigade Group, and Administrative Group.

By this evening (14 January) all formations of Eighth Army were in position: 51 (H) Division with its three brigades between **Wadi Bei el Chebir** and Wadi el Uesc-ca and 7 Armoured Division (4 Light Armoured Brigade, **8 Armoured Brigade**, 131 Infantry Brigade) in the area immediately north of 2 NZ Division. The Army Commander's final instructions for the operation imposed a measure of caution on the outflanking column, as he wished to avoid casualties to tanks, in the belief that the enemy still had some 200 anti-tank guns and twenty-five

of the hated 88-millimetre guns. On 12 January he issued a personal message to all troops:

1. The leading units of Eighth Army are now only about 200 miles from **Tripoli**. The enemy is between us and that port, hoping to hold us off.
2. **THE EIGHTH ARMY IS GOING TO TRIPOLI.**
3. **Tripoli** is the only town in the Italian Empire overseas still remaining in their possession. Therefore we will take it from them; they will then have no overseas Empire. The enemy will try to stop us. But if each one of us whether front-line soldier, or officer or man whose duty is performed in some other sphere, puts his whole heart and soul into this next contest—then nothing can stop us. Nothing has stopped us since the battle of Egypt began on 23rd October 1942. Nothing will stop us now. Some must stay back to begin with, but we will all be in the hunt eventually.
4. **ON TO TRIPOLI!** Our families and friends in the home country will be thrilled when they hear we have captured that place.

**B. L. MONTGOMERY, General
GOC-in-C, Eighth Army**

¹ A sortie is an operational flight by one aircraft.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 6 – ‘ON TO TRIPOLI’

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

15TH JANUARY

15th January

AFTER moving forward during the night 51 (Highland) Division made contact on 15 January with the enemy line and prepared for a night attack. In the southern sector 7 Armoured and 2 NZ Divisions were more mobile. **General Freyberg**, accompanied by the CRA (Brigadier C. E. Weir), spent the day with Tactical Headquarters, which was shelled at intervals. An officer and three men of the protective troop were wounded.

Divisional Cavalry crossed the start line at 7.15 a.m. and reported its first bound clear twenty-five minutes later. This was a ridge immediately west of the **Bu Ngem** track. At the same time 7 Armoured Division found that the **Dor Umm er Raml** ridge on its front was held by anti-tank guns. Thus it was not surprising that when Divisional Cavalry advanced to its second bound, the western edge of **Dor Umm er Raml**, it encountered an infantry and anti-tank screen, and that A Squadron was held up. B Squadron moved off in an attempt to work round the enemy's southern flank, and in this was partly successful, destroying a 75-millimetre gun in the process.

By about 9.30 a.m. the enemy was seen to be in strength sufficient to hold up the advance for some hours. His shelling was particularly heavy. **Freyberg** therefore altered the thrust line 30 degrees to the south to turn the enemy's flanks and called the Greys forward as a complete regiment to move behind Divisional Cavalry. The 211th Medium Battery and 4 Field Regiment were also brought forward from the Reserve Group.

On this new thrust line Divisional Cavalry gradually worked round the end of the ridge, helped by some good shooting from 34 Anti-Tank Battery and a troop of 26 Field Battery. About midday the GOC ordered the Greys to follow, but on a personal reconnaissance found the going

heavy and about 3 p.m. reverted to the original thrust line. By late afternoon Divisional Cavalry and the Greys were round the end of **Dor Umm er Raml** and had engaged enemy tanks and transport on the western side. Both units laagered for the night on the southern slopes of the ridge. In the last spurt of enemy shelling at dusk several more casualties were added to the day's small total.

The rest of the Division advanced slowly without coming into action. Fifth Infantry Brigade Group could not move at all until 2.50 p.m., and was still east of the **Bu Ngem** track at the end of the day. By nightfall only some eight miles had been gained and, in the words of the GOC, 'progress was slow'. From his prepared positions the enemy probably had the better of the engagement; but on the whole **Freyberg** was satisfied, for the pressure played its part in deciding the enemy to draw back. Nevertheless the objectives for 15 January, **Sedada** and **Tmed el Chatua**, were still a long way off.

The tanks of 7 Armoured Division were in action during the day and inflicted losses on the enemy, but at some cost to themselves. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade finished the day well to the south-west, with the Royals near **El Faschia**, which was still in enemy hands.

At the end of the day the GOC learnt that **30 Corps** would resume the advance to **Sedada** at first light next morning.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 15 JANUARY

The Enemy on 15 January

The action of 4 Light Armoured Brigade had been vigorous enough to force 33 *Reconnaissance Unit's* southern outposts back towards **El Faschia**, where there was an Italian garrison. On **Dor Umm er Raml** 15 *Panzer Division*, with 3 *Reconnaissance Unit* on its right, resisted attacks all day and claimed to have inflicted heavy losses on British tanks. The reconnaissance unit reported during the morning that it was in action against a strong enemy force (2 NZ Division) and later that it had fended off an attempt to get round its flank. The German army narrative notes that about midday the Commander-in-Chief (Rommel) ordered a concentration of artillery against the British assembly areas, which no doubt explains the severity of the shelling experienced by 2 NZ Division.

While Rommel thought that the German defence had done well during the day, he was vividly aware of some unpleasant facts. He expected Eighth Army's attack to be intensified next day; he was outnumbered in men and his own supplies were most inadequate; and he could not offer prolonged resistance. By midday, therefore, he had already issued the codeword MOVEMENT RED, which meant that a retirement was to commence to a line running from **Sedada** to Bir el Churgia (20 miles north of **Gheddahia**), starting at 8 p.m. But the remaining Italian troops, except *Centauro Battle Group*, began withdrawing in the afternoon to the **Homs- Tarhuna** line.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

16 JANUARY—ACROSS WADI ZEMZEM

16 January—across Wadi Zemzem

The Highland Division attacked at 10.30 p.m. and found that resistance gradually declined, and that by daylight on 16 January the enemy was retiring. For the New Zealand Division the next few days had an overall sameness, a steady advance over increasingly difficult country, often through clouds of dust, often with long delays, with only the most advanced troops ever seeing the enemy, and with no general deployment—altogether a rather wearisome and monotonous period. But again the engineers worked unceasingly on mine clearance, removal of booby traps, and finding ways round demolitions.

The Division began the 16th by discovering that **Dor Umm er Raml** was deserted by the enemy, except for a few members of *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of *15 Panzer Division*, who appeared to have been forgotten and who were promptly captured. Their morale was good.

The divisional column was led by the screen of Divisional Cavalry and the Greys, with Tactical Headquarters always well forward, 'leading the field at a cracking pace until pulled up by enemy opposition at 4 p.m.'¹ In fact the Greys recorded that the GOC moved at twenty miles an hour and that their heavy tanks could not keep up and had to lag behind. Next after this advanced guard came a gun group of 4 and 6 Field Regiments and **211 Medium Battery**. Minefields, both real and dummy, caused delay on **Dor Umm er Raml** and in **Wadi Zemzem**, and parties from both 6 and 8 Field Companies were called forward to deal with them. **Wadi Zemzem** basically was no obstruction. The forward troops were across by 1 p.m. and nearing **Wadi el Breg**, 12 miles short of **Sedada**.

After crossing this wadi Divisional Cavalry met heavy and accurate shelling from the direction of **Wadi Nfed**, on which **Sedada** was located.

The 4th and 6th Field Regiments were both deployed, opened fire about 4 p.m. and continued until dusk. Tactical Headquarters got so far ahead that it outdistanced the Divisional Cavalry screen during this period, and captured three tanks from *Centauro Battle Group*. The crews, who surrendered to the GOC himself, said they were anti-German and glad to be out of the war.

As daylight faded enemy tanks increased in number, and it was estimated that there were about fifteen German and fifteen Italian. The Greys knocked out two Italian tanks and destroyed many vehicles and guns in an action lasting two hours, but had four tanks hit and evacuated. They captured some twenty prisoners. The 6th Field Regiment finished the day gloriously by capturing sixteen Germans, all from *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*.

In the late afternoon there were two attacks from enemy aircraft on the forward troops of both 7 Armoured and 2 NZ Divisions, one by twelve aircraft and one by fifteen, but no damage was done. The 41st Light Anti-Aircraft Battery shot down one raider from the first attack.

The Division had advanced about 40 miles during the day, with 7 Armoured Division keeping level on the right, despite delays on minefields. The leading troops laagered for the night between **Wadi el Breg** and **Wadi Nfed**, with 25 Battalion providing perimeter defence for the tanks. The rear of 5 Infantry Brigade was still on **Dor Umm er Raml**, with the Administrative Group even farther back. And **Sedada** had not yet been captured, although there were signs that the enemy would go during the night. The opposition had been from *15 Panzer Division* and *Centauro Battle Group*.

The GOC held a conference at 8 p.m., mainly to confirm that the axis for next day would be **Sedada – Tmed el Chatua**—thence north-west to a point on the **Beni Ulid – Bir Dufan** road about 18 miles east of **Beni Ulid** named Obelisco di el Mselleten. The Division had a quiet night except for the comforting noise of aircraft passing overhead to bomb the coastal road and the **Bir Dufan** landing ground.

¹ **Divisional Cavalry war diary.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 16 JANUARY

The Enemy on 16 January

During the night the enemy withdrew under plan MOVEMENT RED and by 8 a.m. on 16 January was in new positions, *90 Light Division* astride the main coast road near Churgia, *3 Reconnaissance Unit* filling a long gap between *90 Light* and the **Sedada** area, *15 Panzer Division* and *Centauro Battle Group* south and south-east of **Sedada**, and *33 Reconnaissance Unit* on the western flank falling back to **Abiar et Tala**, 30 miles west of **Sedada**. The *GAF Brigade* was across the coast road 25 miles behind *90 Light Division*, and *164 Light* and *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* were in second-line positions round **Beni Ulid**.

Enemy reports show that at first it was thought that Eighth Army followed up slowly; but it appears later that the increasing pressure round **Sedada** was felt, and even created some alarm. Units drew on their last reserve of petrol, and were running short of ammunition. Moreover, the shortage of troops caused a serious gap between *90 Light Division* and the units at **Sedada**. Rommel came to the conclusion that he could not resist another day on the same line, and so ordered a withdrawal (MOVEMENT BLUE) to the general line **Beni Ulid – Bir Dufan – Tauorga**, to be commenced at nightfall.

The unit in real trouble was *33 Reconnaissance Unit*, which was trying to withdraw north-west through **Abiar et Tala** to **Beni Ulid**, through very difficult country. It was both short of petrol and much harried by *4 Light Armoured Brigade*. To break clear it had in the end to sacrifice many of its wheeled vehicles, and by nightfall was still many miles from **Beni Ulid** with only enough petrol to take its armoured vehicles 25 kilometres.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

17 JANUARY—ACROSS WADI SOFEGGIN

17 January—across Wadi Sofeggin

In the evening of 16 January Montgomery cancelled the caveat he had imposed and ordered the advance to proceed with great resolution and the utmost speed, for he was already a little concerned with the rate of progress. Despite 7 Armoured and 2 NZ Divisions' efforts the total advance in two days was not more than 50 miles, which was not enough. Montgomery now wanted to intensify the threat to **Tripoli** from the flanking column to cause the enemy to thin out in the **Homs** area, where demolitions along the road promised to be a serious deterrent to the advance there. He then intended to drive hard from his eastern flank once the enemy had drawn away.

During 17 January 51 (H) Division made fairly good progress northwards along the main road and reached **Gioda**, with little opposition from troops but much from mines, craters and demolished bridges. The Army Reserve, 22 Armoured Brigade, moved forward to about halfway between **Tauorga** and **Sedada**.

A landing ground at **Wadi el Breg** was completed during the day by 7 Armoured Division and was occupied almost at once by the **Desert Air Force**. The endless stream of transport aircraft bringing supplies reminded some of the veterans in 2 NZ Division of the similar—but how different—picture of German aircraft streaming on to the airfield at **Maleme** in Crete. Times had changed. The RAF column which had been moving with 2 NZ Division went to this landing ground, which presumably replaced the one intended for **Sedada**. One heavy and one light anti-aircraft battery were detached from the Division for protective duties there, and rejoined it in the morning of the 18th.

The Division advanced again about 7.30 a.m. and **Sedada** was soon reported clear; but the advance of the main column was delayed by

minefields in **Wadi Nfed**, both real and dummy, which obstructed the only good track. Engineers from 7 and 8 Field Companies cleared the mines and improved an alternative track; but even then the going was rough and dusty, and movement was in single column. The engineers had their inevitable casualties from mines, but got some satisfaction from destroying a little stock of captured enemy tanks and guns. There were signs at **Sedada** of a hasty withdrawal, for several small minefields had not been finished, with mines still lying alongside the holes dug for them.

During the day 7 Armoured Division converged on to 2 NZ Division's line of advance, owing to the bottleneck across **Wadi Nfed**. Once during the morning the GOC adjusted the axis to give 7 Armoured Division more space; but shortly after 1 p.m. 7 Armoured Division cut across the Division's axis and separated the leading groups from the rest. The break came in the 6 Brigade column just south of **Sedada**, with the result that only 24 Battalion was in touch with the armour and artillery. The mix-up was referred to **30 Corps**, which ruled that 7 Armoured Division must have priority. The rear portion of 6 Brigade Group and all groups behind it therefore had to halt until the armour passed through, for at the best there were only three good tracks. This caused 2 NZ Division to fall behind 7 Armoured Division, a position it could not retrieve for several days.

The advance of the leading groups continued steadily past **Tmed el Chatua**, across **Wadi Sofeggin** and on towards **Wadi el Merdum**. Odd prisoners were collected, including a party of three Italians who came out of hiding and surrendered. In the late afternoon enemy aircraft again made several attacks, causing casualties in Divisional Cavalry and in the artillery numbering six killed and eight wounded.

At **Wadi el Merdum** the axis of advance turned westwards towards **Beni Ulid**. By 5.30 p.m. leading patrols had passed **Bir Gebira**, and when a halt was called the day's advance was between 40 and 50 miles. Divisional Cavalry and the Greys laagered just west of **Bir Gebira**, with 24 Battalion, the only infantry unit available, providing protection. The

rest of 6 Brigade did not arrive until almost 10 p.m.

A special plan had to be made to bring the remaining groups forward. Provost Company used 400 lamps to light the route for 40 miles. The three groups concerned, Divisional Headquarters, Reserve Group, and 5 Infantry Brigade, set off about 7 p.m. and did not complete the move until after midnight.

On the left of 2 NZ Division patrols of 4 Light Armoured Brigade were ten miles south of Beni Ulid. On the right 8 Armoured Brigade of 7 Armoured Division crossed the Bir Dufan – Beni Ulid road and advanced another ten miles to the west, a notable penetration.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 17 JANUARY

The Enemy on 17 January

The *90th Light Division* continued its withdrawal along the line of the main road back towards **Misurata**. The *164th Light Division, Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* and *Centauro Battle Group* were in and around **Beni Ulid**. The intention was that *164 Light* should act as rearguard after *15 Panzer* and the reconnaissance units had passed through, for **Beni Ulid** was a bottleneck. This left a large gap in the German line, which *GAF Brigade* filled by moving across from the main road to **Bir Dufan**. A further gap still remained between that place and **Beni Ulid** and it was through this that **8 Armoured Brigade** had penetrated. In front of 2 NZ Division *3 Reconnaissance Unit* covered the retirement of *15 Panzer Division* to **Beni Ulid**, and at last light was still to the east of that village. After a bad day *33 Reconnaissance Unit* had escaped *4 Light Armoured Brigade* only by the barest margin with the help of a few tanks from *15 Panzer Division*.

As on the two previous nights, Rommel decided that he could not stand, particularly as his line had been breached by **8 Armoured Brigade**. At 7 p.m. he gave orders for all main bodies to retire to the **Tarhuna–Homs** line and for the Italian non-motorised troops already there to go back to the close defences of **Tripoli**. These ran in an irregular line on an arc about 15 miles from the town, were by no means strong, and presented no real obstacle.

Rommel also indicated to *Superlibia* that not even the motorised formations could make an effective stand on the **Tarhuna–Homs** line, but would also have to move back to **Tripoli**, which would be threatened by 20 or 21 January. His main reason for these conclusions was the shortage of all supplies, for he considered that with better maintenance he could hold the **Tarhuna–Homs** line for some time. The going to the south-west, where an outflanking attack might be made, was known to

be very bad—as 2 NZ Division was to discover.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

18 AND 19 JANUARY—BOTTLENECK AT BENI ULID

18 and 19 January—Bottleneck at Beni Ulid

On 18 January the Eighth Army plan was to continue the advance all along the front. On the right flank 51 Division passed **Misurata** and **Garibaldi** and approached **Zliten**, while 22 Armoured Brigade reached a point 12 miles south of **Zliten**. The enemy's withdrawal speeded up, but artificial obstructions nullified any advantage gained from this. The **Desert Air Force** maintained pressure and on the previous night struck hard at **Castel Benito** airfield, ten miles south of **Tripoli**, causing widespread damage and leaving some thirty fires.

Instructions from **30 Corps** to the inland column for the 18th were to continue to press the enemy back, with precedence to 7 Armoured Division in case of any conflict over the going. Among the tasks given 2 NZ Division was the clearing and marking of the track from **Sedada** to **Beni Ulid** and the road from **Beni Ulid** to **Tarhuna**.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade drove the enemy rearguard out of **Beni Ulid** in the morning and continued towards **Tarhuna**. The New Zealand Division, following up, found many tanks, guns and vehicles abandoned but saw nothing of the enemy apart from one slight brush with a reconnaissance unit.

The axis of advance was now westwards from **Bir Gebira** to **Beni Ulid** and along the road to **Tarhuna**; but the going proved very bad, and by evening the leading troops were still east of **Beni Ulid**. Small changes in the axis proved useless as the country was more difficult than any yet encountered, especially for wheels. It seemed that further movement would have to be by road.

The rather tedious existence of the Administrative Group at the rear of the column changed this day by misadventure. After crossing **Wadi**

Nfed at Sedada it took a wrong turning and followed 7 Armoured Division's axis along the north side of **Wadi el Merdum**, then across the **Bir Dufan** road and for some miles to the north. The Flash Spotting Troop ended up about ten miles north-east of **Beni Ulid**. In addition the vehicles of several NZASC units tangled with 7 Armoured Division columns, which was very easy to do in a mass of vehicles and clouds of dust and a network of parallel wadis. It was all duly sorted out next morning.

The 7th Armoured Division had a reasonably good day, as the going progressively improved, although it was still difficult. The division met little opposition and by 8 p.m. was over 30 miles beyond **Beni Ulid**, east of the **Beni Ulid – Tarhuna** road.

The New Zealand Division advanced only 20 miles on 18 January. It was then instructed to pass through **Beni Ulid** and advance by road towards **Tarhuna**. It was hoped that once clear of **Beni Ulid** it would be able to widen its frontage, for movement through the village was limited to a single column. **General Freyberg** decided to push 6 Infantry Brigade Group through on 19 January, augmented by a squadron of Divisional Cavalry and a few tanks, to concentrate all engineer activities under the CRE, and to halt the rest of the Division for a day's rest and maintenance.

Writing after the war Montgomery says that on 18 January he was not happy about the advance, which 'was becoming sticky, and I was experiencing the first real anxiety I had suffered since assuming command of the Eighth Army.... I was determined, therefore, to accelerate the pace of operations, and to give battle by night as well as by day.... I ordered attacks on both axes to be put in by moonlight. I issued very strong instructions regarding the quickening of our efforts.... On 19 January progress greatly improved...'.¹

Eighth Army Intelligence had noted the switch of the *German Air Force Brigade* from the coastal area to **Tarhuna**, and Montgomery planned accordingly to strike hard on the right flank.

¹ *El Alamein to the River Sangro*, p. 43.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 18 JANUARY

The Enemy on 18 January

Meanwhile Rommel hoped for a short breathing space as he expected our advance to slow down in the broken country southwest and south of **Tarhuna**. Nevertheless he was nervous about his western flank, and gradually strengthened the troops about **Tarhuna** at the expense of the coastal group. Defending **Tarhuna** from west to east were *164 Light Division*, a third of the *Young Fascists*, *Centauro Battle Group* (which had lost heavily in the last few days), *15 Panzer Division*, and the *GAF Brigade*. The rest of the *Young Fascists* were still south of **Tarhuna**, but moved fast into the **Tripoli** defences. The *33rd Reconnaissance Unit* also was south of **Tarhuna**, and 3 and *Nizza Reconnaissance Units* were the link between **Tarhuna** and the coastal forces, with *Nizza* apparently never where it was wanted. In the Cussabat– **Homs** area was *XXI Corps*, with *Trieste Division* and two-thirds of *Pistoia Division*, but with *90 Light Division* in reserve in the **Corradini** area, for again it was Rommel's intention to get the Italians back to **Tripoli**.

The reconnaissance reports which Rommel received from *Superlibia* held that the **Homs– Tarhuna** line could not be outflanked to the west by any large force. There is no evidence that he counted on this, and he later records without surprise that British forces were moving towards **Garian**; but the report showed that the Italian views on what was and was not possible did not coincide with ours.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

19 JANUARY AT BENI ULID

19 January at Beni Ulid

The **Desert Air Force** was very active during the night of 18–19 January and next day, particularly against **Castel Benito** airfield and transport on the roads. Fighter wings operated from landing grounds in the **Bir Dufan** area. But in the opinion of dispassionate army observers, confirmed by checks of the various roads after reaching **Tripoli**, the damage done to enemy columns was slight and not commensurate with the number of planes engaged. The technique of this time did not produce the results that reasonably might have been expected from the excellence of the targets. Bombing was carried out from normal bombing heights, for up to that time the air force had not been strong enough to take undue risks. After the capture of **Tripoli** and a general relaxation of the somewhat rigid orders of past years, the new commander of the **Desert Air Force** (Air Vice-Marshal Broadhurst) set to work to improve techniques, including training in low-flying cannon attacks. The results were seen at **Mareth** and thereafter.

During 19 January 51 (H) Division made better progress and next night entered **Homs**. The 7th Armoured Division was much delayed by mines and bad going, and by nightfall was still eight miles south of **Tarhuna** opposed by enemy rearguards. In the course of the fighting the GOC of this division (Major-General Harding) was wounded by shellfire and evacuated. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade patrolled towards **Garian**, but made slow progress over the difficult country of the Gebel. Air raids on the brigade caused casualties numbering seven killed and twenty-one wounded, indicating that penetration so far west touched the enemy on a tender spot.

The New Zealand Division spent the day clearing the road through **Beni Ulid**, which was situated among ravine-like wadis with steep sides. The only route through was the road, which had been mined and badly

cratered. Almost the full complement of the divisional engineers spent the day lifting mines, filling craters, and making improvements. Bulldozer drivers took great risks from the ever-present danger of mines. The GOC, who was anxious to get on, spent much time on the scene. Meanwhile, farther back, 6 Field Company cleared mines from the track in advance of **Sedada**, and in some three days on this task lost four killed and seven wounded.

It was plain that the Division would have to pass through **Beni Ulid** in single column and would have to continue along the **Tarhuna** road in the same way. The exit from the village was all the more difficult in that it was a steep hill. Luckily there was no air activity.

Two days' rations and water, and petrol for 100 miles, were issued to units in the morning of 19 January, the first replenishment since 14 January. Gradually the Division filtered through **Beni Ulid**, A Squadron of Divisional Cavalry in the morning, followed by one squadron of the Greys, 24 Battalion and 6 Field Regiment in the early afternoon, all these units moving at least 20 miles clear of the village. Engineers all this time continued clearing the road and marking dispersal areas.

The rest of Divisional Cavalry followed, and then, as it was becoming progressively easier to pass through the village, **Freyberg** decided to press on during the night along a lighted route. The remainder of 6 Brigade Group began to move through about 7 p.m. and three or four hours later joined 24 Battalion some 18 to 20 miles north. Fifth Brigade Group, having been warned at 4.15 p.m. that it was to pass through 6 Brigade and take the lead, moved off at 7 p.m. from its location east of the **Bir Dufan** road, and at 9 p.m. began to pass through **Beni Ulid**. From 4 a.m. onwards on the 20th the group approached the Divisional Cavalry area 25 miles north of **Beni Ulid**, and there moved off the road and dispersed. **Divisional Headquarters** and Reserve Group followed 5 Brigade and dispersed just behind it. The whole Division, less Administrative Group, was clear of **Beni Ulid** at first light on the 20th, which speaks volumes for the engineers who had cleared the route, for the **Provost**

Company who had marked it and controlled the traffic, and for all the drivers.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 19-20 JANUARY

The Enemy on 19-20 January

Rommel's comment about this time was that 'the British commander was now conducting his operations far more energetically than he had done in the past.'¹ He was impressed by the increased momentum, including 2 NZ Division's night advance, which was duly noted, although the formation was not identified. While he was satisfied with the resistance that his troops had made to a direct assault on the **Tarhuna** area (by 7 Armoured Division), he was becoming nervous about the outflanking move, which was more obvious every day. The advance of 4 Light Armoured Brigade towards **Garian** had been magnified into an attack by a full armoured division, and Rommel came to the conclusion that if his forces were to avoid being cut off he must move away to the west without delay—to the west and not to **Tripoli**. The first sign that the fall of **Tripoli** was inevitable shows in the orders issued to the Axis forces on the evening of 19 January. The *164th Light Division* and the *GAF Brigade* were to block the **Tarhuna– Castel Benito** road until the evening of the 20th; the reconnaissance group (3, 33, and *Nizza* units) were to deploy south, south-east and south-west of **Azizia** and *15 Panzer* was in army reserve thereabouts. The whole of the Italian *XXI Corps* was to evacuate the **Homs** position at once, part moving to the **Tripoli** defences and part back to **Zauia**, west of **Tripoli**. The *XXth Corps*, comprising the *Young Fascists* and *Centauro Battle Group*, was also to go to **Zauia**, and *90 Light Division* was left to carry out a fighting withdrawal along the coastal road.

¹ *Rommel Papers*, p. 387.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

20 JANUARY—INTO THE GEBEL

20 January—into the Gebel

During the night of 19–20 January and next day the **Desert Air Force** continued its bombing and had good targets even at night, for it was the period of full moon. **Tripoli** was under a pall of smoke, but some of this and some of the fires seen undoubtedly came from the enemy's demolitions.

The Highland Division continued its advance and reached **Corradini**, but was held up there by rearguards. The 22nd Armoured Brigade closed up to **Homs**. The Army Commander was himself well forward directing this coastal thrust and, in the words of his Chief of Staff, was 'cracking the whip'. ¹

Bad visibility caused by ground mist stopped 7 Armoured Division from closing **Tarhuna** until 10.30 a.m., when it was found that the enemy had gone. The advance then continued along the road towards **Castel Benito**, but the division was soon held up by rearguards in a defile about ten miles to the west. The going was almost impossible off the road, for they were now on the northern slopes of the Gebel.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade, making good progress northwestwards from **Beni Ulid**, at nightfall was about 13 miles southwest of **Tazzoli** and 20 miles east of **Garian**, and was searching for a way down the escarpment and out on to the **Tripoli** plain. The brigade was attacked by twelve Stukas three times during the day, visible evidence again of the enemy's touchiness about his right flank, but casualties were light.

General Freyberg held his usual conference in the morning and decided to go forward and gain touch with 7 Armoured Division, for it was expected that 2 NZ Division would have to join in an attack on

Tarhuna. The advance continued, therefore, until Divisional Cavalry, in the lead, reached a point about 17 miles south of **Tarhuna**, where it was learnt from 7 Armoured Division that the town was clear.

The GOC decided at once to swing to the left, although reports from 4 Light Armoured Brigade showed that the going was 'bad'. Divisional Cavalry, directed on **Tazzoli**, where the first Italian civilians were seen, reported it clear by 2 p.m. But a route to the village from the **Tarhuna** road, suitable for all types of traffic, was not discovered until after dark.

Meanwhile the remainder of the Division moved forward along the road from **Beni Ulid** and then essayed the bad going towards **Tazzoli**. By last light 5 Brigade Group, in the lead, was about five miles south-east of that village, where it remained for the night. It took the usual precautions against surprise, as some scattered shelling had been seen on the hills to the north, probably the enemy rearguard opposing 7 Armoured Division. The Division stretched back along the axis to where 6 Infantry Brigade Group was located about 20 miles south of **Tarhuna**.

It was urgent now to find a good route down the Gebel to the plain. The GOC, already impatient about this, decided to send the CRE off in the dark with the task of finding a route, although he had been urged by his staff to wait until dawn. Colonel Hanson already had selected a provisional route from the map, but his task was not easy, for it was supremely difficult country, with precipitous slopes finishing with a drop of anything up to 1000 feet in a few miles. He found a route, however, and ordered 8 Field Company to be on the spot at first light to open a track through a defile.

That evening (20 January) **Brigadier Kippenberger** gave final orders for 5 Brigade Group to move to **Tripoli** and for the occupation of the town. In the outcome these orders had to be considerably modified.

¹ De Guingand, *Operation Victory*, p. 229.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 20 JANUARY

The Enemy on 20 January

The enemy assumed his new dispositions, moving the Italians into the **Tripoli** defences or to points west of **Tripoli**. With the exception that *90 Light Division* moved back a few miles under pressure, the troops that were in rearguard positions, including those west of **Tarhuna**, managed to stand their ground. The advance of 'strong forces' north-west through **Beni Ulid** was duly noted, but the German narrative records that these made slow progress during 20 January, 'obviously because of difficult going'.¹ Undoubtedly this slow advance of 2 NZ Division helped Rommel to decide to stay in his existing positions on 21 January. He relied on *15 Panzer Division* and the *Reconnaissance Group* around **Azizia** to break up any debouchment from the escarpment by British forces 'going large' to the west.

Rommel would not forget 20 January easily, however. A message arrived from Marshal Cavallero (Italian Chief of Staff) saying, 'The Duce is not in favour of the steps at present being taken, because they are not in accordance with his instructions to hold the **Tarhuna– Homs** positions at least three weeks. He does not believe the threat from the south to be very pressing and considers the orders that have been given unjustified and over-hasty. The Duce is of the opinion that the withdrawal will

cer-

¹ Narrative, German-Italian *Panzer Army* (War History Branch translation).

tainly

develop into a break-through if all the moves are speeded up, as

Army [i.e., Rommel] intends to do. The Duce insists on the line laid down by him being held.’¹ And salt was rubbed into the wound when Marshal Bastico (*Superlibia*) stated that in his opinion the threat of encirclement was not so imminent and serious, and requested that orders should be reviewed to prevent the withdrawal from degenerating into a catastrophic flight.

In Rommel's own words, ‘We gasped when we received this signal. A position which has been broken through or outflanked is valueless unless there are mobile forces available to throw back the enemy outflanking column. The best strategic plan is useless if it cannot be executed tactically.’²

That same afternoon a conference took place at which one could wish to have been present, between Rommel, Bastico, Kesselring and Cavallero. Rommel says the discussion was stormy. He maintained that he could not be expected to obey silly orders about time limits, which, he pointed out, he had not accepted when they were first laid down. He asked finally whether he was to stay and fight and so lose the army, or move off to **Tunisia** more or less intact. Cavallero promised that a decision would be given promptly. During this conference word was received that the British had sunk ten out of fourteen petrol barges west of **Tripoli**, which cannot have added to the gaiety of the meeting.

In Count Ciano's diary of early January appears this extract: ‘He [**Mussolini**] realizes that the loss of **Tripoli** will cut deeply into the morale of the people. He would like a desperate house-to-house defence like that in **Stalingrad**. He knows that this is impossible.... He has harsh words for Cavallero and for “that madman Rommel, who thinks of nothing but retreating in **Tunisia**”.’³ Times had changed from those when Rommel stood on the fringe of the **Nile Delta**.

¹ Narrative, German-Italian *Panzer Army*.

² *Rommel Papers*, pp. 388–9.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

21 JANUARY—THE PLAINS OF TRIPOLI

21 January—the Plains of Tripoli

By the evening of 21 January 51 (Highland) Division had forced the enemy back from **Corradini**, and **Tripoli** was less than 50 miles ahead. Despite this the Army Commander was uneasy at the lack of speed, for he noted that demolitions on the road had been skilfully related to the ground, so that it was often impossible for even tracked vehicles to get past. ⁴ His Chief of Staff, Brigadier de Guingand, writes, ‘demolitions had caused great congestion.... it looked a ghastly picture, and one wondered whether it could ever be sorted out in time.’ ¹

In the evening Montgomery decided on his final thrust. The object was to get to **Tripoli** without delay, forgoing any idea of rounding up the enemy, and taking advantage of the fact that the enemy had weakened his coastal forces to counter the inland column. He decided, therefore, to order his Army Reserve, 22 Armoured Brigade, to pass through 51 (H) Division on 22 January and force its way into **Tripoli** along the coastal road.

The 7th Armoured Division made little progress on 21 January and at last light still faced the defile ten miles west of **Tarhuna**. But a first success had been gained towards outflanking the enemy, for **11 Hussars** from the division reached the flat country below the escarpment and patrolled up to 25 miles west of **Tarhuna** towards **Azizia**.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade moved its main body down from the Gebel during the night of 20–21 January, and patrolled towards **Garian** and **Azizia**, one patrol going as far as **Bir el Ghnem**. Tanks were located round **Azizia**, and new defences blocking the road south of **Castel Benito**. Late on the 21st the brigade reported that it was in excellent country for tanks and that there was a good opportunity of cutting through to the coast; but **General Freyberg**, to whom the suggestion was made, would

not agree to release the Greys, and his refusal was confirmed by **30 Corps**. The suggestion was rather venturesome.

At dawn **8 Field Company** began work on the track through the defile, which occupied it all day and into the night. It was a cold morning, and the troops found ice on their groundsheets. Divisional Cavalry was off early, followed by Tactical Headquarters and using the track from **Tazzoli** to **Garian** for about 13 miles, then turning due north into the defile over which **RAF** fighters and guns from **14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment** provided protection. To counter ground opposition, a gun group of **4 Field Regiment**, **211 Medium Battery**, and later **5 Field Regiment**, moved immediately behind Divisional Cavalry. At 1 p.m. there was a raid by twelve aircraft, but no damage was done.

After advancing more than 25 miles along the divisional axis and reaching a point about eight miles south-east of **Azizia**, Divisional Cavalry came under shellfire and reported the enemy in position westwards from Point 193—ten miles east of **Azizia**. The **4th Field Regiment** and **211 Medium Battery** opened fire and compelled the enemy artillery to retire, leaving behind a gun and a truck. By that time it was dark, and the Cavalry laagered 15 miles south-east of **Azizia**, with Tactical Headquarters and the Greys close by.

Fifth Infantry Brigade Group did not move from south of **Tarhuna** until late morning, when **28 (Maori) Battalion** led the advance in single column. By evening the battalion was out in the plain making contact with the rear of Divisional Cavalry. **Brigadier Kippenberger**, who had spent the day forward, gave the Maoris the task of protecting the Greys' laager. The remainder of **5 Brigade Group** halted about 10 p.m. not far behind Divisional Cavalry.

Divisional Headquarters and the Reserve Group did not pass through the defile until after dark, and halted when just clear. The rest of the Division was still to the east of **Tazzoli** and farther back along the road to **Beni Ulid**.

⁴ *El Alamein to the River Sangro*, p. 44.

¹ *Operation Victory*, pp. 229–30.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 21 JANUARY

The Enemy on 21 January

During 21 January the enemy maintained his existing positions, **90 Light Division** opposing **51 (H) Division** astride the road west of **Corradini** and **164 Light** holding up **7 Armoured Division** just west of **Tarhuna**. The **GAF Brigade** was south of **Castel Benito**, with **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment** behind it, and the **Reconnaissance Group** south of **Azizia**, with **15 Panzer Division** to its north. The Italians were either withdrawing into the **Tripoli** defences or were on the way to **Zauia**.

Rommel had decided not to attempt to make a further stand, as the weight of the attack on his western flank was increasing. He would save his army and abandon **Tripoli**, while Montgomery wanted **Tripoli** and looked on the capture of the German army as less urgent. For once the intentions of the opposing commanders were complementary.

So **90 Light Division** was ordered to break off contact during the night of 21–22 January, withdraw through **Tripoli** to west of Sorman and take up a position facing south and east. The **XXIst Corps**, with oddments of Italian divisions and a rearguard from **90 Light**, was to stay in the **Tripoli** defences at least until the evening of the 22nd, for there was just a chance that the advancing British might not reach **Tripoli** by 23 January. The **164th Light Division** would withdraw to the area south of **Zauia**, and **GAF Brigade** was to take over rearguard duties south of **Castel Benito**. The **Reconnaissance Group** was to withdraw when under pressure to the south-west of **Bianchi**; and **15 Panzer** would stay at **Azizia**. **Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment** apparently withdrew to the west, for it disappears from the order of battle for the next few days.

Early on 21 January Rommel received his answer from Marshal Cavallero saying, 'the Duce's directions are unchanged. The destruction of the army must be avoided, but as much time as possible must be

gained.’¹ Ignoring the great discrepancy between this and the previous order, it is difficult to quarrel with this latest directive.

¹ Narrative, German-Italian *Panzer Army*.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ACTION AT AZIZIA, 22 JANUARY

Action at Azizia, 22 January

The **Desert Air Force** had subdued the *Luftwaffe*, now forced to use airfields well west of **Tripoli**. The last attack on **Castel Benito** was made on 21 January, mainly to stop the ploughing up of the field, and three ploughs were destroyed, a strange conclusion to an air attack.

On the coastal road 22 Armoured Brigade passed through 51 (H) Division and by the afternoon was a mere 15 miles from **Tripoli**, where it was held up by rearguards and demolitions. Only one company of infantry was with it, as traffic jams had made it impossible to reinforce by wheeled transport. So Montgomery sent forward a battalion from 51 Division riding on Valentine tanks, with orders to attack on arrival, which meant a night attack with the armour following through by moonlight.

The 7th Armoured Division cleared the defile west of **Tarhuna** during the night of 21-22 January, moved down to the plain, and by nightfall was only a few miles short of **Castel Benito**, with one patrol from **11 Hussars** a few miles to the north-east of the airfield. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade was well across the **Azizia - Bir el Ghnem** road 20 miles south-west of **Azizia**.

It was anticipated that the enemy would make a stand, even if only a short one, across the two roads leading into **Tripoli** from the south; and from experience it was known that the enemy was most skilful in the way in which he covered a withdrawal or a demolition with a combination of single tanks, single 88-millimetre guns and small parties of infantry.

Divisional Cavalry resumed the advance at dawn on 22 January and by 11 a.m. had established that the enemy was holding the high ground

south and south-west of **Azizia**. His guns and tanks held up any further advance. The 4th Field Regiment and **211 Medium Battery** then deployed and engaged the enemy positions, tanks and transport, and under this cover the Greys moved closer to **Azizia** parallel to the road. Scattered shots were exchanged with enemy tanks, but the ground was broken and the enemy well established. Daylight ended with both sides exchanging fire from hull-down positions. This was the Greys' last action in the advance. As an indication of what might be expected in such an operation over heavy going, the regiment started with twenty-six Shermans and four Grants but ended with only fourteen heavy tanks, the loss of sixteen being due almost entirely to engine trouble or other mechanical failure.

Fifth Infantry Brigade Group, now rejoined by 5 Field Regiment, began to advance at 10 a.m., keeping off the road. The leading battalion (28) moved up behind 4 Field Regiment, halted briefly, and then at 11.30 a.m. moved on again, followed by the rest of the column. Progress was slow with frequent stops, and at 2.15 p.m. the column encountered enemy shellfire. **Brigadier Kippenberger** now gave orders that the brigade was to go straight to **Tripoli**, but might have to fight for it. It would advance in three columns, with 28 Battalion as advanced guard, 21 Battalion off the road to the right, 23 to the left, and the remainder of the group astride the road.

In this order the advance resumed at 3.30 p.m., and half an hour later 28 Battalion was about eight miles south of **Azizia**. Here the group halted while the brigadier discussed the situation with the GOC, for an intercepted enemy message had now reached **Divisional Headquarters** that the troops at **Azizia** were to hold out until 7 p.m., and a deduction had been made that they would then withdraw. It thus appeared that an attack would not be needed and unnecessary casualties could be avoided.

In the calmer atmosphere today, it appears that in fact a wrong deduction was made. The message reads: 'From Intelligence channels. 15 [*Panzer Division*] defends **Azizia**. Ramcke defends 15 kilos south **Castel Benito** ordered hold out till 1900 hrs'. The full-stop after ' **Azizia**'

conveys the meaning that the holding-out period applied only to *Ramcke* (the *German Air Force Brigade*), but this was not realised at the time. The enemy certainly had no idea of moving *15 Panzer Division* as early as 7 p.m. In fact it did not receive orders to retire until after 8 p.m. and did not start moving until after midnight. But while this error affected the plans for 5 Brigade, it had no effect on the final result of the operations, the capture of **Tripoli** next morning.

It was now decided that 5 Brigade would advance after dark in column, with 28 Battalion in the lead, and with the hope that the way to **Tripoli** would be found clear. B Company of 28 Battalion would be advanced guard, proceeding by bounds and giving various coloured flares as success signals at each bound. Engineers with mine detectors, and two anti-tank guns, went with this advanced guard.

At 8 p.m. the brigade moved forward slowly, Brigade Tactical Headquarters with 28 Battalion. Five kilometres from **Azizia** B Company met opposition, debussed and went forward on foot. The rest of the battalion followed up at a crawl until it reached the two kilometre peg, and it appeared that **Azizia** was indeed clear. At that moment, however, a flare went up from a hill east of the road, followed by a dozen others on both sides and then by defensive fire which criss-crossed on fixed lines over the front. The advance naturally stopped. Shortly afterwards the enemy opened up with mortar and artillery fire on the road, and vehicles were hastily dispersed.

Brigadier Kippenberger judged the opposition too strong for him to put in an impromptu attack. Moreover, the brigade transport would be in danger at dawn if the enemy remained, for it would certainly be under direct observation. So the advanced guard was recalled and the brigade withdrew some six or seven miles. Divisional Cavalry and the Greys were now the forward troops, the former being some six miles south of **Azizia**.

An examination of the enemy position later confirmed that it had been well organised and strongly held.

About 9 p.m. 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported that enemy transport was moving along the road towards **Azizia** from **Bir el Ghnem**, and some ten miles short of **Azizia**. This was probably part of the German *Reconnaissance Group* retiring northwards. Two sections of carriers and two six-pounder anti-tank guns from 23 Battalion were sent out westwards to deal with this, but it could not be located.

The remainder of 2 NZ Division— **Divisional Headquarters**, Reserve Group, 6 Infantry Brigade Group and Administrative Group—advanced during the day without incident, and the whole Division debouched out of the hills and on to the plain.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 22 JANUARY

The Enemy on 22 January

The enemy's efforts were now directed to leaving **Tripoli** without being rushed. He continued to be more concerned about his southern flank than elsewhere, and kept *15 Panzer Division* and the *GAF Brigade* across the two main lines of approach from that direction, those via **Azizia** and **Castel Benito**. He comments on the probing attacks of 2 NZ Division (but without identifying the formation) and did not fail to notice that the troops pulled back slightly during the evening.

On the coastal road the remaining Italians were to go first and *90 Light Division* was to be the rearguard, moving back through the town and away to the west. Rearguard duties west of **Tripoli** were to be taken up by the *GAF Brigade* around Oliveti. The *15th Panzer Division* was to withdraw at dawn on the 23rd, leaving strong rearguards at Sabotinia to carry out a fighting withdrawal to Maamura and there to link up with the *GAF Brigade*. Other detailed moves need not be recorded; but the result would be a defensive line running from **Zanzur**, in front of **Bianchi** and then westwards. The nearness to the sea, where landing barges could unload, had in the last few days improved the petrol position, and units now had enough for at least 250 kilometres.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

23 JANUARY—TRIPOLI CAPTURED

23 January— Tripoli Captured

During the night of 22–23 January **30 Corps** allotted areas in and around **Tripoli** to be taken up after its capture. The 7th Armoured Division would occupy the west and south-west of the town and keep touch with the enemy; part of 2 NZ Division would be in **Tripoli** and part in **Castel Benito**. The detailed subdivision of the town remained as earlier laid down, but modification seemed likely.

The armoured division reported during the night that the enemy had left **Castel Benito**. Patrols from **11 Hussars** entered **Tripoli** first, their leading patrol at 5 a.m., followed an hour later by troops of 51 (H) Division. It was exactly three months since the opening of the Battle of **Alamein**, and Eighth Army had advanced 1400 miles; and as a climax had captured **Tripoli** within the ten-day limit prescribed by Montgomery, to his very great satisfaction.

It seems that a party from 1 Company, 27 (MG) Battalion, were the first New Zealanders to enter **Tripoli**. When the 5 Brigade attack was abandoned the previous evening, the machine-gunners' truck had broken down, so they bivouacked for the night. At dawn they could find nobody and, with their vehicle repaired, drove off through **Azizia**, passed the Divisional Cavalry patrols, and reached **Tripoli** at 10.30 a.m. as a reward for their initiative.

Early morning patrols confirmed that **Azizia** had been evacuated, and Divisional Cavalry, followed by the Greys and the GOC's Tactical Headquarters, resumed the advance. **Suani Ben Adem** was reached about 11 a.m. and was found already occupied by **8 Armoured Brigade**, which (acting under **30 Corps'** orders) was on its way to the south-west of **Tripoli** and so could not avoid cutting across 2 NZ Division's line of advance.

Fifth Infantry Brigade Group moved at 11 a.m. and, after passing **Azizia**, formed up in one column on the road. Just after midday the GOC instructed the brigade to push right through to **Tripoli**. **Brigadier Kippenberger** went ahead to the **Azizia** Gate of the town and in the main square met Major-General Wimberley, GOC 51 (H) Division. The leading unit of 5 Brigade (28 Battalion) reached the gate at 1.30 p.m.

Fifth Brigade had been prepared to arrange for the subdivision of the town, but troops from 51 Division were already there. **Kippenberger** and Wimberley discussed a re-arrangement, and 'everyone acted sensibly and it was made without difficulty'. ¹ Fifth Brigade went to the southern part of the town with 21 Battalion in the western sub-sector, 23 the central and 28 the eastern. The 5th Field Regiment had remained at **Suani Ben Adem**. Guards were posted on vital points, and the occupation was completed without incident. Civilians gave no trouble.

Divisional Cavalry bivouacked four miles south of the city, **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group between **Suani Ben Adem** and **Bianchi**, and Divisional Artillery concentrated in an area south of **Suani Ben Adem**. Sixth Infantry Brigade Group remained south-east of **Azizia**, pending a move next day to the **Bianchi** area.

Bianchi was reported clear by **30 Corps**, and so the GOC, accompanied by his ADC (Captain **Griffiths** ²), Brigadier Gentry and his staff captain (Captain **Cook** ³) and Brigadier N. W. McD. Weir ⁴ (on attachment from New Zealand), set off about 2.30 p.m. to examine its possibilities as a bivouac area. But **Bianchi** was still occupied by rearguards of **15 Panzer Division**, and the party ran into rifle and machine-gun fire at very close range, followed shortly by mortar fire. Captain Griffiths returned the fire with a Tommy gun. The party went to ground, but the GOC's driver (Lance-Corporal **Norris** ⁵) went back to his car, which was under fire, turned it, picked up the GOC and his ADC and drove off at full speed to get assistance. Brigadier Gentry's driver received a fatal wound, three other men were wounded, and Captain **Cook's** car was destroyed. The party took shelter in a nearby farmhouse.

The GOC soon found some machine-gunners of 3 MG Company and led them back to the scene of the ambush, but as no one could be seen, he thought that the brigadiers and the others had been

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 264.

² Maj J. L. Griffiths, MC, m.i.d.; Paraparaumu; born NZ 9 Apr 1912; bank officer; ADC to GOC 1941–45.

³ Lt-Col J. P. Cook, OBE, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Wellington, 3 May 1917; law clerk.

⁴ Maj-Gen Sir Norman Weir, KBE, CB, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born Christchurch, 6 Jul 1893; Regular soldier; Auck Regt (Lt) 1914–17; GOC 4 Div (in NZ) 1942; comd NZ Tps in Egypt, 1943–44; QMG, Army HQ, 1945; Chief of General Staff 1946–49; died Hamilton, 11 Jul 1961.

⁵ L-Sgt S. A. Norris, MM; Auckland; born NZ 21 Oct 1915; motor driver.

captured. Two tanks of Protective Troop now arrived and were sent in pursuit, but although they chased two armoured cars, could not overhaul them. The party was then found in the farmhouse, having had no further losses.

In a letter ¹ describing the incident General Freyberg said in a postscript, 'I *will* be more careful in future'. It was apparent to all that had the Protective Troop accompanied the party an awkward predicament might have been avoided, but as the GOC had been assured that Bianchi was clear, his indignation later in the day when speaking to the Corps Commander was understandable.

The incident became known in conversation throughout the Division as the 'Battle of Bianchi'. The *Panzer Army's* narrative for the day

speaks of 'strong enemy reconnaissance parties thrusting forward', and perhaps the GOC's journey was one of these.

¹ Letter to the author at the time.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 23 JANUARY

The Enemy on 23 January

The enemy withdrew with the same orderliness in which he had conducted the retirement throughout. On the coast road the final rearguard left its position east of the city at 11 p.m. The *GAF Brigade* had difficulties fending off attacks from 7 Armoured Division and speeded up its timings to commence withdrawing at 9 p.m. on 22 January instead of at midnight. The *15th Panzer Division* withdrew from **Azizia** between 1 a.m. and first light, leaving rearguards in front of **Bianchi**. In the morning of the 23rd 7 Armoured Division was checked south-east of **Zanzur**. There was thus no rapid retreat, and while air reconnaissance showed steady movement to the west, there was nothing resembling a flight. The enemy was apprehensive about the possibility of a wide outflanking movement along the foot of the Gebel westwards to **Medenine** in **Tunisia**, but his general plan was now to retire to the **Mareth** Line in any case, sending all the Italians first and leapfrogging the German formations along the coastal road. By the evening of 23 January the enemy rearguards were west of **Zauia**, and thereafter they withdrew steadily towards the Tunisian frontier.

The advance to **Tripoli** involved 2 NZ Division in very little fighting. Indeed, for the most part, action was restricted to the Divisional Cavalry and the Greys, with some assistance from the artillery. The engineers were frequently called on for mine clearing and track making, and the supply echelons, of course, concerned themselves constantly with the maintenance of the Division. But for the infantry, accustomed as they had become to action and to setting hardship at defiance, the journey from **Nofilia** to **Tripoli** was an easy one. It was mostly very much a matter of sitting patiently in their lorries, enduring the jolting, the dust and the delays until their arrival in what had become a common term for **Tripoli**—the promised land.

The Division's casualties since beginning the march from near **Nofilia** on 9 January were 21 killed and 56 wounded, of whom one killed and ten wounded were from infantry units. The total casualties since leaving the **Bardia** area early in December were 69 killed, 197 wounded and 8 prisoners of war, who were distributed as follows:

	<i>Killed Wounded Captured</i>		
Divisional Cavalry	11	15	
Artillery	12	24	
Engineers	19	44	
5 Infantry Brigade	22	59	
6 Infantry Brigade	4	22	5
Others	1	33	3
	-	-	-
	69	197	8

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

MR CHURCHILL'S VISIT

Mr Churchill's Visit

During the time spent in and around **Tripoli** the troops derived some pleasure from living among greenness and cultivation, with an occasional (or perhaps only one) visit to a large town; but the real culmination to the advance on **Tripoli** came on 4 February, when the Division paraded for **Mr Churchill**—one of the most memorable occasions in its history.

Instructions issued on 30 January concerned a review by the Army Commander. Then it became known that the parade was to be in honour of a 'Mr Bullfinch', who was soon identified by rumour as the Prime Minister of the **United Kingdom**.

Two or three days were devoted to preparations, and leave to **Tripoli** was cancelled. The Division was organised into five groups:

Divisional Troops (comprising Greys, Divisional Cavalry, **Divisional Engineers, Divisional Signals, 27 (MG) Battalion, and Headquarters)**

Divisional Artillery

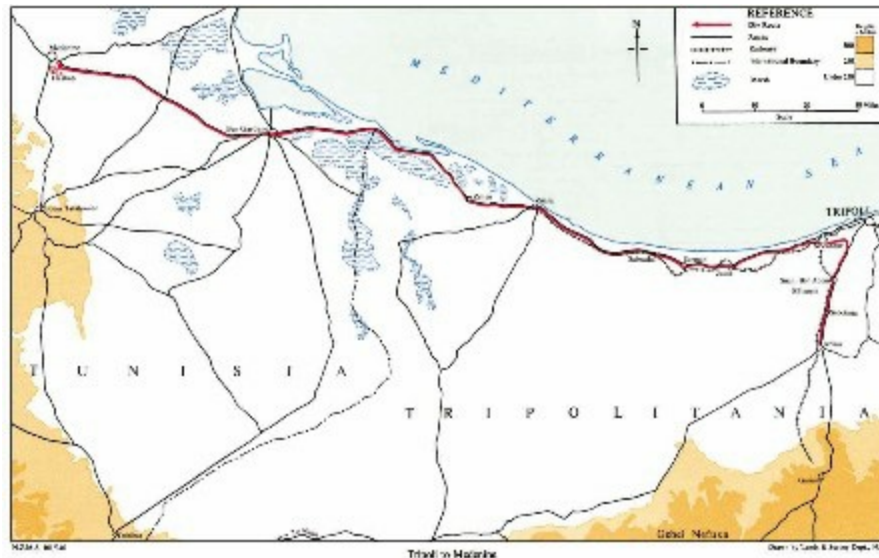
5 Infantry Brigade

6 Infantry Brigade

Services (NZASC, **NZMC, NZOC, NZEME)**

The review took place on a stretch of open green country surrounded by bluegums, not without its resemblance to that homeland so far away. Before lunch there was a full rehearsal, at which the GOC found himself at the point where he had to call for 'Three cheers for...', and at that very moment realised that he had not prepared an alternative name for

the Unknown Guest, and so after a fractional pause plunged deeply and went on '... the Prime Minister', thus confirming or confounding all rumours.



Tripoli to Medenine

The whole force paraded before 2 p.m. to await the official party. **Mr Churchill**, dressed in the uniform of an Air Commodore, arrived standing up in an open car with General Montgomery seated beside him. In the cars that followed were General Sir Alan Brooke (Chief of the Imperial General Staff), General Sir Harold Alexander and other senior officers. An escort of armoured cars swept into line beside the saluting base, and as the Prime Minister's car halted, **General Freyberg** ordered a general salute. The GOC was greeted warmly and invited into the car and, with **Mr Churchill** still standing, they drove along the lines of the massed troops.

After returning to the saluting base the Prime Minister addressed the Division, speaking at first in the well-known grumbling tone, with rather a monotonous delivery:

General Freyberg, officers and men of the New Zealand Division and the **Royal Scots Greys** and other units attached thereto—when I last saw your General, **Bernard Freyberg**, my old friend of so many years of war and peace, the Salamander, as he

may be called, of the British Empire, it was on those bluff and rocky slopes to the south of **Alamein** where you were then preparing to receive what was then expected to be a most dangerous and deadly thrust by the hitherto victorious Rommel. At that time also we had had great doubts and anxieties as to the position in **Russia** and what would happen in the Caucasus and in all approaches to the great oilfields without which the plight of **Germany** is hard.

(And then his tone changed and he electrified his audience, bursting out triumphantly.)

But what a change has taken place since then. By an immortal victory, the Battle of Egypt, the Army of the Axis Powers which had fondly hoped and loudly boasted it would take Egypt and the Nile Valley, was broken, shattered, shivered, and ever since then, by a march unexampled in all history for the speed and force of the advance, you have driven the remnants of that army before you until now the would-be conqueror of Egypt is endeavouring to pass himself off as the deliverer of **Tunisia**. These great feats of arms entitle the Army of the Desert to feel the sure deep-founded sense of comfort and pride based on the footing of valiant duty faithfully done. Now I come and find you here, 1500 miles from where I saw you last, and you may well feel that in that period a great change has taken place in the whole position of the war, and that we now have a right to say that a term will be fixed to the intense exertions to which so many well disposed and good-hearted people have been compelled by the brutal attacks which have been made upon them. Now a turn and a change has come upon the scene, just in the same way as after all these hundreds and hundreds of miles of desert you suddenly came again into green and fertile lands. So there has been a movement of the whole world cause with its 29 United Nations, a movement towards a far surer hope and a far nearer conclusion than anything that was possible before. You will march into fairer lands, you will march into the

lands where the grim and severe conditions of the desert lie behind; but having endured those conditions, the military qualities, the grand fighting qualities you have displayed will only shine the brighter and be turned to greater advantage. Far away in your homes at the other side of the world all hearts are swelling with pride in the deeds of the New Zealand Division. Throughout the Motherland—our little islands, which stood alone for a year surrounded only by children from overseas, against dire odds; far away in New Zealand, throughout the Motherland, all men are filled with admiration for the Desert Army, and we of the **British Isles**, our hearts go out in gratitude to the people of New Zealand who have sent this splendid Division to win glory across the oceans and who, unanimously, by their Parliament in secret session, accorded to you what is, I am sure, your wish to see this particular job through to the end. The enemy has been driven out of Egypt, out of **Cyrenaica**, out of **Tripolitania**. He is now coming towards the end of his means of retreat and in the corner of **Tunisia** a decisive battle has soon to be fought. Other great forces coming in from the west—the First British Army, the powerful armies of the **United States**, a French army coming back to its duty after having been first defeated and then shamefully misled. All these forces are closing in and all these operations are combined, but in them, I am sure, the Desert Army and the New Zealand Division will bear a most recognisable and honourable part. What I would say to you is that the sun has begun to shine. The good cause will not be trampled down. There will be more justice and mercy among men—there will be more freedom—there will be more chances for all as a result of this great world movement in which all the most powerful communities not locked in the Nazi or Fascist heresy will take their part, and in this struggle those whom I speak to now and see before me in their massive array have already taken a glorious part but have still before them the opportunity of increasing the debt which all free nations of the world owe, and I give to you on behalf of His Majesty's Government, on behalf of all the people of the Homeland

—I give you our expression of earnest and warmhearted thanks. We cherish the memory and the tale of all you have done. We wish you God Speed and God's assistance in your further efforts and we feel that as duty will not fail so success will be achieved.

When the speech concluded **General Freyberg** called for three cheers for the Prime Minister, which were hearty indeed. Then in order of groups the Division marched past the saluting base to the music of the massed pipe bands of 51 (Highland) Division, with the troops nine abreast, an unorthodox formation but most suitable and impressive. The armoured and artillery units marched to their nearby vehicle parks, where they mounted their tanks, carriers and guns, and in column of six vehicles abreast were again reviewed.

So for half an hour an almost unbroken line of men, tanks, guns and vehicles passed in salute to the great leader of the Commonwealth cause. **General Freyberg** described it as 'the most impressive and moving parade of my career'.

Mr Churchill's reference to **General Freyberg** as the 'Salamander of the British Empire' puzzled many people, though they all knew it to be high praise of some kind. The salamander is a lizard-like animal to which the superstition once attached that it could live in fire, from which characteristic the parallel of **General Freyberg's** career, involving battle after battle and wound after wound and surviving still, was an easy one. Today the arms of Baron Freyberg include as supporters 'on either side a Salamander Proper'.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

EARLY DAYS IN TRIPOLI

Early Days in Tripoli

THE New Zealand Division was in and around **Tripoli** for over a month, engaged in a variety of duties, and enjoying a reasonable amount of sport and recreation. Dock labour, control of civilians, guard duties, training, reorganisation and absorption of reinforcements, maintenance, **Churchill's** visit, and for the officers discussions of the past and planning for the future—all these figured during the period. Many corps, such as the engineers, ¹ the anti-aircraft artillery, and the ASC were busy with their normal operational duties.

Administrative Group 2, the last of the divisional groups in the advance, did not catch up until 25 January. On that date **Divisional Headquarters** was assembled near **Suani Ben Adem** with Divisional Artillery and the Reserve Group, 5 Infantry Brigade Group was in **Tripoli**, and 6 Infantry Brigade Group in the **Bianchi** area. Fifth Brigade stayed in **Tripoli** only three days, however, being relieved on the 26th by a brigade from 51 (H) Division and moving to an area near **Castel Benito**.

The Division was on three hours' notice for operational employment until 27 January. This was extended to twenty-four hours; but there were indications that in any case the Division would be in its present area until the end of February. Units retained petrol for 100 miles, but for some days there was a shortage which enforced economy. Supplies of petrol, and indeed of everything, depended on the opening up of **Tripoli** port.

The work of the Navy in clearing the port and making it usable again was a notable factor in maintaining Eighth Army's offensive. To the untutored eye, the devastation in the harbour and the obstructions in the entrance seemed to indicate that the port would be unusable for months. But the first vessel entered the harbour on 3 February, followed

by a whole convoy a few days later, and shortly thereafter over 2000 tons a day were being handled. As a

¹ The engineers had another four or five casualties during this period.

temporary measure before 3 February, vessels were unloaded by lighter outside the harbour. ¹

On 26 January the GOC held a conference of formation commanders and heads of services, and led discussions on past operations, on future operations, and on activities in the month ahead. For the immediate future he prescribed a general 'sprucing up', to include weapon training and marching. Leave to **Tripoli**, games, a sports meeting, and concert parties would provide the necessary element of entertainment.

Leave to **Tripoli** began on 29 January, a tenth of unit strength going there every day, but the men were disappointed with the city, which could offer no food or normal entertainment. There were strict orders not to buy food from inhabitants, and the general impression was that one visit was enough, despite the fact that it was a real town with an attractive seafront esplanade. Some trouble was caused by over-indulgence in the local wine, soon known as 'plonk', which was plentiful and cheap. It was a not unusual sight to see odd unit vehicles scouring the countryside on 'plonk missions', or in other words looking for fresh supplies of the local substitute for beer.

Churchill's words about coming into green and fertile lands had good foundation, for the plain of **Tripoli** was indeed fertile compared with the desert country which was all the Division had seen for many long months. There was ample artesian water to irrigate the innumerable small farms which were the visible sign of the Fascist attempt to colonise **Tripolitania**; and the results of hard work were seen in fields of maize and other crops, olive and almond groves, and avenues of trees, all a truly pleasing sight, especially when the almonds came into early

blossom.

By the beginning of February the whole Division was concentrated in the **Suani Ben Adem – Castel Benito** area. Brigade groups and the Reserve Group were broken up, and all units reverted to their own corps' command. The Greys remained with the Division, but the attached artillery went back to its regiments.

¹ The rapid clearing of **Tripoli** harbour, coming on top of past experience at **Tobruk** and **Benghazi**, proved that in fact it was well-nigh impossible to obstruct a harbour for more than a short period, no matter how great the degree of demolition, or the number of sunken vessels or obstructions employed.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

DEMONSTRATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demonstrations and Discussions

Eighth Army made use of the lull and of the minor concentration in the area by holding a series of demonstrations and discussions on the technique of modern battle. Syndicates from the three divisions forming **30 Corps were to demonstrate the solution of problems in which they were experienced: **7 Armoured Division**, in a 'telephone battle', showed how an armoured division attacked; **51 (H) Division** how to make a night attack through minefields, and **2 NZ Division** how to move and deploy in the desert.**

General Montgomery was present on 8 and 9 February, when the demonstrations were first given to an audience of formation and unit commanders from the Corps. The New Zealand Division syndicate spoke first. The GSO I (Colonel Queree) described the ground, the forces, and the plan; the GOC described the organisation and characteristics of a mobile division, and examined the three stages of planning, approach march and deployment. The CRA (Brigadier C. E. Weir) then explained the drill for putting out a 'gun line' when the whole Division was deployed, and the commander of 6 Brigade (Brigadier Gentry) spoke about desert formations. No comment was made on this demonstration, perhaps on account of its convincing nature, but probably because **General Freyberg had such an awe-inspiring reputation.**

Montgomery spoke to all officers and some senior NCOs stationed in and around **Tripoli who gathered in a local theatre. He began by saying, 'You may cough for one minute, then there will be no more coughing'—but he did pause each fifteen minutes to let his audience relax and cough. In his address he outlined the position on the Russian and North African fronts, and gave an indication of future events, when Eighth Army would combine its operations with the Allied troops in **Tunisia**.**

About a week later a 'repeat performance' of the demonstrations was attended by brigadiers and above from local troops, and by many distinguished visitors from farther afield, including Generals Alexander, Paget and Dempsey of the British Army, and Generals Patton and Bedell Smith of the United States Army. This second series coincided with the Casablanca Conference between President Roosevelt, **Mr Churchill**, and the Allied Chiefs of Staff, at which decisions were taken affecting the future fighting in North Africa, among them the appointment of General Alexander to command an Army Group made up of First and Eighth Armies. ¹

At the demonstrations General Montgomery and Air Marshal Coningham reviewed recent campaigns and future operations; and the three divisional demonstrations were repeated, without any comment from the visitors. It was after this exercise that General Patton made his famous remark which has been variously reported, but which implied that it had taught him nothing, at least about methods of command. ²

¹ See p. 127.

² *Operation Victory*, p. 234: 'The story is told of his reply when asked what he thought of Montgomery's address on "How to make war". His reply came slowly with a lovely Southern accent: "I may be old, I may be slow, I may be stoopid, and I know I'm deaf, but it just don't mean a thing to me!"'

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

DOCK LABOUR

Dock Labour

On 10 February 2 NZ Division took over from 51 (H) Division guard duties in **Tripoli**, provision of working parties in the dock area, and part of the anti-aircraft defences. For this purpose 6 Infantry Brigade moved into **Tripoli**, Brigade Headquarters being in the Governor's Palace. Infantry units found guards for power stations, wine factories, hospitals, breweries, petrol depots, water points, flour mills and so on. Brigade Headquarters co-ordinated demands for dock working parties, 900 men being drawn from the brigade itself, 1200 from a composite artillery regiment stationed in the town, and up to 1150 a day from other divisional units (5 Brigade, Divisional Cavalry, and 27 (MG) Battalion). Shifts were worked day and night both on the ships and on shore.

The work on the docks was well done, and received praise from higher authority and even from **Mr Churchill** himself, who on one occasion sent a laudatory telegram. It transpired that the discharge figures were signalled to him daily, and a figure of 2700 tons on 14 February had inspired the telegram. For the moment, tons of stores were more important than ground gained.

However, there was a reverse to the medal, for there was too much pilfering; and on one occasion there was an explosion on an ammunition barge being unloaded by the Maoris, the suspected cause being smoking by some of the men, although this was strictly against orders. At least one man was killed and several wounded. This last episode led to a stiff interview between General Montgomery and **Brigadier Kippenberger**, who was temporarily in charge of the Division in **General Freyberg's** absence. The Army Commander hauled the Brigadier over the coals for the Division's delinquency, and although he stoutly defended the Division, **Kippenberger** was conscious that he was on shaky ground. ¹

There was then a general tightening up of discipline among the working parties, both by stricter control by **Divisional Provost Company** to prevent pilfering, and by a closer supervision by officers in charge of parties. The CO 28 (Maori) Battalion went so far as to stop leave for the unit for some days until he could be convinced that general behaviour had improved. Progressively from 17 to 28 February demands for labour from the Division were reduced, and the work was taken over by pioneer and labour units. The Composite Regiment returned to its units on 25 February and 6 Infantry Brigade to its bivouac area at **Suani Ben Adem** on the 28th.

Meanwhile 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment had been frequently in action along the waterfront, and had fired 30,000 rounds as part of the anti-aircraft barrage over the area. There were enemy raids almost daily, but the damage caused was negligible, and the New Zealand units had no casualties.

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, pp. 268–9.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Other Activities

During the time at **Tripoli** the weather was wintry. There was a lot of rain, and one or two washouts, both actual and figurative. A normally dry wadi in 28 Battalion area, for example, became a fast-flowing stream and washed away several tents; and four troops of carriers from Divisional Cavalry, sent to picket an area to be used by the **RAF** for a bombing exercise, after getting thoroughly wet, found that the exercise had been postponed. On the other hand there were some days of bright sunshine, one of them the day of **Churchill's** visit.

The provision of working parties for the docks, and other duties, interfered as always with any coherent training programme. There were a number of exercises on particular subjects, such as radio-telephony and how to deal with mines, and some 'spit and polish', mostly in the shape of formal guards on headquarters offices. However, it must be admitted that the Eighth Army, so formidable and efficient in war, had become rather like a collection of pirates, gipsies and partisans in appearance and sometimes in conduct.

Work interfered also with the elaborate plans for a divisional athletic championship. But the divisional rugby tournament, commenced at **Bardia** and continued at **Nofilia**, was at last finished on 14 February, when 28 (Maori) Battalion beat Divisional Signals by 8 points to 6.

The first reinforcements from New Zealand for over a year joined the Division at **Tripoli**, the previous draft—the **7th Reinforcements**—having arrived in October 1941. Most of the **8th Reinforcements** had been under arms in New Zealand for over a year and the well-trained 100 officers and 3000 other ranks helped to give new life to the Division. Because of the long distance from **Maadi Camp**, an Advanced Base was opened at **Suani Ben Adem**, to hold reinforcements nearer the Division for as long

as the campaign continued in North Africa.

Reinforcement was especially welcome to the engineers, whose casualties over the months had been much higher than the official estimate of 'likely wastage'. It will have been apparent already that this was due to exceptionally hard work in overcoming the enemy's prodigal use of mines and demolitions.

The Kiwi Concert Party arrived in **Tripoli** on 8 February and gave many performances in the town from 11 February onwards.

On 25 February the **Royal Scots Greys** ceased to be under command, but before leaving handed over some of their Stuart tanks to Divisional Cavalry. They had served the Division well and had done much to improve co-operation between infantry and armour. On the same day 7 NZ Anti-Tank Regiment received the last of its 17-pounder anti-tank guns (known as 'pheasants'), a completely new weapon. The regiment then had sixteen pheasants and forty-eight six-pounders. Courses were held to train crews for the new weapons, which had high muzzle velocity and great hitting power; it was hoped that they would prove as effective as the German 88-millimetre.

Eighth Army changed from Zone B to Zone A time at midnight on 22–23 February when clocks were retarded one hour. Zone B time (two hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time) was that applicable to Egypt. Eighth Army had gone farther and farther west using this time, until an artificial state of affairs had arisen, and was in effect using a 'daylight saving' of one hour. The adjustment was to the time used at the western end of the **Mediterranean** and coincided with that used by First Army.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE CASABLANCA CONFERENCE

The Casablanca Conference

In **Tunisia** in the meantime the reorganisation of the front continued, combined with a gradual build-up of Allied forces. In particular **2 United States Corps** attained its full strength of four divisions, one of which was armoured. The Americans, who were on the southern end of the front, gradually took up positions on a line, albeit a thin one, from **Fondouk** through **Faid** to **Gafsa**. Next to the north was the French **19 Corps**, holding from **Fondouk** to **Pont du Fahs**, and then the British **5 Corps** disposed through **Medjez el Bab** and thence to the north-west. The Allied line was progressively weaker as it passed from north to south, and the American sector resembled a long arm stretched out towards Eighth Army. The latter by mid-February was in touch with the enemy forces on the Tunisian frontier.

At the Casablanca Conference in **Morocco** on 14 February it was decided that Eighth Army should come under Eisenhower's command when it entered **Tunisia**, although it would continue to be supplied from Egypt, that an Army Group Headquarters should be formed to control both First and Eighth Armies and to be known as Eighteenth Army Group, and that General Alexander (then Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces) should be appointed to command this Group under the direction of General Eisenhower, and at the same time should be appointed Deputy Commander-in-Chief to the whole **Allied Expeditionary Force**. General Alexander then assembled a small tactical staff and arrived in **Algiers** on 15 February to take command. The directive issued to him by General Eisenhower on 17 February gave as his mission the early destruction of all Axis forces in **Tunisia**.

It was at this conference that the air forces were reorganised, ¹ the old Western **Desert Air Force** becoming the group of the Tactical Air Force primarily intended for continued co-operation with Eighth Army.

The period about the middle of February 1943 was thus one of a major recasting of organisation and plans in the Allied forces. At this time the two wings of Eighteenth Army Group were still separated by at least 150 miles.

¹ See p. 12, note 1.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ATTEMPT AT DISRUPTION

The Enemy Attempt at Disruption

From the time that they were faced with fighting on two fronts, the Axis commanders—Rommel of the German-Italian *Panzer Army*, and von Arnim of *5 Panzer Army*, the title of the Axis forces in Tunisia—had been apprehensive about an Allied thrust towards Gabes or Sfax from the west, for if successful, this would cut the Axis forces in two. The presence of Allied forces at Gafsa and Faid, even if weak in numbers, was a persistent threat. Rommel had not objected, in early January, when one of his star divisions (*21 Panzer Division*) was sent to Sfax. It is thus not surprising that after the fall of Tripoli the Axis commanders thought that the time had come to deal with this particular danger, for they were now concentrating in a central position and could take advantage of being on interior lines.

As a result of the flare-up over the withdrawal from the Homs-Tarhuna position, Rommel was in bad odour with his Italian superiors; so it was not surprising when on 26 January he was told that because of his bad health he would be released from command as soon as his forces reached the Mareth Line, and was to be succeeded by the Italian general, Messe. He had no illusions himself about the real reason, and in the first rush of anger asked that Messe should come over as soon as possible, for in his own words, 'I had little desire to go on any longer playing the scapegoat for a pack of incompetents'. ²

However, this feeling did not affect his conduct of the immediate operations, and from 23 January the German-Italian *Panzer Army* continued to withdraw in good order to the Mareth Line. By the middle of February all the Italian forces were in the line, but the German forces remained mobile. Messe arrived on 2 February; but then Rommel showed no haste to go off 'on leave', waited for a direct order to hand over, and left the unfortunate Messe hanging about with no definite job. Rommel

now had a new interest and wanted to see it through, for the Axis appreciation was that it would take Montgomery some time to reorganise and replenish the British forces at **Tripoli**, so that for once time, however short, was on the enemy's side.

A side issue of this period is the disappearance of Marshal Bastico, who resigned his appointment as Governor of **Libya** at the end of January. Strangely enough, Rommel speaks of him in a kindly manner in retrospect, and gives him credit for much helpfulness. In his final report Bastico was very critical of Rommel, who in his opinion had lost his nerve after the Battle of **Alamein**, and thought only of retreat back to the **Gabes Gap**. Possibly some of Bastico's bitterness springs from Rommel's failure to give the importance to **Libya** which Bastico naturally thought it deserved. On the other hand, Bastico's failure to realise the strategic necessity of a withdrawal to **Gabes Gap**, as the Axis called the Akarit position, is fairly typical of the military myopia of Rommel's Italian superiors.

At this time—early February 1943—the control of the two Axis armies was being exercised direct by *Comando Supremo* in Rome. There was no other official form of co-ordination. The higher direction of the Axis campaign in North Africa is a major subject in itself, a fascinating study of conflicts of ambition, national pride and incapacity, and of failure to find a satisfactory solution. **Hitler's** view that he was the Supreme Leader of the Axis opposed **Mussolini's** view that he was an equal partner: the Germans' contempt for their ally, sometimes thinly-veiled and leading to a dislike of having to acknowledge any form of Italian command: the exact position of Kesselring, who was sometimes only a Senior Supply Officer, and then was in and out as commander of all German troops in the **Mediterranean**, sometimes with tactical control and sometimes not: geographical factors which made German troops dependent on Italian rail and sea facilities: the fact that most of the fighting took place on what was technically Italian soil, but where the effective striking force was German—all these led to a situation where often it could be said that no one knew who was commanding what. It

was thus inevitable that there should be great confusion, never more noticeable than now when there were two armies in North Africa. All the German post-mortems on the campaign name the 'command muddle' as one of the main causes of their defeat.

However, in February the situation was that **Hitler** had conceded that control of operations in **Tunisia** would be an Italian responsibility, although Field Marshal Kesselring, as German Commander-in-Chief, South, was inserted between the Italian *Comando Supremo* and the two German army commanders, Rommel and von Arnim. By representations to *Comando Supremo*, and by constant personal visits from Rome to the respective battle headquarters in **Tunisia**, Kesselring was able to ensure that German tactical demands were met. Vital orders had still to be issued by *Comando Supremo*, and this made Kesselring's task as much that of ambassador-at-large as Commander-in-Chief, South, for both von Arnim and Rommel made direct overtures to *Comando Supremo*, and neither of them willingly subordinated the interest of his own particular project to that of the other.

The immediate Axis intention in **Tunisia** was that the Eastern Dorsal, the range covering the coastal plain, should be secured, and to this end von Arnim planned to drive the Allies from the wedge they held in the Sidi bou Zid area. Rommel's intention was to drive **2 US Corps** from **Gafsa**, and this operation would not get fully under way until von Arnim's thrust had achieved sufficient success to enable him to release some ninety tanks from **21 Panzer Division**. Initially, von Arnim would have under command both **21** and **10 Panzer Divisions**, with just over 200 tanks, as well as the new heavy tank battalion with a dozen Mark VI Tigers, while Rommel would start his **Gafsa** operation with 70 tanks, 53 from **15 Panzer Division** and the rest Italian. These decisions were made on 9 February, and the operations began soon afterwards. Greater success than anticipated persuaded Rommel that if only he could get command of the three panzer divisions he could burst through to **Tebessa**, with **Bône**, and the consequent withdrawal of First Army and **2 US Corps** to **Algeria**, his ultimate objective.

Consultations between Kesselring, von Arnim and Rommel, together with Rommel's direct approach to *Comando Supremo*, resulted in a formal directive which Rommel interpreted as giving him **Le Kef** as his initial objective, the capture of which would involve most of his force and thus prevent his attempt at a wide outflanking drive from **Tebessa** to **Bône**. Moreover, von Arnim was given complementary tasks in the north, and although both *10* and *21 Panzer Divisions* had been transferred to Rommel's command, only part of *10 Panzer* was released and Rommel did not exert his authority to secure the remainder. Splitting his force, Rommel attacked towards Sbiba and **Kasserine** on 19 February. Successful only at **Kasserine**, Rommel again split his force and thrust simultaneously towards **Tebessa** and **Thala**. By 22 February he decided that success had eluded him, and ordered withdrawal. His action, however, together with von Arnim's continued aggression in the north, postponed effective co-operation between First Army and **2 US Corps** on one hand, and Eighth Army on the other. ¹

On 23 February, *Comando Supremo* announced plans that had been long maturing. Just as the Allies had instituted unified command for the land forces by the establishment of Eighteenth Army Group, so the Axis grouped all their forces into *Army Group Africa*, which included *5 Panzer Army* and the German-Italian *Panzer Army*, or *First Italian Army* as it had been designated during Rommel's absence at **Kasserine**. Although it had been planned that von Arnim was to command *Army Group Africa*, Rommel was persuaded to accept command on the basis that he would relinquish it to von Arnim at a time of his own choosing. In the meantime von Arnim would command *5 Panzer Army* and *Messe 1 Italian Army*, while Rommel retained under his direct command the three panzer divisions. The immediate task for *Army Group Africa* was the disruption of Eighth Army's concentration before the **Mareth** Line, and the panzer divisions were reserved for this purpose. *Fifth Panzer Army* would carry on with offensive operations in the north aimed to delay for as long as possible any effective co-operation between the two Allied armies.

² *Rommel Papers*, p. 391.

¹ For analysis of these operations see [Howe](#), *Northwest Africa: Seizing the Initiative in the West* ([US Army in World War II series](#)).

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ALLIED COUNTER-ACTION

Allied Counter-action

Alexander took over command of Eighteenth Army Group just after Rommel's attack started, and was barely in the saddle when he was called on to restore a battlefield that had almost been shivered to pieces. Part of his defensive measures in the broadest sense called for action by Eighth Army, and on 21 February he ordered Montgomery to create a threat as powerful as possible against the enemy's southern army. But only two days later he was able to tell Montgomery that the crisis had passed and that he was not to prejudice his future plans, even though he was to keep up pressure. That 'future' included the strong possibility of an enemy attack before very long.

It will be remembered that 7 Armoured Division had followed the retreating enemy after the capture of **Tripoli**. Its advance was slow, owing to the thoroughness with which the coastal road had been mined and destroyed, and also to heavy rains which turned the salt flats near the coast into impassable obstacles. However **Ben Gardane**, the first village in **Tunisia**, was occupied on 15 February, and **Medenine** on 18 February, on which date 4 Light Armoured Brigade reached **Foum Tatahouine**, 30 miles to the south.

Medenine was important, first as a junction of many roads and tracks, secondly because it was a good assembly position for an attack against the **Mareth** Line, and thirdly because of a number of airfields in the area.

At this stage 2 NZ Division became aware of a force then known as the 'Fighting French Column', under its commander, General Leclerc. It had been formed in French Equatorial Africa, and was a mixed force—infantry, artillery and armoured cars, machine guns, oddments of transport and even a small air force. In late December 1942 it advanced

north, captured all the Italian posts in southern **Libya**, and made contact with Eighth Army just after the capture of **Tripoli**. There Leclerc willingly agreed to serve under Montgomery, and his force was replenished as liberally as could be done. About the middle of February it reached **Nalut**, on the Tunisian frontier some 80 miles south of **Ben Gardane**. Its travels are not without interest, for the force served later under **Freyberg's** command.

In the first half of February 51 (Highland) Division was moving forward at measured speed, its leading brigade reaching **Ben Gardane** on 19 February. When Montgomery received Alexander's order of 21 February to intensify pressure, he was compelled to push 51 Division faster than he had intended. By 25 February the whole division was west of **Medenine**, and both 7 Armoured and 51 (H) Divisions were pressing against enemy defences east of the **Mareth** Line proper. For once, however, Montgomery was 'off balance', with not enough troops in the forward area, no developed defences, and no reserves between them and **Tripoli** 170 miles away—no 'back-stop' should the enemy attack and penetrate the forward line. He moved Leclerc's force forward to **Ksar Rhilane** (50 miles south-west of **Medenine**) as an additional threat to the enemy—a bold move—and took immediate steps to send forward additional forces from **Tripoli**, including armoured formations and 2 NZ Division. He has since recorded ¹ that from 28 February until 4 March he suffered his second period of great anxiety during this long advance, the first having been during the advance from **Buerat** to **Tripoli**.

By early March all enemy forces had fallen back into or behind the **Mareth** Line, which ran roughly from **Zarat** on the coast through **Mareth** to **Toujane**, where it swung to the north-west.

¹ *El Alamein to the River Sangro*, p. 55.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

IN THE BACKGROUND—OPERATION PUGILIST

In the Background—Operation PUGILIST

The title of this chapter, 'The **Medenine** Incident', is not intended to minimise the engagement of 6 March, still to be described. The reason is that Montgomery himself, in spite of anxiety for a few days, looked on the Battle of **Medenine** as an incident occurring during his preparations for the much greater battle for the **Mareth** Line. That this is so is borne out by his general plan for the next offensive, which was issued on 26 February, well before the existing crisis had been resolved. It is of sufficient importance to be quoted in full.

Most Secret
26 Feb 1943.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OPERATION 'PUGILIST' – GENERAL PLAN OF EIGHTH ARMY

Operation 'PUGILIST'

General Plan of Eighth Army

- 1. Object:** The object of operation 'PUGILIST' is to destroy the enemy now opposing Eighth Army in the **Mareth** position, and to advance and capture **Sfax**. **General Considerations**
- 2. Eighth Army** has made very good progress during the last week, and this has definitely helped in forcing the Germans to withdraw from the **Kasserine** Pass and to break off the fight in that area.
- 3. Our advance**, and the pressure that we have been exerting against the **Mareth** position, now constitutes a definite threat to the enemy. As he has broken off the fight in Central **Tunisia** it is quite possible that he will transfer troops quickly to the **Mareth** front, in order to strengthen that front. He might even consider the possibility of an offensive himself against us, in order to inflict casualties and force us to postpone our own attack—which he must realise is bound to come sooner or later. From our point of view such an offensive by him in the near future would be exactly what we would like; it would give us a great opportunity to take heavy toll of the enemy as a first step, and then to put in our own *heavy attack* when he was disorganised as a result of his abortive offensive.
- 4. The immediate policy in 30 Corps** will therefore be as follows:
 - (To hold on to the positions already gained, and on the left flank**
 - a) to improve these positions in the mountains about Halluf in conjunction with LeClerc's force.**
 - (To organise the Corps area for defence, so that any attack by the**
 - b) enemy to interfere with our own preparations for 'PUGILIST' will have no possible chance of success.**
 - (By patrol and other activity, from firm bases, to press on with**
 - c) preparations for 'PUGILIST'.**
- 5. It will be seen, therefore, that the underlying principles of our action for the next two weeks, as outlined above, are to make quite certain that the enemy gains no success from any offensive he may contemplate; meanwhile we ourselves will quietly get ready for 'PUGILIST'. An essential feature of our own policy must be to gain and keep complete ascendancy over the enemy air forces; for this,**

the selection and preparation of suitable forward air fields is of great importance. Grouping for 'PUGILIST'

6. 30 Corps 50 Div

51 Div

4 Ind Div

201 Gds Bde

23 Armd Bde

NZ Corps 2 NZ Div

8 Armd Bde

KDG

One Med Regt

LeCler's Force

10 Corps 1 Armd Div

7 Armd Div (incl 4 Light Armd Bde, less KDG)

FF Flying Column

Operations 30 Corps

- 7. Before the date for the main attack, 30 Corps will carry out such preliminary operations as are necessary to ensure that the main attack will be immediately effective and will cause immediate enemy reactions. The provisions of paras 4 and 5 to be remembered all the time.**
- 8. The main attack of 30 Corps will be delivered on night 20/21 March against the enemy left or eastern flank. *Object:* To break into the **Mareth** position, to roll it up from the east and north, to destroy the enemy holding troops and prevent their escape, and subsequently to advance and capture **Gabes**. Operations NZ Corps**
- 9. The task of NZ Corps will be to make a turning movement round the enemy western flank, moving via **Nalut** and **Ksar Rhilane**. The Corps will then advance northwards, will break through any enemy troops or switch lines, and will endeavour to establish itself astride the road **Gabes- Matmata** so as to cut off the enemy and prevent his escape.**
- 10. The movement of NZ Corps will be so timed that by night 20/21 March it has begun to create a serious threat against the road**

Gabes– Matmata. Operations 10 Corps

- 11. 10 Corps will be in Army reserve. 7 Armd Div will pass to command 10 Corps in situ at a date and time to be notified later. This date will probably be about 15 Mar.**
- 12. 10 Corps will ensure adequate protection for the left flank and rear of 30 Corps during the period immediately preceding the launching of 30 Corps attack, and during the attack itself.**
- 13. 10 Corps will then be held ready to exploit success, being prepared to operate towards Gabes and Sfax. Further Operations**
- 14. The final objective for operation 'PUGILIST' is Sfax. Once operations have begun on night 20/21 March they will be conducted relentlessly until Sfax has been reached. Administration to be arranged accordingly.**
- 15. Once Sfax is secured, the Eighth Army will operate north-westwards against the rear of enemy forces in front of the Allied divisions in southern Tunisia, and will 'drive' on to Sousse. Royal Air Force**
- 16. Operation 'PUGILIST' will be supported by the full weight of the Allied Air Forces now supporting Eighth Army, and by the air striking forces in Central Tunisia and in Malta.**
- 17. An essential feature in the preparatory stages will be the selection and preparation of forward air fields for fighters and light bombers, so that we can dominate the enemy air force and give adequate cover to our own troops while the battle is being built up.**
- 18. Details of the air action will be notified later. Inter-communication**
- 19. Tac Army will be with Main 30 Corps Tac 10 Corps to be established near Tac Army.**
- 20. Each Divisional Commander will be given one copy of this memorandum. (Sgd) B. L. MONTGOMERY General,
G.O.C.-in-C.
Eighth Army.**

This plan requires few comments. The tenor of paragraphs 4 and 5 shows that the enemy's moves were not to be allowed to upset long-term planning, and that the Army Commander was determined to keep the initiative in the broader field. This intention to adhere to the plan already prepared was later translated into rejecting the immediate advantage of a decided victory over *1 Italian Army*.

On the date this plan was issued many of the formations named in paragraph 6 were still back near El Agheila—Headquarters 10 Corps, 50

Division, 4 Indian Division, 201 Guards Brigade and 1 Armoured Division. The **Free French Flying Column, which came into existence before the Battle of **El Alamein**, was composed partly of **Foreign Legion** and partly of Moroccans, and comprised sub-units of armoured cars, a tank company (Crusaders), some anti-tank guns and some lorried infantry. It should not be confused with Leclerc's force.**

It must be emphasised that planning for the next stage, the attack on the **Mareth Line, and many preliminary moves and much administrative detail were taking place concurrently with the defensive preparations at **Medenine**.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION MOVES TO MEDENINE

2 NZ Division Moves to Medenine

Late on 28 February **General Freyberg** was warned that 2 NZ Division would move immediately to **Medenine**, to come under command of **30 Corps**. He was himself to fly to **Medenine** to see both **General Montgomery** and **Lieutenant-General Leese**. Before leaving, **Freyberg** left instructions that 5 Brigade was to be prepared to move at once, so that delays on the single, narrow road between **Tripoli** and **Medenine** would not prevent the immediate deployment of a complete brigade group. The rest of the Division was to follow as soon as the necessary arrangements were made.

Accordingly, while **Freyberg** was away, 5 Brigade Group was informed early on 1 March that it would receive replenishment priority and, accompanied by its ancillary arms, would move with its second-line transport and additional ammunition, petrol and rations to **Medenine**. The 5 Brigade orders group left **Suani Ben Adem** at midday, reaching Headquarters **30 Corps** six hours later. Here **Brigadier Kippenberger** was given details of the area which the brigade was to occupy. Meanwhile the brigade group assembled, and by midnight was ready to move. However, the remainder of the Division had by this time so advanced preparations for the move that when **General Freyberg** returned he put Main Headquarters NZ Division, Survey Troop of **36 Survey Battery**, 4 Field Regiment, Headquarters Divisional Artillery, Engineers and Signals on the road first. This group left **Suani Ben Adem** at 9.30 p.m., 1 March, and the 5 Brigade Group left an hour later. The rest of the Division was not far behind, 6 Brigade being on the road at 10.15 a.m., 2 March, and the last group, which included Divisional Cavalry, that same afternoon. The GOC and the CRE, **Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson**, went by air early on 2 March, followed in another aircraft by the CRA, **Brigadier Weir**, and the GSO I, **Colonel Queree**.

The move of the Division demonstrated once more the flexibility of the components of Eighth Army. On the first day of March, with the exception of 5 Brigade which had been warned of the move before dawn, all formations of the Division were occupied by the diverse activities of a non-operational period. The Divisional Artillery moved that morning to the south of **Azizia** to begin a three-day course of tactical and gunnery exercises, 6 Brigade was holding a football tournament, Divisional Cavalry was testing and adjusting the 37-millimetre guns which had arrived for the Stuart tanks. If any thought was given to future operations it would have been in terms of Montgomery's outline plan for PUGILIST, in which 2 NZ Division was scheduled to advance into the Dahar by way of **Nalut**. Yet within two days the vast quantity of supplies necessary to move the Division and to maintain it in battle for six days had been drawn and distributed, bivouac areas had been evacuated, vehicles had been prepared, and all units had left the area. Within one more day the Division was ready for battle nearly 200 miles away.

The road was narrow, not built for heavy traffic, and was frequently blocked by tank transporters, some of which had to be off-loaded to cross bridges south of **Ben Gardane**. All groups took rather more than fifteen hours to cover the distance, the complete move being made with very little incident. At **Medenine**, **30 Corps** had issued an operational order on 28 February, defining the divisional areas that were to be occupied for the defensive battle that was expected on, or soon after, 3 March. **General Freyberg** had seen the area assigned to 2 NZ Division on 1 March, and that same evening the 5 Brigade orders group arrived at HQ **30 Corps** to be given details of the brigade sector. In this way all commanders down to battalion level had a fair understanding of the task, and the areas to be occupied, before the units arrived.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE GROUP AND 4 LIGHT ARMoured BRIGADE IN POSITION

5 Infantry Brigade Group and 4 Light Armoured Brigade in Position

In the 30 Corps area 51 (H) Division was already in position north of the **Medenine– Mareth** road with its left flank at **Kef Ahmed ben Abdullah**, and its line running thence to the northeast; and 7 Armoured Division occupied from Kef Ahmed southeastwards parallel to the **Mareth** road, including the prominent feature Tadjera Kbir, the peak of which was known as Point 270. The New Zealand Division was to go into position on the left (south) of 7 Armoured Division, the northerly limit being about one mile south of the road from **Metameur** to **Toujane**, and the sector stretching south and east for some 13,000 yards, facing west and then south. The line was in an arc about four miles from **Medenine**. The Division was to have under command 4 Light Armoured Brigade (which now included the **Free French Flying Column**), and 73 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA. Fifth Brigade Group was to occupy the sector described above, with 6 Brigade in reserve and 4 Light Armoured Brigade protecting the open flank in the south.

The ground for some ten miles in advance of **Medenine** was a gently rising plain, broken by numerous dry wadi beds, and bounded on the west and south by a range of hills, from which the enemy would presumably debouch.

At 8.30 a.m. on 2 March the 5 Brigade orders group made contact with **1 Buffs** (from 7 Armoured Division), which was occupying part of the area now to be taken over, and made a quick reconnaissance of the area, the brigade commander deciding forward defended localities (FDLs) and inter-battalion boundaries. By midday the GOC had arrived, the position was further discussed, and final arrangements for the brigade approved. Commanding officers then made their detailed

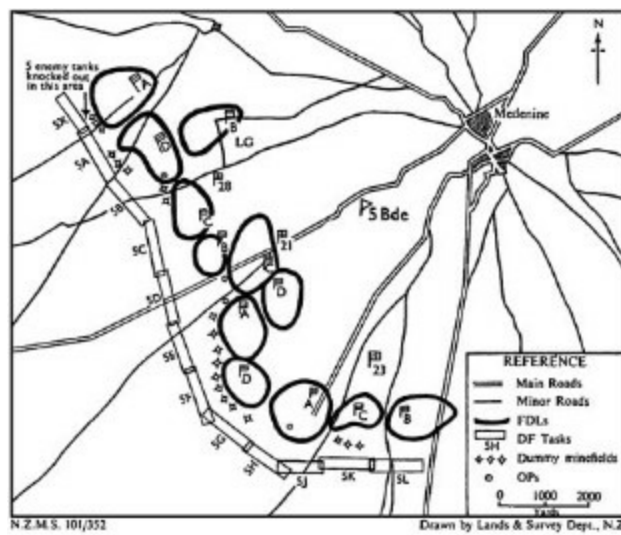
reconnaissances, and in the afternoon met the battalions as they arrived and guided them to their positions. The 21st and 23rd Battalions were deployed shortly after dark, although the final location of posts was left until daylight; 28 Battalion did not arrive until late, and moved forward into its sector early in the morning of 3 March.



MEDENINE, 6 MARCH 1943

Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade was established close to the **Medenine–Keddache** road about a mile and a half clear of **Medenine**.

The **28th (Maori) Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel C. M. Bennett) was on the right facing south of west, with its line running from the boundary with 7 Armoured Division, across the tracks from **Metameur** to **Ksar el Hallouf** and from **Medenine** to **Ksar el Hallouf**, with three companies forward and one in reserve. At a later date (4 March) 28 Battalion relieved the left company of 201 Guards Brigade, the next formation to the north, thus extending the battalion frontage to 5500 yards. One platoon of 4 Machine-Gun Company was sent to the battalion to help occupy this extension.



5 BRIGADE POSITIONS AT MEDENINE
 5 BRIGADE POSITIONS AT MEDENINE

The **21st Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel R. W. Harding) was in the centre astride the road from **Medenine** to **Kreddache**, with two companies forward and two in reserve. It also faced south of west.

The **23rd Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel R. E. Romans) was astride the road from **Medenine** to **Ksar Krerachefa** with its left on the road to **Foum Tatahouine**. One company on the right faced south-west. The other three were then in the line facing south.

When 28 Battalion had taken over the additional front, the total brigade frontage was some 14,000 yards, and the troops were rather thin on the ground. But to add strength in addition to the normal allocation of one anti-tank battery from 7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 5 Brigade was allotted three anti-tank batteries from 73 Regiment, RA, which were already deployed. One of these batteries was allotted to each battalion. On the morning of 4 March the new 17-pounder anti-tank guns just issued to 7 Anti-Tank Regiment arrived, and of these seven were placed in support of 5 Brigade, sited in depth across the front. This gave the brigade greater anti-tank strength than ever before. The normal artillery support coming from 5 Field Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Glasgow ¹) was augmented by support from 4 Field Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart ²), although the latter was intended to give support also to 201 Guards Brigade. ³ But in case of need even further artillery could be

called upon.

All three battalions were in initial—sometimes provisional—positions by first light on 3 March and were patrolling to their fronts shortly thereafter. The situation was firm enough for **General Freyberg** to report to Corps Headquarters about 2 p.m. that both 5 and 6 Brigades were in position and ready for action. The 1st Buffs, which had been temporarily holding the line, then returned to 7 Armoured Division.

¹ Col K. W. R. **Glasgow**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; born **Wellington** 15 Nov 1902; headmaster; CO 14 Lt AA Regt May-Dec 1941; **5 Fd Regt** Dec 1941–May 1943; GSO I NZ **Maadi Camp**, 1944; died Waikanae, 4 Oct 1958.

² Col **G. J. O. Stewart**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 22 Nov 1908; importer; CO **4 Fd Regt** Aug 1942–Mar 1943, Dec 1943–Mar 1945; CRA **2 NZ Div** 22 Feb–16 Mar 1945; wounded 3 Mar 1943.

³ On 3 March while on reconnaissance Lt-Col Stewart's jeep ran over a mine, and he was wounded and evacuated. The second-in-command, **Maj H. E. Gilbert**, took over the regiment.

Behind the left of 23 Battalion was an airfield known as Hazbub. A battalion of the **RAF Regiment** and a light anti-aircraft regiment protected this airfield, together with some armoured cars and a battalion of French troops. There was some liaison with 5 Brigade, mainly to the extent that the ground troops were known to be available on the left flank if required; and the CRA was in touch with the anti-aircraft regiment.

Brigadier Kippenberger described the 5 Brigade position. ¹ He says: 'Each battalion position had a depth of about a mile... and six-pounders [anti-tank guns] echeloned in depth. The men were dug into single rifle pits seven or eight yards apart so that each section was on a front of about sixty yards and no amount of shelling would do much harm. The

greatest possible emphasis was placed on concealment—I preached that a post spotted is a post destroyed, and hardly one was visible from any distance in front.... All weapons had orders to hold fire until decisive range. We always thought this **Medenine position was our masterpiece in the art of laying out a defensive position under desert conditions.’ And that this was so is borne out by the fact that after the battle the Corps Commander sent senior officers from all formations in the Corps to look at it.**

In the evening of 4 March the brigade commander issued instructions that dummy minefields were to be laid on each battalion front. If necessary **8 Armoured Brigade from 7 Armoured Division would make a counter-attack through 5 Brigade, in which case live mines would be an encumbrance.**²

The 7th Field Company started marking the fields at 8 p.m. on 4 March and finished by midnight, by which time there were some 1000 yards of dummy field on the front of 28 Battalion, 1500 yards on 21 Battalion front, and 1700 yards on that of 23 Battalion. Particular attention was paid to a deep wadi on the front of 28 Battalion, and the field was so arranged as to ‘canalise’ advancing tanks to come out on to higher ground. Live mines were placed each night as blocks across the roads leading into the position, and were removed each morning.

The brigade group had made its final adjustments by daylight on 5 March. All battalions had patrols well forward, and 23 Battalion sent out a standing patrol eight miles to the south-west. The Royals of 4 Light Armoured Brigade were continuously on patrol farther out across the whole brigade front. They kept touch with Brigade Headquarters, and withdrew their armoured car screen behind the FDLs each night.

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 271.

² A dummy minefield was marked by the same single strand of wire as a live field; but no containers were laid, nor was there

any simulation of real mines.

The 4th Light Armoured Brigade deployed concurrently with 5 Brigade. In addition to its armoured car regiments and supporting arms, it had under command the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, **Staffordshire Yeomanry** (Sherman tanks), and the **Free French Flying Column**. The role of the Royals has been given. Staffs Yeomanry was concentrated behind the left flank of 5 Brigade, and Divisional Cavalry was in the same area. The 2nd Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, with one squadron of King's Dragoon Guards, and with field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery support and a field squadron of **Royal Engineers**, was to hold **Haddada**, 20 miles south-west of **Medenine**, and was to give warning of any wide enemy outflanking move. The FFF Column filled the gap to the north between 2 KRRC and the Royals, and was also to watch for enemy movement across the plain to **Medenine**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE REMAINDER OF THE DIVISION

The Remainder of the Division

Divisional Headquarters arrived at midday on 2 March and was established just east of **Medenine**, north of the road to **Ben Gardane**. The 4th Field Regiment arrived two hours later and was at once deployed. The commander of 6 Infantry Brigade (Brigadier Gentry) and the commanding officers of 6 Field Regiment and the three battalions met the GOC late in the afternoon and inspected the position the brigade was to occupy north-east of **Medenine** in second line. The GOC was not entirely satisfied with this position and would have preferred it to be south of the **Ben Gardane** road and so better placed to support 5 Brigade. Discussions went on for the next few days, the point at issue being that the GOC wanted 6 Brigade in closer support of 5 Brigade, while both the Army and the Corps Commanders wanted it placed behind the northern sector of the front as Army Intelligence forecast an enemy attack along the coast. The position in the end was a compromise, not so far north as Army wanted, nor so far south as **Freyberg** would have liked.

The brigade arrived in its new area at intervals between 6.30 a.m. and 3 p.m. on 3 March, and the battalions occupied positions already reconnoitred, all some two miles north-east of **Medenine** across the road to **Bou Ghrara**. The **26th Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel D. J. Fountaine) was on the right (north) just east of the **Bou Ghrara** road, and faced north-east. The **24th Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel J. Conolly) was west of the road and faced west, while 25 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel T. B. Morten ¹) was also west of the road south of 24 Battalion and facing west and

¹ Lt-Col T. B. Morten, DSO; Little River; born **Christchurch**, 30 Sep 1913; shepherd; CO **25 Bn** Jan 1943–Feb 1944; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

south. The area was thus organised for all-round defence and was supported by 6 Field Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel **Walter** ¹) deployed farther back. Anti-tank guns were sited with interlocking fields of fire.

The way in which 6 Brigade's area had been organised was, as directed by **30 Corps**, to form a strongpoint should the enemy break through; but at the same time to support 5 Brigade or other parts of the line and even to counter-attack any enemy penetration. The task was thus a fluid one, with emphasis on a 'back-stop' role. For that role the brigade was well-prepared; but for a counter-attack role armoured support was needed. Brigadier Gentry has said since that the discussion about his possible roles were rather 'airy-fairy', but adds, 'I am quite clear that our primary role was to defend our own piece of ground against attack from the flanks or rear after German penetration, and that any attack by us against that penetration would have required a properly laid-on plan with tanks and artillery support.' ²

On 3 March 6 Brigade formed a small mobile force of 31 Anti-Tank Battery and 3 Machine-Gun Company, under Major **Nicholson** ³ of 31 Battery, which was to be ready to go to either flank of 25 Battalion as required. Positions were dug in readiness. (Both these sub-units were additional to the normal allocation to the brigade.) A composite Bren-gun platoon was then formed by 8 Field Company and placed on the left flank of 25 Battalion, so committing these engineers to a fighting role if required.

The CRA had all his regiments linked up on a common communications system which even included the anti-aircraft guns on Hazbub airfield, briefed for possible anti-tank duties. Full use was made of the survey troop of **36 Survey Battery** and for the first time the flash-spotting troop was deployed, setting up a base on high ground round **Metameur** and Point 270. The Divisional Artillery was also linked with that of 7 Armoured Division, 51 (H) Division and **5 Army Group Royal Artillery**, ⁴ with the result that the whole front was covered by a network of interlocking zones of fire.

During 3 March the remaining units of the Division arrived in their new area, the NZASC companies carrying four days' rations and 350 miles of petrol for the whole Division. Units were ordered to replenish daily, and to maintain their petrol supplies at 350 miles—for the shadow of PUGILIST was always in the background.

¹ **Lt-Col C. L. Walter, DSO, ED; Hamilton; born Christchurch, 10 Dec 1902; electrical engineer; CO 6 Fd Regt Dec 1941–Nov 1943.**

² **Letter to the author, 23 Jan 1958.**

³ **Lt-Col S. W. Nicholson, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Auckland, 22 Feb 1914; customs agent; CO 5 Fd Regt Oct–Nov 1944; 7 A–Tk Regt Dec 1944–Mar 1945; 6 Fd Regt Mar–May 1945.**

⁴ **AGRA comprised 7, 64 and 69 Medium Regts, RA, and 4 (Durham) Survey Regiment.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

LULL BEFORE THE STORM

Lull before the Storm

General Freyberg held a conference of all formation and unit commanders in the afternoon of 3 March to review the position and to tie up the loose ends that were inevitable after such a fast move. He discussed the positions of **30 Corps** as a whole, pointing out that all three divisions had an unusually large number of anti-tank guns and extra field artillery, and that 51 (H) Division had an armoured brigade (23 Brigade) in support. The role of 2 NZ Division was to form a solid base round **Medenine**, and also to operate southwards against any penetration by the enemy towards **Ben Gardane**. Thirtieth Corps had 300 heavy tanks (as against the enemy's maximum of 150), and 467 six-pounder anti-tank guns. The New Zealand Division had 112 anti-tank guns, with 50 heavy tanks of Staffs Yeomanry under command and another 16 with the FFF Column. He made it clear that no attempt would be made to pursue the enemy after he had been repulsed. The timings already set down for PUGILIST would be observed.

Complete wireless silence was maintained by the Division; and to keep secret that New Zealanders were in the area a set manned by British operators from 4 Light Armoured Brigade worked from **Divisional Headquarters**, the difference in accent between British and New Zealand voices being enough for the purpose. ¹ Similarly a British operator was lent to work the **RAF** tentacle set.

As usual, landing grounds were of particular importance. In the area round 2 NZ Division there were three, one of them west of **Medenine** and now in the front line. Another was at Hazbub and the third ten miles to the south. Precautions were taken to ensure that no transport drove over these grounds except in cases of operational necessity. New Zealand engineers and working parties from 5 Brigade spent about two days improving the Hazbub ground, which it was intended to use. Nine enemy

aircraft raided this ground on the evening of 4 March, but no damage was done, and the **RAF** destroyed three aircraft.

On 3 March there was still uncertainty about the enemy's intentions. In the evening parties of enemy infantry attacked the carrier screen of 51 (H) Division, but were quickly driven off. It is possible that this somewhat limp attack was a form of reconnaissance for an advance down the coast, in which case it cannot have given the enemy much information. There was a little air activity but all in all the enemy was very quiet, and carrier patrols operating some miles in front of the FDLs on 4 March had nothing to report.

Tactical air reconnaissance on 4 March disclosed much movement of tanks between **Matmata** and **Kreddache**, but there was no clear indication whether the enemy would attack in the north or the south; but the point had now been reached when it did not much matter, for our defensive line was ready.

The morning of 5 March was still quiet, and the day uneventful, except for the activities of a long-range enemy gun, which spasmodically shelled the **Medenine** area, and particularly the Hazbub landing ground. It succeeded in denying the use of the ground to our aircraft from time to time, and its activities were most irritating. Despite flash-spotting and sound-ranging locations and air reconnaissance, the gun was never definitely located, far less dealt with, during the time 2 NZ Division was in the **Medenine** area, and the CRA described it laconically as 'very troublesome'. The **4th Indian Division** overran the gun position in the main **Mareth** attack later in the month; and it was then found that there had been a troop of two 17-centimetre guns, well out of range of the guns of Eighth Army. One of the guns was then presented to 2 NZ Divisional Artillery, and, manned by 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, was in action until the end in North Africa.

Carrier patrols from 5 Infantry Brigade went out as far as the hills on 5 March, with authority to break wireless silence if necessary; but although they saw small parties of infantry, mechanical transport and

armoured cars, the enemy showed no desire to engage. He covered his real intentions with considerable skill. There was even a school of thought that his plan was not to initiate an attack, but to counter-attack from the south-west when Eighth Army attacked the **Mareth Line**, and it is indeed true that Rommel asked for such a plan to be prepared. However, expectations generally were for an early attack from three panzer divisions, their exact location not being known.

It was clear to everyone, from Montgomery downwards, that the brief crisis had passed. Fast movement and efficiency in establishing a strong defensive line had put Eighth Army in such a position that it would be able to resist any attack that *1 Italian Army* could mount against it.

¹ But before the battle the enemy had identified 2 NZ Division in the **Medenine** area.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY PREPARES

The Enemy Prepares

Meanwhile Rommel continued with his preparations. His new command, *Army Group Africa*, now comprised **1 Italian Army** under Messe, **5 Panzer Army** under von Arnim, and a mobile battle group under direct Army Group command of the three panzer divisions (**10**, **15** and **21**) and a group of reconnaissance units. Rommel was running true to form in retaining personal command of the armoured force. But he decentralised enough to ask Messe to prepare plans for his attack and he accepted a part of Messe's plan affecting the lines of advance. His own idea had been to attack from the north from **Mareth** to **Bou Ghrara**; but he listened to Messe and other officers and changed the main line of attack to the south where the going was better for tanks. The thrust lines were then to be:

10 Panzer Division, with 40 tanks and with elements of **164 Light Division** under command, from **Ksar el Hallouf** directed against **Metameur**. **3** and **33 Reconnaissance Units**, plus a small force drawn from the German equivalent of an army headquarters protective unit and known as *Kasta*,¹ all under **10 Panzer Division**, were to 'go large' farther to the south-east.

21 Panzer Division, with 40 tanks, from **Djebel Tebaga** (southeast of **Toujane**, and not to be confused with the hill feature of the same name which **2 NZ Division** came up against later in the month)—directed towards **Tadjera Kbir**, which was recognised as the key of the British defences.

15 Panzer Division with 62 tanks—from behind **Djebel er Remtsia** (east of **Toujane**) towards **Kef Ahmed ben Abdullah**.

The aim was stated to be the destruction of the enemy troops; but at

the most, Rommel really hoped to disrupt Eighth Army's assembly area and so gain more time. For limits were set to exploitation, the farthest objective being **Ben Gardane**; and the final stage was to be a return to the protection of the **Mareth** Line. The Axis Headquarters thought that the Eighth Army line was held from north to south by 51 Division, 44 Division, 2 NZ Division and 7 Armoured Division, the last-named being identified south of **Medenine**. It is probable that 44 Division was identified because 131 Infantry Brigade from that Division was under command of 7 Armoured Division at this time; and the presence of 4 Light Armoured Brigade south of **Medenine** probably accounted for the identification of 7 Armoured Division, for the brigade frequently formed part of that division.

The German codename for the operation was **CAPRI**.

¹ *Kasta* is an abbreviation for *Kampfstaffel*, which was a small mixed force of well under battalion strength, intended originally for Army HQ protective duties, but frequently used for special tasks such as reconnaissance. Basically it consisted of tanks, of which at **Medenine** it seems to have had nine.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ATTACKS

The Enemy Attacks

All doubts about the enemy's intentions ceased at an early hour on 6 March, when fairly heavy shelling of all forward positions began at 6 a.m. Then for the next hour and a half tanks, guns, and transport debouched from the hills between **Toujane** and **Kreddache**, the approach having been concealed by fog in the early stages. The first tanks to be seen came down the **Toujane– Medenine** road and then swung north against 7 Armoured Division.

On the front of 2 NZ Division, contact with the enemy (from **164 Light Division**) was first made by carriers from 21 Battalion, which engaged seven enemy vehicles carrying infantry and anti-tank guns. The carriers opened fire at close range in the fog and inflicted many casualties, but lost one carrier and had two casualties.

Small groups of infantry probed along the whole front, and farther back as the fog lifted, enemy guns could be seen taking up positions. For a long time our artillery was silent, obeying orders not to open fire prematurely, but to wait until targets came within the range of the maximum weight of guns. (This was the result of experience at **Alamein**.) It was definite policy, moreover, for the anti-tank guns to open at short range, and not to dispel a tank attack by using medium or field artillery at long range. The 5th Field Regiment, for instance, withheld fire until enemy tanks had run up against the forward six-pounders, and then fired on the infantry and the soft-skinned vehicles following the tanks, with the result that the tanks were isolated and received no support from the ground troops.

About 8.30 a.m. tanks were reported from two directions advancing on Point 270 (Tadjera Kbir), which seemed to be the main objective. At this time also 28 Battalion reported that ten tanks and thirty trucks

were moving up the wadi on its right front. The tanks reached the boundary of the dummy minefield, and then, as had been hoped, swung towards the rising ground. Two six-pounders from 73 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, then opened fire and knocked out four Mark III Special tanks at 400 yards' range, and mortars of 28 Battalion finished off a fifth. When the crews bailed out, the mortars and machine guns with the battalion had first-class targets and the artillery was quickly in action. The tanks were taken by surprise and lost cohesion; but then they located the anti-tank guns and opened fire on them. Despite damage to one gun of 73 Regiment and the wounding of two of the crew, the gun kept firing; and when all the other weapons had opened fire, the remaining tanks disengaged and made off in confusion. Fifteen prisoners were taken, including the tank company commander, all from *10 Panzer Division*. A member of 27 (MG) Battalion who was on the spot has described the action as 'a truly grand victory for the Tommy gunners, made still more remarkable considering that it was their very first action. The way in which they held their fire was an example to us all.' ¹

¹ R. Ffolliott-Powell.

Shortly after 9 a.m. 21 Battalion engaged and dispersed with mortar fire a party of infantry debussing on its front, and by about 10 a.m. the remaining infantry had withdrawn and were digging in some three or four miles back. Our artillery was now active all over the front, bringing down concentrations on previously arranged zones as soon as enemy troops or vehicles entered them.

There was no serious second attack against 2 NZ Division during the morning, although there was much movement of tanks and transport across the front in a confused way; and indeed, apparent confusion was visible all along the line. But obviously the main enemy thrust was directed against Tadjera Kbir and farther north.

On the left flank, however, the enemy force (3 and 33

Reconnaissance Units and *Kasta*, the last with nine tanks) worked round to the **Foum Tatahouine– Medenine** road; but the Free French, who were holding this area, successfully contained this threat without any assistance. The FFF Column had some fairly hard fighting and incurred twenty-seven casualties, but throughout the day resisted enemy pressure up the line of the road from a point 12 miles south of **Medenine**.

During the afternoon the enemy brought his infantry into the attacks in increasing degree, and at intervals from 3.30 onwards advancing troops were dispersed by artillery fire from 2 NZ Divisional Artillery, without coming to grips with our infantry. The climax came at 5.45 p.m. when about 1000 infantry with tanks reached an area just west of Point 270, and were there subjected to a devastating concentration from 2 NZ Divisional Artillery and Corps and **5 AGRA** field and medium regiments, even the heavy anti-aircraft guns on the landing ground. When the area was inspected after the battle it was found that there was rarely more than six yards between the fall of shot. The time spent in linking up the artillery along the corps front had produced a good dividend.

In the heat of the battle there arrived an addition to the Divisional Artillery, in the shape of a troop of captured 88-millimetre guns, staffed by Royal Artillery personnel under Captain Downing, RA. These had been given to the Division by Brigadier McIntyre, RA, commander of a British anti-aircraft brigade. They were deployed near Divisional Artillery Headquarters and for a short while were employed in an anti-aircraft role; but later in the day they moved to 4 Field Regiment's area, and formed a part of that regiment until the end in North Africa. The troop was soon known as 'Mac Troop', officially and otherwise. ¹

¹ In a report to **War History Branch**, Brigadier Weir says, 'Their first engagement was Anti-aircraft; but in their haste the gunners forgot to set the fuzes to "time" with the result that some of the shells completed the trajectory, bursting on percussion in Col Crump's replenishment area'. It would, however, be unfair to assume that this is why they moved to 4

Field Regiment.

On the front of 51 Division and 7 Armoured Division the fighting was more intense, although no serious penetration of the defences was made and Tadjera Kbir was never in danger.

At 6 p.m. twenty-seven enemy tanks and some infantry passing across 21 Battalion's front out of range of anti-tank guns were engaged by field artillery. This was the last that the Division saw of the enemy in this action.

Throughout the day the enemy attacks had been supported by fighter-bombers and fighters; but the **Desert Air Force** was very active and the *Luftwaffe* had little success. Raids over 5 and 6 Brigades and the gun areas caused no damage or casualties, but two men were killed and two wounded in a raid over 4 Field Ambulance, and some slight damage was suffered in rear areas. One Me109 was shot down by 26 Battalion with a captured **Breda** gun.

By last light it was all over and the enemy everywhere was withdrawing, having achieved no success. There was at no time the faintest requirement to call upon reserves.

The detached force of KRRC and other units at **Haddada** saw no action, but were left very much in the air when the FFF Column on their right was forced back by the enemy attempt to outflank them. For a while the **Haddada** group thought they had been cut off altogether, but they remained in position and were still there next day.

During the night of 6–7 March **30 Corps** patrolled actively, mainly to discover if the enemy would resume his attacks on 7 March, despite his visible losses in tanks. By last light on 6 March it was already known that these were of the order of forty or fifty, so that a renewal of the attack was not likely.

The New Zealand Division had the special task of watching for any

movement round the south of the line. Sappers after dark demolished the five tanks knocked out on 28 Battalion front, and similar action was taken elsewhere along the corps front. Some tanks of Staffs Yeomanry were moved forward slightly in case of an attempt by the enemy to penetrate 5 Brigade's line, but it was a quiet night, except that the Divisional Artillery put down harassing fire at intervals up to 3.30 a.m.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY WITHDRAWS

The Enemy Withdraws

Movement of enemy vehicles, enough to presage a renewal of the attack, was heard during the night 6–7 March, but at first light only small groups of transport were seen moving off to the north and, fired on by our artillery, were quickly out of range. Dawn patrols of carriers from 5 Brigade progressively reached points farther from the FDLs, until at 1 p.m. a patrol from 23 Battalion skirted the foothills without making any contact. The enemy force on the **Foum Tatahouine** road was slower to disengage, and still had troops there in the mid-afternoon.

From noon onwards on 7 March a steady stream of traffic was seen converging on the passes leading to **Ksar el Hallouf** and **Toujane**. On the main road from **Medenine** to **Toujane** vehicles were moving nose to tail, all out of artillery range. This traffic into the hills continued all day, thinning out towards evening, and although the air forces did their best to intervene, low clouds made it difficult for them. By last light **10 Panzer Division** had been located near **Ksar el Hallouf**, and **15 Panzer Division** north-east of **Toujane**. For the moment **21 Panzer Division** was unlocated; but the enemy's offensive was obviously over.

The enemy air force was active in covering the withdrawal but the **Desert Air Force** prevented serious interference over **30 Corps**. However, at 10.15 a.m. 6 Infantry Brigade was bombed by nine aircraft, one man being killed and eight wounded.

Towards midday plans were made at **Divisional Headquarters** to form a special force known as 'Currie Force', after the commander of 4 Light Armoured Brigade. It consisted of one squadron of Divisional Cavalry, 4 Field Regiment less one battery, 34 Anti-Tank Battery and two squadrons of Staffs Yeomanry, and had a separate flank guard of one squadron Staffs Yeomanry, one squadron Divisional Cavalry and 26 Field

Battery, all under command of Brigadier Currie. Its task was to operate southwards from **Medenine** for about eight miles, well clear of the FDLs, and then to work north-westwards across the front of 5 Brigade, sweeping up any enemy troops still remaining.

The flank guard soon made contact with the FFF Column, but found that the enemy had at last gone. Later 26 Battery engaged transport towing guns in the foothills near Ksar el Ababsa, but the enemy was soon out of range. At 5.30 p.m. a single 88-millimetre gun fired twenty-odd rounds at the main column but caused no damage or casualties. The force laagered for the night 7–8 March seven miles south-west of **Medenine**. At dawn it was again fired on by an 88-millimetre gun and had seven casualties. Later in the morning it was recalled and broken up, as there was obviously no further point in retaining it.

During 8 March Divisional Cavalry took over from the Royals the patrol line along the foothills south-east of **Ksar el Hallouf**, and was in contact with the enemy, taking two prisoners. The forward companies of 21 Battalion were shelled at long range in the morning, but otherwise there was little enemy shelling. The flash-spotting troop extended its base with little result, for the hilly country gave the enemy ample shelter from observation. Had the sound-ranging troop been available it might have had better luck.

All divisions maintained patrols during the following night, as the enemy armoured divisions seemed to have halted temporarily. Bad visibility on 9 March hampered air observation, but by the end of the day all the indications were that *15 Panzer Division* was resuming its role of close support to the **Mareth** Line, while *10* and *21 Divisions* were going back to the **Gabes** area. Divisional Cavalry, which kept up observation along the foothills, saw some enemy movement on the escarpment and drew fire from one point. Even on 10 March it was found that all the heights were picketed and any attempt to penetrate drew fire; but enemy offensive action was confined to the everlasting long-range gun, which spasmodically shelled the **Medenine** area and Hazbub landing ground.

On 10 March the FFF Column left 4 Light Armoured Brigade and moved to join Leclerc's force at [Ksar Rhilane](#). By this time the task of 2 NZ Division had finished, although Divisional Cavalry continued to patrol along the foothills until 14 March. Fifth Infantry Brigade was relieved by British troops in the afternoon of 11 March, and next day moved to a staging area for the next operation, to which by this time all efforts were being directed. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade was transferred to the command of [10 Corps](#) at this time.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

SOME THOUGHTS ON MEDENINE

Some Thoughts on Medenine

Rommel has little to say about the Battle of **Medenine**, but his remarks are of some weight: ‘The attack began extraordinarily well, but soon came up against strong British positions in hilly country, protected by mines and anti-tank guns.... Attack after attack was launched, but achieved no success.... it soon became clear that the attack had failed and there was nothing more to be done about it.... The attack had bogged down in the break-in stage and the action never had a chance of becoming fluid. The British commander had grouped his forces extremely well and had completed his preparations with remarkable speed. In fact the attack had been launched about a week too late.... We had suffered tremendous losses, including forty tanks totally destroyed. But the cruellest blow was the knowledge that we had been unable to interfere with Montgomery's preparations. A great gloom settled over us all. The Eighth Army's attack was now imminent and we had to face it. For the Army Group to remain in **Africa** was now plain suicide.’ ¹

The last few sentences show Rommel's views, which he had already voiced several times, and was to voice again more vigorously to both **Mussolini** and **Hitler** within a few days, for this was Rommel's last battle in North Africa. He departed on sick leave on 9 March, and knew that he would not be coming back. His two years of campaigning in North Africa did not end on a high note. Indeed, for him it ended in near disaster.

The German attack at **Medenine** was virtually a straightforward charge against our line, with little subtlety, with only a weak flank attack, and with practically no reconnaissance beforehand. The war diaries of all three panzer divisions show that there was little if any co-ordination by Rommel, and in fact the renewal of the attack on a general scale in the afternoon was arranged by the three divisional commanders themselves through personal and radio discussion. Having

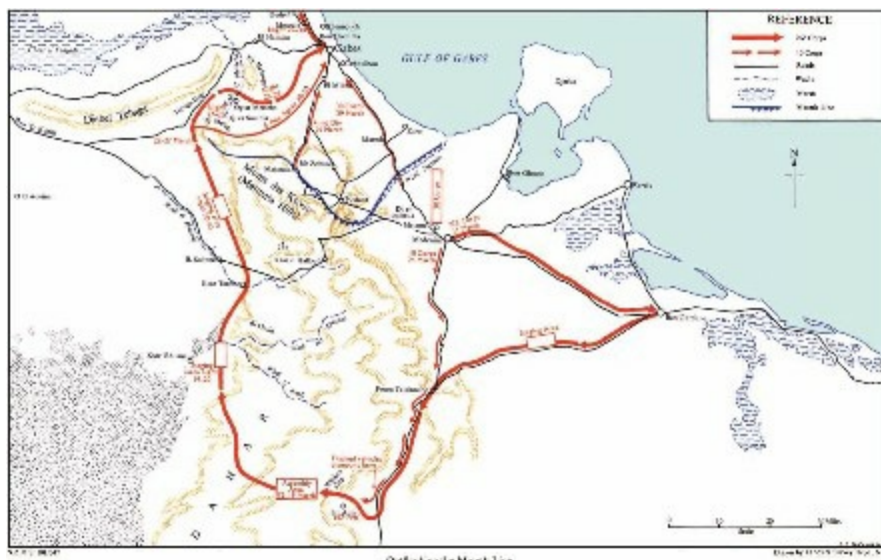
launched the attack, Rommel seems merely to have looked on and almost to have expected the worst from the outset. Like a ghost from the past, one can see Napoleon at **Waterloo** standing at his side.

All three divisions speak repeatedly of heavy and devastating shellfire. Tanks were blinded and there could be no hope of advance unless the British guns were neutralised. At one critical stage *Headquarters 21 Panzer Division* was so heavily shelled that it was out of action for half an hour. It is of some interest to read that the German sound-ranging and flash-spotting sections had no success in locating the British guns.

The *15th Panzer Division* admitted a loss of twenty-four tanks and *21 Panzer Division* over twenty, while *10 Panzer Division* lost about seven or eight. Thirtieth Corps counted fifty-two enemy tanks destroyed, so that the figures are for once in agreement. It was one-third of the enemy's strength in armour, a crippling loss. Enemy prisoners, however, amounted to only eighty-three.

About 6 p.m., acting on mistaken information that *10 Panzer Division* had reached **Metameur**, Rommel planned to move *15 Panzer Division* across to the right (south) during the night and resume the attack next morning; but when the error was discovered he ordered a general withdrawal.

The Allied victory had been due to anti-tank defence in depth supported by massed field and medium artillery, a conclusive answer to the armoured thrust. Only one squadron of armour was engaged, without loss. Good concealment minimised the effects of enemy fire against our artillery, so that little help was possible for the enemy armour. And good concealment also made our losses of infantry very small. Brigadier Weir, responsible for much of the whole artillery programme, later emphasised that Eighth Army, for the first time, had good observation.



Outflanking the **Mareth** Line

Earlier in this chapter it has been explained that Montgomery regarded the **Medenine** battle only as an incident, albeit an annoying one, which occurred while preparations for his next offensive were under way. He did not change those plans because of the victory. Some commanders—Rommel for example—would have jumped at the opportunity of knocking out an already reeling enemy, following up with every man, gun, tank, and aircraft to storm through the **Mareth** Line. Such tactics are spectacular, and sometimes successful. But it was sounder and surer to delay a little and complete preparations before striking with full strength, and this was the course Montgomery followed.

The part of 2 NZ Division in the battle was not great, for the severe fighting took place farther north where forty-seven enemy tanks were destroyed. But the Division by establishing itself so quickly in a defensive line which was a model of its kind made a worthy contribution.

Casualties in the Division from 4 to 10 March were 1 officer and 6 other ranks killed, and 2 officers and 39 other ranks wounded. Most of these were the result of air action, for effective concealment had minimised, indeed almost nullified, the enemy's ground fire.

At **Medenine** the Germans used nebelwerfers for the first time

against Eighth Army. New Zealand observers both heard and saw them, but they seemed to be firing at extreme range, and there is no record of their inflicting any loss on the Division.

¹ *Rommel Papers*, pp. 415–16.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 8 – PREPARING FOR PUGILIST

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE TERRAIN

The Terrain

SOUTH and south-east of **Tripoli** an escarpment, almost a range of hills, trends from the coast near **Homs** in a long crescent that swings in a half-circle to the west and ends just south of **Gabes**. This escarpment forms the southern limit of a coastal plain, some 80 miles at its widest, between **Nalut** and the sea. From **Foum Tatahouine** northwards the range is known as **Monts des Ksour**, popularly called the **Matmata Hills**, the north-western end terminating at **Djebel Melab**. Between the **Matmata Hills** and the sea the north-western end of the coastal plain steadily narrows, and in the hills and across the plain ran the **Mareth Line** from **Toujane** to the sea.

The **Matmata Hills** run generally north and south. Behind them to the west a stretch of desert country, known as the **Dahar**, runs parallel to the hills from near **Nalut**, with the village of **Ksar Rhilane** towards the northern end. Farther west lies a stretch of impassable sand desert, the **Grand Erg Oriental**. The northern end of the **Dahar** merges into a long series of salt marshes known as **Chotts**, the most easterly of which is entitled **Chott Djerid**, with an eastern extension named **Chott el Fedjadj**. South of and parallel to **Chott el Fedjadj** is a long ridge lying east and west—the **Djebel Tebaga**—which continues northwards as a low watershed separating the **Chotts** from the coastal strip. This strip, about 15 miles from **Gabes**, was the **Gabes Gap**, better known to Eighth Army as the **Wadi Akarit** position, from the wadi flowing north-eastwards between the watershed and the sea.

Between **Djebel Tebaga** and **Djebel Melab** a low pass runs from the **Dahar** to the coastal plain south-west of **Gabes**. This is the **Tebaga Gap**.¹ It is about four miles long in its narrowest section and is passable for infantry and tanks over a width of about three and a half miles between the two **djebels**, although wheeled vehicles, generally speaking, must use

the tracks. A force entering the Dahar from the coastal plain farther south could find its way back to the coast through this pass.

¹ See map facing p. 153.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE OUTFLANKING PROBLEM

The Outflanking Problem

The problem now confronting Eighth Army was to force the **Mareth Line** and advance on **Sfax**, the next useable port, and the next area with useful landing grounds. The line had been built by the French in pre-war years to meet possible Italian threats from **Tripolitania**. In the coastal plain, here from ten to 15 miles wide, it ran immediately behind the line of **Wadi Zigzaou** from **Zarat** to Touati, the wadi being a natural anti-tank obstacle with sheer banks reaching in places a height of seventy feet. This stretch was moreover covered along the whole length by concrete and steel pillboxes and emplacements; and these defences, which were in existence before the war, had in recent months been strengthened by anti-tank ditches, wire and minefields. From Touati the line swung south-west to a point just south of **Toujane**, and then north-west through the **Matmata Hills** towards **Djebel Melab**. In the hills the nature of the country was relied on for defence, and there were few artificial aids.

In pre-war days it was considered that the **Mareth Line** could not be outflanked, because the Dahar was thought to be impassable for mechanical transport. In 1938 a French lorried force carried out an exercise to determine whether such an operation was possible, and came to the conclusion that it was not. But since 1938 the motor vehicle had improved enormously, particularly in the introduction of four-wheel drive; and most of the MT in Eighth Army was of this type. Tracked vehicles would also make light of difficulties that had stopped the pre-war lorry. Moreover, Eighth Army was by now expert in desert movement, so that there was every justification for the belief at Army Headquarters that the Dahar was passable and an outflanking move a possibility.

Rommel was never in any doubt about this, and on 10 February in

an appreciation prepared for the Fuehrer, indicated clearly that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to hold off both a frontal attack and a large-scale outflanking attack via **Tebaga Gap**, particularly if these were combined with a southwards thrust from **Gafsa**. Hence he much preferred a position in the **Gabes Gap**, where the flanks rested on either the impassable Chotts or the sea. He had hammered away at this ever since the retreat from **Alamein**, but without avail, and had to be content with getting his troops back into the **Mareth** Line. He was no longer in command when the line was attacked, but all turned out as he had foretold, and the position in the **Gabes Gap** was taken up too late and was stormed by the Eighth Army within a week of making contact.

More than this, Rommel regarded the **Gabes Gap** position merely as a better alternative than **Mareth** for the defence of southern **Tunisia**. He had insisted until as late as 3 March, when the proposal was rejected in both Rome and **Berlin**, that the only chance the Axis had to retain a front in **Africa** was to offer limited delays at both **Mareth** and **Gabes Gap**, and to concentrate for protracted defence in the **Enfidaville** line. From this area the best troops, at least, could be evacuated to **Europe**. When he visited **Hitler** on 10 March he renewed his argument without success, but managed to convince **Hitler** that the **Gabes Gap** was a sounder defensive position than **Mareth**. Kesselring was consequently ordered to move the *Spezia* and *Pistoia Divisions* to the **Gabes Gap** for work there, to relieve *164 Light Division* about **Matmata** by *Centauro Division*, the former to stiffen the Italian units in the **Mareth** Line, and to employ *Trieste Division* to watch for movement from **Gafsa**. But Kesselring did not agree! The *Comando Supremo* was not informed, so that although Kesselring had passed the orders on to von Arnim, who tried to implement them, Messe refused to comply without instructions from Rome. He believed that this was just a back-door method of forcing the Axis troops back to **Enfidaville**. However, under pressure, Messe agreed on 14 March to release *Spezia* and *Pistoia Divisions*, but by the 16th Kesselring had prevailed upon **Hitler** to change his mind and these divisions were ordered back to their former positions in the **Mareth** Line. It was a process that could not fail to aggravate the tensions that

already existed between the Axis partners.

But within limits, Rommel did his best to make things difficult for Eighth Army. For as long as he could he defended the passes into the Dahar from the area round **Foum Tatahouine**, but the Axis forces were scanty and in the outcome were easily driven away by 4 Light Armoured Brigade. From there they went to swell the forces holding the **Tebaga Gap**, where some attempt had been made to prepare defences. The work had started some time before, indeed as early as 1941, but from air photographs the defences seemed to be patchy, and to include only short lengths of anti-tank ditch, a few weapon pits and emplacements, and some stretches of wire. The line was not continuous, had no depth and could not impose more than some slight delay on an attacker.

Steps were taken also to defend other crossings of the **Matmata Hills** from the Dahar back to the coast via the road through **Ksar el Hallouf**, and via the road through **Tamezred** and **Matmata**. Nervousness about these roads persisted for some days after the battle had started, with some reason, for consideration had been given to using the French to open these passes from the west, and eventually 4 Indian Division was directed on **Matmata** from the east.

The outflanking operation had been in Montgomery's mind for some months, but before making final plans it was necessary to discover a practicable route into the Dahar at a point well clear of the **Mareth Line**, and whether in fact the Dahar was passable. While at **Marble Arch** in December 1942, the LRDG was instructed to reconnoitre the area early in January, and T1 Patrol, under Captain **Wilder**,¹ crossed into **Tunisia** south of **Nalut** on 12 January, the first troops of Eighth Army to do so. About 30 miles south-west of **Foum Tatahouine** they found a pass through the hills into the Dahar, later known as Wilder's Gap. Wilder's reconnaissance did not penetrate very far, but a later reconnaissance under Lieutenant **Tinker**² went north on 27 January to **Djebel Tebaga** and examined the **Tebaga Gap**, confirming that the going throughout was suitable for a force of all arms.³ During his reconnaissance the

LRDG base camp at **Ksar Rhilane** was shot up by enemy aircraft and considerable damage was done. This action was the first of a number which showed the enemy's nervousness about operations over this route.

But the last doubts had been dispersed, and it was now known that the route was a practicable one, and that any force in the Dahar could be supplied from **Medenine** by way of Wilder's Gap. Eighth Army had in 2 NZ Division a formation already well trained in long desert moves.

Montgomery had moved Leclerc's Force (now known as 'L' Force) forward from **Nalut** to **Ksar Rhilane**, where it operated during the Battle of **Medenine**.⁴ Here on 10 March it was suddenly attacked by an enemy force of armoured cars, artillery and aircraft. 'L' Force stood firm, and helped by the **Desert Air Force** drove off the attackers and inflicted severe losses on them. It was a spirited performance and ensured protection to the Dahar south of **Ksar Rhilane**, but showed again the enemy's sensitivity.

¹ **Lt-Col N. P. Wilder**, DSO; **Waipukurau**; born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; CO **2 NZ Div Cav**, 1944; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

² **Lt-Col R. A. Tinker**, MC, MM, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born NZ 13 Apr 1913; driver; now Regular soldier; Chief of Staff, Southern Military District.

³ Tinker pushed right through the Chotts to **Gafsa** and on 2 February made contact with troops from First Army.

⁴ See p. 132.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION PREPARES

2 NZ Division Prepares

The Army plan, issued on 26 February, prescribed that an enlarged Division, entitled **New Zealand Corps**, would make a turning movement via **Nalut** and **Ksar Rhilane**. Since then, however, 2 NZ Division had moved forward to **Medenine** and on 10 March was still there.¹ The route via **Nalut** had been prescribed on the assumption that the Division would start from **Tripoli** and would move along the southern edge of the coastal plain. There was obviously no point now in going back as far as **Nalut**; but some rearward movement was necessary, for the direct road from **Medenine** to **Foum Tatahouine** was likely to be open to enemy ground observation. In addition there was always the possibility that rearward movement would mislead the enemy. It was decided therefore that **NZ Corps** should go back to **Ben Gardane** in daylight, and move at night on the road from **Ben Gardane** to **Foum Tatahouine**.

On 5 March, the day before the enemy attack at **Medenine**, a party from 6 Field Company reconnoitred this route and from **Foum Tatahouine** went south for 30 miles as far as, and indeed beyond, the turn-off to Wilder's Gap. All the roads were found to be suitable for all types of traffic, although needing some repairs. On 8 March detachments from 5 Field Park Company and 6 Field Company began clearing and improving the road from **Ben Gardane** to **Foum Tatahouine** and on to Wilder's Gap, and marking a track through the Gap into an assembly area in the Dahar, ten miles north-west of the Gap and 35 miles south-west of **Foum Tatahouine**. The track was, as usual, marked with the black diamond sign.

The engineers at this time also made a plaster model of the **Tebaga Gap** area, used by the GOC at many of his conferences, and later by brigade commanders. There were as usual varied opinions about the usefulness of the model, but it appears that it was genuinely helpful

during the planning stages, although in no way taking the place of ground reconnaissance.

On 10 March **General Freyberg** held a conference to discuss the move to the assembly area. At this conference he compared the strength of the future **NZ Corps** with any enemy forces that might be met, and at this stage he considered only the German **Africa Corps**² which, disregarding any Italian forces, could be expected to

¹ The New Zealand Minister of Defence was proposing to visit the Division in the middle of March, but as the period was obviously unsuitable, he confined his activities for the time being to NZEF camps and units in Egypt, **Syria** and Palestine. He visited the Division towards the end of April.

² Commanded by General Hans Cramer from 13 Feb 1943. Normally *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* were corps troops, but in **Tunisia** this grouping was more often the exception than the rule.

oppose an outflanking movement. The *164th Light Division* had been identified in the **Mareth** Line, where the joint operations of **10** and **30 Corps** would probably retain it, and *10 Panzer Division* was known to be north of **Gabes**.

The GOC concluded that **NZ Corps** would be stronger than **Africa Corps** in troops, about 20,000 (actually 25,600) to 19,300; in field and medium artillery, 112 to 55; in anti-tank guns, 172 to 120, and in tanks, 150 (excluding Divisional Cavalry and 'L' Force) to 70. Estimates of enemy strengths prepared after this conference, to 19 March, lifted the number of troops to 21,500, the field and medium artillery to 100 and the tank strength to 120. But whatever discrepancies between the estimated strength and the actual, for which no reliable figures are available, **General Freyberg's** comment at his conference on the 10th, that the operation was not as rash as might appear when considering the map, seems valid enough.

During the days from 7 March onwards 2 NZ Division stocked up with supplies ready for a move which was to start about 11 March—six days' rations and water, the latter at half a gallon per man per day, and petrol for 300 miles. As a security measure while in the sparsely populated coastal area, fernleaf signs were obliterated from all vehicles, and shoulder titles and hat badges removed. A press release was made that 2 NZ Division was holding part of the **Mareth** Line. Whether for these or for other reasons the Germans were slow in identifying the Division when operations resumed and reported attacks by formations that were nowhere in the area.

The 8th Armoured Brigade from 7 Armoured Division came under command on 10 March. It consisted of 3 Royal Tanks, Notts Yeomanry, and **Staffordshire Yeomanry**, all heavy tank regiments, and 1 **Bufs**, 111 Field Regiment, RA, and ancillary units. The number of tanks held varied a little from day to day, but just before the campaign started their tank state was as follows:

	<i>3RTR</i>	<i>Notts Yeo</i>	<i>Staffs Yeo</i>	<i>HQ</i>	<i>Total</i>
Shermans	25	23	28		76
Grants	4	4	3	2	13
Crusaders	22	19	19	2	62
				—	
					151
Armoured Cars	8	6	7		21

It was normal in the brigade to allocate companies of the **Bufs** to armoured regiments, so forming 'Armoured Regimental Groups'.

'A' Company thus moved under command of Notts Yeo, 'B' Company under 3 RTR, and 'C' Company under Staffs Yeo. Only in a special case, where for instance some sector was to be held as a firm base, did 1 **Bufs** operate as a battalion.

On 11 March the additional platoons for Petrol Company, approved while the Division was at **Bardia**,¹ duly joined up, so increasing the

company from two to five platoons and increasing the reserves of petrol it was possible to have immediately available.

At midnight on 11–12 March 2 NZ Division passed from the command of **30 Corps** to that of **NZ Corps**, the constitution of the latter being:

2 NZ Division Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg
8 Armoured Brigade Brigadier C. B. C. Harvey
King's Dragoon Guards (armoured cars)
64 Medium Regiment, RA
57 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA, less one battery
One battery 53 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RA
'L' Force General Leclerc ²
FFF Column

At this time 'L' Force consisted of the following:

Two troops armoured cars
One squadron self-propelled guns
Eleven other guns of various types
Anti-tank regiment
Anti-aircraft guns
Two reconnaissance companies
Five lorried companies
One Greek squadron

The **Free French Flying Column** consisted of:

Two armoured car squadrons
One tank company (11 Crusaders and 2 Shermans)
Two platoons infantry

The whole French force numbered about 3500 men and 900 vehicles, and was self-contained for long periods, longer even than 2 NZ Division. A proportion of its supporting artillery was British. The French force joined **NZ Corps** *in situ*, remaining in its existing area round **Ksar**

¹ See pp. 7– 8.

² General Jacques Leclerc (*a nom de guerre* adopted to protect his family in **France**) impressed the New Zealanders with whom he came in contact as a keen, alert, and dedicated soldier. He was quick to grasp the import and detail of operations entrusted to him and carried them out aggressively and well. He obviously inspired his small force to staunch effort, and it was not surprising later to learn that he was commanding a French armoured division in **Normandy**, and led the Allied liberation troops into **Paris**. After the war Leclerc was accorded the legal use of his *nom de guerre* and became Vicomte Philippe Francois Marie Leclerc de Hauteclocque. He was killed in an air crash in **Algeria** in November 1947.

General Freyberg commanded both the Corps and the Division, and did not form a separate Corps Headquarters nor was there any corps echelon of administrative troops. Strictly speaking, therefore, the force was a much augmented division and not a true corps. On the tactical side, the absence of a separate Corps Headquarters was not queried before the battle, but at a conference held in **Tripoli** towards the end of February the administrative staff of the Eighth Army expressed some concern at difficulties that might arise owing to the absence of the supply echelon normally interposed between a division and the army roadhead. ¹ But the administrative staff of 2 NZ Division and the CRASC were confident that they could compete with the task and did not want additional staff. All that was wanted was additional RASC units, and these were duly provided. At no point during the operations was there any administrative restriction or delay.

The initial movement of the Corps, less the French Group, to the assembly area began at a starting point a few miles east of **Medenine**, and was to be via a staging area about halfway between **Ben Gardane** and **Foum Tatahouine**. Here dumps of petrol had been arranged so that units

could replenish. Group movements were as follows:

	<i>To Staging Area</i>	<i>To Assembly Area</i>
6 Infantry Brigade Group	8 a.m., 11 March	Night 11–12 March
5 Infantry Brigade Group	8 a.m., 12 March	Night 12–13 March
Headquarters	11.30 a.m., 12 March	Night 12–13 March
ASC Group		Night 13–14 March
Artillery Group	8 a.m., 14 March	Night 14–15 March
Reserve Group	10 a.m., 14 March	Night 14–15 March
8 Armoured Brigade Group	2 p.m., 14 March	Night 15–16 March

The distance from starting point to staging area was about 60 miles, and from there to assembly area about seventy. The move back to **Ben Gardane** was in daylight, as there was no objection to enemy aircraft spotting an apparent withdrawal; but for most groups the move thence to the staging area was also in daylight, probably on the grounds that this location could have served as an assembly area for troops moving into the **Mareth** Line. The move forward to the assembly area was by night. Administrative Group, which had been in the **Ben Gardane** area during the **Medenine** operations, was to move off at 11 a.m. on 17 March and would thus be last in the column.

¹ The terminal supply depot formed by army supply companies. From this depot corps normally established more advanced depots from which divisions drew supplies.

Tracked vehicles of all groups were to be moved on transporters from the **Medenine** area, leaving on 15 March for the staging area, and moving on the night 16–17 March to an unloading point south of **Foum Tatahouine**. Vehicles would be unloaded before daylight and lie camouflaged during 17 March, moving after dark to rejoin their units in the assembly area.

Except in cases of operational necessity, wireless silence was to be observed, all wireless traffic for **NZ Corps** being routed as for Rear Headquarters 'L' Force near the assembly area, through a set manned by

Royal Signals operators. After convoys left the staging area no enemy aircraft were to be engaged unless they made a direct attack. Once in the assembly area movement was to be at a speed that would not raise dust, and there were to be no fires or lights during darkness.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

NZ CORPS MOVES FORWARD

NZ Corps Moves Forward

The moves to the staging area passed off without incident. From there to the assembly area there were some delays owing to the opening and closing of columns in the darkness and without headlights; but again Groups reached their areas in reasonable time. Vehicles were at once dispersed facing north in an attempt to reduce shadow and prevent reflection of sunlight from windscreens, and camouflage nets were spread. Troops were dug in. But none of these precautions could prevent an enemy reconnaissance aircraft flying over the area in the evening of 12 March, when 6 Brigade Group was already there. It was at an estimated height of 10,000 feet, and evoked much speculation. German air reconnaissance in fact failed to detect the assembly area until the 16th, and not positively until the 18th.

The NZASC Group arrived in the assembly area early on 14 March, dumped its second-line holdings and, with all available transport, moved to an Army Roadhead at **Dehibat**, 50 miles southeast of Wilder's Gap. Two RASC companies—one Petrol and one Ammunition—had already come under command to help in the formation of a Field Maintenance Centre ¹ at **Bir Amir**, just short of the Gap. On 17 March, NZASC was further augmented by three General Transport Companies and two Water Tank Companies from RASC, all to provide third-line transport for NZ Corps between the roadhead and the Field Maintenance Centre. Some water was found in a well at **Bir Amir** and was issued from 14 March onwards.

On 17 March Administrative Group arrived in the assembly area and the Corps' concentration was completed, formations being disposed along the axis over a distance of some six miles, with Divisional Cavalry in front, and Administrative Group in the rear. The Corps spent the time resting and training, the latter including short route marches during the

early hours of darkness. The perimeter of the area was patrolled, and in the interests of security all troops on patrol were searched for documents before commencing duty. No contact was made with the enemy, but Arabs were troublesome, nearly a hundred lamps disappearing from the Corps axis. Roving patrols had to be used to check this.

PUGILIST was explained to all officers on 14 March, and later to NCOs and the rank and file. Some very good air photographs of the enemy defences at **Tebaga Gap** were issued and were examined and discussed, particularly by the artillery and by 6 Brigade Group, which was to be in the lead.

The French Group was instructed on 14 March to maintain patrols north and north-east of **Ksar Rhilane** to prevent enemy ground observation of the Corps' assembly. That there was some justification for this precaution was made evident on the night 15–16 March, when considerable movement of motor transport with headlights was seen immediately to the east of the **El Outid** feature. Again, on the morning of 16 March scattered vehicles were seen south-east of Ksar Tarcine.

A party of representatives from KDG, LRDG and 2 NZ Divisional Engineers left on 14 March to reconnoitre the going to the next staging area, some 25 miles farther on. Armoured cars from KDG provided protection. This reconnaissance was uneventful, but a party from 6 Field Company that ventured still farther ahead on 16 March to investigate the crossing of **Wadi bel Krecheb** (north-east of **Ksar Rhilane**) was unable to reach its objective owing to enemy fire from **El Outid**.

¹ A supply depot established between an army roadhead and corps, or between a corps supply depot and a division.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

NZ CORPS OPERATION ORDER NO. 1

NZ Corps Operation Order No. 1

On 16 March **NZ Corps** issued Operation Order No. 1. This gave briefly the Eighth Army plan—and the ‘Intention’ paragraph which reads: ‘**NZ Corps** will capture the airfields West of **SFAX** destroying any enemy forces encountered.’

The groupings and order of march were:

2 NZ Divisional Cavalry, less B Echelon transport

KDG plus one troop artillery

8 Armoured Brigade Group, less B2 Echelon transport

Gun Group (4 NZ Field Regiment, 64 Medium Regiment, and those anti-tank and light anti-aircraft units not with other groups)

6 Brigade Group—normal, plus an extra anti-tank battery and machine-gun company

B Echelon Group

NZ Corps Headquarters and Signals

Reserve Group—portions of 27 (MG) Battalion and other subunits not allocated elsewhere

5 Brigade Group—normal, but with 1 NZ Ammunition Company under command for the march

Administrative Group, including NZASC units not with other groups

The advance would be in three stages. Stage I was a march of some 20 to 30 miles, on the night 19–20 March, commencing at 7 p.m. This would bring the leading elements of the Corps just short of **Wadi bel Krecheb**.

Stage II, a further advance of 40 miles, was to be carried out on 20–21 March with the same timings, but less Administrative Group, which would not move. The B Echelon Group would move as part of 6 Brigade

Group in order to have protection with the closer approach to the enemy. At the end of this stage the head of the column would be some ten miles short of **Tebaga Gap**.

Prior to Stage II the French Group would capture **El Outid** and **Bir Soltane**, and maintain active patrolling to the north and northeast, while KDG provided flank protection along the right flank. There are one or two references in the order to the need for watching this flank, which was a long one.

All vehicles were to refuel at Stage II and be prepared to move forward at first light on 21 March for Stage III, 'with the object of penetrating the Eastern flank of the enemy defences ... and capturing the objective PLUM', which was the entrance to the **Tebaga Gap**. If this was not captured immediately it would be taken as soon after first light as possible. Divisional Cavalry and **8 Armoured Brigade** were entrusted with the initial penetration of PLUM. ¹

After the capture of PLUM the Corps was to advance on **El Hamma** (PEACH) and finally to a line of hills overlooking the coast road just north-west of **Gabes** (GRAPE). In addition, Montgomery and **Freyberg** agreed on a possible alternative advance from PLUM which turned more to the east and bypassed **El Hamma** well to the south, thereafter heading towards **Gabes**. This alternative would be acted upon on receipt of its codename, SIDEWINDOWS, from Montgomery. (It will be remembered that **30 Corps** was to break in through the **Mareth** Line and advance along the main road and capture **Gabes**.)

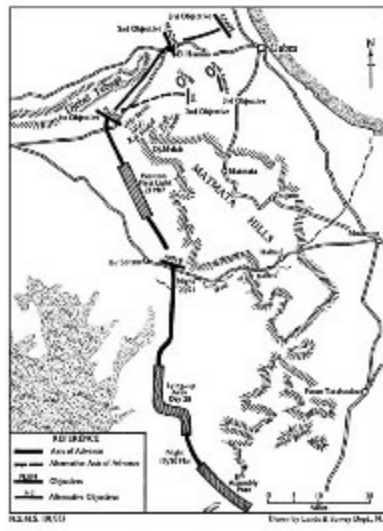
After securing GRAPE, **NZ Corps'** next objective was the landing grounds west of **Sfax**, an operation not assigned to the Corps in the Army outline plan, but which the GOC explained at his conference would be carried out by continuing the outflanking move, with the French giving flank protection and **10 Corps**, with two armoured divisions, driving on **Sfax** itself.

This plan, resulting from many discussions subsequent to the issue

of the Eighth Army general plan on 26 February 1943, set the tasks awaiting **NZ Corps**.

The order contained instructions about wireless silence and recognition of 'own troops', and laid down 'ground to air' and 'target marking' signals, pointing out that the operation would be closely supported by the **Desert Air Force**.

The part to be played by **NZ Corps**, within the Eighth Army plan, was that by the night 20–21 March, the night of the **30 Corps** attack on the main **Mareth** position, the Corps would have bumped the enemy at the Tebaga switch line, made evident the seriousness of the threat from this flank and so have attracted the uncommitted German reserve, and by further vigorous activity would prevent a counter-attack against the **30 Corps** break in the line. Thirtieth Corps, protected on its open flank by **10 Corps**, which was to begin operations in the **Matmata** Hills, would then start 'rolling up' the **Mareth** position from east to west. Continuing its advance, **NZ Corps** would establish itself on the objective northwest of **Gabes**, commanding the coastal road, which by then would have become the only withdrawal route for the Axis forces not already destroyed or escaped. Tenth Corps, supported by **NZ Corps**, would then exploit through **Gabes** to **Sfax**, for it was hoped that the complete defeat of the enemy, followed by rapid exploitation, would prevent a delay at **Wadi Akarit**. In the terms of Montgomery's general plan published on 26 February, the final objective for PUGILIST was **Sfax**. 'Once operations have begun on night 20–21 March they will be conducted relentlessly until **Sfax** has been reached.'



PLAN FOR OPERATION PUGLIS. NEW ZEALAND CORPS' ASSEMBLY AREAS, AXIS OF ADVANCE AND OBJECTIVES

¹ See map on p. 166.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ADMINISTRATIVE INSTRUCTIONS

Administrative Instructions

All first-line units were to leave the assembly area with six days' rations and water, petrol for a minimum of 300 miles and ammunition up to scale. Second-line vehicles would have four days' rations and water, and petrol for 100 miles for all vehicles. One day's rations and water and petrol to top up vehicles would be available at the end of Stage I, and thereafter replenishment would be as the tactical situation permitted. Local water supplies, high in magnesium content, were not to be used for drinking. A special 'Golden List' was prepared for essential administrative personnel, and distinctive labels provided for the windscreens of their vehicles, so as to ensure their high priority in the advance. The list included personnel for the airfields round **Gabes** and for **Sfax** port, and for certain NZASC units which were to control supplies at **Gabes** and **Sfax**.

New Zealand Corps was to have priority during PUGILIST for the evacuation of wounded by air, three aircraft being made available. Two would each carry six lying and two sitting patients, and the third would carry eleven lying or twenty-four sitting. It was hoped to use suitable landing grounds near the Main Dressing Station, but otherwise one Field Ambulance would take patients to the landing ground and superintend evacuation by air.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

FINAL PREPARATIONS

Final Preparations

On 17 March, an unpleasantly windy day with dust lifting freely, the GOC held a conference of commanding officers. The notes of this conference show very clearly the nature of the task ahead, and the manner in which it was proposed to accomplish it:

‘... The force is divided into several groups.... We have a striking force composed of a recce element of two cavalry regts under the comd of the Force Commander. We have an armd bde. We have a strong gun group which starts off with a regt of arty under the 8th Armd Bde Commander, plus a fd arty regt and the medium arty of the 64 Med Regt. Whenever the arty are brought into operation we can count on having two fd regts and a med regt. When the situation allows we can group the two fd regts with the **2 Inf Bde groups. We have a very strong striking force of armour and guns. In addition we have two inf bde groups, not strong in striking power, but very strong indeed in defence, particularly against tank attack. Our Bde Group is capable of putting out a gun line of between 10 and 15 thousand yards, or even more if necessary ... either by day or by night, and they are capable of strong infantry offensive action with the bayonet. There is also Gen Le Clerc's force which, for the start, is guarding our L of C and later in the defence North of **Gabes** of our left flank Lastly we have the Adm[inistrative] group, the importance of which I will go into later.**

‘There are one or two points of tactics. We endeavour to effect a tactical surprise on the battlefield. To do so we have to move fast across country on a very narrow front, with a very deep flank, sometimes as long as 14 miles. The protection of that flank must not weigh too heavily and people must not get preoccupied with their flanks. We must strike quickly and strike hard. That does not, of course, absolve Group Comds from protecting their exposed flanks, but they must have

confidence in the 6-pr gun.... We endeavour to occupy an area which is vital to him, where he must oppose us. We achieve this first by surprise and then by speed and blitz tactics. To do so we have to take risks. In this particular operation we are at some disadvantage owing to bottlenecks. Where country is open we can pin him to the ground and out-manoeuve him. Where there are bottlenecks we may have to resort to ordinary bombardment tactics and attack by night with the bayonet. We can only avoid that by moving fast and adopting blitz tactics.... We know the strength of his mobile force ... he can only oppose us with his DAK. We know that in striking and defensive power we are stronger than he is. Further, by striking fast we hope to divide the DAK into two parts, dividing the armour from the guns. Our job is to force him to oppose us with his tanks, leaving his guns to join up afterwards ... that is a posn from which any further advance by us would threaten to cut off his main Army. If the situation developed in that way we would bring up our gun group and turn the medium arty on him. They don't like the heavy aimed shell. We can destroy him while he is in the open with our mass of arty. We must be able to deploy our powerful gun group quickly, and for that reason it is well to the front in the order of march.

'I want to say a word about the gun line technique. Having pinned the enemy we want to put out a gun line to restore to the armour its power of manoeuvre. If, when you manoeuvre your armour the enemy moves off your front, you can then push the line forward. The gun line can be put out by the motor bn of the armd bde, but it may have to be put out by an inf bde group. If the latter course is necessary economy of force should be considered. I do not think large bns of infantry are needed in the front line. I think you can retain in reserve a large proportion of your bayonet men, as your gun line in daytime wants machine-guns, a percentage of Brens, and the strong A-Tk element. That enables you to rest the bayonet men for possible operations at night.

'I want to say a word or two about tank tactics. We must not rush into an enemy gun line for it is tank suicide. The tactic is to pin him and seek for a flank. If there are no flanks the tactic will be to attack

with inf under the concentrated arty of the whole force.

‘We have a very strong bombardment group, and one of our main objects is to bring as many of the enemy as we can within range of that arty. If we can bring five fd regts on to his force we have gone a long way to breaking his morale ... the arty is going to play the biggest part in this operation. We have only 200 rounds of medium and 360 rounds of 25-pr amn [per gun]. To achieve our object we must in the first place keep our L of C open and we have taken a good deal of care to ensure that there is a quick flow of medium and field arty amn’

General Freyberg then went on to describe the problems that were to be overcome during the approach to PLUM. Of these the most formidable was the crossing of **Wadi el Aredj**, where it was thought that eight hours' preparation by the engineers would be necessary to construct a nine-lane passage. To avoid delay, for a two-hour delay might be decisive, vehicles were to rush through the lanes and then open out again on the other side. At PLUM itself, the planned operation was described in the following words:

‘The armd group will get up to some posn which [in the first place] is a firm base from which the Divisional Cavalry and Tac HQ can operate. Div Cav will recce as wide as possible to the left flank. They will then try to get round on to the high ground [**Djebel Tebaga**] and by light signal will direct the heavy tanks through. It is essential that that high ground should be taken because it commands the roads and approaches to ... [**El Hamma**]. The object is to get that manoeuvre over by dark. If that operation fails the battlegroup will cover the deployment of the gun group. The latter will deploy after daylight and will proceed with systematic registration of the enemy position. We shall then carry out an infantry and tank attack under arty bombardment with the object of clearing a way for the force to move on. We shall have, therefore, either an immediate attack or a deliberate attack. The latter would take about three hours to lay on and would be launched about 0900. All the time it is being mounted the air will pay attention to that gap and the roads and approaches along which 15 Pz and the **Matmata** Garrison [*164 Light*

Division] would come. Our aim is to get into a posn and force him to bring up the 15 Pz and then bring in our gun group and hammer him, at the same time push out a gun line and then moving our armour round to cut the enemy off. With regard to the Adm situation we are able to operate in that area indefinitely. Gen Le Clerc is forming a firm base to which we are bringing up our Adm Group. He will run a shuttle service and convoy things through.'

Considerable thought had been given to the timing of the advance of **NZ Corps** from the assembly area. At the conference Captain **Costello**,¹ the Intelligence Officer, explained that as *164 Light Division* had been withdrawing on **Matmata** from **Kreddache** and Hallouf, Eighth Army Intelligence had a theory that the enemy intention might be to retire from the **Mareth** Line without offering prolonged resistance. **General Freyberg** then went on to say that he did not agree with this, but, with all preparations to be completed by dawn on 18 March, it might be necessary to move that evening, instead of at dusk on the 19th as in the original plan. He would see General Montgomery on the afternoon of the 18th, and a decision would be made. There was, too, the matter of detection of the assembly area by enemy reconnaissance, for obviously if the Corps was clearly discovered there was no purpose in making difficult night moves. If his reconnaissance aircraft seen on the 16th had definitely picked up the assembly area, the GOC thought that he would have returned at night-time with flares to detect a further move. But the movement of his reconnaissance aircraft, which the **Desert Air Force** was trying to keep grounded by blitzing the enemy landing grounds, should make this point clear and the timetable could be adjusted. The important point was that **NZ Corps** should get a good start on *21 Panzer Division*, the reserve for the **Mareth** Line.

An earlier start, or a daylight move during the approach march, would, as the GOC pointed out, be welcomed by **30 Corps**, for it would attract 'a good deal of interest' from the **Mareth** Line to the switch line at Tebaga. On the other hand, a delayed advance would give **NZ Corps** a similar advantage, 'and preoccupy the enemy so that our night thrust

would unbalance him.' At Headquarters Eighth Army, to which **Freyberg** flew on 18 March, General Montgomery was very keen that **NZ Corps** should advance earlier than had been planned, on the afternoon instead of the evening of 19 March. As Army Intelligence had no further evidence of an accelerated enemy withdrawal, it is probable that Montgomery's eye was on the better prospects for **30 Corps** that an earlier move would make possible, but he left the decision to **General Freyberg**. **Freyberg** himself was obviously still interested in the idea of the enemy reserve being committed on the main **Mareth** line, for after his meeting with Montgomery he asked General Leese, Commander **30 Corps**, to be sure to let him know if the **30 Corps** attack

¹ **Maj D. P. Costello**; England; born **Auckland**, 31 Jan 1912; school teacher.

was not successful. He was a little anxious about the method of the **30 Corps** attack, for penetration was to be achieved on a narrow front by one division reinforced by an armoured brigade, and **Freyberg** was doubtful if this was sufficient to crash the formidable defences and allow rapid exploitation on a broad front. It is thus very probable that **General Freyberg** allowed the thought of a **30 Corps** failure to weigh heavily on his mind, for this would be a situation in which the whole of the enemy mobile force would be available against **NZ Corps**. On the other hand, Montgomery was relying on **NZ Corps** so to threaten the rear of the whole **Mareth** position that counter-attack against **30 Corps** would be impossible, and pressure from his three corps would avoid serious concentration of enemy force against any one of them. He considered that with the number of guns available, and the depth of the defences, a break-in on a narrow front was the only practicable solution.



General Freyberg confers with a Royal Scots Greys officer and Brigadier Weir, his artillery commander, near Azizia

General Freyberg confers with a Royal Scots Greys officer and Brigadier Weir, his artillery commander, near Azizia



Entering Tripoli. Four Maori soldiers share a tin of bully beef; (below) Maori anti-tank gunners drive through an avenue of bluegums

Entering Tripoli. Four Maori soldiers share a tin of bully beef; (below) Maori anti-tank gunners drive through an avenue of bluegums





A New Zealand battalion approaches the saluting base on an Eighth Army church parade in Tripoli

A New Zealand battalion approaches the saluting base on an Eighth Army church parade in Tripoli



Unloading supplies from a lighter at Tripoli

Unloading supplies from a lighter



Divisional parade for Mr Churchill at Castel Benito, 4 February 1943

Divisional parade for Mr Churchill at Castel Benito, 4 February 1943



Mr Churchill takes the salute. Behind him (from left) are Generals
Leese, Alexander, Freyberg, Alan Brooke, and Montgomery

Mr Churchill takes the salute. Behind him (from left) are Generals



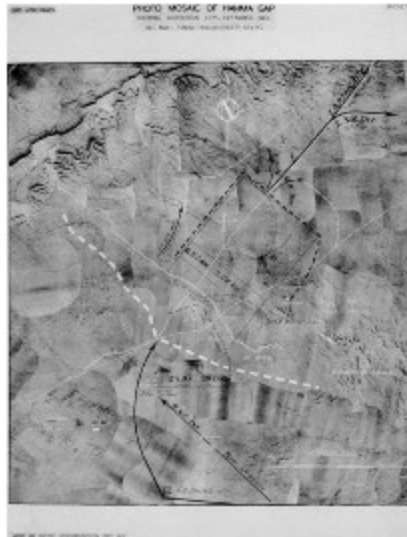
Medenine

Medenine

Soft sand on the route to the Tebaga Gap



Soft sand on the route to the **Tebaga Gap**



Operation SUPPERCHARGE: an aerial mosaic of the Tebaga Gap

Operation SUPPERCHARGE: an aerial mosaic of the Tebaga Gap



A 1 Armoured Division tank moves past a New Zealand medical unit on its way to the Tebaga Gap

A 1 Armoured Division tank moves past a New Zealand medical unit on its way to the **Tebaga Gap**

The breakthrough at Tebaga. British tanks assemble for the advance to El Hamma as enemy prisoners are marched away



The breakthrough at Tebaga. British tanks assemble for the advance to **El Hamma as enemy prisoners are marched away**

Before leaving Montgomery's headquarters the arrangement was made that codewords would be used as signals to provide information helpful in making the decision as to the start time for **NZ Corps. **BENGHAZI MINUS** would mean that Eighth Army had intelligence that the enemy was aware of the outflanking movement, but that there was no reaction. **BENGHAZI PLUS** would indicate awareness and a violent reaction, and **TRIPOLI**, followed by a time, would be an order to move at that time. **General Freyberg** could also send **TRIPOLI** and a time of his own choosing. Maximum air cover for the wadi crossings would be**

provided in either case, and **Freyberg** was assured that supplies for one brigade could be dropped by parachute and that this could be repeated.

This concluded the planning, and **NZ Corps** was standing ready. All New Zealand shoulder titles, badges and vehicle signs had been replaced on 18 March, and all units were probably better briefed for the forthcoming operation than ever before.

The attack of the French forces on the **El Outid** feature was advanced from the night 20–21 March to that of 18–19 March, to ensure that the enemy had no observation on the crossings over **Wadi el Aredj** and **Wadi bel Krecheb**, which appeared to be bottlenecks. In the end the feature was occupied during the night 18th–19th without serious opposition, as the enemy had withdrawn to the north. The French sought him with patrols for some distance, and also patrolled to the north-east, but no contact was made. With the French went 6 Field Company with two bulldozers to prepare crossings over the wadis. Mines were found at Wadi el Aredj, in soft sand. The engineers ¹ worked throughout the night 18–19 March until the moon set at 5.30 a.m., and continued after daylight. By 2 p.m. on 19 March they had prepared nine tracks across the wadi. They then went on to **Wadi bel Krecheb** and by 7 p.m. had prepared one lane 150 yards wide. It was a good day's work.

It was fine on 19 March. After a short conference in the morning, the GOC decided early in the afternoon to adhere to the official timings and commence the march after dark. This meant that there would be marches on two successive nights, and that following on the second night the Corps would close in on PLUM. At the conference Brigadier Harvey entered a mild caveat about the strain on tank crews in having to drive for so long in the dark, over difficult wadis; but he went on to say that the brigade would get there nevertheless.

¹ On 19 March a slight change in the nomenclature of engineer units, to be effective on 3 April, was notified. Companies had hitherto been subdivided into sections, and the latter into subsections. By this order, sections became platoons, and

subsections became sections.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

FIRST ARMY FRONT

First Army Front

After the **Kasserine** fighting in the latter half of February the main task on First Army's front was reorganisation, followed by a defensive phase. The 2nd US Corps after its defeat passed to the direct command of Eighteenth Army Group, so enabling General Alexander to give personal attention to restoring the rather shaken morale of the corps, the troops of which were experiencing their first real fighting. Alexander also began to form a central Army Group Reserve, to be commanded by Headquarters **9 Corps**, which had just arrived. The reserve initially was 6 Armoured Division, soon to be joined by 4 Division. This was part of long-term planning; but for the moment the only fully active front was that of Eighth Army.

In order to distract the enemy's attention, and ensure that the enemy troops in the **Gabes– Sfax** area did not move away to the **Mareth** front, Alexander now initiated a diversionary attack. The 2nd US Corps, in good heart again, accordingly attacked and captured **Gafsa** on 17 March, and continued to advance eastwards up to 20 miles. This established a definite threat to the lines of communication of **1 Italian Army** at **Mareth**, and as a result **10 Panzer Division** remained in the area north-west of **Gabes** and was unlikely to move south. A secondary object of the attack was to open up a new line of communication for Eighth Army once it had reached **Gabes**, and as a first step a dump of petrol was formed at **Gafsa**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

The Enemy

On 19 March enemy dispositions and strengths were as follows:

(*From north to south in the **Mareth Line***

a) **XX Corps: Young Fascists 5000**

Trieste 3000

90 Light 6500

XXI Corps: Spezia 5000

Pistoia 6000

164 Light 6000

The last-named division was on the right flank in the hills, with detachments on the **Hallouf Pass** and at **Kreddache**. It had only one battery of artillery.

(*In reserve to the **Mareth Line** 15 Panzer Division—50 tanks, 7000 b) men*

(*In the **Tebaga switch line** Saharan Group—see following page for c) strength*

(*Uncommitted **21 Panzer Division** at **Gabes**—70 tanks, 8000 men d)*

(*On the **Gafsa front** 10 Panzer Division—50 tanks, 6000 men e) Centauro Group—30 tanks, 7000 men*

The *19th Flak Division*, with sixteen 88-millimetre batteries and several 20-millimetre anti-aircraft batteries, was all on the coast, the *1st Luftwaffe Brigade*, little stronger than a battalion, was behind *Young Fascists*, and *Africa Panzer Grenadier Regiment* watched the main **Gabes– Mareth** road. These, together with *164 Light Division*, comprised the only mobile infantry groups available.

The estimated grand total of enemy fighting strength was 73,500 men, 480 anti-tank guns, 455 field and medium guns, 220 tanks, and 75 88-millimetre guns. ¹

¹ The fighting strength of Eighth Army was:

Army HQ 624

10 Corps 39,159

30 Corps 58,186

NZ Corps 25,721

—

123,690

A direct comparison of the fighting strengths of Eighth Army and *1 Italian Army* is not now possible, for it seems certain that some of the units maintaining the Axis in the field are not included, while all services and many lines-of-communication establishments are included in the Eighth Army fighting strength. On the basis of the estimated Axis total of 73,500, it might give a better comparison to say that Eighth Army, with four infantry and two armoured divisions, together with army and corps troops, totalled about 90,000.

On the other hand, a contemporary estimate of the Axis troops facing Eighth Army was 115,000, with 139 tanks.

The *Saharan Group* was commanded by the Italian General Mannerini and consisted of a somewhat scrappy lot of Italian units which Messe himself later described as ‘picked up here and there’. Its exact constitution is not known, but there was a ‘*Savona Brigade*’ and various Saharan companies largely drawn from frontier guards and from remnants of the garrison posts in southern *Libya*. One German narrator says that there were ‘about five battalions and three light batteries’, but this estimate is certainly too low for artillery units. Another detailed estimate shows that there were about ten companies of sorts and eight batteries, very mixed in nature and calibre. Probably the total strength was something short of 2500, which is the highest figure given anywhere. It was known to the Intelligence service—and so to *NZ Corps*—that the troops in the Gap were all Italian, and that they were not particularly well organised.

Post-war evidence indicates that while the enemy expected a flank

attack on the **Mareth** defences, he did not think initially that the outflanking force would be so strong or would 'go large' as far south-west as **Foum Tatahouine**; but from 16 March onwards his occasional reconnaissance planes made him more and more aware of the assembly of **NZ Corps**, although he believed it to be a combination of **10 Armoured Division** and 4 Indian Division. At this time 2 NZ Division was thought to be still round **Medenine**. On 16 March Messe reported definitely that Eighth Army was preparing to launch an operation west of the **Matmata Hills**.

Rommel was succeeded as Commander-in-Chief by General von Arnim of **5 Panzer Army**, which General von Vaerst took over. Rommel's army, now renamed **1 Italian Army**, was under General Messe. (He was not promoted Marshal until the last day of fighting in North Africa.) This was the first time that German divisions had come under Italian field command. Rommel's last act was to appoint a German general to be liaison officer with **1 Italian Army**, the appointment being effective as from 8 March, which was a day or so before Rommel left **Africa**. His appointee was Major-General Bayerlein, who had long experience in North Africa with **Africa Corps** and on Rommel's staff. ¹

From the first Bayerlein regarded himself as more than a mere liaison officer, and seems gradually to have taken command of the German units, until there were two headquarters in **1 Italian Army**—Messe's, which in Bayerlein's words 'issued paper orders

¹ Bayerlein was lucky to be wounded a few days before the end in North Africa, and so avoided capture in the final debacle. He later commanded an armoured division in **Normandy**, and both an armoured division and a corps in the Ardennes offensive in December 1944.

which could not be carried out and which in any case arrived too late', and Bayerlein's, which issued orders to the German troops direct, and left it to the Italians to conform. One should not accept everything

Bayerlein says as correct, but it is easy to see that a group of units such as *15 and 21 Panzer Divisions* and *90 and 164 Light Divisions* would not take kindly to being commanded by a newly-arrived Italian, who, while he had shown ability on the Russian front and also had sensible ideas while in **Africa, appears to have been vain and self-centred. It can be accepted then that the German units, the hard core of the enemy strength, were in effect still under German command.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[SECTION]

AT 6 p.m. on 19 March **NZ Corps** began its advance in desert formation on a nine-vehicle front, the speed prescribed being 8 m.i.h. ¹ with vehicles at 50 yards' dispersion. Bright moonlight helped to overcome the difficulties of crossing the numerous wadis and sand dunes. The Corps completed its move to the next staging area, a journey of about 30 miles, not long after midnight. Vehicles were at once topped up with petrol, and Petrol Company vehicles then returned to the Field Maintenance Centre at **Bir Amir**. A troop from 26 Field Battery was detached to join King's Dragoon Guards, the advanced guard for the next day. All other troops bedded down until daylight on 20 March.

BENGHAZI MINUS (the enemy was aware of the move), which had been received during the march, decided the GOC to move off immediately after breakfast and not wait until night. Wireless silence was broken shortly after 2.30 a.m. on 20 March when ' **TRIPOLI 0730**' was sent to Army Headquarters, and it was arranged that full wireless communications could open at 7 a.m. It is not clear on what grounds Montgomery sent **BENGHAZI MINUS**, and in fact there is a suspicion that it was just one way of asking the Corps to speed up its rate of advance. ²

At 6 a.m. 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery moved off to cover the crossing of **Wadi el Aredj**, and at the same time Divisional Cavalry (Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant) crossed the wadi and moved to the right flank as a protective screen. KDG (Lieutenant-Colonel M. J. Lindsay) was now well in advance of the Corps, and by 12.20 p.m. had crossed the road from **Bir Soltane** to **Ksar el Hallouf**, having been lightly opposed by elements of 3 *Reconnaissance Unit*. The French Group pushed ahead on the right flank towards Point 298 (ten miles north of this road) with orders to keep up its advance, and in particular to watch the debouchment of the tracks from **Matmata** and **Tamezred**. It was opposed

during the day by *220 Reconnaissance Unit of 164 Light Division*. The French Group, KDG and Divisional Cavalry together thus formed a long right-flank guard.

Shortly after midday the tail of the Corps crossed both **Wadi el Aredj** and **Wadi bel Krecheb**, despite some difficulties of going. The advance continued steadily, but at 4 p.m. the gun group was bombed by aircraft of the United States Army Corps. There were some casualties and one truck was destroyed. It seemed that the pilots became conscious of their mistake, as the rear flight veered off without pressing home the attack. Later an apology was received for this attack.

By last light **NZ Corps** was within sight of the entrance to **Tebaga Gap**, and forward elements were within range of the enemy positions. Indeed, work was started to survey guns in on the permanent grid, but this had to be stopped after dark. Enemy troops were seen withdrawing from the west into the Gap.

Air reconnaissance had reported great activity in the Gap, including digging on a line parallel to PLUM and seven miles north-east. But at last light there was still no sign of any transfer of troops from the **Mareth** Line itself; indeed there was some movement of troop-carrying vehicles from **Matmata** south-east to **Ksar el Hallouf**, which might indicate a strengthening of the line, although it was also possible that this might mean an attack against the line of communication of **NZ Corps**.

Enemy reports of activities during this day—20 March—show that *3 Reconnaissance Unit* was pushed away to the north-west by KDG, and in order to avoid being cut off withdrew to the southern slopes of **Djebel Tebaga**. Messe reports that at 5.40 p.m. the *Saharan Group* was ordered 'to withdraw', but it appears that the withdrawal was merely from in front of PLUM into the actual defences, which is confirmed by the movement seen by **NZ Corps** at last light. Bayerlein states that in the evening of 20 March *164 Light Division* was ordered to move back to the **Matmata– Tamezred** area. *Pistoia Division* then extended to its

right, taking over the line previously held by *164*. The Germans were still nervous about an advance by Eighth Army from **Tamezred** eastwards.

But more important to the future of **NZ Corps** was the warning order, given in the evening of 20 March, that *21 Panzer Division*, then some miles south of **Gabes**, would move to the support of Mannerini.

¹ Miles in the hour, a rate allowing for halts.

² Montgomery made another interesting decision on this day. Planning for the invasion of **Sicily** was proceeding concurrently with the final operations in **Africa**, and on 20 March Montgomery demanded a major change in plan, on the grounds that the forces allotted to him were too weak for his task. His demand was met and the plan was recast.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

DELAYED ATTACK

Delayed Attack

It was on this night of 20–21 March that **NZ Corps** was to make apparent a serious threat against the **Gabes—Matmata** road, and on this same night **30 Corps** was to commence its offensive against the main **Mareth** Line. The frontal and the outflanking attacks were the two parts of one combined attack, the full results of which would only be achieved if they were simultaneous. Any hesitation of the one part, until it was seen what was happening on the other, would be certain to produce a check.

It was already apparent that the Army Commander was a little concerned about the timing of the moves of **NZ Corps**, and short of giving a direct order to push on faster, was trying to speed things up. Past experience had shown that the Germans were very steady and capable of fending off short-range flank pressure while their main body slipped away. A flank attack of vigour and weight was called for, and the obvious course was to attack and capture **PLUM**, after which no real defensive position existed between **NZ Corps** and either the road from **Matmata** to **Gabes** or the village of **El Hamma**. The loss of **PLUM** would clearly threaten the enemy's line of communication, and must produce some result such as the thinning out of the **Mareth** Line to strengthen the flank defences.

But to comply with the Army plan, and with the original timings, the attack should go in on the night 20–21 March and the Gap be forced by early on the 21st. **New Zealand Corps** was at this stage about twelve hours ahead of schedule, and during the evening of 20 March **General Freyberg** informed Eighth Army that he intended to move on **PLUM** at first light on 21 March and asked that it should be bombed at 8 a.m., so losing any advantage that might have been gained.

The NZ Corps plan for 21 March was for KDG to move at first light and reconnoitre the whole enemy line, while **8 Armoured Brigade** would move at 7 a.m. and endeavour to break through the eastern end of the defences. (It will be clear from the map that **NZ Corps** was approaching the Gap diagonally from the south-east and not square on.) Divisional Cavalry was to form a right-flank guard. This procedure conformed with the original conception of first attempting to manoeuvre the enemy from PLUM, but the pace of the advance was already lagging and the initial plan for an infantry attack mounted within three hours of being checked was in abeyance.

Divisional Cavalry began to move at 6.10 a.m. and established patrols on a six-mile radius to the north-east and south-east. At its southern point it was in touch with French patrols, which were stretched out on a wide arc as far south as the road to the Hallouf Pass. On the other flank French forces occupied **Bir Soltane** during the morning without opposition. The situation was still fluid enough for the GOC to give some thought to the rear of the Corps, and 5 Brigade provided a rearguard to take post behind 1 Ammunition Company, the rear unit at the time.

King's Dragoon Guards reconnoitred well up to the enemy line, despite running into a minefield about four miles south of the centre of the line. The 8th Armoured Brigade advanced towards the eastern end of the enemy position close to **Zemlet el Madjel**, the western feature of **Djebel Melab**, found the going very rough and rocky, but made fair progress until it was halted by a combination of mines and shellfire. Notts Yeomanry (Lieutenant-Colonel J. D. Player) on the right flank tried to find a way round the enemy's left; but although they destroyed a gun and a few trucks they could not make any penetration. The 1st Buffs in support of Notts Yeomanry ran on to a minefield. The 3rd Royal Tanks (Lieutenant-Colonel D. A. H. Silvertop, MC) met strong enemy resistance astride the **Kebili** road round Point 170, and later in the day probed the enemy defences north of Point 180. Staffs Yeomanry (Lieutenant-Colonel J. A. Eadie, DSO) then came up on the left and managed to advance a

little on the north of the **Kebili** road, but all in all a combination of mines, wire, infantry and anti-tank guns held up the advance, which was somewhat piecemeal.

PLUM was duly bombed at 8 a.m. and many fires started, but this was insufficient to allow the tanks, unsupported by infantry, to get through. ¹

The rest of 21 March was on the whole a day of reconnaissance, and the GOC spent the day well forward. During the morning, in company with the CRA (Brigadier Weir) and the Commander 6 Brigade (Brigadier Gentry), he was with Tactical Headquarters **8 Armoured Brigade**. At first the COs of 25 and 26 Battalions accompanied their brigade commander but it soon became obvious that there would be no early attack, and they went back to their battalions.

The artillery was greatly helped by some useful and accurate trig lists which had been found in **Tripoli**. Both 4 Field Regiment and **211 Medium Battery** were in action in the morning, and later moved up by batteries closer to the enemy positions. They were shelled at intervals, and Mac Troop had nine casualties.

Shortly before midday the GOC received a message from Montgomery saying that **30 Corps** had attacked the evening before with some initial success, but that the enemy was apparently going to

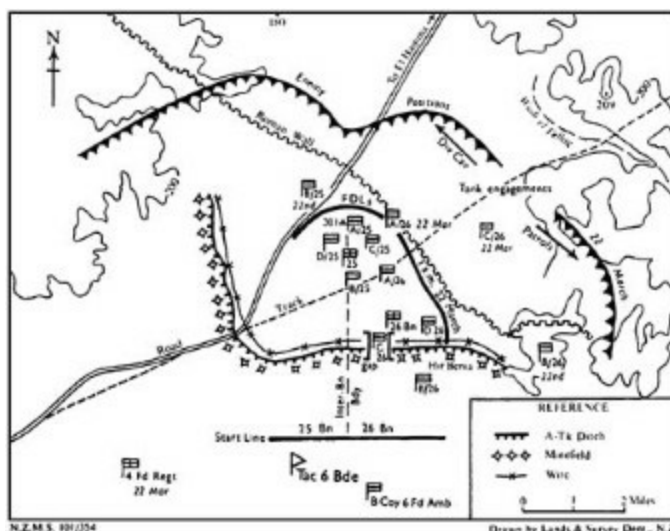
¹ Forward troops were bombed on the way back, despite the burning of orange smoke, the arranged signal. One man was killed and one or two trucks destroyed in 4 Field Regiment.

stand and fight. Montgomery wanted the GOC to make for PEACH (i.e., **El Hamma**) forthwith, and to be prepared to occupy GRAPE (north-west of **Gabes**) and from there turn towards **Mareth** with mobile forces. The GOC replied that he had bumped into an extensive minefield, and that he intended to attack PLUM that night and would then exploit towards PEACH. But time was moving on, and the Corps was now well

behind schedule.

By afternoon it had been established that the enemy defences followed the line of an old Roman wall, in front of which the feature **Point 201** formed a strongly defended outpost. The wall itself was a line of crumbling rock about eighteen inches to two feet high and two to three feet wide, and was clearly visible across the Gap. Apparently, even in olden days the Romans had defended **Tebaga Gap**.

It was not until the middle of the afternoon that it was decided that infantry must force a way through the minefield to allow the tanks to push through. Sixth Infantry Brigade would attack, and **8 Armoured Brigade** would move through the gap at first light and fan out to right and left, leading a general advance on **El Hamma**. When this plan was formulated it was believed that Germans had arrived in the line, but this was not correct.



6 BRIGADE ATTACKS POINT 201, 21-22 MARCH

6 BRIGADE ATTACKS POINT 201, 21-22 MARCH

General Freyberg warned Brigadier Gentry at 3 p.m. that 6 Brigade would be required to attack that night, and at 5 p.m. when at Point 180, from which **Point 201** was visible, he confirmed this. He directed 6 Brigade to capture **Point 201** that night with the support of all available artillery, subject however to a restriction to sixty rounds per gun, as there might be a shortage of ammunition. This was over-cautious, for

the line of communication was fully operative and, in fact, fifty rounds per gun were distributed at last light to all batteries that had been in action.

Brigadier Gentry had already warned his battalion commanders to meet him at Point 180, and gave his verbal orders for the attack within a few minutes of receiving the GOC's orders. Reports from forward troops had supported the information already available from air photographs and the artillery targets were given to the CRA, who was present throughout, from these. As ammunition expenditure was to be limited, the bombardment was confined to the enemy's forward defences. One squadron of Sherman tanks from 3 RTR was under command of 6 Infantry Brigade.

All arrangements were made by 5.30 p.m., only about twenty minutes after the GOC had given his orders. At 6.35 p.m. the following order was issued from Brigade Headquarters: ¹

Confirming verbal orders. 6 Bde will attack and capture hill feature 201 tonight. Right **26 Bn** left **25 Bn** inter bn boundary 89 easting grid. start line east and west through 180 hill feature. zero hour 2130 hrs when inf leaves start line. arty programme zero to zero plus 21 minutes on enemy FDLs finishing with one round smoke. thence lift 300 yards for one min thence till zero plus 60 mins on trig 201 at rate one rd per min as guide to adv inf. inf rate of adv to enemy FDLs 100 yards in one and a half mins thence 100 yards in two mins. bde HQ closes present location 2000 hrs move to start line on axis. ADS moves with Bde HQ and establishes 600 yards due south of start line on axis. axis to centre of start line normal provost lights ending with two blue. start line taped. units not taking part in attack remain present area.

Sections were detached from 8 Field Company to clear minefield gaps, one to each attacking battalion, from sixteen to twenty-four yards wide, and about 250 yards from the centre line of the advance, which ran through the summit of **Point 201**. A provost detachment worked

with each section.

At approximately 6.30 p.m. Brigadier Gentry travelled up the axis to see how arrangements for lighting and for marking the start line were progressing. Some distance before the start line the lights on the axis suddenly ended, and the axis could not be found. The liaison officers with the brigade commander were sent off to try and locate the provosts, but after half an hour he decided that zero hour would have to be delayed, and spoke in clear over the

¹ Certain figured map references have been omitted for clarity to present-day readers.

radio to the Brigade Major (Major Dawson ¹) saying that the time on the message then being prepared was to be altered to 2200 hours if 'Steve' (the CRA) could change his timing. This postponement of half an hour was in fact carried out.

It transpired that the officer sent with the provosts to mark the axis and start line had moved too fast for the provosts, who had to place lamps, and the latter were left behind. All was well in the end, but it gave Gentry an uncomfortable few minutes.

The order quoted on the previous page is an impressive example of simplicity combined with clarity and brevity, and shows the state of training that had now been reached in 2 NZ Division. For none but first-class troops could have faced an approach march and a subsequent attack under the timings given.

The 25th and 26th Battalions moved by transport some two miles up the axis and debussed about a mile from the start line, thereafter marching on foot and reaching their positions in good time. One enemy bomber came over while the troops were in vehicles, but his bombs did no damage.

At 10 p.m. the artillery opened fire and the infantry advanced across

the start line in brilliant moonlight. The **26th Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel D. J. Fountaine) on the right flank had A Company on the right and D on the left, with B in support and C in reserve. The **25th Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel T. B. Morten) had C Company on the right and A on the left, with D behind A, and B as reserve.

The enemy did not open fire until the twenty-one minute concentration was over, and by that time the forward companies were ahead of the enemy's fixed lines, and the advance was not held up. At one point, however, Headquarters 26 Battalion and the reserve company were pinned to the ground by flanking fire, which led the battalion commander to send his Intelligence Officer back to Brigade Headquarters to ask for tank support. But by that time the brigade commander had estimated that the overall position was good and that nothing would be gained by sending up tanks; and in fact, after a brief delay at some wire, where several casualties were suffered, soon after midnight first D Company and then A Company reached its objective and fired the success signal, followed by B Company shortly afterwards. The battalion had gone slightly off course to the east, but this did not affect the successful outcome, which included the taking of many prisoners. From then on until daylight there was only spasmodic shelling of the battalion position.

¹ **Brig R. B. Dawson**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Rotorua**, 21 Jul 1916; Regular soldier; BM 5 Bde 1941, Jan–Jun 1942; BM 6 Bde 1942–43; CO 3 Bn, 2 NZEF (**Japan**), 1947–48; QMG, Army HQ, 1960–.

On the left 25 Battalion had a more adventurous time. C and A Companies pressed on steadily, attacking and passing the first enemy positions, which consisted of fortified and well-dug trenches. Meanwhile D Company, after some initial delay, deployed to the left of A Company and also advanced steadily, capturing among other things a small field-gun position. B Company in reserve was pinned down by fixed-line fire, and its headquarters put out of action. C and A Companies went on

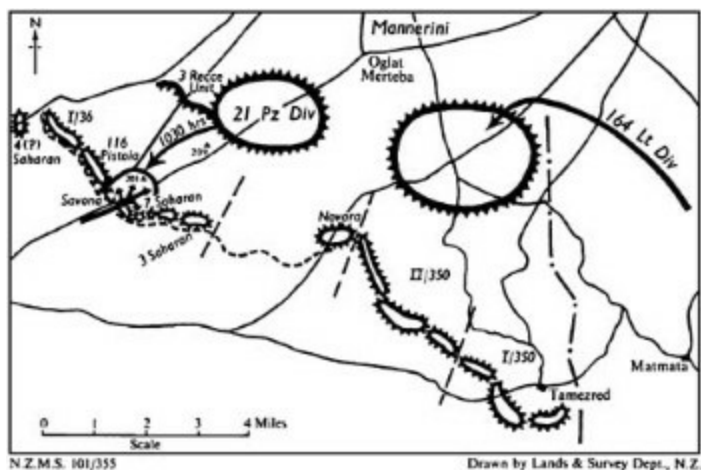
towards **Point 201**, while D Company covered the left flank, and in so doing got amongst enemy transport and guns in an exhilarating action. Finally all three companies consolidated on the northern slopes of 201, while B Company deployed in the rear. Again the battalion had gone slightly to the east and had occupied the whole of **Point 201**, but this had no effect upon a clear-cut victory.

The attack had shown good planning, a determined approach, and resolute fighting, and was an outstanding success. The casualties were 11 killed and 68 wounded and missing. Thirty-two officers and 817 other ranks were captured, all Italian; and weapons captured included some hundreds of rifles, 32 MMGs, 10 anti-tank guns and 12 75-millimetre infantry guns.

About midnight, when Brigadier Gentry was certain that his attack was successful, he telephoned the GOC and urged that **8 Armoured Brigade** should be moved through at once instead of delaying until first light. To this the GOC replied that it might be difficult to move the armour so unexpectedly, but that Gentry had his authority to take a message to the commander **8 Armoured Brigade** asking that the tanks should move forthwith through the minefield to exploit the infantry success. No direct message was sent from Corps Headquarters to Brigadier Harvey, who was not on the telephone. Gentry entrusted the mission to the officer commanding the Machine-Gun Company under command (Captain I. S. Moore), who was at Brigade Headquarters at the time. This officer made contact with Brigadier Harvey and gave him the message, which was in the form of a request and not an order. There was some discussion between Harvey and Moore, but as the form in which the message had been sent did not appear to indicate a real urgency, and as there was the normal need for maintenance and rest, Harvey thought that it would be better to adhere to his original orders to move at first light. There is no doubt that if he had received a direct order to push on, the order that the circumstances seem to call for, he would have complied.

The 6 Brigade victory thus remained an isolated one in the midst of

a lethargy in the rest of the Corps. And the final fruits of the little victory had yet to be picked. The 8th Field Company had followed up closely and by the early hours of 22 March had filled in an anti-tank ditch and prepared lanes through the minefield. The squadron of tanks under command commenced to move up behind 25 Battalion at 2.30 a.m. They were intended primarily for anti-tank defence in case of failure to get other weapons forward, but before daylight all supporting arms were in place. In the first daylight hours the combined efforts of the various infantry weapons, supported in one case by a tank, caused much damage and led to the surrender of another 400 Italians. There was never a clearer case of moral superiority, and obviously a clean wedge had been driven through PLUM.



MANNERINI GROUP POSITIONS ON 22 MARCH SHOWING 6 NEW ZEALAND BRIGADE'S PENETRATION AT POINT 201 — A TRACE FROM ENEMY RECORDS

MANNERINI GROUP POSITIONS ON 22 MARCH SHOWING 6 NEW ZEALAND BRIGADE'S PENETRATION AT POINT 201 — A TRACE FROM ENEMY RECORDS

In the opinion of some subordinate commanders at the time, and on reviewing the facts today, there can be little doubt that an opportunity was lost, and that if **8 Armoured Brigade** had passed through about 3 a.m. it could have disrupted the Italian position, and might well have been through the four miles' length of gap by daylight. Such an attack presupposed a really offensive design within the Corps, and this was not visible at the time.

The reason for the GOC's caution may have been that just before 6

Brigade attacked, he had received another message from the Army Commander saying that everything pointed to the likelihood of the enemy being put off balance as the **NZ Corps** movement developed. He suggested that **NZ Corps** should reach GRAPE (northwest of **Gabes**) as soon as possible, should then attack **Gabes** and destroy all the enemy depots there, and then operate with mobile forces towards **Mareth**, while holding **Gabes** securely against any enemy withdrawal northwards. He asked for a forecast when the GOC expected to reach GRAPE.

This was in fact a modified version of the Army Commander's **SIDEWINDOWS** alternative, and was a departure from the existing plan, which for **30 Corps** was to capture **Gabes** while **NZ Corps** bypassed the town. The GOC's earlier preference, expressed by his reluctance to accept Montgomery's accelerated timetable and by his insistence that Leese inform him should the **30 Corps** attack falter, that the enemy reserve should be committed at **Mareth** before **NZ Corps** drove forward from Tebaga, now appeared to reassert itself, and from this perspective it must have seemed that he was being asked to advance alone and absorb single-handed the thrust of all the mobile armour and infantry. It was a situation which presented with immediate insistence, and in a new form, the necessity of deciding whether to risk all on Montgomery's judgment and chance a serious encounter with the bulk of *1 Italian Army*, or whether to go slowly and carefully and wait until **NZ Corps** should not be alone in the field. The point that success on the **Mareth** front had always been dependent on the speed with which **NZ Corps** turned the flank at the Tebaga switch line seems again to have been submerged in a wave of caution. **Freyberg** replied that it was too early to prophesy, but that if the 6 Brigade attack was successful the Corps would operate towards PEACH (**El Hamma**). There was no mention of GRAPE or of the other tasks suggested to him.

The fighting on the front of **NZ Corps** for the next four days— 22 to 25 March inclusive—shows a similarity from day to day, inching forward in the centre and flanks, with exploratory reconnaissance on either flank. The total advance in the centre was of the order of only 1500

yards, for by the evening of 22 March, **21 Panzer Division** was on the scene, and on 23 March **164 Light Division** had also arrived. These troops were a different proposition from the Italians, and any chance of a speedy breakthrough had gone.

The activities of **NZ Corps** during daylight on 21 March—the various reconnaissances—were enough to induce the enemy to speed up the moves of **21** and **164 Divisions**. About 9.30 a.m. **21 Division** was ordered to move to the area just north of **Zemlet el Madjel**, and later in the day **164 Division** was relieved by **Pistoia Division** and was moved back to a central position on the **Gabes—Kebili** road some ten miles from **Gabes**. The **21 st Panzer Division** moved with increasing speed as the day went on, with the general idea of attacking through **Point 201** along the line of the road from **Gabes** to **Kebili**. At this time **6 Brigade** had not captured **Point 201**.

The Germans were still reporting the attacking formation as **10 Armoured Division**, and had not identified **NZ Corps**.¹

¹ For some reason the German Intelligence Staff had **10 Armoured Division** on the brain, for it crops up many times in their Order of Battle of Eighth Army. The 10th Armoured Division did not in fact leave Egypt after it had played its part in the Battle of **El Alamein**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

22 MARCH

22 March

At first light **8 Armoured Brigade** advanced with **Staffs Yeomanry** on the right, **Notts Yeomanry** on the left, and **3 Royal Tanks** in reserve. The brigade made little progress, being much hampered by enemy artillery fire from both flanks, including fire from **88-millimetre guns**. **Staffs Yeomanry** established a footing in the right of the enemy line about **Point 247**, knocked out at least one tank and took 100 prisoners, and for its pains was bombed by our own aircraft. **Notts Yeomanry** passed through the minefield and penetrated to the north of **Point 201**, but was heavily shelled and lost two tanks. During the advance of **8 Armoured Brigade**, **Colonel Kellett**, DSO, second-in-command of the brigade, was killed, actually while talking to **General Freyberg**, who as usual was well to the front.

Intelligence reports the previous evening had foreshadowed the arrival of three troops of **88-millimetre guns**, and now proof had come that the report was correct. Moreover, by midday ground observers reported eleven enemy tanks north-east of **Point 201**, and later another twenty tanks were reported a few miles farther back. Later still, air reconnaissance confirmed that this was ***21 Panzer Division***.

In the early afternoon there was a series of tank engagements at long range, punctuated by enemy artillery fire from the foothills of **Djebel Tebaga**. The RAF made several raids in support of **NZ Corps** during the day, and on one occasion some forty aircraft bombed a group of tanks estimated at forty and claimed hits on thirty-two, including the destruction of nine.

Divisional Cavalry also moved forward through the minefield with orders to clear enemy positions, including the enemy guns on the **Djebel Tebaga** slopes, that were holding up the tanks, but enemy fire, both from

guns and tanks, was too strong and little progress was made. They did, however, capture one troop of 77-millimetre guns and took prisoner 11 officers and 135 other ranks, all Italians.

King's Dragoon Guards spent most of the day in and around **Zemlet el Madjel**, but in the afternoon one squadron was sent to try to find a passage through **Djebel Tebaga**. The squadron reached the top of the range but reported that the northern face was sheer and impassable.

During the day both 4 and 6 Field Regiments, and the anti-tank batteries with 6 Brigade, moved forward, for enemy targets were getting out of range. The counter-battery work by the Corps artillery (111 Field Regiment, RA, 64 Medium Regiment, RA, and 4 and 6 Field Regiments, NZA) was effective enough to quieten the enemy guns from time to time.

A number of enemy air raids on our gun positions during the day caused no damage, but bombs did cause damage and casualties in the forward medical units. Towards the end of the day it was thought better to move 6 Brigade Advanced Dressing Station to a quieter position.

The ground occupied by 25 and 26 Battalions was kept under heavy enemy fire, and at midday it was bombed. The **25th Battalion** had ten casualties from shellfire. In the early evening 6 Infantry Brigade began to ease forward and occupy the ground gained during the day by the tanks, and as part of this move 25 Battalion took over a little of the frontage of 26 Battalion east of the **Kebili — El Hamma** road, so allowing the latter to stretch out to the north and east. The **25th Battalion** moved without incident, and deployed the reserve company on its left flank. But when B Company of 26 Battalion began to move towards high ground on the right flank, a radio message was received saying that enemy tanks and Italian troops in unknown strengths were advancing up a wadi on the other side. The company took cover at the north-west end of the feature and waited for the position to clarify, the Italians being visible about 100 yards away. Their supporting machine-gun platoon (4 Platoon of 2 MG Company), thinking that B Company had occupied the feature but having no means of wireless communication

with the company commander, moved up to consolidate. The result was that the platoon, under Lieutenant Titchener,¹ ran into the Italians, and while both sides were surprised, the machine-gunners recovered first and rounded up thirty-five Italians and captured intact four 75-millimetre guns and two machine-gun posts.

The enemy vehicles advancing on the feature were then engaged by **8 Armoured Brigade**, and the enemy advance petered out. It appears most unlikely that these vehicles were in fact tanks; Lieutenant Titchener himself disclaims their presence, saying that they were more likely to be tracked infantry carriers.

The remainder of 26 Battalion moved forward unopposed to their new positions some 500 to 1000 yards ahead. By the end of the day the enemy was securely established on the high ground to the north-west and the east of PLUM, and had cross-observation on all movement over the ground between **Djebel Melab** and **Djebel Tebaga**. There was every sign that he intended to stay there.

¹ **Lt-Col W. F. Titchener**, MC and bar; Ahmedabad, **India**; born Dunedin, 14 Dec 1907; public accountant; CO 27 Bn, **Japan**, May 1946–Mar 1947; wounded 2 Nov 1942.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY—22 MARCH

The Enemy—22 March

Following 6 Brigade's successful attack on the night 21–22 March, **21 Panzer Division** was ordered to counter-attack. This the division did about 11 a.m., with tanks leading, but bad going and **NZ Corps'** shellfire delayed the advance, and it was soon clear that the attack could not succeed that day. The division therefore took up a line which ran roughly north-west and south-east some 3500 yards short of (i.e., north-east of) **Point 201**. It was then still hoped to recapture the feature the next day.

About 10.30 a.m. **164 Light Division** was ordered to move to the Tebaga front immediately; but after some further discussion it took up an intermediate position round Hir el Assouad, some miles east of PLUM and on the north-east slopes of **Djebel Melab**. (The enemy still feared an advance by Eighth Army through the passes east of **Djebel Melab**.) However, in the evening **164 Light Division** was told to join **21 Panzer** in the line facing the enemy, as it was now apparent to the Germans that the greater danger was on the Tebaga front. Both divisions were to be under Mannerini's command.

That same evening there were discussions between the commanders of **21 Panzer** and **164 Light Divisions**, and between them and Mannerini. They concluded that another attack on **Point 201** could not succeed, and that their only course was to go on the defensive.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

NZ CORPS—23 MARCH

NZ Corps—23 March

Activities on 23 March bear close similarity to those of 22 March—a cautious edging along the flanks combined with attempts to ascertain if a wider outflanking was possible, and probing here and there at the enemy line. The GOC became increasingly concerned about the line of communication, not only to the south-east, but also to the west. Altogether the day was an unsatisfactory one.

The 8th Armoured Brigade had no particular success to record during the day after attempting to work along both flanks. The CO of 3 Royal Tanks, Lieutenant-Colonel D. A. H. Silvertop, was wounded and evacuated and the second-in-command died of wounds. Divisional Cavalry patrolled the foothills of **Djebel Tebaga**, took many prisoners and destroyed a number of abandoned guns.

During the night 22–23 March the enemy filtered back on to the northern slopes of ‘Titchener Hill’, and in the end the enemy fire was heavy enough to force the greater part of our troops to retire, leaving only observation parties on the top of the hill.

Both 25 and 26 Battalions were spasmodically shelled. Three enemy air raids caused no damage, but at 9.20 a.m. the **RAF** bombed and strafed our troops, mainly in 26 Battalion area. This was too much, and by arrangement indication marks were erected in the area—the letter ‘A’ in 26 Battalion, ‘E’ on **Point 201**, and ‘H’ in 25 Battalion area.

In the morning the CO 24 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly) with his company commanders reconnoitred 26 Battalion area with a view to relieving that battalion the following night, but at midday the GOC decided that 24 Battalion would probably have to go into the line on the left of 25 Battalion to extend the front, and a reconnaissance

was then made of the new area.

The uncertain movements of *10 Panzer Division* now became a complicating factor. After its **Medenine** rebuff this division had gone to an area north of **Gabes**, but on the renewed activity of **2 US Corps**¹ it had moved towards **Gafsa**. It was reasonable to assume that *10 Panzer* was to oppose the Americans, who on 22 March entered **Maknassy**, which was only some 40 miles from the coast between **Gabes** and **Sfax**. The threat to the enemy's 'neck' was now becoming really dangerous.

But late on 22 March Eighth Army informed **NZ Corps** that *10 Panzer Division* was believed to be round **Gabes**, and that there was a chance that it would be used to support *21 Panzer Division* against **NZ Corps**. This may have seemed a possibility to Intelligence Eighth Army, but in a personal telegram to **General Freyberg**, sent in the early hours of 23 March and yet to be discussed, Montgomery said *inter alia*, '10 Panzer Division engaged in **Gafsa** area'. This conflict of views explains why **NZ Corps** early on 23 March wirelessly Eighth Army, 'Require Tactical Reconnaissance locate 10 Panzer Division and attempt follow movements'. A reply came from Eighth Army almost immediately: 'Indications 10 Pz Div more concerned American threat but will watch with Strategic Reconnaissance today.'

However, **Freyberg** was still not reassured about the movements of *10 Panzer Division*, and in mid-morning ordered 5 Infantry Brigade to take up defensive positions facing south and south-west on a line whose centre was some seven miles south-west from **Point 201**. By 6 p.m. the brigade had moved from its halting place of 20 March and was in position with 23 Battalion on the right, 28 (Maori) Battalion in the centre, and 21 Battalion on the left on a frontage of about 17,000 yards. The 5th Field Regiment reverted to the command of the CRA and was deployed on the right flank under the **Zemlet el Madjel** foothills, near other artillery units, where it could support 5 Brigade if necessary.

The brigade was now facing south-west and was therefore in position to resist an enemy coming from that direction. To attack in this way

would entail for *10 Panzer Division* a march round the north and west of **Djebel Tebaga**, which does not seem at all likely in view of the distance it must travel and the shortage of petrol. To deploy 5 Brigade in this way was thus to take an extreme measure of defence.

The Corps artillery was very active during 23 March, the accuracy of the fire being attested by prisoners. Between 5 p.m. and 6.30 p.m. ten series of concentrations were put down on known enemy batteries and defended localities, tasks in which the Bofors guns of 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment took part. The enemy artillery was also active, helped by the good observation from the flanks, in particular against the main axis and the minefield gaps.

Several enemy fighter-bomber attacks took place during the day but caused no damage. Between 3 and 3.30 p.m. our own tankbusters and fighters put in their first attack, making use of the new indication letter marks. From ground observation and flash-spotting intersections the attacks were made in the areas desired, and many fires were seen.

At last light 24 Battalion moved to occupy the positions reconnoitred on the left flank to the north-west of the **Kebili— El Hamma** road. The troops were in their positions without interference by 10 p.m.

Eight lanes through the minefields were cleared by 8 Field Company, with assistance from sections of 6 and 7 Field Companies, and marked with cairns and lights. Losses in this task were four killed and four wounded. The 6th Field Company lifted from four to five hundred mines, and another party of engineers began work on a landing strip for the air evacuation centre, sited about ten miles south of **Point 201**. This was completed on 24 March, and from it about 40 per cent of total evacuations were made by air, thanks to some steady work under difficult conditions by the **RAF** pilots.

The activities on 23 March ended in some slight gains on both flanks. A further 506 prisoners were captured, making a total of over

2100, nearly all Italians.

¹ **See p. 172.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE RIGHT FLANK ON 23 MARCH

The Right Flank on 23 March

'L' Force of the French Group had in the meantime been patrolling in the northern foothills of **Zemlet el Madjel**, often in co-operation with KDG. The ground was very broken and hilly, and any advance could only be slow, but as mentioned earlier, the enemy was unusually sensitive about a debouchment northwards from **Djebel Melab**, and the activities of 'L' Force had engaged his attention.

The force had been working westwards towards the right of 26 Battalion, but the GOC now intended that it should turn more to the north towards Points 242 and 209, helped by KDG and accompanied by FOOs from 6 Field Regiment. This meant that 'L' Force would be finally committed to an advance, and its earlier task of flank protection to the lines of communication would no longer be possible. The FFF Column was still on this duty, and for the time being came directly under Rear Headquarters NZ Corps, commanded by Colonel **Crump**,¹ the CRASC. In the view of the GOC this was too light a force for the duty, as he considered the lines of communication might still be attacked. He therefore asked Eighth Army for an additional armoured car regiment.

This again was over-insurance, for by this time the whereabouts of the panzer divisions was known— *15 Panzer* at **Mareth**, *21 Panzer* at **Tebaga**, and *10 Panzer* to the north-west of **Gabes**—and the move of *164 Light Division* out of the **Mareth** Line had also been noted. This last move left *Pistoia Division* on the right of the line, and it was most unlikely that *Pistoia* should suddenly burst out to the south across the **Matmata** Hills. The truth was not that the right flank had become more vulnerable, but that the 'inching ahead' tactics were swallowing up 'L' Force, KDG and Divisional Cavalry, once used as flank guards. These tactics were proving as absorptive of troops as would have one concentrated attack.

However, the request was still-born, for at 4 a.m. on the morning of 23 March General Montgomery sent a message to **General Freyberg** that was in effect an answer:

MOST SECRET personal for **General Freyberg** from Army Comd. **30 Corps** thrust meeting increased resistance and have decided hold tightly there for the present. Instead will reinforce your thrust with **1 Armd Div** and this increased strength should enable you to push on and reach **Gabes**. **15 Pz Div** closely engaged on my front. **10 Pz Div** engaged in **Gafsa** area. Troops available to oppose you are **21 Pz Div** and have reason to believe certain elements of this div have gone to **Gafsa** front. Must also expect more of **164 Div** to oppose you. For maintenance and other reasons essential have **Corps HQ** on your flank and am sending **Horrocks** to take charge. Am sure you will understand. You and he will work well together and should achieve decisive results. **Horrocks** and recce parties should reach you tomorrow about 12 noon. **10 Corps** to take over when **1 Armd Div** have arrived probably afternoon 25 March.

¹ **Brig S. H. Crump**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d., Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **Wellington**, 25 Jan 1889; Regular soldier; NZASC 1915–19; Commander NZASC, **2 NZ Div**, 1940–45; comd 2 NZEF (**Japan**), Jun–Sep 1947; on staff HQ BCOF and NZ representative on Disposals Board in **Japan**, 1948–49.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE MAIN MARETH FRONT

The Main Mareth Front

Operations had not gone as planned on the front of **30 Corps**. Although the desired penetration had been achieved, the enemy had been able to counter-attack. The attack commenced at 10.30 p.m. on the 20th, at which time **50 (Northumbrian) Division** and **23 Armoured Brigade** passed through **51 (H) Division** between **Mareth** village and the sea. The initial task was to cross **Wadi Zigzaou**, a formidable obstacle with its natural hazards intensified by the enemy's minefields, ditches and wire. The enemy line was held in the main by Italians, but with **90 Light Division** strengthening certain sectors, and with **15 Panzer Division** in immediate reserve.

The attackers crossed the wadi in places, though with difficulty, and even then the deep and steep-sided nature of the wadi, and the enfilade fire encountered, sweeping easily across the narrow front, made the foothold on the far bank precarious. The gains were held on 21 March, and were extended during the night 21-22, but on 22 March there was heavy rain and the wadi crossing became more difficult than ever, and for armour and wheeled vehicles wellnigh impossible. Bad weather prevented the air force from interfering with the enemy's preparations for a counter-attack, which was duly delivered by **15 Panzer Division** in the afternoon of 22 March. Much of the bridgehead was recaptured by the enemy, for conditions made it impossible to get more than a handful of tanks and anti-tank guns across the wadi. By 2 a.m. on 23 March it was known that the results of the counter-attack were serious. But, on the other hand, Montgomery considered that the enemy was now committed to offensive action on his eastern flank.

He therefore took the decision which has been given in the message quoted above. It was intended that the move of Headquarters **10 Corps** and **1 Armoured Division** should start after dark on 23 March, in the

hope that a fresh offensive could be launched at Tebaga on 25 March. At the same time **30 Corps**, strengthened by 7 Armoured Division from **10 Corps** and by 4 Indian Division from Army Reserve, was to launch a new attack in the centre towards **Toujane** and **Zeltene**, in an area beyond the artificial defences of the **Mareth** Line, where, in effect, a gap had already been left by the departure of *164 Light Division* to Tebaga. One advantage of this attack was that the lateral road from **Medenine** through the **Hallouf Pass** would be opened and the two wings of the army brought closer together. The **4th Indian Division** was entrusted with this special attack, to commence after dark on 23 March. Thirtieth Corps would then have 50, 51 and 7 Armoured Divisions to hold the enemy in the **Mareth** Line proper, while 4 Indian Division undertook what Montgomery calls a 'short hook' round the line.

By the evening of 23 March all troops were withdrawn across **Wadi Zigzaou** and the whole of the bridgehead given up. Tenth Corps, consisting of Corps Headquarters, 1 Armoured Division (2 Armoured Brigade and 7 Motor Brigade), 69 Medium Regiment, RA, with corps engineers and anti-aircraft artillery, moved from **Medenine** soon after midnight on 23–24 March, taking the direct road to **Foum Tatahouine**. With it moved **36 Survey Battery**, less the detachments already with **NZ Corps**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

NZ CORPS WINDS UP PUGILIST

NZ Corps winds up PUGILIST

While **10 Corps** was on its way to Tebaga, the nature of the fighting on the front of **NZ Corps** remained unchanged. On 23 March **164 Light Division** came into the line on the right of **21 Panzer**, with a sector including **Point 209** to **Djebel Tebaga**, and 3 and 33 *Reconnaissance Units*, acting as a group, patrolled the area north of the Djebel between the mountains and the Chotts. Apparently the enemy was as apprehensive of an advance on our part round the north of the Djebel as **Freyberg** had been of an enemy attack by the same route.

The two German divisions were to some degree mixed up, a common occurrence, and those Italians still fit for fighting were sandwiched in between German units. The **220th Reconnaissance Unit** of **164 Light Division** was away watching the passes over the hills east of **Djebel Melab**. In the words of **164 Light** this was to 'stiffen **XXI Corps**' (the Italians on the right of the **Mareth** defences), but **21 Panzer Division**, not so polite, said it was to 'bolster up the Italians'. The advance of 'L' Force had borne some fruit, for **164 Division** reported certain successes by them in **Zemlet el Madjel**.

At 3 p.m. on 23 March command of the whole enemy front passed to Major-General von Liebenstein, GOC **164 Division**. It is recorded that Mannerini was given 'new orders', but what they were is not known. He disappeared from the Tebaga front.

The enemy line was now about three miles north-east of **Point 201**, but on the east flank curved to the south to take in **Point 184**, and from there ran into the peaks of **Zemlet el Madjel**. Between the opposing FDLs was a 'no-man's land' of some width. The enemy took full advantage of the slopes of **Djebel Tebaga**, and in the afternoon the headquarters of both **164 Light** and **21 Panzer Divisions** moved there so that they could

overlook the front.

Events on the Corps front on 24 and 25 March do not justify recounting in detail, except for certain special activities. The 8th Armoured Brigade continued to advance slowly on the left flank along the slopes of **Djebel Tebaga**. Divisional Cavalry also operated there, and spent some time trying to find a good track through the Djebel, but had no better fortune than had KDG. The object of these reconnaissances is not clear, for it would have been wild optimism to think of launching an attack by that route. The most that could be achieved was an assurance that the enemy could not come that way either.

The **Desert Air Force** gradually stepped up its support and on 24 March delivered two strong attacks. The first, by forty-seven Kittyhawks and twelve Hurricane tank-busters, destroyed about twenty vehicles of various sorts, and left many others in flames, including at least four tanks. The second attack was specifically directed against the enemy tanks which were opposing **8 Armoured Brigade**. Six tanks were destroyed and one damaged, and the attack led the GOC to send a message of congratulation to the Air Officer Commanding. Our aircraft ran into heavy flak, but the six aircraft which were hit were all landed within our lines. For both attacks the forward troops burned yellow smoke to indicate the front line. During the second attack the enemy burned yellow smoke as well, but the pilots were not deceived.

'L' Force and KDG continued to operate together in **Zemlet el Madjel**, the latter reporting frankly that the ground was not suitable for armoured cars. By nightfall 'L' Force was in touch with the enemy on Point 354, the highest point. During the day, on the instructions of the GOC, **Brigadier Kippenberger** went with General Leclerc to this point in order to give an opinion whether or not an attack could be made by 5 Brigade round the enemy's left flank. His opinion was that it was possible but difficult, and the difficulty applied specially to transport and supporting weapons, which meant that consolidation might be costly.

It is difficult to believe that there was ever a real intention to attack

by this route, which at best was over ground quite unsuitable for any rapid action, but by this time it was abundantly clear that the GOC was not in favour of a strong central thrust with his present forces, and was looking for some way round. However, by the time **Kippenberger** got back to Corps Headquarters, Lieutenant-General Horrocks had arrived, and events were fast moving to something altogether bigger.

The three battalions of 6 Brigade had on the whole an uneventful time. There were a number of enemy air raids of varying intensity, but damage was negligible and casualties were slight. The only real excitement was a triviality—the appearance in the late afternoon of 24 March of a lorry and motor-cycle on the **El Hamma- Kebili** road. Men on **Point 201** stood up in their trenches to watch the approach, but machine-gunners spoilt the fun by opening up at 2000 yards' range, whereupon the motor-cyclist disappeared, apparently wounded, and the truck turned round and went off in a cloud of dust. Driving into the enemy's lines was an occasional occurrence to both sides.

On the night 24–25 March an attempt was made to capture **Point 184**, which gave good observation over our positions. At 7.30 p.m., just before the moon rose, D Company of 26 Battalion attacked silently, but the two leading platoons ran into heavy machine-gun and mortar fire, and found the feature steeper than had been expected. Fire called from our own guns silenced the enemy mortars, but the attack was not persisted in, and the company withdrew. It was clear that **Point 184** could not be stormed by two platoons.

Throughout this period supplies were coming forward regularly from the New Zealand Field Maintenance Centre, which until 22 March was still at **Bir Amir** on the eastern side of Wilder's Gap. On that day the FMC was moved forward to **Bir Soltane**, which shortened the haul for the Corps transport and transferred the burden to the Army authorities. Lack of supplies at no stage hindered operations, not even the ever-increasing demands for gun ammunition—which speaks volumes for the combined efforts of the NZASC and the RASC units supporting **NZ Corps**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

The Enemy

On 24 March the enemy appreciated that on the main **Mareth** front the British forces, especially the armoured forces, were being thinned out, and that the main attack would move to 'the southwest front'. Thus **15 Panzer Division** was moved back to **Hir Zouitinat** (13 miles southwest of **Gabes**), where it could support either front and where it was later identified by air reconnaissance. Some nervousness was shown over the advance of 4 Indian Division in the centre and the Italian forces in the area were warned about the importance of blocking **Hallouf Pass**.

The two divisions in the Tebaga line (**21 Panzer** and **164 Light**) reported various **NZ Corps** activities during the day, including the air attacks. The enemy by now had no illusions about the final outcome of the Tebaga operations, but was determined to impose delay as long as possible. This attitude was apparently shared by von Arnim, who visited the front during the morning, and decided that the time had come to withdraw into the Akarit position—the **Gabes Gap**—commencing that night, 24–25 March. Messe pointed out that he did not have enough MT for so fast a move, and would have to delay twenty-four hours, but did not dispute the orders otherwise for there were still bitter memories of the way in which the non-motorised Italian troops had been left stranded at **Alamein**. However, later in the day Kesselring also visited the front, came to the conclusion that the situation was not really serious, and persuaded Messe to tell von Arnim that he was going to hit back, and did not consider the withdrawal necessary. But von Arnim adhered to his decision, agreeing only to a postponement so that the withdrawal would now start on the night 25–26 March.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHANGE OF PLAN

Change of Plan

In the afternoon of 24 March the Army Commander made proposals to **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** for the future, and shortly after the receipt of his message (at the most an hour or so) Lieutenant-General Horrocks arrived to discuss them. So although the piecemeal activities of **NZ Corps** continued into 25 March, Operation PUGILIST was now over, and its place taken by something new.

In itself PUGILIST had not been a success. On **30 Corps'** front the check was disappointing to all concerned, not least to Montgomery. But without exception they can be grateful that he did not persist with the attack on First World War lines, and that he changed his plan so speedily. It was a bold decision, all the more marked in that it was taken about 2.30 a.m. after two days of strain.

The point naturally arises whether a move by **10 Corps**, the Army Reserve, had been considered at the planning stage. A study of the facts as known at the time shows that **10 Corps** was intended to exploit success only on **30 Corps'** front. It is true that de Guingand, Montgomery's Chief of Staff, had, as an orthodox task, initiated some preliminary staff planning on the possible move of **10 Corps** to Tebaga. Such planning must have been very sketchy, however, for the traffic confusion with 4 Indian Division during the early stages of the eventual move of **10 Corps** pointed to an absence of study or planning, and lack of maintenance arrangements resulted in **10 Corps**, on arrival at Tebaga, having to depend on **NZ Corps** for supplies. Horrocks himself had no knowledge of the possibility of a move to Tebaga, although there had been many conferences, and much planning, over the various alternatives on the **30 Corps** front.

A fact of greater importance, however, is that **10 Corps** was so

positioned that it could be transferred to Tebaga, where no more than a lodgement had been made. Yet PUGILIST had achieved something. Apart from its attrition of the enemy, a route avoiding the hazards of the **Wadi Zigzaou** and the fixed defences of the **Mareth** Line had been established. The most important feature, **Point 201**, in the entrance to **Tebaga Gap** had been secured, and a force of all arms threatened the enemy's flank, and indeed had impelled him to react and redispense his divisions. PUGILIST provided the practicable line of attack for further effort, and although inconclusive everywhere, in itself it gave the opportunity for a second stage, now to begin.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[SECTION]

IN the early afternoon of 24 March **General Freyberg** received proposals from the Army Commander, first by message, and then in outline by liaison officer, for a large-scale attack on 25 March to blast a way through **Tebaga Gap** and allow armour to deploy in the open country beyond. Montgomery's plan included a bombing attack heavier than usual on the enemy on the night 24–25 March, and preliminary low-level attacks for two or three hours to disorganise the defence. This would require maximum assistance with guiding lights for the air force. Zero hour would be about 3 p.m. so that the westering sun would be shining behind the attacking troops. (The enemy on the north-east and Eighth Army on the south-west was something new in desert fighting.) Montgomery asked for an immediate reply as to whether **Freyberg** agreed in principle, and said that in the meantime he was going ahead with all preparations at his end.

To this **Freyberg** replied that a night landmark would be arranged and that there would be no difficulty in staging an attack, but he would signal at length on the general situation and would suggest alternative plans. While he was in the course of preparing this full reply Lieutenant-General Horrocks arrived.

The change in command upset **General Freyberg**. He thought that in every way the correct answer would have been to leave him in command, even if it was necessary to send him a fresh corps headquarters. He was senior to Horrocks.¹ But from Montgomery's viewpoint the problem was straightforward. Tenth Corps was the Army Reserve. The Corps was complete with commander and staff, was fully briefed, and one of its divisions and some of the corps troops were to move with it, so that it was obvious that the simplest thing to do was to allow it to absorb the troops already on the spot and proceed with the battle, to which it would give fresh impetus. It will be remembered that

NZ Corps had no separate corps headquarters, and it has been suggested that a bare

¹ **Freyberg**: Major-General 24 Aug 1939, temporary Lieutenant-General 1 Mar 1942. Horrocks: Acting Major-General 27 Jun 1941, acting Lieutenant-General 13 Aug 1942.

divisional headquarters might be tried too hard if suddenly it had to control double its existing force. In fact Horrocks said after his arrival that it was the headquarters staff of **10 Corps** that was wanted more than the Corps Commander.

There is some evidence that Montgomery knew that there might be difficulties, and certainly both Horrocks and de Guingand were aware of the prickly nature of the situation. Between them all they did their best to make things easier. Horrocks and de Guingand agreed that all messages sent from Army Headquarters should go to both commanders, and Montgomery was careful in the wording of his various telegrams and letters. But it is small wonder that Horrocks sensed a frigid atmosphere when he arrived. One must have sympathy with him, for he was innocent of any offence. **Freyberg** was determined to make sure that no newcomer should intrude in the handling of 2 NZ Division, and was grim, firm, and not at all forthcoming.

In his message early on 23 March Montgomery laid down that **10 Corps** was to take over when 1 Armoured Division arrived, probably in the afternoon of 25 March. After some discussion between the two commanders, they agreed that Horrocks should assume command at 6 p.m. on 25 March, that **Freyberg** should be responsible for the detailed planning of the forthcoming operation, and that, to all intents and purposes, Horrocks's command would be effective after the break-in.

There is a difference of opinion between Horrocks and **Freyberg** over the responsibility for the message later sent to Montgomery, numbered 503, a draft of which was already in existence when Horrocks arrived. It

had his concurrence, and it must be assumed that he agreed with it, although it is not difficult to see that the commander on the spot had for the moment the advantage. The message was sent 'From Generals **Freyberg** and **Horrocks**'.

It described the bottleneck at PLUM, and said that hitherto the policy of **NZ Corps** had been to work along the high ground on the flanks and reduce the enemy's observation over the gap. Alternative courses for future action were then given:

1. Carry on as we are going until we can force gap and pass **1 Armd Div** through. This should be possible in from 5 to 7 days.
2. Carry on as at present and pass **1 Armd Div** round **Kebili** to attack Hamma from west, thus further stretching enemy. This could probably develop night 27/28.
3. Carry out blitz attack by daylight with **8 Armd Bde** supported by maximum air and five arty regts. This would be very costly but might break through.

In our opinion second course is far the best and is most certain to produce quick results and minimum losses.

Of these three possibilities, the first would obviously take too long. The second plan has an air of unreality, for it meant a further 60 miles' march for 1 Armoured Division and would interpose an impassable range of mountains between the two wings of the outflanking force, and lose the virtue of concentration and of taking full advantage of a preponderance in tanks, guns, infantry, and air support. Moreover, a fresh line of communications round the west end of **Djebel Tebaga** could only add to the difficulties of supply, for when **10 Corps** did arrive on the Tebaga front it had not completed its administration arrangements and leant heavily on **NZ Corps** for its first issues of supplies and ammunition. The third course more accorded with the Army Commander's suggestion.

There is difficulty in determining the exact order of the communications which passed at this time, for it appears that Montgomery's next letter was in fact written before he had received message 503, but after the return to Army Headquarters of his liaison

officer. These liaison officers were all specially selected by him and formed a *corps d'élite*. They brought to him the atmosphere they found in the formations they visited as well as battle reports, and in this case it is possible that the liaison officer sensed that there was still a reluctance on **NZ Corps'** front to thrust with full force. Whether or not that is the case, the fact remains that the letter given below shows that Montgomery was several laps ahead of anyone else in his thinking about the future. The relevant parts of the letter are as follows:

I want to speed up your thrust as much as possible, and I think we can do a great deal to help you by heavy air bombing all night and day. To take full advantage of this you would have to do an afternoon attack with the sun behind you. The plan would be as follows:—

- (Continuous bombing by Wellingtons and night bombers on
a) night D-1/D.
- (Intensive artillery shelling for say one hour before zero. Smoke
b) etc on high ground on flanks and/or to cover mine lifting.
- (Air cover and attacks by fighters on any movement to and from
c) the battle area.

I do not believe that any enemy could stand up to such treatment, and you would, after it, burst through the defile quite easily and get to **El Hamma** and **Gabes**.

I believe it would be another **SUPERCHARGE** which would do the trick like we did it with **SUPERCHARGE** at **Alamein**. The army and air staffs are working it out and we can lay it on if you agree you will accept it. Date: the earlier the better. I would like D day to be tomorrow 25 March, 1 Armoured Division to be up by then, ready to exploit success on 26 March.

I think you would get surprise, as the enemy thinks we always attack at night.... The RAF will play 100%. Let us call it **SUPERCHARGE**, and give me a date for D Day.

Enclosed with this letter was one from de Guingand, written after a

conference with the AOC. After saying that the night strafe was to be intensified, he went on:

(b)The Kittybombers will now carry out an intensive bombing and strafing period for about two hours before your attack goes in and will also operate during the attack itself dealing with any movement in the battle area and on the roads leading to the battle area.

(c)By keeping quiet in the morning we have a better chance of obtaining surprise and if we do not start the Kittybombers sooner than zero minus two hours the enemy should not have time to withdraw his air forces from the central **Tunisia** front. We would be grateful if you would let us have the most complete picture of the enemy defensive lay-out as you see it, and any details of your plan, start line etc.

When message 503 did reach Montgomery, he cannot have found it at all helpful, and must have been confirmed in his view that he must take a firm grip ¹ of the forthcoming battle himself. In the event the outline plan was his alone, although the detailed planning of the break-in was **Freyberg's**, a situation which does not support **Freyberg's** later view that Montgomery went into too much detail and interfered with the freedom of action of his subordinates.

Generals **Freyberg** and Horrocks then replied, first, that they were considering SUPERCHARGE, but that it could not be carried out before 26 March as 1 Armoured Division would not be ready until then; and then later that SUPERCHARGE would definitely take place on 26 March. Air communication and adequate signal arrangements enabled all these messages and letters to pass during the afternoon of 24 March. Montgomery's acknowledgment to this last telegram from **Freyberg** and Horrocks is the first to be dated 25 March. In it he expressed his delight at the news and, *inter alia*, said that he did not like their second course as it would split the outflanking force.

This exchange of telegrams and letters was in effect summarised in a letter sent by de Guingand on 25 March. It reads in part:

My Dear Generals,

(I feel as if I am writing to the old combination Hindenburg and Ludendorff!) This letter gives you the Army Commander's views as to future operations.

- 1. Supercharge is virtually your course No. 1² with stronger and more intimate air support than we have ever tried before.**

¹ **Montgomery, *Memoirs*, pp. 81–2: ‘To succeed, a C.-in-C. must ensure from the beginning a very firm grip on his military machine; only in this way will his force maintain balance and cohesion and thus develop its full fighting potential. This firm grip does not mean interference, or cramping the initiative of subordinates; indeed, it is by the initiative of subordinates that the battle is finally won. The firm grip is essential in order that the master plan will not be undermined by the independent ideas of individual subordinate commanders at particular moments in the battle. Operations must develop within a predetermined pattern of action.’**

² **The resemblance between ‘Course No. 1’ and SUPERCHARGE is in reality very faint.**

- 2. The Army Commander wants you to go 100% for Supercharge and produce a simple cut and dried plan and we will give you the maximum air support possible.**
- 3. The Army Commander stresses the need to keep your joint resources concentrated and not dispersed; that is why he did not like the **Kebili** project as it placed a mountain range between the two divisions.**
- 4. He feels sure that if we break into this front facing you, you can take considerable risks and, by pushing on deep, the enemy will be forced to pull back from the hills.**
- 5. {Omitted—estimate of enemy morale, believed low.}**

6. {Omitted—estimate of enemy morale, believed low.}
7. We are sending over Darwin.... to help you tie up the air support for Supercharge. The RAF have ordered an armoured car to report to NZ HQ and it is proposed that Darwin should be located 'cheek by jowl' with comd **8 Armd Bde** or whoever else is in a position to get the latest information as to how the air support is working. It is important that he should be able to see the battle area from a good OP, and he will then be able to give the pilots the low-down as to how they are doing. It is important of course that he does keep in the closest touch with one of our commanders as he must have an up-to-date picture. Sitting back here it would look as if **8 Armd Bde** is the right location.
8. (Omitted—list of Spitfire and Kittyhawk squadrons.
 - a) (The length of time they can operate over area continuously
 - b) depends on the Spitfire Sqns. These can operate continuously for two hours. Therefore you can expect continuous Kitty-bomber attacks throughout this two-hours period at the density of two squadrons.
 - (The important thing will be to decide on the correct timing.
 - c) We feel that it might be best to start this intensive air effort about zero minus 30 minutes. This should thoroughly disorganise the defence at the psychological moment and allow the fighter bombers to continue supporting the attack during the most difficult period. You may, however, feel you would like a longer preparation beforehand but it is probable that your artillery will be able to deal with this.
 - (It will be most important to give the air force as soon as
 - d) possible the maximum information as to your plan of attack and the areas and centre of enemy resistance guns etc that you wish to be attacked.
9. The Air Force are going flat out on this low strafing. It may be very expensive owing to flak and enemy opposition, but they have agreed to cooperate wholeheartedly because the Army Commander has told them it is the big thing in this stage of the campaign. They will not be able to stage such an intensive effort two days running.

It will be seen from the above that the air forces intended to make an all-out effort for a low-flying blitz, something new to Eighth Army. The risks were great, but the results might be immense.

Years later de Guingand pointed out that although Broadhurst had willingly taken on the assignment, there were those, some of high rank, who did not agree that he had been correct in doing so. The accepted doctrine was that the primary task of the Air Force was to defeat the enemy air force, and that too close co-operation with the ground forces would impede this task, particularly if risk of losses was high. ¹

¹ *Operation Victory*, p. 264.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PREPARATIONS ON 25 MARCH

Preparations on 25 March

March the 25th was a day of conferences both formal and informal, and of planning on every level. The first formal conference was held with brigadiers and heads of services at 7.30 a.m., with General Horrocks present. All the details which later appeared in the operation orders were discussed, but two decisions were made for activities preceding the main attack. First, 5 Infantry Brigade was to capture **Point 184** that evening (25 March), as the feature overlooked the lying-up area for the infantry; and secondly, all rearrangements of the existing front, including 5 Infantry Brigade's taking over a sector of the front, were to be completed during the forthcoming hours of darkness. The troops were then to dig in and lie up in concealment all day on 26 March until zero hour. The tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** were also to lie up on that day, concealed in low ground running across the Gap behind the Roman Wall.

There was considerable discussion on the most suitable time for zero hour, which was chosen at the request of General Horrocks and of Major-General Briggs, commander of 1 Armoured Division. It was the latest hour possible which would give 1 Armoured Division time to pass through the forward troops before dark and reach an area in which to lie up until the moon rose, at 11 p.m. The timings for the whole operation were fixed with the intention of obtaining the maximum benefit from the sun, which would greatly limit enemy observation, consistent with the estimated times for the **NZ Corps** break-in and the move of 1 Armoured Division. Zero hour for **NZ Corps** was settled for 4 p.m., and the final objective was to be reached two hours later. At this point, 6 p.m., 1 Armoured Division would begin to move up through the battlefield, and by last light, about 7.30 p.m., would be in its lying-up area some five miles from the start line. Here it would laager until the

moon rose and then continue on to El Hamma.

General Freyberg thought at the time that 1 Armoured Division fixed a late timing for its moonlight move, and events were to lend some support to this view, but there were difficulties in moving across country at night over unknown going, and an earlier start might have led to a general mix-up in the dark. On the whole it is probable that Horrocks and Briggs were right in deciding to wait until the moon rose.

Following this conference **Kippenberger**, together with the COs of 23 and 28 Battalions and their intelligence officers, made a reconnaissance from the high ground between **Hir Benia** and **Zemlet el Madjel**, and had what the brigadier later described as 'the best view of an enemy position I have ever had'. The usefulness of the hills flanking the gap for observation was thus shared by both sides, although the enemy had the advantage in this respect.

In the afternoon of 25 March **Freyberg** held another conference attended by COs and above, by heads of services, by **RAF** liaison officers and by Generals Horrocks and Briggs, at which he reviewed the whole position and explained the details of the **NZ Corps** plan, which was the first stage of the full plan for the attack on and disruption of the enemy lines at Tebaga and beyond. **New Zealand Corps** would make the gap, 1 Armoured Division would then go through, and as soon as **NZ Corps** could clear its flanks it would follow to **El Hamma** and **Gabes**. It was firmly intended that, provided the **NZ Corps** attack was not a complete debacle, 1 Armoured Division would go through. General Horrocks has since said that **General Freyberg** was most insistent in asking for assurances that the tanks would go through, to which he replied, 'They will go through and I am going with them'. ¹

The combined plan was sent to Army Headquarters by liaison officer in the afternoon, with **Freyberg's** concurrence that the air-support programme should start half an hour before zero hour. The plan received unstinted approbation from the Army Commander, who signalled to both generals on the 25th that the plan was first class and, on 26 March,

wrote to General Horrocks as follows:

Have seen your LO with plan. It is very simple and first class. The weather forecast is not too good. But dust and smoke and sun in his eyes will make it quite impossible for the enemy to see anything.

The more dust the better—provided that the **RAF can see the battle area from the sky.**

Am sending you and Bernard one bottle of brandy each. Good luck to you and the whole party. My very special regards to Bernard.

¹ Letter to author, 3 Sep 1958.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ORDERS FOR SUPERCHARGE

Orders for SUPERCHARGE

Whatever **Freyberg's** feelings may have been in the preceding forty-eight hours, he must have been relieved at the arrival of additional strength at the switch line, for a new vigour became apparent in the conduct of operations. The combination was now irresistible—Montgomery's conception of a blitz attack to take place in the afternoon, Broadhurst's readiness to provide overwhelming air support with new techniques, **Freyberg's** plan for a set-piece attack to break through, and Horrocks's determination that the armour would carry on relentlessly.

The actual plans are best explained by two orders issued during the night of 25–26 March.

The first is **10 Corps** Operation Order No. 14, of which extracts follow:

INFORMATION

1. The enemy is now believed to be at full stretch and the only reinforcement on **10 Corps** front which seems possible, is that 15 Pz Div might be extracted from **Mareth** to support 21 Pz Div....

INTENTION

2. **10 Corps** will seize HAMMA.

METHOD

3. The operation will be divided into two phases.

Phase 1. The rupture by 2 NZ Corps of the enemy's present line in

the area Y.9009 [north-east of **Point 201**].

Phase 2. Exploitation by 1 Armd Div to include the capture of Hamma.

4. Phase 1

2 NZ Corps will advance astride the main road for a distance of 4,500 yards from the ROMAN WALL. Details of this operation are in process of production by 2 NZ Corps now.

ZERO HOUR will be 1600 hrs 26 Mar 43.

1 Armd Div will follow up the advance of 2 NZ Corps.

5. Phase 2.

1 Armd Div will pass through 2 NZ Corps at Z plus 200 minutes and will be concentrated NORTH-EAST of 2 NZ Corps final objective by last light 26 Mar 43.

When the moon is up i.e. approx 2315 hrs 1 Armd Div will move with centre line Main Road and capture HAMMA.

Subsequent to inception of Phase 2, 2 NZ Corps will destroy the enemy in the hills on either side of the centre line of the advance. This will be completed with the greatest possible despatch in order that 2 NZ Corps may rejoin 1 Armd Div in the HAMMA- GABES area earliest.

7. ARTY

1 Armd Div Arty (less 11 H.A.C.) and 69 Med Regt will be in support of 2 NZ Corps for Phase 1 of this operation....

8. AIR

For Phase 1 of this operation ALL air will be in support of 2 NZ Corps. During this Phase 2 NZ Corps will deal direct with Air

Support Control on all matters affecting this Phase, **HQ 10 Corps** listening only. This support has been arranged to take the form of:
—

- (1) **Night 25/26 Mar heavy night bombing of enemy forward areas on Corps front.**
- (2) **P.M. 26 Mar until zero hour concentrated light bomber, fighter bomber and tank-buster attack on enemy troops, tanks and guns in the forward area.**

From 1900 hrs 26 Mar air support will be controlled and arranged by HQ 10 Corps.

12. LOCATION HQS

G.O.C. 10 Corps Recce HQ will be established initially in the area of **Tac HQ 1 Armd Div**. By the beginning of PHASE 2 it will be located with **Main HQ 1 Armd Div**. **Main HQ 10 Corps** will remain present location until mopping up operations by **2 NZ Corps** to the **HAMMA** area.

13. Code name of operation is SUPERCHARGE.

The second relevant order is NZ Corps Operation Order No. 2, of which extracts follow:

4. Air

From 1530 hrs for a period of two hours RAF is providing continuous fighter cover and direct air support for this operation. The following forces will be employed on this task:—

Sixteen sqns fighter-bombers

One sqn tank-busters

One sqn spitfires

INTENTION

5. NZ Corps will attack and capture the enemy position between Djebel Tebaga and Djebel Melab [map references given.]

METHOD

6. General

The attack will be made on a two bde front with 5 NZ Inf Bde on the right and 6 NZ Inf Bde on the left, 8 Armd Bde superimposed on the whole front. It will be supported by RAF and Arty

8. Start Line Boundaries etc.

See Trace 'A' attached. ¹

(....

a)

(Axis of advance: rd KEBILI—HAMMA.

b)

(....

c)

(Boundaries Inter-bde: rd KEBILI—HAMMA incl to 5 NZ Inf bde.

d)

(Objectives First: [2000 yards from start line] Second: [2500 yards beyond first]

(Rate of advance To first objective: 100 yds in 1 min From first f) to second objective: 100 yds in 2 mins

9. Timings

(8 Armd Bde cross ROMAN WALL at 1600 hrs at same time as a) arty bombardment commences.

(5 and 6 NZ Inf Bde[s] cross inf start line immediately behind 8 b) Armd Bde at 1615 hrs.

(There will be no pause on First Objective.

c)

10. Arty

(In addition to arty of NZ Corps, the attack will be supported by

a) two fd regts and one med regt of **10 Corps**

(Arty will support attack by a creeping barrage with timed

b) concentrations on known enemy localities and hostile batteries.

(Timings for arty barrage are shown in Trace 'A'.

c)

(To indicate final objective has been reached arty will fire smoke

d) for 4 minutes, 200 yds ahead of objective.

11. Special Tasks

(**KDG:** will maintain patrols as at present and be prepared to

a) concentrate at short notice and pass through the bridgehead and exploit NE.

(**Div Cav:** In support 6 NZ Inf Bde to move NE and assist in

b) mopping up in foothills on western flank.

(**8 Armd Bde:** move in advance of inf during attack with heavy

c) sqns leading, and regulating pace to the arty barrage. Regts will support bns as under: Notts Yeo: 28 NZ (Maori) Bn Staffs Yeo: 23 NZ Inf Bn 3 R Tanks: 24 NZ Inf Bn.

(**Corps Res Gp:** protection of Main NZ Corps

d)

('L' Force: Maintain present tasks.

e)

12. Action on Capture of Final Objective

(**8 Armd Bde:** rally and form bridgehead and exploit to east and

a) NE.

(**5 NZ Inf Bde:** reorganise and exploit high ground to the east.

b)

(**6 NZ Inf Bde:** reorganise and complete mopping up of enemy

c) pockets in foothills DJEBEL TABAGA.

17. Recognition signals

(*Ground to Air*

a) (i) Forward line of inf will burn orange smoke at the following times:— 1530 hrs 1540 hrs 1550 hrs It is essential that orange smoke be shown **ONLY BY FORWARD LINE OF TPS** in order that **RAF** will see continuous line of smoke indicating FDLs.

(ii) Arty will fire smoke, rate one round per minute in general area of hostile batteries from 1530 hrs to 1730 hrs.

(iii) To assist **RAF**, 5 NZ Inf Bde will establish a landmark letter 'A' at [point one mile east of Pt 201] by 0700 hrs and will burn RED and BLUE smoke on the site on approach of our own aircraft. Between 1530 hrs and 1600 hrs the smoke will be shown every 60 seconds.

(*Ground to Ground* Tracer fired vertically.
b)

18. *Zero Hour*

Zero hour will be 1600 hrs, and is the time at which fire commences on the arty opening line.

19. *Security*

It is imperative that NO mention of this operation be made by wireless, other than in high-grade cipher.

20. *Codewords*

This operation will be known as **SUPERCHARGE**

21. *Synchronisation*

By BBC time signal.

Groupings for the attack were much as usual, the field artillery remaining under the CRA until after the barrage. The brigade groups each had two machine-gun companies attached instead of the normal one, and 5 Brigade Group had two anti-tank batteries.

¹ Not reproduced.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

STARTING POSITIONS FOR SUPERCHARGE

Starting Positions for SUPERCHARGE

Considerable rearrangement of battalion sectors was involved in the preparations. Fifth Infantry Brigade was to take over the front east of the **Kebili — El Hamma** road, and 6 Infantry Brigade intended to reorganise its remaining portion of the front. But the first essential was the capture of **Point 184**, for it completely overlooked the proposed start line, which for most of its length was in front of the existing FDLs. There could be no move until this feature was held securely.

In view of the previous failure to capture this point and of the absolute necessity of its capture, **Brigadier Kippenberger** entrusted the task to a whole battalion. The CO of 21 Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Harding) was given orders for the attack at 10 a.m. on 25 March, and spent the rest of the morning and the early afternoon on reconnaissance with his company commanders, and in arranging artillery support through Brigade Headquarters. All instructions were verbal, as there was no time to prepare written orders. At this time—about midday 25 March—5 Infantry Brigade was still in the position taken up on 23 March as a counter to possible action by *10 Panzer Division*.

The first objective was **Point 184**, known as Objective 'A', to be attacked by C Company (Major **Laird**¹) with A (Captain **Bullock-Douglas**²) in support. The second was another knoll 1000 yards farther north, known as Objective 'B', to be attacked by D Company (Captain **Murray**³). The 4th and 6th Field Regiments were to concentrate for fifteen minutes on both objectives and then for another five on 'B' only. One medium battery was to fire on 'B' for the full twenty minutes. The start line was at right angles to the Roman Wall and faced east towards the objectives.

The **21st Battalion** began to move up at 6.30 p.m. and debussed at

the Roman Wall south-east of **Point 201**. The companies formed up on the start line just before midnight, the artillery opened fire at 1 a.m. on 26 March, and the companies advanced and, despite some close fighting, captured both objectives by 2.50 a.m. A Company, in reserve to C Company, was not called on. The artillery preparation appears to have demoralised the enemy, so enabling our infantry to follow up quickly with the bayonet before they could recover. Enemy losses on Objective 'A' appeared to be only six killed, but thirty-seven were taken prisoner, all from *104 Panzer Grenadier Regiment of 21 Panzer Division*. One truck, eleven heavy machine-guns, two mortars and much personal equipment was captured. On Objective 'B' twelve dead were counted, and eight were captured together with two mortars and one antitank gun. Here the enemy had fought harder; and shortly after D Company had consolidated, there was much noise from tanks and vehicles, and a counter-attack was suspected. Artillery support was called for at 3.15 a.m., and a concentration put down within nine minutes. It was effective in stopping any counter-measures.

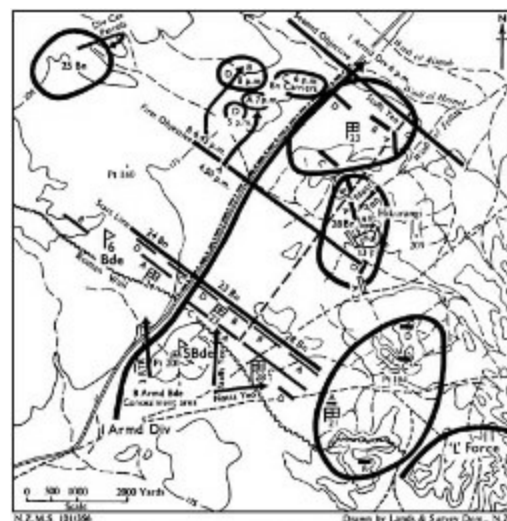
The total casualties in 21 Battalion were four killed and seventeen wounded. Altogether it was a quick and clean operation. Before first light supporting arms—machine guns, mortars, and antitank guns—were in position, augmented by the mortars of 28 Battalion, which were to be on loan until that battalion advanced later in the day. There were distinct signs of an enemy attack about 8 a.m., but nothing happened, and no counter-action was taken, as it was not desired to alarm the enemy at that time.

Both the companies and their supporting weapons found great difficulty in digging in on the rocky ground, and had to build up rather than dig down. Enemy fire, heavy on occasion, made conditions most unpleasant up to the time the **NZ Corps'** attack began. In this attack, 21 Battalion took no part, remaining in a right-flank protection role.

The brigade reorganisation could now go on without enemy observation from close at hand. Sixth Infantry Brigade had all three battalions in the line—26 on the right, stretching out towards **Point**

184; 25 in the centre, mainly east of the [El Hamma](#) road, but with one company on the west; and 24 Battalion on the left, entirely west of the road. The brigade was now to attack with 24 Battalion only, with its right flank extended to but excluding the road.

A sequence of moves was now to take place in the following order—28 Battalion to relieve 26 Battalion; 26 Battalion to occupy all 25 Battalion positions east of and including the [El Hamma](#) road; 25 Battalion moving out to relieve the Buffs battalion on the foothills on the extreme left. The [24th Battalion](#) was to move forward to 1000 yards beyond the Roman Wall, with its right flank verging the road; 23 Battalion was then to move up between 28 and 24 Battalions. The final state of the line, in preparation for the attack, would then be 28 Battalion on the right, 23 in the centre, and 24 on the left. All the above moves were to be complete before first light on 26 March, for all movement after dawn was to be kept to the absolute minimum. Only troops whose training was thorough could have attempted such a reshuffle at night. In addition, patrols from 24 and 26 Battalions were to go out up to 1200 yards beyond their new FDLs to discover if there were any minefields which might hinder the advance of the armour. Detachments of engineers moved with the patrols for mine-clearing. No incident occurred and no mines were reported.



OPERATION SUPERCHARGE. THE BREAKTHROUGH AT YEBAGA GAP,
26 MARCH

The Maori Battalion moved early on 25 March, but did not occupy its forward position until after dark, initially relieving the forward companies of 26 Battalion. After a hot meal at 3 a.m., companies moved forward to the start line, except for B Company, on the extreme right, which was to be relieved by a company of 21 Battalion. This relief was delayed, and so B Company dug in some distance short of the start line, with orders to move off twenty minutes before zero hour so as to catch up. The battalion was dug in and out of sight by first light. Under command were one troop of six-pounders and one section of 17-pounders, a detachment of 7 Field Company and one platoon from 4 Machine-Gun Company. In addition, 28 Battalion was allotted temporarily the 21 Battalion carriers to protect its exposed right flank during the advance. The 28 Battalion mortars, on loan to 21 Battalion during the attack on **Point 184**, were to rejoin as soon as the advance started.

The **23rd Battalion** moved off after dark and went as far as a lying-up position south of the Roman Wall. There the men bedded down until 3 a.m., when after a hot meal the advance to the start line commenced. Support arms were on the same scale as for 28 Battalion except for the exchange of mortars and carriers. Again, all were in position before daylight.

The **24th Battalion** had only to move forward from its old positions. It had under command one machine-gun platoon and two sections of 8 Field Company, but no anti-tank guns, which for the time being were kept in brigade reserve.

After 23 Battalion had passed through, 26 Battalion took up a more concentrated position in rear. The **25th Battalion** was withdrawn and at 2 p.m. moved across to relieve **1 Buffs of 8 Armoured Brigade** on the foothills on the left flank, where that battalion had been since 24 March.

¹ Maj B. M. Laird, ED; **Auckland**; born **Rotorua**, 5 Jul 1904;

school teacher.

² Capt G. A. H. Bullock-Douglas; Hawera; born Wanganui, 4 Jun 1911; bank accountant; twice wounded.

³ Capt I. A. Murray; born Wanganui, 9 Aug 1917; Regular soldier; twice wounded; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ARTILLERY

Artillery

Engineers from 7 Field Company conducted a mine reconnaissance of proposed artillery positions during 25 March, and made additional gaps through the minefield to allow regiments to get forward. In the afternoon 36 Survey Battery surveyed new forward positions for 4 and 5 NZ Field Regiments, 111 Field Regiment, RA, and 64 Medium Regiment, RA.

The artillery of 1 Armoured Division made a forced march and, except for one medium battery lost in a dust-storm, arrived after dark on 25 March and was deployed by the CRA NZ Corps in the moonlight. By the morning of 26 March six field regiments and two medium regiments were all ready. It had been exhausting work, involving much digging and dumping of ammunition in the midst of a khamsin, which raised the dust and limited visibility to 100 yards.

The three New Zealand field regiments were to fire a barrage, 4 Field Regiment covering the right sector of the two into which the front had been divided, 5 Field Regiment the left, and 6 Field Regiment the whole front. From the artillery opening line to the finishing line was 4200 yards, divided into forty-two 100-yard lifts, all at right angles to the axis of advance. The opening line was to have twenty-three minutes' shelling at a mixture of rates: the first ten lifts were each to last a minute at normal rate, the tenth lift coinciding with the first objective. There was no pause on this objective, and from then on the barrage was to lift 100 yards every two minutes.

During the barrage 2 and 4 Field Regiments, RHA, from 1 Armoured Division, 111 Field Regiment from 8 Armoured Brigade and 69 Medium Regiment from 10 Corps were to fire tasks, while 64 Medium Regiment (under command NZ Corps) was to fire a counter-battery programme. The

task tables for all regiments included firing smoke at selected targets which were also to be attacked from the air, and this proved of much assistance to the [RAF](#). The artillery firing the barrage was finally to fire smoke for four minutes, two hundred yards beyond the final objective, to indicate that it had been reached.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

RATE OF ADVANCE

Rate of Advance

The rate of advance to the first objective, 100 yards in one minute, was a fast one for infantry and normally could not be maintained for very long. The reason in this case was that no enemy posts had been located between the start line and the first objective, and therefore no fighting was expected. Moreover, this was the area over which enemy defensive fire was expected, and which should be crossed quickly. Thereafter the rate fell to 100 yards in two minutes, which is still a fast rate.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

AIR SUPPORT

Air Support

It has been seen above that great care was to be taken to indicate the leading wave of tanks and infantry, and it was hoped that the orange smoke would appear from the air as a continuous line.

The air attack was to open with simultaneous bombing by three squadrons of escorted light bombers, approaching at low level to achieve surprise. Thereafter two and a half squadrons of Kittyhawk bombers would enter the area every fifteen minutes to bomb selected targets, including gun positions. Throughout the period Hurricane tank-busters were to break up enemy tank concentrations. The normal night heavy bombing would continue, and was directed against **El Hamma** for the night 26–27 March.

The following extract from de Guingand's account of the campaign explains the genesis of this new departure in North Africa: ¹

We in the Army had always wanted to try out what is generally called a 'Blitz' attack. The Germans...used their dive bombers for that very close and intimate air support which we felt would prove very effective. Hitherto the close support given to the attack had always been by bomb from the light bomber, and the fighter bomber. The RAF had for very good reasons been against the dive bomber, but we felt the cannons from the fighter bomber with their bombs dropped from comparatively high the fighters might prove more deadly and disrupting to the enemy than altitudes. In view of the importance of this attack, and the narrow frontage to which we were confined, this did look to be the right occasion for trying out this type of attack. Using the fighter in this low-flying role over the immediate battle area was a considerable risk, and it was possible that the casualties would prove very severe. On the

other hand, we felt that, from our own experiences from low-flying attacks, the defence took some time to recover equilibrium, and that some sort of temporary paralysis often set in.

The Commander of the Western **Desert Air Force**, Air Vice-Marshal Broadhurst, agreed to give full co-operation and supply 'the whole boiling match', and both commander and pilots entered into the plan with an enthusiasm that guaranteed success.

¹ *Operation Victory*, p. 256.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

BRIGADE OPERATION ORDERS

Brigade Operation Orders

Fifth Infantry Brigade operation order was received by battalions early on 26 March. The order largely recapitulated what has been said above in relation to 10 Corps and NZ Corps orders, but the following paragraphs applied particularly to the brigade:

8. The attack will be made on a two bn front, 28 NZ (Maori) Bn on right, 23 NZ Bn on left, supported by RAF, Arty, and with two regts hy tanks (Notts Yeo and Staffs Yeo) superimposed on Bde front.

17. Carriers

(a) Two secs carriers from 21 NZ Bn will report forthwith to 28 NZ (Maori) Bn and will come under comd on arrival.

(b) Carriers universal and mortar will move behind by tanks and ahead of light flanks with special tasks of:—

(i) Protecting flanks

(ii) Attacking and neutralising enemy A Tk guns

(iii) Covering exploitation and consolidation.

18. Special task: 21 NZ Bn will remain in present area and will assist adv by

(i) Giving protection to right flank

(ii) Neutralising all enemy fire possible.

19. Action on capture of final objective

(a) Exploitation

(i) 23 NZ Bn will exploit to limit of high ground on axis of adv.

(ii) 28 NZ (Maori) Bn will exploit to limit of high ground on axis adv and to high ground on EAST.

(b) Reorganisation: will proceed under unit direction on final

objective.

20. MMGs: 2 NZ MG Coy will remain in present posn until further orders and maintain liaison with Bde HQ.

{This was the additional MG Coy in the Group.}

On 5 Brigade front, 28 Battalion, holding a frontage of 1400 yards on the exposed right flank, had the most difficult task, namely the capture of **Point 209**.

The 6 Brigade operation order was a simple one, as the brigade was attacking on a one-battalion front only. Special points were that 24 Battalion was to follow behind the Crusader tanks of 3 Royal Tanks as they crossed the start line. On the final objective the battalion was to reorganise on a 2000-yard front. The **25th Battalion** was to support the attack with observed fire from its position on the left flank, and was to assist Divisional Cavalry in mopping up. The battalion was to be prepared to move forward and reorganise on the left of 24 Battalion once the final objective had been reached.

By dawn on 26 March the infantry was lying up in slit trenches, well camouflaged. ¹ Fires were forbidden and the men rested, for little sleep had been possible during the night. The forward positions, except those of 21 Battalion, obvious on **Point 184**, were not subjected to any increased shellfire in the period before zero hour, which is a tribute both to the success of the concealment, and to the battle discipline of the troops.

The plan for **NZ Corps'** part in SUPERCHARGE had been prepared speedily, and was simple and clear. It showed the GOC and 2 NZ Division at their best, and could be taken as a model of its kind. The preliminaries to the attack were also much to the credit of the Division and of the commander who trained it—the decisive attack on **Point 184**, and the amazing rearrangement of units during the night 25–26 March, all showing good staff work and good training.

While this activity was going on at Tebaga, far away in the rear the

road from **Medenine** via **Hallouf Pass** was open for mechanical transport by nightfall on 25 March, the advance of 4 Indian Division having uncovered the approaches. Contact between the two wings of Eighth Army was by that amount closer, but it does not appear that in the end much use was made of this route. **New Zealand Corps** did not use it, but continued to use the route via Wilder's Gap to **Gabes**. Shortly after the attack an Army Roadhead was opened near **Gabes**, and **NZ Corps** wound up its administrative tail on the old route and commenced drawing from there.

¹ The armour had also hidden itself away, concealed under its camouflage nets.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

The Enemy

It will be remembered that one of Montgomery's reasons for changing his plan was that the enemy had committed his reserve (*15 Panzer Division*) to the **Mareth** front. By 24 March, however, *15 Panzer* was withdrawn to a central position ready to reinforce either front, and was watching closely the situation at Tebaga. Tenth Corps was now moved to the Tebaga front and SUPERCHARGE was launched before *15 Panzer* moved a second time. Despite the check at **Mareth** Montgomery kept the initiative.

During 25 March the enemy formations at Tebaga reported no special activity, except the Allied mastery of the air and vast superiority in ammunition. They comment ruefully that bombers were over their lines without a break all night. The *21st Panzer Division* seems to have been disconcerted by the attack on **Point 184**, and soon decided that all it could do was to seal off the penetration.

The front opposite **NZ Corps** was still divided between *164 Light Division* and *21 Panzer Division*, with the dividing line the road running through the gap to **El Hamma**, but with tanks from *21 Division* across the whole front. The *164th Division's* sector included the slopes of **Djebel Tebaga**, while *21 Panzer Division* had its left flank on **Djebel Melab**. There were odd Italian groups of men—one can hardly call them units—interspersed along the front. The Germans merely mention 'remnants of **Mannerini Group**'.

German documents record that on 25 March *21 Panzer Division* had forty-four tanks, and *15 Panzer Division* twenty-nine. But the number of tanks with these two divisions fluctuated widely from day to day. Twenty-four hours later *21 Panzer* had only twenty-five tanks effective after our offensive, and on 27 March *15 Panzer* had only nineteen. A

report of 30 March shows *21 Panzer* with thirteen runners and forty-five in workshops, while *15 Panzer* had ten runners and twenty-five in workshops. The German repair system was good, and low numbers on one day did not mean that the numbers would not be high the next. All that can be said by way of generalisation is that the two divisions together did not have as many tanks as **8 Armoured Brigade**, which left **2 Armoured Brigade of 1 Armoured Division** as clear profit—a very substantial profit of 67 Shermans, 11 Grants, and 60 Crusaders.

The enemy's appreciation of Allied intentions was quite firm. The move of **10 Corps** from **Mareth** had been observed late on 23 March, and continued movement was reported on the following day. His immediate reactions have been related,¹ and although no orders appear to have been issued to units before the attack was launched, the probability of early withdrawal may have had some effect on dispositions, particularly those of *15 Panzer Division*.

¹ See pp. 195– 6.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

AN OUTLINE OF SUPERCHARGE II

An Outline of SUPERCHARGE II

Precisely at 3.30 p.m. the Air Force appeared, and for half an hour bombed and strafed enemy positions and gun emplacements. Then the guns opened and the heavy tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** moved forward from their concealed positions ready for the attack, followed by the first line of carriers. The sun shone behind the tanks as they moved forward, and the strong wind which had been blowing all day carried the stirred-up dust into the enemy lines; thus the enemy was not only looking into the sun but into dust and haze with the sun behind it. Moreover, the enemy was by now accustomed to the usual night attack, and was probably ill-prepared for a daylight assault. It was not until the first line of armour reached the start line at 4.15 p.m. that the enemy reacted, and it is not known whether this was due to the element of surprise, the poor visibility, or because the fighter-bombers kept the enemy crews away from their guns, but probably it was the result of all three.

When the leading tanks on the right flank ran into shellfire on the start line the tank commanders must have thought that they had caught up with the barrage, for the tanks halted. This was quickly noticed and the tanks were told to move on, after a pause of only a few minutes. The second wave of armour, Crusader tanks followed by carriers, had probably closed up a little, for at 4.20 p.m. the first wave moved on, closely followed by the second wave. Almost immediately afterwards the infantry moved into position approximately 200 yards behind the armour and the whole force was in motion. The Shermans and carriers, followed by Crusaders and carriers, followed by the lines of infantry of the three battalions, all advancing behind the fire of six field and two medium regiments, while overhead fighter, light-bomber and tank-buster aircraft flew in constant procession, represented the closest co-operation between land and air forces that the war in the desert had

seen: it was the perfect blitzkrieg. Behind the front line the tanks and lorried infantry of 1 Armoured Division waited, ready to move up and exploit success when the gap had been breached.

The advance to the first objective was accomplished without serious opposition, and for the infantry it was largely a matter of following the tanks. The enemy was obviously not prepared for a daylight attack, infantry and artillery positions being sited with a view to night defence.

The smoothness of the advance was interrupted beyond the line of the first objective. On the right flank the tanks were held up by the difficult, heavily defended feature **Point 209**, and forced by the going to bunch to the west. The 28th Battalion was halted and deployed to attack **Point 209** and its western extremity, the underfeature later called **Hikurangi**.

In the centre momentum was not lost, although tanks and carriers met determined opposition on the reverse slopes of the feature between the first and second objectives. Opposition to 23 Battalion in the centre was chiefly on its right flank, where German infantry put up a determined, but short-lived, defence from well entrenched positions. This opposition was largely overcome by the carriers. The tanks, closely followed by carriers and the leading infantry companies, reached a line slightly short of the second objective at 5.56 p.m., twenty-three minutes after the barrage had lifted 200 yards to fire smoke as a guide to the infantry.

On the left sector, west of the road, the tanks were not far behind those in the centre. Here the advance had lost the precision shown earlier because of an unsuspected minefield supporting dug positions on the left flank. The tanks lost formation, and then advanced too quickly for the infantry; 24 Battalion encountered very stiff resistance from German machine-gun posts bypassed by the tanks, posts which were still being dealt with when 1 Armoured Division began to move up the **El Hamma** road. But, despite heavy casualties, the leading infantry company reached its final objective within five minutes of the tanks.

At 6 p.m. 1 Armoured Division passed through the forward positions to laager in its forward staging area until the moon rose to light the remainder of the advance to [El Hamma](#). The gap had been won.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

8 ARMOURED BRIGADE

8 Armoured Brigade

While the regiments of **8 Armoured Brigade** each operated on the front of one battalion, and were 'in support', the fact that they were advancing in front of the infantry gave them almost an independent role, and on the whole they adhered to their advance without conforming to the varying fortunes of the infantry. It had been impressed on all the regiments that the important thing was to break through, and that they should not delay on account of individual battles or delays on the flanks of their advance.

Each regiment advanced with its heavy squadron of Shermans and Grants in front, following which came the carriers of the battalions, and then the Crusaders in the second line of tanks followed by the carriers of the armoured regiments. At this point the leading foot soldiers joined the advance. Notts Yeomanry had a rough passage round **Point 209**, but their war diary cheerfully reports that in the end they got to their objective. Staffs Yeomanry in the centre had the clearest run, and reached **Wadi el Aisoub** in advance of the final objective. Similarly **3 Royal Tanks** on the left reached the same wadi, but only after some difficulty. None of the regiments lost touch completely with its affiliated battalion, although there was a period when the tanks were forging ahead on their own.

In this attack **8 Armoured Brigade** lost twelve Shermans, one Grant and three Crusaders, but claimed the destruction of sixteen enemy tanks and sixteen guns. It took 130 prisoners. Of the three regiments **3 Royal Tanks** had the heaviest losses, due partly to minefields and partly to enemy tanks.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

28 (Maori) Battalion

The 28th Battalion advanced with A Company (Major **Porter**¹) on the right and B Company (Captain **Sorensen**²) on the left; C Company (Captain **Awatere**³), 300 yards behind, covered both these companies, and D Company (Captain **Matehaere**⁴), another 300 yards in the right rear of C, had the special task of watching the exposed right flank. Two sections of carriers operated some two miles to the east as right-flank guard.

For three-quarters of the way to the first objective the battalion had few casualties, for enemy shelling was directed mainly at the tanks. But nearer this objective there were signs that stiffer opposition lay ahead. **Point 209** was clearly held strongly, and already four tanks of Notts Yeomanry had been knocked out after pushing their attack with vigour. The tanks bunched to the left away from

¹ **Maj W. Porter**, MC and bar; Kaeo; born Taumarere, 23 Aug 1915; taxi driver; twice wounded.

² **Maj C. Sorensen; Whangarei**; born **Auckland**, 5 Jun 1917; school teacher; twice wounded.

³ **Lt-Col A. Awatere**, DSO, MC; **Rotorua**; born Tuparoa, 25 Apr 1910; civil servant; CO 28 Bn Jul–Aug 1944, Nov 1944–Jun 1945; twice wounded.

⁴ **Maj J. Matehaere**, MC, m.i.d.; Tirau; born NZ 28 Feb 1916; farmhand; three times wounded.

Point 209 and advanced up a small wadi, and 28 Battalion also edged

off to the left and finally was somewhat concentrated well to the west of **Point 209**.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett then went forward to the tank commander. The essential task was to clear the high ground on the right, with its many anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns. Accordingly Bennett ordered C Company to swing right and capture **Point 209**, while the other three companies were to dig in where they were and so establish a firm base. It was then 5 p.m. and still light. A and B Companies were about 1000 yards beyond the first objective, but were still 1500 yards short of the final objective, while D Company faced right to the south of **Point 209**.

Topography now played a part, for the hill immediately to the right, C Company's objective, was not in fact **Point 209**, but a steep underfeature west of and separated from it by a saddle almost 1000 yards long. There is some doubt whether anyone realised this at the time, but certainly both battalion and later brigade headquarters thought for varying periods that C Company's attack was being made on **Point 209** proper. Bennett was not certain when he visited the feature after dusk, and in the confusion of battle the point was not cleared up at that time. Brigade Headquarters had been informed that 209 had been captured and did not realise the mistake until the brigade commander went forward in the morning to see for himself. This meant that in the evening and during the night there was no artillery fire in immediate support of the attackers, and what fire there was came down on the reverse slopes of **Point 209**, in the belief that the summit of that feature had been captured. Had the true situation been known, Brigade Headquarters could have arranged for heavy artillery support.

The sub-feature was later called Hikurangi, after a mountain in the East Coast district of New Zealand from which C Company was drawn. The defenders came from *II Battalion, 433 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, of 164 Light Division*. C Company attacked Hikurangi with great dash, Captain Awatere working his three platoons with whistle and arm signal in a manner that was most impressive. No. 13 Platoon (Lieutenant

Jackson ¹) worked round the hill on the right, 15 Platoon (Lieutenant **Haig** ²) in the centre, and 14 Platoon (Second-Lieutenant **Ngarimu** ³) on the left. No. 15 Platoon was pinned to the ground near the foot of the hill and could not get forward till after dark: 13 and 14 Platoons reached a point

¹ **Maj S. F. Jackson**, m.i.d.; **Lower Hutt**; born NZ 11 Sep 1918; labourer; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

² **Capt W. Te A. Haig**, m.i.d.; Ruatoria; born Waipiro Bay, Ruatoria, 14 Nov 1904; clerk.

³ 2 Lt **Te M. N. Ngarimu**, VC; born NZ 7 Apr 1918; shepherd; killed in action 27 Mar 1943.

near, but not actually on, the crest. The enemy, above them on the reverse slope, counter-attacked repeatedly, supported by intense machine-gun and mortar fire, but was gallantly withstood, although with severe losses to C Company. By nightfall when Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett visited Hikurangi, both Captain Awatere and Second-Lieutenant **Ngarimu** had been wounded. Awatere refused to go until his wounded leg had swollen so much that he could only crawl, and the command of the company passed to Lieutenant Jackson. **Ngarimu** asked to be allowed to stay, and was given permission. Bennett gave instructions that the hill was to be held at all costs, while the remaining companies were to be ready for counter-attacks. Battalion headquarters was established a few hundred yards from the foot of Hikurangi.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett was not at the time aware that the main attack had reached the final objective, and that a gap had been made through the enemy position. The capture of Hikurangi and **Point 209** had now in effect developed into a private struggle between 28 Battalion and *II/433 Panzer Grenadier Regiment*, to be fought out with all the gallantry that grim determination can produce.

The battalion support arms came forward after dark and were deployed, and the mortars, now rejoined from 21 Battalion, were concentrated at the foot of Hikurangi; and equally acceptable was the arrival of a hot meal about 8 p.m. This was distributed throughout, even to the men of C Company who were within earshot of the enemy. The dead and wounded were removed from the top of the hill and signal lines laid to all companies from battalion headquarters.

However, there was no communication with Brigade Headquarters, and the brigade commander in some concern instructed 21 Battalion to send a patrol from **Point 184** to make contact. This was duly done, but as it happened 28 Battalion was finally in touch by wireless with Brigade Headquarters about the same time. The report was then made that **Point 209** had been captured. The battalion appeared to be in good order, but Bennett was concerned both about his open right flank, and in having all four companies committed. He tried to arrange for tanks to be placed on his right flank, but without success. His only reserve was the carrier platoon. **Brigadier Kippenberger** then instructed 21 Battalion to move one company forward to the right of 28 Battalion, and after sundry adventures, including an alarming encounter with a patrol from 23 Battalion, A Company of 21 Battalion (Captain Bullock-Douglas) arrived in position to the right of D Company, 28 Battalion. It was then 3 a.m. on 27 March. There was still a gap between A Company's position and that of D Company, 21 Battalion, on the northern hillock of **Point 184**.

About this time also, 23 Battalion on the other flank made contact with 28, and the latter's brief isolation was at an end. The battalion was now in good heart for whatever the morning might bring.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

23 BATTALION

23 Battalion

The **23rd Battalion** advanced with B Company (Captain Robertson ¹) on the right and D (Captain **Black** ²) on the left, with A (Captain **Thomas** ³) behind B, and C (Captain **Slee** ⁴) behind D. The battalion had comparatively easy going, for the ground was good for tanks, which advanced steadily in line, drawing most of the artillery fire. Lieutenant-Colonel Romans travelled well forward in a jeep, within speaking distance of the RSM of Staffs Yeomanry, who moved in a rear tank and was in wireless touch with the regimental commander. Romans was lucky, for a jeep amongst armour is a risky vehicle. His water bottle was shot from his side and several bullet-holes were drilled in the jeep's seat.

The first objective was passed about 4.40 p.m. almost unnoticed, but more shell and machine-gun fire marked the advance to the final objective. However, many enemy defensive positions were now overrun, and Germans surrendered in dozens. Enemy tanks were driven off by Staffs Yeomanry and four destroyed. But touch was lost with 28 Battalion, the ground caused the tanks to bunch towards the left flank and the companies lost their precise formation. D Company on the left, for instance, drew additional support from the tanks on its front and got ahead of the others. There was increasing enemy fire as the troops reached the crest of a low rise (which was in fact the watershed of **Tebaga Gap**), but the momentum of the advance was enough to keep it going, and co-ordinated attacks dealt with some annoying anti-tank guns which had accounted for six Staffs Yeomanry tanks. The battalion carriers here did noble work, armed not only with Brens but with captured enemy weapons, and there were occasions when they engaged enemy anti-tank guns at close range.

During the advance down the northern slopes of the rise, there was increased fire from enemy positions which had already been overrun by

tanks. Many prisoners were disarmed and sent back but enemy fire increased. The tanks were by now under heavy antitank fire from the north side of **Wadi el Hernel**, and from enemy tanks there and in **Wadi el Fellag**, but were fast nearing the final objective. B Company on the right front was forced to go to ground, so Captain Thomas brought A Company forward to the right of B, and sent a section against the enemy in **Wadi el Fellag**, disorganising them and even inducing enemy tanks to withdraw.

About 6 p.m. both A and B Companies were dug in just south of **Wadi el Hernel** and D Company was on their left close to the **El Hamma** road, all only slightly short of the final objective. Staffs Yeomanry had by then cleared the area up to **Wadi el Hernel**, and 1 Armoured Division was beginning to pass through towards **Wadi Aisoub**. Patches of resistance on the right flank were soon cleared up, firing died down, and the battalion consolidated with the tanks laagered behind the forward companies. There was still, however, no link with 28 Battalion, and finally Lieutenant-Colonel Romans sent out a patrol from A Company, which met A Company from 21 Battalion advancing to support the 28th, and very nearly started a private war.

Battalion headquarters was set up well forward of the rise between the two objectives, but owing to a breakdown in the wireless set was not in touch with Brigade Headquarters until nearly midnight. The night proved uneventful.

The battalion war history records that 'practically everything in this battle went according to plan for the battalion', and it had scored a clear-cut victory on the vital sector of the front. The total casualties were 11 killed and 30 wounded, but over 400 prisoners were taken. The battalion had the highest praise for the Staffs Yeomanry.

¹ **Capt G. McG. Robertson**, m.i.d.; born Ladbrooks, 20 Apr 1909; bank officer; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

² **Capt H. C. Black**; born NZ 29 Aug 1917; warehouseman; twice wounded; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

³ **Lt-Col W. B. Thomas**, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d., Silver Star (US); London; born Nelson, 29 Jun 1918; bank officer; CO **23 Bn** 1944–45; **22 Bn (Japan)** Oct 1945–Nov 1946; wounded and p.w. 25 May 1941; escaped Nov 1941; returned to unit May 1942; twice wounded; Hampshire Regt, 1947–.

⁴ **Maj C. A. Slee**, m.i.d.; born Westport; clerk; died of wounds 5 Apr 1944.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

24 BATTALION

24 Battalion

The **24th Battalion** was delayed on the start line for almost ten minutes because 3 Royal Tanks mistook the enemy's artillery fire for the supporting barrage and waited for it to lift. This rectified, the initial advance proceeded smoothly, but the delay caused the battalion to fall well behind the barrage. Twelve of the tanks paused briefly to embark two men each as 'tank-riding crews', one man with a sub-machine gun, and one with a bag of No. 36 grenades. This was the first time such action had been taken and, in fact, 24 Battalion was the only one to try the practice. The experiment was not a success.

C Company (Captain **Seal**¹) on the right and D (Captain **Dew**²) on the left advanced behind the armour, with A (Captain **Aked**³) in support. B Company (Major **Andrews**⁴) was 600 yards behind in the left rear with orders not to become involved, but each of the forward companies had a section from B Company to help collect prisoners, and all companies had 3-inch mortars under command.

The advance to the first objective was uneventful. Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly, travelling in a carrier, moved forward to contact the tanks and try to speed up the advance, but enemy opposition became so strong that there was no question of catching up with the barrage. A ridge sloped down into the battalion sector from the west about midway between the two objectives, with a minefield on its southern slopes leaving a gap near the Hamma road. The top of the ridge was heavily defended by anti-tank guns. The defenders were from *125 Panzer Grenadier Regiment of 164 Light Division* and some Italians supported by tanks from *21 Panzer Division*.

Some tanks and carriers tried to burst through the minefield, but several were blown up, and others bunched towards the road to move

over the ridge at the road end, where the enemy had placed his strongest anti-tank defences. Only on the extreme right of the sector did the advance proceed satisfactorily, and here the tanks reached the final objective shortly before 6 p.m. The delays at the minefield caused those tanks which cleared the area to speed up to catch the barrage, but thereby they left many enemy positions unattacked, and as their aim was to break through to the final objective they were of little assistance to the infantry. After the battle, Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly spoke strongly about the need for a better system of communication between battalion and regimental commanders, the only method open to him being to climb into a tank and use the regiment's internal link. The battalion was now confronted with an enemy which was probably numerically stronger and was firmly entrenched. C Company passed just to the east of the minefield and continued to advance, but with its left flank in the air, as D Company on its left was faced with stern opposition from the ridge in front of it. It was during this progress almost across the enemy's front that C Company suffered its heaviest casualties. Many posts were mopped up but others had to

¹ Maj R. J. H. Seal; Auckland; born London, 20 Feb 1912; public accountant; GSO II, HQ Allied Military Liaison, Yugoslavia, 1944; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

² Maj M. T. S. Dew; Wellington; born Nelson 27 Apr 1916; Regular soldier; LO 210 British Military Mission, 1942; 2 i/c 24 Bn Dec 1943–Jan 1944.

³ Lt-Col E. W. Aked, MC, m.i.d., Aristion Andrias (Gk); Tauranga; born England, 12 Feb 1911; shop assistant; CO 24 Bn 4–8 Jun 1944; CO 210 British Liaison Unit with 3 Greek Bde in Italy and Greece, 1944–45.

⁴ Maj E. R. Andrews, ED, m.i.d.; Pukearuhe, Taranaki; born New Plymouth, 17 Jul 1913; farmer; 2 i/c 24 Bn Jun 1944–Jun 1945.

be left, and it was now that the men riding on the tanks were sorely missed. Prisoners were merely disarmed and sent back as there were no spare men for escorts despite the extra section from B Company. But Captain Seal kept the company going, and alone among the companies of 24 Battalion it reached the vicinity of the final objective by 6 p.m. Later some carriers, sent forward by Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly after he had visited the company, were used to fill the gap caused by the absence of D Company. Thus C Company's success, plus that of 23 Battalion and **8 Armoured Brigade**, cleared a sufficient gap in the centre of the enemy line for 1 Armoured Division to progress astride the vital axis of advance.

In the rear of C Company the position was not good, and among other complications, unguarded prisoners picked up abandoned weapons and resumed hostilities. In this confused situation some of our wounded were killed. On the left, D Company reached the first objective without difficulty, and then arrived at the minefield from which the tanks had swerved away. By now the barrage was lost, but Captain Dew had been told that the infantry attack must continue, and all three platoons crossed the minefield and advanced under heavy fire against the ridge beyond, capturing some twenty prisoners who were sent to the rear without escort. The commander of 16 Platoon, Second-Lieutenant Cater,¹ was killed and gradually every man in the platoon became a casualty; 17 Platoon was finally pinned to the ground in front of an enemy strongpoint and its commander, Lieutenant **Friend**,² was wounded; and 18 Platoon reached the crest of the ridge and was closing with the enemy when, among other casualties, its commander, Second-Lieutenant Woodcock,³ was killed. The company had maintained its offensive till the last but was by now exhausted of manpower and incapable of further effort.

A Company in support then became involved, and was held up behind the minefield, where it found several tanks knocked out as well as the mortars of D Company. No. 7 Platoon was sent round the western end of the minefield, and 8 and 9 still farther to the left, in an attempt

to outflank the strongpoints at the top. They managed to move forward for a while, but it was slow progress. For the moment Captain Aked refrained from launching any stronger attack until he could discuss the situation with the battalion commander, and he withdrew 7 Platoon which was making no progress.

¹ 2 Lt W. P. Cater; born NZ 21 Jan 1919; dairy factory assistant; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

² Capt L. C. Friend, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Suva, 3 Nov 1913; bank officer; OC 1 NZ Interrogation Sec 1944; OC Allied Interrogation Det, Italy, 1944; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

³ 2 Lt F. C. Woodcock; born England, 3 Apr 1909; orchardist and motor mechanic; wounded 27 Nov 1941; killed in action 26 Mar 1943.

Now B Company, the reserve, came into the picture. The company commander, Major Andrews, could see the trouble ahead, and leaving his company under cover went to battalion headquarters, soon to be joined by Captain Aked. Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly was at the moment away in his carrier with C Company, and the adjutant, Captain Boord,¹ had been wounded some time before; and so Major Andrews was left to make his own decision, which was to attack farther on the left, where there was a chance that he would outflank the enemy and even link up with 25 Battalion.

Unknown to him, however, Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly sent back a radio signal to B Company ordering it forward on C Company's axis, with the idea of taking the enemy strongpoints from the rear—in other words exploiting success. But B Company's signal arrangements had broken down and the message was never delivered.

So B Company moved off to the west and then advanced in extended order across the minefield, but as soon as it emerged from a patch of

dead ground it was faced with heavy small-arms fire and was gradually forced to ground. After a while Andrews thought it was serving no useful purpose to stay there in daylight—it was about 6 p.m.—and so withdrew the company and re-formed, reporting back at once to the battalion commander.

At Headquarters it was found that the position had improved. There had been a conference between Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly, Captain Aked and Captain Dew, the last-named describing the losses of D Company and the obscure position on his front, where, however, the company had now made some progress. So Conolly ordered A Company to carry on with its attack, and Aked decided to go on in one line with the two platoons left to him. No. 7 Platoon had not yet reported back. With mortar support A Company charged forward, withheld their fire until at short range, and then closed with the bayonet. The verve of this attack at the double overwhelmed the enemy and all the enemy troops not killed surrendered at once. The company advanced down the northern slopes of the ridge for 300 yards and then reorganised, having taken ninety-two prisoners. A surprising reinforcement to this attack came from seven men of 3 Royal Tanks whose vehicles had been knocked out, but who had joined A Company in its last assault.

So with this foundation Conolly ordered B Company to renew the attack wide on the left, and the advance was resumed at 9 p.m.; but the enemy had retired. Later about eighteen survivors from D

¹ **Lt-Col R. Boord**, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born NZ 4 Feb 1908; student; CO **24 Bn** Jul-Dec 1945; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

Company were added to B, and the company advanced steadily and consolidated on the left of C, a little short of the final objective. This move concluded 24 Battalion's attack, and by 10 p.m. the sector was stable. Expected counter-attacks did not eventuate, and by 2 a.m. on 27 March the whole area had been combed for enemy troops, and all companies were reorganised and dug in. One company from 26 Battalion

was standing ready to help with mopping up, but this assistance was not required.

Casualties in 24 Battalion were fairly heavy—49 killed and 58 wounded, a much higher proportion of killed to wounded than is normal. The medical records show that the proportion of killed to wounded all across the front was higher than usual, owing possibly to the fact that this attack was made in daylight.

The battalion had captured between 400 and 500 prisoners, and another 150 were rounded up in the morning; and enemy casualties in killed and wounded were high also. Inspection of the enemy position disclosed just how strongly it had been prepared and fortified, but a sustained offensive by 24 Battalion, combined with success elsewhere, had overcome all opposition.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

FLANKING UNITS

Flanking Units

The 21st Battalion on Point 184 continued to be shelled throughout the Corps' attack, but as the advance progressed the shelling came from the east only. Any movement from the hastily constructed slit trenches was almost impossible, and for the moment the battalion was held down to its defensive role.

The 28th Battalion had sent two sections of its carriers to operate up to two miles on the east of the battalion, with the task of stopping interference from that area. Both sections drew a considerable amount of fire, but they ranged far and wide and engaged anything that showed signs of movement.

On the left flank of the Corps 25 Battalion made a diversionary attack to draw enemy fire away from the left of 24 Battalion, distant about 2000 yards. No definite objective was given the battalion, the governing factor being the amount of opposition encountered. There was some progress on the right, an enemy position was captured, and after dark about fifty Italians surrendered. On the left the companies ran into heavy opposition from tanks, and were in the end pinned down and surrounded. The situation was saved by the battalion anti-tank platoon under Lieutenant **Williams.¹ It destroyed one tank, and then in turn pinned down the others, until finally they withdrew. After dark, when it was known that the main attack had been successful, all companies were withdrawn.**

Divisional Cavalry patrolled all day in the foothills of **Djebel Tebaga without any serious engagement. KDG and 'L' Force remained on **Zemlet el Madjel** and **Djebel Melab**, where 'L' Force worked towards Point 242.**

Throughout the action there was practically no enemy counter-

battery activity or air interference. Only one unit mentions the appearance of enemy aircraft and it refers to one 'very slight fighter-bomber raid'. The only trouble came from a Kittyhawk fighter-bomber which attacked a Divisional Cavalry carrier and caused two casualties, and also strafed 6 Brigade Headquarters three times. The pilot was apparently badly briefed for this was the only case where our aircraft made a mistake, a tribute to the system of marking ground positions which had been evolved.

¹ Maj J. L. Williams, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 25 Jun 1908; school teacher.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

1 ARMoured DIVISION

1 Armoured Division

Although 28 Battalion had not captured **Point 209** by nightfall, the result of the attacks of 23 and 24 Battalions was to open the gap for 1 Armoured Division, which advanced at the appointed time, and by last light was some four miles beyond the final objective. The appearance of the mass of tanks and other vehicles moving steadily forward was a very comforting sight. ¹

The 1st Armoured Division halted until the moon rose (about 11 p.m.) and then continued its advance towards **El Hamma**, disregarding the scattered fighting still going on in **NZ Corps'** area, and disregarding also the German troops and their defences still in position between **NZ Corps'** final objective and **El Hamma**. The division was thus passing through the remnants of *164 Light Division*, and even more spectacularly was passing through *21 Panzer Division*, which although only a shadow of its former strength was still a foe to be respected. During its advance the division charged through the headquarters of both the German divisions, so increasing the confusion.

For the moment, however, the activities of 1 Armoured Division had ceased to be the concern of **NZ Corps**.

¹ 1 Armoured Division arrived in its assembly area south-west of the start line just in time, the last vehicle only thirty minutes before zero hour. In effect the division went straight into action after its approach march.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

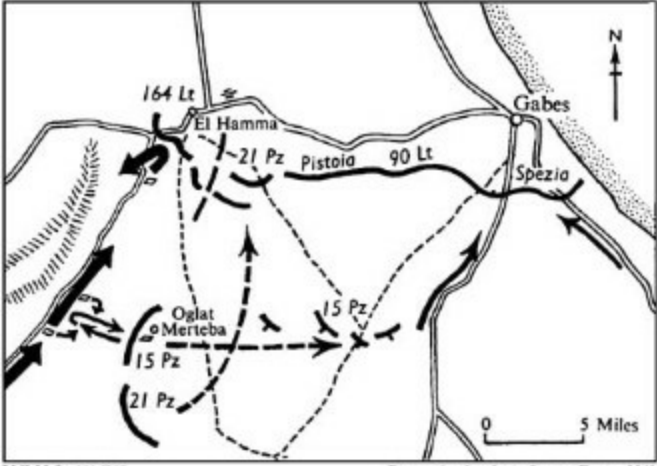
The Enemy

During the morning of 26 March the enemy plans for the formal withdrawal from the **Mareth** Line were settled, although apparently the Italian formations in the line made it more difficult by beating the pistol and then demanding that the Germans cover their withdrawal. (Memories of the retreat from **Alamein** were still bitter ones.) There had been some idea of taking up an intermediate position on **Wadi Zerkine**, some six miles in the rear, but the final decision was to go straight back to a line in front of **Gabes**, the first stage to be on the night 26–27 March.

The loss of **Point 184** early on 26 March was enough to cause part of **15 Panzer Division** to be sent forward to strengthen the German left flank, but while the enemy was still taking steps to remedy this defeat, the afternoon attack burst on him with staggering force, and for the first time in the period covered in this volume there are clear signs of disorganisation and even panic. The opening air attacks were in themselves most effective. On the front of **21 Panzer Division** traffic to and from the fighting line became impossible, and the artillery of **164 Light Division** lost more than half its guns. There was a frantic appeal for help from the air, but by 6 p.m. not a single Axis aircraft had been seen by **21 Division**.

On that division's front the position at dark was not bad, as it had not been directly attacked, and **Point 209** on its right was still holding out. The strength of the **NZ Corps'** attack came as a surprise to **164 Light**, whose communications had already been dislocated by the blitz attack; but despite the knowledge that a wide penetration had been made on its front, its commander, von Liebenstein—who also commanded the whole Tebaga front—took steps to restore the situation, including bringing the engineer battalion into the firing line. He then

decided that *164 Light* would fight it out on the right, while a combination of *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* on the left counter-attacked against the right flank of the advancing **NZ Corps**.



N.Z.M.S. 101/357 Drawn by Lands & Survey Dept., N.Z.
LIEBENSTEIN GROUP POSITIONS, 27 MARCH, SHOWING ADVANCE BY
1 ARMoured DIVISION AND COUNTER-ATTACK BY 15 PANZER — A
TRACE FROM ENEMY RECORDS

LIEBENSTEIN GROUP POSITIONS, 27 MARCH, SHOWING ADVANCE BY 1 ARMoured DIVISION AND COUNTER-ATTACK BY 15 PANZER — A TRACE FROM ENEMY RECORDS

But the results of 1 Armoured Division's penetration at midnight and later were catastrophic, and the whole front, at least as far as *164 Light Division* was concerned, collapsed. But again von Liebenstein did all he could to restore the situation by placing a large concentration of anti-aircraft guns astride the track to **El Hamma** to stop the British tanks. These guns did not open fire, because they had never expected tanks to push ahead in the dark and took them for German. Had they opened fire, it might have seriously affected 1 Armoured Division's advance, but on the other hand might have only increased the confusion in the German ranks—a confusion that was certainly made no less by the appearance of British tanks passing through the divisional headquarters. One enemy battery was actually overrun by our tanks and was wiped out.

After what must have been a period of great tension among the various commanders and staffs, it became obvious that *164 Division* was in no state to stand and fight any further, and must break clear; so an immediate withdrawal was ordered to the south-west of **El Hamma**, where a centre of resistance would be organised to cover the withdrawal

of forces from **Mareth**. The *3rd* and *33rd Reconnaissance Units*, which all this time had been north-west of **Djebel Tebaga**, were ordered to move at once to the defile south-west of **El Hamma**, and a garrison which surprisingly was still at **Kebili** was withdrawn. From far and near the various commanders—Bayerlein at Liaison Headquarters and von Liebenstein at *164 Light Division*—began to collect units and bits of units to form a new line. It was a remarkable effort of improvisation and of restoring order out of near-chaos—particularly as *164 Division* was short of MT, and some of the troops had to walk back across **Djebel Tebaga**.

One ripple of the disorganisation was that *II/433 Panzer Grenadier Regiment* on **Point 209** was cut off from communication with its own division, and was transferred to the command of *21 Panzer* with which it had kept touch. The *21st Panzer Division* was not much affected on its own front by the general upset, but its tanks were well spread and the breakthrough threatened to surround and cut off much of the armour remaining to it. What can only be called a *saue-qui-peut* instruction was sent out to the tanks, but in the end some sort of order was restored.

The following is an extract from *21 Panzer Division's* war diary for 27 March:

0001 hrs {i.e., midnight 26–27 March}: Report received that enemy tanks were advancing 2 km south of Div Battle HQ.

0015 hrs: The G 1 decided to move battle HQ. The move had to be made in a hurry, as the enemy tanks had advanced to a point level with Div Battle HQ and were spraying the area right and left of the track with fire. The Ops staff like many other German units, took advantage of the heavy sand-storm and disengaged from the enemy unseen, moving parallel to the enemy advance.

The only hope was that at first light *15 Panzer Division*, now complete after its move, would be able to counter-attack and relieve the

pressure, but at what must have been a tense conference at 8 p.m. the commander of *8 Panzer Regiment* of *15 Panzer Division* reported that he had only ten runners.

Strangely enough, *21 Panzer Division* reported that it was *4 Indian Division* that had attacked—possibly the Maoris were mistaken for Indian troops. At this time *4 Indian Division* was no farther north than **Toujane**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

POINT 209

Point 209

For NZ Corps the full capture of **Point 209** had never been of the first importance. It was enough to blanket it and prevent the enemy from interfering with the move of 1 Armoured Division and the later follow-up by the Corps. In the end the move forward of **NZ Corps** commenced before **Point 209** was finally subdued, and the struggle there thus remained an isolated one between two fairly equal infantry units, one of which had great resources to support it, while the other was in effect abandoned by its parent formation and left to its fate.

During the night 26–27 March the struggle on the top of Hikurangi continued, the enemy launching repeated counter-attacks. The enemy battalion disposed two companies on and around Hikurangi, headquarters and one company on **Point 209**, and one company behind 209. The Maoris and the Germans on Hikurangi were only about twenty yards apart, and each time the sound of footsteps gave warning of another attack the men of 13 and 14 Platoons threw hand grenades. When the enemy once broke into 14 Platoon's sector **Ngarimu** moved there, killed some Germans with his Tommy gun, and scared others away by throwing stones as if they were grenades. (*No. 7 Company of II/433 Regiment* also used stones on occasion.) C Company's casualties gradually mounted. The hill was held, but by morning Lieutenant Jackson reported that it was doubtful if the company could hold out much longer, as only about twelve men were left, so two sections from D Company were sent up as reinforcements.

The last counter-attack came while this decision was being made, *7 Company* having been reinforced by two other platoons. It was watched anxiously from the foot of the hill. **Ngarimu** was seen waving his men on, Tommy gun in hand, and then at last was shot down on the crest of the hill. For a moment it looked as if the enemy would regain Hikurangi,

and the battalion carriers were brought forward to cover the area; but this was the enemy's last effort, and they shortly afterwards withdrew to **Point 209**. We know today that in this last attack all the enemy platoon commanders and half the men became casualties.

D Company under Captain Matehaere was now ordered to take over the defence of Hikurangi.

The brigade commander was at this time with Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett. He had first visited 21 Battalion and then moved north to 28 Battalion. Only then, from the profile of the feature thus presented, was it realised that **Point 209** proper was still in enemy hands. He telephoned the Brigade Major (**Major Fairbrother** ¹) and ordered heavy 'stonks' ² on **Point 209**, saying that it was perfectly safe for 28 Battalion for they were well short of that point. The artillery complied with alacrity and with great effect. The first concentration was fired at 8.42 a.m. by two field and two medium regiments, and was repeated several times, causing devastating damage.

Brigadier Kippenberger impressed on Bennett that the offensive must be maintained, but was content to leave it to 28 Battalion as he was sure the feature must sooner or later fall by the weight of events. He then moved on to 23 Battalion, told them of the position, and gave orders for help to be given to 28 Battalion if asked for.

Meanwhile Matehaere's company relieved the remnants of C Company. There was considerable enemy activity on the Corps' right flank, but despite one or two indications, including the movement of tanks, no counter-attack developed and the impression gained ground that the enemy was withdrawing—but not yet from **Point 209**.

The first signs of weakness came at 10 a.m. when two Germans tried to surrender, but not making this obvious enough they were shot down. Then about 11 a.m. four Germans, a doctor and three medical orderlies, came over under a **Red Cross** flag. The doctor asked in fluent English for assistance for ninety badly wounded men, as they had run out of

medical supplies. With the permission of Brigade Headquarters it was arranged that the wounded should be brought to 28 Battalion Regimental Aid Post, stretchers being lent for the purpose.

At midday the doctor was back again with a long column of wounded and with twenty others who had come to surrender. From interrogation it was clear that the enemy could not resist much longer, and Bennett decided that the time had come to deliver a final blow. D Company was warned to be ready to attack at 3 p.m. Bennett then made local arrangements with a nearby British field regiment (unidentified) for a concentration on the top of **Point 209** at 3 p.m., and also arranged for the 23 Battalion mortars to fire concentrations on the reverse slopes.

As it happened the artillery concentration was of no use, as the fire came down not on **Point 209** but away to the north on B Company, 28 Battalion, and even on A Company, 23 Battalion. The guns were stopped, and Matehaere asked whether or not he was to go on. He was ordered to proceed, and D Company advanced over the top of Hikurangi and as far as the foot of **Point 209**, but was then forced to ground by machine-gun fire.

This was the critical moment of the attack, but the CO detailed two carriers mounting heavy machine guns to go forward, and at the same time arranged supporting fire from two machine-gun platoons. The carriers moved in on **Point 209**, one from north and one from south, and the 23 Battalion mortars fired steadily. At the right moment Matehaere and his company rose and charged up the hill. Many men of the **Maori Battalion** were now standing on Hikurangi urging the attackers on with cheers and hakas—and the enemy collapsed and surrendered. By 5 p.m. the surrender was complete. A total of 231 Germans, including the commander, Major Meissner, his adjutant and three company commanders, were rounded up. They had put up a stout defence and their CO attributed their capture to their lack of transport. The culminating point for the enemy, the adjutant claimed, had been the appearance of the carriers, which were mistaken for tanks.

A report by a company commander, however, makes it clear that the battalion commander had decided to surrender soon after midday and that the period thereafter had been spent preparing for this. The company commander would not accept the order to surrender, and in the end succeeded in getting some forty-two men from the battalion through to **Gabes**. Despite this achievement it seems certain that the battalion was in fact at its last gasp, having neither ammunition nor transport, with large numbers of wounded, and with no hope of relief.

The 28 Battalion casualties on 26 and 27 March were 22 killed and 77 wounded—again a proportion of killed to wounded slightly higher than normal.

For his outstanding service in this operation, Second-Lieutenant **Ngarimu** was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

¹ **Brig M. C. Fairbrother**, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Carterton**, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; GSO II **2 NZ Div** Jun–Oct 1944; CO **26 Bn** Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base 2 NZEF, Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

² A ‘stonk’ was a quick concentration, with fixed dimensions at this time of 1200 yards by 300 yards. The only information required by the artillery was the centre point of the target and the bearing of the short sides of the rectangle. If required, a ‘stonk’ could be put down in a matter of minutes.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 11 – CONCENTRATION AT GABES

CHAPTER 11

Concentration at Gabes

Reorganisation

ALTHOUGH Point 209 had not been captured until 5 p.m. on 27 March, the further operations of **NZ Corps** were not delayed. By daylight it was known that the enemy had been completely cleared from the left flank on **Djebel Tebaga**, and preparations were made to follow 1 Armoured Division, leaving 5 Infantry Brigade Group to clear the right flank and hand over to 'L' Force. The situation east of **Point 209** was still uncertain. The enemy's problem was now to withdraw about five weak divisions from the **Mareth** Line and through the gap at **Gabes**, the narrow corridor between the sea and the Chotts. There was thus a chance that the enemy might thrust to the south-west to keep the line of escape open, for he still had *15 Panzer Division* and at least some of the tanks of *21 Panzer Division*.

About midday, therefore, 5 Infantry Brigade Group was ordered to take up a position roughly parallel to the **Kebili — El Hamma** road, facing south-east, to safeguard the line of communication. In this gun line 28 Battalion would stay where it was, 23 Battalion was to move to its left, and 21 Battalion would prolong the line, each on a frontage of about 3500 yards. Part of 'L' Force relieved 21 Battalion on **Point 184** in the afternoon. Other moves were dependent on the capture of **Point 209**, and did not start until about 6.30 p.m., but the group was in position by 10 p.m.

But the anticipated counter-attack had come and gone before 5 Brigade changed position. Unmarked by the brigade, and apparently unknown to NZ Corps Headquarters, the enemy tank thrust to the south-west had been countered by **8 Armoured Brigade**, all three regiments of which were engaged from 7 a.m. onwards, and despite losses beat off the enemy attack by midday. Bayerlein says: 'Early in the morning (27 March) 15 Panzer Division plus **21 Panzer Division**'s tanks counter-

attacked the enemy's flank from the line **Oglat Merteba** — **Djebel Souinia**. The attack took the enemy by surprise, and six more heavy tanks were knocked out. About mid-day 15 Panzer Division had to retire to its start line in face of a strong armoured pincers attack. The objective to cut off the enemy had not been attained, but the flank attack had forced the enemy to divert the main body of his tanks from the north and set them against 15 Panzer Division. This relieved the thin **El Hamma** line temporarily.'



Passing through Gages. The inhabitants fill in a crossing over Wadi Gages

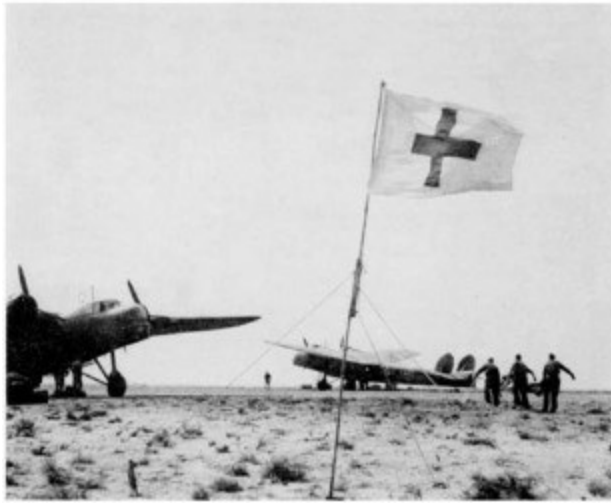
Passing through **Gages**. The inhabitants fill in a crossing over **Wadi Gages**



A Hurricane drops a message from General Montgomery at New Zealand Corps headquarters

A Hurricane drops a message from General Montgomery at **New Zealand Corps** headquarters

Stretcher bearers carry wounded to an ambulance plane
near Tebaga Gap



Stretcher bearers carry wounded to an ambulance plane near Tebaga Gap



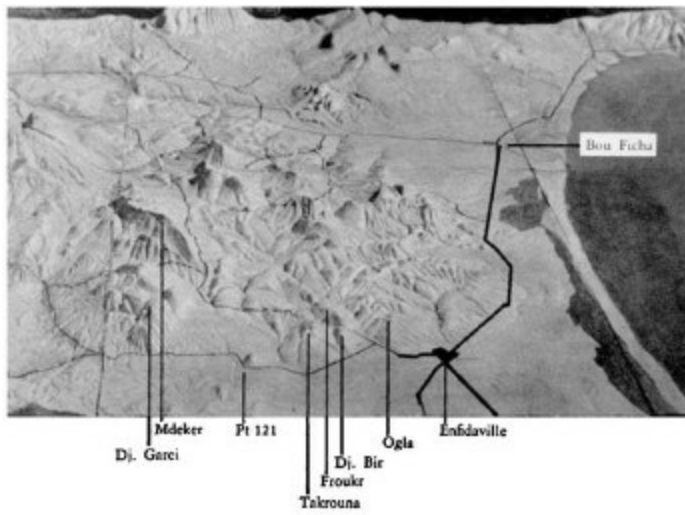
Eighth Army advances to attack the Wadi Akarit position

Eighth Army advances to attack the Wadi Akarit position

NZASC vehicles pass through the Wadi Akarit defences



NZASC vehicles pass through the Wadi Akarit defences



The Enfidaville battlefield—a relief model made by New Zealand engineers

The Enfidaville battlefield—a relief model made by New Zealand engineers

Takrouna, from the east. On the extreme left is the white farmhouse in the Maori Battalion area



Takrouna, from the east. On the extreme left is the white farmhouse in the Maori Battalion area



5 Brigade's sector. The marks in ink were made by Brigadier Kippenberger after the attack and show the axes of advance of his three battalions. Takrouna is marked Fort, A is Djebel Cherachir and Djebel Bir is marked Bin.

5 Brigade's sector. The marks in ink were made by Brigadier Kippenberger after the attack and show the axes of advance of his three battalions. Takrouna is marked Fort, A is Djebel Cherachir and Djebel Bir is marked Bin



Takrouna. The Ledge, taken from the Pinnacle

Takrouna. The Ledge, taken from the Pinnacle



Looking south-east
from Takrouna

Looking south-east from Takrouna



The lower village

The lower village

New Zealand field artillery in action near Takrouna



New Zealand field artillery in action near Takrouna



A convoy passes through a field of daisies

A convoy passes through a field of daisies

Black diamond signs and cactus hedges mark the route forward



Black diamond signs and cactus hedges mark the route forward

Bayerlein's conclusion is wrong, however. The main body of tanks, those of 1 Armoured Division, maintained their attack on **El Hamma without hindrance and **8 Armoured Brigade** alone dealt with **15 Panzer Division**, although the figure it later reported of seventy-five enemy tanks was about double the actual strength.**

Meanwhile Divisional Cavalry was sent up the **Kebili — El Hamma road to keep contact with 1 Armoured Division. Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant said later, 'We tried till 4 p.m. to reach them, but every time our patrols went forward they were fired on by artillery and anti-tank guns and when they went on foot, by small-arms fire. We fired**

recognition signals and did everything possible to show them that we were friendly troops. On my asking them later if they knew what the recognition signal was, I was informed that they had never heard of it.' Liaison was finally made on the road northwest of **Oglat Merteba**. The only consolation to Divisional Cavalry was the capture of 140 prisoners. In defence of 1 Armoured Division it must be said that during the morning it had been in action to both front and rear, and the situation in the rear had been obscured by a series of engagements with enemy tanks and 88-millimetre guns. ¹

Units of 6 Infantry Brigade Group were ready to move from early morning, but it was not until late afternoon that they were ordered to assemble by 6.45 p.m., with the leading vehicles on the **El Hamma** road some four miles beyond the Roman Wall. **New Zealand Corps** had paused while the situation at **El Hamma** became clearer.

¹ In some post-war comments Maj-Gen Briggs says: 'Such incidents as these do happen even with the best-trained troops. My diary informs me that one ammunition lorry of 76 Anti-tank Regiment was set on fire by the NZ Div Cav Regt.' So honours are even!

Dealing with the El Hamma Bottleneck

During the day 1 Armoured Division had sustained a check at **El Hamma**, although it had approached to within two miles of the place. The Germans had produced their usual quick defence. Before first light the GOC *164 Light Division* had stopped all retreating forces in the area, and was organising a delaying position there; panzer grenadier regiments were drawn from *15 Panzer Division* and *90 Light Division*—the latter from north-west of **Gabes**; and Messe sent anti-aircraft artillery, both heavy and light, from **Mareth**. It has been estimated that 1 Armoured Division was just one hour too late, which supports **General Freyberg's** early view that it should have set off before moonrise.

The going was harder than 1 Armoured Division expected, and the night move was correspondingly slower. On several occasions it had to reduce to a narrow front to cross wadis. Small actions took place with odd German groups of vehicles, and progressively as the night wore on more and more enemy tanks attacked the rear of the division, for after all 1 Armoured Division had passed right through the German lines. The division closed up to **El Hamma** village in daylight, and as it moved down the forward slope the enemy defences, particularly strong in anti-tank guns, proceeded to take toll. **El Hamma** was in a bottleneck between **Djebel Tebaga** on the west and **Djebel Halouga** on the east, both dominating heights, and there was little or no freedom of manoeuvre for an attacking force. Horrocks soon decided that it was too much for 1 Armoured Division to tackle alone, and informed Eighth Army that **El Hamma** could not be taken until **NZ Corps** caught up, which meant that an attack could not take place until midnight.

Shortly after 4.30 p.m. **Freyberg** received orders to move by moonlight to join 1 Armoured Division. Included in other details were fresh recognition signals for Allied ground forces, which in all the circumstances were badly wanted. Shortly afterwards a second message was received from Horrocks asking if **Freyberg** would be prepared to launch a second **SUPERCHARGE** against **El Hamma** with timing intervals similar to the first. Meanwhile **NZ Corps**, less 5 Infantry Brigade Group and 'L' Force, was to close up to within a few miles.

At 6 p.m. **General Freyberg** replied with counter-proposals representing strongly that **NZ Corps** should branch off about ten miles short of **El Hamma**, and head east and north to **Gabes**, passing round the southern end of **Djebel Halouga**. The Corps would advance on a broad front, and **Freyberg** was clearly relying on the ability of his troops, including **8 Armoured Brigade**, to move rapidly over broken country. **Freyberg** much preferred this course to going straight for **El Hamma**, where the enemy was in a position to contain both formations for perhaps a day or more. His proposal was in fact a reversion to the alternative plan (**SIDEWINDOWS**) which had appeared in **NZ Corps'**

Operation Order No. 1 on 16 March for action after the capture of PLUM,¹ and it avoided the inevitable infantry losses of set-piece action.

Horrocks was prepared to agree with this proposal, but had doubts about the capacity of the Corps to cross the difficult ground on the direct route to **Gabes**. While the proposal was still under consideration **General Freyberg** arrived unexpectedly at General Horrocks's Reconnaissance Headquarters, which was located close to Tactical Headquarters 1 Armoured Division. He had come forward in the darkness—it was then 2 a.m. on 28 March—for discussions. He seems to have done this entirely on his own initiative, as it was unknown to the staff of **NZ Corps** at the time, and no record of it appears in any New Zealand war diary. The discussion took place alongside the tank in which Horrocks was travelling, and cleared up all doubts. Horrocks agreed with **Freyberg's** proposal as being the better arrangement, but said that he did not think Montgomery would like it as he had definitely made **El Hamma** the first objective and **Gabes** the second, and did not want any pockets of resistance remaining on the line of communication. The instructions to Horrocks had been to keep his force collected and well-balanced.

There is no doubt that **General Freyberg's** wish to go direct to **Gabes** instead of piling up in column of formations in front of **El Hamma** was correct, and showed tactical sense combined with an understanding of what **NZ Corps** could do in the way of crosscountry travel. The alternative of following behind 1 Armoured Division with the prospect of another major attack was in no way appealing, and there was everything to be said for bypassing the **El Hamma** bottleneck, even on an inner flank.

Formal approval to **Freyberg's** proposal was sent from **10 Corps** at 4 a.m., but was not received at **NZ Corps** until after 6 a.m. In this message Horrocks repeated his qualms about Montgomery's reactions, and asked **Freyberg** to convince Montgomery that the action was in accord with the Army plans. But communications' between **NZ Corps** and Eighth Army were very poor at this time, and there is no evidence that **Freyberg** took any such action. In addition, at 5.10 a.m. on 28 March, Horrocks

signalled Montgomery saying that **Freyberg** and he had met, and went on: 'Plan at 0500 hrs. **NZ Corps** to move east at first light objective **Gabes** by centre line track **Oglat Merteba — Gabes**. 1 Armoured Division follow and turn south as in original plan. Wished obtain army commander's approval but signal delays prevented. Reason for change strength of **El Hamma** bottleneck which prevents deployment. Request air cover for NZ move'.

To this Montgomery replied at 9.15 a.m.: 'Do not repeat not direct 1 Armoured Division south from **Gabes**. Position your whole force about **Gabes** and to west and prevent northward movement. Recce from **Gabes** towards **Mareth** with armd cars. **30 Corps** ordered to advance but not clear how completely enemy have evacuated **Mareth** position.' From which it may be taken that Montgomery had tacitly accepted the change in plan for **NZ Corps**. Later in the day Horrocks flew to Army Headquarters for a brief visit, and presumably all plans were then coordinated.

¹ See p. 165.

New Zealand Corps advances

Late on 27 March, beginning about 8.30 p.m., **NZ Corps** moved forward a short distance but soon halted to await first light on 28 March. Information about the enemy showed that all German forces had gone from the **Mareth** Line except for rearguards, but the final words in Montgomery's telegram to Horrocks showed some doubts. Other reports stated that **21 Panzer Division** had moved to the **El Hamma** front, while **15 Panzer Division** with an estimated fifteen tanks was east of **Oglat Merteba** trying to form a line along **Wadi Merteba** to keep open the corridor from **Mareth** to **Gabes**. The **10th Panzer Division** was still facing the American thrust near **Maknassy**.

In point of fact, during the afternoon of 27 March **15 Panzer**

Division, disconcerted after its abortive counter-attack in the morning, gave up the idea of making a stand on **Wadi Merteba** and withdrew another ten miles north-east to **Hir Zouitinat**, where it was ordered to remain on 28 March and keep the passage open. During the night 27–28 March the last troops were withdrawn from the **Mareth** Line, and all non-motorised formations were sent direct to the Akarit position.

At dawn on 28 March **NZ Corps**, less 5 Brigade Group and 'L' Force, resumed its advance in desert formation. The KDGs led, followed by Tactical Headquarters, comprising the GOC, GSO II, CRA, CRE, and a navigating party from **36 Survey Battery**. Then followed 8 Armoured Brigade Group, Gun Group, 6 Infantry Brigade Group, Main Corps Headquarters, Reserve Group and Rear Corps Headquarters. Divisional Cavalry had remained well forward behind 1 Armoured Division, waiting to lead **NZ Corps** off on its new axis to the east and north.

Contact with the enemy was first made on the line of **Wadi Merteba**, where there was an enemy position. F Troop, 4 Field Regiment, attached to KDG, deployed, and after some shooting the armoured cars of KDG rounded up what was left of two complete Italian battalions, a total of 32 officers and 700 other ranks. The position was found to be quite well equipped with anti-tank guns, mortars, etc., but the defensive spirit of the Italians was very low, and in addition they were surprised by the arrival of **NZ Corps** in force. They came from *125 Regiment of Spezia Division*, and had been sent by Messe to extend the **El Hamma** line to the south. The main part of their division was still on the coastal end of the enemy line, at this time just in front of **Gabes**.

By 11 a.m. the forward patrols had turned east and crossed **Wadi Merteba** south-west of **Djebel Halouga**. While reconnaissance was being made for suitable crossing places for the Corps, patrols were pushed out for some miles to the east and south. Five tanks had been reported to be moving up from the south, but they moved off to the east without making contact. Meanwhile bulldozers from 6 Field Company were improving the crossings over various small wadis, and other engineers were marking tracks for the advance, nine in all.

The 8th Armoured Brigade crossed the wadi and moved east for some four or five miles. All three regiments saw sporadic action and both sides had small tank losses, but the result of the advance was to press **15 Panzer Division** back, and then threaten to outflank it on the side nearer **Djebel Halouga**. The going was bad, and one regiment comments particularly on the lack of time for maintenance, which meant that it had only fifteen runners left at the end of the day. A pursuit is always strenuous, alike to man and machine.

The gun group moved steadily, the only delay being shortly after 9 a.m., when 4 Field Regiment was deployed and stood by while the prisoners were being rounded up. The group then moved on, turned east, and by 2 p.m. was across **Wadi Merteba**, engaging odd targets of enemy infantry and transport until last light. Some support was also given to **8 Armoured Brigade**.

Sixth Infantry Brigade Group advanced in nine columns, with 26 Battalion in the lead and the guns of 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery deployed among the brigade. It was a tedious and tiring advance, with only spasmodic movement and in hot and dusty conditions. The leading battalion turned to the east at 12.15 p.m., and then the brigade halted for two hours, after which it was instructed to take up a position on the southern edge of **Djebel Halouga** in order to cover the armour, which would retire behind the infantry for the night.

The group began to move forward again at 2.30 p.m., but very slowly over difficult going. Shortly thereafter it was bombed by enemy Ju88s. Seven men were killed and twenty-two wounded, and two trucks were destroyed. Later two planes bombed and strafed the columns and fatally wounded the brigade intelligence officer.

Finally, Headquarters 6 Infantry Brigade was established a few miles east of **Oglat Merteba**, and 26 Battalion, 31 Anti-Tank Battery and 3 Machine-Gun Company formed a gun line, the battalion being on Point 222, a pronounced feature on the southern end of **Djebel Halouga**. The

tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** then withdrew behind the battalion. The remainder of **6 Infantry Brigade Group** had to reduce frontage and close up after dark, and it was 7 p.m. before the tail was across **Wadi Merteba**. The group made no contact with the enemy all day, nor during the night.

5 Infantry Brigade Group on 28 March

When **NZ Corps** moved forward on 28 March, **5 Brigade Group** remained in the flanking position taken up the previous evening. The prisoners from the **Point 209** battle had been rounded up the evening before, but did not reach **Brigade Headquarters** until the morning of the 28th. As a recognition of a worthy foe, **Brigadier Kippenberger** asked the commanding officer and the adjutant of the enemy battalion to breakfast, and had an interesting talk with the CO on the fighting of the previous few days, the adjutant interpreting. The CO was then given permission to address his men before they were marched off to the prisoner-of-war cage, and did so in a straight-forward and soldierly fashion. He and the adjutant were then sent off in a 15-cwt truck, and took with them, in the **Brigade Major's** words, 'the sympathy of those who watched, for they showed good qualities to the very end.'

During the previous night (27th–28th) there was no sign of any enemy activity, and it was clear that the usefulness of the flank position had ceased. At 9.55 a.m. **NZ Corps** ordered the brigade to move to an area to the south of **Djebel Halouga**, moving by the direct track from **Point 209** to **Oglat Merteba** and thence towards **Gabes**.

At midday the group moved off with **21 Battalion** and **Tactical Headquarters** leading. Owing to a mistake in navigation the column set off to the south-east instead of going at once to the north-east. The brigade commander quickly noted the mistake, but as there was a mass of transport ahead on the correct route, he said nothing and let the march go on, for he knew that another track more or less parallel to the first also led to **Gabes**. He thought, moreover, that there was nothing to be gained in piling up behind the rest of the Corps, and, on the lower

level, was acting towards the main body of **NZ Corps** much as **NZ Corps** had acted towards **10 Corps**. In other words he wanted to get ahead on his own. It is recounted that his intelligence officer was much relieved not to be 'ticked off' when he confessed the error.

So the column headed south-east for about five miles, and passed across the front of 'L' Force, which mistook them for the enemy and opened fire. There were no casualties, but two trucks in 21 Battalion were damaged.

The brigade had been warned of the presence of enemy tanks in the area ahead of it, so the 17-pounders of 32 Anti-Tank Battery moved with Tactical Headquarters. But about 1.30 p.m., when it was definite that the group would be moving on a route farther to the east than that originally intended, the column was reorganised to cope the better with the risk. A special advanced guard was formed consisting of 29 Field Battery, one company from 21 Battalion, one section of 23 Battalion carriers, 21 Battalion antitank guns, and the 17-pounders of 32 Battery, all under the command of Major D. J. **Robertson**¹ of 32 Battery. The 6th Field Regiment was also moved up to the front of the column ahead of 21 Battalion. About this time a squadron of armoured cars from King's Dragoon Guards, under Major P. D. Chrystal (who, it will be remembered, had reconnoitred Chrystal's Rift), which was patrolling east of the **El Hamma** road, joined the column unofficially and remained with it for the next twenty-four hours.

The crossing over Wadi el Melab was found to be mined, and had to be passed on a one-vehicle front while the engineers made additional crossings. Three bombs were dropped amongst the transport of 23 Battalion at this crossing, and three men were killed and nine wounded.

Towards dusk the advanced guard took up a position almost due south of that occupied by 26 Battalion of 6 Brigade, but five miles distant, for the course taken by 5 Brigade was at this point about five miles south of the one originally intended. At last light one battery went into action against a group of enemy tanks directly ahead, but the light

was against successful shooting. The battalions were then disposed astride the track behind the advanced guard, 28 on the right, 21 in the centre, and 23 on the left. Normal precautions were taken, but patrols sent forward found only vacated enemy positions. At 8.30 p.m. the brigade was instructed to rejoin the main body on 29 March.

The result of the day's advance for **NZ Corps** as a whole was reasonably good, for the going was bad. Much enemy equipment was captured, including thirty-four guns, among them three of the detested 88-millimetre.

¹ **Maj D. J. Robertson; Timaru**; born NZ 17 Dec 1906; manufacturing representative.

The Enemy on 28 March

On the **Mareth** front the enemy had completely withdrawn, with **30 Corps** following up as fast as mining and demolitions would allow. He had restored some sort of order to the shattered line facing **10 Corps** and **NZ Corps** and there was a reasonably continuous line between **El Hamma** and the sea. *Liebenstein Group*, consisting of *164 Light Division*, *21 Panzer Division* and some units of *90 Light Division*, was on the enemy right covering **El Hamma**. Then came the remnants of *Pistoia Division*, the bulk of *90 Light*, and finally *Spezia Division* in front of **Gabes**. But in the afternoon *Pistoia* was sent to the rear and *90 Light* took over its sector.

The *15th Panzer Division*, in an advanced position opposing **NZ Corps**, was forced back during the day. The enemy high command—Messe or Bayerlein—decided that it could no longer withstand the pressure of what amounted to two armoured divisions and would have to leave **El Hamma**. This withdrawal started in the afternoon, to a line behind **Gabes**, east and west through **Oudref**. All troops except *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* and *164 Light* were to go straight back to the **Akarit** position; but these were to make a stand on the intermediate line

and were to leave strong rearguards behind them.

The enemy had again avoided encirclement, and all except the rearguards were out of the **Mareth** position and for the moment safe in the Chotts area. But **SUPERCHARGE** had been alarming to the troops in the **Mareth** Line, and nearly catastrophic to those at Tebaga, with the result that all withdrawals were faster than usual, indeed so fast that the effectiveness of their delaying measures by mine and demolition was much less than usual. Had it not been for the sanctuary of the Akarit line the enemy would have been kept on the run. The truth was that at last the continued defeats and retirements had weakened the enemy's physical power to resist, except where the ground might prove eminently suitable for defence. But while the Italians had obviously had enough, the morale of the Germans was as high as ever.

10 Corps' Orders

In the early afternoon of 28 March **10 Corps** issued orders prescribing action to be taken by **NZ Corps** and 1 Armoured Division to capture **El Hamma** and advance to the line **Gabes — El Hamma**. The first phase was for **NZ Corps** to reach the line of the track running from **Bir Zeltene** to **El Hamma** (i.e., through **Hir Zouitinat**) while 1 Armoured Division manoeuvred in the approaches to **El Hamma**. The second phase was for **NZ Corps** to occupy the **Gabes** oasis, while 1 Armoured Division moved round the south of **Djebel Halouga** and came up on the west of **NZ Corps**. There were instructions to **NZ Corps** about the early entry into **Gabes** of advanced landing ground construction parties and airfield defence units, some of which were to join the Corps and move with it. **New Zealand Corps** remained responsible for containing the enemy in the **Djebel Melab** area, where 'L' Force still remained.

But during the afternoon events moved faster than expected. **New Zealand Corps** was almost up to **Hir Zouitinat**, the enemy was evacuating the **Mareth** Line with all speed, and the first phase of the order was virtually completed. The order was then amended to give **10 Corps** (including **NZ Corps**) the objective **El Hamma** to west of **Gabes**. **New**

Zealand Corps was given a series of bounds northwards across the **Gabes** — **El Hamma** road, with its axis about midway between the two towns. The 1st Armoured Division's move round the south of **Djebel Halouga** was cancelled. Horrocks emphasised that 'No major action or attack will be undertaken, as the policy now is to conserve our resources of men and material. The enemy will be dislodged by manoeuvre and fire'. The amendment stated that 51 (Highland) Division was advancing up the main road towards **Gabes**, and that 4 Indian Division would advance to **Gabes** from **Zeltene**.

We see here an example of what can happen when by force of events a headquarters gets out of the picture. Tenth Corps Headquarters had followed 1 Armoured Division, in spite of **Freyberg's** suggestion that it should remain farther back, and when **NZ Corps** went off to the north-east, **10 Corps'** control over it was very tenuous. In any case events moved so rapidly on that day of 28 March that, not for the first time in desert warfare, formal orders with 'phases' could not keep pace, and only the most general directive met the case. Considerable latitude had to be given to subordinate commanders. **Freyberg** left unaltered his axis of advance through **Gabes**.

Gabes Captured

In the early morning of 29 March 1 Armoured Division found that **El Hamma** had been evacuated, and **NZ Corps** also found the enemy gone, leaving only a small hastily-constructed minefield. The Corps' main column moved forward shortly after first light, with KDG patrols on the right and Divisional Cavalry patrols on the left, followed by **8 Armoured Brigade**. There were no signs of the enemy during the whole day except for two small groups of tanks away to the north. The axis of advance was just south of **Zemlet el Gueloua**, and then towards **Gabes**. Some five miles south on a parallel axis was 5 Infantry Brigade Group, so that the Corps in effect was advancing on a two-brigade front. But in **Brigadier Kippenberger's** words, 5 Brigade had 'stolen the lead' and it is their adventures that lend colour to the day.

The brigade began its advance at 6.30 a.m., preceded by B Squadron, KDG. Then followed the advanced guard, tactical headquarters and 6 Field Regiment, and 23, 21, and 28 Battalions. They moved 15 miles before meeting any opposition, and were then held up by concrete strongpoints ('pillboxes') covering the road from **Matmata** to **Gabes** a few miles south of **Gabes**. Quick action by anti-tank and field guns flushed the enemy and the advance continued, but with 23 Battalion now immediately behind the advanced guard, as it seemed possible that the battalion might have to clear the town. A detachment of 7 Field Company was also brought forward to search for mines and booby traps.

It will be remembered that **NZ Corps** had been told to bypass **Gabes** and turn north, but **Freyberg** preferred to keep his wheeled traffic on the better going that led through **Gabes** and diverted only Divisional Cavalry, KDG and **8 Armoured Brigade**. These were directed to the west of **Gabes** while still some six or seven miles away from the town. To prevent congestion at the south of **Gabes**, **Freyberg**, during the morning, sent **Kippenberger** a message instructing him to bypass **Gabes** also. But the message was not received until the concrete strongpoints had been overcome, and, partly because he could see the way into **Gabes** open and hoped to cut off some enemy troops, and partly because at the point the brigade had now reached the country to the west of the town was seen to be closely planted and well-nigh impassable for wheeled transport, **Kippenberger** carried on. These few hours on 29 March show an atmosphere of excitement, exhilaration and desire to get to the front, not only within **NZ Corps** but throughout Eighth Army, that enlivened the grim business of beating the enemy.

Armoured cars of the KDG and 23 Battalion carriers entered **Gabes** just as the rearguard from **15 Panzer Division** was blowing up the bridge at the northern exit, and in fact a few dilatory Germans were captured at the crossing. The brigade commander arrived shortly after the armoured cars. The town was seething with excitement, and indeed the troops were also excited, for this was the first time that Eighth Army had liberated an Allied town.

The head of **30 Corps** now also neared **Gabes**, and the corps commander, Lieutenant-General Leese, joined **Kippenberger** at the blown bridge. And soon afterwards **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** and his Tactical Headquarters also entered **Gabes**, having already seen the Brigade Major of 5 Brigade, who had had the delicate task of explaining to the GOC why 5 Brigade had blocked the **NZ Corps'** axis by moving directly on **Gabes**.

There were thus signs of impending congestion at the entrance to **Gabes**, for 51 (H) Division was only a few miles away, and 4 Indian Division had reached El M'dou on the **Matmata** road. However, it was arranged that **10 Corps** should take the lead, and that **NZ Corps** should pass through **Gabes**. The 1st Armoured Division was to bypass the town well to the west and would then advance on the left of **NZ Corps**.

The armour of **NZ Corps** was meanwhile advancing to the west of **Gabes**, where **8 Armoured Brigade**, after desultory exchanges of fire with enemy tanks, finished the day just west of **Metouia** while Divisional Cavalry turned towards **Gabes** to complete the encirclement.

The first task was to get 5 Infantry Brigade Group through **Gabes**. A temporary crossing was being made over the stream of the **Wadi Gabes** at the northern exit, the first steps being made by civilians throwing stones into the bed after **Brigadier Kippenberger** had given a lead. Now engineers from 7 Field Company and working parties from infantry units joined in. The advanced guard managed to get across upstream, although the banks got progressively higher and steeper, and carried on the pursuit up the main road. Here the six-pounder anti-tank guns in the advanced guard, firing from the northern edge of the **Bou Chemma** oasis, found good targets among enemy vehicles and later armoured cars, destroying two of the latter. The KDG and Divisional Cavalry ran into minor trouble north of **Bou Chemma**, being held up by mines on the road, and it appeared that the enemy was holding a position in front of **Metouia** and **Oudref**—the 'intermediate line'¹—prior to going back into the Akarit position.

Fifth Brigade advanced guard halted north of **Bou Chemma** while traffic congestion in **Gabes** was sorted out. By 1.30 p.m. 23 Battalion was across the temporary causeway and had reached **Bou Chemma**, where it dispersed to the right of the road. The 6th Field Regiment arrived shortly after and by 2 p.m. was in action, although there were few targets. Back in **Gabes** 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery was in action against enemy aircraft attacking traffic at the crossing, but considering the targets offered enemy air activity was negligible.

Fifth Brigade Headquarters got through **Gabes** by late afternoon, 21 Battalion shortly after dark, and 28 Battalion finally by 4 a.m. on 30 March after struggling through the town most of the night, with the added discomfort of heavy rain. The brigade was then concentrated between **Bou Chemma** and the coast, with 23 Battalion forming an outpost line just south-west of **Rhennouch**, which was reported clear. Tactical Headquarters NZ Corps arrived just north of **Bou Chemma** in the afternoon, but all the rest of the Corps was still south of **Gabes** at last light. The 4th Field Regiment crossed the stream during the night over a new causeway made by 7 Field Company, and arrived north of **Bou Chemma** early on 30 March, having been given special priority of movement.

The immediate intention of Eighth Army was to get **NZ Corps** forward as a first step in what was hoped would be a speedy move to **Sfax**. Army Intelligence thought that the enemy would not delay at **Wadi Akarit** if hard pressed, an example of the over-optimism that marked it about this time. In any case a limiting factor to the Corps' activities was the Army Commander's wish, now repeated in a message from **10 Corps**, that neither **NZ Corps** nor 1 Armoured Division should incur heavy losses, especially in tanks. This wish expressed only a short-term view, however, and was in preparation for the future role of both formations in operations against the Akarit line. In other words, they were to conserve their efforts for the next few days, in readiness for an unrestricted effort in the near future.

¹ See p. 242.

The Enemy on 29 March

It is difficult to clarify the movements of the enemy formations about this time. The general policy was for rearguards from German units to resist strongly while first the Italians and then the Germans went back into the Akarit position. At this moment the fighting value of the Italians was virtually nil, and the defence was left to the German group, *15 and 21 Panzer Divisions*, and *90 and 164 Light Divisions*. Of these, *164 Light* had been almost shattered at Tebaga and all formations were much intermingled. Often the armoured units of *15 and 21 Panzer* were on a different sector from the unarmoured.

By daylight on 29 March the four German divisions had rearguards on the **El Hamma — Gabes** line, in order from west to east *164 Light*, *21 Panzer*, *90 Light* and *15 Panzer*, the last-named having taken over the sector previously held by *Spezia Division*. The transport situation about this time is described by one formation as ‘catastrophic’, and a day later Bayerlein reports quite simply, ‘164 Light Division had to walk as it had no MT’. By midday on 29 March the pressure from Eighth Army—mostly from **NZ Corps**—was strong enough to force the rearguards to give up this line and go back to the intermediate line through **Oudref**. Even here there was no respite, for the pressure in the afternoon, from both **NZ Corps** and 1 Armoured Division, was so strong that the enemy headquarters decided to withdraw all troops forthwith to the Akarit position. But for the advantage of this semi-prepared position on a narrow front with secure flanks, it seems that the enemy might well have been kept on the run, instead of having seven or eight days' respite.

The End of the SUPERCHARGE Phase

On 30 March KDG and Divisional Cavalry, each with a battery and

an engineer detachment under command, moved forward through **Oudref** and their advanced patrols reached the south bank of **Wadi Akarit**. A few prisoners and abandoned vehicles were captured. The going through **Metouia** and **Oudref** was not easy, there were many steep-sided marshy wadis, patrols got across only with difficulty, and obviously much engineer work would be wanted before **NZ Corps** could cross on anything other than a narrow frontage.

Enemy movement could be seen to the north of **Wadi Akarit**, and there were clear signs that the enemy was not only holding the northern bank, but also that he was there in strength. The 25th and 26th Batteries and Mac Troop were in action north of **Oudref** in the early afternoon, and were shelled spasmodically in return, but otherwise there was no contact with the enemy.

The 8th Armoured Brigade operated north-west of **Oudref**, its most advanced regiment moving quite some distance towards and even across the upper part of **Wadi Akarit**. But it was stopped by enemy demolitions. It came back with a gun captured from *21 Panzer Division*.

Still farther west, 1 Armoured Division cleared **El Hamma** and by the evening of 30 March had advanced as far as the foothills of **Djebel Zemlet el Beida**, ten miles to the north. There it ran into increasingly strong defences, and no more progress was possible.

For **NZ Corps** engineering work had first priority—crossings over wadis and demolitions, clearing minefields and road verges, etc. This meant working round the clock, and all three field companies and the field park company took their share. The biggest demolition of many, on the main road near **Oudref**, was not ready for traffic until 9 a.m. on 31 March.

In all ranks of the Corps morale was high. They were once more in sight of the sea, in a cultivated countryside now becoming steadily greener with the onset of spring. Fifth Brigade Group quickly discovered warm thermal waters in its area and the dust and grime of recent weeks

soon disappeared. During 30 March the brigade moved round the west of Djebel ed Aissa to a position two miles south of **Oudref**. There was some talk of an attack to test the Akarit defences, but the brigade commander was not in favour of a serious attack, and succeeded in getting approval for patrols only, which 21 Battalion provided.

The move forward of 6 Brigade Group was much hindered by stoppages caused by the density of traffic in and around **Gabes**. It was intended that the brigade should move through on the night 29–30 March, but after about one and a half hours' progress, Brigadier Gentry halted until first light as the going was so bad and the traffic so dense. Main Headquarters NZ Corps, also on the way forward, struggled on through the night, and finally reached a point west of **Bou Chemma** early on 30 March.

Sixth Infantry Brigade was not clear of **Gabes** until mid-afternoon, and even then only 24 and 26 Battalions reached their new area—south-west of **Bou Chemma**—by last light. The **25th Battalion** did not arrive until the morning of 1 April, by which time the brigade had closed up on the rear of 5 Brigade. They were now near enough to the sea to be sent there for a swim, which for all New Zealanders was a special treat. ¹

Most of the Reserve Group gradually assembled west of **Gabes**, and the various administrative units opened replenishment points there, but the congestion of transport made it very difficult to find suitable locations.

The whole Corps was concentrated in the new area by 31 March. At 5 p.m. on that day **NZ Corps** lost its identity, and 2 NZ Division came under **30 Corps** for operations and **10 Corps** for administration. The 8th Armoured Brigade and certain other units remained with the Division, but the French Group passed to the direct command of **10 Corps**. Activities in no way ceased, and 31 March was a day of patrolling and other preparations for the next stage. The **Mareth** operations, however, were over.

On 30 March General Montgomery sent the following message to **Lieutenant-General Freyberg**:

My very best congratulations to **NZ Corps** and **10 Corps** on splendid results achieved by the left hook. These results have led to the complete disintegration of the enemy resistance and the whole **Mareth** position. Give my congratulations to all your officers and men, and tell them how pleased I am with all they have done.

It remains to record the cost. Of the offensive weapons, the most marked loss was in tanks. Over a period from 21 to 31 March **8 Armoured Brigade** lost thirty-one Shermans and Grants, and twenty Crusaders, roughly one-third of the strength with which it had started.

The total casualties of New Zealand troops were 646, made up as follows:

<i>Killed</i>		<i>Wounded</i>		<i>Missing</i>	
Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
10	115	29	444	—	48

The 'attached troops'— **8 Armoured Brigade**, KDG, 'L' Force, etc.— suffered 299 casualties over the same period. The **Desert Air Force** had lost only seven or eight pilots, a clear vindication of Broadhurst's policy.

¹ The Germans had strange ideas about the sea, and a hygiene precaution issued by **164 Light Division** appears curious to sea-loving New Zealanders. It reads: 'Units bivouacked by the sea are to prohibit daily bathing because of the danger of dysentery. Every man may have a *short* sea bathe not oftener than every second day.'

On a more serious level, and according to Lt-Gen Westphal, once Rommel's Chief of Staff, the Germans were not only homesick, but particularly disliked having the sea between them and their homeland. We must remember that while every part of the Commonwealth forces crossed the sea in both wars, the Germans fought with land communications except for this campaign in North Africa.

Tebaga in Retrospect

The initial attack of the **Mareth**/Tebaga operations took place at **Mareth** on 20 March. By 27 March, one week later, the enemy was in full retreat, in considerable disorganisation, and in no fit state to make another effective stand until, over a fortnight later, he was among the hills at **Enfidaville**. It is certainly not easy, and rarely is it safe, to prophesy with certainty the outcome on the field of battle. Nevertheless, it is probable that this victory could have been achieved more swiftly and could have been even more damaging to the enemy.

General Freyberg's handling of the **Tebaga Gap** operations in the early stage now seems curiously hesitant, and there is no doubt that a quick thrust through the weak defences there on 21 and 22 March would have yielded rich dividends, with highly favourable repercussions at **Mareth**. The risk had been correctly assessed and the **New Zealand Corps** should have been well able to deal with any enemy reaction beyond the Gap. Delay at Tebaga allowed the enemy to offer far more resistance to **30 Corps** than the Eighth Army plan envisaged.

The delay, though, was the product of several factors, none of them inconsiderable. For one thing, the GOC thought that the **30 Corps** attack was on much too narrow a front, and from the outset was therefore dubious of a quick success at **Mareth**.

Manpower, always a matter which weighed heavily with **General Freyberg**, was another factor. The latest draft of reinforcements—the first for fifteen months—had been absorbed, yet the Division was still short of 2400 men in an establishment of 16,000. This compared favourably enough with other divisions, both Allied and enemy, but the 2 NZEF was a national force whose fate had already trembled in the balance, and further serious losses could lead to its entire withdrawal from the **Middle East** theatre.

Further, if the **New Zealand Corps** emerged at once beyond the Gap, could the GOC rely on his own armour? The course of events at **Sidi**

Rezegh, Minqar Qaim, Ruweisat and El Mreir was not yet overshadowed by more recent successes, evidence was still freely available that the 88-millimetre gun continued to dominate the battlefield, and at the end of a long and partially unprotected line of communication there was still an element of chance that the armour, a brittle arm, could suffer crippling losses at the hands of the concentrated panzer divisions, depleted though they were.

The burden of decision rested squarely on **General Freyberg's** shoulders, and he seems to have kept it there, for no record has been discovered that he discussed the problem with any of his subordinate commanders, although of course there was no call on him to do so. Nor apparently did he warn Eighth Army of any conditions likely to impede the rapid execution of his task, an action which, in the circumstances, it might have been wiser to take, although it is uncertain whether he realised the harmful effects of delay at Tebaga. Altogether, the combined circumstances of the occasion seem to have exercised a cramping effect on his initiative.

An early, full and vigorous thrust at Tebaga would almost certainly have achieved success both at Tebaga and on the **30 Corps** front. Failure to provide this created a situation in which the Army Commander was bound to intervene.

The breakthrough operation at Tebaga, once mounted, created a new standard in co-operation between infantry and armour and the Air Force. It closely resembled the Germans' own 'blitzkrieg' and was indeed more closely integrated, and thus more damaging, than the thrusts which had decimated and scattered the Eighth Army earlier in the war. The terrain confined the power of the thrust almost entirely to the floor of the Gap, and here the Air Force concentrated its close support, strafing and bombing, while the artillery barrage, weighty and devastating, pounded irresistibly to the objective and beyond. The path of the armour and the infantry was well paved, but they, in any case, were not to be denied. A new pattern was set for the future, and a new standard produced by which co-operation between ground and air could henceforward be

measured.



Gages to Enfidaville

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

REORGANISATION

Reorganisation

ALTHOUGH Point 209 had not been captured until 5 p.m. on 27 March, the further operations of **NZ Corps** were not delayed. By daylight it was known that the enemy had been completely cleared from the left flank on **Djebel Tebaga**, and preparations were made to follow 1 Armoured Division, leaving 5 Infantry Brigade Group to clear the right flank and hand over to 'L' Force. The situation east of **Point 209** was still uncertain. The enemy's problem was now to withdraw about five weak divisions from the **Mareth** Line and through the gap at **Gabes**, the narrow corridor between the sea and the Chotts. There was thus a chance that the enemy might thrust to the south-west to keep the line of escape open, for he still had **15 Panzer Division** and at least some of the tanks of **21 Panzer Division**.

About midday, therefore, 5 Infantry Brigade Group was ordered to take up a position roughly parallel to the **Kebili — El Hamma** road, facing south-east, to safeguard the line of communication. In this gun line 28 Battalion would stay where it was, 23 Battalion was to move to its left, and 21 Battalion would prolong the line, each on a frontage of about 3500 yards. Part of 'L' Force relieved 21 Battalion on **Point 184** in the afternoon. Other moves were dependent on the capture of **Point 209**, and did not start until about 6.30 p.m., but the group was in position by 10 p.m.

But the anticipated counter-attack had come and gone before 5 Brigade changed position. Unmarked by the brigade, and apparently unknown to NZ Corps Headquarters, the enemy tank thrust to the south-west had been countered by **8 Armoured Brigade**, all three regiments of which were engaged from 7 a.m. onwards, and despite losses beat off the enemy attack by midday. Bayerlein says: 'Early in the morning (27 March) 15 Panzer Division plus **21 Panzer Division's** tanks counter-

attacked the enemy's flank from the line **Oglat Merteba** — **Djebel Souinia**. The attack took the enemy by surprise, and six more heavy tanks were knocked out. About mid-day 15 Panzer Division had to retire to its start line in face of a strong armoured pincers attack. The objective to cut off the enemy had not been attained, but the flank attack had forced the enemy to divert the main body of his tanks from the north and set them against 15 Panzer Division. This relieved the thin **El Hamma** line temporarily.'



Passing through **Gabes**. The inhabitants fill in a crossing over **Wadi Gabes**

Passing through **Gabes**. The inhabitants fill in a crossing over **Wadi Gabes**



A Hurricane drops a message from General Montgomery at **New Zealand Corps** headquarters

A Hurricane drops a message from General Montgomery at **New Zealand Corps** headquarters

Stretcher bearers carry wounded to an ambulance plane
near Tebaga Gap



Stretcher bearers carry wounded to an ambulance plane near [Tebaga Gap](#)



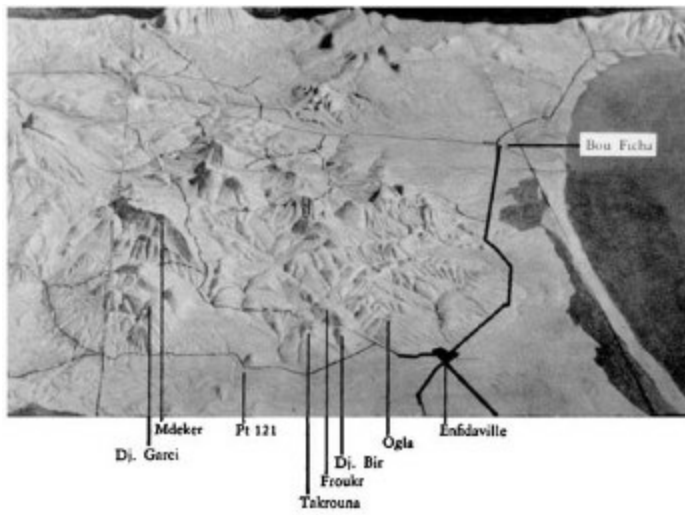
Eighth Army advances to attack the Wadi Akarit position

Eighth Army advances to attack the [Wadi Akarit](#) position

NZASC vehicles pass through the Wadi Akarit defences



NZASC vehicles pass through the [Wadi Akarit](#) defences



The Enfidaville battlefield—a relief model made by New Zealand engineers

The Enfidaville battlefield—a relief model made by New Zealand engineers

Takrouna, from the east. On the extreme left is the white farmhouse in the Maori Battalion area



Takrouna, from the east. On the extreme left is the white farmhouse in the Maori Battalion area



5 Brigade's sector. The marks in ink were made by Brigadier Kippenberger after the attack and show the axes of advance of his three battalions. Takrouna is marked Fort, A is Djebel Cherachir and Djebel Bir is marked Bin.

5 Brigade's sector. The marks in ink were made by Brigadier Kippenberger after the attack and show the axes of advance of his three battalions. Takrouna is marked Fort, A is Djebel Cherachir and Djebel Bir is marked Bin



Takrouna. The Ledge, taken from the Pinnacle

Takrouna. The Ledge, taken from the Pinnacle



Looking south-east
from Takrouna

Looking south-east from Takrouna



The lower village

The lower village

New Zealand field artillery in action near Takrouna



New Zealand field artillery in action near Takrouna



A convoy passes through a field of daisies

A convoy passes through a field of daisies

Black diamond signs and cactus hedges mark the route forward



Black diamond signs and cactus hedges mark the route forward

Bayerlein's conclusion is wrong, however. The main body of tanks, those of 1 Armoured Division, maintained their attack on **El Hamma without hindrance and **8 Armoured Brigade** alone dealt with **15 Panzer Division**, although the figure it later reported of seventy-five enemy tanks was about double the actual strength.**

Meanwhile Divisional Cavalry was sent up the **Kebili — El Hamma road to keep contact with 1 Armoured Division. Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant said later, 'We tried till 4 p.m. to reach them, but every time our patrols went forward they were fired on by artillery and anti-tank guns and when they went on foot, by small-arms fire. We fired**

recognition signals and did everything possible to show them that we were friendly troops. On my asking them later if they knew what the recognition signal was, I was informed that they had never heard of it.' Liaison was finally made on the road northwest of **Oglat Merteba**. The only consolation to Divisional Cavalry was the capture of 140 prisoners. In defence of 1 Armoured Division it must be said that during the morning it had been in action to both front and rear, and the situation in the rear had been obscured by a series of engagements with enemy tanks and 88-millimetre guns. ¹

Units of 6 Infantry Brigade Group were ready to move from early morning, but it was not until late afternoon that they were ordered to assemble by 6.45 p.m., with the leading vehicles on the **El Hamma** road some four miles beyond the Roman Wall. **New Zealand Corps** had paused while the situation at **El Hamma** became clearer.

¹ In some post-war comments Maj-Gen Briggs says: 'Such incidents as these do happen even with the best-trained troops. My diary informs me that one ammunition lorry of 76 Anti-tank Regiment was set on fire by the NZ Div Cav Regt.' So honours are even!

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

DEALING WITH THE EL HAMMA BOTTLENECK

Dealing with the El Hamma Bottleneck

During the day 1 Armoured Division had sustained a check at **El Hamma**, although it had approached to within two miles of the place. The Germans had produced their usual quick defence. Before first light the GOC *164 Light Division* had stopped all retreating forces in the area, and was organising a delaying position there; panzer grenadier regiments were drawn from *15 Panzer Division* and *90 Light Division*—the latter from north-west of **Gabes**; and Messe sent anti-aircraft artillery, both heavy and light, from **Mareth**. It has been estimated that 1 Armoured Division was just one hour too late, which supports **General Freyberg's** early view that it should have set off before moonrise.

The going was harder than 1 Armoured Division expected, and the night move was correspondingly slower. On several occasions it had to reduce to a narrow front to cross wadis. Small actions took place with odd German groups of vehicles, and progressively as the night wore on more and more enemy tanks attacked the rear of the division, for after all 1 Armoured Division had passed right through the German lines. The division closed up to **El Hamma** village in daylight, and as it moved down the forward slope the enemy defences, particularly strong in anti-tank guns, proceeded to take toll. **El Hamma** was in a bottleneck between **Djebel Tebaga** on the west and **Djebel Halouga** on the east, both dominating heights, and there was little or no freedom of manoeuvre for an attacking force. Horrocks soon decided that it was too much for 1 Armoured Division to tackle alone, and informed Eighth Army that **El Hamma** could not be taken until **NZ Corps** caught up, which meant that an attack could not take place until midnight.

Shortly after 4.30 p.m. **Freyberg** received orders to move by moonlight to join 1 Armoured Division. Included in other details were fresh recognition signals for Allied ground forces, which in all the

circumstances were badly wanted. Shortly afterwards a second message was received from Horrocks asking if **Freyberg** would be prepared to launch a second **SUPERCHARGE** against **El Hamma** with timing intervals similar to the first. Meanwhile **NZ Corps**, less 5 Infantry Brigade Group and 'L' Force, was to close up to within a few miles.

At 6 p.m. **General Freyberg** replied with counter-proposals representing strongly that **NZ Corps** should branch off about ten miles short of **El Hamma**, and head east and north to **Gabes**, passing round the southern end of **Djebel Halouga**. The Corps would advance on a broad front, and **Freyberg** was clearly relying on the ability of his troops, including **8 Armoured Brigade**, to move rapidly over broken country. **Freyberg** much preferred this course to going straight for **El Hamma**, where the enemy was in a position to contain both formations for perhaps a day or more. His proposal was in fact a reversion to the alternative plan (**SIDEWINDOWS**) which had appeared in **NZ Corps'** Operation Order No. 1 on 16 March for action after the capture of **PLUM**,¹ and it avoided the inevitable infantry losses of set-piece action.

Horrocks was prepared to agree with this proposal, but had doubts about the capacity of the Corps to cross the difficult ground on the direct route to **Gabes**. While the proposal was still under consideration **General Freyberg** arrived unexpectedly at **General Horrocks's** Reconnaissance Headquarters, which was located close to **Tactical Headquarters 1 Armoured Division**. He had come forward in the darkness—it was then 2 a.m. on 28 March—for discussions. He seems to have done this entirely on his own initiative, as it was unknown to the staff of **NZ Corps** at the time, and no record of it appears in any New Zealand war diary. The discussion took place alongside the tank in which **Horrocks** was travelling, and cleared up all doubts. **Horrocks** agreed with **Freyberg's** proposal as being the better arrangement, but said that he did not think **Montgomery** would like it as he had definitely made **El Hamma** the first objective and **Gabes** the second, and did not want any pockets of resistance remaining on the line of communication. The instructions to **Horrocks** had been to keep his force collected and well-balanced.

There is no doubt that **General Freyberg's** wish to go direct to **Gabes** instead of piling up in column of formations in front of **El Hamma** was correct, and showed tactical sense combined with an understanding of what **NZ Corps** could do in the way of crosscountry travel. The alternative of following behind 1 Armoured Division with the prospect of another major attack was in no way appealing, and there was everything to be said for bypassing the **El Hamma** bottleneck, even on an inner flank.

Formal approval to **Freyberg's** proposal was sent from **10 Corps** at 4 a.m., but was not received at **NZ Corps** until after 6 a.m. In this message **Horrocks** repeated his qualms about **Montgomery's** reactions, and asked **Freyberg** to convince **Montgomery** that the action was in accord with the Army plans. But communications' between **NZ Corps** and Eighth Army were very poor at this time, and there is no evidence that **Freyberg** took any such action. In addition, at 5.10 a.m. on 28 March, **Horrocks** signalled **Montgomery** saying that **Freyberg** and he had met, and went on: 'Plan at 0500 hrs. **NZ Corps** to move east at first light objective **Gabes** by centre line track **Oglat Merteba — Gabes**. 1 Armoured Division follow and turn south as in original plan. Wished obtain army commander's approval but signal delays prevented. Reason for change strength of **El Hamma** bottleneck which prevents deployment. Request air cover for NZ move'.

To this **Montgomery** replied at 9.15 a.m.: 'Do not repeat not direct 1 Armoured Division south from **Gabes**. Position your whole force about **Gabes** and to west and prevent northward movement. Recce from **Gabes** towards **Mareth** with armd cars. **30 Corps** ordered to advance but not clear how completely enemy have evacuated **Mareth** position.' From which it may be taken that **Montgomery** had tacitly accepted the change in plan for **NZ Corps**. Later in the day **Horrocks** flew to Army Headquarters for a brief visit, and presumably all plans were then coordinated.

¹ See p. 165.



BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

NEW ZEALAND CORPS ADVANCES

New Zealand Corps advances

Late on 27 March, beginning about 8.30 p.m., **NZ Corps** moved forward a short distance but soon halted to await first light on 28 March. Information about the enemy showed that all German forces had gone from the **Mareth** Line except for rearguards, but the final words in Montgomery's telegram to Horrocks showed some doubts. Other reports stated that **21 Panzer Division** had moved to the **El Hamma** front, while **15 Panzer Division** with an estimated fifteen tanks was east of **Oglat Merteba** trying to form a line along **Wadi Merteba** to keep open the corridor from **Mareth** to **Gabes**. The **10th Panzer Division** was still facing the American thrust near **Maknassy**.

In point of fact, during the afternoon of 27 March **15 Panzer Division**, disconcerted after its abortive counter-attack in the morning, gave up the idea of making a stand on **Wadi Merteba** and withdrew another ten miles north-east to **Hir Zouitinat**, where it was ordered to remain on 28 March and keep the passage open. During the night 27–28 March the last troops were withdrawn from the **Mareth** Line, and all non-motorised formations were sent direct to the Akarit position.

At dawn on 28 March **NZ Corps**, less 5 Brigade Group and 'L' Force, resumed its advance in desert formation. The KDGs led, followed by Tactical Headquarters, comprising the GOC, GSO II, CRA, CRE, and a navigating party from **36 Survey Battery**. Then followed 8 Armoured Brigade Group, Gun Group, 6 Infantry Brigade Group, Main Corps Headquarters, Reserve Group and Rear Corps Headquarters. Divisional Cavalry had remained well forward behind 1 Armoured Division, waiting to lead **NZ Corps** off on its new axis to the east and north.

Contact with the enemy was first made on the line of **Wadi Merteba**, where there was an enemy position. F Troop, 4 Field Regiment, attached

to KDG, deployed, and after some shooting the armoured cars of KDG rounded up what was left of two complete Italian battalions, a total of 32 officers and 700 other ranks. The position was found to be quite well equipped with anti-tank guns, mortars, etc., but the defensive spirit of the Italians was very low, and in addition they were surprised by the arrival of **NZ Corps** in force. They came from *125 Regiment of Spezia Division*, and had been sent by Messe to extend the **El Hamma** line to the south. The main part of their division was still on the coastal end of the enemy line, at this time just in front of **Gabes**.

By 11 a.m. the forward patrols had turned east and crossed **Wadi Merteba** south-west of **Djebel Halouga**. While reconnaissance was being made for suitable crossing places for the Corps, patrols were pushed out for some miles to the east and south. Five tanks had been reported to be moving up from the south, but they moved off to the east without making contact. Meanwhile bulldozers from 6 Field Company were improving the crossings over various small wadis, and other engineers were marking tracks for the advance, nine in all.

The 8th Armoured Brigade crossed the wadi and moved east for some four or five miles. All three regiments saw sporadic action and both sides had small tank losses, but the result of the advance was to press **15 Panzer Division** back, and then threaten to outflank it on the side nearer **Djebel Halouga**. The going was bad, and one regiment comments particularly on the lack of time for maintenance, which meant that it had only fifteen runners left at the end of the day. A pursuit is always strenuous, alike to man and machine.

The gun group moved steadily, the only delay being shortly after 9 a.m., when 4 Field Regiment was deployed and stood by while the prisoners were being rounded up. The group then moved on, turned east, and by 2 p.m. was across **Wadi Merteba**, engaging odd targets of enemy infantry and transport until last light. Some support was also given to **8 Armoured Brigade**.

Sixth Infantry Brigade Group advanced in nine columns, with 26

Battalion in the lead and the guns of 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery deployed among the brigade. It was a tedious and tiring advance, with only spasmodic movement and in hot and dusty conditions. The leading battalion turned to the east at 12.15 p.m., and then the brigade halted for two hours, after which it was instructed to take up a position on the southern edge of [Djebel Halouga](#) in order to cover the armour, which would retire behind the infantry for the night.

The group began to move forward again at 2.30 p.m., but very slowly over difficult going. Shortly thereafter it was bombed by enemy Ju88s. Seven men were killed and twenty-two wounded, and two trucks were destroyed. Later two planes bombed and strafed the columns and fatally wounded the brigade intelligence officer.

Finally, Headquarters 6 Infantry Brigade was established a few miles east of [Oglat Mertebe](#), and 26 Battalion, 31 Anti-Tank Battery and 3 Machine-Gun Company formed a gun line, the battalion being on Point 222, a pronounced feature on the southern end of [Djebel Halouga](#). The tanks of [8 Armoured Brigade](#) then withdrew behind the battalion. The remainder of 6 Infantry Brigade Group had to reduce frontage and close up after dark, and it was 7 p.m. before the tail was across [Wadi Mertebe](#). The group made no contact with the enemy all day, nor during the night.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE GROUP ON 28 MARCH

5 Infantry Brigade Group on 28 March

When NZ Corps moved forward on 28 March, 5 Brigade Group remained in the flanking position taken up the previous evening. The prisoners from the **Point 209** battle had been rounded up the evening before, but did not reach Brigade Headquarters until the morning of the 28th. As a recognition of a worthy foe, **Brigadier Kippenberger** asked the commanding officer and the adjutant of the enemy battalion to breakfast, and had an interesting talk with the CO on the fighting of the previous few days, the adjutant interpreting. The CO was then given permission to address his men before they were marched off to the prisoner-of-war cage, and did so in a straight-forward and soldierly fashion. He and the adjutant were then sent off in a 15-cwt truck, and took with them, in the Brigade Major's words, 'the sympathy of those who watched, for they showed good qualities to the very end.'

During the previous night (27th–28th) there was no sign of any enemy activity, and it was clear that the usefulness of the flank position had ceased. At 9.55 a.m. **NZ Corps** ordered the brigade to move to an area to the south of **Djebel Halouga**, moving by the direct track from **Point 209** to **Oglat Merteba** and thence towards **Gabes**.

At midday the group moved off with 21 Battalion and Tactical Headquarters leading. Owing to a mistake in navigation the column set off to the south-east instead of going at once to the north-east. The brigade commander quickly noted the mistake, but as there was a mass of transport ahead on the correct route, he said nothing and let the march go on, for he knew that another track more or less parallel to the first also led to **Gabes**. He thought, moreover, that there was nothing to be gained in piling up behind the rest of the Corps, and, on the lower level, was acting towards the main body of **NZ Corps** much as **NZ Corps** had acted towards **10 Corps**. In other words he wanted to get ahead on

his own. It is recounted that his intelligence officer was much relieved not to be 'ticked off' when he confessed the error.

So the column headed south-east for about five miles, and passed across the front of 'L' Force, which mistook them for the enemy and opened fire. There were no casualties, but two trucks in 21 Battalion were damaged.

The brigade had been warned of the presence of enemy tanks in the area ahead of it, so the 17-pounders of 32 Anti-Tank Battery moved with Tactical Headquarters. But about 1.30 p.m., when it was definite that the group would be moving on a route farther to the east than that originally intended, the column was reorganised to cope the better with the risk. A special advanced guard was formed consisting of 29 Field Battery, one company from 21 Battalion, one section of 23 Battalion carriers, 21 Battalion antitank guns, and the 17-pounders of 32 Battery, all under the command of Major D. J. Robertson¹ of 32 Battery. The 6th Field Regiment was also moved up to the front of the column ahead of 21 Battalion. About this time a squadron of armoured cars from King's Dragoon Guards, under Major P. D. Chrystal (who, it will be remembered, had reconnoitred Chrystal's Rift), which was patrolling east of the [El Hamma](#) road, joined the column unofficially and remained with it for the next twenty-four hours.

The crossing over Wadi el Melab was found to be mined, and had to be passed on a one-vehicle front while the engineers made additional crossings. Three bombs were dropped amongst the transport of 23 Battalion at this crossing, and three men were killed and nine wounded.

Towards dusk the advanced guard took up a position almost due south of that occupied by 26 Battalion of 6 Brigade, but five miles distant, for the course taken by 5 Brigade was at this point about five miles south of the one originally intended. At last light one battery went into action against a group of enemy tanks directly ahead, but the light was against successful shooting. The battalions were then disposed astride the track behind the advanced guard, 28 on the right, 21 in the

centre, and 23 on the left. Normal precautions were taken, but patrols sent forward found only vacated enemy positions. At 8.30 p.m. the brigade was instructed to rejoin the main body on 29 March.

The result of the day's advance for **NZ Corps** as a whole was reasonably good, for the going was bad. Much enemy equipment was captured, including thirty-four guns, among them three of the detested 88-millimetre.

¹ **Maj D. J. Robertson; Timaru; born NZ 17 Dec 1906; manufacturing representative.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 28 MARCH

The Enemy on 28 March

On the **Mareth** front the enemy had completely withdrawn, with **30 Corps** following up as fast as mining and demolitions would allow. He had restored some sort of order to the shattered line facing **10 Corps** and **NZ Corps** and there was a reasonably continuous line between **El Hamma** and the sea. *Liebenstein Group*, consisting of *164 Light Division*, *21 Panzer Division* and some units of *90 Light Division*, was on the enemy right covering **El Hamma**. Then came the remnants of *Pistoia Division*, the bulk of *90 Light*, and finally *Spezia Division* in front of **Gabes**. But in the afternoon *Pistoia* was sent to the rear and *90 Light* took over its sector.

The *15th Panzer Division*, in an advanced position opposing **NZ Corps**, was forced back during the day. The enemy high command—*Messe* or *Bayerlein*—decided that it could no longer withstand the pressure of what amounted to two armoured divisions and would have to leave **El Hamma**. This withdrawal started in the afternoon, to a line behind **Gabes**, east and west through **Oudref**. All troops except *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* and *164 Light* were to go straight back to the **Akarit** position; but these were to make a stand on the intermediate line and were to leave strong rearguards behind them.

The enemy had again avoided encirclement, and all except the rearguards were out of the **Mareth** position and for the moment safe in the **Chotts** area. But **SUPERCHARGE** had been alarming to the troops in the **Mareth** Line, and nearly catastrophic to those at **Tebaga**, with the result that all withdrawals were faster than usual, indeed so fast that the effectiveness of their delaying measures by mine and demolition was much less than usual. Had it not been for the sanctuary of the **Akarit** line the enemy would have been kept on the run. The truth was that at last the continued defeats and retirements had weakened the enemy's

physical power to resist, except where the ground might prove eminently suitable for defence. But while the Italians had obviously had enough, the morale of the Germans was as high as ever.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

10 CORPS' ORDERS

10 Corps' Orders

In the early afternoon of 28 March **10 Corps** issued orders prescribing action to be taken by **NZ Corps** and **1 Armoured Division** to capture **El Hamma** and advance to the line **Gabes — El Hamma**. The first phase was for **NZ Corps** to reach the line of the track running from **Bir Zeltene** to **El Hamma** (i.e., through **Hir Zouitinat**) while **1 Armoured Division** manoeuvred in the approaches to **El Hamma**. The second phase was for **NZ Corps** to occupy the **Gabes** oasis, while **1 Armoured Division** moved round the south of **Djebel Halouga** and came up on the west of **NZ Corps**. There were instructions to **NZ Corps** about the early entry into **Gabes** of advanced landing ground construction parties and airfield defence units, some of which were to join the Corps and move with it. **New Zealand Corps** remained responsible for containing the enemy in the **Djebel Melab** area, where 'L' Force still remained.

But during the afternoon events moved faster than expected. **New Zealand Corps** was almost up to **Hir Zouitinat**, the enemy was evacuating the **Mareth** Line with all speed, and the first phase of the order was virtually completed. The order was then amended to give **10 Corps** (including **NZ Corps**) the objective **El Hamma** to west of **Gabes**. **New Zealand Corps** was given a series of bounds northwards across the **Gabes — El Hamma** road, with its axis about midway between the two towns. The **1st Armoured Division's** move round the south of **Djebel Halouga** was cancelled. **Horrocks** emphasised that 'No major action or attack will be undertaken, as the policy now is to conserve our resources of men and material. The enemy will be dislodged by manoeuvre and fire'. The amendment stated that **51 (Highland) Division** was advancing up the main road towards **Gabes**, and that **4 Indian Division** would advance to **Gabes** from **Zeltene**.

We see here an example of what can happen when by force of events

a headquarters gets out of the picture. Tenth Corps Headquarters had followed 1 Armoured Division, in spite of Freyberg's suggestion that it should remain farther back, and when NZ Corps went off to the north-east, 10 Corps' control over it was very tenuous. In any case events moved so rapidly on that day of 28 March that, not for the first time in desert warfare, formal orders with 'phases' could not keep pace, and only the most general directive met the case. Considerable latitude had to be given to subordinate commanders. Freyberg left unaltered his axis of advance through Gabes.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

GABES CAPTURED

Gabes Captured

In the early morning of 29 March 1 Armoured Division found that **El Hamma** had been evacuated, and **NZ Corps** also found the enemy gone, leaving only a small hastily-constructed minefield. The Corps' main column moved forward shortly after first light, with KDG patrols on the right and Divisional Cavalry patrols on the left, followed by **8 Armoured Brigade**. There were no signs of the enemy during the whole day except for two small groups of tanks away to the north. The axis of advance was just south of **Zemlet el Gueloua**, and then towards **Gabes**. Some five miles south on a parallel axis was 5 Infantry Brigade Group, so that the Corps in effect was advancing on a two-brigade front. But in **Brigadier Kippenberger's** words, 5 Brigade had 'stolen the lead' and it is their adventures that lend colour to the day.

The brigade began its advance at 6.30 a.m., preceded by B Squadron, KDG. Then followed the advanced guard, tactical headquarters and 6 Field Regiment, and 23, 21, and 28 Battalions. They moved 15 miles before meeting any opposition, and were then held up by concrete strongpoints ('pillboxes') covering the road from **Matmata** to **Gabes** a few miles south of **Gabes**. Quick action by anti-tank and field guns flushed the enemy and the advance continued, but with 23 Battalion now immediately behind the advanced guard, as it seemed possible that the battalion might have to clear the town. A detachment of 7 Field Company was also brought forward to search for mines and booby traps.

It will be remembered that **NZ Corps** had been told to bypass **Gabes** and turn north, but **Freyberg** preferred to keep his wheeled traffic on the better going that led through **Gabes** and diverted only Divisional Cavalry, KDG and **8 Armoured Brigade**. These were directed to the west of **Gabes** while still some six or seven miles away from the town. To prevent congestion at the south of **Gabes**, **Freyberg**, during the morning,

sent **Kippenberger** a message instructing him to bypass **Gabes** also. But the message was not received until the concrete strongpoints had been overcome, and, partly because he could see the way into **Gabes** open and hoped to cut off some enemy troops, and partly because at the point the brigade had now reached the country to the west of the town was seen to be closely planted and well-nigh impassable for wheeled transport, **Kippenberger** carried on. These few hours on 29 March show an atmosphere of excitement, exhilaration and desire to get to the front, not only within **NZ Corps** but throughout Eighth Army, that enlivened the grim business of beating the enemy.

Armoured cars of the KDG and 23 Battalion carriers entered **Gabes** just as the rearguard from *15 Panzer Division* was blowing up the bridge at the northern exit, and in fact a few dilatory Germans were captured at the crossing. The brigade commander arrived shortly after the armoured cars. The town was seething with excitement, and indeed the troops were also excited, for this was the first time that Eighth Army had liberated an Allied town.

The head of **30 Corps** now also neared **Gabes**, and the corps commander, Lieutenant-General Leese, joined **Kippenberger** at the blown bridge. And soon afterwards **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** and his Tactical Headquarters also entered **Gabes**, having already seen the Brigade Major of 5 Brigade, who had had the delicate task of explaining to the GOC why 5 Brigade had blocked the **NZ Corps'** axis by moving directly on **Gabes**.

There were thus signs of impending congestion at the entrance to **Gabes**, for 51 (H) Division was only a few miles away, and 4 Indian Division had reached El M'dou on the **Matmata** road. However, it was arranged that **10 Corps** should take the lead, and that **NZ Corps** should pass through **Gabes**. The 1st Armoured Division was to bypass the town well to the west and would then advance on the left of **NZ Corps**.

The armour of **NZ Corps** was meanwhile advancing to the west of **Gabes**, where **8 Armoured Brigade**, after desultory exchanges of fire with

enemy tanks, finished the day just west of **Metouia** while Divisional Cavalry turned towards **Gabes** to complete the encirclement.

The first task was to get 5 Infantry Brigade Group through **Gabes**. A temporary crossing was being made over the stream of the **Wadi Gabes** at the northern exit, the first steps being made by civilians throwing stones into the bed after **Brigadier Kippenberger** had given a lead. Now engineers from 7 Field Company and working parties from infantry units joined in. The advanced guard managed to get across upstream, although the banks got progressively higher and steeper, and carried on the pursuit up the main road. Here the six-pounder anti-tank guns in the advanced guard, firing from the northern edge of the **Bou Chemma** oasis, found good targets among enemy vehicles and later armoured cars, destroying two of the latter. The KDG and Divisional Cavalry ran into minor trouble north of **Bou Chemma**, being held up by mines on the road, and it appeared that the enemy was holding a position in front of **Metouia** and **Oudref**—the ‘intermediate line’¹—prior to going back into the Akarit position.

Fifth Brigade advanced guard halted north of **Bou Chemma** while traffic congestion in **Gabes** was sorted out. By 1.30 p.m. 23 Battalion was across the temporary causeway and had reached **Bou Chemma**, where it dispersed to the right of the road. The 6th Field Regiment arrived shortly after and by 2 p.m. was in action, although there were few targets. Back in **Gabes** 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery was in action against enemy aircraft attacking traffic at the crossing, but considering the targets offered enemy air activity was negligible.

Fifth Brigade Headquarters got through **Gabes** by late afternoon, 21 Battalion shortly after dark, and 28 Battalion finally by 4 a.m. on 30 March after struggling through the town most of the night, with the added discomfort of heavy rain. The brigade was then concentrated between **Bou Chemma** and the coast, with 23 Battalion forming an outpost line just south-west of **Rhennouch**, which was reported clear. Tactical Headquarters NZ Corps arrived just north of **Bou Chemma** in the

afternoon, but all the rest of the Corps was still south of **Gabes** at last light. The 4th Field Regiment crossed the stream during the night over a new causeway made by 7 Field Company, and arrived north of **Bou Chemma** early on 30 March, having been given special priority of movement.

The immediate intention of Eighth Army was to get **NZ Corps** forward as a first step in what was hoped would be a speedy move to **Sfax**. Army Intelligence thought that the enemy would not delay at **Wadi Akarit** if hard pressed, an example of the over-optimism that marked it about this time. In any case a limiting factor to the Corps' activities was the Army Commander's wish, now repeated in a message from **10 Corps**, that neither **NZ Corps** nor 1 Armoured Division should incur heavy losses, especially in tanks. This wish expressed only a short-term view, however, and was in preparation for the future role of both formations in operations against the Akarit line. In other words, they were to conserve their efforts for the next few days, in readiness for an unrestricted effort in the near future.

¹ See p. 242.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY ON 29 MARCH

The Enemy on 29 March

It is difficult to clarify the movements of the enemy formations about this time. The general policy was for rearguards from German units to resist strongly while first the Italians and then the Germans went back into the Akarit position. At this moment the fighting value of the Italians was virtually nil, and the defence was left to the German group, *15 and 21 Panzer Divisions*, and *90 and 164 Light Divisions*. Of these, *164 Light* had been almost shattered at Tebaga and all formations were much intermingled. Often the armoured units of *15 and 21 Panzer* were on a different sector from the unarmoured.

By daylight on 29 March the four German divisions had rearguards on the **El Hamma — Gabes** line, in order from west to east *164 Light, 21 Panzer, 90 Light* and *15 Panzer*, the last-named having taken over the sector previously held by *Spezia Division*. The transport situation about this time is described by one formation as 'catastrophic', and a day later Bayerlein reports quite simply, '164 Light Division had to walk as it had no MT'. By midday on 29 March the pressure from Eighth Army—mostly from **NZ Corps**—was strong enough to force the rearguards to give up this line and go back to the intermediate line through **Oudref**. Even here there was no respite, for the pressure in the afternoon, from both **NZ Corps** and 1 Armoured Division, was so strong that the enemy headquarters decided to withdraw all troops forthwith to the Akarit position. But for the advantage of this semi-prepared position on a narrow front with secure flanks, it seems that the enemy might well have been kept on the run, instead of having seven or eight days' respite.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE END OF THE SUPERCHARGE PHASE

The End of the SUPERCHARGE Phase

On 30 March KDG and Divisional Cavalry, each with a battery and an engineer detachment under command, moved forward through **Oudref** and their advanced patrols reached the south bank of **Wadi Akarit**. A few prisoners and abandoned vehicles were captured. The going through **Metouia** and **Oudref** was not easy, there were many steep-sided marshy wadis, patrols got across only with difficulty, and obviously much engineer work would be wanted before **NZ Corps** could cross on anything other than a narrow frontage.

Enemy movement could be seen to the north of **Wadi Akarit**, and there were clear signs that the enemy was not only holding the northern bank, but also that he was there in strength. The 25th and 26th Batteries and Mac Troop were in action north of **Oudref** in the early afternoon, and were shelled spasmodically in return, but otherwise there was no contact with the enemy.

The 8th Armoured Brigade operated north-west of **Oudref**, its most advanced regiment moving quite some distance towards and even across the upper part of **Wadi Akarit**. But it was stopped by enemy demolitions. It came back with a gun captured from *21 Panzer Division*.

Still farther west, 1 Armoured Division cleared **El Hamma** and by the evening of 30 March had advanced as far as the foothills of **Djebel Zemlet el Beida**, ten miles to the north. There it ran into increasingly strong defences, and no more progress was possible.

For NZ Corps engineering work had first priority—crossings over wadis and demolitions, clearing minefields and road verges, etc. This meant working round the clock, and all three field companies and the field park company took their share. The biggest demolition of many, on

the main road near **Oudref**, was not ready for traffic until 9 a.m. on 31 March.

In all ranks of the Corps morale was high. They were once more in sight of the sea, in a cultivated countryside now becoming steadily greener with the onset of spring. Fifth Brigade Group quickly discovered warm thermal waters in its area and the dust and grime of recent weeks soon disappeared. During 30 March the brigade moved round the west of Djebel ed Aissa to a position two miles south of **Oudref**. There was some talk of an attack to test the Akarit defences, but the brigade commander was not in favour of a serious attack, and succeeded in getting approval for patrols only, which 21 Battalion provided.

The move forward of 6 Brigade Group was much hindered by stoppages caused by the density of traffic in and around **Gabes**. It was intended that the brigade should move through on the night 29–30 March, but after about one and a half hours' progress, Brigadier Gentry halted until first light as the going was so bad and the traffic so dense. Main Headquarters NZ Corps, also on the way forward, struggled on through the night, and finally reached a point west of **Bou Chemma** early on 30 March.

Sixth Infantry Brigade was not clear of **Gabes** until mid-afternoon, and even then only 24 and 26 Battalions reached their new area—south-west of **Bou Chemma**—by last light. The **25th Battalion** did not arrive until the morning of 1 April, by which time the brigade had closed up on the rear of 5 Brigade. They were now near enough to the sea to be sent there for a swim, which for all New Zealanders was a special treat. ¹

Most of the Reserve Group gradually assembled west of **Gabes**, and the various administrative units opened replenishment points there, but the congestion of transport made it very difficult to find suitable locations.

The whole Corps was concentrated in the new area by 31 March. At 5 p.m. on that day **NZ Corps** lost its identity, and 2 NZ Division came

under **30 Corps** for operations and **10 Corps** for administration. The 8th Armoured Brigade and certain other units remained with the Division, but the French Group passed to the direct command of **10 Corps**. Activities in no way ceased, and 31 March was a day of patrolling and other preparations for the next stage. The **Mareth** operations, however, were over.

On 30 March General Montgomery sent the following message to **Lieutenant-General Freyberg**:

My very best congratulations to **NZ Corps** and **10 Corps** on splendid results achieved by the left hook. These results have led to the complete disintegration of the enemy resistance and the whole **Mareth** position. Give my congratulations to all your officers and men, and tell them how pleased I am with all they have done.

It remains to record the cost. Of the offensive weapons, the most marked loss was in tanks. Over a period from 21 to 31 March **8 Armoured Brigade** lost thirty-one Shermans and Grants, and twenty Crusaders, roughly one-third of the strength with which it had started.

The total casualties of New Zealand troops were 646, made up as follows:

<i>Killed</i>		<i>Wounded</i>		<i>Missing</i>	
Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
10	115	29	444	—	48

The 'attached troops'— **8 Armoured Brigade**, KDG, 'L' Force, etc.—suffered 299 casualties over the same period. The **Desert Air Force** had lost only seven or eight pilots, a clear vindication of Broadhurst's policy.

¹ The Germans had strange ideas about the sea, and a hygiene precaution issued by **164 Light Division** appears curious to sea-loving New Zealanders. It reads: 'Units bivouacked by the sea are to prohibit daily bathing because of the danger of dysentery. Every man may have a *short* sea bathe not oftener than every second day.'

On a more serious level, and according to Lt-Gen Westphal, once Rommel's Chief of Staff, the Germans were not only homesick, but particularly disliked having the sea between them and their homeland. We must remember that while every part of the Commonwealth forces crossed the sea in both wars, the Germans fought with land communications except for this campaign in North Africa.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

TEBAGA IN RETROSPECT

Tebaga in Retrospect

The initial attack of the **Mareth**/Tebaga operations took place at **Mareth** on 20 March. By 27 March, one week later, the enemy was in full retreat, in considerable disorganisation, and in no fit state to make another effective stand until, over a fortnight later, he was among the hills at **Enfidaville**. It is certainly not easy, and rarely is it safe, to prophesy with certainty the outcome on the field of battle. Nevertheless, it is probable that this victory could have been achieved more swiftly and could have been even more damaging to the enemy.

General Freyberg's handling of the **Tebaga Gap** operations in the early stage now seems curiously hesitant, and there is no doubt that a quick thrust through the weak defences there on 21 and 22 March would have yielded rich dividends, with highly favourable repercussions at **Mareth**. The risk had been correctly assessed and the **New Zealand Corps** should have been well able to deal with any enemy reaction beyond the Gap. Delay at Tebaga allowed the enemy to offer far more resistance to **30 Corps** than the Eighth Army plan envisaged.

The delay, though, was the product of several factors, none of them inconsiderable. For one thing, the GOC thought that the **30 Corps** attack was on much too narrow a front, and from the outset was therefore dubious of a quick success at **Mareth**.

Manpower, always a matter which weighed heavily with **General Freyberg**, was another factor. The latest draft of reinforcements—the first for fifteen months—had been absorbed, yet the Division was still short of 2400 men in an establishment of 16,000. This compared favourably enough with other divisions, both Allied and enemy, but the 2 NZEF was a national force whose fate had already trembled in the balance, and further serious losses could lead to its entire withdrawal

from the **Middle East** theatre.

Further, if the **New Zealand Corps** emerged at once beyond the Gap, could the GOC rely on his own armour? The course of events at **Sidi Rezegh, Minqar Qaim, Ruweisat** and **El Mreir** was not yet overshadowed by more recent successes, evidence was still freely available that the 88-millimetre gun continued to dominate the battlefield, and at the end of a long and partially unprotected line of communication there was still an element of chance that the armour, a brittle arm, could suffer crippling losses at the hands of the concentrated panzer divisions, depleted though they were.

The burden of decision rested squarely on **General Freyberg's** shoulders, and he seems to have kept it there, for no record has been discovered that he discussed the problem with any of his subordinate commanders, although of course there was no call on him to do so. Nor apparently did he warn Eighth Army of any conditions likely to impede the rapid execution of his task, an action which, in the circumstances, it might have been wiser to take, although it is uncertain whether he realised the harmful effects of delay at **Tebaga**. Altogether, the combined circumstances of the occasion seem to have exercised a cramping effect on his initiative.

An early, full and vigorous thrust at **Tebaga** would almost certainly have achieved success both at **Tebaga** and on the **30 Corps** front. Failure to provide this created a situation in which the Army Commander was bound to intervene.

The breakthrough operation at **Tebaga**, once mounted, created a new standard in co-operation between infantry and armour and the Air Force. It closely resembled the Germans' own 'blitzkrieg' and was indeed more closely integrated, and thus more damaging, than the thrusts which had decimated and scattered the Eighth Army earlier in the war. The terrain confined the power of the thrust almost entirely to the floor of the Gap, and here the Air Force concentrated its close support, strafing and bombing, while the artillery barrage, weighty and devastating, pounded

irresistibly to the objective and beyond. The path of the armour and the infantry was well paved, but they, in any case, were not to be denied. A new pattern was set for the future, and a new standard produced by which co-operation between ground and air could henceforward be measured.



Gabes to Enfidaville

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 12 – BREAKTHROUGH AT AKARIT

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

EIGHTEENTH ARMY GROUP PLAN

Eighteenth Army Group Plan

WHILE all the turmoil had been going on between **Medenine** and **Gabes**, elsewhere Eighteenth Army Group was increasing its activity after the upheaval at the end of February. There have been occasional references in preceding chapters to the action taken by **2 US Corps** in attacking towards **Maknassy**, and this pressure was kept up in early April but without much success. Farther north First Army was now organised into **5** and **9 Corps**—which comprised 6 Armoured, 1, 4, 46, and 78 British Divisions—and the French **19 Corps** of about two divisions. On this front an Anglo-French force resumed the offensive north of **Medjez el Bab** on 28 March, and in the course of a few days advanced some 18 miles. It was intended that this offensive should continue and free Medjez from enemy threat.

Alexander by this time had prepared a long-term plan for ending the war in North Africa, of which the first two phases were to be the advance of Eighth Army through the Akarit position and a thrust by **9 Corps** towards **Kairouan**, so threatening the rear of **1 Italian Army**. (In the preliminary stage of the second phase, American troops entered **Fondouk** on 27 March.) By these two offensives Alexander would obtain the use of the coastal plain west and north of **Sousse** and, in his own words, ‘seize and secure airfields ... from which we can develop the full weight of our great superiority in the air, thereby paralysing the enemy's supply system’.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

EIGHTH ARMY PLAN

Eighth Army Plan

There was still a chance—or perhaps it would be better to say a hope—that **10 Corps** might secure the Akarit line without a formal attack. Pressure by **2 NZ Division** might enable **1 Armoured Division** to pass through. This possibility was discussed by Montgomery with Horrocks and **Freyberg** at a conference south of **Gabes** on 30 March, the outcome being that Horrocks was to consider whether or not this was practicable. In the meantime **30 Corps** would prepare a plan for a set-piece attack.

The New Zealand Division continued to test the defences on 30 and 31 March, after which Horrocks reported that the line was firmly held, and that **2 NZ Division** could not get through without heavy fighting, and resultant heavy losses. This was contrary to Montgomery's wishes. First, he did not want to incur heavy casualties at a time when the end in North Africa was seen to be inevitable, and when he himself knew that Eighth Army was to be the British component of the Allied forces to invade **Sicily**. Secondly, he wished to use **2 NZ Division** in the exploitation beyond Akarit.

Thus the burden fell on **30 Corps**. A first plan was produced in which **51 (Highland) Division** would relieve **2 NZ Division** and keep up the pressure with a view to attacking later, but only if necessary, for the hope that set-piece action could be avoided still continued. Part of the reason for this lay in the results that would ensue from a successful offensive by **2 US Corps**, which at the best would reduce Eighth Army's part to a follow-up; but this hope proved illusory.

The final decision, therefore, was to launch an attack with three divisions, to open a gap for **2 NZ Division**, for **1 Armoured Division** to follow through, and for **10 Corps** to take up the pursuit with these two divisions. Codename for the operation was **SCIPIO**, to be launched on 6

April. Montgomery could not wait for the next moon, and this time the attack was to be in the dark, an hour or so before daylight.

There were good reasons for these changes of plan, but the outcome was a rather bewildering number of Army and Corps operation orders and instructions giving many alternatives, changes in responsibility for sectors, and transfers of formations during the battle from one corps to another. The result, however, was a brilliant success, and further evidence that Eighth Army could take such troubles in its stride.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE TERRAIN

The Terrain

The position now confronting Eighth Army was known to both sides as the 'Akarit Line', but was sometimes described by one or the other as **Wadi Akarit**, the **Gabes Line**, the **Gabes Gap**, or the Chotts. Had Rommel had his way, it would have been prepared when the Battle of **El Alamein** was seen to be decisive and the Allies had landed in **Algeria**, and there would have been only delaying action between Egypt and Akarit during the withdrawal. Rommel was reinforced in this opinion after inspecting the **Mareth Line** in January and confirming that it could be outflanked. The outstanding virtue of the Akarit Line from the German standpoint was that it rested on the sea to the east and the Chotts to the west and could not be outflanked. The western end rested on **Sebkret el Hamma** (the eastern end of Chott el Fedjadj), which was virtually impassable.

Wadi Akarit itself ends at the coast about ten miles north of **Oudref**, trends towards its source just south of west for about four miles, and then bends to the south-west for another four miles, at which point it disappears in the low watershed between the coastal slope and the inland descent to **Sebkret el Hamma**. The wadi banks in the lower reaches are steep. There is a gap of only about one mile between the western end (the source) of **Wadi Akarit** and the eastern end of Wadi Telman, which drains into the Sebkret. Both wadis are normally dry.

Behind **Wadi Akarit** and Wadi Telman is a line of hill features, the eastern end of a range north of the Chotts. Starting from the west these are (*a*) **Djebel Zemlet el Beida**; (*b*) **Djebel Tebaga Fatnassa**, a much higher feature with three separate peaks named from south to north **Rass oued ez Zouai**, **Djebel Mesreb el Alig**, and **Djebel Tebaga Fatnassa** itself, together with a fourth peak to the east of the last-named called **Djebel el Meida**; and (*c*), three miles farther east across a marked col, **Djebel er Roumana**, often known as Point 170. These features

completely overlook the country south of **Wadi Akarit**.¹

In the approaches to the **Wadi Akarit** position the going was difficult off the roads owing to frequent small wadis, marshes, and patches of soft sand.

The enemy made use of **Wadi Akarit** itself for his main defence line for the first five miles from the sea. From there an anti-tank ditch carried on south of west for a mile and a half and then ran north for half a mile and west for two miles, this last stretch covering the gap between **Djebel er Roumana** and **Djebel el Meida**. It was covered by a minefield throughout. Farther west the enemy relied on the naturally broken ground of **Djebel Tebaga Fatnassa** and **Zemlet el Beida**, strengthened by some defensive works. There was a second anti-tank ditch resting on the rear (northern) end of **Djebel Roumana** and running thence south-east to **Wadi Akarit**. Both sides of all these ditches were staked, and over the whole length of the line there were well dug-in positions. An attempt had been made latterly to dig an anti-tank ditch between the rear slopes of **Zemlet el Beida** and **Sebkret en Noual** to the north-west, probably as a precaution against another left hook.

¹ See map on p. 262.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ENEMY DISPOSITIONS

Enemy Dispositions

First Italian Army had to rely mainly on Italians to hold the line, while the Germans laced the position at critical points. The line was held by ***XX Corps*** on the east and ***XXI Corps*** on the west. ***XX Corps*** had ***Young Fascist Division*** on the coast, ***90 Light Division*** astride the main road, and ***Trieste Division*** as far as Djebel Roumana. ***XXI Corps*** had ***Spezia Division*** on the east and ***Pistoia*** on the west, with one regiment from ***90 Light***, and with what was left of ***164 Light Division*** as reserve. The ***90th Light Division*** was much concerned about the defence of Djebel er Roumana, which was not in its sector, and did its best to persuade the Italians to strengthen the defences, even to the extent of offering to put a German battalion there. The offer was not accepted, but ***90 Light*** nevertheless directed one of its regiments to reconnoitre routes to Roumana.

The enemy's transport situation was acute. The ***90th Light Division*** was only 50 per cent mobile, and ***164 Light*** had to march on foot back to its existing position in reserve.

But, as usual, Eighth Army's greatest interest was the whereabouts of the three panzer divisions. The ***15th Panzer Division***, with only fifteen runners at this time, was in reserve behind ***XX Corps***, much as at ***Mareth***. The ***10th Panzer Division***, with fifty tanks, together with a heavy tank battalion of twenty-three tanks and ***Centauro Battle Group*** with ten, was opposite the Americans at ***Maknassy***. And ***21 Panzer Division*** with forty tanks was opposing the Americans at ***El Guettar***, 50 miles south-west of ***Maknassy***. The enemy's armour was thus dispersed, with the greater strength opposite the Americans, but it was all within one night's travel to any part of the front.

The average strength of the unarmoured divisions, whether German

or Italian, was estimated at 4100, and the total unarmoured troops in the Akarit line at 24,500.

However, as with all enemy strength states at this period, the record is insufficient for any degree of certainty. A contemporary estimate for 7 April 1943 puts the strength of *1 Italian Army*, including its German element, at 106,000.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION IS RELIEVED

2 NZ Division is Relieved

During 31 March reconnaissance of the enemy position continued, patrols from 21 Battalion bringing back reports of defences with outposts in front. The **23rd Battalion** was moved forward to strengthen a somewhat nebulous position, and then 5 Infantry Brigade formed a properly co-ordinated gun line near the main road. The **21st Battalion** was on the right of the railway line just west of the road, and **23 Battalion** on the left, the general line of the FDLs being some two miles short of **Wadi Akarit**. The troops and the guns of 5 Field Regiment moved up after nightfall, and 4 and 6 Field Regiments also deployed, although in some places it was difficult to find good positions. Both Sound Ranging and Flash Spotting Troops of **36 Survey Battery** found good sites, and Survey Troop was as usual busy with bearing pickets.

The position was occupied without enemy interference, but in the morning of 1 April it was both shelled and mortared. However, during that time the relief officers from 51 (H) Division arrived to reconnoitre the line, and after dark the relief took place. Fifth Infantry Brigade then withdrew to the west of **Metouia**. Divisional Cavalry patrols were withdrawn, and the whole Division, including **8 Armoured Brigade**, but less the divisional artillery, was now in rear areas. The artillery was to support **30 Corps** in its attack, and remained in position.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PLANS AND ORDERS

Plans and Orders

At a **30 Corps** conference on 1 April, the Corps' plan was explained for the first time. The New Zealand Division would not take part in the main attack, but would pass through a gap made by 50 Division, and would not advance until the gap was made. The Army's final objective was the line **Sfax- Faid** (codename RUM), but at that stage the situation would be reconsidered, as there should by then be a junction with the Americans. Thirtieth Corps was responsible for a sector from the sea up to and including **Djebel Tebaga Fatnassa**, with **10 Corps** west of that point. The objectives of the attacking divisions were:

51 (Highland) Division—Djebel er Roumana

50 (Northumbrian) Division—the pass between Djebel er Roumana and Tebaga Fatnassa, where a gap was to be made for 2 NZ Division

4 Indian Division— **Djebel Tebaga Fatnassa**

The 7th Armoured Division was in reserve. As 2 NZ Division was to pass through a gap made by **30 Corps**, it was under tactical command of that Corps at the outset, but at a suitable time when it was into or through the gap it would revert to the tactical command of **10 Corps**.

For the moment **10 Corps** was responsible only for the line west of **30 Corps**. On the night before 'D' day the Corps—in effect 1 Armoured Division and 'L' Force—was to make a feint attack by way of deception. The 1st Armoured Division would follow 2 NZ Division, with the latter responsible for armoured car reconnaissance across the whole Corps' front until 1 Armoured Division could speed up and position itself on the left.

The right boundary of **10 Corps** after the breakthrough was a line parallel to but one mile west of the main road for about 20 miles, and thereafter due north. 'L' Force was to relieve 1 Armoured Division early on 'D' day and would then protect the left flank during **10 Corps'** advance, ranging just as far to the west as terrain and resources would permit. The initial objective for **10 Corps** was to be the area round **Sebkret en Noual**, bounded by the line of the railway from **Mahares** to **Mezzouna**.

Both the **30 Corps** break-in and the **10 Corps** break-out were to be closely supported by the **Desert Air Force**, as an extension of the air attacks on enemy positions, transport and landing grounds which were already going on relentlessly day and night. For **30 Corps'** attack there would be a fighter screen to protect close and concentrated attacks similar to those at Tebaga. Subsequently 2 NZ Division would have steady air support, on call through four air tentacles. The arrangements included many details for indicating targets and forward defended localities, and for making specified landmarks by letters bulldozed in the sand and blackened with burned petrol tins.

One small point of interest at this time is that the shadow of **United States** formations falls across Eighth Army, for in many orders, including those of **10 Corps**, it was thought better to specify that the British formation was ' **1 British Armoured Division**', as the **United States** formation round **Maknassy** was 1 US Armoured Division.

For this operation there was an absolute proliferation of code-names, and one paragraph in a **30 Corps'** instruction reads:

To avoid any risk of duplication or confusion any code names to be used by divs will be restricted to the following types of words:—

HQ 30 Corps Classical names

CCRA Birds

7 Armd Div Biblical names and animals

2 NZ Div Food names

50 (N) Div Girl's names
51 (H) Div Scotch place names
4 Ind Div Games and sports.

**Army Headquarters used names of drinks, e.g., GIN and RUM; 1
Armoured Division used names connected with horses and harness, while
'L' Force used colours.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION ORDERS

2 NZ Division Orders

The operation instruction for 2 NZ Division (No. 14) was not issued until 5 April, and was as usual the culmination of many conferences, discussions and general activities in the period from 31 March.

The order, after recapitulating the details of Army and Corps instructions, then prescribes the order of march through the gap as:

8 Armd Bde less B2 Ech

2 NZ Div Cav

KDG

Gun Group

5 NZ Inf Bde Gp

Main HQ 2 NZ Div

B2 Ech Gp

2 NZ Div Res Gp

6 NZ Inf Bde Gp

1 NZ Amn Coy

Rear HQ 2 NZ Div

2 NZ Div Adm Gp less 1 NZ Amn Coy

The 8th Armoured Brigade was to form up on the night before 'D' day with its head some five miles short of the anti-tank ditch. For the advance through the gap both Divisional Cavalry and King's Dragoon

Guards were to be under the orders of the brigade, and were to form up and move behind it. The gun group would not be able to form up until it had finished firing in support of **30 Corps'** attack. It consisted of 4 Field Regiment (less a troop with KDG), 64 Medium Regiment, RA, 7 NZ Anti-Tank and 14 NZ Anti-Aircraft Regiments (less detached batteries with groups), **36 Survey Battery** and Mac Troop. No moves were initially laid down for the remainder of the Division, although 5 Infantry Brigade Group stood prepared to form up on 6 April ready to move forward.

A special 'task force' was to move in rear of 50 Division's attack, and make and mark three gaps in the minefield ready for the passage of 2 NZ Division. It was to consist of:

One platoon of engineers from 8 Field Company
One company of infantry from 6 Infantry Brigade ¹
Detachment from **Divisional Provost Company**

and was to be supported by one squadron of Crusader tanks from **8 Armoured Brigade**—all under the command of the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel F. M. H. Hanson.

This special force was given its duties after discussions with 50 Division by the GSO I and the CRE. Both officers came away somewhat perturbed by the method of getting through a minefield adopted by that division. New Zealand infantry had always gone through in extended line closely following the barrage, but 50 Division's plan was for each infantry company to be led through the minefield in single file by a sapper, using a mine detector, a procedure which occasioned later delays, but which, nevertheless, was based on much experience.

The divisional instruction laid down the axis of advance, and the action to be taken by the leading troops when through the gap, which amounted to reconnaissance to the north and west while the main body of the Division awaited developments. The only new unit was the **Greek Squadron** of armoured cars, which had been with 'L' Force since February. It came under 2 NZ Division on 3 April and was placed with

Divisional Cavalry.

The order of march given on [page 257](#) shows, quite unobtrusively, what was claimed as a minor victory for the infantry brigadiers, in that **8 Armoured Brigade was to lead off without its B2 Echelon of transport. It had long been a source of complaint that armoured brigades took their excessively long 'tail' with them in close support. It has already been recorded that on occasion the next-following formation was either delayed in moving off, or forced into tactical remoteness.**

The only special point in the administrative instructions was that all units would hold rations and water for seven days and petrol for a minimum of 300 miles in first-line vehicles, and rations and water for four days and petrol for 100 miles in second line. There were still two RASC companies with the Division to augment the New Zealand companies. As usual, these simple words cover a great deal of planning by the AA & QMG (Lieutenant-Colonel Barrington), and of hard work by the ASC, ordnance and EME units, to ensure that the Division moved off fully stocked.

¹ **D Company, 26 Battalion.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ARTILLERY

Artillery

Because of the vital importance of penetration on this front, 2 NZ Divisional Artillery was to support 50 (Northumbrian) Division in its attack. Two of 50 (N) Division's three field regiments had been left behind at **Mareth** to help clear up the battlefield, and only one (124 Field Regiment, RA) was available for the battle. In addition, 2 Regiment of **Royal Horse Artillery** from 1 Armoured Division would help when not required on other tasks, all regiments being under the direction of the CRA 2 NZ Division. The programme included a barrage by the three New Zealand field regiments, fire on selected targets by the other field regiments and by the New Zealand regiments when not engaged in the barrage, and defensive fire tasks by two medium regiments. The 111th Field Regiment, RA, of **8 Armoured Brigade** took no part but remained in immediate readiness to advance with its brigade. On the conclusion of the programme 5 and 6 Field Regiments were to join 5 and 6 Infantry Brigades respectively, while 4 Field Regiment and 64 Medium Regiment, RA, joined the gun group.

After the final objective had been gained, one battery from 6 Field Regiment would fire at intervals along a defined line to mark the bomblines for the air force.

For the Ammunition Company it was a period of heavy dumpings—9000 rounds on 1 April, 9164 on 3 April and 2700 on 4 April; by 6 April it had dumped 300 rounds per gun and kept up full replenishment as well. A second company was obviously needed, but the NZASC had to finish the war in North Africa without it. ¹

¹ See pp. 7– 8.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

BRIGADE PLANS

Brigade Plans

The 8th Armoured Brigade decided to advance on a one-regiment front with Staffs Yeomanry in the lead, followed by Tactical Headquarters. But as soon as conditions allowed the brigade would move in 'A' formation, with 3 Royal Tanks echeloned back on the left and Notts Yeomanry on the right.

On the day of the attack 5 Infantry Brigade Group was to form up in nine columns on the east side of the tracks (nine in number) which the engineers would prepare from the divisional area to the minefield—all moves to be completed by 11 a.m. The order of march would be:

Advanced Guard as before ²

Tac HQ

21 Bn Group

5 Field Regiment

23 Bn Group

28 Bn Group

7 Field Company less dets

Main HQ and B Echelon transport

ADS 5 Field Ambulance

Workshops

There was a degree of decentralisation down to battalions more marked than usual, which led to the use of the term 'battalion group'.

Attachments to each battalion were two troops of anti-tank guns, one section of light anti-aircraft guns, and two platoons of machine guns.

² See p. 241. The Field Battery was from **5 Fd Regt.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

DIVISIONAL ACTIVITIES, 1-6 APRIL

Divisional Activities, 1-6 April

The days preceding the attack were reasonably quiet, except for a little harassing fire on both sides. The 50th Division took over the central sector of **30 Corps'** front at 8 a.m. on 4 April, with 69 Infantry Brigade in the line. Responsibility for its artillery support then passed to the CRA 2 NZ Division.

The engineers carried on with their usual multifarious tasks—water supply, repairs to demolitions, maintenance of roads—and there were in addition two special tasks intimately connected with the forthcoming operation. One was the preparation and marking of nine tracks, starting three miles south-west of **Metouia** and ending on a ridge seven miles farther north, beyond which it was not possible to proceed without coming into view of the enemy. This involved much bulldozing and laying of culverts in wadis that now had water in them. It kept 5 Field Park Company and 6 Field Company pleasantly busy.

The second was to prepare for the task of clearing gaps in the minefield. For this purpose 8 Field Company (Major **Pemberton**¹), less headquarters and inessential transport, assembled south-west of **Oudref** before dark on 5 April. There it was joined by the tank, infantry and provost components.

For Divisional Cavalry and the infantry the few days from 1 to 5 April were restful on the whole. The cavalry was made up to establishment in Stuart tanks and the **Greek Squadron** came under its wing. All six infantry battalions carried out the usual activities in a rest period—maintenance, reorganisation, conferences, route marches, tactical exercises, swimming excursions where the sea was near enough—and had some real rest.

Enemy air forces were active in this period, although the bombs dropped were nearly all anti-personnel. The results were negligible.

On the other hand, the activities of the Allied air forces far exceeded those of the enemy and in some directions were devastating. The **Desert Air Force** attacked landing grounds, enemy positions and transport, and farther behind the battlefield the air forces were dislocating the enemy's air transport system from **Sicily** and **Italy**. At the end of March it was estimated that over 100 transport aircraft were arriving in **Tunisia** every day, but on 5 April forty were destroyed in the air and 188 on Tunisian and Sicilian airfields, a blow that was well-nigh crippling.

General Montgomery visited 2 NZ Division on 2 April and spoke to all officers and NCOs who could be released from duty; he then moved in turn to **Divisional Headquarters**, 6 Infantry Brigade, Reserve Group, 5 Infantry Brigade (including KDG and Divisional Cavalry), Divisional Artillery, and **8 Armoured Brigade**. On 4 April **General Freyberg** paid a special visit to **8 Armoured Brigade** and spoke to the officers of all three regiments, for he—and others in 2 NZ Division—had much regretted that in press references to the Division the British formations and units under command had not received their due credit. The visit was much appreciated, for all units gave it a special 'write-up' in their war diaries.

¹ **Lt-Col R. C. Pemberton**, MC and bar, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Christchurch**, 23 Mar 1915; engineer; OC **8 Fd Coy** Dec 1942-Oct 1943; acting CRE **2 NZ Div** Jul-Aug 1944; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

The Enemy

The enemy still looked on the American front as the more dangerous for the moment, partly because of the terrain, and partly because, although it had been correctly estimated that Eighth Army would attack at night to gain a breach through which the armour could be passed, the attack was not expected until the first favourable moon, 15 April. On 3 April *21 Panzer Division* joined *10 Panzer Division* in the **Maknassy** area, and the combined divisions counter-attacked and gained some ground. Even on 'D' day, 6 April, the enemy resistance on this front remained strong. Although the American advance did not achieve all that had been hoped, it attracted two of the most dangerous foes away from the Akarit front, and some part in the subsequent victory can be claimed for it.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

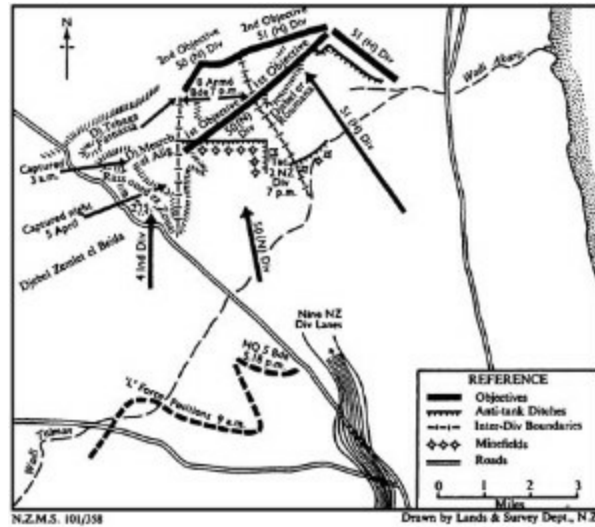
THE ATTACK AT AKARIT

The Attack at Akarit

In the **30 Corps'** plan of attack **4 Indian Division**, probably the body of Allied troops best trained in mountain warfare, planned its own attack within certain specified limits of time and place. To obtain the advantage of surprise the division began by attacking, without artillery support, the southern peak of the **Djebel Tebaga Fatnassa** massif immediately after dark on 5 April. This peak, the commanding ground, was soon taken, and the division went on to capture both **Djebel Mesreb el Alig** and **Djebel el Meida**, a magnificent night's work that earned both the admiration and the awe of the rest of Eighth Army. By 9.30 a.m. on 6 April the left flank had triumphed and some 3000 prisoners had been taken, nearly all from **Spezia** and **Pistoia Divisions**. Two counter-attacks had been beaten off, and the mixed German and Italian troops were never allowed to recover from the audacious and successful assault.

At 4 a.m. on 6 April the artillery throughout **30 Corps** began their tasks. All told, there were eighteen field regiments and four medium regiments, a total of 496 guns. From a forward observation post the effect of this weight of artillery was most impressive—overhead a constant sighing as the shells went over, to the rear bright and continuous flashes, to the front a constant crashing of shells, and pervading all the numbing detonation of the guns. The effect on the enemy's side must have been great.

On the right flank **51 (H) Division** reached **Djebel er Roumana** by 6 a.m., and by 11 a.m. reached the north-west end of the anti-tank ditch beyond, which was a point on the final objective. This was held after a struggle. One battalion from **Trieste Division** was eliminated, and prisoners were taken from **90 Light Division**, one regiment of which counter-attacked at 9 a.m. and for a while held **51 Division**, but was in turn driven back.



30 CORPS' ATTACK AT WADI AKARIT, 5-6 APRIL 1943

30 CORPS' ATTACK AT WADI AKARIT, 5-6 APRIL 1943

In the central sector—50 (N) Division—the minefield and anti-tank ditch formed a genuine obstacle, and the enemy resisted strongly any attempts to cross. By 5.30 a.m. a footing was made towards the seaward end, but further penetration was stopped.

During the rest of the day both 51 and 4 Indian Divisions reached their final objectives. The enemy counter-attacked again at 4 p.m., this time with *15 Panzer Division* from reserve, and forced 51 Division back slightly, although not enough to affect the satisfactory position on the right flank. The *4th Indian Division* had some hard fighting with yet another regiment from *90 Light*, but held all its gains. In his despatch on the campaign General Alexander says of this day that '15 Panzer and 90 Light Divisions, fighting perhaps the best battle of their distinguished careers, counter-attacked with great vigour and by their self-sacrifice enabled Messe to stabilise the situation.' The desperate efforts of these two divisions to stop up the holes in the front irrespective of where the holes occurred can only excite our admiration. Certainly Montgomery described the fighting as having been 'heavier and more savage than any we have had since *Alamein*.'

During the day the *Desert Air Force* maintained unceasing attacks against transport, gun positions and troop concentrations, but could

find few tanks and claimed only one destroyed.

Owing largely to the success of 4 Indian Division in clearing the heights on the left flank and discovering a passable track through the hills so as to avoid the anti-tank ditch which was still delaying 50 (N) Division, Horrocks persuaded the Army Commander to order the advance of 10 Corps. Tanks did in fact move up to the 4 Indian Division area, but guns from the rear of Roumana, firing obliquely, prevented any move forward. But 10 Corps was now taking part in the battle, and 2 NZ Division passed to its command at 11.10 a.m. Until the situation on Roumana, scene of many counter-attacks, was clarified, and the offending guns, probably 88-millimetres, silenced, a further advance depended upon the success of 50 (N) Division.

This division had advanced shortly after 4 a.m. At 5.30 a.m. the gap-making force from 2 NZ Division moved forward some miles and there waited while the CRE and the second-in-command 8 Field Company (Captain [Willey](#)¹) went to reconnoitre. When they reached the centre of the position they found that 50 Division was baffled by the minefield and anti-tank ditch and was not taking any special action to overcome the difficulty, but had transferred activity to the ends of the ditch.

The CRE decided to proceed at once with the task of lifting the mines and filling in the ditch, over which two crossings for tanks were to be made. He called forward the supporting tanks and infantry by wireless and ordered the tanks to keep close watch on enemy activities, especially on the mortar and machine-gun posts that covered the ditch. Major Pemberton started his company clearing gaps in the minefield, removing booby traps and trip-wires. D Company, 26 Battalion (Captain [Hobbs](#)²), then moved through the minefield, some men taking up positions on the far side of the ditch, while the remainder set to work to fill in the crossings for tanks. It was now about 9.30 a.m. and reports on the state of the work were wirelessed back to Divisional Headquarters. Infantry of 50 Division was now mopping up enemy posts across the ditch and so helping to reduce the volume of fire.

This comparatively slow rate of progress led the GOC to consider taking the Division round the east side of Djebel er Roumana, and up to 11 a.m. he was still undecided. Divisional Cavalry was sent forward on a reconnaissance over the country leading to the east of Roumana, but as the going was not favourable and obvious complications would arise from such a change of axis, it was decided to adhere to the original plan.

One crossing over the ditch was open by 2 p.m. and the second not long after; but there was still considerable opposition from the enemy. It was the generally aggressive attitude of the little gap-making force, the watchfulness of the tanks and infantry and the determination of the engineers that enabled the work to be done at all.

Meanwhile 50 (N) Division, finding enemy resistance strong in the centre, had concentrated on the flanks, and the climax came when infantry supported by tanks from 7 Armoured Division forced their way across near Point 85, the right-hand end of the obstacle, and followed this with an attack westwards along the far side of the ditch.

So one way and another a gap had been made and covered by 50 Division, even though the depth of penetration was shallow and enemy resistance still strong. In the early afternoon 8 Armoured Brigade was ordered forward, and Notts Yeomanry and Staffs Yeomanry moved into the gap, the former using the right-hand crossing just completed, the latter moving at the west end of 50 Division's sector. Staffs Yeomanry reported at 3 p.m. that they were through. Progress was impeded by fire from defiladed anti-tank guns, but the regiment was jubilant in knocking out a Tiger tank just at the close of day. Notts Yeomanry towards last light moved up on Djebel er Roumana to help 51 (H) Division, which was in difficulty with a combination of 15 Panzer and 90 Light, for until Roumana was fully cleared the gap could not be freely used. The third regiment, 3 Royal Tanks, followed the other two, and KDG closed up to the line of the ditch. But despite the presence of 8 Armoured Brigade within the gap, enemy guns behind the disputed

Roumana feature, as well as the commanding positions there, made it impracticable to pass 2 NZ Division through for exploitation.

During the afternoon 4 and 6 Field Regiments moved forward to an area immediately south of the minefield, and were in action there during the evening and night. Fifth Infantry Brigade Group had formed up in mid-morning and finally at 4 p.m. began a move of eight miles, which brought it some five miles short of the anti-tank ditch. The intention that 21 Battalion should go forward to protect the armour was later cancelled.

Sixth Infantry Brigade Group did not move, but remained at thirty minutes' notice in its area west of Gabes. There were several air raids on the divisional area, causing small casualties, and at least two aircraft were shot down by Bofors fire.

A new method of ground-to-air control was further improved on at Akarit, having previously been tried out with 2 NZ Division for SUPERCHARGE II. The RAF supplied a small number of armoured cars which controlled aircraft from within visual range of targets. These vehicles remained with 2 NZ Division for the next month. They were the predecessors of what was later called the 'cabrank' system, an arrangement by which several fighter-bombers remained overhead at call and were directed individually at a moment's notice to attack a target, which they could be 'talked-on' to.

¹ Maj P. B. Wildey, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 13 Oct 1913; mining student; OC Engr and Ordnance Trg Depot 1943.

² Maj K. W. Hobbs, m.i.d.; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 14 Jan 1917; clerk.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

POSITION AT THE END OF 6 APRIL

Position at the End of 6 April

At the end of the day the flanking divisions of **30 Corps** had achieved their objectives, although there was still some doubt about the possession of the northern spur of Djebel er Roumana. In the centre progress had been slow. Forward elements of **8 Armoured Brigade** were well north of the anti-tank ditch, part of the gun group was forward and in action, and the ditch had been cleared and filled sufficiently for **10 Corps** to cross. The 1st Armoured Division had been relieved by 'L' Force during the morning and was concentrated south-west of **Oudref**.

The enemy had in fact prevented a clean break through, but Montgomery clearly had the initiative and therefore decided to launch a 'blitz' attack next morning. This was to be made at 9.30 a.m. by **6 NZ Infantry Brigade** and **8 Armoured Brigade**, with an artillery barrage and extensive air support, from a start line 3000 yards north of the gaps.

Tactical Headquarters of both **2 NZ Division** and **8 Armoured Brigade** moved forward to the ditch to be in close touch with the forward situation, but for the time being **6 Infantry Brigade** did not move. Brigadier Gentry kept himself informed of any developments by visits to **General Freyberg** and by wireless. The CRA and his staff began preparing barrage tables for the attack.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

The Enemy

The *15th Panzer* and *90th Light Divisions* had done their best to patch up the front. About midday General von Arnim arrived from the north to visit *1 Italian Army*; he thought at first that the situation could be retrieved, and even ordered an additional infantry regiment to be sent down from *5 Panzer Army*. Bayerlein was not optimistic. The counter-attack by *15 Panzer* against Roumana followed in the afternoon, but despite some measure of success it was the last effort of which the German divisions were capable. All the divisional commanders were then of the one opinion—that the position would be untenable on the following day.

So at 10 p.m. *Army Group Headquarters* gave the order to withdraw: *90 Light Division* was directed to go back astride the main road to the *La Skhirra* area, *15 Panzer Division* to Sidi Mehedeb, and *164 Light Division*—still in a bad way with no transport—to the *Kat es Satour* area. The remnants of *Pistoia Division* and other Italians were to fall back on the west of *164 Division*.

Headquarters 1 Italian Army gave its orders with reference to *XX* and *XXI Corps*, which shared the front between them. Bayerlein had been authorised by von Arnim during his visit to give orders direct to all German formations in *1 Italian Army*, and for the next week while the withdrawal to *Enfidaville* was taking place, Bayerlein controlled the German formations as rearguards to the army as a whole.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ADVANCE FROM AKARIT

Advance from Akarit

During the night 6–7 April there were indications that the enemy was withdrawing. By 6.30 a.m. it was clear that the attack by 2 NZ Division was unnecessary, and before 7 a.m. it was established that the enemy had evacuated the Akarit line completely. The battle had thus taken only twenty-four hours, and victory after seven or eight hours had been prevented by the combined efforts of *15* and *90 Divisions*, and by the Italian artillery which fought extremely well. The *19th Flak Division*, with nine batteries of 88-millimetre guns, from scattered but extremely effective positions, imposed delay quite disproportionate to its numbers.

At 7.20 a.m. the attack by 2 NZ Division was definitely cancelled, leaving the artillery staff to lament some hours of wasted work, and orders were given for the Division to move forward, the passage through the gap being covered by 53 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RA, and one troop from 14 NZ Regiment. The armoured cars of King's Dragoon Guards and the light tanks of Divisional Cavalry led the Division, followed by the heavy tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade**. They found a miscellaneous debris of prisoners and enemy material, the prisoners coming from *90 Light* and *164 Light Divisions* in small numbers and from Italian units more freely. All units in the Allied forces were instructed about this time that captured enemy artillery equipment was not to be destroyed unless recapture seemed certain. The days when the battlefield swayed violently backwards and forwards were apparently over. The forward elements found no firm rearguard in position, but only a ragged array of infantry, mostly Italian. For once even the Germans had gone back hurriedly, seeming to need a respite in which to recover.

An inspection of the Akarit line served to show how strong it was basically, and also how great was the power of Eighth Army in armour,

artillery, and air power when it could overwhelm the defences in one day. During his inspection, the CRA reported that around him he could count twenty-four guns knocked out.

There was no good defensive position between Akarit and **Enfidaville**, 150 miles farther north, where a mountain range provided a wall for the enemy's back. The tasks of the opposing forces in these circumstances were, for the enemy, to impose the maximum delay within the power of rearguards without accepting battle; and for Eighth Army, to keep up the momentum of the advance, to do its best to brush rearguards aside without having to deploy, and to capture or occupy landing grounds in a state fit to be used at once. For while the speed of the advance was likely to be much affected by country more enclosed, the air forces were able to range far and wide with ever-increasing intensity, provided they had sufficient landing grounds from which to employ their great superiority in numbers.

For the next six or seven days 2 NZ Division again carried out a pursuit, and while there were compensations, the fact remains that a pursuit is fatiguing, especially as often there appears to be nothing happening at all. To the men in the lorries it meant day after day of start, stop, start, stop, move ahead in low gear, halt for hours, never seeing a glimpse of an enemy. No New Zealand infantry had any fighting during this period, for most units were never deployed. There were one or two scuffles and nothing more. The reconnaissance and armoured forces, however, had a more exciting time, the only serious fighting being carried out by **8 Armoured Brigade**, KDG, and Divisional Cavalry, with the first-named the most involved. Soon the supremacy of the tank on the North African battlefield was to pass away—for Eighth Army very soon indeed, only a week ahead—but in this last period, this British formation played its part to the full, and did honour to the New Zealand Division.

Eighth Army had now broken through into an area of country known as the Sahel, a strip of coastal plain varying in width and fertility. It

ranged from 20 to 40 miles wide, and became progressively more mountainous on its western side. Near the coast the ground was fertile, especially so in large areas around **Sfax** and **Sousse**. In various spots, mostly about 20 miles inland, there were salt marshes (called **Sebkret** or **Sebkra**) which as before were impassable for wheels. While the general trend of the land was flat, the terrain was sufficiently accidented, albeit in a minor way, to make the going often very bad. The fertile areas were much enclosed by cactus and other hedges and intersected by narrow lanes bordered by loose stone walls.

So much for the cold facts; but there was another aspect which had much appeal to the men. It was springtime, and the country was largely cultivated, with areas of olive plantations and occasional palm groves, and with green crops of wheat and barley. And even more attractive were the masses—a veritable carpet—of wild flowers, red, blue, white and yellow, poppies and daisies. Even dandelions and thistles were pleasant to see. To the men of **Greece** and **Crete** the olive groves brought back memories of those early days.

The troops were delighted with the change of scene: there was ample water, and everyone knew that the end could not be long delayed. No matter what was said about boring days of travel, it was a relief that the days passed without casualties.

On 7 April, at the outset of the advance, Divisional Cavalry exploited to the north-west behind **Djebel Tebaga Fatnassa** while King's Dragoon Guards advanced on both the east and west of **Djebel er Roumana**. The forward elements of these two regiments reached **Wadi er Rmel** at 8.45 a.m., meeting only light opposition, and at 11.15 a.m. captured the eastern feature of the low hill **Kat Zbara**.

This penetration alarmed the enemy, and at noon some Tiger tanks from *Army Reserve* were placed under **15 Panzer Division** with orders to attack the British armour (**8 Armoured Brigade**) which was close behind the reconnaissance forces. Thus it is not surprising that the advance soon ran up against real opposition and the artillery had to be deployed.

The tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** in hull-down positions engaged the enemy, helped not only by **4 Field Regiment** but by two guns of **Q Troop, 34 Anti-Tank Battery**, equipped with the new 17-pounders, which now opened fire for the first time.

This combined effort halted the enemy. By 6 p.m. the enemy tanks, of which some twenty-two had been seen (including the Tigers), were withdrawing, having offered the only serious resistance encountered this day, and having checked progress for some hours. One Tiger at least was knocked out, but other enemy losses are not known.

But while two of the three regiments of **8 Armoured Brigade** were held up in the area north of **Kat es Satour**, **3 Royal Tanks** and part of **KDG** succeeded in pushing forward along the eastern side of **Sebkret en Noual**, and at 5.30 p.m. cut the road from **Mahares** to **Maknassy** and **El Guettar** at a point east of **Rir er Rebaia**, and took many prisoners and destroyed much MT. The Division's advance had in fact cut across the line of retreat of the German forces that had been facing the Americans at **El Guettar** and **Maknassy**, and had been too quick for some of the enemy. This advance of **3 Royal Tanks**, and the earlier withdrawal of the enemy tanks, had been helped on the left of **2 NZ Division** by the arrival of **2 Armoured Brigade** from **1 Armoured Division**, which, once through the gap at **Akarit**, had made good going. Its cavalry regiment (**12 Lancers**) took over part of the front being covered by **KDG**.

The arrival of this force at **Rir er Rebaia** alarmed the enemy, and it then transpired that the Italian troops who were intended to fill the gap in the line east of **Sebkret en Noual** had either never gone there, or were so disorganised as to be useless. So once again a force from **90 Light Division** was rushed to that flank, together with elements (probably unarmoured) from **21 Panzer Division**, now retiring from **El Guettar**.

Each day of the campaign in North Africa made history of some kind, but on this day it was something to appeal to the popular imagination, for at 3.30 p.m. while moving forward **12 Lancers** made contact with desert patrols of American troops—the first contact

between the two armies of Eighteenth Army Group.

On the right of 2 NZ Division **30 Corps** pushed north along the coast road with 51 (H) Division and 23 Armoured Brigade, and by last light were just short of **Skhirra**. Between these forces and 2 NZ Division, 22 Armoured Brigade from 7 Armoured Division advanced on the same level. The whole advance of Eighth Army was closely supported from the air, increasingly so as the day went on and targets became more plentiful. The best targets were found along the road and tracks from **El Guettar**, where the enemy was in full retreat.

It had been quite a good day for all, but the time had come for 2 NZ Division to establish a firm base for the night, and for this purpose 5 Infantry Brigade came forward and formed a gun line in an arc some four miles to the north-east of **Kat Zbara**.

The **23rd Battalion** was to have been on the left of this arc, but at 6 p.m. the GOC from Tactical Headquarters ordered it to push out well to the north and get astride the **Maknassy** road at **Rir er Rebaia**, with a view to blocking the enemy retreat from the west. It appears that for some reason Headquarters was not aware that 3 Royal Tanks had already cut the road.

Lieutenant-Colonel Romans, in the words of the Brigade Major, 'took 23 Battalion off like a rocket', and in the faded light the two rear companies were left behind and had to wait until daylight. As it happened, the country over which the battalion advanced was quite unsuitable for night travel, for the route lay along the shore of **Sebkret en Noual**, where the marshy ground quickly brought the move to a halt, despite frantic efforts by all ranks to keep vehicles moving. After some hours' struggle the CO finally decided at 3 a.m. on 8 April to go no farther, and ordered the troops to bed down and wait for daylight.

The other two battalions of 5 Brigade supported by 5 Field Regiment duly took up their positions for the night. At last light (about 7.30 p.m.) **8 Armoured Brigade** was concentrating forward on 3 Royal Tanks—the

brigade's tactical headquarters did not reach the laager until after midnight—Divisional Cavalry was north-west of 5 Infantry Brigade, and Tactical Headquarters of the Division was on **Kat Zbara**. Sixth Infantry Brigade Group kept moving until about midnight it reached **Wadi er Rmel**.

The Division made a good haul of prisoners during the day, although exact figures are not known, but Divisional Cavalry recorded 15 Italian officers and 1204 other ranks, and 12 German officers and 111 other ranks. Twenty-seven guns of various calibres had been sent back and many vehicles. It was noticeable that while the Italians were weary-looking and ill-clad and only too glad to be quit of the war, the Germans were better-clad, bore themselves well, and were unshaken in morale.

The enemy had done his best during the day, but even his best could delay Eighth Army only temporarily. By the end of the day he was in general retreat to the line **Chebket en Nouiges** - **Sebkret Ouadrene**. The conduct of the withdrawal had been rationalised by this time, for all Italian troops were sent straight back to **Enfidaville**, leaving the German formations to impose delay.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

8 APRIL

8 April

At first light KDG, Divisional Cavalry and **8 Armoured Brigade** moved off again. Notts Yeomanry and 3 Royal Tanks went to the high ground towards **Chebket en Nouiges**, and there forestalled enemy tanks on the feature, the defenders again being *15 Panzer Division* and part of *21 Panzer*. There were in fact still some enemy troops, including tanks, to the south of **Chebket en Nouiges**, and the troop of artillery with KDG had some good shooting, destroying one tank and forcing others to withdraw. But the enemy screen of tanks combined with anti-tank guns proved quite effective, as so often before, and slowed down the advance of **8 Armoured Brigade**. It was not until the afternoon that there were signs that the enemy was again thinning out, for tanks and transport were moving north, probably hastened a little by the pressure of 1 Armoured Division against **Mezzouna** farther west. Here a reconnaissance group of 3, 33 and *Nizza Reconnaissance Units* was trying to fill the gap left by the disintegration of the Italians.

Both Divisional Cavalry and KDG had an exhilarating time, the roving movements of the latter giving great scope to their supporting troop of artillery, which finished the day in a position on the railway line well in advance of **Chebket en Nouiges**.

There was enough enemy resistance for the gun group to be brought into action by 11.30 a.m. from positions behind the Chebket, and here a 17-pounder was used by the Division for the second and last time against tanks in North Africa. A weapon of this special nature with such great hitting power had been long and eagerly awaited by Eighth Army, but it had come so late that it was hardly used or needed.

Meanwhile 23 Battalion extricated itself from the marshes—helped by tanks from **8 Armoured Brigade**—and by 6.45 a.m. at last reached the

road near **Rir er Rebaia**. Even at this late stage there was still enemy transport about, and hostile action of various kinds by everyone from the CO downwards resulted in eight vehicles being destroyed and in vehicles and equipment being captured. These came from *10 Panzer Division*, lately opposite **Maknassy**.

The remainder of 5 Infantry Brigade started to move forward at 8 a.m. but found the going difficult. It was halted some three miles south-east of the **Rir er Rebaia** crossroads, and stayed there during the early part of the afternoon awaiting a move that night. At 2 p.m. its main headquarters and 21 Battalion were attacked by five enemy fighters, and one man was killed and eight wounded, but Bofors shot down one fighter and Spitfires got another.

As all the indications were that the enemy was continuing his withdrawal, Lieutenant-General Horrocks decided to push ahead after dark on an axis running due north. The New Zealand Division would be the spearhead, but 1 Armoured Division and 'L' Force still farther west would conform. By late afternoon the enemy had begun to withdraw to a line some 20 miles farther north. The rearguards of *1 Italian Army*, namely *90 Light*, *164 Light*, and *15 Panzer Divisions* (the last-named reinforced by part of *21 Panzer Division*) now covered a stretch of country—it cannot be called a line—running inland from the coast for about 25 miles. To their west there was still the reconnaissance group, but now both *10* and *21 Panzer Divisions* had joined and were in the area north-east of **Maknassy**.

It becomes increasingly difficult to pin-point further the various enemy formations and units. Enemy material at divisional level ceases to exist after the end of March, and the war diaries of either *Army* or *Army Group Headquarters* are of little assistance in filling in detail. This will serve to explain why sometimes in the days that follow it is not possible to be certain which formation was opposing 2 NZ Division.

However, the general conclusion about the enemy situation at the end of 8 April was that, while there was a fairly continuous line on *1*

Italian Army's front, farther west there were large gaps.

To return to 2 NZ Division—with the object of carrying out a night advance, **8 Armoured Brigade** was withdrawn early in the afternoon for a few hours' rest, while arrangements were made to form a special battle group of **8 Armoured Brigade**, KDG, Divisional Cavalry and 5 Brigade Group. The remainder of the Division was to remain at its last-light locations, all south of **Chebket en Nouiges**. Although progress had not been rapid, more than 500 prisoners had been captured, including the GOC *Saharan Group*, General Mannerini, and his staff. This last capture gave some excitement to 28 (Maori) Battalion, through the hands of which the prisoners were passed. It compensated for a day in which the battalion had 'led the brigade column in an advance that was mostly halts.' ¹

At 5.45 p.m. the battle group moved off with **8 Armoured Brigade** leading, followed by 28 Battalion (under command **8 Armoured Brigade**), Divisional Cavalry, 5 Brigade, and with KDG for once bringing up the rear. The advance was uneventful, and by 11 p.m. the leading tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** had reached the forward slopes of Toual ech Cheikh, over 20 miles due north from **Chebket en Nouiges**. The Maori Battalion mounted flank guards on both sides of the axis, and the rest of the column bedded down a few miles farther south—except that, as usual for sappers, part of 7 Field Company spent most of the night working on crossings over watercourses.

¹ **J. F. Cody**, *28 (Maori) Battalion*, p. 285.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

9 APRIL—TO THE SFAX-FAID ROAD

9 April—to the Sfax- Faid Road

This advance penetrated into a gap between the right flank of **1 Italian Army** (as represented by the German rearguards) and **10** and **21 Panzer Divisions**, now collecting themselves after their withdrawal from **Maknassy** and **El Guettar**. It took the enemy by surprise, disrupted his line occupied only the evening before, so that he still had troops wandering about south and east of Toual ech Cheikh.

At first light it had been intended that **28 Battalion** should consolidate on the feature, but while Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett was on reconnaissance Brigadier Harvey passed word that the enemy was moving northwards and **8 Armoured Brigade** was already pushing on. The **28th Battalion** therefore reverted to the command of **5 Infantry Brigade**, and rejoined the column.

King's Dragoon Guards went into the lead, covering the whole front, moved rapidly, and were on the road from **Sfax** to **Faid** by 11 a.m., although they could not block it firmly at this time. The **8th Armoured Brigade** followed up to the northern slopes of **Djebel et Telil**, and was on a line from there to the north end of **Sebkret Mecheguigue**. Tactical Headquarters **2 NZ Division** was at this time (midday) just south of Telil. For a while the GOC considered sending part of **KDG** with extra artillery round the west side of the **Sebkret** to outflank enemy tanks which could be seen to the north, but about this time **2 Armoured Brigade** came up the east side of the **Sebkret** and prolonged **8 Armoured Brigade's** line to the west.

The gun group—**4 Field Regiment** and **64 Medium Regiment**—was then called forward and deployed on the south and east slopes of **Telil**, and was there joined by **111 Field Regiment** from **8 Armoured Brigade**. The gun area was protected by **31 Anti-Tank Battery** on both the front

and flanks, A Troop being on the left.

About 2 p.m., just as the *portées* of A Troop had unloaded and were driving away, some thirteen tanks appeared at very short range from a depression to the west, heading straight for the gun positions. For a moment it was thought they were American, but they opened fire on the *portées* and A Troop went into action. One gun stopped a Mark IV Special before it was put out of action, and the No. 1 of another gun, Bombardier **Keating**,¹ despite casualties to his gun crew, got his gun firing and accounted for two and possibly three tanks, even though for part of the time he had to do all the loading, laying and firing himself. Staffs Yeomanry then appeared and forced the enemy to withdraw. The 4th Field Regiment had adopted 'tank control' and was ready to repel boarders, but in the end the enemy did not come close enough. One quad of 111 Field Regiment was destroyed, and damage caused to guns of 31 Anti-Tank Battery. In addition to the tanks knocked out by A Troop, 64 Medium Regiment destroyed two by shellfire, and Staffs Yeomanry another two. The 2nd Armoured Brigade on the left joined in and helped to drive the enemy away to the north.

Despite all reconnaissance, it appears that the enemy tanks had been bypassed, and had waited until a good target offered. They came either from *21 Panzer Division* or from an extra tank battalion with the division. The whole force appears to have had about thirty-seven tanks, of which twenty-five attacked 2 NZ Division, while twelve were on the front of 2 Armoured Brigade. But good anti-tank defence had foiled the attack.

Meanwhile Divisional Cavalry was watching odd enemy vehicles, including tanks, in the area south-east of Telil, some miles behind the 2 NZ Division spearhead. As the day wore on these enemy forces became an embarrassment, and finally 26 Battalion was ordered to send out a mobile patrol of carriers, mortars, anti-tank guns and machine guns. This patrol in the end surprised two enemy tanks, destroyed one and drove the other away, and by this time it was dark.

By last light the enemy was still on the **Sfax– Faid** road, but his tanks had all moved off to the north. The enemy had now heard the alarming news that First Army had broken through towards **Kairouan**, so threatening the rear of all his forces facing Eighth Army. Orders were at once given by *Army Group Headquarters* for **1 Italian Army** to go straight back to a line north of **Sousse**, but a combination of a shortage of petrol and a desire to have a little longer to remove ammunition stocks from **Sfax** led Bayerlein to lay down a withdrawal to a line running east from **Sebkret mta el Rherra**, leaving rearguards to cover **Sfax**. Bayerlein's words on this date are, 'The troops (some of them tired out, some of them separated from their units) disengaged from the enemy with great difficulty, and retired to the new line, followed up closely by the enemy.'

Towards last light 2 Armoured Brigade took over from **8 Armoured Brigade** on **Djebel et Telil**, and the latter side-slipped a few miles to the east, with KDG in company and Divisional Cavalry just behind, all in preparation for another night move to the **Djebel bou Thadi**. The infantry of the Division was by this time well stretched out beyond **Djebel Toual ech Cheikh**, with 26 Battalion from 6 Brigade slightly displaced to the east as a safety precaution. Practically the whole day's advance had been through crop lands and olive groves, and the going was heavy.

Poor visibility had limited the operations of the air force, and in any case targets were becoming rare. The enemy made a few raids on 2 NZ Division, but casualties and damage were slight.

¹ **S-Sgt A. O. Keating**, DCM; born **Christchurch**, 31 Oct 1906; clerk.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

FIRST ARMY FRONT

First Army Front

On 7 April **9 Corps** launched the prepared attack against the pass at **Fondouk** which led out of the hills. On 8 April it captured **Pichon**, and on 9 April cleared **Fondouk** and forced the pass beyond. It was now out of the hills with an open road in front of it and **Kairouan** only 20 miles away, so that the enemy's alarm is understandable.

The 2nd US Corps was now squeezed by the ever narrowing front, and by 9 April was on its way to the extreme northern flank of the Allied line next the sea, where it was to join other American units and prepare for its part in the final phase.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

10 APRIL—CROSS-COUNTRY JOURNEY

10 April—Cross-country Journey

The idea of a night advance, and indeed of any advance due north, was abandoned quite early, and at 3.40 a.m. on 10 April was replaced by an advance by 2 NZ Division to the north-east towards **La Hencha** (on the main road north of **Sfax**), with the object of cutting off the troops opposing **30 Corps** in **Sfax**. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade would come up on the left of 2 NZ Division, and farther left would be 1 Armoured Division and 'L' Force.

So at 6.30 a.m. the GOC held a conference about the day's move. King's Dragoon Guards, Divisional Cavalry and **8 Armoured Brigade** were to lead, on an axis via **Triaga** and **La Hencha**. The change in plan delayed the start until 9 a.m., and in any case at 8.15 a.m. word was received that **Sfax** had been entered, almost inevitably, by **11 Hussars** of **7 Armoured Division**. However, the plan was not altered, and the advance continued, but contacts with the enemy were confined to brushes with the tail of his rearguards. Air reconnaissance discovered little south of **Sousse**; nevertheless the enemy's demolition parties were active, and KDG reached **La Hencha** at 11.30 a.m. just as the main road to the north was blown—and badly blown—where it crossed a marsh. All that could be done was to send a few shells after retreating MT. King's Dragoon Guards ended the day deployed on an arc from the main road north of **La Hencha** to the coastal road at **Djebiniana**, where it was in touch with **7 Armoured Division**.

Divisional Cavalry made no contact with the enemy, but managed to penetrate off the roads through the gap between **Sebkret mta el Rherra** and **Sebkret mta el Djem**, despite the very enclosed nature of the country. They ended the day at **El Djem** itself, well in the lead.

Staffs Yeomanry, by dint of much cross-country work, also got

through the gap between the two sebkrets, to within seven miles of **El Djem**, but was then almost out of petrol because wheeled transport was held up at the large 'blow' north of **La Hencha**.

Sappers of 6 and 7 Field Companies worked on this all afternoon, and indeed through the following night. Meanwhile other engineers were sent during the day to report on landing grounds north-east of Telil. The party was bombed just as it was leaving one ground, and two men were killed and eight wounded. This episode showed the importance that both sides attached to advanced landing grounds, we to use them, and the enemy to stop us. It is again an example of the active part played by the engineers.

The gun group was partially deployed south of **La Hencha** and got off some rounds at straggling enemy transport. Infantry had no action of any kind, and most unit diaries comment on the pleasant move among green crops and wild flowers and under olive trees. ¹

By the end of the day **10 Corps** was in a long arc from **Djebiniana** through **La Hencha**, north of **Sebkret mta el Rherra**, north of **Djebel bou Thadi** and **Djebel Kordj** to **Kefer Rayat**. The only forward element of **30 Corps** was **11 Hussars**, which in its usual style had a patrol on the coast as far north as **Chebba**. From now on, however, Eighth Army operated with one corps only, leaving Headquarters **30 Corps** planning the next stage, the invasion of **Sicily**. In any case it was time to give some thought to the administrative position, for the army was still dependent on supplies from **Tripoli**, now some 300 miles away. It was an urgent matter to get the port of **Sfax** into order.

The 6th Armoured Division of **9 Corps** was now fighting hard at the gates of **Kairouan**, and this was the enemy's greatest danger. The *21st Panzer Division* had already been moved there and now *15 Panzer Division* was sent back to the defile between **Sebkra Kelbia** and **Sebkra de Sidi el Hani**, so blocking the direct road from **Kairouan** to **Sousse**. Rearguards south of this line were provided by *90 Light Division* on the coastal strip and *164 Light Division* farther inland. It was commonly

remarked that Eighth Army would be chasing '90 Light' to the end of time.

The *15th Panzer Division* had supplied the rearguards opposing 2 NZ Division, but had now moved to its new task. Except for some small unarmoured elements, the Division was not again to meet *21 Panzer Division* which, with *10 Panzer Division*, was transferred to the First Army front.

¹ The country around **Sfax** is probably the most fertile in **Tunisia**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

11 APRIL—REST AND NO REST

11 April—Rest and no Rest

The advance of **30 Corps** ended at **Sfax**, but **4 Indian** and **50 Divisions** were later ordered north from **Akarit** to join **10 Corps**. The **1st Armoured Division** was halted and passed to the direct command of **Eighth Army**, mainly because **6 Armoured Division** was now on the west flank. Troops of these two divisions made contact during **11 April**, and for the first time **Eighth** and **First Armies** formed a continuous line. The **6th Armoured Division** entered **Kairouan** about the same time.

The enemy had obviously won the race back to **Enfidaville** and there was no chance of any spectacular round-up, so a little time could be given to rest and reorganisation. At **5.30 a.m.** on **11 April** **10 Corps** advised **2 NZ Division** that the advance on **Sousse** would not take place until **12 April**, and all units were told that there would be rest and maintenance for the next twenty-four hours, except for the patrols in contact with the enemy. To hear the word 'rest' doubtless sounded most pleasant, but its hearers must have wondered later if they had heard aright.

The first sign of disenchantment came as early as **11 a.m.**, when the **GOC** held a conference, and **8 Armoured Brigade** and the gun group learnt that they were to move by road that afternoon as soon as the demolition at **La Hencha** was filled. For one way and another it appeared that movement on the roads would be slow, and the **Division** was still **50 miles** from **Sousse**. However, the remainder of the **Division** would not move until **12 April**, and would advance across country.

Meanwhile **KDG** kept touch with the enemy, although it was late afternoon before actual contact was made with light rearguards south of **Sousse**. There were demolitions on many roads, including a large one on the main road at **Wadi Kerker**, **14 miles** north of **El Djem**, necessitating

another SOS for engineers.

The 8th Armoured Brigade moved forward in the afternoon, making use of more than one road. Units on the main road managed to bypass the **Wadi Kerker** 'blow' and the brigade laagered north and north-east of this, having for once seen nothing of the enemy. The gun group did not in the end move until after 7 p.m.; 4 Field Regiment went on to **Wadi Kerker**, but the rest of the group halted just clear of **La Hencha**.

Divisional Cavalry spent the day in the **El Djem** area, no doubt admiring, as did all the troops, the magnificent ruins of the Roman amphitheatre there. ¹ At the landing ground just north of the village the enemy's only attempt to prevent its use was frustrated, for seven fused bombs laid in trenches on the runway were found by engineers and were later blown up. The filling of the **La Hencha** crater turned out to be a prolonged task, and even by 12.30 p.m. only a single line of traffic could pass, and 6 Field Company had to stand by for continuous maintenance.

At midday disenchantment was complete when the Division was warned to move. Fifth Infantry Brigade had scant time to wind up all the 'make and mend' activities and move by 3 p.m. It bypassed **La Hencha**, covered 25 miles in just over three hours and halted off the road north-west of **El Djem**. Sixth Infantry Brigade closed up as far as **La Hencha**.

The GOC attended a conference at **10 Corps** at 3 p.m. to hear of future plans. On 12 April 2 NZ Division was to capture **Sousse** and close up to the **Enfidaville** line with 4 Light Armoured Brigade, 'L' Force and some heavy tanks on its left. The 4th Indian and 50th Divisions would arrive from Akarit about 15 April with the role of the immediate capture of the enemy's line.

But meanwhile the enemy was moving too fast for the pursuing forces, and early on 11 April had withdrawn from **Sousse** except for small rearguards. The *90th Light Division* retired to high ground about six miles north of **Sousse**, *164 Light* to **Sidi bou Ali**, and *15 Panzer* to the area between **Sidi bou Ali** and **Sebkra Kelbia**, with a reconnaissance

party on the **Enfidaville- Kairouan** road at the south-west end of the Sebkra. The enemy was now nearing the end of the forced withdrawal from Akarit, and had behind him a really strong position, where Italian troops had already been working on defences.

¹ When the Division returned to **Maadi Camp** in May, the large concert amphitheatre there, shaped out of a slope in the camp, was named ' **El Djem**'.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

12 APRIL—THE END OF DESERT FIGHTING

12 April—the End of Desert Fighting

After a quiet night 2 NZ Division advanced on **Sousse** at first light on 12 April, and at 7.45 a.m. the first KDG patrol entered the town. Engineers at once disarmed prepared charges on the traffic bridge over the railway on the northern outskirts of the town. The inhabitants gave the troops an enthusiastic welcome, producing flowers, wine and brandy amidst much hand-clapping and cries of 'Vive! Victoire!' They reported that the enemy had left only five minutes before, and at 8.45 a.m. Tactical Air Reconnaissance reported the tail of the rearguard as only four miles north of the town. In fact, not long afterwards Divisional Cavalry patrols ran into the rearguard in position on high ground near **Akouda**, where it was using a number of guns, together with mines and wire. Prisoners confirmed that it was part of *90 Light Division*.

Cavalry patrols were then directed to the west via Kalaa Srira in an effort to turn the enemy position, and during the day, helped by steady artillery support, gradually worked round to the north, although it was slow going. In the late afternoon **8 Armoured Brigade** caught up, having pushed on throughout the day although slowed down by various 'blows'. The brigade bypassed **Sousse** and also came up against the enemy rearguard. However, pressure was maintained and towards last light the enemy was obviously thinning out. At 7.30 p.m. the whole position had been turned, and **8 Armoured Brigade** went on, Notts Yeomanry finishing up only 3000 yards short of **Sidi bou Ali**, with Staffs Yeomanry close behind. Divisional Cavalry and King's Dragoon Guards disengaged and laagered west of **Sousse**.

The enemy rearguard had achieved its purpose and had delayed the advance for many hours.

For the rest of the Division the day had been one of hard going with

no action. Progress across country was difficult, and in most places the 'going' was impassable to wheels, so that traffic was confined to the roads, which the enemy had mined in many places. At one critical point north of **Msaken**, for instance, the road was both mined and cratered heavily, the crater being 64 feet wide. It was 3 p.m. before the engineers had filled it in.

Fifth Infantry Brigade Group moved at 8.15 a.m. in nine columns off the road, but at **Wadi Kerker** the broken nature of the ground forced it into single column along the road, and at one stage it became badly strung out. By 4.50 p.m. Headquarters and 28 Battalion neared **Akouda**, having bypassed **Sousse**, but were then held up while the last of the enemy rearguard was cleared away. This group then passed through **Akouda** and was at last joined by its two strayed battalions, which had moved through **Sousse**. The countryside was a mass of narrow lanes among thick cactus hedges and olive groves, and it was very easy to take the wrong turning. The **21st Battalion** official history says: 'On the afternoon of 12 April 21 Battalion passed through **Sousse**. Again it was at the rear of the column, but it came in for its share of "Vives" from the populace—"Vive les Anglais" and "Vive les Enzed"—which accompanied odd bottles of wine given to the troops and bundles of flowers pressed on the grinning drivers. This was running a war on the right lines, and the battalion hoped to be at the head of the column at the next town.'

By last light the Division was stretched out for 60 miles, from north of **Akouda** to **La Hencha**. Maintenance had been normal as usual, but the platoons of Petrol Company were working hard to keep supplies going. Petrol was all that mattered, for rations offered no difficulty, casualties had been slight, and ammunition expenditure negligible.

Despite the check at **Akouda** it was a useful day on the whole, for landing grounds had been overrun before damage could be done to them, and the little port of **Sousse** was undamaged and workable. There was no enemy interference all day.

On the west flank 4 Light Armoured Brigade moved round the west of **Sebkra de Sidi el Hani** and kept touch with 2 NZ Division's patrols.

Late on 12 April 10 Corps issued a directive about the first approach to the **Enfidaville** line, saying that it was expected the enemy would hold an outpost position east and west through **Enfidaville**, with the main position running west from **Bou Ficha** on the coast. Tenth Corps was to close up to this line, with 2 NZ Division on a front from the coast to west of **Takrouna**, 4 Indian Division in the centre opposite **Djebel Garci**, and 7 Armoured Division on the left. ¹ For the first time for Eighth Army an inter-army boundary was defined—a dividing line between 7 Armoured Division and 19 French Corps, the right-hand formation of First Army.

General Freyberg then decided that the Division must progress a little farther before 13 April, and the outcome of various conferences and orders was that 28 (Maori) Battalion was to occupy **Sidi bou Ali**, but was to be well clear of the road by first light so as not to block 8 **Armoured Brigade**, which would be passing through, with 21 Battalion in support.

At midnight 12–13 April 28 Battalion set off, but A Company (Major Porter) debussed short of the town ready to go forward on foot. However, the battalion intelligence officer (Lieutenant **Wikiriwhi** ²) volunteered to reconnoitre by carrier, and in due course reported the village clear. A Company carried on for another four miles, and when almost at the end of its task ran into the *90 Light Division* rearguard. In the ensuing skirmish the company destroyed a gun *portée*, killed two of its crew, wounded two more and took two prisoners. The company had one man killed and two wounded. By 5 a.m. all companies were in areas off the road, where they remained until they rejoined the 5 Brigade column later in the day. There was some slight enemy shelling at first light, but no casualties.

On 13 April 2 NZ Division came up against the outposts of the ‘**Enfidaville** line’, which lay along the northern limit of the Sahel, for at

this point the mountains on the west ran down to the sea, leaving only a very narrow strip of flat land along the water's edge. The [Enfidaville](#) line marked the end of desert fighting for Eighth Army.

¹ **See map on [p. 294](#).**

² **[Capt M. Wikiriwhi](#), DSO, MC, m.i.d.; [Pukekohe](#); born [Rotorua](#), 4 Apr 1918; shepherd; twice wounded.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 13 – UP AGAINST IT AT ENFIDAVILLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

FIRST CONTACTS WITH THE ENEMY LINE

First Contacts with the Enemy Line

THE hills now facing Eighth Army were the spurs of **Djebel Zaghouan**, a 4200-foot-high mountain some distance farther west. The most easterly peaks of these spurs were **Djebel Garci** and **Takrouna**, ¹ the last-named being on the western side of the entrance to the coastal strip. From **Takrouna** the hills trended away east of north, coming closer and closer to the coast, until at **Hammamet**, 20 miles away, they came right down to the water's edge.

The little town of **Enfidaville** was situated on the flat land at the entrance to the coastal strip, about halfway between **Takrouna** and the coast. Behind it, the country rose gradually, and **Enfidaville** nestled, half hidden, on the fringe of large olive groves which ran down to the sea, and amongst bluegums and other trees which surrounded its houses and lined its streets. On its outskirts some of these gum trees had been felled as road blocks, which later spelt doom to several soldiers who innocently but prematurely tried to enter the town.

The line of peaks, **Garci** and **Takrouna** in particular, commanded the coastal plain stretching south from **Enfidaville**, and overlooked the country across which the Division must travel to come to grips with the enemy. The advantage in terrain for ground fighting thus lay with the enemy, but the advantage in landing grounds now lay overwhelmingly with the Allies.

At first light on 13 April 2 NZ Division resumed the advance when Divisional Cavalry patrols moved up the main road from **Sidi bou Ali**, and KDG patrolled along the road running north from **Sebkra Kelbia**. There was a little shellfire on the main road, and KDG struck resistance some five miles north of the Sebkra. The supporting artillery came into action, and was in turn shelled, but armoured cars rounded up several

vehicles and captured thirty prisoners, and the enemy withdrew. There seemed to be enemy positions about every three miles, typical rearguard tactics, and there were undoubted indications that the Division was approaching a stronger line of defence, for enemy shelling became progressively more intense as forward elements approached **Enfidaville**.

More pressure was wanted, and the tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** were pushed through **Sidi bou Ali** astride the road. By 1.20 p.m. the brigade was in touch with the enemy, but found difficulty in getting observation from the tank turrets because of the olive groves, so 21 Battalion was sent forward, the carriers leading. Finally, at 4.30 p.m. the battalion took up a position across the road about five miles short of the town.

Meanwhile 5 Infantry Brigade had been called into action. At about 9 a.m. the GOC, from the roof of a farmhouse near **Sidi bou Ali**, instructed **Brigadier Kippenberger** to move direct on **Djebel Garci**, capture it if possible, and then advance on **Enfidaville** from the flank and rear. The brigade therefore took the secondary road and track from **Sidi bou Ali** towards **Djebel Garci**, 17 miles distant.

The proposed operation seemed a fairly extensive one, a 'tall order', but one must always bear in mind the special relationship between the GOC and his infantry brigadiers. The latter could estimate correctly just how much or how little was really meant by the General's sometimes startling instructions, and the General knew that his brigadiers would interpret his orders more in the spirit than the letter. In this case there was another factor, to be mentioned again later, namely that it was believed that the enemy was not going to make a real stand on the **Enfidaville** line, and that it was quite likely that the hills—including **Djebel Garci**—would not be strongly held.

The brigade commander at once summoned his battalion commanders, and prescribed the order of advance as 23 Battalion, Tactical Headquarters, platoon 7 Field Company, 5 Field Regiment, 28 Battalion, 21 Battalion, 7 Field Company (less a platoon), Main Headquarters, and B Echelon transport, the advance to be if necessary in

single column. Lieutenant-Colonel Romans was told that his battalion, with four Sherman tanks from **8 Armoured Brigade**, was to capture **Djebel Garci**.

Some four miles beyond **Sidi bou Ali**, 23 Battalion was joined by the four tanks, and here 21 Battalion left the brigade to join **8 Armoured Brigade** as already recorded. The movements of the four tanks are a mystery, for they did not accompany 23 Battalion on what became a dash at express speed over the countryside. Whether they fell behind owing to the rapid advance, or were told by **Brigadier Kippenberger** or Lieutenant-Colonel Romans to disengage, or were forgotten in the excitement is not known.

The **23rd Battalion** formed up in desert formation of nine columns, had a meal, and at 1.30 p.m. moved forward in the van of the brigade. At 3.10 p.m. it was some three miles in advance of the road from **Enfidaville** to **Sebkra Kelbia**, and was in full view of the enemy on the high ground north of **Wadi el Boul**. The enemy had commenced shelling the column, the head of which was still some six miles from the top of **Djebel Garci**.

But by now **Brigadier Kippenberger** had examined the Garci feature from closer range, and had decided that it was too big for either a battalion or even a brigade attack, and was a divisional objective. Well to the right, however, was another striking feature identified as **Takrouna**, the capture of which would still enable a flank attack to be made against **Enfidaville**.

Speed was essential if the enemy was to be caught off balance. So while they were all still moving ahead in their vehicles, **Kippenberger** shouted out his instructions to Romans for the change of plan. The attack was to go straight in without even waiting for support from 5 Field Regiment, for the regiment was some way behind, and it would take time to bring it forward and to find positions. It was now about 3.30 p.m.

The carriers of 23 Battalion, now in the lead, reached Point 70 overlooking **Wadi el Boul**, and from there could see enemy transport moving along the road running south of **Takrouna**. Behind the carriers the companies began to arrive in their vehicles, 'bumping and bouncing over the rough ground', and enemy shelling intensified. There were repeated salvos of four. A self-propelled gun could be seen on the road in front of **Takrouna**, there appeared to be about three troops of 105-millimetre guns in action, and our own artillery was not available. The enemy was obviously ready, and the brigade commander decided that without artillery or armoured support it was most unlikely that the battalion would ever get to **Takrouna**, which was still three miles away. So despite the readiness of the battalion commander and the battalion to go on, the brigade commander ordered the troops to debus and take shelter behind the ridge near the hamlet of **Hamadet Salah**.

The troops debussed and dug in with all speed, while the carriers went forward to shoot up transport. By 5.30 p.m. 5 Field Regiment was in action, but the wide-open nature of the plain made it necessary for the guns to deploy some distance back, a factor that was to affect all artillery activities in the days that followed.

Brigadier Kippenberger decided to hold the high ground round Point 70 and to extend the line to the west with two companies of 28 Battalion, using the other two companies to patrol forward to the road. While he was conferring with his commanding officers at Headquarters 23 Battalion there was heavy shelling in the area. After this conference, at about 6 p.m., Lieutenant-Colonel Romans arranged the dispositions to be taken up round Point 70, and these were occupied after dark. In the early hours of 14 April the battalion sent fighting patrols as far as the road, but these had nothing to report.

After dark 28 Battalion took up its position, with two companies dug in on the left of the 23rd. The other two sent out patrols up to the road along a stretch of two miles, but had nothing to report except that there was water in **Wadi el Boul**.

The casualties incurred by 5 Infantry Brigade during the day were surprisingly light, considering the advance across an open plain and the weight of the enemy shellfire. One officer and one other rank were killed, and fourteen other ranks wounded.

Sixth Infantry Brigade Group was assembled in the Bourdjine area by 11 a.m., 24 and 26 Battalions joining Headquarters and 25 Battalion which had moved there the night before. The brigade moved forward by stages during the day to just south of **Sidi bou Ali**, where it arrived at 10 p.m. A 'flag-showing' detachment of carrier patrol strength was sent round via **Djemmal** and **Moknine** and received enthusiastic welcomes from the local populace.

Night found **8 Armoured Brigade** laagering behind a 21 Battalion gun line five miles south of **Enfidaville**, and 5 Infantry Brigade dug in four miles south-west of **Enfidaville** facing **Takrouna**. King's Dragoon Guards and Divisional Cavalry maintained patrols across the front, and ten miles from **Enfidaville** were in touch with 'L' Force. The gun group was some miles back, but the Division was gradually assembling, and only needed to have artillery in closer support before making an attempt to breach the enemy line—or so it appeared.

Farther to the west 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 'L' Force had at last light reached a line running east and west just south of **Djebibina**.

Very little was known of the enemy dispositions except that a line of posts existed west of **Takrouna**, and numerous infantry had been seen digging in at various points. Air and ground reconnaissance had reported much enemy transport moving west from **Enfidaville**. Army Intelligence suggested that the enemy main line of resistance might well not be based on the positions at **Enfidaville**, but that these might constitute an outpost line for a main position between **Bou Fichta** and **Zaghuan**. This appreciation became generally accepted.

Available records give little information about the enemy just at this time, save that **15 Panzer Division** was in *Army Reserve*, and both **10**

and *21 Panzer Divisions* were west of the **Enfidaville** front. What was left of both *90* and *164 Light Divisions* faced *2 NZ Division*, together with portions of several Italian divisions, but it is not until a few days later that details are recorded.

¹ The word '**Takrouna**' applies both to the peak and to the village on its northern slopes. The word 'Djebel' does not, as is usual, figure as part of the name of the peak. Here, the word '**Takrouna**' will be used for the peak only. The village will be described as **Takrouna** village.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

A HALT ON 14 APRIL

A Halt on 14 April

The GOC indicated in the evening of 13 April that he would bring forward the artillery, shell the enemy out of his rearguard positions, and pass 6 Brigade Group through to take over the advanced guard role. As at Akarit, it was hoped that the enemy might be 'bounced' from his positions if pressure was maintained.

On 14 April King's Dragoon Guards under Lieutenant-Colonel M. J. Lindsay was withdrawn from the forward area and passed to the direct command of Eighth Army. So ended a pleasant association with a gallant regiment.

Divisional Cavalry patrols were active all along the front. The **23rd Battalion** carriers reported that enemy infantry was holding a line on the road immediately north of Point 70, having apparently occupied it at first light, as patrols during the night had found nothing there. During the morning the carriers, acting on the brigade commander's instructions, occupied Point 105 two miles to the west of Point 70.

At midday 21 Battalion returned, having been relieved from its task round **Enfidaville**. **Brigadier Kippenberger** then ordered it to advance about 1500 yards from the positions held by 23 Battalion, cross **Wadi el Boul**, and cut the road at an elbow north of Point 70, while the **Maori Battalion** was to advance the right flank of the line now held by 23 Battalion and so straighten it east of Point 70. The 28th Battalion was also to relieve 23 Battalion on Point 105. This was all to be done after dark without artillery support, at times arranged by the battalion commanders concerned.

The **21st Battalion** advance was uneventful. Companies debussed short of Point 70 and marched forward 2000 yards on foot, digging in

just south of the road. All companies were in position by 10.30 p.m., supported by two platoons of machine guns. The engineers of 7 Field Company built crossings over the wadi, and vehicles of all supporting arms were over by midnight. The 28th Battalion's moves were completed without incident by 11.30 p.m. Perhaps the enemy had changed his dispositions since being reported at the road by the 23 Battalion patrols, or perhaps the troops reported there had themselves been patrolling.

After its move 28 Battalion continued to be split to either side of the 23rd, but the two battalion headquarters were close together, and the 28 Battalion companies on the east served as a base from which to send out patrols. The 21st Battalion was completely detached from the other two, forming in effect an advanced strongpoint.

After some discussion between General Freyberg and Brigadier Gentry, 25 Battalion was called forward about 9 a.m. and moved to within about six miles of Enfidaville, where it pulled off the road and dispersed. The carriers and one company were sent forward, the former attempting vainly to enter the town. Later the carriers and some tanks from 8 Armoured Brigade tried to outflank Enfidaville from the east, and progressed until they were about 2000 yards north-east of it. Here they encountered enemy positions and could get no farther. The forward infantry company settled down astride the road two miles short of Enfidaville, and was strengthened by mortars and anti-tank guns.

This advance of 25 Battalion had relieved 21 Battalion from its duties of covering 8 Armoured Brigade, and allowed it to rejoin its brigade.

Sixth Infantry Brigade Group gradually concentrated forward into an area south of Enfidaville. In the late evening and during the night the remainder of 25 Battalion moved up to within 3000 yards of the town, and kept it under close reconnaissance. The 8th Field Company was also called forward to mark and clear minefield gaps.

At midday on 14 April, 2 NZ Divisional Artillery opened its counter-

battery office for the first time since Akarit, and during the day the Divisional Artillery and attached regiments gradually came into action under the CRA. By evening 4, 5, and 6 Field Regiments, NZA, 111 Field Regiment, RA, and 69 Medium Regiment, RA, were all surveyed into position. The survey troop had a busy day, and the flash-spotting troop was deployed also. The great trouble was the lack of cover, for the high features to the north, particularly **Takrouna, dominated the area, and made good gun positions hard to find.**

There was no enemy air activity during the day, but 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment was deployed throughout the divisional area.

Thus disposed, 2 NZ Division, temporarily halted after the advance from Akarit, awaited the moment for operations to be resumed.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE TACTICAL PICTURE

The Tactical Picture

It is a commonplace to say that tactics are much affected by topography. In this last corner of **Africa** held by the Axis, the configuration of the ground as usual pointed to the manner in which the enemy positions could be most readily overcome. From the tangle of mountains in eastern **Algeria**, themselves the eastern end of the long Atlas chain, there runs north-east into **Tunisia** a series of parallel spurs, each spur a range of mountains in itself. Allowing for some simplification, there are three main spurs. The most northern runs in general towards **Bizerta**, the central one towards **Tunis**, and the southerly towards **Cape Bon**. Between the northern and the central spur lies the valley of the Medjerda River—a true river—a gorge in its upper reaches above **Medjez el Bab**, but there opening out into an extensive plain stretching to **Tunis**. Between the central and the southern spur is the valley of the Miliane River, with the defile of **Pont du Fahs** towards its upper end. The natural lines of advance thus run from the south-west to the north-east.

The southern spur culminates east of **Pont du Fahs** in **Djebel Zaghuan**, and the spurs of this mountain in their turn form the backdrop to the advance northwards through the Sahel, and present an obstacle to further advances. From this point there is no clear way to the north except for the ever-diminishing strip along the coast, a strip which is commanded all the way by the hills on its western side. There are indeed some roads to **Tunis**, but they wind through and across a tangle of hills and valleys, are all defiles, and give every advantage to the defender. To attempt to penetrate this area would be rather like charging into a gigantic maze.

But on the side of **Medjez el Bab** the country slopes gently and evenly downwards to **Tunis** and **Bizerta**, and moreover opens out more and more

as it nears the city. This was the area in which the superiority of the Allies in manpower, and in air and ground resources, could be used to best advantage, and could more than compensate for the use of an obvious line of approach. Rommel says, 'This area **Medjez el Bab** was an ideal place for motorised forces to assemble for an attack on **Tunis** and consequently represented an "Achilles Heel" for our front.' ¹

To return to the events of the period—on 11 April Montgomery advised Alexander that he was going to try and 'gate-crash' the enemy position round **Enfidaville** during 'this moon period'. ² He asked that 6 Armoured Division should be placed under his command in order that all operations 'between the mountains and the sea' could be directed by him. Alexander's reply, received the same day, said that the main effort in the next phase would be made by First Army, which was already preparing for an attack to be launched on 22 April. The most suitable area for the employment of armour was now in the plain west of **Tunis**, and he required one armoured division and one armoured car regiment to join **9 Corps** as early as could be arranged. The message ended with the words, 'Hope you can develop maximum pressure possible against **Enfidaville** position to fit in with First Army attack.'

The 1st Armoured Division and King's Dragoon Guards were chosen for the transfer, and started their move in the next few days.

Alexander's initial intention had been to use Eighth Army for a final assault on **Tunis**, but he records in his despatch how he abandoned this idea, partly on the grounds of topography and partly because an advance from the south would tend to concentrate the enemy in hilly, difficult country, rather than divide it for ultimate annihilation. He therefore decided to use First Army for a thrust to **Tunis** from the west, driving a strong wedge into the heart of the enemy position. He then proposed to leave the smaller body of enemy troops to the north of this wedge to be mopped up by the force on the spot, mainly **2 US Corps**, and to use his main force, First Army, to drive the remainder against the line firmly held by Eighth Army, which would conduct a 'holding attack'. First

Army was to be the hammer, Eighth Army the anvil.

The revised intention was communicated to Montgomery by Alexander's message of 11 April. It now appears, for the evidence is not conclusive, that Montgomery was not satisfied with the part that Eighth Army was to play in the final offensive. The Eighth Army plan of operations was roughed out on 14 and 15 April, the 10 Corps' operation order being issued on the 15th. This outlined a major attack that would conclude with an advance up the narrow coastal strip to Hammamet, it being Montgomery's expressed belief that the Axis High Command would go to Cape Bon, and that was where Eighth Army would go. General Freyberg was in accord with this plan, and thought that it was correct both tactically and from the point of view of the prestige of the formations engaged.

Alexander then issued his final directive on 16 April. Eighth Army's role was extended and comprised, as well as the earlier task of drawing enemy forces from First Army by the exertion of continuous pressure, the additional task of advancing on the axis Enfidaville- Hammamet- Tunis to prevent the enemy withdrawing into the Cape Bon peninsula. This obviously departed from his original concept, for clearly Eighth Army, with the resources then at its disposal, could not provide a firm base in the Enfidaville area upon which the Axis forces could be driven by First Army, and at the same time advance on Tunis by way of Hammamet. Nor, on the other hand, has any evidence been traced which suggests that Montgomery intended to advance on Tunis. Available sources indicate that his concept of the combined operations of First and Eighth Armies was that the joint offensive of the two armies would result in an enemy concentration in the Cape Bon peninsula, where he hoped Eighth Army would be well placed to overcome it.

But however much the final plan resulted from dissatisfaction with the earlier role, it is probable that the insistence of Eighth Army that it be in at the kill led directly to it being asked to do more than was possible with the troops then available, and perhaps more than was expected by General Alexander. For Montgomery was expressing the

opinion of the rank and file, attuned now to success. Eighth Army as a whole was keen to be in at the finish, and **General Freyberg** spoke for his division when he said that the plan correctly considered the prestige of the formations involved.

First Army was ordered to capture **Tunis**, to co-operate with **2 US Corps** in the capture of **Bizerta**, and to be prepared to co-operate with Eighth Army should the enemy withdraw to **Cape Bon**. The US Corps was to capture **Bizerta**.

The full resources of the Tactical Air Force were to be available to assist the land operations.

No dates appear in the directive, but it was already understood that First Army was to attack on 22 April. It was then arranged that Eighth Army should attack on 19–20 April in order to ‘draw enemy forces off First Army by exerting continuous pressure on the enemy.’

¹ *Rommel Papers*, p. 409.

² Full moon was 19 or 20 April.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

COMPARATIVE STRENGTHS

Comparative Strengths

The following table gives some idea of the comparative strengths of the Allies and the Axis at this time.

	<i>Allies</i>	<i>Axis</i>
Divisions—armoured	4—strong	3—very weak
Tanks—all types	1,193	About 130
Divisions—infantry	15	9 or 10—very weak
Artillery—field and medium	1,472	475
Artillery—anti-tank	2,659	525
Fighting strength	470,000 ¹	90,000
Aircraft—all types	3,310	545

As examples of the low strengths of the Axis divisions, *164 Light Division* was only 2500 strong, *Trieste* 1000, and *Spezia* 500. The strongest Axis division numbered only 7000.

Yet against these figures must be weighed a contemporary estimate of a total of 185,000 Axis troops and the final bag of about a quarter of a million prisoners.

¹ But see p. 173, note 1.

By this time (mid-April) the **United States 2 Corps** (four divisions) had moved to the northern end of the Allied line facing **Bizerta**. First Army (six British and three French divisions) was astride the Medjerda and Miliane valleys, and Eighth Army (six divisions ¹) covered the remainder of the front.

The allocation of the enemy's formations between *5 Panzer* and *1 Italian Armies* was reasonably well known to the Allies. The situation towards the end of April was as follows:

5 Panzer Army 1 Italian Army

German infantry divisions	4	2
Italian infantry divisions	1	3
Panzer divisions	2	1
Tanks	91	35
Battle strength	50,000	40,000

In other words, the Axis forces were already noticeably stronger in the west than the south, and the enemy, realising his danger, had strengthened his forces in the west at a very recent date. In the circumstances there would not appear to be any chance that he would move troops back again, and the task assigned Eighth Army, of drawing enemy troops from First Army, appears to be realistic only when it is remembered that at the time it was believed that both *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* would be used as at **Mareth** and **Akarit**, as mobile reserves to seal off penetration on either front.

There persisted, however, a belief that the enemy would not stand, and that the attack would at the most be a steady advance against rearguards pulling back to main positions on higher ground, ending at **Bou Fichta**. This belief ran right through the Army at the time, and had its effect on corps, division and brigade planning, but as the days went on the attitude changed a little. At the last it was thought that there would be resistance, although even then the degree of resistance was underestimated.

Throughout the whole of its career to date the Eighth Army had fought in the desert. It had become accustomed to fast movement (both forward and backward), deep penetrations, wide frontages, open flanks, open country with no natural obstacles except wadis and soft going and the occasional escarpment, and a terrain that on the whole was flat. Broken country had been found in the approaches to **Tripoli**, in the **Matmata** Hills, and at **Wadi Akarit**, but none of these positions had any depth.

¹ Includes 51 (H) Division, withdrawn for pre- **Sicily** training, and

56 (**London**) Division, still en route from **Iraq**. The latter's divisional sign was a black cat, deriving from the story of Dick Whittington, Lord Mayor of **London**.

The Army was now confronted with something new, mountainous country with no clearly defined lines of advance. The front edge of this irregular belt overlooked the approaches from the south, and had natural defensive depth for 30 miles; and if the objective was to be **Cape Bon**, then it was more than thirty. The terrain now gave all the advantages to the defence, and greatly reduced the effectiveness of Eighth Army's superiority in air, armour and artillery.

Eighth Army approached this last corner of **Tunisia** flushed with victory and full of confidence, for the farther it had advanced the speedier had been its victories. There was only this last pocket of enemy troops to brush away and the Army would have completed the task it had begun at **Alamein**.

This attitude can be easily understood, but it was not accompanied by a realisation that the same methods which had given victory in previous months were not now strictly applicable. There was a failure to appreciate that tactics suitable to the desert were not necessarily suitable to the hills. Montgomery was conscious that an advance north from **Enfidaville** was more difficult than one north-east from **Medjez el Bab**, and after a while was an advocate of a more passive role for Eighth Army; but initially he planned for a final victory on his own front, an understandable ambition. We find him using words to the effect that nothing short of the capture of the enemy Supreme Headquarters would suffice, that he was not in the least interested in the west, that the **Axis High Command** was at **Cape Bon** and that was where the Eighth Army would go. On 18 April he stated that the bulk of the Axis forces was on Eighth Army's front, which proved to be incorrect, and became progressively more so as the days went on.

This strain of optimism and invincibility ran right through the Army, and the effects are clear in the various operation orders. The

enemy, on the other hand, was aware of the defensive strength of his position at **Enfidaville**, had thinned out already, and had no real fears for that part of his line. But Eighth Army did not appreciate that it was faced by a new problem requiring a new solution.

About two months earlier when Rommel was attacking towards **Kasserine**, the German forces found themselves suddenly in hilly country. After stating that one particular attack collapsed, Rommel says, 'The trouble was that they had gone the wrong way about it. After fighting for so long in the desert the officers had suddenly found themselves confronted with a terrain not unlike the European Alps.'¹ The error then made by the Germans—to try to advance along the valleys without attacking the hills—was not one that was likely to be made by British troops experienced in fighting on

¹ *Rommel Papers*, p. 403.

the North-West Frontier of **India**, but the incident shows that Eighth Army was not alone in making errors when the terrain changed.

The truth was that the era of deep penetrations in the attack had ended and was to be replaced by penetrations of a few thousand yards at a time, with a greater density of troops, and a slower rate of progress. Such were the inevitable concomitants of warfare in hilly country. The New Zealand Division had seen something of these problems in **Greece**, and was later, after a shaky start, to deal successfully with them in **Italy**, as indeed was the whole Eighth Army. But for the moment the answer was elusive.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

EIGHTH ARMY

Eighth Army

While at **Tripoli** in January, Montgomery had been told that Eighth Army was to form the British component of the Allied force which would later invade **Sicily**. This task was now approaching and some thought had to be given to planning for the invasion, and to conserving the troops nominated for it. Montgomery therefore decided to rest Headquarters **30 Corps** while **10 Corps** conducted the forthcoming attack, and to call forward **56 (London) Division**—a newcomer to the theatre—to relieve one of his three forward infantry divisions—**50 (Northumbrian)**, **51 (Highland)**, or **2 New Zealand**, all of which had long experience. The final decision was to relieve **50 (N) Division** by **56 (L) Division**, and to employ **51 (H) Division** only lightly.

The little port of **Sfax** was in use from 14 April, and Eighth Army was also drawing part of its supplies from the First Army replenishment area at **Sbeitla**, but the greater part was still coming from **Tripoli** 300 miles away.

Allied air strength was by now so overwhelming that enemy aircraft seldom appeared over our ground troops, and most of the air activity took place behind the enemy's lines. Our air offensive was steadily increasing in intensity, and the enemy's shipping, air transports, landing grounds, and every kind of activity were being subjected to a relentless attack.

At this time the long-term employment of **2 NZ Division** was again under consideration. While the inter-governmental communications,¹ as in the previous December,² had no effect on the immediate activities of the Division, it is of interest to mention them.

On 14 April **Churchill** cabled to Fraser in New Zealand giving details

of the forces to be used for the invasion of **Sicily**, saying that Alexander particularly wanted to use 2 NZ Division, and asking if it could be made available.

To this Fraser replied that the future employment of the Division at the end of the Tunisian campaign would have to be discussed in a secret session of parliament, which could not be before 19 May. The problem for him was that New Zealand's whole manpower position required review, as between the demands of the **Mediterranean** and the **Pacific**, for the country had over-reached itself in supplying men for the forces. Despite various pressing cables from **Churchill**, including a suggestion that they should take a gamble on a favourable result of the parliamentary debate, Fraser adhered to his first cable, and said that he must wait for parliament to decide. Time was against further delay, for if the Division was to be used for the invasion of **Sicily** it would have to be withdrawn from the line almost at once and trained for an amphibious operation. So on 20 April **Churchill** said that in the circumstances he would tell Alexander that the Division would not be immediately available, but he went on to say that he hoped it could be used later for the follow-up in **Europe**. There the matter rested, with the result that 2 NZ Division saw out the campaign in **Tunisia** to the end, and did not take part in the Sicilian campaign.

¹ *Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 182 *et seq.*

² See p. 6.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

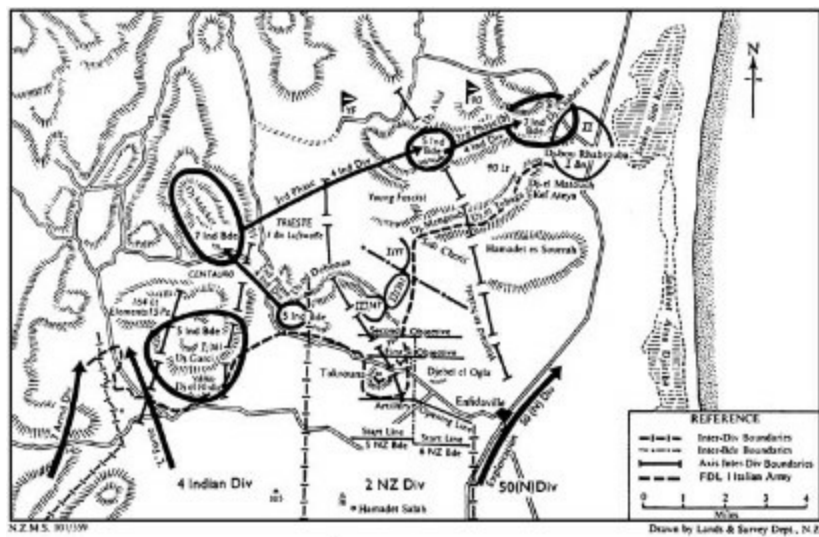
10 CORPS' PLAN

10 Corps' Plan

On 15 April Lieutenant-General Horrocks visited 2 NZ Division and discussed the future, roughing out a plan with Lieutenant-General Freyberg. Later in the afternoon the Army Commander also called to see General Freyberg, after which it was arranged that 50 (N) Division was to take over the eastern part of 2 NZ Division's front on the night 16–17 April.

Late on 15 April 10 Corps Operation Order No. 22 was issued. The 'Intention' was that 10 Corps would prepare to advance to the Bou Ficha line, the high ridges between Zaghouan and Bou Ficha. The 4th Indian Division, on the right, and 7 Armoured Division were coming into the line on the left of 2 NZ Division, and the latter would arrange with its neighbours, 50 (N) Division and 4 Indian Division, for mutually acceptable inter-divisional boundaries.

The role of 2 NZ Division was 'To break into the Enfidaville line in the area Takrouna - Djebel el Froukr. Thereafter the division will be prepared to exploit north-east to the coastal road via Djebel Mengoub'. It was then to advance along the coastal road. The 50th Division was to capture Enfidaville and patrol up the road. The 4th Indian Division was to capture Djebel Garci and then Djebel Biada, and exploit north and east to the coast road near Sebkra Sidi Kralifa, about eight miles north of Enfidaville. There would be full-scale air support by fighter-bombers and light bombers. The codename was ORATION, and 'D' day was later set for the night 19–20 April.



10 CORPS' PLAN FOR OPERATION ORATION

10 CORPS' PLAN FOR OPERATION ORATION

On 18 April **10 Corps** issued a further order (No. 23) elaborating on the above, but adhering to the objectives. Thus does the failure to realise that the terrain had changed become more apparent. Operating from flat country overlooked by the enemy, **10 Corps** was proposing to break into the hills, and with successive actions advance across them for some 15 miles. Such penetrations were common in the desert where the mass of supporting arms could invariably closely follow the assault, as **10 Corps** had only recently done in the breakthrough at Akarit, but in the circumstances of 18 April the plan was certainly ambitious and seems to have ignored the marked difference in the terrain. It was based on the belief that the enemy's main line of resistance was farther north, in which case the attack would progressively come up against stronger defences. The plan reflects the general atmosphere at the time, that it would be easy to push the enemy back at least as far as **Bou Ficha**. Horrocks knew that the plan was ambitious and relied for success in part on the low state of morale in the Axis troops. But this was to prove illusory, for even the Italians showed a sudden revival of spirit.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION, 15-18 APRIL

2 NZ Division, 15-18 April

From 15 April onwards the work of the Division, and indeed of 10 Corps as a whole, was directed to reconnaissances and planning for the forthcoming operation, including the usual series of conferences and administrative preparations.

The countryside in which the Division now found itself was much cultivated, as elsewhere in Tunisia, but in spite of this and the absence of any appreciable surface water, stagnant or otherwise, mosquitoes began to be very troublesome. Luckily they were not malarial, but from sunset to sunrise they were active in swarms, causing restless nights and swollen faces, and contributing in marked measure to the fatigue which came over the troops before the end of the campaign.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

6 INFANTRY BRIGADE AND ENFIDAVILLE

6 Infantry Brigade and Enfidaville

Early attempts by **8 Armoured Brigade** and **6 Infantry Brigade** to capture **Enfidaville**, or even to enter the town, and a later attempt by **Divisional Cavalry** to bypass it on the east, were all foiled either on minefields or by bad going or by the resistance of an alert enemy. As early as the afternoon of 15 April any idea of a stronger attack or large raid was abandoned, in view of forthcoming alterations to the front. The **26th Battalion** came into the line on 15 April on the left of **25 Battalion**, so filling a gap between **6** and **5 Brigades**.

During 16 April there was some desultory enemy shelling, but no casualties. Commanding officers of relieving battalions from **201 Guards Brigade of 50 (N) Division** made their reconnaissances during the day, and both **25** and **26 Battalions** were relieved shortly after midnight 16–17 April, the former assembling some miles in the rear. The **26th Battalion** then side-slipped to the left and was located entirely west of the main road, and the boundary between **50 (N) Division** and **2 NZ Division** was fixed on a line running just west of the road, but **2 NZ Division** retained a right to use the road for administrative purposes.

In the readjustment of frontages **26 Battalion** took over the front covered by the two right companies of **28 Battalion**, the inter-brigade boundary being just east of **Takrouna**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE AND THE TAKROUNA AREA

5 Infantry Brigade and the Takrouna Area

All three battalions of 5 Brigade experienced fairly heavy shelling, and realised how completely they were overlooked from **Takrouna**—which for the moment had just to be borne—and also from Djebel el Ktatiss (Point 121) to the west of it. This was not so difficult to deal with, and a platoon from 21 Battalion captured it after dark on 15 April, taking six prisoners from the *Young Fascist Division*. A bright spot on the same day was the capture of an enemy truck that drove along the road in front of 21 Battalion, evidently unaware of the presence of our troops. It was first stopped by machine-gun fire, and then driven into the battalion lines.

As detailed plans would rest largely on the outcome of patrol activities, this day was the first of several of active patrolling. The result of the first day's work was to suggest that the enemy held a defensive line along the front of **Takrouna** joining up with the defences of **Enfidaville**. This was of particular interest to 5 Brigade, for the brigadier had already been told that the capture of **Takrouna** would be the task of the brigade. Despite enemy shelling on 23 Battalion, **Brigadier Kippenberger** held a conference at battalion headquarters on 16 April to discuss the future, and one of the decisions was to continue active patrolling, as there was uncertainty still about the enemy's posts.

As part of the readjustment of the front, 28 Battalion handed over its eastern sector to 26 Battalion, and Point 105 passed to 4 Indian Division on the left. The result of these adjustments was to reduce the divisional frontage to about five miles.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Other Activities

The forward area was now becoming very congested, and strict orders had to be enforced about the class of vehicle to be allowed into brigade areas, which for the occasion had definite rear boundaries. The opportunity was taken to move **8 Armoured Brigade** and Divisional Cavalry back into rear areas, as for the moment there was no task for them.

The artillery's main problem was one of concealment, as any positions within required ranges were visible to the enemy. Forward gun positions and command posts had to be dug at night and carefully camouflaged, while ammunition also was dumped at night. Guns not immediately required went back to laager areas. The Survey Battery was active in all its roles, including the issue of meteorological information.

On 17 April an air observation post appeared for the first time. ¹ This consisted of a light aircraft and a staff of one officer and four other ranks, all gunners. It was attached to **6 Field Regiment**, and units were warned that it would be operating on the divisional sector. There had been a long struggle with the **RAF** to persuade it to supply such a machine, and it now arrived at a time when its services might prove of real value, as it was difficult to observe targets from posts in the plain. It proved very useful, but like all new developments took some time to show what it could do. It was not until the Division was in **Italy** that it reached its full usefulness.

The engineers' main tasks were to prepare crossings over **Wadi el Boul** on the front of both brigades, and over **Wadi Moussa** on **6 Brigade** front. ² One task, with an undertone of cynical humour, was to erect signs on all roads leading into enemy territory. This arose after a premature announcement by the **BBC** that **Enfidaville** had been

captured, followed by the loss of several senior British officers and others from Army Headquarters and below who had gone forward to look at it. The only loss in this way from 2 NZ Division was the quartermaster's vehicle from Divisional Cavalry.

¹ The Air OP originally went overseas with the **British Expeditionary Force to France** in 1940. Much increased in strength and reorganised, it landed with the First Army in **Tunisia** and had already proved its usefulness when this detachment joined Eighth Army.

² See map on p. 313.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PATROLLING

Patrolling

On the front of 6 Infantry Brigade it was not possible to start patrolling until the night of 17–18 April, as it was only then that the brigade was in firm occupation of its new sector, but a good deal of information was obtained from air reports and from local inhabitants, especially concerning an anti-tank ditch which ran west from **Enfidaville**. Good air photographs were not available until 17 April, and a study of these led Brigadier Gentry to decide that in the forthcoming attack he would need two battalions instead of the one hitherto considered adequate. The photos showed that Wadi el Brek, running across the brigade sector, was unexpectedly deep, and might cause trouble.

On 5 Brigade front patrolling commenced on the night 15–16 April, continued right up to the night 18th–19th, with patrols going out both by day and night from all three battalions. Several patrol reports mention that the alarm was given in the enemy position by dogs. There is no evidence that the enemy had any special ‘dog force’, and the probability is that the dogs were the usual strays found in all native areas.

Despite a period of good weather with bright sunny days, overprint maps embracing the information available from ground and air reconnaissance were not available until the afternoon of 19 April, not long before zero hour, which was to be 11 p.m. In the light of subsequent knowledge these maps contained little helpful information, and added little to the patrol reports. The reports brought back by the patrols were not very conclusive, and often they were contradictory. Because a patrol on the night 16–17 April found a number of empty trenches which seemed to have been occupied by German troops, the belief grew that enemy positions south of **Takrouna** had been abandoned.

A daylight patrol seemed to confirm this, and a section was briefed to occupy the top of **Takrouna** should there be little opposition. But enemy troops were found, and the project was not pursued. On the night of the 18th further patrols found definite evidence that the enemy had not gone.

This lack of certainty, combined with the prevailing spirit of optimism, had an undoubted influence on both the scope of the forthcoming operation and on the plans. There was an atmosphere readily understood by those who experienced it, but difficult to describe in the aftermath. Perhaps it would be going some distance towards the truth to say that, although few had the least appreciation of the difficulties ahead, and though the most favourable interpretation was invariably put on the patrol reports, there was at the back of everybody's mind the thought that there might be unexpected difficulties. Only the sobering experience of the operation itself crystallised these thoughts.

To say this is not to say that plans were carelessly made or lightly entered into, for that would be contrary to fact. The planning was meticulously carried out, and within the scope of the operation there were no loose ends. Indeed, as the date of the attack came closer, but after all the plans had been finalised, **General Freyberg** said at a conference that it would be unwise to underestimate the difficulties ahead, for there might be considerable opposition. **Brigadier Kippenberger** said that the operation would be the most difficult since the attack on **Miteiriya Ridge**.¹ But in spite of these opinions, upon which it is easier to place emphasis now that the difficulties are known, the general feeling remained, as one of the battalion commanders explained to his officers, that the whole thing was 'a piece of cake'.

Perhaps the reason for this, apart from the altogether commendable spirit of invincibility, was the miscalculation concerning the enemy positions. The plans themselves make this clear, and it was emphasised at the final conferences when Generals **Freyberg**, **Horrocks** and **Montgomery** all referred to **10 Corps'** objectives as covering positions for

a main line of resistance farther back. Thus the eyes of the planners were not focussed on **Takrouna**, or even on **Djebel Garci**, but on **Djebel Froukr** and on **Djebel Mdeker**. But because it was admitted that maps were poor, that there was limited information from reconnaissance, and that, generally speaking, information was inadequate, there was an element of experiment in the plans. Adhering to his principle of maintaining balance and poise, General Montgomery insisted that the further development of the operation, a hook eastwards along the ridges from Mdeker, would depend entirely on the degree of resistance met during the first phase. Horrocks went no farther than to claim that all they could be certain of were the first and second objectives. But even this was too much.

¹ At the opening of the Battle of **El Alamein**, 23–24 Oct 1942.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

10 CORPS' ORDERS

10 Corps' Orders

On 18 April **10 Corps** issued its final order for **ORATION**, amplifying and bringing up to date the earlier order of 15 April. The objectives were given as the line **Enfidaville– Takrouna– Djebel Mdeker** and a hill feature four miles to the west of **Djebel Garci**. The **New Zealand** and **4 Indian Divisions** would carry out this attack, while **7 Armoured Division**, which **General Montgomery** had explained earlier must be kept as protection on the left flank until **56 (London) Division** came up from **Tripoli**, carried out a limited advance on the left, and **50 (Northumbrian) Division**, which was not to get heavily involved, would watch the right flank, occupy **Enfidaville** after the objectives had been carried, and send out patrols.

The objectives for the attack were divided into two series. First, **2 New Zealand Division** was to break into the **Enfidaville– Takrouna** line, **4 Indian Division** was to capture both **Djebel Garci** and **Djebel Biada**, and **7 Armoured Division** was to advance to the **Enfidaville– Djebibina** road and be prepared for a further advance on the west flank. Second, **2 NZ Division** was to capture **Djebel Froukr**, a high peak commanding the coastal area, and **4 Indian Division** was to capture **Djebel Mdeker**, about four miles north of **Garci** and over five miles north-west of **Froukr**. The **4th Indian Division** was then to swing to the east and advance along the ridges towards the coast, occupying in particular two features, **Djebel Abid** and **Sidi Mehed**. The **New Zealand Division** was to assist in this by exploiting forward from its second objectives, and **7 Armoured Division** was to make further advances on the west flank. The village of **Enfidaville**, tactically desirable only as an important road junction, would then be occupied by **50 (N) Division**, which would also send patrols up the coast road.

Timing for the operation, a reflection of the uncertainty of the degree of opposition that would be encountered, was laid down only for **2**

NZ Division's two objectives, and for [Djebel Garci](#), the major part of 4 Indian Division's first objective. As was explained at the final conference, everything depended on what was met, and General Horrocks did not expect that 4 Indian Division would be launched on its hook to the coast until at least the night 20–21 April, twenty-four hours after the operation had begun.

When all objectives had been consolidated, and when at least one brigade from 56 (L) Division was available for the protection of the western flank, 7 Armoured Division would be launched along the coast road towards [Hammamet](#). This was to be the culmination of the whole operation, and it was hoped that, protected by the infantry on the high ground, covered by the guns of the Army, the armour would achieve a decisive breakthrough.

The first objective for 2 NZ Division was an east-west line passing just north of [Djebel ech Cherachir](#), and the second an east-west line passing north of [Djebel el Froukr](#). The right boundary of the Division, and of 6 Brigade, was a 'grid easting' running about a mile west of [Enfidaville](#). The left boundary of the Division, and of 5 Brigade, was a series of points between [Takrouna](#) and Garci which ran two miles west of the peak of [Takrouna](#). This boundary was changed just before the attack to include Djebel ed Debonaa, east of [Djebel Biada](#), an Indian objective, in the New Zealand sector. The widened sector was covered by placing one squadron of Divisional Cavalry under command of 5 Brigade for duty on that flank, and by adding Djebel ed Debonaa to the brigade's exploitation tasks.

The 2 NZ Division operation order was issued before it was decided that 6 Brigade would be attacking with two battalions, and was accordingly amended on 18 April to meet the new requirements. The intention was to 'attack and capture the Dj el Froukr and Dj el Ogla features and exploit to the NW and North'. From a two-brigade front the battalions would advance under a barrage at the rate of one hundred yards in two minutes. Sixth Brigade, on the right, with two battalions

attacking and one in reserve, had a start line behind that of 5 Brigade because of the wadi across its front. For this reason, and because it was necessary to cover the area west of **Enfidaville**, the barrage line was hinged at the brigade boundary, straightening out to a straight line covering both brigades before lifting on the 5 Brigade front. Attacking due north, it was simple to define the first and second objectives, and the boundaries, by the map grid lines. First objective for 6 Brigade included **Djebel Ogla**, for 5 Brigade **Djebel ech Cherachir**, a ridge to the north of **Takrouna**. The second objective for 6 Brigade was less well defined by geographic features but included a ridge system, **Hamaid en Nakrla**, beginning just to the east of **Ogla** and running north and south. **Djebel Froukr** was second objective for 5 Brigade. ¹

Timings were so arranged that, with the artillery opening at 11 p.m. on the opening line of the barrage, the infantry would have eighteen minutes to close up to the barrage from their start lines. Thereafter the barrage would lift one hundred yards at two-minute intervals for 2000 yards, to the first objective, where it would pause for eighty minutes while the infantry consolidated and, on 5 Brigade's sector, a fresh battalion passed through to its start line. The barrage would then continue a further 800 yards in the same manner to the final objective. Smoke shells were to be fired on each of the outside edges of the barrage as a guide for the infantry. The barrage was to be fired on 6 Brigade front by two and a half field regiments, and on 5 Brigade front by three and a half, the three field regiments of 50 (N) Division coming under command for the purpose. One other field regiment was allotted special targets over the whole front, particularly **Takrouna** and the west side of **Enfidaville**. Two medium regiments from **5 AGRA** were to fire on suspected enemy positions, track junctions and possible concentration areas, with one regiment devoting a whole hour to **Takrouna**.

The rate of the barrage was fixed, after an earnest discussion between the brigadier and his commanding officers, at 100 yards in two minutes. This rate, which proved to be too fast, was based mainly on the rate used in the Battle of **El Alamein** (100 yards in three minutes), where

in flat, open country the commanding officers thought the rate too slow.

An armoured regiment from **8 Armoured Brigade** was to come under command of each brigade, to support the attack and to supply flank protection after the objectives had been reached. The remainder of the armour was to be used for exploitation towards **Enfidaville**, and should the armour get beyond the town, Divisional Cavalry, being held in reserve, was to be passed through to work along the coastal strip.

¹ See maps on pp. 294 and 313.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

8 ARMoured BRIGADE

8 Armoured Brigade

The 8th Armoured Brigade's order, issued on 18 April, simply detailed 3 Royal Tanks and Notts Yeomanry to the command of 6 and 5 Brigades respectively, and prescribed a suitable assembly area where the rest of the brigade would remain in readiness for future exploitation.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

6 INFANTRY BRIGADE

6 Infantry Brigade

The 6th Infantry Brigade operation order named only the objectives, **Djebel Ogla** and **Hamaid en Nakrla**, for its two attacking battalions, although **Djebel Ogla** lay within the divisional first objective and 6 Brigade was to fire success signals when it was reached.

On the right was 26 Battalion with, under command, two platoons of machine guns and a troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns; and on the left 24 Battalion with no troops under command. The prescribed inter-battalion boundary made it the task of 26 Battalion to capture the summits of both the above features, leaving 24 Battalion to attack up the low ground between these features and **Djebels Bir** and **Cherachir** on the right of 5 Brigade sector. The **25th Battalion** was to be in reserve and would occupy 26 Battalion's area after 3 a.m. on 20 April, i.e., after the attack had finished.

The 3rd Royal Tanks had three tasks: to provide six Crusaders for gapping parties, one party for each attacking battalion; to move when ordered to an area from which enemy fire on the right flank could be neutralised; and to be prepared to support 26 Battalion. 'Gapping columns' were organised for each attacking battalion, consisting of detachments from 8 Field Company, Scorpions, Crusader tanks, followed by battalion carriers, engineer transport and battalion transport in that order. These would provide crossings over the deep **Wadi el Boul**, deal with any minefields, and prepare routes for supporting arms.

A composite company of 27 (MG) Battalion—1 and 2 Platoons of No. 1 Company and 8 Platoon of No. 3 Company—was to neutralise the area on the south-west face of **Enfidaville** for an hour after zero, and 201 Guards Brigade was also asked to maintain mortar and machine-gun fire there during the attack. The brigade commander had previously drawn

attention to the threat to his right flank from **Enfidaville**, which was not being formally attacked; and these arrangements were made to strengthen the defence there.

The infantry start line for the brigade ran east and west, between **Wadi el Boul** and **Wadi Moussa**. This was 200 metres behind the start line of 5 Brigade, necessary owing to the course of the wadis.

Brigade Headquarters was to open some two miles behind the start line, a distance that was greater than normal, because the ground in the area was so completely under enemy observation.

The frontage of 26 Battalion was 1500 yards, and it was intended to attack with two companies forward and two in support. It was expected that the battalion objectives, **Djebel el Ogla** and **Hamaid en Nakrla**, would be strongly held. The approach to these was not easy, the ground being intersected by many wadis, one or two impassable to wheels. On the right, a little north of Wadi el Brek, were three arms of the anti-tank ditch which protected **Enfidaville**.

The **24th Battalion** sector was 800 yards wide, and it also was to attack with two companies forward and two in support. There did not appear to be any particular natural difficulties in the ground to be crossed.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE

5 Infantry Brigade

On the front allotted to 5 Infantry Brigade a little more was known of the enemy dispositions, but the going was certainly more difficult, and the relative location of the various hill features made it an awkward problem to subdivide the front into battalion sectors. The frontage of attack was 2300 yards, and the boundary with 6 Brigade left **Djebel Bir**, **Djebel ech Cherachir**, and **Djebel el Froukr** within the 5 Brigade sector.

As with 6 Brigade, the objectives of 5 Brigade were described as features, although attention was drawn to the grid lines on which the artillery barrage would pause and which delineated the phases of the operation. **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna** were the first objectives, **Djebel Froukr** the second. In the first phase 28 (Maori) Battalion on the right and 21 Battalion on the left were to advance to the first objective, each having under command one six-pounder anti-tank troop, one platoon of machine guns, a detachment of engineers, and two or three Crusader tanks to crush gaps in cactus hedges. The inter-battalion boundary ran north and south practically through the peak of **Takrouna**, which nevertheless was the responsibility of 28 Battalion, although 21 Battalion was to be prepared to assist if required.

As a safeguard on the left flank, for there was no contact on the ground with 4 Indian Division, 21 Battalion was to keep a small garrison—one platoon and one troop of anti-tank guns—on Point 121 throughout the operation. On completion of the first phase the battalion was to establish an anti-tank gun line facing north-west from Point 121 to a point on the **Enfidaville– Zaghuan** road just north-west of **Takrouna**.

The second phase affected 23 Battalion only. The battalion was to form up behind 28 (Maori) Battalion on the line of the first objective and capture **Djebel Froukr**. An 80-minute pause was designed to allow time

for the forming-up procedures, after which, at 1.28 a.m., the barrage would resume. The **23rd Battalion** also was to have a troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns and one machine-gun platoon under command.

Notts Yeomanry was to assemble in 23 Battalion's area round **Hamadet Salah**, and at 4 a.m. on 20 April would move some two miles forward in readiness for mopping-up and flank protection duties.

Fifth Brigade had two machine-gun companies under command, one of which provided a platoon to each battalion. The other remained concentrated, and was to take post between the left of the start line and Point 121, where it was to support the advance of 21 Battalion by firing 300 yards in front of the artillery barrage along the west side of **Takrouna**, lifting in accordance with the barrage timings.

The support arms of all three battalions were to assemble in a transport area south of **Wadi el Boul**, and battalions when they required them were to call for them through Brigade Headquarters, which would control their movements.

Headquarters selected a point just south of the **Enfidaville– Djebibina** road, and would establish itself there before the attack commenced. This was close to the start line, a very suitable location.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

28 (MAORI) BATTALION

28 (Maori) Battalion

The plan for 28 Battalion was finalised from a forward vantage point in the afternoon of 19 April and orders were verbal. The battalion objectives were **Takrouna** and **Djebel Bir**, and the road running between these features and **Djebel ech Cherachir** was, in all discussions, generally regarded as the final objective, although provision was made for exploitation for 200 yards beyond the road.

Takrouna was a peak, rising abruptly on the south side from the plain for some 450 or 500 feet. The southern slopes were steep but by no means unscalable, although the last twenty feet before the summit was precipitous. On the summit was a stone village of Berber origin, with a domed mosque as the most striking feature. This area was later known as 'the pinnacle'. Nearby, on a lower level north-west of the pinnacle, was a line of stone buildings running along a level ridge with very steep sides, known later as 'the ledge'. On the northern side the slope was more gradual, and here was the small native village of **Takrouna**, a collection of a dozen or two stone and mud houses. It was known as 'the lower village' to distinguish it from the village on the pinnacle. From the lower village the ground sloped irregularly but not steeply to the **Zaghuan** road. The normal approach to both villages was by way of a track up the northern slope.

Stretching south from the base of **Takrouna** was a series of large olive groves, and among them a distinctive white house. It was expected that the summit would be strongly held, although the garrison was believed to be Italian. It was not expected that much opposition would be met on the southern slopes, and no special steps were taken to deal with this area.

The second feature, **Djebel Bir**, was some 1000 yards east of

Takrouna, with a valley between. It was a roundish feature rising some 300 feet above the plain, with a steep bluff dropping down to a wadi on the west side. The indications were that it would be defended. The ground between it and **Takrouna** was uneven, and was cultivated in places, with occasional cactus hedges.

Beyond **Djebel Bir** the **Enfidaville– Zaghouan** road ran through a defile between **Djebel Bir** and **Djebel ech Cherachir**, the latter being an east-west ridge. Just across the road a deep wadi ran eastwards to join Wadi el Brek. Little was known about Cherachir, and its tactical importance appears to have been overlooked.

The battalion was to attack with three companies in line. The fourth company was to mop up and was to swing round and capture **Takrouna** from the rear after the leading companies had reached the road. To help deceive the enemy and make him think that a frontal attack was intended, one of the leading companies was to send two sections up the southern face, and **Kippenberger** advised that attack by the most difficult approach might be the most effective.

One Crusader tank was attached to each forward company to breach gaps in hedges, and all available machetes were issued to the troops for the same purpose.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

21 BATTALION

21 Battalion

The **21st Battalion's** sector included the western slopes of **Takrouna** and a number of smaller spurs separated by wadis. As far as **Takrouna** the going was reasonably good except for olive groves and cactus hedges. Farther north the country was more broken. Both Italians and Germans had been heard by various patrols, but practically nothing was known of the fixed defences in the area.

The intention of the battalion was to advance to the **Zaghuan** road, which was just short of the barrage pause line for the first phase. Normal exploitation on the ridge beyond the road would follow. The attack was to be made by three companies with one in support. When the battalion had consolidated on the road the gun line was to be formed facing north-west and running back to Point 121, with all four companies in the line. One squadron of Notts Yeomanry would be available to support the battalion at first light.

The task of helping 28 Battalion was doubtless in the mind of the battalion commander; but no special action was taken and no reserve was available for the purpose.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

23 BATTALION

23 Battalion

The plan for 23 Battalion was straightforward. There were special instructions for taping the start line, and for measuring the distance to the second objective. This was to be checked by pacing by one man in each platoon, three men in each company headquarters, and three men in battalion headquarters, the distance being 1100 paces.

The battalion was to advance through 28 Battalion with two companies forward and two in support. During the 80-minute pause of the barrage on the first objective, the battalion was to form up on the line of the **Zaghuan road and then move up to the start line, which was about 200 yards north of the road. Once it had reached the final objective—the northern side of **Djebel el Froukr**—the leading companies were to dig in, while the others exploited along **Djebel Ebilate** and linked up with 24 and 21 Battalions on the flanks.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

PLANS REVIEWED

Plans Reviewed

These plans, together, reflected the combined intentions of Generals Alexander and Montgomery. As already outlined, Alexander's instructions to Montgomery had been enlarged to include an advance along the coast to **Hammamet**, the initial axis for which was the final objective of Operation ORATION. Montgomery's influence in bringing about this expanded role may or may not have been considerable—the point is irrelevant here. What is of importance is that the role was accepted, and that Montgomery's corps and divisional commanders prepared their plans without dissent. Moreover, the primary role of Eighth Army remained that of launching an attack which would, at the least, pin down all enemy forces on its front and, if possible, draw enemy troops away from First Army which was to make the major thrust. Such an attack, to be effective, had necessarily to be on an ambitious scale, but it may well be that a more closely defined attack on any of the commanding ground between **Zaghuan** and the coast would have had better results.

However, the Army plan did make it necessary for 4 Indian and 2 New Zealand Divisions to seek objectives which now seem quite unrealistic. These two divisions were to break into country that was more mountainous than **Mareth** and Akarit, and of much greater defensive depth, but in both these operations the attacking strength was nearly twice that thought necessary here. An operation such as ORATION could have been planned only in an atmosphere of unlimited optimism. It is difficult to make a case for the influence of the misappreciation of the enemy positions on these plans, for if **Ogla**, **Takrouna** and Garci were believed to be outpost positions, from which the enemy would withdraw in face of spirited attack, how much more unrealistic it now appears that one Indian brigade should be used to

capture **Djebel Mdeker**, and that one New Zealand battalion was to capture **Djebel Froukr**, both believed to be in the heart of the main position? The conviction that the enemy would withdraw to **Cape Bon** must have been very strong indeed.

An optimistic army plan inevitably results in an optimistic divisional plan. The New Zealand Division proposed to tackle its part by delivering a modified **SUPERCHARGE**. It was to be an attack similar to that at **Tebaga**, but without the close air support and in country which ruled armoured support virtually out of the question. But the area was divided into sectors, the infantry was to crash through behind a creeping barrage, and emphasis was placed on maintaining momentum to the final objective without becoming over-concerned with pockets of resistance. It is here that the conflict between the methods so successfully employed in the desert and the requirements of a changed topography become so evident.

Perhaps the brigade plans bring this point out more clearly. The 6 Brigade plan was simple and straightforward, there were no really difficult geographic features in the sector, and the two battalions committed were confidently expected to deal with an unknown degree of opposition. But the 5 Brigade plan made virtually no allowance for the formidable and essentially defensible features in its sector. The right-hand battalion was to burst through the valley between **Bir** and **Takrouna** to reach the road, the start line for the battalion attacking the second objective. **Bir** and **Takrouna** were to be cleared up after the road had been reached, and although stiff opposition was expected from the summit of **Takrouna**, only one company was assigned to this feature. There was no allowance for the type of delay that was experienced at **Tebaga** on both flanks, in broken but easier country, and all companies were committed. There was no reserve.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

LINING UP FOR ORATION

Lining up for ORATION

The two days before the attack, 18 and 19 April, on the whole were quiet. The units of **8 Armoured Brigade** were either resting or doing maintenance. Their strength was now 69 serviceable tanks, showing a wastage of about 25 in the month since preparations were being made for PUGILIST. Both 3 Royal Tanks and Notts Yeomanry were in close liaison with their respective infantry brigades, and netted their sets into the brigade wireless net. They moved to their assembly positions after dark on 19 April.

Divisional Cavalry spent the few days before the attack in maintenance and reorganisation, including absorbing four new Stuart tanks with power-operated turrets, which did not meet with much favour as they were thought too elaborate.

The field regiments had been preparing their forward positions for some nights, but did not occupy them until after dark on 18 or 19 April, and in the former case did not fire during daylight on 19 April. Mac Troop was at first excluded from firing in the barrage owing to the wear in its gun barrels, but was later reprieved under the strict condition that its range-drum readings were to be 800 yards greater than the actual ranges. To take part in the long-range tasks there now appeared an enemy 170-millimetre gun, one of those which had been such a nuisance at **Medenine**. It had been captured in the **Matmata** Hills by 4 Indian Division, handed over to 2 NZ Division, and was now manned by 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment. It was a source of much irritation to its earlier German owners. ¹

Both 7 and 8 Field Companies took over their Scorpions before the attack, and completed their preparations for mine-lifting.

The medical evacuation chain was now from the ADS on each brigade front to the MDS just north of **Sidi bou Ali**, thence to the New Zealand Casualty Clearing Station at **El Djem**, and thence to the newly-opened 3 New Zealand General Hospital near **Tripoli**. This was the first time that the chain was composed completely of New Zealand units.

Replenishment in the area was normal. As before at Akarit, the ammunition company was the hardest worked. In anticipation of an advance into the hills, **1 NZ Mule Pack Company** was formed on 17 April, the personnel—six officers and 155 other ranks—coming mostly from NZASC, and the 102 mules and 96 donkeys from local civil sources. The company began and ended its career with a training programme, as the expected advance into the hills never eventuated.

The composite machine-gun company which was to provide flank protection for the open right flank of 26 Battalion was installed during 18 and 19 April. There appears to have been a local arrangement with the machine-gun battalion of 50 Division by which some of its guns also provided flank protection for 2 NZ Division, for special arrangements were made to prevent the fire of the companies from overlapping.

Within 6 Brigade, 26 Battalion was already in the forward area. The **24th Battalion** moved forward in part after dark on 18 April and in part at 8 p.m. on 19 April, some two and a half hours before zero. The **25th Battalion** needed only to move into the area vacated by 26 Battalion.

Fifth Infantry Brigade had two battalions already in the forward area—23 on Point 70, and 21 just south of the **Enfidaville– Djebibina** road. The 28th Battalion had been moved back some five miles, on 17 April, and would have a short approach march. The **23rd Battalion** area was shelled at intervals on 18 and 19 April, but there were no casualties.

¹ As with Mac Troop it started badly, with a premature airburst over regimental headquarters of 4 Field Regiment.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ENEMY

The Enemy

Unfortunately, after the Tebaga operations information from German sources becomes increasingly thin and unhelpful, and it is difficult to build up any coherent picture of enemy movements. The last previous references to the enemy are made in the passages describing the advance on **Enfidaville**, where the opponents of 2 NZ Division came from that perpetual rearguard, *90 Light Division*. By the middle of April somewhere to the west were bits and pieces—the terms are used deliberately—of all the formations *15 Panzer*, *21 Panzer*, *164 Light* and various Italian divisions.

The only reports available for the period from 13 April onwards are those of Marshal Messe, General Bayerlein, and *90 Light Division*. The first-named is of little worth, being written somewhat flamboyantly for home consumption; the second ends on 27 April and the third on 20 April. During the few days about the middle of April there are a few items of interest. The Germans were also preparing to use horses and mules, but because they were short of MT; *90 Light Division's* strength report of 3 April shows that it numbered 5700 all ranks, and on at least one occasion in the **Enfidaville** line it was bombed by its own planes.

About the middle of April there was a movement of troops away to the north and west to join *5 Panzer Army*. The *10th Panzer Division* departed from the front of Eighth Army for good, as did the armoured elements of *21 Panzer Division*, although some unarmoured elements of this division made their appearance later. The remaining panzer division, the redoubtable *15th*, went into reserve about 13 April, north of **Ain Hallouf** (ten miles north of **Enfidaville**), and was still there on 19–20 April. About this time Messe reports that there were only thirty tanks, both German and Italian, in his army, drawn from *15 Panzer Division* and *Centauro Battle Group*.¹ They played no part in the next battle,

and it appears that the armour of *15 Panzer* also went over to *5 Panzer Army*. Thus *2 NZ Division*, though it did not realise it in mid-April, was not to be opposed again in North Africa by enemy armour.

From 12 April onwards the commander of *90 Light Division* (Major-General Graf von Sponeck) supported by the commander of *164 Light Division* (Major-General von Liebenstein) made strong representations that it was useless to try to hold a line in the level ground round **Enfidaville**, or indeed anywhere on the flat, and that the thing to do was to go back into the hills, leaving only token forces on the plain. The line von Sponeck advocated started 'just east of **Takrouna**', and then ran to the eastern slopes of Djebels Bir, Cherachir and Froukr – eastern bank of Wadi Krarrouba – southern edge of **Sidi Cherif** – southern slope of **Djebel Mengoub** – eastern slope of Djebel et Tebaga – southern edge of **Kef Ateya** – eastern slopes of Djebel el Matouch – thence east to the southern tip of **Sebkra Sidi Kralifa**. Apparently von Liebenstein made much the same kind of representation on his sector, which was west of **Djebel Garci**.

The *90th Light Division's* war diary says, ' **Takrouna** was the dominating point, flanking the enemy in both directions and must be held as long as possible to keep up our OPs'. An extract from Bayerlein's diary says, ' **1 Italian Army** suggested that **Takrouna** be fortified as an advanced strong point not to be evacuated except under heavy pressure. Army Group agreed'. Messe says, 'I had immediately seen the importance which **Takrouna** hill could have in the general defensive scheme, though far advanced and almost detached from the main positions. I planned to make it an independent strongpoint whose function would be to break the first impetus of the enemy attack and divert it towards the re-entrants in the coastal and central sectors'.

The enemy's main line of resistance included Djebels Froukr and Cherachir, then turned north-west to run along the northern side of the **Zaghuan** road. **Djebel Bir** also was an 'advanced strongpoint'. It will be seen from the above that the enemy was apparently prepared to lose **Takrouna** without considering it a fatal blow, for the reason presumably

that **Takrouna**, overlooking the hills to the north, was far less formidable and threatening as when overlooking the plain to the south. In the allotment of troops to the line **Takrouna** was given to the Italians, with only one German platoon doubtless intended to protect the German artillery observation post established there, although a *Luftwaffe* battalion was positioned behind them in second line.

At a conference held on 14 April General von Arnim, commander of *Army Group Africa*, agreed to a withdrawal into the hills, with the result that *90 Light Division* went back to a sector running from Djebel et Tebaga to the sea, with a part of the *Young Fascist Division* holding a sub-sector. Rearguards of one company per regiment were left in a line running through **Enfidaville**, and it is these rearguards which had kept the town in German hands.

By 16 April the front was held by *90 Light Division* as above, followed on the west by the main part of *Young Fascist Division* as far as **Djebel Bir**, but with part of *361 Regiment* (of *90 Light*) and part of *47 Regiment* (from *5 Panzer Army*) holding Froukr, Cherachir and Bir. Then came *Trieste Division* holding as far as Garci exclusive, with German support behind **Takrouna**. Farther to the west were *164 Light*, *Centauro*, a part of *90 Light*, and unarmoured elements of *15 Panzer*, but these were all well away from *2 NZ Division*.

About this time *15 Panzer Division* numbered 6000, *90 Light* was reduced to 5700, *164 Light* 2500, and *Trieste* 1000. In numbers alone *1 Italian Army* was hopelessly outclassed, but the next battle was to show the enormous value of a naturally strong defensive position.

There is in the records the usual conflict between Messe and Bayerlein regarding their responsibilities, and in many cases they contradict each other flatly. But the impression emerges that Messe on this occasion was really prepared to fight to the last.

¹ Which closely approximates the figure given on p. 290. Cf. p. 254.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 14 – ORATION—A SOLDIERS' BATTLE

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[SECTION]

THE night of 19 April was brilliant, with a moon nearly full. Zero hour was 11 p.m.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

6 INFANTRY BRIGADE—26 BATTALION

6 Infantry Brigade—26 Battalion

On the right of 6 Brigade 26 Battalion moved off, following the barrage without difficulty—in fact the companies were exercised not to overrun it. Thus the advance went for the first thousand yards.

Then C Company (Captain J. J. D. Sinclair) on the right met action across the **Zaghuan** road, where Wadi el Brek and an anti-tank ditch marked an area of organised resistance, and some time was spent dealing with isolated pockets of infantry and in combing out the rising ground. Enemy troops were already dazed by the barrage and were soon overcome. A large stone construction farther north was regarded with suspicion, but when hand grenades were tossed in it the explosions showed that it was a reservoir. Cactus hedges then caused slight delay, and briefly the company fell behind the barrage, but quickened its pace and reached the first objective as the artillery paused a few hundred yards to the north just after midnight. The company then swung east to secure the open right flank and took up positions south-east of **Hamaid en Nakrla**.

On the left, A Company (Captain **Ollivier**¹), with **Djebel el Ogla** as its first objective, met nothing to prevent close movement with the barrage and reached its objective. Enemy trenches were found to be empty, the only opposition coming from some machine-gun fire from **Enfidaville** and a little light shelling. The summit of **Djebel el Ogla** was hard limestone, which made digging impossible, but when the barrage lifted again at 1.28 a.m. the two forward platoons went on another 700 yards and dug in on the fringe of some olive groves.

The battalion support companies moved up unopposed, and Lieutenant-Colonel Fontaine established battalion headquarters behind **Djebel el Ogla**. The whole operation had been successful and opposition

negligible, for the enemy, comprising company outposts from *90 Light Division*, had been instructed to withdraw in the face of any strong attack to the main position farther north. Casualties in the battalion were five wounded.



TAKROUNA. COMPANY POSITIONS AND LINES OF ADVANCE,
19-20 APRIL

TAKROUNA. COMPANY POSITIONS AND LINES OF ADVANCE, 19-20 APRIL

¹ Maj F. M. Ollivier; Lower Hutt; born NZ 11 Jan 1916; student; wounded 23 Nov 1941.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

24 BATTALION

24 Battalion

The battalion moved off with B Company (Major E. R. Andrews) on the right and A (Captain **Santon**¹) on the left, and for the first thousand yards or more all went well; but when the companies reached the angle between the **Zaghouan** road and the road past Djebel el Ktatiss, they ran into a heavy artillery concentration which for a while was thought to be 'shorts' from the barrage. B Company went to ground for a while, but then crossed the roads at their point of junction, being by this time in some confusion. Gradually the troops edged to the east towards Wadi el Brek, and took shelter in its upper reaches. While they were reorganising here a heavy mortar concentration landed amongst them, but when the fire slackened the company pushed on up the wadi and there made contact with the left-hand platoon of 26 Battalion, in whose area they now were.

A Company had a similar experience, and also finished up in the wadi in 26 Battalion sector, where it spent some time reorganising.

Meanwhile C Company (Captain R. J. H. Seal), with battalion headquarters immediately behind, had moved up the centre of the battalion sector without opposition except for some steady shell and mortar fire. Both proceeded until well across the **Zaghouan** road. Lieutenant-Colonel Conolly then sent runners forward to his leading companies, but they reported that they could not find them. Luckily wireless contact was made and the companies were asked to put up flares, but to Conolly's surprise these were not only to the right but to the right rear. The CO then ordered both companies to push on to the final objective. Each time flares were sent up the enemy fired concentrations against them. The truth of the matter was that 24 Battalion was passing across the front of the enemy on **Djebel Bir** and **Djebel ech Cherachir**, and so was going through an area which the

enemy had registered well. Such points as the road junction and Wadi el Brek were obvious targets.

While C Company and Headquarters were waiting for the situation to clear they were heavily shelled, the No. 11 wireless set was destroyed, and Conolly was wounded but remained on duty.

After A and B Companies had reorganised, the two company commanders decided to advance round the east side of **Djebel el Ogla**, as there seemed a better chance of avoiding the continued shelling. They did this without direct opposition, and in the end both companies went well beyond Ogla and reached a line among olive groves very close to the final objective, although the eastern end was still in 26 Battalion sector.

As soon as the forward companies had reached these positions Headquarters and C Company moved forward, using small wadis as cover from the persistent shelling, and by 3 a.m. were established slightly in advance of **Djebel el Ogla**. For some time the battalion was out of touch with Brigade Headquarters owing to breaks in the telephone line and the loss of the wireless set, and had to pass messages through 26 Battalion.

It was not necessary to call on D Company's services. Casualties had been heavier than with 26 Battalion, being five killed and forty-one wounded, a lower than usual proportion of killed to wounded that was to be repeated all over the front. There was practically no physical contact with the enemy.

¹ **Capt T. G. Santon**, ED; Taneatua; born Taneatua, 17 Mar 1907; farmer; wounded 25 Apr 1943.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OTHER ARMS IN 6 BRIGADE

Other Arms in 6 Brigade

The machine guns supporting 6 Brigade on the right flank fired their tasks without interruption. The 3rd Royal Tanks duly followed the brigade advance, and by 3.50 a.m. was between **Djebel el Ogla and **Hamaid en Nakrla**.**

The engineers had mixed fortunes in clearing the tracks for unit support arms. The right gapping party, in 26 Battalion's sector, had practically a clear run, and by 1.20 a.m. the first vehicle for the battalion arrived in the forward area. But the left column, on 24 Battalion front, first ran into machine-gun fire at a crossing over the anti-tank ditch, and then later into a minefield. Some gallant reconnaissance work was done as usual, and the Scorpions started work, but soon both Scorpion commanders were wounded. It was clear that the route would not be ready by daylight, so the OC 8 Field Company (Major Pemberton) gave instructions that all work should cease, intending to divert 24 Battalion transport to the right-hand route although, in fact, this had already been done by the CSM of 8 Field Company, who had realised the situation. The engineers had two men killed and sixteen wounded, nearly all on the left-hand route, which was under fire throughout.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE—28 (MAORI) BATTALION

5 Infantry Brigade—28 (Maori) Battalion

The start line for 21 and 28 Battalions was laid by the brigade and battalion intelligence officers after dark on 19 April. All helped first to lay the 21 Battalion line, but were a little late owing to delay in collecting enough white tape for both battalions. They were fired on while at work, but were held up only a little on this account. Then the 28 Battalion Intelligence Section began to lay its own tape alone, but was not ready as soon as was desirable.

The battalion moved up from its rear area in transport at 8.15 p.m., assembling just south of **Wadi el Boul**, where a brief church service was held. It then formed up in column of companies—three forward and one back—ready to move off, but the Intelligence Officer who was to be the guide was late in arriving back from laying the tapes, and the battalion moved off without him. It was thus barely in battle formation on the start line by zero hour.

A Company on the right flank had an additional complication, for Major Porter was doubtful about the position of 24 Battalion on his right, as he was not aware that 6 Brigade was using a start line 200 metres behind 5 Brigade. For a while he thought that he had got behind 24 Battalion, so advanced in double time, but later suspected that he was too far ahead and halted a while. When C Company (Captain **Awarau**¹) next on the left caught up, A Company moved off again, with **Djebel Bir** as its objective, but it seems likely that about this time it lost the full support of the barrage, and in any case was running into the enemy's defensive fire.

By the time the company had reached the east-west track that ran to the south of **Djebel Bir** it had had many casualties from mortar and artillery fire, and from booby-trapped minefields where wooden box-

mines were connected with trip-wires to 'S' mines. Opposition was not so great from **Djebel Bir** itself as from the west. Two platoon commanders were casualties and the company lost any precise formation. On and around the track it came to a standstill, and then the remaining platoon commander was hit. Porter became most concerned at his losses, which had reduced his strength by half, and with such low numbers feared that he might find himself unsupported on both flanks if he were to go on. He tried to get in touch with battalion headquarters by wireless, and at that point was himself wounded by a mortar bomb.

Though without officers the company tried to carry on, but heavy artillery, anti-tank, mortar and machine-gun fire was now sweeping the area and what was left of the company finally went to ground on the nearer slopes of **Djebel Bir**.

C Company's experience was much the same as A Company's. Enemy mortar and artillery fire was soon encountered and became progressively more intense, and the advance became disjointed. The company commander and one platoon commander were soon wounded, but the company pushed on, having in one or two places to hack its way through cactus. Mines were found similar to those on the front of A Company, and soon the company strength was much depleted. Lieutenant Haig of 15 Platoon found that he was the only officer still with the company and took command, but by that time numbers were so low—Haig's own platoon had dwindled to three men—that further advance was impossible, and the company remained under what cover could be found in a wadi running down from **Takrouna**. The company had made no contact with the enemy, but had become disorganised by the loss of officers and men, by enemy defensive fire, and by the booby-trapped minefields.

All across the front by this time there was much dust and smoke, and visibility was practically nil, particularly about the enemy's defensive fire zone.

On the battalion's left flank, B Company (Captain C. Sorensen) made

reasonable progress, though slowed down by the cactus hedges, until it reached the foot of **Takrouna** on the east side; but it

¹ **Capt W. M. Awarau; Hawera; born NZ 28 Sep 1904; barrister and solicitor; twice wounded.**

was out of touch with C Company on its right and, because of **Takrouna** itself, could not keep contact with 21 Battalion on its left. It then ran into intensive machine-gun and mortar fire from **Takrouna**, laced with crossfire from **Djebel Bir**. Again mines caused further casualties, and the company went to ground.

By this time battalion headquarters had moved up close to the white house, and the battalion commander sent his Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant M. Wikiriwhi, to find out what had caused B Company to stop and so leave C Company with an exposed left flank. When the IO reported back, he was sent forward again with orders to B Company to push on, link up with C Company and go on to the **Zaghouan** road. Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett himself then went to visit C Company, and found that it was just about to move on and follow Lieutenant Haig, who had gone on ahead. He told the company to wait for a while until B Company caught up, his idea being to form some semblance of a battalion line.

All touch had been lost with A Company, but Bennett then moved back to B Company, which he found still opposed by very heavy fire from **Takrouna**. He gave some instructions for countering the enemy's fire, including sending a message back to the three supporting tanks to use their guns against the hill, and then instructed Captain Sorensen to push on. On his way back to C Company to co-ordinate further this new advance, Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett was severely wounded on a box mine.

It seems doubtful if the tanks were able to help at this time, as it was impossible for them to get beyond the white house; but at first light

they were on the northern edge of the olive groves and helped with fire in cleaning out enemy pockets on **Takrouna** and **Djebel Bir**.

The wounding of the battalion commander completed the disorganisation of the headquarters, for in the meantime the adjutant and the RSM had been wounded also. Lieutenant Wikiriwhi tried to find Lieutenant-Colonel Bennett after he had been to B Company, but failed. He then took steps to establish a fresh headquarters.

And meanwhile the OC and one platoon commander in B Company had been wounded while the company was pushing on another 300 yards round the toe of **Takrouna**. No. 10 Platoon was left behind under its commander, Sergeant **Rogers**,¹ to make the feint attack up the southern slopes, while the platoon commander, Lieutenant **Morgan**,² now acting as company commander, went on with 11 and 12 Platoons. He was soon himself wounded. Nevertheless the two platoons went on edging ahead along the eastern

¹ **Sgt J. Rogers**; born NZ 29 Dec 1916; school teacher; kilian in action 20 Apr 1943.

² **Lt E. Morgan**; **Rotorua**; born **Thames**, 20 Sep 1909; clerk; wounded 5 Aug 1942.

slopes, and from 11 Platoon two sections managed to reach the road after a difficult advance through intense fire. In one section only one man had survived. When 12 Platoon began the last phase of its advance it had only nine men under Sergeant **Trainor**.¹ Enemy machine-gun posts covering two 75-millimetre anti-tank guns were discovered and promptly attacked and captured, together with twenty-seven prisoners, all German. No. 12 Platoon then reached the road, the time being about 2.30 a.m. A grim persistence had put these gallant few on their objective, even though they were two hours behind the artillery programme, which very obviously was far too ambitious in its timings.

D Company (Captain **Ornberg** ²) in reserve now became involved, for it soon caught up with B Company and had casualties from the same sources. It had been told by the CO to help B Company, but for the moment all it could do was engage enemy weapon pits on **Takrouna** with machine guns. When it was learned that Captain Sorensen had been wounded, and that it was believed that the CO was wounded also, **Ornberg** decided to push on round the lower slopes of **Takrouna** and make for the battalion objective. The company was by now only forty strong, including a few stragglers from B and C Companies. The time was about 2.30 a.m., and by this time 23 Battalion had moved through the Maoris.

Thus A Company had gone to ground on the near slopes of **Djebel Bir**, C Company likewise was in a wadi running down from **Takrouna**, two platoons of B Company were on the **Zaghouan** road with one platoon preparing to make the feint attack on **Takrouna**, and D Company was about to move on towards the road. The CO, three company commanders, and several platoon commanders were all casualties.

¹ **Sgt T. Trainor**, MM; born Ruatoki, 15 Feb 1919; carpenter; died of wounds 24 May 1944.

² **Capt P. F. Te H. Ornberg**, MC, m.i.d.; born NZ 2 Apr 1919; clerk; wounded 20 Apr 1943; died of wounds 30 May 1944.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

21 BATTALION

21 Battalion

The **21st Battalion** advanced behind the barrage on time, with C Company on the right, A in the centre, B on the left, and D less one platoon in reserve. The remaining platoon of D Company was on Point 121 (Djebel el Ktatiss) as a 'firm base' for the final position the battalion was to secure, the gun line facing north-west.

C Company (Major B. M. Laird) soon ran into rough country, and became rather scattered among the olives and cactus hedges. At first enemy opposition consisted of artillery and mortar fire, but this was intensified by fire from nebelwerfers, six-barrelled electric-ally fired 15- or 21-cm rocket launchers. This was the first time that nebelwerfers had been encountered by 2 NZ Division. ¹ Fire against the company was then increased by intense machine-gun fire from **Takrouna** on the right flank, which to the company was an open flank. The left platoon—15 under Lieutenant **Shaw** ²—fared better, and for a while carried on with A Company; but the right platoon was forced into shelter and was pinned down by fire while in the middle of a minefield. Sections from the reserve platoon failed in an attempt to get forward. The company commander reviewed the situation, and from a reconnaissance came to the conclusion that the companies on his left had not been successful either, so decided to report back for instructions, taking with him the portions of the right and reserve platoons that were immediately accessible. But in the darkness he missed battalion headquarters and eventually found Brigade Headquarters, which was in the original battalion area. It was then 2 a.m.

But, as it happened, A and B Companies had achieved some success, mainly because they were not obstructed by cactus hedges and could keep up with the barrage, and so had passed the danger area round **Takrouna** before the enemy opened up. Moreover, these companies were

not as close to the lower slopes of **Takrouna** as C Company. The two forward platoons of both companies had in fact almost reached the road before the enemy opened fire with anything other than artillery.

A Company (Captain Bullock-Douglas) had a few casualties on the start line owing to an artillery concentration which came down on headquarters and 9 Platoon, the support platoon. This delayed their start, but 8 Platoon (Lieutenant **Chalmers**³) on the right and 7 Platoon (Sergeant **Howell**⁴) on the left got away in good time and had an uninterrupted advance to the **Zaghuan** road, capturing a few prisoners on the way. But by now enemy fire had become more intense and it was realised that their right and rear were much exposed. In fact, one of the sections of 8 Platoon, after handling the prisoners that had been passed back to it, was cut off from the others by small-arms fire from **Takrouna**.

No. 9 Platoon under Lieutenant Upton⁵ lost contact with the others, and in a haze of smoke and dust went on alone, having

¹ Nebelwerfers were used for the first time in North Africa during Rommel's attack in February against **Kasserine**. They were seen and heard by 2 NZ Division at **Medenine**, but were firing against other parts of the front.

² **Capt R. A. Shaw**; Taumarunui; born **New Plymouth**, 8 Jun 1912; commercial traveller; twice wounded.

³ **Capt J. C. Chalmers**; **Auckland**; born **Greymouth**, 8 Feb 1914; school teacher.

⁴ **S-Sgt C. C. Howell**; born **Gisborne**, 17 Feb 1913; Regular soldier; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

⁵ 2 Lt **J. T. Upton**; born NZ 11 Aug 1917; clerk accountant; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

casualties from nebelwerfers. Upton decided to make contact with C Company on the right and moved in that direction, passing many booby traps, and in fact getting close to the foot of **Takrouna** hill. Here the platoon became mixed up with cactus hedges, tripwires and minefields, and finally went to ground, by which time Lieutenant Upton was missing. ¹ The platoon sergeant, Sergeant **Dotchin**, ² searched for a lane through the minefield, but when he came back to the platoon he found that they were nearly all casualties on mines. Captain Bullock-Douglas, who after the delay in starting was searching for the company, now arrived, and while Dotchin and he were endeavouring to get forward both were wounded. The two advanced platoons of A Company were thus left on the road with no chance of further support.

B Company's advance (under Captain **Roach** ³) had followed a similar pattern. The two leading platoons reached the road in front of the enemy's defensive fire—and it is believed outside the area covered by the barrage—while headquarters and the third platoon encountered severe fire and were cut off from the forward elements. Captain Roach went with the reserve platoon to within a few hundred yards of the road, but as he could find no trace of the rest of his company he went back to battalion headquarters to report.

Meanwhile runners from the platoons of A and B Companies on the road were also on their way back with situation reports.

D Company (Captain I. A. Murray) at first advanced without interference, and then passed through a belt of enemy defensive fire but was screened by the dust and smoke. However, shortly afterwards the murk cleared and the company possibly became visible in the moonlight, for it was subjected to a heavy mortar and artillery concentration. The company commander was killed, and there were many casualties. Lieutenant P. **Robertson** ⁴ assumed command and moved the company a little to the west where there was some cover.

Headquarters 21 Battalion, advancing behind D Company, also had several casualties, including Lieutenant-Colonel Harding, who was

wounded but remained on duty. Headquarters was for a while lost in the haze, but the RSM reconnoitred ahead, made contact with D Company and then led the headquarters forward to a site from where there was good observation. D Company was told to dig in where it was, but so far the CO had no contact with any of

¹ Later found killed.

² Sgt B. Dotchin; Auckland; born Wellington, 3 Mar 1915; oil storeman; twice wounded.

³ Maj W. J. G. Roach, MC; Wellington; born Levin, 12 Oct 1909; bank officer; 2 i/c 21 Bn Oct 1943-Mar 1944; wounded 22 Nov 1941.

⁴ Capt P. Robertson, MC; Auckland; born England, 1 May 1918; commercial traveller.

the other companies, for all wireless sets had ceased to function, either sets or operators being casualties.

The carrier platoon advanced on a line to the west of the companies, and soon ran into heavy enemy fire. Sergeant Mellsop's ¹ carrier charged and silenced two machine-gun posts and then silenced an anti-tank gun, but despite an offensive spirit throughout the platoon, there were too many anti-tank guns about for comfort, and the platoon withdrew a few hundred yards. It seems probable that only darkness saved it from destruction.

The CO was already beginning to suspect that the operation had not gone according to plan. The runners came in from A and B Companies, and Lieutenant Shaw with 15 Platoon and parts of 13 and 14 from C Company also reported about the same time; but there was no later news. No success signal had been seen from 28 Battalion, which meant presumably that Takrouna was still in enemy hands, and observation on

the spot made it only too clear that the enemy still occupied the south-west and west slopes. About 2.30 a.m., therefore, Lieutenant-Colonel Harding sent the runners back to the forward platoons of A and B Companies with instructions that they were to withdraw to the area of his headquarters should they not have made contact with 28 Battalion on their right. At the same time he sent a runner to Brigade Headquarters to report his decision.

Meanwhile both companies had severe fighting to the north of the **Zaghuan** road, where they were in fact in contact with the enemy's main line, held here mostly by *Trieste Division*. When 8 Platoon reached the road it took cover in a ditch, while Lieutenant Chalmers tried first to find company headquarters, and then to make contact with any friendly troops on the right. He went some distance, as far in fact as the foot of the track leading up to **Takrouna** village, but found no trace of either 28 or 23 Battalions. (The latter at this time was still fighting for its start line.) No. 7 Platoon was under heavy fire, and Sergeant Howell, the commander, was killed. Lance-Sergeant Steiner² took charge, organised an attack across the road, with 8 Platoon giving covering fire, and led his party forward, attacking with Tommy guns and grenades. Five machine-gun posts were destroyed, but Steiner then found that only two other men were left, and one of these was soon afterwards mortally wounded, so the little party withdrew back to the road.

¹ **Sgt C. R. Mellsop**, MM; Waimauku, **Auckland**; born **Waiuku**, 17 Aug 1912; farmer; wounded 22 Apr 1943.

² Lt **L. A. Steiner**, DCM; born NZ 4 Mar 1918; farmhand; killed in action 23 Sep 1944.

Lieutenant Chalmers had now returned, and in company with Sergeant Steiner went back to battalion headquarters to report, leaving the company under Sergeant Klaus.¹

To the left of A Company, 12 and 11 Platoons of B Company crossed

the road and attacked the enemy, and soon were engaged in bitter fighting. Both platoon commanders, Lieutenants **Donaldson**² and **Taylor**,³ were killed, and Sergeant **Parris**⁴ of 12 Platoon was shortly the only senior NCO available. He found that when the enemy position had been taken there was only a handful of men left, and in fact he could find only four who were still fully active. Neither platoon was capable of further effort; and as an enemy counter-attack seemed imminent, Sergeant Parris decided to go back to the road, where he found the remnants of A Company. He then went back to try to find either company or battalion headquarters.

At Brigade Headquarters all the information tended to show that 21 Battalion could not hold its objective. The early information from the OC C Company seemed to indicate that the position of the battalion would be untenable at first light if **Takrouna** were not taken. Then a runner from B Company arrived, having failed to find battalion headquarters, and reported the position on the **Zaghuan** road as it had been when he left, before Lieutenant Taylor had been killed. Moreover, the news from the remainder of the brigade front was not reassuring. Accordingly, shortly after 2.45 a.m. **Brigadier Kippenberger** sent messages to Lieutenant-Colonel Harding, by two liaison officers moving separately, to the effect that the battalion should withdraw to its original area if its position would be untenable at first light. The messages from Brigade Headquarters crossed with the one from Harding saying that he intended to take just that action.

It is doubtful if the runners from battalion headquarters to A and B Companies ever got through, but Lieutenant Chalmers and Captain Roach had located Headquarters by this time and conferred with Lieutenant-Colonel Harding. The final decision, taken at 4.30 a.m., was that the forward companies would withdraw if by 5.30 a.m. contact had not been made with either 28 or 23 Battalions. Each company was to act independently, and armed with these instructions Roach and Chalmers went forward again.

¹ 2 Lt C. D. M. Klaus, MM; born **Waihi**, 20 Oct 1916; freezing worker; wounded 20 Apr 1943; killed in action 18 Mar 1944.

² Lt **R. Donaldson**; born NZ 14 Apr 1921; Regular soldier; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

³ Lt **G. M. Taylor**; born Walton, 23 Aug 1910; carrier; killed in action 20 Apr 1943.

⁴ Sgt **L. N. Parris**, MM; born **Auckland**, 15 Dec 1915; grocer; three times wounded.

About 5.30 a.m. battalion headquarters and D Company, together with part of C Company, began to withdraw. The remnants of A and B Companies were also assembled and taken back, many not arriving until after daylight. They were fired on during their journey, but had no more casualties and even collected a few Italian prisoners. It was obvious from personal reconnaissance by Roach, Chalmers, Dotchin and Steiner that the withdrawal was timely, as there was still much enemy activity on the slopes of **Takrouna**.

So on the west side of **Takrouna**, although the scene of much courageous fighting, the brigade attack had failed, and it is time to return to the east side, where 23 Battalion was deeply involved.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

23 BATTALION

23 Battalion

At 10 p.m. 23 Battalion moved off northwards from near Point 70 in column of route, joined the **Enfidaville- Djebibina** road near Tactical Brigade Headquarters, and from there turned off the road practically at once, deployed, and headed north-east towards the valley between **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna**. B Company was on the right and D on the left, with Headquarters in the centre. C and A were on the right and left in support. There was considerable haze from dust and smoke, and some casualties, for the valley was well covered by criss-crossed lines of fire of all types. Before going far Lieutenant-Colonel Romans was wounded, and Captain W. B. Thomas, commanding A Company, was called forward to take over. About the same time the OC B Company (Captain **Wilson** ¹) and one of his platoon commanders were wounded, together with all the platoon commanders in D Company.

It was already apparent that 28 Battalion had not captured either **Takrouna** or **Djebel Bir**, and was well short of the **Zaghouan** road, but when handing over to Captain Thomas, Romans emphasised that his instructions from Brigade Headquarters covered such a situation, and that the battalion was to go on with the attack.

When Captain Thomas arrived there was some disorganisation in the battalion owing to the number of casualties to officers and the intensity of the enemy fire. One NCO says, 'Sgts were promoting themselves to Platoon commanders, Corporals to Sgts. and so on and in many cases they no sooner promoted themselves than they were wounded, but everyone stood their ground and there was no panic.' ² Simple words, but a great tribute to the individual men and their discipline in battle.

¹ Capt **S. Wilson**, ED, m.i.d.; born Dunedin, 23 Dec 1903; french

polisher; wounded 20 Apr 1943; died 1 May 1949.

² A. Ross, *23 Battalion*, p. 259, quoting Cpl W. S. Smellie.

After a rapid survey of the situation and a brief consultation with such officers as were near at hand, Thomas decided to go on, one of his reasons being that it seemed to him that the battalion was now beyond the zone of the enemy's defensive fire. The two forward companies (B where Lieutenant **Robins** ¹ had just taken command, and D under Captain H. C. Black) were still in reasonable order, so Captain Thomas called on them to advance, and on they went firing to the front and shouting loudly, partly to give confidence and partly, it was hoped, to frighten the enemy. They passed rapidly through the area in which C Company, 28 Battalion, had suffered so many casualties, causing some alarm to their friends from the noise they were making. Lieutenant Haig of C Company was at the moment on his way back to find out what had happened to the rest of his company, and says, 'Their advance was a particularly vociferous one and I can assure you that it was a fearsome thing to encounter especially when on one's own.' ²

The companies advanced in bounds of about 200 yards, fired concentrated bursts of small-arms fire on **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna**, and finally reached and crossed the **Zaghouan** road. As with preceding units there were many casualties from enemy fire and mines, and trip-wires were found connected as warnings to the enemy in their pits. They reached a deep wadi to the south of Cherachir, from which frontal fire was now coming—they were in contact with the main enemy line—but were still some 200 yards short of their intended start line. It was 1.30 a.m. and the barrage had already moved on from the long pause, and they were without their two support companies, who had not heard Thomas's shouts to them to come on. A quick check showed that B Company could muster only twenty men, and D seventeen. Captain Thomas sent the IO, Lieutenant **Bailey**, ³ back for the other two companies, and instructed B Company to capture the eastern slopes of

Cherachir forthwith, and D Company to capture the western side and then move on [Djebel el Froukr](#). This was maintenance of the objective with a vengeance!

B Company started the climb with some shouting, but finally went on silently up a wadi, which was steep and stony. Despite much enemy mortar fire which went over their heads, and flares which lit the way for them, they were not observed and reached the crest,

¹ [Maj A. S. Robins](#), MC; Queenstown; born Queenstown, 8 Aug 1917; shepherd; wounded 20 Apr 1943.

² Lt Haig, in a report to [War History Branch](#).

³ [Lt A. F. Bailey](#), MC; [Christchurch](#); born NZ 22 Jun 1913; window dresser; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

but were then fired on from both left and right. D Company's advance helped them on the left, and they concentrated on the enemy on their right, but were finally forced to take cover just below the top, still on the southern side.

D Company had greater trouble and gradually lost all its officers. ¹ The three platoons were now commanded by Sergeant [McLean](#), ² Sergeant Muir ³ and Corporal [Smellie](#), ⁴ and then Muir took command of the company, which charged up the slopes and reached the crest. Again, however, the company had to go to ground just below the top, as the crest of [Djebel ech Cherachir](#) was untenable.

Captain Thomas with part of battalion headquarters established himself in a wadi north of the road, but for a while had no exact knowledge of the progress made, and was not in touch with Brigade Headquarters or any of the other battalions. The only wireless set was with the adjutant, Captain [Ross](#), ⁵ and the rest of battalion headquarters back in the wadi near where Lieutenant-Colonel Romans had been

wounded. Here Captain Ross had set up what amounted to a firm base and an administrative post for the battalion, and was keeping in touch with supporting arms and passing what information he had back to Brigade Headquarters.

On one occasion Thomas gave orders for red tracer to be fired vertically as a recognition signal, but this brought such violent fire from the enemy that no further attempt was made to 'prove' the front. **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna** were still clearly held by the enemy and 23 Battalion was isolated, and once a party of about twenty Germans dashed right past battalion headquarters without either side firing on the other. Each side was calling to its own troops, and members of 23 Battalion did their best to confuse the enemy by also shouting, and even started a cry of 'Panzer!' to make the enemy believe that tanks were coming.

B and D Companies reported that they had been able to clear as far as the rim of Cherachir, and part of C Company arrived under its commander, Captain Slee, and was sent off to capture the southern end of Cherachir south of B Company. This it duly did after a series of brisk engagements, but as with the other companies, it was thin on the ground.

¹ Capt Black was later found to have been killed.

² **Sgt N. C. McLean**, MM, m.i.d.; born Palmerston, 3 Jan 1918; labourer; twice wounded.

³ 2 Lt **F. J. Muir**, MM; born NZ 8 Feb 1915; clerk; killed in action 15 Mar 1944.

⁴ **WO II W. S. Smellie**; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 24 Dec 1907; stock buyer; wounded 9 May 1943.

⁵ **Maj A. Ross**, MC and bar, ED, m.i.d., Aristion Andrias (Gk); Dunedin; born Herbert, Nth Otago, 19 Jul 1911; university

lecturer; four times wounded.

Then part of A Company, now under Lieutenant [Hunt](#),¹ arrived and was sent to occupy Point 73 west of Cherachir and to link up with D Company on the western end of the feature. A platoon of this company was later sent to a position on the battalion right flank behind the part held by C Company.

While these efforts were being made there was a burst of fire from an area which had already been combed out. A cautious investigation by Lieutenant [Montgomery](#)² of C Company disclosed that it was occupied by Maoris from D Company, 28 Battalion.

¹ **[Capt C. C. Hunt](#); born NZ 31 Dec 1910; clerk.**

² **[Maj H. Montgomery](#), ED and clasp; [Ashburton](#); born [Scotland](#), 25 May 1907; school teacher.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

23 AND 28 (MAORI) BATTALIONS

23 and 28 (Maori) Battalions

We left D Company, 28 Battalion, at the point where Captain Ornberg had decided to push on towards the **Zaghoun** road, as he felt that some decisive action by the reserve company was essential. The company moved up through the gap between **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna** in silence, and despite the enemy fire crossed the road and entered the wadi south of Cherachir, where it halted to take stock of the situation. Various shouts in English led the men to believe that some of the rest of 28 Battalion had got through, and Captain Ornberg—who had been lightly wounded—sent an officer forward to find out what had happened. This officer made contact with Captain Slee of C Company, 23 Battalion. After consultation with Slee and later with Thomas, Ornberg agreed to assist C Company on the eastern flank. His company then dug in on the south-east end of Cherachir, facing back towards **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna**. By now it was almost daylight, and a counter-attack could be expected.

So in the end 23 Battalion, with D Company of 28 Battalion, was established, not very firmly, between the **Zaghoun** road and the crest of **Djebel ech Cherachir**. The companies were sited for all-round defence, for the battalion was virtually surrounded, and so far no support arms or carriers were available. The carriers had started forward with the battalion, but had gradually been brought to a halt by a combination of bad going and enemy fire, and with the approval of the adjutant were used during the night for the evacuation of wounded. Just before dawn, on the instructions of Brigade Headquarters, the carriers were placed on the brigade right flank to the east of **Djebel Bir**. Other support arms remained in the old battalion area ready to move up when conditions permitted.

Determination by all ranks despite heavy losses and much

disorganisation had enabled 23 Battalion to effect a definite penetration into the enemy's line, but the outlook was not very bright.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE ASSAULT ON TAKROUNA

The Assault on Takrouna

Sergeant Rogers with 10 Platoon of B Company, 28 Battalion, remained at the south end of **Takrouna** when the rest of the company went on to the **Zaghouna** road. The platoon had a difficult task in front of it, for the southern face of **Takrouna** was sufficiently steep to make climbing hazardous even in daylight, and although the impression that this face was unoccupied was soon proved to be wrong, it was expected that the summit would be securely held.

The initial attacking party consisted of ten men from B Company, one man from D Company, and Sergeant W. J. Smith ¹ of 23 Battalion, who had lost touch with his own unit and so attached himself to the party, a most welcome addition. Sergeant Rogers and his second-in-command, Lance-Sergeant **Manahi**, ² consulted together and decided to divide their forces. Rogers with one party, including Smith, would attack from the south-east, and Manahi with the other from the south-west. A forward observation officer from 5 Field Regiment, Captain **Catchpole**, ³ arrived about this time and gave some advice and encouragement before reporting to his regiment.

The parties set off just before daybreak and found that the slopes were occupied. They gradually worked their way up the hill, running for shelter from rock to rock, and firing on enemy positions. By first light they were halfway up the slope and able to fire down into what turned out to be deep fighting pits, and soon convinced the enemy that they had the upper hand in more ways than one. Italians, their pits now exposed, showed signs of surrendering, and Private **Grant** ⁴ alone rounded up some sixty prisoners. Even though daylight had come they pushed on, and little by little reached the 'ledge', the last twenty feet being up an almost sheer rock face. To climb this they made good use of bunches of telephone cables running to the abandoned enemy positions

below. From the ledge they occupied the maze of buildings on the 'pinnacle', which surprisingly enough was not specifically defended, and their movements round the pinnacle resulted in the capture of a German artillery observation officer and his wireless operator.

From the pinnacle they looked down into **Takrouna** village below, and got what Sergeant Smith described as 'lovely targets', as the enemy was unaware that the pinnacle had been captured. Shots from our men soon scattered the Italian soldiers in the village, and Rogers and Manahi decided to block all access to the pinnacle from the village, which meant posting men to overlook some steps cut in the stone, and blocking the mouth of a tunnel with a large boulder. The pinnacle and the ledge were then organised for defence. Some stragglers from both 28 and 23 Battalions, some of them hailed by Manahi from the top, filtered up the hill and joined the tiny garrison, and soon afterwards a forward observation officer from 64 Medium Regiment arrived but only for a reconnaissance. By this time it was mid-morning.

¹ 2 Lt W. J. Smith, DCM; **Lower Hutt**; born **Timaru**, 24 Sep 1917; labourer; wounded 26 May 1941.

² Sgt H. Manahi, DCM; **Rotorua**; born Ohinemutu, 28 Sep 1913; labourer; wounded 23 May 1941.

³ Maj S. F. Catchpole, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Huntly**, 12 Apr 1916; salesman.

⁴ Lt H. Grant, MM; **Rotorua**; born Mourea, **Rotorua**, 9 Jul 1921; chainman; twice wounded.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

SITUATION AT FIRST LIGHT, 20 APRIL

Situation at First Light, 20 April

The attack on the front of 6 Brigade had been successful.

Communications were established between battalions and Brigade Headquarters, support arms were forward, and the regiment of tanks under command had moved up to the objective.

On the right flank a patrol from 26 Battalion entered **Enfidaville just before first light and found it empty. At 6.58 a.m. **8 Armoured Brigade** reported it clear, and this information was passed to 50 Division, whose task it now became to occupy the town and patrol northwards along the coast road. Pending the arrival of 50 Division, **NZ Divisional Cavalry** patrolled north for four miles and captured four men from **90 Light Division**. In the early afternoon 201 Guards Brigade from 50 Division came forward and occupied positions on a line running from the coast north of **Enfidaville** and linking up with the right of 6 Infantry Brigade.**

On 5 Infantry Brigade's front enemy opposition and the difficulties of the going had made success impossible. On the west of **Takrouna the attack had failed completely. On the east side there had been some gains, which had not been firmly consolidated, and only part of the first objective had been reached and none of the second. Communications within the brigade were not good, two battalions had lost their COs, and one had lost all but one of its company commanders and many other officers and NCOs besides.**

On the left of 2 NZ Division the attack by 4 Indian Division met with only slight success. **Djebel Garci proved too great an objective for one brigade, and the Division had to be content with taking **Djebel Blida**, which was no more than an outpost to the defences on the main feature.**

Farther to the west 7 Armoured Division was just north of **Djebibina.**

The FDLs of 2 NZ Division now ran from a point about 1000 yards north-west of **Enfidaville** in a curve trending first north-west and then west round the northern slopes of Djebel Oglia, held by 6 Infantry Brigade. There was then a gap across the valley to **Djebel ech Cherachir**, which feature was held somewhat precariously by the isolated 23 Battalion with part of 28 (Maori) Battalion. Behind them the Maoris held the southern end of **Djebel Bir**, with a few troops on the **Zaghuan** road to the north-west. There was a slender footing on the top of **Takrouna**, not linked with any other troops. To the left 21 Battalion had returned to its start-line positions.

The artillery had fired its programme with practically no interference from the enemy, and despite earlier fears no guns were knocked out. But 6 Field Regiment, which was in the open in full view of **Takrouna**, was pulled back at first light.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

6 INFANTRY BRIGADE ON 20 APRIL

6 Infantry Brigade on 20 April

At 6.45 a.m. Brigadier Gentry reported to **General Freyberg** by telephone and gave him a report on his front, which was a good one. At that moment the situation on 5 Brigade front was not known at **Divisional Headquarters**, but it was known that there was an enemy pocket between the two brigades, and **8 Armoured Brigade** was given the task of mopping up with its remaining regiment (Staffs Yeomanry), while **3 Royal Tanks** (under 6 Infantry Brigade) moved westwards with the same task. The Royal Tanks lost three tanks on mines, but neither regiment had any losses from shellfire, which was heavy.

For **26 and 24 Battalions** the day was spent mainly in keeping to slit trenches to avoid the constant shelling. Enemy transport and other enemy activities were seen to the north-west, and at 11.15 a.m. our artillery engaged observation posts on **Djebel el Froukr**, and also the flat ground between Froukr and Ogla.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

5 INFANTRY BRIGADE

5 Infantry Brigade

At Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade the picture was put together as information came in. It will be easily understood that at first light the position with 23 and 28 Battalions was obscure, but one thing was certain, that assistance would be wanted. Just before 6 a.m. **Brigadier Kippenberger** sent part of Notts Yeomanry forward to clear up any pockets of resistance on the east side of **Takrouna**, and to give what help it could to either battalion. Notts Yeomanry succeeded in crossing the **Zaghuan** road, but had lost six tanks on mines and one by shellfire. However, their presence was both welcome and useful, and they took twenty prisoners.

Among other results, the tanks helped to capture **Djebel Bir**. First light found 28 Battalion much disorganised, with most of the officers wounded. Lieutenant Wikiriwhi went forward to look at the situation, especially on **Djebel Bir**, where A Company was dug in on the southern edge, with the enemy occupying most of the remainder. He suggested to Private **Heka**¹ of A Company that he 'should take a closer look' at the rear of **Djebel Bir**, under protection of the tanks. As soon as the tanks opened fire as arranged by Wikiriwhi, Heka advanced alone, attacked and captured an antitank-gun post, and then put three machine-gun posts out of action, finally coming back with fourteen prisoners. Help also came from the troops on Cherachir, who fired into the backs of the enemy on **Djebel Bir**. The result was the collapse of all resistance on the feature.

Prisoners in this area were all German and came from either 47 or 361 Infantry Regiments. The 90th Light Division, in reporting the loss of Bir, gives some credit to the support given by '50 tanks', and it is possible that the operation being carried out by Staffs Yeomanry and 3 Royal Tanks in the gap between Bir and Ogla had some effect on this

surrender. But nothing can detract from Heka's little victory.

Wikiriwhi then met Haig, who was searching for more C Company men and getting them securely dug in between **Takrouna and **Djebel Bir**. This action was confirmed, and Wikiriwhi then went to Brigade Headquarters to report, arriving there about 7.45 a.m. By this time he was functioning as a combination of CO, adjutant and intelligence officer.**

The GOC and the CRA had arrived at Headquarters 5 Brigade not long before, and at much the same time our own troops could be seen on the top of **Takrouna, the first indication that they had arrived there.**

Brigadier Kippenberger now heard the first authentic information about 28 Battalion, and after listening to Wikiriwhi's report gave him a definite line on which to reorganise, with the object of establishing a second line of defence in case 23 Battalion was overrun. Captain **Pene,² the senior surviving officer, was sent for to take command of 28 Battalion, and other officers to take over the companies. Pene did not arrive from the B Echelon area until late afternoon, and meanwhile Wikiriwhi had restored control within the battalion. A telephone line was run from battalion headquarters to the Maoris on **Takrouna**. The whole valley between **Takrouna** and **Djebel Bir** was under shell and mortar fire during the day, and tasks such as this, and the evacuation of the wounded, were performed under great difficulties.**

After the conference at Brigade Headquarters the CRA at once fired several 'stonks' with all available artillery on **Djebel el Froukr and other features beyond **Djebel ech Cherachir**, in the belief that while the exact position of our troops was not known, supporting fire on any points held by the enemy would be good for morale. Enemy retaliation against the artillery continued to be negligible, and in the afternoon 6 Field Regiment moved forward again to positions not far south of **Takrouna**.**

The **23rd Battalion expected a counter-attack at first light, but nothing happened. The troops were all dug in or in sheltered positions**

and the perimeter was so small that central control from battalion headquarters was possible by runner, and even on occasion by voice. Cherachir was held by the battalion, but the security of its tenure seemed doubtful. D Company was on the north-west end of the feature: B on the north-east and east: part of C Company together with D Company, 28 Battalion, at the south-eastern end: the rest of C Company on the south-western face: and A Company partly on the western end of Cherachir and partly on Point 73. They were overlooked on three sides, and were not sure 'what side owned what ground', as a survivor has put it, but they were determined to stay there. The offensive spirit was still alive, and probably had some effect in stopping a counter-attack, for Captain Thomas decided to take a gamble on further supplies of ammunition getting through, and ordered the battalion to keep on engaging the enemy. So the northern slopes of **Takrouna** were fired on, odd enemy positions cleared out, transport at the rear of **Takrouna** engaged, fire directed into the backs of the enemy on **Djebel Bir**, and a party of Germans trying to get to **Takrouna** from the north pinned to the ground. B Company even captured about twenty Germans who walked into its area.

As there was still no sign of supporting arms or tanks, and as there were indications of the enemy massing behind Point 136 to the north-west, at 9 a.m. Captain Thomas sent the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Bailey, back to Brigade Headquarters to report. Bailey had a hazardous journey down the valley, but reached Brigade Headquarters about 10 a.m. This was the first direct information from 23 Battalion, and within minutes Point 136 and other targets were 'stonked', much to the delight of Thomas and the battalion. It was some comfort also to know that the IO had got through.

The tanks of Notts Yeomanry were still involved in the very difficult ground near the **Zaghouan** road, and one tank which managed to cross the road was immobilised on a mine.

Varying fortunes attended the attempts of the supporting arms of 23 Battalion to reach the forward positions, for the valley was no place for

soft-skinned vehicles. The machine-gun platoon made three attempts but was forced back by artillery and mortar fire. In the afternoon two six-pounders of the anti-tank platoon reached the south-east slopes of **Takrouna**, but were withdrawn after dark. Neither could the carrier platoon join up, although one carrier did get far enough forward to be used for evacuating wounded.

Until the afternoon the adjutant, Captain Ross, stayed in his original post, and from there kept up a link with advanced headquarters and with rear echelons, but then he decided that something must be done to get at least the No. 11 wireless set forward. He was told by Brigade Headquarters to wait for an armoured vehicle, but the armoured car which did arrive was holed almost at once and made unserviceable. So Ross decided to run the gauntlet in his jeep, and managed to get as far as the **Zaghuan** road. There he organised a party of prisoners of war to carry the set to Headquarters, warning them in advance of what would happen were the set sabotaged. From then on, direct communication from battalion to brigade was established, and the unit was able to call for artillery fire at short notice. So by the end of 20 April, 23 Battalion was at least well in hand, and the first steps had been taken by Brigade Headquarters to relieve it after dark by 25 Battalion.

¹ **Pte T. Heka**, DCM; Awanui, Nth Auckland; born NZ 15 Nov 1915; labourer.

² **Capt M. R. Pene**; Rotorua; born **Whakatane**, 1 Feb 1912; foreman, Maori Affairs Dept.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

TAKROUNA, 20 APRIL

Takrouna, 20 April

The foothold on **Takrouna** was no more than a foothold, and as soon as the enemy realised that he had lost the pinnacle he subjected it to a steady deluge of shells of all kinds. Casualties were heavy, and of the gallant first party five at least were soon killed, including Sergeant Rogers, so that Manahi was left in charge. The enemy fire on **Takrouna** persisted during all the activities still to be described.

The few troops still left on the top continued to guard the pinnacle offensively by firing at targets on lower levels, including two captured 25-pounders that the enemy had sited on the northern slopes. ¹ Every member of the little garrison played his part.

Meanwhile Captain Catchpole moved his armoured car as close to **Takrouna** as possible and established a post in the northern fringe of the olives, sending back to his CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Glasgow, what information he received from the top. Another officer from 5 Field Regiment, Captain **Muirhead**, ² originally detailed as forward observation officer to 23 Battalion, climbed to the top and made a detailed reconnaissance. From there he went back to 5 Field Regiment and reported the position to **Glasgow**, so confirming reports from Catchpole. Both officers said that more infantry were wanted if **Takrouna** was to be held.



Italian troops surrender north of Enfidaville

Italian troops surrender north of Enfidaville



General Montgomery

General Montgomery



Lieutenant-General Horrocks

Lieutenant-General Horrocks

10 Corps Headquarters awaits word of the enemy's capitulation,
13 May 1943



10 Corps Headquarters awaits word of the enemy's capitulation, 13 May 1943

MESSAGE FORM			
TO	FROM	CLASSIFICATION	DATE
10 CORPS HEADQUARTERS	1 ITALIAN ARMY	SECRET	12 MAY 1943
SUBJECT: SURRENDER OF ITALIAN ARMY			
OPERATIONAL INFORMATION			
1. POSITION	2. SITUATION	3. COMMENTS	4. REFERENCES
5. ACTION	6. RECOMMENDATIONS	7. OTHER	8. SIGNATURE
<p>10 CORPS HEADQUARTERS, 12 MAY 1943, 9:50 P.M.</p> <p>TO: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>FROM: 10 CORPS HEADQUARTERS, 12 MAY 1943, 9:50 P.M.</p> <p>SUBJECT: SURRENDER OF ITALIAN ARMY</p> <p>OPERATIONAL INFORMATION</p> <p>1. POSITION: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>2. SITUATION: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>3. COMMENTS: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>4. REFERENCES: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>5. ACTION: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>6. RECOMMENDATIONS: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>7. OTHER: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p> <p>8. SIGNATURE: 1 ITALIAN ARMY, 13 MAY 1943, 12:00 P.M.</p>			

10 Corps message to 1 Italian Army, 12 May 1943, 9:50 p.m. and situation report on 13 May notifying the surrender of the Italians

10 Corps' message to 1 Italian Army, 9.5 p.m., 12 May 1943, and situation report on 13 May notifying the surrender of the Italians



Field Marshal Messe surrenders to General Freyberg,
13 May 1943

Field Marshal Messe surrenders to General Freyberg, 13 May 1943



General Mannerini, GOC *Sabaran Group* (left), with his Chief of Staff at Divisional Headquarters, 8 April 1943. They were captured after the breakthrough at Wadi Akarit

General Mannerini, GOC *Saharan Group* (left), with his Chief of Staff at Divisional Headquarters, 8 April 1943. They were captured after the breakthrough at Wadi Akarit

General von Liebenstein, GOC 164 *Light Africa Division*,
surrenders on 13 May



General von Liebenstein, GOC 164 *Light Africa Division*. surrenders on 13 May



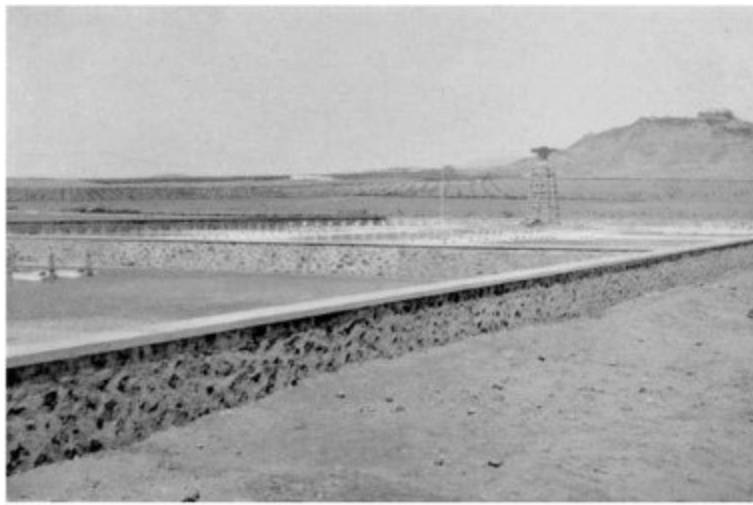
German prisoners in Tunisia

German prisoners in Tunisia



An Italian taken at Akarit

An Italian taken at Akarit



War cemetery at Enfidaville. Takrouna and the white farmhouse are in the background

War cemetery at Enfidaville. Takrouna and the white farmhouse are in the background

The Division returns to Egypt



The Division returns to Egypt



The end of a 2000-mile journey. *Above:* Passing through Maadi township; *below:* Arriving at Maadi Camp

The end of a 2000-mile journey. ***Above:*** Passing through **Maadi** township; ***below:*** Arriving at **Maadi Camp**



By this time **Brigadier Kippenberger** had himself been up to the foot of **Takrouna** and had decided that the Maoris on the summit would be relieved by a platoon from 21 Battalion, instructions to this end being given at 11.45. a.m. **Kippenberger** had rejected a suggestion from both Corps and Divisional commanders that all troops in the vicinity of **Takrouna** should be withdrawn and the feature pounded with artillery. In view of the comparative failure of the whole attack he preferred to hold on to what had been gained, especially when it was such a key point. But until the top could be made secure the success of this policy hung in the balance.

During his forward reconnaissance **Kippenberger** visited the area

held by 28 (Maori) Battalion and made some adjustments to the line.

Before reinforcements could arrive the retention of even the toehold on **Takrouna** became doubtful, as was only to be expected when the defenders of the peak were confined to such a restricted area and under such heavy and continuous fire. Fortunately the enemy was limiting his action to fire, and still showed no signs of counter-attacking. Manahi realised that very soon there would be nobody left to defend the spot, so took a risk, went down from the summit, found Lieutenant Haig of C Company and obtained from him a section of men and some stretcher bearers, food and ammunition. On the way back he was told by the Medium Regiment forward observation officer (who did not know that this policy had been dropped), that he should clear his men away from the feature as it was going to be heavily shelled. Manahi then consulted Catchpole, who told him to hang on at all costs, that reinforcements were on the way (this was an inspired guess), and that he would stop any artillery programme against the summit.

So Manahi went back with his section and again posted them to cover all approaches, and not long afterwards 15 Platoon of 21 Battalion arrived under Lieutenant Shaw. But while Shaw and Manahi were making a brief reconnaissance the enemy at last attacked both pinnacle and ledge. The defence was furious in its vigour, and the enemy troops were shot, bayoneted, or pushed over the cliff. And at this point Captain Muirhead arrived back with a few Maoris he had collected and clinched the victory. The attackers were believed to be all Italians, but *90 Light Division* mentions a few Germans from *47 Regiment*.

It was now 6.45 p.m. The ledge and pinnacle were cleared, and in the following lull most of the Maoris, by now near exhaustion, went back to their battalion.

Captain Muirhead and Lieutenant Shaw then consulted together, with the result that Shaw sent a runner to Brigade Headquarters to ask for more men, and 21 Battalion was promptly instructed to send up another platoon. Runners had to be used to and from the top, as despite

wearying work the brigade signallers were unable to keep up communication by telephone for the cable was continually cut.

At last light, therefore, while the territory held on **Takrouna had not been increased, it had at least been held.**

¹ Later recaptured by our troops.

² Maj J. C. Muirhead, MC; **Palmerston North; born **Palmerston North**, 5 Oct 1911; clerk; wounded 23 Nov 1941.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

21 BATTALION

21 Battalion

For 21 Battalion the day was spent in reorganisation and in collecting the wounded. The latter activity was made difficult by enemy fire, and at least one search party was pinned to the ground. During the afternoon Captain **Nathan**¹ of 4 Field Regiment, together with Captain Roach of B Company, ranged on enemy machine-gun posts on the western slopes of the hill. There was a good deal of enemy shelling throughout the day.

In the afternoon there was a report that enemy tanks were in the vicinity. Staffs Yeomanry moved out to the west, but could find nothing, nor could anything be found by tank-busters and Spitfires that later circled the area. The report must have been incorrect, for one feature of this battle was the complete absence of enemy armour.

¹ **Maj E. C. W. Nathan; Wellington; born NZ 28 Feb 1911; stockbroker.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

SITUATION AT THE END OF 20 APRIL

Situation at the End of 20 April

At the end of the day 2 NZ Division had consolidated its first-light positions. Communications had improved, and the various headquarters knew the situation in detail, but the general outlook was little better. Prisoners amounted to 380, of whom 120 were German, all from 90 *Light Division*—either 47 or 361 *Regiment*. The Italians came from *Trieste Division*, and in the main had fought surprisingly well. All the opposition was still on the front of 5 *Infantry Brigade*. On that of 6 *Infantry Brigade* there was only token opposition, for the reason, still not fully appreciated, that the real line of defence was even farther north than had so far been reached.

The enemy showed little desire to counter-attack. Nothing came of the feared assembly opposite 23 *Battalion*, and his only offensive ground action anywhere was the small attack against the summit of **Takrouna**. The defence had centred, only too effectively, on guns, mortars, and small-arms fire, brought down over likely areas of approach and any movement, and mines had hampered movement whatever its nature.

On the flanks of the *Division* also there was stalemate. The 201st *Guards Brigade* on the right was able merely to patrol some few miles north of **Enfidaville**. The 4th *Indian Division* on the left resisted continuous enemy counter-attacks against its foothold on *Djebel el Blida*, but made no further advance.

During the morning of 20 April the tanks of 15 *Panzer Division* moved from the **Bou Ficha** area west and then south towards the rear of **Djebel Mdeker**, apparently to be ready in case of a breakthrough on our part. But they were never close enough to be in contact with our troops, and once it was evident that the advance of 2 NZ and 4 *Indian Divisions* was definitely checked, the tanks were moved back again. During the

next day or two they went to the front of First Army. Eighth Army's attack had thus not even pinned down the enemy troops on its front, far less caused the withdrawal of those opposing First Army. The enemy had every reason to be content with the check he had given Eighth Army from the security of his positions based on strong natural defences.

At 11.10 p.m. on 20 April 10 Corps issued a message outlining its plans for the immediate future, but other than foreshadowing the relief of 50 (N) and 2 NZ Divisions and the arrival in the area of 51 (H) and 56 (L) Divisions, the instructions amounted for the moment to 'hang on to what you've got'. For 2 NZ Division the interest lay in its relief by 56 (L) Division, followed by further operations northwards, but no date was given for the relief and no details of the operations.

In fact, most senior officers were beginning to wonder just what they could hope to achieve by continuing the attacks in any form.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

20-21 APRIL—SOME REORGANISATION

20-21 April—Some Reorganisation

During the afternoon of 20 April **General Freyberg** again visited Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade and was told that the casualties in the brigade were likely to be about 400. In the discussion that ensued **Brigadier Kippenberger** asked for another battalion to relieve 23 Battalion, and the GOC agreed that 25 Battalion, the reserve battalion of 6 Brigade, should do so. Lieutenant-Colonel T. B. Morten reported to **Brigadier Kippenberger** at 3 p.m. and was told to carry out the relief after dark, moving up to Cherachir westwards from 24 Battalion area.

At 7 p.m. 25 Battalion moved on foot along the 6 Brigade axis to the **Zaghoun** road, and thence to 23 Battalion area. Transport was used for support arms for part of the way. There was a little shelling, but the relief was completed without incident at 11 p.m. The companies were placed in a perimeter with the mortars and only two six-pounder anti-tank guns, and with the carriers on the east flank of the battalion. The remaining anti-tank guns were not retained as the country was naturally tank-proof. One platoon of 2 Machine-Gun Company was withdrawn from the west side of **Takrouna** in the early hours of 21 April and sent up to 25 Battalion. It came under heavy mortar and machine-gun fire while getting into position, and both this platoon and a later relief platoon were so severely shelled that they could do little effective work.

The **23rd Battalion** withdrew down the valley between **Takrouna** and **Djebel Bir** up which it had attacked, and without much incident was picked up by transport and taken well back.

During the night D Company of 24 Battalion moved into the gap between the left of 24 and the right of 25 Battalions, so completing the divisional line. The engineers cleared the **Zaghoun** road from **Enfidaville** as far as 25 Battalion, and also cleared a passage through the

mines between **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna**. The 28th Battalion by this time had reorganised and taken up a position facing north-west between **Djebel Bir** and the olive groves south of **Takrouna**.

On **Takrouna** itself 14 Platoon of 21 Battalion under Lieutenant **Hirst**¹ joined 15 Platoon shortly after 9 p.m. on 20 April, and almost immediately afterwards the enemy attacked, achieved a measure of surprise, and succeeded in occupying the mosque and other buildings on the pinnacle, but was stopped from clearing the ledge. The enemy had gained access through the tunnel, which had been overlooked in the course of the various changes of personnel. A period of stalemate followed, for neither side could move the other, but when daylight came on 21 April the enemy if anything had the better of it, as he was on higher ground. Lieutenant Shaw was wounded early in the morning of 21 April and was evacuated with difficulty. Lieutenant Hirst took charge.

¹ **Lt I. H. Hirst, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 5 Feb 1915; farmer; wounded 3 Sep 1942.**

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

21 APRIL—THE END OF ORATION

21 April—the End of ORATION

Divisional Cavalry spent 21 April patrolling on the front of 6 Infantry Brigade and up the coastal strip for some five miles north of **Enfidaville**. The artillery had an active day, shelling enemy batteries heavily. The 4th Field Regiment, for instance, expended 3143 rounds and 5 Field Regiment fired nineteen concentrations and six 'stonks' in addition to other tasks.

In 6 Brigade's area the day was uneventful. It was Brigadier Gentry's last day in command, for at midnight 21–22 April he was to hand over to Brigadier **Parkinson**,¹ and start his journey back to New Zealand to take up the appointment of Deputy Chief of the General Staff.²

The GOC held his usual conference early in the day to decide what further action could be taken. The 8th Armoured Brigade was sent to work round the west of **Takrouna** and to get as far north as possible, even to the **Zaghuan** road. Staffs Yeomanry made the attempt, directed on Point 136, but met heavy and accurate fire, particularly from **Djebel Biada** on the left, lost three tanks and could make little progress. As 21 Battalion had already discovered, this stretch north of and parallel to the **Zaghuan** road was part of the enemy's main line, and was strongly defended.

There was enemy shelling and mortaring on Cherachir from first light until dark, and snipers were a perpetual annoyance until three Crusader tanks moved into the area after 3 p.m. and gave some relief. Notts Yeomanry moved on to **Djebel Bir** and as far as the road between there and Cherachir, overran a few enemy posts, took another twenty-three prisoners and won commendation from the infantry for steady and helpful work.

On **Takrouna** there was great activity all day. During the night 20–21 April communication had been established between the summit and headquarters of both 5 Infantry Brigade and 5 Field Regiment, and **Brigadier Kippenberger** took direct control of further operations against the peak. There was steady enemy shelling throughout, and this extended southwards into the area of both 21 and 28 Battalions.

When it was learnt that the enemy had regained part of the feature, **Kippenberger** arranged that 28 Battalion should send reinforcements, including Sergeant Manahi and any others who knew the layout on the summit. Manahi responded at once and took a party of about fourteen volunteers drawn from B and D Companies, arriving soon after first light.

Lieutenant Hirst and Manahi planned first to soften up the enemy posts and then attack from two directions. Fire from the battalion mortars from below the hill was ineffective as the range was too great, and when a 2-inch mortar was brought to the ledge the reverse was the case, for the range—only 100 yards—was too

¹ **Maj-Gen G. B. Parkinson**, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Christchurch**; born **Wellington**, 5 Nov 1896; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1917–19; CO **4 Fd Regt** Jan 1940–Aug 1941; comd 1 NZ Army Tank Bde and 7 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) 1941–42; 6 Bde Apr 1943–Jun 1944; GOC **2 NZ Div** 3–27 Mar 1944; **CRA 2 NZ Div** Jun–Aug 1944; comd 6 Bde Aug 1944–Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, Jan–Sep 1946; NZ Military Liaison Officer, **London**, 1946–49; Commander, Southern Military District, 1949–51.

² Brigadier Gentry's period of service with the Division, first as staff officer then as brigade commander, was resumed in 1944.

short. Then Captain **Harding**, ¹ who was observing for 5 Field Regiment, opened fire with one gun, taking the risk of hitting the ledge

instead of the summit; after trying conventional ranging, he finally brought the fall of shot round by round up the southern slopes, until from the last few rounds out of about sixty fired, three direct hits were obtained on the mosque, the range being about 8000 yards. It was by now about midday.

Parties from the ledge went forward at once, and found that the enemy had gone, using the same tunnel by which he had arrived. But he had not finished fighting and soon retaliated with heavy mortar fire from the lower village, where he was firmly entrenched. Harding silenced the mortars with artillery fire, and our troops fired at any movement they could see.

The lower village was a difficult target for field artillery to hit, as it was perched on a narrow ridge. During all this time Brigade Headquarters at the foot of the hill had been closely in touch with all activities, and after other devices had been suggested and discarded, **Fairbrother**, the Brigade Major, arranged for a 17-pounder anti-tank gun to snipe at the village, its lower trajectory being better suited to rake the target. After a shaky start—the first round hit the dome of the mosque occupied by our men—the gun worked back on to the village from south to north and caused considerable damage with its solid shot, in addition to the alarm caused by its high velocity.

Meanwhile Sergeant Manahi and some of his men had on their own initiative been stalking enemy posts on the north-east slopes, and had captured several, and other Maoris were moving down direct to the village. The enemy there was much shaken by the 17-pounder fire, and Lieutenant Hirst, who had sensed this, took a party, moved right round the western slopes and entered the village from the north, rounding up the enemy and driving them towards Manahi's group. This was too much for the enemy, who collapsed and surrendered: 323 prisoners were captured, of whom only five were German. The Italians, as before, came from *Trieste Division*.

The troops then on **Takrouna** were relieved in the early evening by a

force drawn from A and B Companies of 21 Battalion, together with the battalion mortars and a platoon of machine guns, all under Captain Roach of B Company. The relief was effected without incident, and the new troops occupied the northern slopes with a small reserve below the mosque. **Takrouna** was now firmly held, and the operation brought a special message of commendation to 5 Brigade from General Horrocks and **General Freyberg**.

¹ **Maj A. F. Harding**, MC; **Wellington**; born **Wanganui**, 27 Nov 1916; accountant; wounded 25 Nov 1941.

With the capture of **Takrouna** ORATION was over.

Casualties were heavy. From 19 to 21 April 3 officers and 43 other ranks were killed, 29 officers and 375 other ranks wounded, and 2 officers and 84 other ranks missing—a total of 536. The proportion of killed to wounded was luckily much lower than usual. The three battalions of 5 Brigade incurred the major number of casualties. The total for 21 Battalion was 169, for 28 Battalion 124, and for 23 Battalion 115, a total of 408. The 28th Battalion lost 12 officers out of 17.

The brigade captured 732 prisoners, of whom 164 were German. Equipment captured on **Takrouna** alone amounted to 12 guns of various types, 122 machine guns, 6 mortars and 4 vehicles.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OPERATIONS ON DJEBEL GARCI

Operations on Djebel Garci

On the left of the Division 5 Indian Brigade had won a toehold on the formidable peak, **Djebel Garci**, after severe fighting that had cost the leading companies 30 per cent casualties. By the next day, the 20th, four of the six infantry battalions of 4 Indian Division were committed on Garci, the first objective for this Division, and there had been approximately 500 casualties. On the night 22–23 April, by which time the main effort was to hold the ground so dearly won, the Indian division was relieved by a brigade from 51 (H) Division, called up from the rear where it had been preparing for **Sicily**.¹ For the Indian division, ‘the fighting on Garci had been the stickiest affair in two and a half years of savage fighting....’²

¹ G. R. Stevens, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 232–45.

² *The Tiger Kills*, p. 189.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

ORATION IN RETROSPECT

ORATION in Retrospect

The ambitious nature of the Eighth Army plan, and the manner in which the divisional plan fitted in, has already been discussed. Now that it has been described how few of even the first objectives were captured, it would be excusable to state that little else could have been expected, and leave it at that. Yet such a course would result in too much emphasis being placed on what was, at the time of preparation, a plan accepted without demur by some of the Allies' most seasoned soldiers, and which only much later, with all the hazards clearly exposed, appears unrealistic. A brief examination of the causes of the failure might discover a course of action which would have allowed Eighth Army to pin down enemy forces without committing itself to an operation which had no chance of success.

But first it is necessary to be clear about the intention—was it to pin down enemy forces, or to gain ground? Was the real intention to turn the whole Axis position with the reduced forces available? Or was the aim more in sympathy with Alexander's original concept, that Eighth Army was to pin down all the enemy forces on its front and, if possible, attract additional enemy troops from the front of First Army? All that Montgomery said at the time, and his further effort, still to be related, to force Eighth Army along the narrow coastal corridor to **Cape Bon, makes his intention clear.**

Had the goal for Eighth Army been a genuine 'holding attack', to use Alexander's expression, it is probable that its attention would have been focussed on a target more readily available with the means at its disposal, and perhaps of more value to the operations of Eighteenth Army Group. Almost invariably, vital ground is high ground. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that had Eighth Army limited its ultimate objective, and combined all of its resources for the possession

of but one of the dominating peaks between **Zaghouan** and the coast, more distress would have been caused to the enemy at a lower cost.

The divisional battle complemented the army battle, and although the ultimate possession of **Takrouna** will always remain an outstanding military feat, **Takrouna**, in the plan, was a company objective. Froukr remained in enemy hands virtually until the final capitulation. There would be little profit in a close analysis of the cause of this debacle, for the Division shared in the general failure imposed by attempting to do too much with too little. But it is difficult to understand why it was thought that the southern slopes of **Takrouna** could be neglected, that an assault through the valley between Bir and **Takrouna** could succeed without gaining control of these peaks, and why Cherachir, a large and well defended feature, was overlooked in the planning. As Messe had hoped, ¹ the attack was directed to the re-entrants, where it spent itself.

As in the Army and the Corps, there was a strain of optimism running through the Division—a participant has called it ‘Axis HQ fever’—combined with a failure to realise the changed tactics necessary for the change in terrain. **Kippenberger** has since said, ‘When we lined up at **Enfidaville** I don't think we adjusted our thinking to the closer country there.’ ²

Whatever the reason—natural optimism, failure to perceive the changes necessary, or more practically a poor assessment of information—there was a sad miscalculation of the resistance to be

¹ See p. 310.

² Letter to the author.

expected, too great a miscalculation to be overcome by any efforts made by units. This was the basic error.

Only a month before, at Tebaga on 26 March, there had been an

example of first-class planning, careful timing, co-ordination between ground and air and between arms, and excellent preparation of every kind, all carried out in a matter of forty-eight hours or so. Allowing for the normal frictions to be expected in any action, and granting that the units were highly trained, all that the units had to do was carry out the plan given them. But here at **Takrouna the plan collapsed almost at once, and units were forced to do the best they could with their own unaided efforts.**

Their ‘best’ was of course magnificent—leadership by commanding officers carried on down through the echelons of command as far as the most junior NCOs, and often enough as far as the rank and file: readiness to step forward and take responsibility when those above were put out of action: tackling each fresh problem as it arose with the resources at hand: trying to get information back so that those behind could play their part: and in every way determination to get forward somehow.

Not for the first nor the last time in the long history of war, such victories as were achieved came from the efforts of subordinate commanders and from the initiative and determination of platoons, sections, and individual men. It was that highest glory, a ‘Soldiers’ Battle’.

****Takrouna** itself remains a supreme example of courage and determination. The way in which a few men in daylight found their way to the top of an ‘unstoppable’ hill through a tangle of enemy posts, capturing prisoners many times their own number, reads like an imaginative incident in a romantic novel. And this initial action was followed by a period of bravery and of skill in minor tactics shown by parties from two battalions, although the main honour rests with the Maoris. General Horrocks has since said that it was the most gallant feat of arms he witnessed in the course of the war. ¹ ‘In the Division as a whole the men who had survived the struggle were regarded with something akin to awe. For two whole days and nights **Takrouna** had been hidden by the smoke and dust of the bloody battle, and strange**

stories of passages and secret entrances had circulated amongst the troops. Already, **Takrouna** and the battle there had become legend.’²

¹ Article in the *Sunday Times*, London, 3 Nov 1957.

² I. McL. Wards, *Takrouna*, War History Branch Episodes and Studies series.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 15 – THE END IN NORTH AFRICA

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BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

[SECTION]

THE three weeks following the capture of **Takrouna** were some of the most irritating and frustrating ever to befall 2 NZ Division. There was a consciousness that the campaign could not be brought to an end on the front of Eighth Army, and that further efforts to effect this would be pointless. The final disappointment was to miss participating in the spectacular advance farther north, by remaining on the holding front while others had the immense exhilaration arising from a triumphant and speedy victory.

After **ORATION**, there was briefly some doubt in the minds of both the Army and Corps Commanders how best to implement the Army Group plan, for the result of attacking into the hills head-on had not been encouraging. Late on 21 April in a telephone conversation with **General Freyberg**, General Horrocks said that the Army Commander thought the best thing to do would be to advance astride the coast road for four or five thousand yards, and then swing westwards into the hills—still of course with the intention of getting to **Bou Ficha** and **Hammamet**. But this policy was not adopted. There was, however, no intention of persisting with **ORATION**, and the basic policy for the immediate future finally became that of enlarging the entrance into the coastal strip north of **Enfidaville**, then to enlarge this encroachment farther north by pushing to the west in a series of piecemeal operations. Small wonder, however, that no one liked this scheme, for the configuration of the ground was such that Eighth Army, with diminishing forces, would be hard put to it not to finish up in a complete bottleneck, where it would be no better placed to act as anvil to First Army's blows than at **Enfidaville**. There was so far little sign that the Eighth Army had drawn enemy troops from the western face, indeed quite the reverse, for on 24 April the armour of **15 Panzer Division** was identified in the north.

General Montgomery was still concerned with the planning for **Sicily**. When it was clear that ORATION had failed, he left Eighth Army to extend its positions at **Enfidaville** while he visited **Cairo**, where, since 13 April, he had been represented at the planning conferences by his Chief of Staff, de Guingand. Montgomery was away between 23 and 26 April ¹ and the responsibility for the activities and planning within Eighth Army for this period was carried by General Horrocks. Headquarters **30 Corps** was being rested prior to the **Sicily** campaign, and General Leese was in Egypt.

¹ De Guingand, *Operation Victory*, p. 280.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION AFTER TAKROUNA

2 NZ Division after Takrouna

When, on 21 April, **General Freyberg** heard **Horrocks's** account of the **Army Commander's** intentions, he said that his own appreciation had been the same that morning, but he now wondered if it would not be better to thrust north-west from **Takrouna**. **Fifth Infantry Brigade** would try to complete its objective within the next twenty-four hours, and after that it would depend on where the best gun positions could be found. However, during the night of 21–22 April, **25 Battalion** made a special reconnaissance of those parts of **Cherachir** not yet occupied, with the idea of later making a silent attack by one company to secure the whole feature. But the information brought back led **Lieutenant-Colonel Morten** to think that the attack could not succeed, and after discussion with **Brigadier Kippenberger** it was cancelled. After this no attempt to capture **Cherachir**, far less **Froukr**, was made by **2 NZ Division**.

During the night engineers from **7 Field Company** cleared mines in **28 Battalion** area, and also on the road from **Takrouna** village to the **Zaghuan** road, so enabling supporting arms to be sent up to **Captain Roach** on **Takrouna**.

On 22 April there was little activity on the part of **2 NZ Division**, except for some artillery fire on known enemy positions. Very little observed shooting was done owing to poor visibility, which not even the **Air OP** could overcome. The main air offensive was crippled this day by bad weather. Enemy artillery and mortars were very active, the bulk of the fire being against **Cherachir** and **Takrouna**. The **25th Battalion** was severely shelled from time to time during the day, and had five killed and nine wounded, and fire on **Takrouna** was continuous. Altogether the shelling on **5 Brigade's** front was the heaviest yet experienced.

On this day **8 Armoured Brigade** was withdrawn for rest and maintenance. In the morning the GOC conferred with the commanders of 5 and 6 Brigades, and decided that 6 Brigade should take over the whole divisional front on the following night, but in the evening this move was cancelled, and 5 Brigade stayed in the line for another twenty-four hours, at the end of which time it was in any case to be relieved by a brigade of 51 (H) Division. This was Brigadier Parkinson's first day in command of 6 Infantry Brigade. The **28th (Maori) Battalion** also had a new commander, for Major Keiha ¹ arrived from the LOB camp near **Tripoli** and took over.

During the night of 22–23 April 6 Infantry Brigade sent out patrols as preliminaries to a proposed operation to capture the Srafi feature, north of **Djebel el Hamaid**. Some reorganisation took place within 5 Infantry Brigade where 25 Battalion relieved 21 Battalion on **Takrouna**, and at the same time bowed to the inevitable, gave up the position on Cherachir, and withdrew to the northern slopes of **Djebel Bir** and **Takrouna**. The shelling on Cherachir had been too intense, **Kippenberger** considered, to be suffered a second day to no good purpose.

The **10 Corps** programme of reliefs started this night with the relief of 4 Indian Division by 51 (Highland) Division. Next day, 23 April, representatives from 152 Brigade of 51 (H) Division arrived to prepare for the relief of 5 Infantry Brigade, which was carried out after dark. The **25th Battalion** suffered casualties from mines and booby traps still in the area, but 21 and 28 Battalions were relieved without loss, and the whole changeover was complete by 3 a.m., 24 April. The **25th Battalion** then reverted to 6 Infantry Brigade, while 5 Brigade assembled in a rest area about seven miles south of **Enfidaville**. It had experienced one of its most difficult assignments, had been only partly successful, but had produced in the capture of **Takrouna** a feat which had caught the attention of the whole army.

There had also been a change on the east flank of 2 NZ Division, where 56 (**London**) Division took over from 50 (Northumbrian) Division.

The 201st Guards Brigade of 50 (N) Division remained in the line, however, passing to the command of the London Division. This last formation had come all the way from **Iraq** direct into action, travelling 3223 miles in 30 days, probably a record in approach marches. The division was now seeing operational service for the first time.

After the relief of 5 Brigade the frontage of 2 NZ Division was that of 6 Brigade only, with its forward defences unchanged, running in a semicircle from Point 63 (east of **Hamaid en Nakrla**) to the **Zaghouan** road north-east of **Djebel Bir**.

In the evening of 22 April **General Freyberg** had agreed to push forward the 6 Brigade line, first for 2000 yards on the night 23–24 April, and then for an unspecified distance on the night 24–25

¹ **Lt-Col K. A. Keiha**, MC; **Lower Hutt**; born **Gisborne**, 24 Jan 1900; law clerk and interpreter; CO 28 Bn Apr–Sep 1943.

April, both advances to be without armoured or artillery support in the hope that such ‘peaceful penetrations’ would be successful. This was not considered too venturesome, for a marked enemy map captured on **Takrouna** had shown that the enemy's main line was still some distance to the north. ¹ The GOC said beforehand that it was not likely that much opposition would be met on the first advance, but that the second might be a greater problem. He was right.

These advances were in fact the first measures in the new policy of widening the ‘throat’ of the coastal strip, and were to be followed by similar attacks. The object was to obtain a position from which to attack the main enemy line in the **Kef Ateya – Sidi Cherif** area.

The objectives given to battalions for the first night's advance were, for 26 Battalion, **Djebel dar Djaje**, and for 24 Battalion, **Djebel el Hamaid**. Both battalions were to dig in deeply on their objectives, and 24 Battalion was to be sited with a view to repelling attacks from the north-

west. The axis of advance was now running almost parallel to the enemy's front, and 24 Battalion was in effect open to being 'raked' from its left flank. Each battalion was to have an additional platoon of machine guns. Two squadrons of tanks from Staffs Yeomanry were to take up positions about a mile south-east of the new line ready in case of an immediate enemy counter-attack. The 201st Guards Brigade would also be advancing on the right.

At 10 p.m. the two battalions advanced, each with two companies only, and occupied their objectives without opposition. Supporting arms were in position before 1 a.m. on 24 April. The **24th Battalion** exploited forwards to Point 107, and had a short exchange of fire with an enemy patrol during which one man was wounded, the only casualty in either unit. Junction with 201 Guards Brigade was made by 26 Battalion just to the east of Djebel Djaje, and the tanks were in their appointed position.

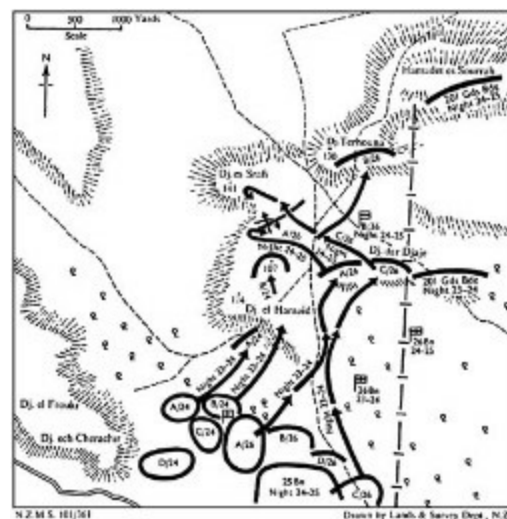
Little movement was seen after daylight, but enemy shelling and mortaring were severe, for good use was made of **Djebel el Froukr** for observation purposes, as it overlooked the 6 Brigade salient. The feature was first 'stonked' several times, but the summit was razor-edged and a difficult target. At 2.15 p.m. the CRA fired a concentration from fourteen regiments, which brought heavy retaliation directed on **Takrouna**. Lieutenant-General Horrocks observed this concentration from a vantage point on **Takrouna**, which he was visiting, and was pinned to the ground by the enemy's shellfire.

¹ See p. 310.

During the day Notts Yeomanry moved out north-east of **Enfidaville** in support of 201 Guards Brigade, and in the course of the operation its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J. D. Player, who had done much in the support of 5 Brigade, was killed.

At 9.30 a.m. a conference was held at Headquarters 2 NZ Division,

attended also by the GOC 56 (L) Division and his brigadiers. This decided that the second advance by 201 Guards Brigade and 6 Brigade should again be silent, but the artillery was to be ready to support the advance with concentrations and to bring down defensive fire later. The objectives for 6 Brigade were first **Djebel Terhouna**, including a spur running to the north, and then **Djebel es Srafi**, both to be taken by 26 Battalion, which alone was to advance. On the right 201 Guards Brigade would conform. The **25th Battalion** was to move up to the rear of 26 Battalion to strengthen the defence facing north-west, for by the end of the operation the brigade line would run nearly north and south. The **24th Battalion** would not move, but the 'hinge' of the line just east of **Djebel Bir** was strengthened by several anti-tank guns, including two 17-pounders.



DJEBEL TERHOUNA AND DJEBEL ES SRAFI, NIGHT ATTACKS ON 23 AND 24 APRIL

DJEBEL TERHOUNA AND DJEBEL ES SRAFI, NIGHT ATTACKS ON 23 AND 24 APRIL

A final decision about artillery support was to be made at 6 p.m., but the divisional intelligence summary issued at that hour caused some concern as it stated that the enemy was in occupation of part of the objective, in particular the west end of **Djebel es Srafi**. There was further consultation between brigade and divisional headquarters, and a decision was not reached until 9 p.m. This was to adhere to the silent attack, as the case was held to be not proven, but events proved that the summary was substantially correct.

At 10 p.m. 26 Battalion, with B Company (Major L. G. **Smith**¹) on the right, and A Company (Captain F. M. Ollivier) on the left, moved off to their objectives, Terhouna and Srafi respectively. B Company almost reached Terhouna but then met shell and mortar fire, and two platoons were held up. The company commander called for an artillery concentration at 3 a.m., and this was fired fifteen minutes later; but the enemy's fire intensified, and Major Smith was mortally wounded. The CSM, Warrant Officer **Lock**,² sited the two platoons, helped in the evacuation of the wounded, and then guided up the supporting arms, which were all in position on Terhouna before dawn. The enemy made no attempt to counterattack, but kept the feature under heavy fire.

A Company met strong opposition on Srafi. During its approach heavy fire came from the feature itself, and as the ground was broken and the going difficult little progress was made, and the company went to ground on the southern slopes. Captain Ollivier went back to report to Lieutenant-Colonel Fountaine, who decided that another attempt must be made, and arranged for C Company (Captain J. J. D. Sinclair) to assist. C Company was directed to the east end of Srafi and A to the west. Arrangements were made for the artillery to fire concentrations on **Point 141**, a feature just beyond Srafi, and for the battalion mortars joined by others from 24 Battalion to bombard Srafi and then **Point 141**.

At 3.30 a.m. the mortars fired from behind **Djebel el Hamaid**, and as soon as they had switched to **Point 141** C Company advanced from south-east of Srafi. The fighting was severe, as the enemy troops—all Italian from *Young Fascist Division*—were well dug-in and well armed, and their pits had to be cleared out by hand grenades and bayonets. While the rest of the company was fighting

¹ Maj L. G. Smith, m.i.d.; born **Mataura**, 18 Aug 1911; accountant; died of wounds 25 Apr 1943.

² Capt A. R. G. Lock, DCM, MM, m.i.d.; **Rotorua**; born **Masterton**, 4 Jan 1914; carpenter; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

on Srafi, 13 Platoon (Lieutenant **Thomas**¹) went on to attack **Point 141** and even induced the enemy to surrender, but by that time was reduced to the OC and three other ranks. The prisoners managed to regain their positions, and the opposition was too strong for the small party, which had to withdraw to Srafi, and even here the company had in the end to be content with digging in on the southern slopes. It was now only 27 strong.

A Company's experience on the western end of Srafi was much the same, and the fighting soon became a series of section and individual actions among a maze of occupied trenches. Bit by bit the company, now only between twenty-five and thirty strong, became lodged on the western end and was in touch with C Company, but as it had not been possible to clear **Point 141**, it had to keep below the crest.

At daylight on 25 April (Anzac Day) an enemy attempt to clear Srafi was defeated, but he continued to hold weapon pits on the highest point, and our companies could not advance farther. There was persistent sniping, mortaring and shelling, and movement from the trenches was impossible. But no further attack developed and the companies retained their somewhat uneasy gains.

B Company on Terhouna was likewise pinned to its trenches during daylight, but made contact between all three platoons and was reasonably secure. It was in touch with neither 201 Guards Brigade on Hamadet es Sourrah nor with C Company on Srafi, although the gaps were covered by fire.

Headquarters 6 Brigade had made arrangements for a further attack on Srafi should 26 Battalion not succeed, and for this purpose moved A Company of 25 Battalion (now on **Hamaid en Nakrla**) to a point near Headquarters 26 Battalion behind **Djebel dar Djaje**, intending that it should be used as part of a force for which 3 Royal Tanks was to provide armour. When at 5.40 a.m. it was reported that Srafi had been captured, this plan was cancelled, but when a little later 26 Battalion reported

that its companies had reached only the southern slopes, 3 Royal Tanks was instructed to move up to occupy the feature. Unfortunately the plan to incorporate infantry was not revived. Tanks from B Squadron, 3 Royal Tanks, swept over the top of Srafi at 9 a.m. and destroyed some guns, then withdrew to the foot of the hill owing to shelling. Again at 1 p.m. they moved over the top, this time as far as **Point 141**, reporting that they thought infantry could get there if the tanks removed themselves to avoid drawing fire. But while part of C Company succeeded in clearing the eastern end of Srafi and

¹ **Lt G. J. Thomas**, MC; **Nelson**; born NZ 17 Mar 1917; tobacco grower; twice wounded.

consolidating there, no infantry was available to follow up the tank attack, and the tanks promptly called for infantry support. However, the companies on Srafi were too weak to do any more, and the tank attack remained a rather disjointed operation. Enemy infantry, which seems to have remained in concealment during the armoured sweeps, was not permanently dislodged. At 2.15 p.m. Fountaine reported that he could hold Srafi but could not both capture and hold **Point 141**.

Evacuation of the wounded from Srafi was a continuing problem. Walking wounded as usual made their own way back, but one of the tragic hazards of war occurred when some of these, still with their arms, appeared from the enemy side of Point 114, held by 24 Battalion. They were fired on, and one was killed and two wounded again before their identity was established. The casualties in 26 Battalion up to the end of 25 April were six killed and twenty-seven wounded, with six missing.

For 24 Battalion the day was one of constant shelling and restricted movement. At one stage, seeing enemy troops on Srafi, the OC B Company, Major Andrews, took forward two carriers with heavy machine guns and opened fire from about 1400 yards. The enemy troops scattered, but 88-millimetre guns soon opened up on the carriers, which were obviously under direct observation, and they had to withdraw.

On **Djebel Terhouna** and **Djebel es Srafi** enemy fire died down towards evening, and after dusk meals were taken up to the forward companies. B Company extended its line to the east and made junction with 201 Guards Brigade, and our artillery fired three heavy concentrations on **Point 141** during the night to discourage any idea the enemy might have of counter-attacking. The situation, however, had steadied down into uneasy stalemate.

The opposing enemy comprised *Young Fascists* interspersed with men from *90 Light*. There was also a report of tanks some distance back but it was a doubtful one. It is unlikely that there were any German tanks hereabouts at this time, as *15 Panzer Division* was already away in the north.

That the enemy had accepted the position was shown on 26 April, when his shelling greatly decreased and our troops had a comparatively quiet day. It was their last action for a while, as 25 and 26 Battalions were relieved that night by 169 Infantry Brigade of 56 (L) Division, and 24 Battalion by 152 Infantry Brigade of 51 (H) Division, the boundaries between these two divisions being adjusted accordingly. Despite a little harassing fire the relief was complete by 2.30 a.m. on 27 April, without incident.

The **4th Indian Division** was withdrawn from the line at much the same time, and Eighth Army's front was held by 56 (L) Division on the right from the coast to **Djebel dar Djaje**: 51 (H) Division in the centre as far as the western side of **Djebel Garci**: and 7 Armoured Division on the west flank, soon to be replaced by 4 Light Armoured Brigade and 'L' Force. The French **19 Corps**, one division of which was under Eighth Army, was on the left.

The New Zealand Division, including **8 Armoured Brigade**, but less the artillery and engineers, concentrated in a rest area a few miles west and north-west of **Sidi bou Ali**. The duties of the artillery and engineers will be described later.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE GENERAL SITUATION UP TO 26 APRIL

The General Situation up to 26 April

It will be remembered that the attack by First Army and 2 US Corps was to commence on 22 April. The enemy knew or deduced enough of the Allied intentions to stage one last spoiling attack, and 'beat First Army to the draw' by attacking near **Medjez el Bab** on the night 20–21 April—the evening that ORATION started. But while there was some slight dislocation, the results of the enemy attack were not great, and the First Army offensive was only slightly delayed.

The Allied attack was in three thrusts—9 British Corps (1 Armoured, 6 Armoured and 46 Infantry Divisions) round the **Sebkret el Kourzia** salt marshes directed on **Tunis**: 5 British Corps (1, 4, and 78 Infantry Divisions) astride the Medjerda River east of Medjez: and 2 US Corps (1 and 9 US Divisions) between **Beja** and **Sedjenane** directed on **Mateur**.

All three thrusts were strongly opposed. South of the Medjerda River 9 and 5 Corps were ultimately opposed by the three panzer divisions—10, 15 and 21—in addition to German infantry.

In four days' severe fighting, 9 Corps, employing its three divisions, had advanced to an area north-east of the marshes, but here the enemy stabilised his front for the time being. Fifth Corps attacked with 1 and 4 British Divisions south of the Medjerda and 78 Division to the north. On the south they reached a point just short of **Djebel bou Aoukaz**, and on the north bank cleared **Djebel Ahmera**, which as 'Longstop Hill' had been a thorn in the flesh since the early days of the campaign.¹ But here again the enemy managed to establish a defensive line, and still showed good fighting spirit. The United States Corps had heavy fighting in mountainous country, and had in the end also to employ 34 and 1 US Armoured Divisions, but was gradually working its way towards **Mateur**.

Thus none of the thrusts effected a breakthrough, but the enemy was becoming badly stretched, and it was probable that another heavy blow would be decisive. A pause was necessary, however, and on 26 April First Army was ordered to check the offensive. Eighteenth Army Group then began the preparation of its final plan, which was to concentrate for a continued offensive. This would include moving 1 and 6 Armoured Divisions from 9 Corps to 5 Corps in the Medjerda valley, where the main effort would be made. Eighth Army would continue its pressure towards Hammamet, to prevent any more forces moving across to oppose First Army. By this time, however, the last available enemy formation (*15 Panzer Division*) had gone, and the most that could now be achieved would be to keep the enemy occupied all along the front and never relax the strain on his Higher Command. The enemy had the advantage of working on short interior lines of communication and did, in fact, early in May, move a battalion from *90 Light Division* to *5 Panzer Army*.

¹ See p. 74.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

EIGHTH ARMY PLANS

Eighth Army Plans

The push towards **Hammamet** was now to be effected in a series of operations, of which the readjustment of the Army line completed on 26–27 April was a preliminary. These operations never got beyond the early stages, and as 2 NZ Division prepared no orders and took no part in those activities which did take place, it is unnecessary to give full details, but the stages were to be as follows:

Night 26–27 April: 2 NZ Division to be relieved by 56 (L) and 51 (H) Divisions.

Night 28–29 April: 56 (L) Division to complete the capture of **Point 130 (on Terhouana) and to capture **Point 141**. About this time 4 Indian Division was to move north of **Enfidaville**.**

Night 29–30 April: 56 (L) Division on the right and 4 Indian Division on the left to capture a line running from the coast to Djebel et Tebaga (Operation CHOLERA).¹

Night 30 April–1 May: 56 (L) Division to relieve 4 Indian Division and take over the whole operational front; 7 Armoured and 2 NZ Divisions to concentrate for the final phase.

Night 1–2 May: 4 Indian Division to capture Djebel Chabet el Akam; 2 NZ Division to break through between this point and **Sebkra Sidi Kralifa; 7 Armoured Division to pass through the gap and exploit towards **Hammamet**. Very heavy air support was to be available.**

¹ See map on p. 294.

This culminating operation was known as ACCOMPLISH, which name was sometimes applied to the whole group of operations.

The plans for this series of operations had been in the process of formulation since it became clear that ORATION would not succeed. Unlike ORATION, however, they did not have the support of the generals who were to carry them out. General Horrocks has since written, ‘I always look back on the time when we were planning this operation as probably the most difficult period of the war. I disliked the battle and realised that casualties would be high. Generals Freiburg [sic] and Tewker [sic] also hated it, and I have always felt that it was extremely public-spirited of the former to undertake the main role in this operation. I know that he was under fire as regards New Zealand casualties, ¹ and these might have been considerable. When Field Marshal Montgomery returned from Cairo (where he had been examining the plan for the invasion of Sicily) I pointed out the difficulties of the forthcoming battle. I said “we will break through but I doubt whether at the end there will be very much left of the 8th Army”.’ ²

Horrocks also felt certain that Montgomery did not like the operation. Yet Montgomery insisted that ‘the big issues are so vital that we have got to force this through here.’ ³ But Horrocks believed that the operation was ‘contingent on success in the North’, ⁴ in which case a success by First Army would render redundant a costly victory by Eighth Army. Moreover, when the operation failed, Alexander was able to write in his despatch that this made no difference to the plans that he was making for the final offensive, and, indeed, it was 28 April, the eve of the operation, when Montgomery informed Alexander that it was his intention ‘to establish three divisions and later four divisions in area Hammamet– Bou Ficha–Marie du Zit and then to operate as situation demands.’ ⁵ Thus it seems inescapable to conclude that Montgomery was still anxious to employ Eighth Army in a role which resources and terrain combined to render impracticable, and which was not in itself essential to the Army Group plan.

That Montgomery was determined that Eighth Army should fight its way through the bottleneck north of **Enfidaville**, in spite of the objections of his generals, and at the same time give Horrocks the impression that he was not happy about the proposed operation,

¹ **Freyberg** estimated that success would cost the Division 400 casualties, failure 1000.

² Comments by **Lt-Gen Sir Brian Horrocks** on **War History Branch** narrative on Tunisian campaign, 14 Feb 1951. De Guingand (*Operation Victory*, p. 280) suggests that Montgomery was too unwell on 27 April, after his return from **Cairo**, to attend a **Sicily** planning conference in **Algiers**.

³ GOC's Diary, 26 April.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ UK Narrative, 28 April.

may well reflect lack of confidence that First Army would be able to achieve decisive results in time to maintain the timetable for the invasion of **Sicily**. Or it may indicate the continued existence of the earlier divergence in the tactical appreciations of Alexander and Montgomery. Yet this ignores the fact that Alexander included in his Army Group directive the instruction that Eighth Army should advance to **Tunis** via **Hammamet**, either on his own or on Montgomery's initiative. A further complication is that Horrocks has recorded the statement that after ORATION Montgomery considered that the best policy would be for Eighth Army to further reinforce First Army, but that this was impossible for administrative reasons. ¹ In this maze of contradictions the historian might be pardoned if he overlooked the more simple possibility that, although it was probable that a degree of misunderstanding existed between Alexander and Montgomery, the

Eighth Army, personified by its commander, did not, after its long and victorious march from [Alamein](#), have any intention of stopping until victory was in its grasp.

For [Freyberg](#) this difficult planning period was complicated by his dual responsibilities: to the Army for the operation and to the [New Zealand Government](#) for the wise use of the Division. When his objections were met by the repeated assurance that the operation was vital to the Army Group plan, he finally, on 27 April, agreed. As it is not now possible to regard the operation in this light, it is a case for reflection whether the plight of a general officer with [Freyberg's](#) high sense of duty, and dual responsibility, could have been avoided.

However, during the week of planning [Freyberg](#) carefully explored the tactical implications of the task ahead, and as early as 22 April exhorted his senior officers not to get depressed. He told them the story of the Turk who accepted a large sum of money from the [Sultan](#) as a fee for teaching a donkey to talk. The Grand Vizier said to him, 'You are a rash young man. You know what will happen to you if you fail?' The young man replied: 'It will take three years, and a lot may happen in that time. The [Sultan](#) may be dead: I may be dead: or the donkey may be dead!' Although it must have seemed to [Freyberg](#) during the period between the 22nd, when he related it, and the 27th, when he finally gave his decision, that the donkey was not going to die, the wisdom of this fable was soon to be proved.

On the night 28–29 April 56 (L) Division duly captured Points 130 and 141, but the enemy recaptured [Point 141](#) in the morning of the 29th. In the ensuing alarm, 2 NZ Divisional Artillery, which

¹ Comments on NZ narrative.

had deployed north of [Enfidaville](#), found it advisable to post all available light machine guns and riflemen round the gun positions, in order to deal with any enemy penetration. Although none occurred, the

stand-down was not given for twenty-four hours. At 4.45 p.m. on 29 April, 2 NZ Division was advised by 10 Corps that the operation set down for the coming night would not take place, and at 6 p.m. that all future operations had been postponed. Later in the evening Horrocks phoned Freyberg to say that all plans were to be recast, and that future moves would be known by midday on 30 April.

It transpired that after the check to 56 (L) Division Montgomery had advised Alexander that the division had little fighting value at the moment,¹ and that in any case he was not at all happy about the 'present plan for finishing off this business'. He asked if Alexander could come and see him on 30 April.

¹ It must be mentioned again that this operation was the first in which the units of 56 Division were engaged.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHANGE OF PLAN

Change of Plan

On 29 April Eighteenth Army Group had in fact issued another directive to First Army for the continuation of the offensive, which was to be pursued with the formations already under command, but this was held back when Montgomery's message was received, and after the discussion on 30 April it was cancelled.

At this meeting Montgomery repeated that he could now see no good purpose in going on with his offensive up the coast, and the whole tactical position was discussed. The first decision was that Eighth Army was to adopt a purely holding role. The next, the earlier 'administrative difficulties' evidently overcome, was that the best formations that could be spared from Eighth Army were to be moved across at once to First Army. It is clear that while General Alexander had been quite prepared to plan the First Army attack with its existing strength, he was more than willing to accept the transfer of troops now that Montgomery was willing to give them up. He was in any case becoming anxious about further delays, as in the background was the invasion of Sicily, which would take some time to prepare.

The speed with which the new plan was made is indicated by the fact that, although Alexander did not arrive at Headquarters Eighth Army until 7.30 a.m., the orders for 4 Indian Division and other formations to move were sent out at 9 a.m., only an hour and a half later.

The prospects for First Army now changed from a continuation of a slogging match to the delivery of a smashing blow. The new plan put overwhelming strength at the decisive point, and made full use of the power of the Allied forces. Perhaps the decision to transfer troops was a little belated.

Montgomery selected 7 Armoured Division, 4 Indian Division, and 201 Guards Brigade for transfer and there was a very good reason for the choice of these formations. They were the nucleus of the original **Western Desert Force** of 1940, from which Eighth Army had evolved. (The 201st Guards Brigade was at that time numbered 22.) The 7th Armoured Division and 4 Indian Division had taken part in the first offensive at **Sidi Barrani** in December 1940, and it was fitting that they should take part in the final victory. To quote from General Alexander's despatch:

The **Enfidaville** line thus marked the culmination of Eighth Army's great advance across **Africa**....In six months they had advanced eighteen hundred miles and fought numerous battles in which they were always successful. This would be an astonishing rate of progress even in a civilised country with all the modern facilities of transport—the equivalent of an advance from **London** to two hundred miles east of **Moscow**—but in a desert it was even more remarkable.

In the First Army the commander of **9 Corps** had been accidentally wounded, and Lieutenant-General Horrocks was sent from **10 Corps** to take over **9 Corps**, which was to be the spearhead of the final attack. **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** was then appointed to take temporary command of **10 Corps**.

The task of Eighth Army now became a holding one on the existing line and to maintain pressure by limited attacks with the forces available. These were now 2 NZ, 51 (H), 56 (L), and 1 Free French Divisions, and 4 Light Armoured and 8 Armoured Brigades. Montgomery decided to hold the line with 56 (L) and 1 Free French Divisions, to keep 51 (H) in reserve where it could begin training for **Sicily**, and to move 2 NZ Division and **8 Armoured Brigade** to the western flank for an operation against **Saouaf**—an operation which was designed to assist the French formations, due to attack on 3 May. All these formations, except 51 (H) Division in Army Reserve, formed part of **10 Corps**.

Lieutenant-General Freyberg took over the Corps at 4 p.m. on 30 April, and at the same time **Brigadier Kippenberger** took command of 2 NZ Division, **Lieutenant-Colonel R. W. Harding** took over 5 Infantry Brigade and **Major M. C. Fairbrother** went to command 21 Battalion.

During these last few days the **Hon. F. Jones**, New Zealand Minister of Defence, visited the Division. He arrived at Headquarters on 27 April and remained until 1 May, visiting many of the units not in the line. He also had discussions with **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** regarding the General's future, and on proposals for a furlough scheme for long-service personnel.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION FROM 27 APRIL TO 3 MAY

2 NZ Division from 27 April to 3 May

It has already been recorded that 2 NZ Divisional Artillery and Engineers remained in the forward area when the infantry was withdrawn on 26 April, for it was intended that they should support the attack on 29–30 April and subsequently. Relief was given to one-third of a regiment at a time, the guns remaining in position but the men going back for a rest. On the night 27–28 April, after due reconnaissance and survey work, all three New Zealand regiments and 111 Field Regiment, RA, moved through **Enfidaville** and, despite the brief time before daylight and what the CRA called the ‘tightness’ of the deployment, were in position north of the town by first light on the 28th.

There was little activity on 28 and 29 April, and as the attack set down for the night 29–30 April did not eventuate, they were mostly left to their own devices for a few days. In fact the CRA has since said, ‘I was always puzzled whose orders we were under during this stage. I don't remember getting any orders from anybody, so mostly made up our own.’

1

The CRA conducted one or two exercises on barrages on 1 May. Unfortunately the second exercise created some ‘alarm and despondency’ in 56 (**London**) Division, as the enemy reacted very quickly with defensive fire, which covered an advanced observation post occupied at the time by the GOC 56 Division and some of his staff, who were spectators of Weir's target.

After dark on 1 May, 4 and 5 NZ Regiments and 111 Regiment, RA, were withdrawn for rest, but 6 Field Regiment remained in position under command of 56 (L) Division, this role lasting until 10 May.

Between 25 and 29 April the **Divisional Engineers** worked steadily on

the construction of tracks from the south of **Wadi el Boul** to the **Zaghuan** road west of **Enfidaville**, to make easier the approach marches of the troops destined for ACCOMPLISH, Like so much work at this time, it was in the end to no purpose.

Meanwhile the infantry brigades were having a well-earned rest, including visits to the beach. On 3 May Brigadier Harding moved 5 Brigade farther back to a new area south-west of **Sidi bou Ali**. Units had only just arrived there when orders came that 5 Brigade was to prepare for an operational role in the **Djebibina** area, where the Division would be moving on 4 May.

¹ Comments made to **War History Branch**.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE LAST PLAN

The Last Plan

The move of 2 NZ Division to the left flank of 10 Corps was a minor one in the last stage of the offensive in Tunisia. By 3 May Eighteenth Army Group's final plan was ready, and the directive reads:

INTENTION

1. The Allied Forces of 18 Army Group will take the offensive to destroy or capture the enemy forces remaining in Tunisia.

METHOD

2. First Army will attack and capture Tunis. Eighth Army and 2 US Corps will co-operate by exercising the maximum pressure in order to prevent the enemy transferring troops to oppose the attack of First Army.
3. [Details of grouping]
4. After the capture of Tunis, First Army will, in order of priority:
 -
 - (Exploit rapidly eastwards and south-east from the Tunis area
 - a) to prevent the enemy establishing himself in the Cap Bon Peninsula. Eighth Army will co-operate in this phase by pressing forward to the Hammamet area from the south.
 - (Co-operate with 2 US Corps by an advance from the south to
 - b) capture Bizerta.

General Alexander's fresh plan was to strike an overwhelming blow along the direct road from Medjez el Bab to Tunis on 6 May. This would be done by 9 Corps under Lieutenant-General Horrocks, with four divisions under command. Two divisions, 4 British and 4 Indian, on a front of only 3000 yards, were to breach the enemy defences, and 6 and 7 Armoured Divisions were to break out through the gap, directed on Tunis. The 1st Armoured Division was held in First Army reserve to reinforce this attack if required.

The plan for **9 Corps** was much influenced by that for **SUPERCHARGE** on 26 March, in that it was to be on a narrow front preceded by an all-out air blitz. Horrocks put into good effect the experience gained from the earlier battle.

After the capture of **Tunis**, **7 Armoured Division** was to turn northwards towards **Bizerta**, and **6 Armoured Division** was to advance east and south across the base of the **Cape Bon** peninsula towards **Hammamet**, driving the enemy up against Eighth Army and preventing a last stand in the tip of the peninsula. The **Royal Navy** was waiting gleefully to deal with any forces attempting to escape by sea.

Fifth British Corps was to pave the way on 5 May by capturing **Djebel bou Aoukaz**, south of the Medjerda, to remove the threat to the left flank of **9 Corps**. Second US Corps had been maintaining pressure throughout, and was to continue towards **Bizerta** and form the northern jaw of the pincers of which **7 Armoured Division** would form the southern.

Army Group Headquarters stressed that Eighth Army was to do all it could to prevent the transfer of enemy troops from the south to the west face, and even before the issue of his directive Alexander asked Montgomery for an outline of local operations and deceptions that could reasonably be carried out. He was anxious that among these there should be some action to hearten **19 French Corps**, whose task it was to attack **Djebel Zaghouan** on 3 May and so open the **Pont du Fahs** defile. Montgomery replied on 1 May that he would carry out local operations south of **Saouaf** on the early morning of 4 May, and would increase the pressure on 5 and 6 May. He would begin at once a system of artillery concentrations on known enemy areas and sensitive points, together with active patrolling.

The task of assisting the French became that of **2 NZ Division**, which was to mount local attacks south of **Saouaf** to support the French flank, prevent the enemy from reinforcing his front opposite the French, and stand in readiness to advance should **19 French Corps** be successful.

The possibility of this role had been known since 1 May, and the commander of **10 Corps (Lieutenant-General Freyberg)** had examined the area with the commander of **4 Light Armoured Brigade**, who was responsible for the sector. For a brief time it was intended to use **8 Armoured Brigade** for exploitation, but the final plan was for the Division to use only its two infantry brigades supported by **5 Army Group Royal Artillery**, consisting of three field regiments and one medium regiment, one light anti-aircraft and one heavy anti-aircraft battery, in addition to **4 and 5 NZ Field Regiments**.

Initially the Division would advance north-east through the line occupied by **4 Light Armoured Brigade**, and establish itself in the hills parallel to but some 2500 yards short of the road from **Enfidaville** to **Saouaf**, but no major operation was to be carried out, and the advance was to be a mixture of penetration during darkness and exploitation by patrolling. The boundaries with **51 (H) Division** on the right and **19 French Corps** on the left gave a frontage of about five miles.

On 3 May the French duly attacked **Djebel Zaghouan** and penetrated to a depth of four miles.

The Division moved by road to its new sector on 4 and 5 May in its usual groups. Divisional Cavalry made the first reconnaissance on 4 May, ready to take over the patrol line from **4 Light Armoured Brigade** early next morning, followed by **5 Brigade Group**. When the leading unit, **21 Battalion**, reached **Djebibina** it was bombed by machines of the **USAAF**, and one other rank was killed and other damage done. The column was delayed for fifteen minutes, but by 9.50 a.m. the group was dispersed without further incident. The **7th Field Company** went to work at once clearing mines, which were thickly sown in the proposed field of operations.

Divisional Headquarters and the artillery, less **6 Field Regiment**, moved without incident. The units of **5 AGRA** were already in position in the area. The **5th Field Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel Glasgow)** commenced deployment during the afternoon, but the first battery in

action was heavily shelled and was later found to be almost in the very thinly manned FDLs. One battery of 4 Field Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel **Philp**¹) was detached to support the French division on the left and was soon in action. The enemy 170-millimetre gun was also used in this area against the crossroads at **Pont du Fahs**. It ended its active service on this duty.

On 5 May 6 Brigade Group moved and dispersed near **Djebibina**. It remained in reserve during the operations which followed. Many administrative units did not move at all.

¹ **Lt-Col W. D. Philp**, DSO, ED; **Palmerston North**; born **Christchurch**, 5 Apr 1905; PWD foreman; **CO 4 Fd Regt** Mar–Dec 1943; **6 Fd Regt** Aug 1944–Feb 1945; wounded 22 May 1941.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

OPERATIONS AROUND DJEBIBINA

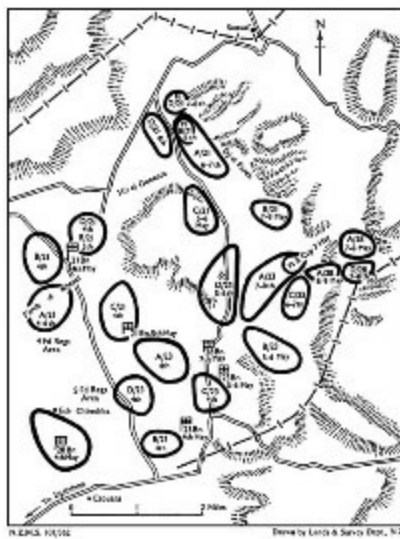
Operations Around Djebibina

Between 4 and 9 May the total casualties in 2 NZ Division were some fifteen killed and thirty-six wounded. All the operations in this period were of a minor nature as the policy was that no major operation would be carried out, but that some degree of penetration would be effected whenever possible during darkness. Successes obtained in such a way were to be exploited on subsequent nights by vigorous patrolling.

General Freyberg did not expect any notable results, and believed that the more the enemy was stretched in this area, the more firmly he would hold the coastal sector.

Not a great deal was known of the enemy troops nor of their exact position on the ground, but the main line appeared to be immediately to the north of the road running through **Saouaf**, with advanced posts farther south. The whole area was heavily mined. While there seem to have been elements of regiments from other divisions, it is sufficiently accurate to say that opposite 2 NZ Division there was now the unarmoured portion of **21 Panzer Division**, and a mixture of **164 Light Division** and **Pistoia** (or **Superga**) Divisions.

On 4 May the French attack against **Djebel Zaghuan** went no farther, and 19 French Corps merely consolidated its gains.



5 BRIGADE OPERATIONS NORTH-EAST OF DJEBIBINA, 4-8 MAY

That night 23 Battalion, on the right, and 21 on the left advanced silently and settled down by 10 p.m. without incident about four miles north-east of **Djebibina** on a front of five to six thousand yards. Thick minefields were discovered, indicating that the enemy's main positions lay farther ahead. The 28th Battalion remained in reserve.

Divisional Cavalry reconnoitred forward for about another 2000 yards on 5 May, drew fire, but was held up by mines. Patrols sent out by the battalions brought back the same tale, but it appeared that the line could still go forward without difficulty, and **Major-General Kippenberger** gave instructions accordingly for a further advance of from 1500 to 3000 yards.

At 3.30 p.m. eight enemy aircraft dropped a few bombs in a hit-and-run raid over the artillery area, but caused no damage. As far as is known, this was the last raid by the *Luftwaffe* against 2 NZ Division in North Africa.

The two battalions duly went forward after dark, again without artillery support. The forward platoon on the left came in touch with enemy troops and exchanged fire, but as instructions were to avoid close action, the platoon withdrew. The line of 21 Battalion was advanced under cover of fog on 6 May, by which time the FDLs faced nearly due east.

During the night 5–6 May our artillery fired concentrations at targets on the front of 19 French Corps and later received thanks from the divisional commander, although the French had not been able to achieve decisive results.

Sappers of 7 Field Company were kept hard at work clearing mines, which were considered to be more thickly sown than ever before in the experience of the Division. But while the minefields caused much delay, they caused little damage, for the enemy no longer covered them by observation or fire, and they could be cleared at leisure.

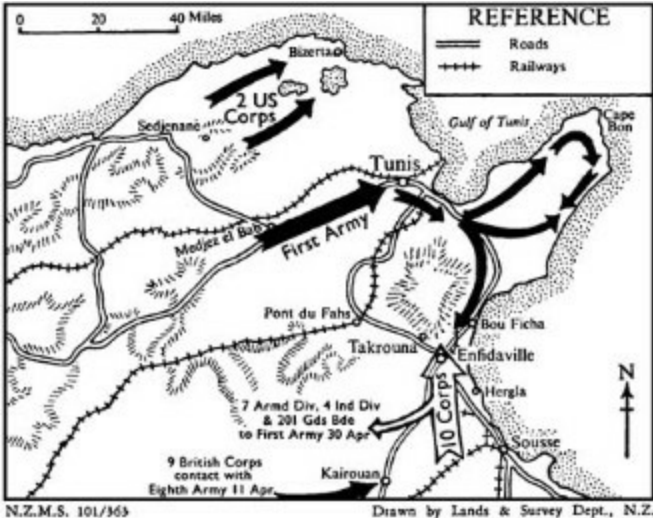
The activities of the next few days were much the same as previously, to push forward as far as possible without becoming involved in a major operation. The Division had ample artillery support, and engendered great excitement in senior officers of 19 Corps by offering the support of up to 200 guns, but despite some French exuberance there was no sign that the support would be wanted. On 6 May General Freyberg directed that the operations should aim at pinching out Djebel Garci, which still loomed unconquered on the right front. But it was soon discovered that limited operations were insufficient to capture the feature.

On the night 6–7 May 23 and 21 Battalions advanced another 1000 yards or so. There were a few minor clashes, and a handful of prisoners were taken. The limit of ‘peaceful penetration’ had almost been reached.

Meanwhile, away to the north the last battle had started. Fifth Corps captured Djebel bou Aoukaz by nightfall on 5 May, enabling 9 Corps to form up. At 3.30 a.m. on 6 May, 4 British and 4 Indian Divisions moved forward, and aided by massed artillery and by the greatest air effort in the war up to that time—over 2000 sorties—made a gap by midday. The armour and armoured cars of 6 and 7 Armoured Divisions then passed through and by nightfall were halfway to Tunis. On the American front resistance showed signs of crumbling also, and the advance was fast.

On 7 May, 6 and 7 Armoured Divisions moved forward at first light, stormed down the road to **Tunis**, and at 2.45 p.m. entered the town. At 4.15 p.m. American troops entered **Bizerta**. The first stage had been a brilliant success, and it now remained to round up the enemy troops and prevent any last-ditch stand.

The same day the French also occupied **Pont du Fahs**, which had long been an objective.



THE END IN TUNISIA, APRIL-MAY 1943

THE END IN TUNISIA, APRIL-MAY 1943

It is small wonder that when these stirring events came to the ears of 2 NZ Division there was a feeling of disappointment that it had not shared them. But in the meantime, like good soldiers, they had to carry on with more mundane tasks. By the evening of 8 May the divisional FDLs ran parallel to the **Saouaf** road and some 2500 yards short of it, a total advance since 4 May of some 6000 yards. The **21st Battalion** was on the left throughout, but latterly 28 Battalion had in effect passed through 23 Battalion, and was now in a rather exposed position and having some casualties from shell and mortar fire. The various posts were scattered and were not linked up on the ground, showing the effects of the policy of penetration where possible, as opposed to a set-piece advance.

In the north on 8 May, 6 and 7 Armoured Divisions fanned out as

intended. The 7th Armoured Division was fast closing its half of the net towards **Bizerta**, and had almost met 1 US Armoured Division coming south from that port. The 6th Armoured Division came up against the defile between the hills and the sea at **Hammam Lif**, ten miles east of **Tunis**. It was closely supported by 1 Armoured Division and 4 **British Division**, but had run into strong defences, well supplied with 88-millimetre guns, and was there temporarily held up.

General Freyberg now decided so to dispose **10 Corps** that, in accordance with the plan for Eighth Army, it could advance quickly up the coast towards **Hammamet**. It was arranged therefore that 56 (L) Division would attack during the night 8–9 May, and 5 **AGRA** was to leave 2 NZ Division during 8 May and move across to provide additional support. Moreover, 2 NZ Division less 5 Infantry Brigade Group was also to move to **Enfidaville** in the early hours of darkness on 8 May, leaving 5 Brigade to continue exerting pressure to turn **Djebel Garci**. But later in the day instructions were received that present positions were to be consolidated, and that on the night 9–10 May the area was to be handed back to 4 Light Armoured Brigade. Fifth Infantry Brigade Group would then rejoin the Division. When this relief was complete the **10 Corps** line from east to west would be held by 56 (L) Division, 1 **Free French Division** (which had relieved 51 (H) Division), 'L' Force, and 4 Light Armoured Brigade.

Instructions in 5 Brigade for the night 8–9 May were that there would be no patrolling, and that a passive attitude was to be maintained. But the enemy suddenly became aggressive, worked round one company of 28 Battalion and showed every sign of surrounding it. So dangerous did the position become that the company commander—wisely in the circumstances—withdraw. It seemed that the point had been reached when the enemy had decided that something must be done to stop the infiltration of his line. It may have also been a last attempt to keep up morale.

However, activity died down and a patrol from 28 Battalion made things even by rounding up twenty-five prisoners and some machine

guns during daylight on 9 May. The relief of 5 Brigade took place without incident that night, and on the morning of 10 May the group moved back to the [Enfidaville](#) area.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

THE CAMPAIGN ENDS

The Campaign Ends

While 2 NZ Division was still at **Djebibina** or being relieved there, other formations in **10 Corps** were carrying out the operations decided upon by **General Freyberg** to advance towards **Hammamet**. On the night 8–9 May 56 (L) Division attacked and reached a line five miles north of **Enfidaville**. It was intended that on the next night it should advance to **Djebel bou Rhabrouba**, two miles farther on, and that on the same night 6 Brigade of 2 NZ Division should relieve 169 Brigade, its left-hand brigade. Then on the night 10–11 May 56 (L) Division would capture **Djebel Chabet**, yet another mile north, and 2 NZ Division was to be prepared for exploitation to **Hammamet**.

The **25th Battalion** therefore relieved 169 Brigade, and shortly after midnight on 9–10 May was in position on a line from **Djebel Hamadet es Sourrah** to **Djebel Ogla**, with three companies forward and one in reserve.

The attack by 56 (L) Division on this night was supported by **5 AGRA**, 111 Field Regiment, RA, and 4 and 6 Field Regiments, NZA. It did not succeed, mainly owing to enemy fire from **Djebel et Tebaga** and **Kef Ateya**, and the troops returned to their starting positions. This was the last attempt by **10 Corps** to advance. Active patrolling was prescribed for the future, combined with a free use of the large artillery resources.

Meanwhile, farther north, 6 Armoured Division, after being held up for forty-eight hours at **Hammam Lif**, on that very morning of 10 May at last broke through and careered down the road towards **Hammamet**. The noose had already closed between **Tunis** and **Bizerta**, and what was left of three enemy divisions—including **15 Panzer Division** and the armour of **21 Panzer**—had been captured, together with von Vaerst, the commander of **5 Panzer Army**. The task remained of gathering in what

was left, now fast being compressed between First and Eighth Armies. The Navy was ready with a plan to deal with any attempted evacuation by sea, the 'Intention' paragraph reading: 'All Axis forces crossing the Sicilian Narrows will be drowned'. ¹

By nightfall on 10 May, 6 Armoured Division reached **Hammamet**, and advancing south on its right (i.e., west) were three other British and Indian divisions, directed along the roads from **Tunis** to **Zaghuan** and **Ste Marie du Zit**. The ring round the remaining Axis forces was complete.

On 10 May activity on **10 Corps'** front was almost entirely confined to artillery fire from both sides. It was a quiet day, with a quietness that was strange when contrasted with the violent activity not many miles away. In the afternoon **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** sent a message to Major-General Graf von Sponeck of *90 Light Division*, by a German prisoner under a white flag, inviting him to surrender, but at the end of the day there was no response.

During the night patrols from 25 Battalion found that enemy troops were still on **Djebel Mengoub**, and even on **Point 141**, the scene of earlier operations.

At 6 a.m. on 11 May, **1 Free French Division** attacked northwards from **Takrouna**, capturing **Djebel el Froukr** and exploiting north-west. By evening a platoon from the reserve company of 25 Battalion made junction with the French between **Djebel el Hamaid** and **Djebel Froukr**. This move was the last alteration of 2 NZ Division's operational dispositions in North Africa.

The Free French division captured some 300 prisoners, mostly German from *164 Light Division*. On the rest of the front there were vigorous exchanges between the opposing artillery. Enemy fire was very fierce, and guns and mortars sprayed the countryside in a way suggesting that the enemy was getting rid of his stocks of ammunition. **Kippenberger** says that 'shells pitched at random in a most

disconcerting fashion'. Tenth Corps' artillery replied with the biggest counter-battery programme yet fired in the campaign, thirtyone hostile batteries being engaged in a four-hour period.

There were still occasional casualties in 25 Battalion and among the gunners, all very distressing at this stage of the campaign.

During the day further attempts were made to induce the enemy to surrender. At 9.30 a.m. all guns on Eighth Army front stopped firing while two officers, one from 56 (L) Division and one from **1 Free French Division**, were sent out with messages asking for unconditional surrender. Again there was no clear reply, but there were fires and demolitions along the whole front, and indiscriminate artillery fire remained heavy.

On this day, 11 May, **4 British Division** swept right round the **Cape Bon** peninsula, capturing many prisoners. At last light 6 Armoured Division was just to the north of **Bou Fichta**, close enough to **10 Corps** for the artillery of 2 NZ Division to fire in support of 6 Armoured Division at targets in the **Ain Hallouf — Bou Fichta** area. The **4th Indian Division** reached **Ste Marie du Zit**, and was in the hills north of **Zaghuan**. The French Corps had some fighting during the day, but at the end all enemy troops opposing them, including parts of **21 Panzer Division**, agreed to surrender next morning.

But there were still some last pockets of resistance, and of these the greatest was in the area west of **Hammamet**, north of **Enfidaville** and east of **Zaghuan**, the most difficult to penetrate. On this day it became known that the *Young Fascist Division* had been rechristened '**Bersaglieri d' Africa**', the reason given by some unkind commentator being that they were now neither young nor Fascist.

The night 11–12 May was quiet. Two patrols went out from 25 Battalion to **Point 141** and Djebel et Tebaga and found the enemy still there. During the night General Messe made contact with Headquarters 56 (L) Division, but was told that he must get in touch with **10 Corps**,

and that in any case only unconditional surrender would be considered.

On 12 May the quiet continued until about 9 a.m., when enemy fire from artillery and mortars reached the same intensity as on the previous day, again with no set targets and no co-ordination. Our own artillery was vigorous in reply, and 4 Field Regiment records that over 7000 rounds were fired. Nebelwerfers were active, and a concentration on the headquarters of 111 Field Regiment, RA, killed the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel W. P. Hobbs, who had been associated with 2 NZ Division on many occasions.

Our own air forces had, needless to say, played a large part in the disorganisation of the enemy, and now helped to decide the issue locally, for at 3.30 p.m. three formations each of eighteen medium bombers attacked the coastal area and for some miles inland, as a prelude to the further advance of 6 Armoured Division to link up with 56 (L) Division. When 6 Armoured Division moved on after the bombing, white flags appeared on many positions, and advancing tanks were not fired on. After an attempt at getting terms, *90 Light Division* finally surrendered unconditionally. By 8 p.m. the surrender of all troops between 6 Armoured and 56 (L) Divisions was complete. Graf von Sponeck of *90 Light Division* surrendered initially to Major-General Keightley of 6 Armoured Division. Later **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** went forward through 56 (L) Division and met von Sponeck, who is believed to have repeated his words of surrender, for many members of *90 Light* said that they were glad to surrender to their old foe, 2 NZ Division. Von Sponeck was interrogated by **General Freyberg**, but there were no other courtesies. When a little later this surrender became known throughout the Division, only dimly, amidst the drama of the enemy's collapse, did men realise that the chase of *90 Light* 'to the end of time' was over.

Farther west 4 Indian Division captured General von Arnim, the Supreme Commander in **Tunisia**. He was taken to General Alexander's headquarters, where, says Alexander, 'he still seemed surprised by the suddenness of the disaster'.

There remained, however, the rest of *1 Italian Army* under Messe, comprising the troops in pockets in the hills and including what was left of *164 Light*, and *Trieste* and *Young Fascist Divisions*. This still held from north of *Saouaf* to north and north-west of 25 Battalion, and even showed signs of fight, but its activities were foiled by **10 Corps'** artillery fire. Up to darkness on 12 May there was no sign of surrender, and patrols found **Point 141** still occupied.

But during the afternoon Messe had apparently been trying to get in touch with some British headquarters. The message was picked up by 2 NZ Divisional Signals, which soon established good communication with the enemy headquarters. At 8.30 p.m. Divisional Signals was instructed to transmit the following message:

Commander First Italian Army from Commander **10 Corps**.
Hostilities will not cease until all troops lay down their arms and surrender to the nearest Allied unit.

At 10.33 p.m. a reply was received:

From Italian First Army to **10 Corps** Eighth Army. Reference your message our representatives have left to meet yours at 10 p.m. your time. We have nothing further to add.

In the early hours of 13 May there was still some confusion over representatives, and it appeared that Messe was hoping for terms. Finally, at 8.30 a.m. the Italian envoys arrived at Headquarters **10 Corps**. **General Freyberg** refused to discuss any terms and sent them back with the message:

You will now issue orders to your troops as follows:

1. To lay down their arms and surrender to the nearest Allied troops immediately.
2. To destroy no equipment.
3. To furnish plans of all known minefields in your areas to the nearest Allied unit.

Hostilities will continue until you have complied with these orders.

Compliance must be immediate and you will inform me by wireless and by messenger at what time your troops will surrender.

At the same time a wireless message was sent to Headquarters *1 Italian Army* saying:

Your representatives with a British officer carrying instructions have left for your headquarters. I have ordered my troops to cease fire pending your acceptance of these terms by 1230 hours today.

At 11.45 a.m. *1 Italian Army* surrendered. A wireless message from Messe said:

As my proposals for a truce to give time to my representatives to carry out their orders has not been accepted and your troops are still carrying out their attack in the *Saouaf* area and considering the fact that my representatives sent out at 9 p.m. yesterday to First British Army have not yet returned I have ordered my troops to lay down their arms.

It was signed 'Field-Marshal Messe', his promotion having just been announced over the Italian Radio.

Later Marshal Messe, accompanied by Major-General von Liebenstein of *164 Light Division*, surrendered in person to *General Freyberg* at Headquarters *10 Corps*. Messe's last messages to the *Comando Supremo* in Rome read somewhat grandiloquently, but are not without dignity. He was in fact the last to surrender.

At 2.45 p.m. on 13 May General Alexander signalled to *Mr Churchill*:

Sir, it is my duty to report that the Tunisian campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are masters of the North African shores.

The last word about the surrender may be left to a British narrator, who says, speaking of the 210,000 prisoners captured between 6 and 13 May, that they were ‘as pretty a baby as any G has passed to the A/Q staff in the campaign’.

¹ Only some 600 got away, nearly all sailors or dock-workers.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

2 NZ DIVISION AFTER THE SURRENDER

2 NZ Division after the Surrender

Prisoners began to stream in from about 10 a.m. on 13 May, including many from *90 Light Division*. The guns of 4 and 6 Field Regiments were in action until midday, but did not fire, and the war just faded away.

For 2 NZ Division the 'fading away' was perhaps somewhat more marked than with other formations. Since about 22 April it had become apparent that the Division would not be in at the kill, but was to operate in a minor way while others participated in the rapid and spectacular victory. Moreover, the majority of men in the Division were not even in action on the day of surrender, and knew little of what was happening from hour to hour. There was no exhilaration, no excitement, no cheering, and it can only be said that the campaign came to an end very quietly. No written cease-fire order was issued.

There was, of course, also the fact that the troops were tired—not just the tiredness of a few nights without sleep, but the gradual insidious tiredness that comes from weeks and months of movement and strain and fighting, sustained only with the urge to keep on with a job that had to be done. It is little wonder that when the task was finished the reaction was equally great. After all, the Division had not been out of the theatre of war since arriving in the **Western Desert** from **Syria** towards the end of June 1942, ten months and more previously, and even if one were to disregard the several crises of those summer months of 1942, the mere length of time was enough to leave its mark.

So 13 May was something of an anti-climax, and the Division had to wait for two years before sharing in a final overwhelming victory.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

BACK TO EGYPT

Back to Egypt

It has already been recorded why the **New Zealand Government** could not give approval for the Division to take part in the invasion of **Sicily**, or at least could not give a decision within the time limits involved. First Army was now to take over from Eighth Army, and the formations of the latter were to move back, some to prepare for the **Sicily** operations. In the circumstances, there was no point in holding 2 NZ Division anywhere in the forward area. For some time it had been understood that when it did move, the Division would return to Egypt. Furthermore, concurrently with the recent operations, there had been discussions between the United Kingdom Government, the **New Zealand Government**, and 2 NZEF overseas about the commencement of a furlough scheme, sufficient agreement by the two governments being reached towards the end of the campaign. It was now the responsibility of 2 NZ Division to get back to its main base as soon as possible, in order that the furlough scheme might be implemented. ¹

Arrangements for the return journey had been under discussion since 11 May, and it suited all concerned that the Division should move promptly. As a first step 56 (L) Division relieved 6 Infantry Brigade by 3 p.m. on 13 May, and the whole Division assembled in areas south of **Enfidaville**, groupings being ended and units reverting to their parent corps.

At this point the association with **8 Armoured Brigade** ended, to the regret of all. **General Freyberg** later sent units of the brigade a copy of his despatch to the **New Zealand Government** on the recent campaign, in which the services of the brigade were recognised.

On 14 May Lieutenant-General Horrocks returned to **10 Corps**, **Lieutenant-General Freyberg** reassumed command of 2 NZ Division,

Brigadier Kippenberger of 5 Brigade, and **Lieutenant-Colonel Harding** of 21 Battalion. **Lieutenant-Colonel Fairbrother** assumed command of 23 Battalion in place of **Lieutenant-Colonel Connolly**. ²

There was a daily quota for leave to **Tunis**, the very small one of 200 all ranks, but it is certain that many more, one way or another, managed to visit the city. However, the journey to Egypt was to start on 15 and 16 May, so that there was little time for sightseeing. Large parties risked the mines and booby traps on **Takrouna** to visit that already historic feature, and others searched areas for as yet unburied bodies. Most formations had thanksgiving services, including one in which for the first time all units of Divisional Artillery paraded together from a common laager area. The NZASC staged a 'donkey derby' with the animals of the Mule Pack Company, so providing much enjoyment for some thousands of men. And everyone collected souvenirs from among the accumulations of enemy equipment, in direct proportion to the opportunities for concealment, for there were strict orders that all enemy equipment was to be handed in.

Some interest was found also in watching the thousands of healthy-looking German prisoners who came out of the hills to give themselves up. They had been well-fed and well-equipped up to the last, and given the chance could have resisted for many days and even weeks ahead. But the blitzkrieg had overcome its inventors.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind about the most desirable destination in Egypt. In fact there was unanimity that somehow or other the Division must squeeze into **Maadi Camp**, and a squeeze it would be, for there were 12,800 extra personnel with their 3100 vehicles to be accommodated. To allow for this, most of the troops already in the camp—training depots and reinforcements—were moved out to **Mena** camp near the Pyramids.

For the move to Egypt the Division was divided into five serials, each with its due proportion of troop-carrying vehicles, maintenance units, medical units and provost. The serials were:

1. NZASC less detachments with other serials.
2. HQ 2 NZ Division
Divisional Signals
Provost Company less detachments.
3. 5 Infantry Brigade
NZ Engineers
NZ Medical Corps less detachments.
4. 6 Infantry Brigade
Divisional Cavalry
27 MG Battalion
NZ Ordnance Corps
NZ Electrical and Mechanical Engineers less detachments.
5. NZ Artillery.

The serials were then grouped into flights, the first three constituting Flight 'A', and the last two Flight 'B'. Tanks were handed in to a British tank reception depot. Bren carriers went back to Egypt on transporters or by sea under separate arrangements.

Flight 'A' left **Enfidaville** on 15 May, staged at **Wadi Akarit** and **Ben Gardane**, and arrived at **Suani Ben Adem** near **Tripoli** in the evening of 17 May. Flight 'B' followed one day later at each stage. Flights halted for a day at Suani, and then, still moving a day apart, staged at **Misurata**, **Buerat**, **Nofilia**, and **Agedabia**, and arrived at **Benghazi** on 23 and 24 May. Again after a day's pause, flights continued on 25 and 26 May, staged at **Lamluda**, **El Adem**, **Buq Buq**, **Mersa Matruh**, **El Daba**, and **Amiriya**, and arrived in **Maadi** on 31 May and 1 June. Administration for the move had worked smoothly throughout, and there were no difficulties over replenishment. The age of the vehicles and the supply of tyres presented the only trouble, but the LADs worked hard and kept the vehicles moving. Only thirteen were evacuated, and only fourteen arrived on tow, out of a total of 3100.

The troops enjoyed the journey, for the stages were easy and the places they passed through had associations with the many movements of the Division in the past. Mobile cinemas and the **Kiwi Concert Party** provided entertainment at intervals. National Patriotic Fund parcels

were distributed and beer was issued from time to time. And when they arrived in **Maadi**, units were told that up to 40 per cent of each unit at a time would be given the opportunity of a fortnight's leave in **Cairo** or **Alexandria**.

But what was even more heartening was the news that a furlough scheme to New Zealand was to be put into effect at once. For a while at least the war was over, and the future shone bright.

¹ See Documents, Vol. II; Problems of 2 NZEF; **Italy**, Vol. I; and The New Zealand People at War-Political and External Affairs.

² **Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly**, m.i.d.; **Ashburton**; born NZ 13 Aug 1910; petrol serviceman; CO **23 Bn** Apr-May 1943, Dec 1943-May 1944; twice wounded.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

CHAPTER 16 – CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 16

Conclusion

THE Division, then, had returned to Egypt, whence it had set out early in November with high hopes which were now amply fulfilled. Fulfilled in the advance of nearly 2000 miles from **Alamein to **Tunis**, the longest military progress in history, in which Eighth Army had advanced at the average rate of more than ten miles for each day for almost six months. For the Division the jousting season of the war was over, and no more would battles, exhilarating, costly, disappointing or successful, sway backwards and forwards over the familiar desert. Here the exemplary fortitude and bravery of the troops had been the common factors in all encounters, the variants being supplies, equipment and skill in leadership. Not for many long months, not until after all the bitterness of **Cassino**, would the troops again experience the exhilaration of pursuing an out-fought, out-manoevred enemy. Not until after the Battle of the **Senio** would they again fight over so much territory in so little time. Never again would the Division, as before **El Alamein**, stand at the crossroads of history, and by its very presence and quality, with its blood and by its skill, wrest from the battlefield a decision that would influence the strategy of the Allies and the whole course of the war.**

Hard fighting and physical privations, different in nature but comparable to those experienced in **Africa, certainly lay ahead, but the return to Egypt had brought to an end a type of warfare that is unique. Here man's most modern weapons, in a theatre remote from the obstructions of civilisation, were pitted against each other in a struggle in which the outcome depended on the tactical skill of the commander, the fortitude of the troops and the amplitude of supply. Supply, of water, armour, munitions, motor fuel, confined the war in the desert to particular areas more firmly than did geographical boundaries. In the long run command in the air became decisive, for as Rommel ruefully noted, 'Anyone who has to fight, even with the most modern weapons, against an enemy in complete command of the air, fights like a savage against modern European troops, under the same handicaps and with**

the same chance of success.’¹ Command of the sea was equally decisive, for he who possessed it deprived his adversary of supply, and at the same time took advantage of this medium for the carriage of the enormous bulk of his own war material.

The long advance from **Alamein** to **Tunis** was thus a campaign demanding the optimum tactical skill of its commander, for he had so to move his ground forces that the greatest advantage could be gained from predominance in the air and at sea. Landing grounds and ports were of much greater tactical significance than wadis, soft sand and mountain barriers. Finesse in manoeuvre had become the ability to combine the requirements of land, sea and air.

Eighth Army had in General Montgomery a commander willing and able to manage these diverse elements which time, the misfortunes of earlier commanders and the workshops of the Allies had united to put into his hands. Other volumes in this series have shown how and why success had eluded his predecessors, either through inability to control one or other of these elements, land, sea and air forces, or because the supply of one, or all, was at some critical period inadequate in quantity or quality. In the period covered by this volume all that was needed was there in abundance—Montgomery was the man who used this abundance to the greatest advantage. If the historian is to judge him he need not go beyond the words of the most famous of the enemy desert generals, Rommel, who, in considering the battle of **Alam Halfa**—and it could have been **Medenine**, or **Mareth**, or Akarit—said: ‘There is no doubt that the British Commander's handling of this action had been absolutely right and well suited to the occasion, for it enabled him to inflict very heavy damage on us in relation to his own losses, and to retain the striking power of his own force.’² Montgomery himself often expressed this concept in one word, balance, and the retention of perfect balance became one of the predominant features of all his operations.

It is in the field of tactics that the lasting interest in this campaign will be found. There were no strategic surprises, if one excepts the

Anglo-American landings in North- **West Africa** just before it began, and the disappointing development of that enterprise. For even though the self-willed shortsightedness of both **Mussolini** and **Hitler** prevented them from seeing the issues at stake, all the rest of the political and military leaders on both sides recognised, after **Alamein** and the Anglo-American landings, that it was only a matter of time before the Axis was driven from the whole of **Africa**. The decision to make those landings had in fact been made in July 1942,

¹ *Rommel Papers*, p. 285.

² *Ibid.*, p. 284.

and by October the watchful Italian Foreign Minister was confiding to his diary that all the information he had led to the conclusion that landings were going to be made, and that, **Africa** secured, the Allies planned to launch their blows against the Axis. **Italy** was geographically and logically their first objective. ¹

Before **Alamein**, **Rommel**, while in Rome in September, bluntly informed the *Duce* that unless supplies were sent on at least the scale he demanded, the Axis would soon have to get out of **Africa**. He concluded his report to **Hitler** in similar but more emphatic terms. After **Alamein**, and after the landings in North- **West Africa**, **Rommel** wanted to withdraw to **Wadi Akarit**, where he could prepare a position against which armour would be little use and which could not be outflanked. He wanted to make only such delaying operations as would not involve him in further losses, and he wanted it accepted that even this drastic step could only serve to gain time, for he now believed that final defeat in **Africa** was inevitable. His ultimate object was to evacuate the best of his troops to **Europe** for the continuance of the struggle, and in his judgment **Akarit** alone would give him sufficient geographical advantage to do this. He calculated, too—an interesting point in view of subsequent criticism of **Montgomery's** tardiness—that it would take **Eighth Army**

‘several months’ to transport sufficient material through the whole of **Libya** to enable it to attack at Akarit with assured prospect of success.² As we have seen, Montgomery fought three major operations, and many lesser ones, between **Alamein** and Akarit, but by using his army on the docks of **Tripoli** suffered no serious delays waiting for a build-up of supply.

The Italian general, Messe, sent in January to command the Italian forces in **Tunisia**, defined his new duties as ‘commander of the dispersed forces’. Before leaving **Italy** he confessed that his task was hopeless, and that he thought his appointment was a backhanded blow struck at him by Cavallero to get rid of him, ‘since he, too, must be convinced that there are no prospects for us in **Tunisia**.’ Messe felt that he was deliberately being deprived of his reputation.³

Rommel's proposition was an interesting one and his analysis of final defeat correct, for there is no reason to suppose that the Allies would not have retained command in the air and on the sea, but it is interesting to reflect that had he refused to accept battle between **Alamein** and Akarit unfortunate consequences would have resulted for the Allies, particularly as regards the timetable for the invasion of **Sicily**, which was decided in January 1943. The enemy position at Akarit could not in fact be outflanked, nor could it be subjected

¹ *Ciano's Diary*, 9 Oct 1942, pp. 508–9.

² *Rommel Papers*, pp. 293, 295, 320, 361–2.

³ *Ciano's Diary*, p. 550.

to tank attack. An earlier appearance of Rommel's forces in this area would have had decided repercussions on the Anglo-American force which was experiencing teething trouble—as would Rommel's own presence. Axis supply could have been concentrated instead of dispersed,

and the Axis air forces would have been in a much better position to support ground operations. The fifty-two tanks lost at **Medenine** and the casualties and lost equipment at **Mareth**, to say nothing of motor fuel and ammunition expended, would have been of great value in the Akarit position. But because **Mussolini** refused to abandon **Tripolitania** for political reasons, and then failed to recognise the tactical advantage that would accrue if only minimum delay was made at **Mareth**, and because to **Hitler** each yard of ground lost was interpreted as a personal affront, Rommel did not have his way. Moreover, as related earlier, in the complicated area of the service and political hierarchy between **Mussolini** and **Hitler** and their field commanders, there was no unanimity on this question. The refusal to withdraw to Akarit was, however, the chief, perhaps the only, strategic decision that, if reversed, might have prolonged the final surrender in **Africa** beyond the actual date of 13 May. This in turn might have delayed the invasion of **Sicily**, which, unquestionably, would have added grave stresses to the relationship between **London**, **Washington** and **Moscow**. For Stalin was waiting with some acerbity for the promised opening of the Second Front.

The two great western Allies had not in fact made the vital decisions concerning the theatre of operations after **Africa**. This is a matter which has been too well told, in **Churchill's** *The Hinge of Fate*, in *The White House Papers of Harry Hopkins*, and in this series, in a summary by Professor Phillips,¹ to require more than brief mention here. The point that must be made is that as late as the end of November 1942, when the end of the war in **Africa** had become more than a possibility, no decision had been made concerning future operations. Indeed, in **Washington**, far from Ciano's prognostication in October, plans for **Italy** revolved round thoughts of a heavy bombing programme.² The attack on **Sicily** was not decided until January, at **Casablanca**, where the target date, 'the favourable July moon', was accepted, and it was not until May, at the Washington Conference after the end of the war in **Africa**, that instructions were given for plans to be prepared for the invasion of the Italian mainland. From the strategic point of view, then, the only

decision to be borne in mind is that the target date

¹ *Italy, Vol. I, The Sangro to Cassino.*

² *White House Papers, pp. 654–6.*

for **Sicily** was early July 1943—the invasion actually began on 10 July—so that it was necessary for all operations to be completed in time for the units and commanders taking part to be ready.

It is stated above that General Montgomery was pre-eminently suited to command Eighth Army at this time. In the years to come, with Montgomery firmly seated among the great captains, and when the voluminous comment and criticism has been sifted by the accumulated wisdom of time, it will be North Africa to which historians will turn for the first flowering of the genius of his command. **El Alamein**, regardless of the fact that it was Montgomery who galvanised Eighth Army into urgent activity there, and who fought the great offensive battle, may always be associated to some extent with the names of other commanders. Wavell, Auchinleck and, at the end, Alexander, all made their own contributions at this historic battlefield. But as the gap between the old battlefields and the new was widened, as Montgomery gained experience, so it can be seen that his became the sole hand in control. Montgomery was the first to advance beyond **El Agheila**. **Mareth** was the first battle which was entirely a Montgomery battle. **Tebaga** soon followed. **Enfidaville** was Montgomery's first failure, and it is Alexander's name which will be indelibly linked with the final victory.

Closely identified with Montgomery's grasp of the required tactics was his determination to make certain that his will was not impeded by the differing opinions of his immediate subordinates. After **El Alamein** an alteration that he made to the command structure brought General Horrocks to **10 Corps**, in which were the armoured divisions. At this early stage in Horrocks's career his greatest asset was his approach to

the directions of the Army Commander: these were to be carried out to the letter, without question. Montgomery was not hampered by the accumulation of wrong ideas concerning the use of armour which had mutilated earlier desert battles. His guiding rule was co-ordination, whether in defence or attack, and the narratives of the battles at **Mareth** and at **Akarit** or at **Enfidaville** can be searched in vain for evidence of dispersal of effort or lack of co-ordination between all arms. No longer in attack need the infantry fear that their sternest endeavours would be frustrated because the tanks had failed to arrive at the critical moment. Never again, with the exception of **PUGILIST**, did the armour fail to advance and to fan out when a breach had been made. In the defensive battle at **Medenine** no tanks clashed against tanks: instead Rommel was forced into that cavalry nightmare—charging an impregnable gun line. It is difficult to imagine these various situations under an earlier regime.

The commendable spirit with which General Horrocks, in whose **10 Corps** 2 NZ Division fought for most of the campaign, regarded the orders of the Army Commander, left what dissension there was to the divisional commanders; perhaps to two only, **Freyberg** and **Tuker**. The record of the various conferences makes it abundantly clear that while Montgomery and Horrocks spoke with one voice, **Freyberg** frequently, and **Tuker** sometimes, disagreed. It would be quite incorrect to jump to the conclusion that **Freyberg** was not very biddable, and to leave it at that. For **Freyberg** had experience and battle wisdom, as well as service seniority. No other commander in Eighth Army had served so continuously in battle, no other had argued his way so consistently through the 'bad days'. The Division fighting together as one formation, the set-piece attack, the taped start lines, the lifting barrage, the punched hole and the fanning armour, all these were the epitome of **Freyberg** and his battle-wise staff. Further, **Freyberg** was responsible for the prudent use of his Division to his government, which never quite forgot **Greece** or **Crete**, and which throughout the whole of this campaign was balancing the requirements of the **Mediterranean** against the demands of the **Pacific**. Small wonder that against this background **Freyberg** frequently raised his voice in dissent, still less wonder that he

was listened to with respect. Only on one occasion, during PUGILIST, did **Freyberg's** 'independence' interfere with the complete fulfilment of Montgomery's plan. During the later **Enfidaville** battles **Freyberg** carried on with the Army plan in direct contradiction to his own opinion. But a man must be judged on his total effort, and during the whole of this campaign **Freyberg's** co-operation with Montgomery, his translation of plan into action, his battle sense and his leadership were such that his name will ever be associated with it immediately after that of his Army Commander.

The lasting interest in this campaign will centre on the tactics employed by the commanders on both sides—for the Allies the effort to pin down and destroy the Axis forces, or to keep them on the run, and for the Axis the task of avoiding destruction while offering the maximum delay. Much has been written already of the skill with which Rommel conducted his retreat. While not denying this, it is always necessary to remember that a retreating force has certain advantages, in the selection of ground on which to do battle, and in retreating upon supplies instead of further stretching supply lines. **General Freyberg** said in **Greece** that less skill was required to conduct a retreat than an advance, and in **Greece** the Division learned that relatively small forces can impose damaging delays. Once a small force has made its opponent deploy it retains a certain tactical advantage in that it alone knows how long it is going to delay, and where next it is going to stand. The advancing force must almost invariably be prepared for the worst possible contingency. In Greece, to take an example, the German troops launched three heavy attacks *after* the New Zealanders had withdrawn, at **Servia**, at **Olympus** and at **Thermopylae**. At Platamon one battalion, the 21st, with no armour or anti-tank guns, forced the deployment of half a tank corps, and then vanished to leave the enemy striking at the air.

The problems were the same between **Bardia** and **Enfidaville**. Lightly armoured reconnaissance forces led the advance: a handful of tanks, a few 88-millimetre guns and some pockets of motorised infantry delayed

it. When contact was made the problem for the advancing force was whether a quick attack would be successful, or whether it was necessary to delay until a larger force was deployed. In Greece the Germans outnumbered the British force by five to one, and had command of the air. In this campaign the Allies had approximately three to one superiority and command of the air. The tactics employed in both cases were identical. Light reconnaissance forces made contact, the closely following corps containing armour, artillery and infantry in its advanced elements went immediately into action, and if this was not enough the resources of the whole corps were deployed. In neither case were light advanced elements needlessly thrown away, for in both a little deliberation could achieve the desired result with small loss. During the whole of the advance covered by this volume it is difficult to see that different action at **El Agheila**, **Nofilia**, at **Dor Umm er Raml**, **Azizia**, or **Takrouna** on first contact, would have altered the final date of 13 May by very much.

Before leaving the comparison between the campaigns in **Greece** and in **Africa**, it is interesting to remember that the advancing force in both theatres had command in the air, and that in neither case was it used to the greatest advantage. In Greece the Germans had virtually uncontested supremacy, but their air force was not able to interfere with the withdrawal of the British force, largely because instead of concentrating on one or two key targets—bottlenecks in the communications network—it dispersed its effort over the whole field. In Africa the Allied air forces were not seriously contested, but although their contribution was very great they did not create the havoc among the retreating columns that their supremacy might indicate. It is probable that the main reason for this was that attacks were made from too great a height, and that by working much closer to their targets our aircraft would have been more certain of their destruction.

The task of Eighth Army was to pin down and destroy the enemy forces, or to keep them on the run. Which was the real intention? Time and again the orders repeated the words pin down and destroy, and

during the closer examination of the earlier chapters some disappointment was recorded that this had not been done, and some reasons advanced in explanation. But in the over-all picture it is clear that such disappointment is not valid, with one exception to be mentioned later. Immediately after the breakthrough at **Alamein, Tripoli** became the objective in the minds of most in Eighth Army, including Montgomery. ¹ **Tripoli**, so long sought after, so illusory. There was less of the hope that the bulk of the enemy force could be destroyed or captured. Indeed, it was not until after **El Agheila** that the suspicion was removed from Montgomery's mind that the enemy might again break out and make back for Egypt, and he made his dispositions with this possibility in view. The New Zealand Division might well have been disappointed that it did not have enough armour, and that refuelling delays—a normal friction—prevented what armour there was reaching the road in time. But on final analysis Montgomery's own explanation in his *Memoirs* is probably valid, that he wanted to get the position quickly and that the best way to do this was to bluff and manoeuvre, 'to bustle Rommel to such an extent that he might think he would lose his whole force if he stood to fight.' This was certainly what happened, and if a case is to be made that the outflanking force should have been stronger, it must also be possible to demonstrate that the assembly, march and supply of that larger force would not in itself have imposed further delays, and that Montgomery was completely wrong, at the time, in imagining that the notoriously impetuous Rommel would attempt a sudden thrust towards Egypt, as he had done before.

Wavell once compared the art of waging war with that of playing contract bridge. He wrote that calling in bridge could be regarded as strategy, the play of the hand, tactics. Strategy, in war as in bridge, can be mastered in a very short time by 'any reasonable intelligence', for although in both there is scope for judgment, boldness and originality, both are to a certain degree mechanical and subject to conventions. However, in the end it is the playing of the cards that matters, and in war the hand is always played by the commander in the field. Wavell rated the skilful tactician above the skilful strategist, especially he who

played bad cards well. ² This homely analogy, as Wavell called it, can be applied to the battle for the

¹ *Memoirs*, p. 140.

² Theodore Ropp, *War in the Modern World*, p. xiv, quoting Wavell's *The Good Soldier*, pp. 10, 32.

Mareth Line, where Montgomery did the calling and his corps commanders played the hands. The first game went to Montgomery after the model defensive action at **Medenine**. Montgomery lost the second game by calling PUGILIST, but won the rubber with a grand slam in SUPERCHARGE II. It is the lost game which concerns us here.

In calling PUGILIST, Montgomery exercised boldness, originality and judgment. Now that all the cards are face upwards on the table, there can be few quibbles over his bid. Success hinged upon the inability of the Axis to counter-attack on the main **Mareth** front, and all other factors which eventually militated against that success, the width of the front at **Mareth** and the consequent difficulty in getting anti-tank guns and armour across **Wadi Zigzaou** among others, are of lesser importance. As the game was called, and with the cards held, there need not have been a counter-attack. The reasons for the failure of PUGILIST have been examined, and the conclusion reached that **General Freyberg** played his hand badly: he did not use his good cards well. But that was in the short run. Napoleon's maxim yet holds good, that the general who wins is the general who makes the fewest mistakes, and among the players **Freyberg** remained the star performer. With the cards dealt for SUPERCHARGE II firmly in his hand, he did not fail to take a trick.

There will always remain the speculation as to the course of events if PUGILIST had succeeded. First and foremost, it would have added greatly to Montgomery's military reputation, for the plan was finely calculated and its fulfilment would have been spectacular. It is not unreasonable to suppose that much of the enemy would have been cut

off and captured, or at least so bustling that reorganisation at Akarit would have been impossible, which in turn raises fresh possibilities for the final battles at **Enfidaville**. But no one can be certain, for no exact calculations can be made without positive knowledge of the enemy's reaction to these changed circumstances, and only the events themselves could supply it. In war, each and every circumstance of itself produces unforeseen frictions, a fact which renders so unacceptable the findings of armchair strategists.

At **Enfidaville**, Eighth Army attempted without success to apply the techniques so arduously learned in the desert to a changed topography. This has been made clear in the relevant chapters. On first encounter the whole of Eighth Army went with its commander, and there were no dissenting voices. But after the first unsuccessful engagement the two most seasoned commanders, **Freyberg** and Taker, began raising objections which, although extremely pertinent, were disregarded. The interest in the final operations lies, then, not in the strenuous fighting that took place, but in the object of it all. This object was Montgomery's own determination to drive Eighth Army through to **Cape Bon**. From the historical point of view, here was Montgomery's first failure, for **PUGILIST** was virtually one part of a battle in which Montgomery retained the initiative throughout and can be excepted. Upon final analysis the operations that began on 19 April, and included the notable infantry achievement of the capture of **Takrouna**, may well be regarded as an ambitious, even an incautious, but nevertheless legitimate 'try-on'. For the only way to discover if the enemy intends to stand and fight is to attack and find out.

That is the most favourable case that can be made. On the other hand it is fair to say that optimism in war must have its limits, and that it might have been reasonable to have realised that the enemy must stand and fight, or perish. **Stalingrad**, where for the first time since Napoleon a Prussian army had been captured intact, had given no indication that capitulation would not be delayed until the last possible minute. In somewhat similar circumstances, for the enemy had no

means of retreat, Montgomery initially attacked a mountainous, essentially defensible area, held, on contemporary calculations, by at least the quantity of troops that had opposed Eighth Army at Akarit, and probably by more. Armour was of little use to either side, and the bulk of the Allies' air power was being used on the First Army front. Where at Akarit the break-in attack had been made by three divisions, with a fourth division briefed for exploitation, at **Enfidaville** two divisions attacked, and the major exploitation role was to have been accomplished by one of the attacking divisions. The other two divisions had minor roles. Upon the failure of this operation a new plan was made in which two divisions, one of them inexperienced, were to attack the hill positions, and the New Zealand and 7 Armoured Divisions were to break out. The area held by the Axis was as readily defensible as the **Cassino** area in **Italy** and in many ways comparable with it. The line could not be outflanked, as at **Mareth**, and had considerably more depth than Akarit where initial penetration breached the position. Eighth Army did not have sufficient infantry to capture the **Enfidaville** position, and without it the plans that were made were quite unrealistic. Without doubt the 'fight and find out' theory was here pressed too hard, but perhaps in terms of the experience that is required to test and temper a great military commander, **Enfidaville** was salutary and necessary.

The campaign as a whole was notable for some interesting innovations in battle technique, or for the development of what was best in the old. The most impressive advance was in the field of co-operation, for as observed at the beginning of this chapter, the nature of the campaign demanded that the Eighth Army commander must combine the requirements of land, sea and air. Only by ensuring that tactical objectives included advanced landing grounds and that troops, as well as capturing them, cleared ¹ them for immediate operations, was supremacy in the air used to the greatest advantage. In similar fashion troops assisted in the rapid re-establishment of ports, so that supplies could be brought in bulk and so that the striking arm of the Navy—MTBs operated from **Tripoli**, **Sfax** and **Sousse** within a day or two of capture—could work close to the front line. Much of the Eighth Army did round-

the-clock stevedoring at **Tripoli**, with the result that the Army was based on that port within weeks of capturing it and the long land haul from **Benghazi** was eliminated.

Many innovations were introduced in the air force's vital role of assisting the ground troops. The **El Agheila** operation had demonstrated that there was room for improving the demarcation of bomblines when the air force was required to work close to advancing troops, and the 'left hook' at **Mareth** saw much development in the techniques of using coloured smoke, day and night landmarks, and ground to air communications. The 'tank-buster', which was in effect an airborne anti-tank gun, first began its devastating work in **Tunisia** and probably destroyed more tanks (except at **Medenine**) than the ground forces. The 'cabrank' system, where fighters and tank-busters poised in the air in continuous circuit to be directed on opportunity targets from the ground, was begun at Tebaga. At **Enfidaville** aircraft were first used in Eighth Army as artillery observation posts, with gunners trained to operate them. Carpet or area bombing, of localities declared of nuisance value to the ground troops, was undertaken, and the closely ranked formations of eighteen or more bombers, at medium height, became a familiar sight to the troops. That busy maid-of-all-work, the Douglas transport, was given a new role, the evacuation by air of sick and wounded. And probably of equal importance was the great impetus to morale that this closer co-operation, these new and diverse duties, gave to all ranks in the air and on the ground.

For the troops it seemed that the old days of frustration, when effort and sacrifice, for some reason or other, had been thrown away, were over. The old, deep, grievances that had centred on the use of armour were forgotten and replaced by a new and growing admiration for the determination and skill of the Armoured Corps. The battle at **Medenine**, where Montgomery relied almost entirely on his anti-tank guns sited in a defensive network in advanced positions, and on his artillery which separated attacking tanks and their supporting infantry, with which it dealt methodically; the battle

¹ The term used at the time was 'deloused'.

at Tebaga, where tanks led the infantry in the most perfect example of united action between ground and air that any army, British or German, had yet seen; the spectacular 'break-outs' by armour and mobile infantry at **Mareth** and Akarit; and the everyday, forceful reconnaissance by light armoured and cavalry corps, all of these things provide a fascinating field for study, and in their growth and development gave to the Eighth Army its collective *élan* and unbridled confidence.

In these diverse activities, in this fruitful field of military endeavour, the New Zealand Division, under its much experienced and battle-wise commander, **Freyberg**, whose name was already inseparable from his division, played its part, and added to, and drew from, the accumulated pool of knowledge.

For the men of the Division the great advance was perhaps the high-tide of the war. Not only did the relentless, onwards movement signify success, which is heady wine, but time and the changing panorama of the **Mediterranean** coast of **Africa** combined with that success to give perspective to that total experience of war in the desert. All now had meaning. The scars were healing, and although the childhood picture of the gently moving column of dust, which might be a djinn, had faded for ever, the vision of the silent desert under a canopy of stars unbelievably bright would remain always. When a desert veteran thinks of sunrise, he will remember the ethereal beauty of the cold, unearthly clarity of the starlight as it was warmed and suffused by the palest peach, the delicate rose, the richer gold of the rising sun. When he thinks of shade, he will remember the joy of the unexpected oasis. When he yearns for space he will in memory stand at dawn, before the haze of the day, and gaze over the limitless desert which was once all torment, thirst, hatred and blood.

Not for nothing had these men come ten thousand miles from their

homeland in the new world to play their part in restoring a balance in the old.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

APPENDIX I

Appendix I

I: Allied Battle Casualties, North Africa, October 1942-May 1943

This table was prepared by the Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office from returns supplied by the War Office in September 1946. 'Missing' are included under 'Prisoners' (P). In each column officer casualties are shown by the first figure, other-rank casualties by the second figure. New Zealand casualties for the period covered by this volume are given in **Section II** of this appendix.

Period	<i>United Kingdom</i>			<i>Australia</i>			<i>New Zealand</i>			<i>South Africa</i>
	K	W	P	K	W	P	K	W	P	
Oct–Nov 1942	224	588	67	54	138	6	32	89	2	22
Alamein– Agheila	1,864	6,170	898	559	1,870	138	329	1,278	64	17
Nov 42–Jan 30 43		119	10	–	–	–	3	17	4	4
Agheila– Buerat	302	1,115	110	–	–	–	43	144	10	10
Jan–Feb 1943	26	69	9	–	–	–	2	7	–	–
Buerat– Zuara	219	706	130	–	–	–	16	59	–	–
Feb–Mar 1943	27	115	30	–	–	–	1	3	–	–
Zuara– Mareth	351	1,307	459	–	–	–	10	82	4	–
Mar–Apr 1943	110	348	30	–	–	–	16	50	–	–
Mareth– Enfidaville	910	3,758	689	–	–	–	193	667	6	6

Apr-May 1943	50	224	16	-	-	-	13	52	-	-
Enfidaville end	465	2,503	144	-	-	-	127	627	51	-
Total Eighth Army	4,578	17,022	2,592	613	2,008	144	785	3,075	141	21

II: 2 New Zealand Division Casualties, 11 November 1942-13 May 1943 *

Period	Killed		Wounded		Prisoner	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
Libya—						
11 Nov 1942–28 Feb 1943	4	70	27	212	2	6
Tunisia—						
1–19 Mar 1943	1	16	3	60	-	-
20 Mar–18 Apr 1943	17	197	47	607	1	5
19 Apr–13 May 1943	14	140	45	522	-	25
Total	36	423	122	1,401	3	36 †

III: Axis Casualties, 23 October 1942-13 May 1943

These are estimates supplied by the Historical Section of the UK Cabinet Office, and represent killed and wounded only.

	<i>German</i>	<i>Italian</i>	<i>Total</i>
23 Oct 1942–19 Mar 1943 (Eighth Army sector)	22,000	19,000	41,000
8 Nov 1942–19 Mar 1943 (First Army sector)	3,000	1,500	4,500
20 Mar–5 May 1943 (18 Army Group)	23,200	12,600	35,800
6–10 May 1943 (18 Army Group)	9,000	1,000	10,000
	-	-	-
Total	57,200	34,100	91,300

Axis prisoners of war, from figures supplied by the same source.

	<i>German</i>	<i>Italian</i>	<i>Total</i>
23 Oct 1942–19 Mar 1943 (Eighth Army sector)	9,200	25,400	34,600

8 Nov 1942–19 Mar 1943 (First Army sector)	2,200	1,400	3,600
20 Mar–5 May 1943 (18 Army Group)	9,800	24,700	34,500
6 May–13 May 1943 (18 Army Group)	148,000	62,000	210,000
	–	–	–
Total	169,200	113,500	282,700

¹ Killed, wounded, prisoners.

* The discrepancies between the figures in this section and those in **Section I** are accounted for by the preliminary nature of the War Office table, the different date groupings, and the possibility that other than New Zealand troops are included with 2 NZ Division during its operations as **NZ Corps**.

† Includes 2 died of wounds, 11 wounded.

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

I: ALLIED BATTLE CASUALTIES, NORTH AFRICA, OCTOBER 1942-MAY 1943

I: Allied Battle Casualties, North Africa, October 1942-May 1943

This table was prepared by the Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office from returns supplied by the War Office in September 1946. 'Missing' are included under 'Prisoners' (P). In each column officer casualties are shown by the first figure, other-rank casualties by the second figure. New Zealand casualties for the period covered by this volume are given in [Section II](#) of this appendix.

Period	<i>United Kingdom</i>			<i>Australia</i>			<i>New Zealand</i>			<i>South Africa</i>
	K	W	P	K	W	P	K	W	P	
Oct–Nov 1942	224	588	67	54	138	6	32	89	2	22
Alamein–Agheila	1,864	6,170	898	559	1,870	138	329	1,278	64	17
Nov 42–Jan 43		119	10	–	–	–	3	17	4	4
Agheila–Buerat	302	1,115	110	–	–	–	43	144	10	10
Jan–Feb 1943	26	69	9	–	–	–	2	7	–	–
Buerat–Zuara	219	706	130	–	–	–	16	59	–	–
Feb–Mar 1943	27	115	30	–	–	–	1	3	–	–
Zuara–Mareth	351	1,307	459	–	–	–	10	82	4	–
Mar–Apr 1943	110	348	30	–	–	–	16	50	–	–
Mareth–Enfidaville	910	3,758	689	–	–	–	193	667	6	6

Apr-May 1943	50	224	16	-	-	-	13	52	-	-
Enfidaville- end	465	2,503	144	-	-	-	127	627	51	-
Total Eighth Army	4,578	17,022	2,592	613	-	-	2,008	144,785	3,075	141,211

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

II: 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION CASUALTIES, 11 NOVEMBER 1942-13 MAY 1943*

*II: 2 New Zealand Division Casualties, 11 November 1942-13 May 1943 **

Period	Killed		Wounded		Prisoner	
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
Libya—						
11 Nov 1942–28 Feb 1943	4	70	27	212	2	6
Tunisia—						
1–19 Mar 1943	1	16	3	60	–	–
20 Mar–18 Apr 1943	17	197	47	607	1	5
19 Apr–13 May 1943	14	140	45	522	–	25
Total	36	423	122	1,401	3	36 †

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

III: AXIS CASUALTIES, 23 OCTOBER 1942-13 MAY 1943

III: Axis Casualties, 23 October 1942-13 May 1943

These are estimates supplied by the Historical Section of the UK Cabinet Office, and represent killed and wounded only.

	<i>German</i>	<i>Italian</i>	<i>Total</i>
23 Oct 1942–19 Mar 1943 (Eighth Army sector)	22,000	19,000	41,000
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	–	–	–
Total	57,200	34,100	91,300

Axis prisoners of war, from figures supplied by the same source.

	<i>German</i>	<i>Italian</i>	<i>Total</i>
23 Oct 1942–19 Mar 1943 (Eighth Army sector)	9,200	25,400	34,600
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20 Mar–5 May 1943 (18 Army Group)	9,800	24,700	34,500
6 May–13 May 1943 (18 Army Group)	148,000	62,000	210,000
	–	–	–
Total	169,200	113,500	282,700

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

APPENDIX II

Appendix II

The principal appointments and the order of battle for 2 NZ Division for the period 11 November 1942–13 May 1943 were:

Divisional Headquarters

GOC	Lt-Gen Sir Bernard Freyberg, VC (to 30 Apr 1943) Maj-Gen H. K. Kippenberger
GSO I	Col R. C. Queree
AA & QMG	Lt-Col A. E. Hillier, North Staffordshire Regiment (to 19 Nov 1942) Lt-Col B. Barrington
CSO	Lt-Col G. L. Agar
<i>Divisional Cavalry Regiment</i>	
CO	Lt-Col J. H. Sutherland (to 28 Jan 1943) Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant
<i>Divisional Artillery</i>	
CRA	Brig C. E. Weir
36 Survey Battery	Maj R. G. Drummond
4 Field Regiment (25, 26, 46 Btys)	Lt-Col G. J. O. Stewart (to 3 Mar 1943) Maj H. E. Gilbert (to 10 Mar 1943) Lt-Col W. D. Philp
5 Field Regiment (27, 28, 47 Btys)	Lt-Col K. W. R. Glasgow
6 Field Regiment (29, 30, 48 Btys)	Lt-Col C. L. Walter
14 Light Anti-Aircraft 'Regiment (41, 42, 43 Btys)	Lt-Col J. F. R. Sprosen
7 Anti-Tank Regiment	Lt-Col J. M. Mitchell
<i>Divisional Engineers</i>	
CRE	Lt-Col F. M. H. Hanson
5 Field Park Company	Maj K. Rix-Trott

6 Field Company	Maj J. N. Anderson
7 Field Company	Maj C. F. Skinner (to 2 Mar 1943)
	Maj H. C. Page
8 Field Company	Maj R. C. Pemberton
<i>5 Infantry Brigade</i>	
Comd	Brig H. K. Kippenberger (to 30 Apr 1943)
	Brig R. W. Harding
21 Battalion	Lt-Col R. W. Harding (to 30 Apr 1943)
	Lt-Col M. C. Fairbrother
23 Battalion	Lt-Col R. E. Romans (to 20 Apr 1943)
	Lt-Col J. R. J. Connolly
28 (Maori) Battalion	Lt-Col C. M. Bennett (to 20 Apr 1943)
	Lt-Col K. A. Keiha
<i>6 Infantry Brigade</i>	
Comd	Brig W. G. Gentry (to 22 Apr 1943)
	Brig G. B. Parkinson
24 Battalion	Lt-Col R. G. Webb (to 16 Dec 1942)
	Lt-Col J. Conolly
25 Battalion	Lt-Col I. L. Bonifant (to 28 Jan 1943)
	Lt-Col T. B. Morten
26 Battalion	Lt-Col D. J. Fountaine
<i>27 (Machine-Gun) Battalion</i>	Lt-Col A. W. White (to 31 Jan 1943)
	Lt-Col R. L. McGaffin (to 3 Apr 1943)
	Lt-Col J. K. Robbie
<i>Army Service Corps</i>	
CRASC	Col S. H. Crump
Divisional Ammunition Company	Maj P. E. Coutts (to 26 Jan 1943)
	Maj S. A. Sampson
Divisional Petrol Company	Maj G. S. Forbes
Divisional Supply Company	Maj N. W. Pryde (to 5 Dec 1942)
	Maj J. R. Morris
4 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company	Maj I. E. Stock
6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company	Maj A. G. Hood (to 2 Feb 1943)
	Maj G. G. Good

Medical Corps
ADMS

4 Field Ambulance
5 Field Ambulance
6 Field Ambulance

Mobile Dental Unit

Ordnance Corps

ADOS

Ordnance Field Park
Ordnance Field Workshops

*Electrical and Mechanical
Engineers*

CREME

Provost Company

Divisional Postal Unit

Col P. A. Ardagh (to 16 Feb 1943)

Col F. P. Furkert

Lt-Col R. D. King

Lt-Col J. P. McQuilkin

Lt-Col F. P. Furkert (to 16 Feb 1943)

Lt-Col W. B. Fisher

Maj W. G. Middlemass

Lt-Col A. H. Andrews (to 1 Dec 1942)

Lt-Col J. O. Kelsey

Maj H. B. Ward

Maj G. D. Pollock (to 22 Nov 1942)

Maj P. C. M. Carlton

Lt-Col A. H. Andrews (from 1 Dec 1942)

Maj E. W. Hayton (to 16 Feb 1943)

Maj H. M. Blacklock

Lt W. H. McClure

BARDIA TO ENFIDAVILLE

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GLOSSARY

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AA	anti-aircraft
AA & QMG	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General
A/Q	
<i>Abiar</i>	wells or cisterns (pl. of <i>bir</i>)
ACCOMPLISH	Code-name for operation by Eighth Army, 26–30 April 1943, to break through Enfidaville line and exploit to Hammamet
Ack	Acknowledge
ACV	Armoured Command Vehicle
ADC	<i>aide-de-camp</i>
Adm, Admin	Administration
ADMS	Assistant Director of Medical Services
ADOS	Assistant Director of Ordnance Services
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station (forward medical establishment usually situated behind RAPs of fighting units)
adv	advance(d)
A Echelon	Transport usually taken into battle
AFC	Air Force Cross
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle (tank or armoured car)
AG	Adjutant-General
AGRA	Army Group Royal Artillery
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
<i>Ain</i>	spring, well
Air Support Control	Combined Army- RAF organisation to bring air support to bear on ground operations
ALG	Advanced Landing Ground
amn	ammunition
AOC-in-C	Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief
AP	armour-piercing
armd	armoured
armd Cs	armoured cars

armoured brigade	formation of fast cruiser tanks, etc.
army tank brigade	formation of slow infantry tanks, etc.
arty	artillery
ASC	Army Service Corps
A tk	anti-tank
A Tk	
a-tk	
A-Tk	
Aust	Australian
Bde	Brigade (British or Allied formation, normally three tank or infantry battalions)
B Ech(elon)	Transport sometimes temporarily dispensed with in battle
Bel	Belgian
<i>Bel</i>	abbr. of <i>ben el</i> , son of
<i>Ben</i>	(pl. <i>beni</i>) son of
<i>Bersaglieri</i>	Italian motorised infantry, organised in regiments each of two or three battalions
BGS	Brigadier, General Staff (chief staff officer at Corps or Army)
<i>Bir</i>	well or cistern (pl. <i>Abiar</i>)
Blenheim	British twin-engined bomber
BLOOD	Code-name for attack by 7 Armoured Division at Bir es Suera , December 1942
BM	Brigade Major (chief staff officer at Brigade)
Bn	Battalion (a unit of tanks or reconnaissance troops, normally three squadrons plus HQ; or infantry, four rifle companies plus HQ company; or machine-gunners, four companies of Vickers guns)
<i>Bn</i>	<i>Battalion</i> (German unit of tanks, anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns, engineers, infantry, machine-gunners, or motor-cyclists) (Italian organisation was similar)
Bofors	Automatic 40-millimetre light anti-aircraft gun of Swedish design
<i>Bordj</i>	bastion, tower, rest house
<i>Bou, bu, abou,</i>	father of, owner of
Box	All-round defensive position for battalion, brigade or

	division in static operations
BRA	Brigadier, Royal Artillery (Corps or Army)
Breda	Italian heavy machine-gun or light automatic cannon
Bren	standard British light machine-gun
Bren-carrier	light armoured tracked vehicle intended to carry same, but also used for reconnaissance, carrying ammunition or wounded under fire, etc.
BTE	British Troops in Egypt (command excluding Western Desert Force, later Eighth Army)
Bty	battery (two, three or four troops of guns)
1 Buffs	Royal East Kent Regiment
CAPRI	German code-name for attack at Medenine, 6 Mar 1943
carrier (Universal)	see Bren-
Cav	Cavalry (light tanks, armoured cars, carriers)
CB	Companion of the Order of the Bath; counter-battery (fire), locating and silencing of hostile guns
CBE	Commander of the Order of the British Empire
CBO	Counter-battery officer
CCRA	Corps Commander, Royal Artillery
CCS	Casualty Clearing Station (large medical establishment situated between MDS and field hospital)
Cdr	Commander
CE	Chief Engineer (Corps or Army)
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
Chabet	gorge, defile
Chebka, chebket	area of streams and criss-crossed valleys
Chor	watercourse
Chort, shott	salt marsh or lake
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CO	Commanding Officer (usually of a unit)
Col	Colonel; Column (of troops or transport)
Coln	Column
Comando Supremo	Italian Supreme Command (counterpart of OKW)
Comd	Commander; Commanding

comn	communication(s)
commn	
conc	concentration (of troops, equipment, fire)
coy	(own) sub-unit of engineers, infantry or ASC troops (in infantry, three platoons; in others three or four sections) (enemy) sub-unit of tanks (=squadron), anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns, engineers, signals, infantry, service, or medical troops
company	
CRA	Commander, Royal Artillery (of division)
CRASC	Commander, Royal Army Service Corps (of division)—later in NZ Division called CNZASC
CRE	Commander, Royal Engineers (of division)
CREME	Commander, Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
CRUSADER	Code-name for British offensive resulting in relief of Tobruk
Crusader	British Cruiser tank Mark VI
CSM	Company Sergeant-Major
CSO	Chief Signal Officer
DAK	<i>Deutsches Afrikakorps</i> (German Africa Corps)
DAQMG	Deputy Assistant Quartermaster-General
dar	house, habitation of
DCM	Distinguished Conduct Medal
det(s)	detachment(s)
DFC	Distinguished Flying Cross
Div	formation above brigade or <i>Regiment</i>, below corps
Division	
Div Arty	Divisional Artillery (Headquarters, often HQ NZA)
Div Cav	Divisional Cavalry
Div Workshops	Ordnance unit for maintaining guns, vehicles and other equipment
<i>Djebel (Dj), jebel, gebel</i>	mountain
<i>Dor</i>	Group of hills
DR	despatch rider (usually motor-cyclist)
DSO	Distinguished Service Order

Ech	First, Second, Third, three main contingents of 2 NZEF in order of embarkation, chiefly comprising 4, 5 and 6 Brigades respectively (see also A Echelon, B Echelon)
Echelon	
<i>ech, ed, el, er, es, et</i>	the (in place-names)
ED	Efficiency Decoration
Engr(s)	Engineer(s)
<i>en portée</i>	(of 2-pdr gun) carried on special lorry, ready to fire
<i>Erg</i>	country of sand-dunes
FAD	Field Ammunition Depot
fd	field
Fd Amb	Field Ambulance (medical unit)
Fd Coy	Field Company (of engineers)
FDL(s)	Forward defended locality (localities) (the front was seldom a line, usually a series of FDLs)
Fd Pk Coy	Field Park Company (of engineers)
Fd Regt	Field Regiment (unit of artillery)
FF	Free French
FFF Column	Free French Flying Column
FIRE-EATER	Code-name for Eighth Army operation to capture Tripoli, January 1943
FMC	Field Maintenance Centre (included FAD, FSD, etc.)
FOO	Forward Observation Officer (field or medium artillery)
<i>Foum</i>	mouth, opening (in Sahara)
FSD	Forward Supply Depot
fwd	forward
GAF Brigade	German Air Force Brigade
G Branch (Office)	Staff of division or higher formation or command dealing with operations
'G' staff	
GCMG	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George
Gds	Guards
GHQ	General Headquarters
Gk	Greek
GOC (-in-C)	General Officer Commanding (-in-Chief)
Gp	(Battalion or Brigade) force of all arms

GPO	Gun Position Officer (field or medium artillery)
GRAPE	Code-name for Eighth Army objective north-west of <i>Gabes</i>
Greys	The Royal Scots Greys
GSO (I, II, III)	General Staff Officer (Class 1, 2, 3)
GUILLOTINE	Code-name for 30 Corps' operation to break through and outflank the <i>El Agheila</i> position, December 1942
H	Hussars; heavy
51 (H) Div	51 (Highland) Division
HAA	Heavy anti-aircraft
11 HAC	11 Honorable Artillery Corps
Half-track	Vehicle with wheels in front, tank-like tracks in rear
<i>Hamada,</i> <i>hamadet</i>	rocky plain, plateau
<i>Hamma</i>	warm spring
HE	high explosive
HMG	heavy machine-gun
Honey	nickname for General Stuart tank (American M3)
HQ	headquarters
hrs	hours
hy	heavy
I	Intelligence (of enemy)
Int	
2 i/c	Second-in-command
incl	inclusive; including
Ind	Indian
inf	infantry
IO	Intelligence Officer
<i>Kalaa</i>	fortress, rugged feature
KBE	Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire
KCB	Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath
KDG	King's Dragoon Guards (a reconnaissance unit)
<i>Kef</i>	rock, cliff, hill
kilo	kilometre
km	
1 KRRC	1 Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps (the '60th Rifles')

<i>Ksar</i>	(pl. <i>ksour</i>) walled or fortified village
LAA	light anti-aircraft
laager	defensive disposition of unit or formation halted in mobile operations, open order by day and close order by night (often spelt 'leaguer', though pronounced 'laager')
LAD	Light Aid Detachment (Ordnance establishment for repairing guns, transport, etc.)
56 (L) Div	56 (London) Division
'L' Force	Code-name for French force under General Leclerc
line (transport)	
1st	unit
2nd	divisional (carrying between FMC and division)
3rd	rear (carrying between railhead and FMC)
LMG	light machine-gun
LO	Liaison Officer
LOB	Left out of battle
L of C	Line(s) of communication
LRDG	Long Range Desert Group
Lt	Lieutenant; light
2 Lt	Second-Lieutenant
<i>Luftflotte</i>	German Air Fleet, largest formation of <i>Luftwaffe</i>
<i>Luftwaffe</i>	German Air Force
M	medium
M13	chief Italian medium tank
<i>Maaten</i>	shallow wells
Mac Troop	Royal Artillery troop of captured enemy 88-mm guns attached to 4 Fd Regt —named after Brig McIntyre, RA
Mark (I, II, etc.)	designation of production type, especially of tanks (in German documents, 'Mark II'=Matilda tank; British documents refer to <i>Pzkw II, III, IV</i> as Mark II, III, IV; see also Crusader ; the Mark VIB was the standard British light tank)
<i>Marsa, mersa</i>	port, anchorage
Maryland	twin-engined bomber (American)
MBE	Member of the Order of the British Empire
MC	Military Cross; motor-cycle
MDS	Medical Dressing Station (divisional medical establishment usually situated between ADS and CCS)

ME(F)	Middle East (Forces)
Me109F	high-flying single-engined Messerschmitt (German) fighter
Me110	twin-engined long-range fighter or fighter-bomber
Med	Medium
Medjez	ford
MET	mechanised enemy transport (i.e., enemy vehicles)
(M)MG	(Medium) machine-gun
m.i.d.	Mentioned in Despatches
m.i.h.	miles in the hour (a rate allowing for halts)
MM	Military Medal
MO	Medical Officer
Mot	motorised
m.p.g.	miles per gallon
m.p.h.	miles per hour (actual rate)
MT	mechanised transport
mtd	motorised
Mtd	Mounted
NAAFI	Navy, Army, Air Force Institute(s)
'Nat Pat' parcel	National Patriotic Fund Board Parcel
NCO	non-commissioned officer
n.c.o.	
Notts Yeo	Nottinghamshire Yeomanry
50 (N) Div	50 (Northumbrian) Division
NZA	New Zealand Artillery
NZASC	New Zealand Army Service Corps
NZE	New Zealand Engineers
NZEF	New Zealand Expeditionary Force
NZEME	New Zealand Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
NZMC	New Zealand Medical Corps
NZOC	New Zealand Ordnance Corps
OBE	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
Obelisco	obelisk
OC	Officer Commanding (squadron, battery, company)
offrs	officers
Os	officers
Ogla, oglat	group of wells

OKH	<i>Oberkommando des Heeres</i> (High Command of the German Army)
OKL	<i>Oberkommando der Luftwaffe</i> (High Command of the German Air Force)
OKM	<i>Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine</i> (High Command of the German Navy)
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> (Supreme Command of the German Armed Forces, roughly equivalent to the War Office)
OP	Observation Post
Ops	Operations; staff branch dealing with same
ORATION	Code-name for operation to break through the Enfidaville line
Ouest	middle
ORs	other ranks (not officers)
oued, wadi	watercourse
PA	Personal Assistant (to GOC)
<i>Panzergruppe Afrika</i>	Panzer Group Africa
<i>Pz Gp Africa</i>	
PEACH	Code-name for El Hamma
PHEASANT	Code-name for 17-pdr anti-tank gun
pl	platoon
PLUM	Code-name for the southern entrance to the Tebaga Gap
Point	Height marked on map, usually in metres above sea level
Pt	
POL	Petrol, oil and lubricants
<i>portée</i>	see <i>en portée</i>
posn	position
pr	pounder
pdr	
PUGILIST	Code-name for operations, 12–24 March 1943, to break through the Mareth Line
PW	prisoner(s) of war
p.w.	
PZ	German tank; armoured (unit or formation)
<i>Panzer</i>	

QM(G)	Quartermaster Quartermaster(-General)
quad	lorry for towing British field gun or anti-tank 18-pdr
RA	Royal Artillery
RAC	Royal Armoured Corps
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RAP	Regimental Aid Post (unit medical establishment)
Ras, rass	cape, headland, summit
RASC	Royal Army Service Corps
rd	road, round
RE	Royal Engineers
recce	reconnaissance; reconnoitre
Regt	Regiment (unit of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or artillery; in British Army also groups of tank, artillery or infantry units, e.g., RTR, RHA, Black Watch)
Regt	<i>Regiment (enemy) (formation of armoured troops or infantry, roughly equivalent to ‘brigade’; also unit of field or medium artillery)</i>
Reinforcements (4th, 5th, etc.)	Successive contingents of 2 NZEF after Third Echelon
Repat	Repatriation
rept, rpt	repeat (message)
Res	reserve
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery (motorised, usually supporting armoured troops)
RHQ	Regimental Headquarters
Ridotto	redoubt
Rmel	sand, sandy earth
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer (of a unit)
RMT	Reserve Mechanical Transport (general carrier when not taking infantry into or out of action)
Res MT	
RNZA	Royal New Zealand Artillery (Regular Force only)
Royals	The Royal Dragoons (reconnaissance unit)
RSM	Regimental Sergeant-Major (senior NCO of unit)
R/T	radio-telephony (wireless transmission of speech)
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment, Royal Tanks (part of RAC)

RATks	small arms
<i>Sahel</i>	coast, shore
sangar	rocks piled up for protection in lieu of slit trench where ground was too hard to dig
<i>Saniet</i>	deep well
SC	Staff Captain (administrative staff officer at Brigade)
SCIPPIO	Code-name for Eighth Army attack on Wadi Akarit , 6 Apr 1943
scorpion	tank fitted with a flail device for clearing a path through a minefield
<i>Sebka, sebcha, sebcbet, sebkra, sebkret</i>	salt lake, marsh
sec	section (2–3 guns; detachment of Signals; third of infantry platoon; third of ASC company, etc.)
Serb	Serbian
SIDEWINDOWS	Code-name for alternative advance towards Gabes , bypassing El Hamma
<i>Sidi</i>	saint or marabout
Sigs	Signals (responsible for R/T, W/T, DR, telephone and other communications)
sitrep	situation report
slit trench	one- or two-man trench for fire position or protection
SP	self-propelled (gun); Starting Point
spandau	nickname for standard German light and medium MG
sqn	squadron (of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or aircraft)
ST	Starting Time
Staffs Yeo	Staffordshire Yeomanry
‘Stonk’	A quick defensive artillery concentration according to a prearranged pattern
Stuart (General)	American M3 light cruiser tank
Stuka	Junkers 87 dive-bomber
SUPERCHARGE	Code-name for operation to break through Tebaga Gap and capture Gabes . Also known as SUPERCHARGE II, to distinguish it from the operation at El Alamein
<i>Superlibia</i>	Italian Command in North Africa
Svy	Survey
SWEAT	Code-name for attack by 51 (Highland Division) at

Tac Army	Marsa Brega, December 1942 Tactical Headquarters, Eighth Army
Tac HQ	Tactical Headquarters
TAF	Tactical Air Force
<i>Tell</i>	high ground, small hill
tentacle	wireless detachment, usually of Air Support Control
Tk	tank
TOIL	Code-name for attack by 2 NZ Division to cut the El Agheila - Marada track, December 1942
Tommy gun	Thompson sub-machine gun
TORCH	Code-name for Anglo-American landings in French North Africa, November 1942
tp(s)	troop(s); part of squadron of tanks or reconnaissance troops (usually four tanks, armoured cars); part of battery (4–6 guns)
Trg	Training
<i>Trigh</i>	track
U-boat	German submarine
USAAF	United States Army Air Force
VC	Victoria Cross
VD	Volunteer Officers' Decoration
<i>wadi, oued</i>	watercourse
wastage	reduction of manpower
WDF	Western Desert Force
WE, war establishment	authorised full allotment (of men, weapons, etc.)
<i>Wehrmacht</i>	German Armed Forces

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