

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

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BATTLE FOR EGYPT

Contents

[covers]

[title page]

[frontispiece]

[title page]

Preface p. vii

Contents p. ix

List of Illustrations p. xi

List of Maps p. xv

CHAPTER 1 — Aftermath of Libyan Campaign p. 1

CHAPTER 2 — A Hazardous Project p. 7

CHAPTER 3 — Alternative Roles p. 22

CHAPTER 4 — Division in Syria p. 28

CHAPTER 5 — Rommel Strikes p. 44

CHAPTER 6 — Forced March to the Desert p. 50

CHAPTER 7 — Preparations for Decisive Battle p. 59

CHAPTER 8 — Auchinleck takes Command p. 69

CHAPTER 9 — Rommel's Battle Plans p. 77

CHAPTER 10 — Germans Break In p. 81

CHAPTER 11 — New Zealand Division Isolated p. 90

CHAPTER 12 — Twenty-four Tense Hours p. 103

CHAPTER 13 — Eighth Army in Last Ditch p. 136

CHAPTER 14 — The Enemy Plan p. 149

CHAPTER 15 — Eighth Army Holds the Line p. 155

CHAPTER 16 — Defeat of Ariete Division p. 167

CHAPTER 17 — Thrusts, Parries, and Plans p. 178

CHAPTER 18 — Both Armies Prepare Attacks p. 195

CHAPTER 19 — Battle of Tell el Eisa p. 204

CHAPTER 20 — Armies Spar for Positions p. 213

CHAPTER 21 — Planning for Ruweisat p. 220

CHAPTER 22 — Capture of Ruweisat Ridge p. 232

CHAPTER 23	— The First Disaster	p. 249
CHAPTER 24	— Fighting on the Ridge	p. 264
CHAPTER 25	— Enemy Prepares Counter-attack	p. 276
CHAPTER 26	— Fourth Brigade Overrun	p. 287
CHAPTER 27	— Reflections	p. 299
CHAPTER 28	— Raids, Patrols, Consolidation	p. 308
CHAPTER 29	— Plans for El Mreir	p. 319
CHAPTER 30	— Advance of Sixth Brigade	p. 338
CHAPTER 31	— Succession of Disasters	p. 352
CHAPTER 32	— Price of Bad Planning	p. 364
CHAPTER 33	— Reorganisation	p. 370
Appendix I		p. 381
Appendix II	— 22 BATTALION IN CAPTIVITY	p. 385
Appendix III		p. 387
Glossary		p. 389
Bibliography		p. 391
Index		p. 393
[backmatter]		

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

Contents

[covers]

[title page]

[frontispiece]

[title page]

Preface p. vii

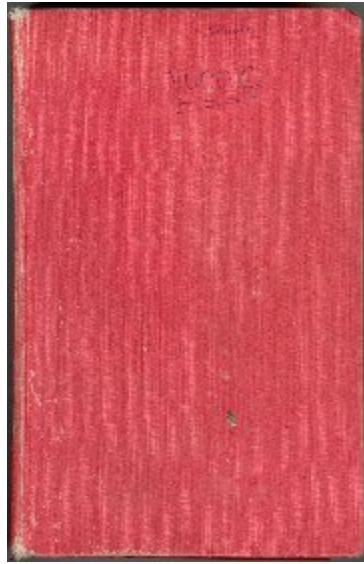
Contents p. ix

List of Illustrations p. xi

List of Maps p. xv

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

[COVERS]



BATTLE FOR EGYPT

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Looking north-east from 5 Brigade HQ at Minqar Qaim on 27 June 1942

Looking north-east from 5 Brigade HQ at [Minqar Qaim](#) on 27 June 1942

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

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Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

The Summer of 1942

Lieutenant-Colonel J. L. SCOULLAR

WAR HISTORY BRANCH

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS

WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND 1955

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

PREFACE

Preface

THIS is a story of occasional victory, but more often of the trials and tribulations of war in that part of the campaign in North Africa in 1942 when Field Marshal Rommel and his German-Italian *Panzerarmee Afrika* drove the British Eighth Army from the gate to **Tripolitania** at **El Agheila** to the gate to **Cairo** and the **Middle East** at **El Alamein**. How and why the 2nd New Zealand Division became involved and the part it played is the core of the story.

The first purpose of the work is to place on permanent record a substantial part of the Dominion's contribution to the war through the operations of the Division in North Africa. As these stirring and arduous days are recalled to officers and other ranks of the Division, they are told why they were moved here and there, why this and that were done, why, so often in this campaign, circumstances deprived them of the full fruits of their labour, valour and skill. The third purpose is to draw from the campaign, for civilians and soldiers alike, such lessons in the art of war as may have permanent value.

The facts have been compiled from the Division's official documents and those of the corps, army, and theatre headquarters under which it served, and from the corresponding records of *Panzerarmee Afrika*, the latter through the courtesy and co-operation of the Historical Division of the Department of the Army of the **United States of America**, Washington. Valuable help has also been given by the Historical Sections of the War Office, **London**, and of the Union of South Africa. The documentary evidence has been illuminated as occasion required by the personal narratives of many officers and other ranks.

The author would not have attempted the task, indeed he could not have done so, without the excellent briefs, each one almost a volume in

itself, compiled by the **War History Branch**. Every movement of every unit has been extracted, sorted, collated and verified by cross-references. The author is especially grateful to the narrator with whom he has been closely associated, Mr Ronald Walker, for the thoroughness of his original work and his patience in answering questions. He is also greatly indebted to Mr W. D. Dawson, who translated many of the German documents, and to the staff of the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department who were responsible for the maps and sketches.

For material not to be found in any written record the author has had the most willing co-operation of the Division's senior officers he consulted. Special mention should be made of **Lieutenant-General Lord Freyberg**, VC, Major-General L. M. Inglis, **Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger**, Major-General W. G. Gentry, Brigadier C. E. Weir and Brigadier F. M. H. Hanson.

In freely acknowledging all this indispensable help, there remains to be stated only the fact that the conclusions drawn, the deductions made, and the opinions and views expressed in the work are the author's own.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CONTENTS

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
PREFACE	vii
1 AFTERMATH OF LIBYAN CAMPAIGN	1
2 A HAZARDOUS PROJECT	7
3 ALTERNATIVE ROLES	22
4 DIVISION IN SYRIA	28
5 ROMMEL STRIKES	44
6 FORCED MARCH TO THE DESERT	50
7 PREPARATIONS FOR DECISIVE BATTLE	59
8 AUCHINLECK TAKES COMMAND	69
9 ROMMEL'S BATTLE PLANS	77
10 GERMANS BREAK IN	81
11 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION ISOLATED	90
12 TWENTY-FOUR TENSE HOURS	103
13 EIGHTH ARMY IN LAST DITCH	136
14 THE ENEMY PLAN	149
15 EIGHTH ARMY HOLDS THE LINE	155
16 DEFEAT OF ARIETE DIVISION	167
17 THRUSTS, PARRIES, AND PLANS	178
18 BOTH ARMIES PREPARE ATTACKS	195
19 BATTLE OF TELL EL EISA	204
20 ARMIES SPAR FOR POSITIONS	213
21 PLANNING FOR RUWEISAT	220
22 CAPTURE OF RUWEISAT RIDGE	232
23 THE FIRST DISASTER	249
24 FIGHTING ON THE RIDGE	264
25 ENEMY PREPARES COUNTER-ATTACK	276
26 FOURTH BRIGADE OVERRUN	287
27 REFLECTIONS	299
28 RAIDS, PATROLS, CONSOLIDATION	308
29 PLANS FOR EL MREIR	319

30 ADVANCE OF SIXTH BRIGADE	338
31 SUCCESSION OF DISASTERS	352
32 PRICE OF BAD PLANNING	364
33 REORGANISATION	370
APPENDIX I Commanders and Staff, June 1942	381
APPENDIX II 22 Battalion in Captivity	385
APPENDIX III Casualties, June–August 1942	387
GLOSSARY	389
BIBLIOGRAPHY	391

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

List of Illustrations

Looking north-east at **Minqar Qaim**

Frontispiece

W. A. Whitlock

Following page 102

Wire for defensive positions in **Syria**

NZ Army (M. D. Elias)

Machine-gunners digging in, **Syria**

W. G. Judd collection

Sappers digging a gunpit, **Syria**

R. S. Wait collection

Convoy at the ruins of **Palmyra**

NZ Army (M. D. Elias)

On the **Damascus** road

W. G. Judd collection

Dumps on fire at Mersa Matruh

Unloading on the escarpment at **Minqar Qaim**

W. A. Whitlock

Digging in on the rocky escarpment

NZ Army (H. Paton)

Looking east from 5 Brigade HQ

W. A. Whitlock

Shells bursting on gun positions

W. A. Whitlock

Observing shellfire

NZ Army (H. Paton)

A 25-pounder in action at **Minqar Qaim**

NZ Army (H. Paton)

Lieutenant-General Freyberg wounded

NZ Army (H. Paton)

The break-out—painting by Peter McIntyre

Wrecked vehicles—painting by J. Crippen

Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade halted

F. G. Ross

After early morning conference at Munassib

F. G. Ross

The northern edge of the **Qattara Depression**

NZ Army (W. Timmins)

19 Battalion advancing against **Ariete Division**

*F. V. England
collection*

Enemy shells on **Alam Nayil** ridge

F. T. Allan

Some of the guns captured by the CRA's column
and 19 Battalion

F. T. Allan

Following page 102

German 88-millimetre guns captured on **Alam
Nayil**

NZ Army (H. Paton)

Ruweisat Ridge

*J. C. Holmes
collection*

18 Battalion transport bombed
25-pounders firing on Ruweisat Ridge—painting
by C. Hansen
21 Battalion Signal Office
El Mreir Depression—painting by J. Crippen
28 Battalion RAP
The hard summer of 1942
Lieutenant-General W. H. E. Gott
General Auchinleck and Major-General Freyberg
Brig G. H. Clifton and Col W. G. Gentry
Rommel, with staff, and Brig Clifton

Brig H. K. Kippenberger
Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis
Brig C. E. Weir
Lt-Col G. L. Agar
Lt-Col R. C. Queree
Lt-Col K. W. R. Glasgow
Lt-Col C. L. Walter
Lt-Col J. M. Mitchell
Lt-Col F. M. H. Hanson
Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll
General Auchinleck and Lt-Col R. J. Lynch
Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants
Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell
Lt-Col J. T. Burrows
Brig Kippenberger and Lt-Col S. F. Allen
Lt-Col J. T. Russell

Lt-Col R. E. Romans
Lt-Col A. W. Greville
Lt-Col C. D. A. George
Lt-Cols J. Gray and J. N. Peart
Lt-Col F. Gwilliam
Col S. H. Crump
Brig H. S. Kenrick
Capt C. H. Upham

R. B. Abbott collection
Following page 298

C. N. D'Arcy collection
NZ Army (H. Paton)
British Official
NZ Army
F. G. Ross
captured German
photograph
F. G. Ross
NZ Army (H. Paton)
NZ Army

NZ Army (G. R. Bull)
NZ Army (M. D. Elias)
NZ Army (G. R. Bull)
NZ Army (G. F. Kaye)
NZ Army (G. R. Bull)

NZ Army
NZ Army (G. R. Bull)
British Official
NZ Army (G. R. Bull)
F. G. Ross
T. E. Champion

Following page 298

NZ Army
NZ Army

The NZ Herald
G. V. Turnbull
NZ Army
NZ Army (G. R. Bull)
NZ Army (H. Paton)

Sgt K. Elliott

NZ Army (H. Paton)

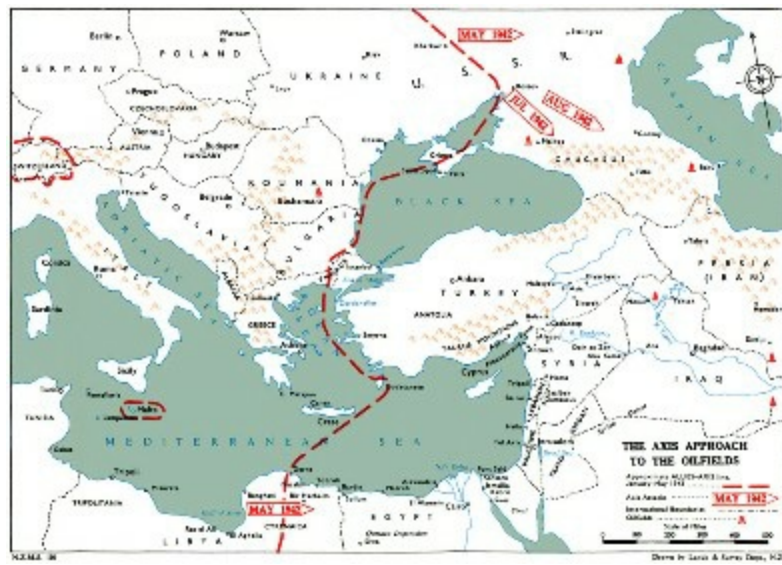
BATTLE FOREGYPT

LIST OF MAPS

List of Maps

	<i>Facing page</i>
The Axis Approach to the Oilfields Syria and Lebanon	1 19
Minqar Qaim and Alamein: Dispositions on evening 26 June 1942	53
El Alamein	135
Ruweisat Ridge: Plan of Attack and Dispositions on 14 July 1942	201
El Mreir: Plan of Attack and Dispositions on 21 July 1942	315
<i>In text</i>	
	<i>Page</i>
The Advance of <i>Panzerarmee</i> on Matruh, 26–27 June 1942	46
<i>21 Panzer Division</i>'s Encirclement of New Zealand Division at Minqar Qaim on 27 June 1942	84
Withdrawal of New Zealand Division from Minqar Qaim on night 27–28 June 1942	106
The Rout of <i>Ariete Division</i>, 3 July 1942	168
4 and 5 New Zealand Brigades from 3 to 7 July 1942	174
Ruweisat Ridge: The Morning of 15 July 1942	238
Ruweisat Ridge: <i>Afrika Korps</i>' Attack on 4 New Zealand Brigade, 15 July 1942	288
El Mreir: The Advance and Dawn Counter-attack, 22 July 1942	329
El Mreir: 23 Armoured Brigade's Advance and final New Zealand Dispositions, 22 July 1942	356

The occupations given in the biographical footnotes are those on enlistment. The ranks are those held on discharge or at the date of death.



The Axis Approach to the Oilfields

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 1 – AFTERMATH OF LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

CHAPTER 1

Aftermath of Libyan Campaign

THE New Zealand Division felt injured, puzzled, and to some extent ill-used, but yet was proud of itself as it recuperated in the rest and refitting area of **Baggush** in December 1941. After twelve days of arduous fighting in **Cyrenaica** the Division—less its 5th Brigade, the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and the Reserve Mechanical Transport Companies, left temporarily with Eighth Army for further operations—had been withdrawn because, in the words of General Auchinleck,¹ ‘two-thirds of the New Zealand Division had been cut to pieces.’

No man doubted that a round had been won against the Germans or that the Division had acquitted itself well. But experienced officers knew, and their junior officers and other ranks suspected, that the best had not been made of the Division's capabilities. Assertions of bungling and of avoidable losses were put against the sum of achievements. A victory had been won but the fruit had a bitter flavour.

In the isolation his thoughts imposed, **Major-General Sir Bernard Freyberg**,² commanding the Division, considered the campaign had been a failure. The German ***Afrika Korps*** under Rommel had escaped ‘when he should have been caught like a rat in a trap.’³ Failure and cost were due, in **Freyberg's** opinion, to the British Army Command's persistence with faulty ideas. These had been the greatest factor in the Division's losses, then estimated at 4000 in killed, wounded and prisoners.⁴ True, other divisions had suffered heavy losses, in some cases more severe than those of the New Zealand Division. But that was no consolation. It did not ease **General Freyberg's** mind concerning his responsibility to the Government and people of New Zealand for the welfare of their Division.

¹ General (now Field Marshal) Sir Claude J. E. Auchinleck, GCB, GCIE, CSI, DSO, OBE, Commander-in-Chief Middle East Forces, 1941–42.

² **Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg**, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Greek); born **Richmond, Surrey**, 1889; CO Hood Bn 1914–16; commanded 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–18; GOC **2 NZEF** Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand 17 Jun 1946–15 Aug 1952.

³ GOC's papers, report on New Zealand Division in **Syria**.

⁴ New Zealand Division casualties in the second Libyan campaign (Nov 1941–Feb 1942) were later officially recorded as: Killed, 671; died of wounds, 208; died on active service (sickness, accident, etc.), 202; wounded, 1699; prisoners of war (includes 201 wounded and prisoners of war and 5 died of wounds while prisoners), 2042; total, 4822.

Freyberg's meditations on this and previous campaigns and his experiences led him to the conviction that in the interests of New Zealand he should do his utmost to get the Division away from the **Desert Command**.

The belief of the junior officers and other ranks that their part in the campaign had been successful was firmly based. They knew they had acquitted themselves well in battle. The intimate personal doubts which affect the soldier when he first comes under fire had been resolved. Men who had served in **Greece** and **Crete** had found that the long period out of battle had not affected their nerves. Gaps in the ranks and losses in equipment proclaimed that the price of victory had been high. But the fighting had been severe and heavy toll had been taken of the enemy. The balance, in the general opinion, was in favour of the British.

Moreover, it was argued, the campaign must have been successful because the enemy was retreating. In Norway and **France**, in **Greece**, **Crete** and **North Africa**, the British forces had been compelled to retreat in the face of the enemy's superiority in numbers, equipment and tactics. Now the tables had been turned. The **Afrika Korps**, then

believed to be a specially trained force and the *élite* of the German Army, was withdrawing to the security of **El Agheila**. To ensure its own safety, the *Korps* was abandoning its Italian allies. For this there could be only one reason. It was beaten. At long last the British Army had been trained and provided with the tools for the job. With more and better tools and further training and experience there should be greater and more clear-cut victories.

The Division did not know that the Commander-in-Chief would report that ‘two-thirds of the New Zealand Division had been cut to pieces, and had had to be withdrawn to refit’,¹ and that the Division was ‘exhausted but in good heart.’² Even had the men known that the Commander-in-Chief would thus describe their losses, their good heart was such that morale would not have been adversely affected. The New Zealanders, at this period, had that peculiar quality of good troops—a grim pride in their ability to take hard knocks. They were not aware of being exhausted. They were tired, but not beyond the swift and easy remedies of regular meals and sleep.

Satisfaction with the campaign was not confined to the Division's own part. Letters to New Zealand from **Baggush** were generous in praise of the British troops, especially of the tank units and the **Royal Air Force**. The men listened to the German radio broadcasts and scoffed at assertions that **Britain** was using only colonial forces

¹ Despatch, *London Gazette*, 15 Jan 1948, p. 313.

² *Ibid.* p. 341.

in the field. ‘We are one division out of a whole army,’ a soldier wrote to his parents. ‘We have suffered certainly and so have the South Africans, but nothing much is said of the glorious work of our tank boys.... There is not a better band of men in the world.’¹ ‘I take off my hat to those Tommy tank chaps,’ another soldier wrote. ‘They certainly

are wonderful scrappers and the best of chaps.' ²

Men who had complained of the lack of air support in **Greece** and **Crete** now extolled the **Royal Air Force**. 'The Air Force did a great job.' 'We hardly saw any enemy planes.' 'Not once were we troubled from the air.' 'This time the Huns are getting more than they ever gave us and I hope they like it.' These were typical comments in letters examined by the **Field Censorship Section** and recorded in the weekly summary. They permitted the censor to report: 'There can be no question of NZEF morale being anything but of the highest order.' ³

This attitude was gratifying. But it reflected the truth of the saying that often the soldier cannot see the battle for the bullets. The men had no inkling of **General Freyberg's** analysis of the campaign and of the thoughts that troubled him.

General Freyberg was more than the commander of a division. He was the representative in the field of the Government of New Zealand and its adviser on the employment of the Division. He had a dual responsibility. He was responsible to the commander-in-chief of the theatre in which the Division was deployed and also, primarily, to the Government for the manner in which it was used.

This problem had been discussed by him with the Government on his appointment at the outbreak of the war. In illustration of difficulties that might arise he had cited the possible loss of a brigade. If such a misfortune befell the Division, to whom would he be responsible—the commander-in-chief of the theatre or the Government? The Hon P. Fraser, to whom the question was addressed in **London**, had replied that account would have to be made to the Government.

Freyberg thereupon had had prepared a directive which defined the powers of the commander-in-chief, reserved the rights of the **New Zealand Government** concerning the use of the Division, gave the commander of the Division direct access to the Government and the commander-in-chief, and vested in the divisional commander full

authority in organisation and training. The directive was accepted by the **New Zealand Government** and was incorporated in an agree-

¹ **Middle East Field Censorship Summary, December 1941.**

² **Ibid.**

³ **Ibid.**

ment with the Government of the **United Kingdom**. It was signed by the Prime Minister, the **Rt Hon M. J. Savage**, on 5 January 1940. ¹

In brief, the directive placed the Division under the command of the theatre commander-in-chief only for operations and then only with the previous consent of the **New Zealand Government**, although **General Freyberg**, or his successors, could act on the Government's behalf 'in the case of sufficiently grave emergency or in special circumstances, of which he must be the sole judge'. The directive was similar to those given by the Government of the **United Kingdom** to commanders-in-chief taking British forces overseas.

At **Baggush** **General Freyberg** had to refer to his directive, his 'charter' as he was wont to call it. He used his discretion 'in special circumstances' to permit the Divisional Cavalry to operate with **2 South African Division** at **Bardia**. Fifth Brigade, under Brigadier **Wilder**, ² was left with Eighth Army for the pursuit to **Gazala**. The RMT companies and other transport were also placed at the disposal of Eighth Army. And as the Division would not be required for further active operations for some time, a low priority for replacing lost and damaged equipment was accepted without question.

These, however, were minor matters compared with **General Freyberg's** reflections on the campaign. He disagreed with the Army policy of dividing divisions into brigade groups in battle. Brigade groups were suitable only for movement in the desert. Armour 'in support' of

infantry had proved to be a myth. The Army had not been correctly disposed in the first days of the campaign to deal with the armoured forces the enemy could concentrate against it. On the way to the frontier he had told the Army Commander, Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Cunningham, that he would fail with the forces he was deploying. **Freyberg** had been so apprehensive that he had told Cunningham he would not take the New Zealand Division over the frontier until the armoured battle had been won. Wrong deductions by Army concerning that battle had sent the Division on its way to suffer at **Bardia** and **Sidi Rezegh**.³

General Freyberg's disquiet was not a product solely of the current campaign. It had a background of **Greece** and **Crete**. He had also seen Operation **BATTLEAXE**, an affair on the frontier in June of that year in which the British forces had fared badly. This had seriously disturbed him. Nor was he alone in his thoughts. From **Baggush**

¹ For full text see *Documents*, Vol I, No. 39.

² **Maj-Gen A. S. Wilder**, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Order of the White Eagle (Serb); Te Hau, **Waipukurau**; born NZ 24 May 1890, sheepfarmer; Major, Wgtn Mtd Rifles, 1914–19; CO 25 Bn May 1940–Sep 1941; comd NZ Trg Group, **Maadi** Camp, Sep–Dec 1941 Jan–Feb 1942; 5 Bde 6 Dec 1941–17 Jan 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Apr 1942–Jan 1943; 1 Div Jan–Nov 1943.

³ Statement to author, 3 May 1948.

he visited Lieutenant-General G. E. Brink, of the South Africans, to find Brink 'in despair over dissipation of his forces and manner in which his Bdes are employed even without reference to him.'¹

Middle East Command's reception of **General Freyberg's** draft report on the Division's operations and the lessons they taught reinforced his doubts of the Command's wisdom and skill. General Auchinleck asked

that the report should be sent to him before it was circulated 'as he feels that it is most important that nothing should go into it that is not in accordance with the policy he wishes adopted in tactical operations.' The report was returned with the note: 'The only item I disagree with is the comment on battle-groups. Also it shows how badly we handle our "I" tanks.'

Auchinleck ordered the deletion of a remark that 'the dangerous mistake of committing our small force piecemeal was gradually being corrected', and also references to the ineffectiveness of the binary, or two-brigade, division and the brigade-group organisation. ²

The sum of these reflections and the decision they inspired are expressed in **Freyberg's** own words:

'While I was responsible to the Commander-in-Chief in operations, my primary responsibility and loyalty were to the Government and people of New Zealand. No other loyalty could come before that. I had their Division and I was responsible for it.

'I had seen what had happened in **Greece** and **Crete** and in the desert at **Sidi Barrani** and **Battleaxe**. I had seen the **Desert Command** under Auchinleck. I knew their ideas and how faulty they were. I became firmly convinced that the only way to safeguard the interests of New Zealand and of the Division was to get the Division away from the **Desert Command**.' ³

Accordingly, **General Freyberg** revived with **Middle East Headquarters** the project of August 1941 for the transfer of the Division to **Syria**. Other reasons supported the move. **Turkey** and **Syria** might become an active theatre if the fortunes of war flowed against the Soviet Union. The Australian divisions then in **Syria** were likely to be withdrawn for service in the **Pacific** and would have to be replaced. The New Zealand Division's experiences in similar terrain in **Greece** and **Crete** made it specially suitable for operations in **Turkey** and **Syria**. **Syria** offered a more congenial climate in which to rest, refit and train. There were

defensive works to be completed. Further, while **Syria** remained a non-operational theatre, the Division would be readily available should it be required for the **Pacific**.

¹ GOC's diary, 12 Dec 1941.

² GOC's papers.

³ Statement to author, 3 May 1948.

General Freyberg would not have pressed for the transfer without these supporting arguments. His was not the nature to avoid battle or seek only the easiest tasks. Nor was this the spirit of the Division. The Government's policy was one of fullest co-operation. Although events proved that the danger of a German invasion of the **Middle East** through **Turkey** was exaggerated, Auchinleck and his staff were apprehensive of the northern flank. ¹ **Freyberg** shared these views. He believed there was a substantial role for the Division in **Syria**.

It was with relief, therefore, that on 13 December **Freyberg** cabled the Government: 'Division is now to refit and train for future operations on the Syrian front. I consider it will take two months' hard training to get units and formations up to the requisite pitch.'

¹ Despatch, p. 309.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 2 – A HAZARDOUS PROJECT

CHAPTER 2

A Hazardous Project

REST and recreation, refitting, reorganisation and training were quick-acting specifics in the revival of the Division at **Baggush**. There were 5000 trained men in the reinforcement pool at **Maadi** to fill gaps in the ranks. Reorganisation was eased by the fact that the administrative portions of the units and formations had escaped comparatively lightly in the recent fighting. Casualties among the officers ¹ and non-commissioned officers, however, had been heavy. But the Division, at this period, was fortunate in the wealth of material available for promotion. Nevertheless, time was required to make the selections and to accustom the promoted officers and non-commissioned officers to their new responsibilities. The tactical lessons of the campaign had to be assimilated and put into practice. The two months' period suggested by **General Freyberg** for the restoration of the Division was not too long.

Excitement was aroused by the return of officers and men who had been taken prisoner but who had escaped and made their way back to the Division, some after many vicissitudes. This excitement reached a peak early in January with the capture of **Bardia** by the South Africans and the recovery of about 800 New Zealanders, mostly from **5 Brigade**. The recaptured men reported that all the officers who had been taken with them, including Brigadier **Hargest**, ² the brigade commander, and Brigadier **Miles**, ³ the commander of the New Zealand Artillery, had been shipped away by the enemy. Among the returning officers were Lieutenant-Colonels Dittner, ⁴ of

¹ Fifty officers were killed in action, 13 died of wounds, 122 were wounded, and 144 were taken prisoner. Two COs were killed in action, two brigadiers and three COs taken prisoner, and four COs wounded.

² **Brig J. Hargest**, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; Member of Parliament for **Invercargill** 1931–35, **Awarua** 1935–44; born Gore,

4 Sep 1891; farmer; served **1 NZEF** 1914–20, comd 2 Bn Otago Regt, 1918; comd 5 Bde May 1940–Nov 1941; p.w. 27 Nov 1941; escaped Mar 1943; killed in action, **France**, 12 Aug 1944.

³ **Brig R. Miles**, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d.; born Springston, 10 Dec 1892; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1914–19; CRA 2 NZ Div 1940–41; comd **2 NZEF (UK)** 1940; wounded and p.w. 1 Dec 1941; died, **Spain**, 20 Oct 1943.

⁴ **Brig G. Dittmer**, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Maharahara, 4 Jun 1893; Regular soldier; Auckland Regt 1914–19 (OC 1 NZ Entrenching Bn); CO 28 (Maori) Bn, Jan 1940–Nov 1941; wounded 23 Nov 1941; comd 1 Inf Bde Gp (in NZ) Apr 1942–Aug 1943; 1 Div, Aug 1942–Jan 1943; **Fiji Military Forces** and Fiji Inf Bde Gp, Sep 1943–Nov 1945; Camp Commandant, Papakura Military Camp, 1946; Commandant, Central Military District, 1946–48.

28 (Maori) Battalion, and **Kippenberger**, ¹ **20 Battalion**, who had separately escaped after their capture in the New Zealand medical centre near **Point 175**. The latter on his arrival at **Baggush** found some compensation for his wounds and trials in **General Freyberg's** greeting: 'You're a brigadier!'

The sick and wounded of the recovered prisoners were sent to hospital and the remainder to **Maadi**.

Innocuous rumour and gossip based on the war communiques and commentaries, scraps from the intelligence reports and letters from New Zealand also varied the routine. The Pacific war aroused the keenest interest and was the basis of many rumours concerning the Division's future. These were coloured by the Government's request for experienced officers and non-commissioned officers for the home defence forces then being rapidly expanded. **Brigadier Barrowclough**, DSO, ² commanding **6 Brigade**, was specially asked for to command a division. Other senior officers released at this time and later were Brigadier Wilder and Lieutenant-Colonels Andrew, VC, ³ Dittmer, **Satterthwaite** ⁴ and **Duff**. ⁵

The transfer of these officers meant more to the Division than occasion for gossip or colour for rumour. Added to the loss of other senior officers in **Cyrenaica**, their departure created anxiety for the Division's efficiency in command and staff.

In Divisional Headquarters, Lieutenant-Colonel C. E. Weir ⁶ moved up from the command of **6 Field Regiment** to become CRA and a brigadier in place of Brigadier Miles. The three field regiments and the anti-tank and light anti-aircraft regiments all had new commanding officers. In the infantry, **Lieutenant-Colonel**

¹ Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Wellington; born Ladbrooks, 28 Jan 1897; barrister and solicitor; 1 NZEF 1916–17; CO 20 Bn Sep 1939–Apr 1941, Jun–Dec 1941; comd 10 Bde, Crete, May 1941; 5 Bde Jan 1942–Jun 1943, Nov 1943–Feb 1944; 2 NZ Div 30 Apr–14 May 1943 and 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; Prisoner of War Reception Group (UK) 1944–45; twice wounded; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories.

² Maj-Gen Rt Hon Sir Harold Barrowclough, PC, KCMG, CB, DSO and bar, MC, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US), Croix de Guerre (Fr); Wellington; born Masterton, 23 Jun 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde 1915–19 (CO 4 Bn); comd 7 NZ Inf Bde in UK, 1940; 6 Bde, 1 May 1940–21 Feb 1942; GOC 2 NZEF in Pacific and GOC 3 NZ Div, 8 Aug 1942–20 Oct 1944; Chief Justice of New Zealand.

³ Brig L. W. Andrew, VC, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Ashurst, 23 Mar 1897; Regular soldier; Wellington Regt, 1915–19; CO 22 Bn Jan 1940–Mar 1942; comd 5 Bde 27 Nov–8 Dec 1941; Area Commander, Wellington, Nov 1943–Dec 1946; Commandant Central Military District, Apr 1948–Mar 1952.

⁴ Col S. M. Satterthwaite, m.i.d.; Timaru; born Timaru, 7 Jan 1897; Regular soldier; Bde IO (Lt) NZ Rifle Bde, 1917–19; CO 26 Bn Dec 1941–Apr 1942.

⁵ Brig C. S. J. Duff, DSO, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 19 Nov 1898; Regular soldier; comd 34 NZ A-Tk Bty, 1939–40; 7 A-Tk Regt, Oct 1940–May 1941; 4 Fd Regt, Aug 1941–Apr 1942; CRA 3 NZ Div, Aug 1942–Oct 1944; NZLO Melbourne, 1947–48.

⁶ Maj-Gen C.E. Weir, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ 5 Oct 1905; Regular soldier; CO 6 Fd Regt Sep 1939–Dec 1941; CRA 2 NZ Div Dec 1941–Jun 1944; comd 2 NZ Div 4 Sep–17 Oct 1944; 46 (Brit) Div Nov 1944–Sep 1946; Commandant Southern Military District, 1948–49; QMG Army HQ Nov 1951–.

Kippenberger succeeded to the command of **5 Brigade** and Colonel **Clifton**¹ to **6 Brigade**. Of the ten infantry battalions, no fewer than seven had new commanding officers. In its command structure the Division was thus to some extent immature in spite of the battle experience of the officers who had assumed greater responsibilities and duties.²

This immaturity applied also to many of the units. In the artillery, **6 Field Regiment** had suffered extremely heavy casualties at **Sidi Rezegh** and **Belhamed**, and new officers and other ranks far outnumbered the old hands. To a slightly lesser extent this was also the case with **7 Anti-Tank Regiment**. In 4 Infantry Brigade, **18 Battalion**'s losses had not been severe and **19 Battalion** had come out of the campaign almost intact. The 20th Battalion, now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel **Burrows**,³ on the other hand, had been practically destroyed at **Belhamed**. It was rebuilt with a team of new officers, some 600 reinforcements and a stiffening of about 150 old hands still to be found in **Egypt**. So also with **21 Battalion** in **5 Brigade** and **6 Brigade**'s three units, 24, 25, and 26 Battalions. All were rebuilt on a nucleus of survivors and of officers and other ranks left out of battle.

All this involved many psychological adjustments. On the return from **Cyrenaica** the survivors moved into the dugouts they had occupied

before the campaign. The dugouts, in which each man had his neatly cut bed in the wall, his patent stove, his 'pin-ups', might have been regarded in other circumstances as 'home'. But now they created a mood of sadness. They contained too many reminders of friends who had not come back from the battle. Besides the vacant places, there was the listing of details concerning friends known to be missing, the collecting and packing of the effects of comrades who had been killed, and then the pitiable battalion musters of the first days when the remnants of companies lined up—ragged, aggressive, resentful of anything suggestive of 'paradeground stuff': all part and parcel of war. Many had experienced it before and would go through it again and again before they became hardened but never callous to it.

¹ **Brig G. H. Clifton**, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); CRE 2 NZ Div 1940–41; Chief Engineer **30 Corps** 1941–42; comd 6 Bde Feb–Sep 1942; p.w. 4 Sep 1942; escaped, **Germany**, Mar 1945; NZ Military Liaison Officer, **London**, 1949–52; Commandant Northern Military District, Mar 1952–Sep 1953.

² The principal appointments in the Division in June 1942 with some notes on the units are given in Appendix I.

³ **Brig J. T. Burrows**, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Order of Valour (Gk); **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 14 Jul 1904; schoolmaster; CO 20 Bn Dec 1941–Jun 1942; 20 Bn and Armd Regt Aug 1942–Jul 1943; comd 4 Bde 27–29 Jun 1942, 5 Jul–15 Aug 1942; 5 Bde Mar 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; 6 Bde Jul–Aug 1944; Commandant Southern Military District, Nov 1951–Oct 1953; Commander K Force Nov 1953–Nov 1954.

The absorption of the reinforcements was a study in individual and mass psychology. Veterans on the one side and reinforcements on the other were sufficiently numerous to make distinct classes. Each class was slightly resentful of the other. The reinforcements carried a chip on

the shoulder when they were dubbed 'Coconut Bombers' because their service in **Fiji** had been bloodless. They felt the depression of the older hands, but could not share it. If any of them appeared to be stepping too easily into a dead comrade's shoes, or oblivious of the honour done him in admission to the sacred ranks, he was coolly received. There was little that anybody could do about it except wait for the two groups to settle down together.

This settling-down process was hastened at the New Year with a celebration big enough to pass into tradition as the 'Battle of **Baggush**'. At midnight on the last day of the year, pent feelings were loosed with a display of fireworks on a grand scale. German and Italian flares were fired in abundance. Machine-gun and rifle fire was almost continuous. The artillery added bass tones to the celebrations with their 25-pounders. So many Very lights, parachute flares, tracer bullets, and shells and weapons of all kinds heralded the New Year that adjacent Navy and Air Force commands made emergency calls asking if the Division was being attacked.

General Freyberg noted in his diary that it was a 'regrettable waste of ammunition and enemy flares, etc., but, being New Year's Eve, only to be expected.' If, however, there was material waste, there was moral gain. All ranks, old and new, now had something in common. From that moment morale took a distinct upward turn.

Thus 1941 ended on a high note and gave way to 1942 with all the confident hopes associated with the change of the calendar. But, as so often happens, the New Year was to bring the unexpected.

Only three days after **General Freyberg** had advised the Government of the move to **Syria**, he was warned of another projected role for the Division. The enemy was then resisting stubbornly on the **Gazala** line in **Cyrenaica**, but **Middle East Headquarters** was confident of victory and thought that some time in February it would be possible to mount a battle for the key defensive area at **El Agheila**. The New Zealand Division would be required for this operation. Instead of going to **Syria**, the

Division would move into General Headquarters Reserve at **Maadi** and the Combined Operations Training Centre at **Kabrit**, on the **Suez Canal**, to complete refitting and to train for its revised role. ¹

¹ GOC's papers, messages Lt-Gen A. F. Smith (CGS, ME) to **Freyberg** of 16 and 19 Dec 1941.

Agheila loomed large in the appreciations of Auchinleck and his staff. The remnants of Graziani's Italian Army had escaped to the shelter of this naturally strong position the previous January. From **Agheila**, ***Afrika Korps*** and the reorganised Italians under Rommel had debouched on 30 March to recapture the whole of **Cyrenaica** except **Tobruk** and establish themselves on the frontier of **Egypt**. In the current operations the destruction of the enemy forces, especially of the armour, was given its customary place as the main objective of Eighth Army, but always in mind there was the additional objective of preventing a withdrawal to **Agheila** in organised strength.

The new strategic situation created by the entry of **Japan** into the war gave further importance to **Agheila**. While Auchinleck hoped to continue the offensive through **Agheila** to **Tripoli**, he was compelled to recognise that transfers and diversions of formations and equipment to the **Far East** might force him to halt at the western frontier of **Cyrenaica**. Therefore he was as anxious to secure **Agheila** as he judged the enemy would be to hold it. **Agheila** had to be traversed to invade **Tripolitania**. It was equally essential to control the area in order to hold **Cyrenaica**. Otherwise, Auchinleck feared, Eighth Army would have to retire to the Egyptian frontier if the enemy became strong enough to launch an offensive in force. ¹

Looking well ahead, **Middle East Headquarters** prepared a plan for the capture of **Agheila** and, in the middle of December, assigned troops and equipment for the project as well as for intermediate operations to clear **Bardia** and **Halfaya** and thus improve the administrative situation. The general idea was that a lightly equipped brigade group would be landed

on the coast at **Ras el Ali** to the west of the enemy positions at **Agheila**, while a motorised brigade would move round the positions to the south and then turn north to join the seaborne forces in the enemy's rear. The combined forces would then prevent reinforcements from reaching the enemy from **Tripoli** and close his only avenue of escape from a frontal attack to be made at the same time.

A New Zealand brigade group (later the 5th) was cast for the role of the landing force and the **22nd (Guards) Motorised Brigade**, accompanied by Headquarters New Zealand Division, was assigned the encircling move through the desert. The desert column was to be commanded by **Freyberg**.

Credit for the plan, known successively as 'Acrobat Minimus', 'Blood Orange' and 'Graduate', was claimed by Combined Training Centre at **Kabrit**. The plan may have been inspired by Mr Churchill's constant urgings that the enemy's long communica-

¹ Despatch, p. 348.

tions along the North African coast were vulnerable to amphibious operations, ¹ and to the natural desire of the Training Centre to see its theories and teachings expressed. Like most plans for placing forces astride the enemy's communications it had superficial attractions.

When, however, the project was submitted to **General Freyberg** he did his utmost to dissuade **Middle East Headquarters** from pursuing it. In his view, the plan had nothing to commend it. It was based, he thought, on too scant information and faulty appreciation of the enemy's strength and resourcefulness. **Freyberg** told **Middle East Headquarters** that they did not know what reserves Rommel had behind **Agheila** and that, in any case, it would be a simple matter for Rommel to turn on the landing force and destroy it.

It would seem obvious that **General Freyberg**, holding such views,

should refuse the assignment. He could do so within the terms of his 'charter'. Alternatively, he could use his right to refer the matter to the Government for its decision. The obvious course, however, was not open to him. Certainly it was not one to be taken at that early stage of the project. Nor, at that stage, could he give the Government all the information and advice it would need in reaching a decision. There were, however, other factors which, consciously or subconsciously, would weigh with any commander of **Freyberg's** experience and sense of responsibility. Of these, perhaps the most important was morale. ²

General Freyberg's decision could enhance or weaken the morale of Eighth Army. If **Middle East Headquarters** abandoned the operation because of his refusal to undertake it rather than because of the merits of his arguments against it, the fact was almost certain to become known and, with repetition, to become distorted. The army in the field might rejoice in the decision; it might also lose confidence in a high command apparently willing to be dictated to by a subordinate.

There would have been an even worse effect on the British divisions in Eighth Army if there were the slightest suspicion that the New Zealanders had the right to pick and choose their tasks; that they were willing to accept the easy and spectacular and leave the difficult and hazardous to others. Already there was some discontent among the British troops concerning the publicity given to the Dominions' forces in operations in which British units had

¹ Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (Cassell), p. 374.

² In spite of all that has been said and written about morale, few laymen and not over-many soldiers really understand how important it is and the calculations which may be based on it. The morale of the fighting forces and the civil population of **Britain** was the 'real test' on which the Government decided to fight on alone in 1940. See Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, pp. 78–9.

played an equal part. After the capture of **Bardia** in January 1942 a battalion of the **Royal Armoured Corps**, which had been particularly valorous in five assaults on the enemy in one day, heard in the official report and comments by the **BBC** all the credit being given to Dominion troops. The absence of even passing reference to the role of the British tank crews provoked, among other remarks, the ironical comment: 'The worst part of the Statute of Westminster is that the **United Kingdom** did not acquire Dominion status.'

The New Zealand Division, too, would resent any suggestion that it would not essay dangerous operations. Again, the high reputation of the New Zealanders in two world wars would be undermined if, in spite of **Freyberg's** misgivings, another division accomplished the mission. It could also be argued that refusal to comply with the Commander-in-Chief's plans would not be in keeping with the Dominion's policy of full co-operation with **Britain**, a policy precisely stated by the Prime Minister, Mr Savage, in September 1939: 'Where she goes, we go.'

Strategically, it was highly desirable that the enemy should be prised out of **Agheila** at the earliest moment and the way cleared for an advance into **Tripolitania**. And, on the vital tactical side, it was a matter of opinion whether the project was feasible or not. Against **Freyberg's** doubts and apprehensions, **Middle East Headquarters** could array the views of other experienced officers whose judgment had to be respected.

General Freyberg had a test question he used as an aid in reaching a decision when he doubted the worth or feasibility of an operation. 'If the New Zealand Division does not accept the assignment, will some other division which cannot refuse be ordered to undertake it?' If the answer were in the affirmative, the New Zealanders should accept the task and do their best to ensure success. ¹

Reflection on these factors persuaded **Freyberg** that he could not refuse the assignment and orders were issued for the moves to **Maadi** and **Kabrit**. His apprehensions were not allayed, but he could still press **Middle East Headquarters** not to go on with the project as planned. He

could also supervise the detailed planning, particularly co-operation among the three services and the provision of air cover.

Throughout the remainder of December and in early January **Freyberg** urged his views on **Middle East Headquarters**, asking questions, examining the answers and raising still further objections. Finally, at the request of the Commander-in-Chief, he referred the matter to the Government. The Government asked for details, but when a fuller explanation was submitted to Middle East Head-

¹ Statement to author, 3 May 1948.

quarters for approval its transmission was refused on the grounds that the secret might be endangered. The Minister of Defence then informed **Freyberg** that if it was impossible to consult the Government for security reasons or the necessity for immediate action, the Government would rely on his judgment. ¹

Thus the matter stood until the final planning conference, which was attended by about thirty officers from the three services. At this conference **Freyberg** was so forthright in his comments and so argumentative that at length Admiral Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief Eastern Mediterranean Fleet, beckoned him out of the room. Cunningham advised him not to worry. He said he had told **Middle East Headquarters** that the Navy would not go into the Gulf of **Sirte** unless air cover for twenty-four hours was guaranteed. As the aircraft were not available 'the show was off' so far as the Navy was concerned. ²

But unknown to the planners and completely unexpected by them, a more decisive factor was to make an end to the project. 'On the 21st January the improbable occurred, and without warning the Axis forces began to advance.' ³ Rommel once more was on the rampage into **Cyrenaica**. Neither the New Zealanders nor any other British troops except captives were to see **Agheila** until nearly a year later.

Doubts and discussions concerning the Division's participation in the **Ras el Ali** project did not hold up the moves and training incidental to the operation.

On 4 January **5 Brigade**, the last of the brigades to return to **Baggush** from the battle area, with **28 (Maori) Battalion** attached, moved to **Kabrit**. Under the direction of the Combined Training Centre, units practised the details of landing operations item by item, including rowing, use of scaling ladders, embarking in and disembarking from assault landing craft, assembling and loading handcarts, and the art of crossing beach wire defences.

From these elementary practices the brigade moved to combined training exercises under the direction of **Divisional Headquarters**, which had followed the brigade from **Baggush** and had been established at **Fayid**, on the west side of **Great Bitter Lake**. The object was to practise the brigade in landing on a beach in darkness against light opposition, as well as in the use of air support and signals. Using a Glen ship moored in **Great Bitter Lake** as brigade headquarters, the units embarked in various types of assault craft

¹ *Documents*, Vol II, Nos. 116–19.

² **General Freyberg** to author, 3 May 1948.

³ Despatch, p. 348.

at the **Kabrit** landing stage in the early hours of the morning. Just before dawn landings were made on assigned beaches, and at dawn the **Royal Air Force** bombed targets ahead of the landing parties.

The training of the brigade culminated in the first week in February in a landing operation in the **Red Sea**. The men thought the exercise was mainly for the benefit of the Combined Training Centre, which had

not previously attempted the landing of a full brigade. Actually it was a full-dress rehearsal for the assault at **Ras el Ali** which had not then been abandoned. The exercise was watched by General Auchinleck.

At the jetties at **Fanara** and **Fayid** four Glen ships— *Saint Essylt*, *Glengyle*, *Princess Marguerite* and *Derwentdale*—were loaded with guns, vehicles and men, and on 4 February they sailed in convoy to **Port Tewfik**. Next morning the ships moved into the Gulf of **Suez** to a point opposite **Ras el Sudr** on the east coast. At 11 a.m. the first waves of assaulting troops reached the beach. They were followed by heavier landing craft with guns and vehicles. Beachheads and communications were established.

The principal errors reported in a generally successful exercise were the grounding of a tank landing craft too far out for the guns to be unloaded and the failure for some time of communications with the mobile tank column. Units bedded down in the positions they were holding and next morning re-embarked in preparation for a similar exercise by night.

At this date, however, **Middle East Headquarters** was convinced by events in **Cyrenaica** that the enemy's emergence from the **Agheila** stronghold was more than a reconnaissance in force. By 4 February the advanced divisions of Eighth Army had been forced back to the **Gazala-Bir Hacheim** line. The **Ras el Ali** operation, therefore, was cancelled and the Division was given another new role.

Apart from **General Freyberg**, perhaps no one in the Division was more relieved by the abandonment of the landing than **Brigadier Kippenberger**, who had assumed command of **5 Brigade** on 17 January in succession to Brigadier Wilder, who was returning to New Zealand for duty. **Kippenberger** had disliked the project from its inception and, although he was urged to the task by **General Freyberg**, privately doubted whether **Freyberg** would permit it to go on. ¹ In December 1942 when he studied the ground at **Ras el Ali** he became firmly convinced that the operation would have been disastrous, for the simple reason

that landing craft would have grounded some distance off shore and no tanks, guns, or vehicles could have been landed. This information was supplied by a naval officer unloading supplies at the single small jetty at **Ras el Ali**.

¹ **Kippenberger, *Infantry Brigadier*** (Oxford), p. 113.

While **5 Brigade** was doing its advanced training and **4 Brigade** was performing elementary landing exercises at **Kabrit**, **6 Brigade** and groups from the base units at **Maadi** under Brigadier **Falconer** ¹ took part in an incident which was seriously to disturb AngloEgyptian relations in the post-war years.

At the beginning of February the New Zealanders moved into **Cairo** for security duty. Contact was made with British and South African forces similarly employed and brigade battle headquarters was established in the leave and transit camp at **Abbassia**. The 24th Battalion was lodged at **Abbassia**, the 25th at **Kasr-el-Nil** Barracks, and the 26th was quartered in the Citadel.

All ranks were vaguely aware of a crisis in the affairs of the Egyptian Government, but most contented themselves with the official explanation for such a display of force. This was that the crisis might precipitate demonstrations and rioting, which could not be allowed to get out of hand to prejudice the security of the British forces.

The 24th Battalion's announced role was to prevent mobs from crossing the main railway bridge, to maintain order in Sharia Shubra, and to disperse demonstrators forming elsewhere in the Shubra area. The 25th Battalion had orders to patrol part of Sharias Abbas and Bulac and to prevent mobs from assembling in and breaking out of the Bulac area.

In the evening of 4 February a New Zealand detachment some 800 strong, under Lieutenant-Colonel **Gray**, ² joined British and South African troops in enclosing Abdin Palace where **King Farouk** was in

residence. By nine o'clock the palace was completely surrounded by infantry shoulder to shoulder, with carriers, light machine guns and rifles. Light tanks were deployed in the palace yard and further tanks and artillery in Abdin Square, opposite the main entrance to the palace. Orders were given that no Egyptians were to be allowed to enter or leave the palace until the cordon was withdrawn.

These operations were prepared and carried out with such secrecy that no hitch occurred. All orders were given verbally and contained only enough information to permit commanders and junior officers to carry out the roles assigned to them. The mounted and dis-

¹ **Brig A. S. Falconer**, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born **Mosgiel**, 4 Nov 1892; tobacconist and secretary; Otago Regt 1914–19 (BM 2 NZ Inf Bde); CO 23 Bn May–Aug 1940 and Mar–May 1941; comd 7 and 5 Inf Bdes in **UK**, 1940–41; NZ **Maadi** Camp Jun 1941–Oct 1942; 5 Div (in NZ) Dec 1942–Aug 1943; Overseas Commissioner, NZ Patriotic Fund Board, Nov 1943–Feb 1945.

² **Brig J. R. Gray**, ED, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 7 Aug 1900; barrister and solicitor; CO 18 Bn Sep 1939–Nov 1941, Mar–Jun 1942; comd 4 Bde 29 Jun–5 Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

mounted bodyguard whose barracks adjoined the palace did not offer any opposition.

Shortly after nine o'clock the British Ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson, accompanied by military representatives, had audience with **King Farouk**. Upon his withdrawal the cordon about the palace was also withdrawn. Later, the units deployed elsewhere in the city returned to their camps.

No official record of the Ambassador's audience with the King was issued in **London** or **Cairo** nor, in the post-war years, was any effort made to challenge or contradict highly coloured and somewhat dramatic

accounts which purported to be records in the first person of the meeting. The background and the result of the audience, however, are not in dispute.

Early in January trouble arose between **King Farouk** and the Prime Minister, Hussein Sirry Pasha, when the Government broke off diplomatic relations with Vichy France. Although the King did not object to the Government's decision, he challenged the method in which it had been made. He claimed he had not been consulted and that the Royal prerogative had been infringed. The disagreement appeared to be capable of settlement, but the King pressed the affair to the point of demanding the resignation of the Foreign Minister, Salim Samy Pasha. The Prime Minister interpreted this as an effort to undermine his position and, although he was conciliatory, he made it known at the end of the month that he no longer enjoyed the King's confidence. On 2 February his Government resigned.

Hussein Sirry Pasha had been loyal to the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, and the British Government, therefore, was concerned with his fate. The interest quickened when it was learned that the King was negotiating with politicians who might not be so favourable in observing the terms of the treaty. Consequently, on 4 February the British Ambassador, on instructions from **London**, entered the palace for the audience at which he persuaded the King to send for **Nahas Pasha**, leader of the **Wafdist Party**, to form a Government. The display of armed force was to support the Ambassador in his representations.

Nahas Pasha accepted the King's commission and, as the decision received popular acclaim, no further trouble was expected and the troops were withdrawn from **Cairo**.

The occurrence passed into Egyptian history as the 'Incident of 1942'. It loomed large in demands by **Egypt** after the war that **Britain** should withdraw her garrison of the **Suez Canal** zone and for the removal from the treaty of the clauses giving **Britain** rights of occupation. Egyptian Governments contended that it was not consistent with the

independence and dignity of **Egypt** that foreign troops should have occupation rights. When the British Government denied that these rights prejudiced **Egypt's** independence, pointed reference was made to the 'Incident of 1942' as an example of direct interference with **Egypt's** internal affairs.

Rommel's advance from **Agheila** was halted on the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** line. General Auchinleck ordered Eighth Army to make a stand there to preserve **Tobruk** as a forward supply base. He hoped to fight a decisive battle on the **Gazala** line and to convert the British retreat into another offensive. As an insurance against misfortune, the defences of **Tobruk** and of the frontier at **Sollum** and **Halfaya** were to be strengthened.

Headquarters New Zealand Division was then at **Fayid**, **4 Brigade** at **Kabrit**, **5 Brigade** on **Great Bitter Lake** and **6 Brigade** at **Maadi**. The **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, which had carried on with **2 South African Division** in **Cyrenaica**, had rejoined the Division and was refitting at **Maadi**. The only units still to rejoin the Division were companies of the **Army Service Corps** serving British formations of the Eighth Army. One of the companies, **4 Reserve Mechanical Transport**, had the ill-luck to be in a convoy which ran into the enemy advancing from **Agheila**. The New Zealanders had men of the **1st Battalion Welch Regiment** in twelve trucks and were taking them forward from **Benghazi**. The convoy was surrounded. The New Zealanders destroyed their trucks and, with the British troops, set out on foot in small groups in an attempt to slip through the enemy columns. Only four of the New Zealanders escaped, although another, **Driver Oswald Martin**,¹ later organised an escape from a prison compound near **Benghazi** and got through to the British lines in April.

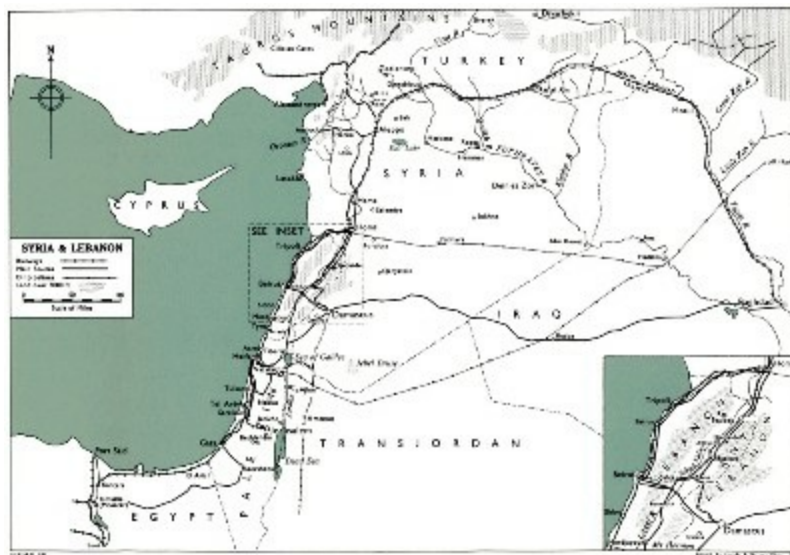
On **6 February** **General Freyberg** cabled the Prime Minister, Mr Fraser,² that he had received orders for the Division to move to the desert for a full operational role, the move to be completed by the **22nd**. The Division was to relieve troops coming out to rest and refit.

Equipment was being made up completely in the next two days and the Division was up to strength in officers and men and in good condition. **Freyberg** said he expected a defensive role but this depended on the Commander-in-Chief's future policy, which had not yet been divulged to him. ³

¹ **Dvr O. Martin, MM; Wellington; born NZ 11 Dec 1918; labourer.**

² **Mr Fraser had become Prime Minister on the death of Mr Savage in March 1940.**

³ *Documents, Vol II, No. 121.*



Syria & Lebanon

The Government's response was swift and left no doubt of its feelings in the matter. 'While we must accept the position,' **Freyberg** was advised the following day, 'we are most disappointed that circumstances now apparently require further operations by the New Zealand Division so soon after its recent heavy losses. We assume that nothing but the serious nature of the emergency has necessitated this step, and we would wish this communication to be shown to the Commander-in-Chief.' ¹

At the same time the Government took up the matter with Mr Churchill. ² After repeating the information received from **Freyberg** and stating that 'we have of course told him that we must accept the position', Mr Fraser said that 'ill-informed comments emanating recently from **America** and elsewhere concerning the very large forces retained inactive in the **United Kingdom** as compared with the needs elsewhere, the despatch of American troops to Northern Ireland, and the use of Dominion forces in the **Middle East** have been taken up with some force in this Dominion and were indeed reflected, with some degree of embarrassment to us, at the secret session of Parliament yesterday.'

Mr Fraser recalled that the Division had had a full share of heavy fighting and had suffered grievous losses. 'I greatly fear,' he continued, 'that their renewed employment will add weight to this point of view, especially since their employment now will be misrepresented here as an indication that their last campaign was useless and that the job must be done again. Indeed, point may well be added to a demand that the New Zealand forces should be returned to the **Pacific** area to meet the danger nearer home.... Such consensus of sentiments may have mischievous results.'

Mr Fraser added that to counter any such propaganda and to allay any possible public feeling, he would be most grateful if Mr Churchill would let him have, as far as possible for public use, a full statement of the number of troops then held in the **United Kingdom** and the reasons for their retention—'reasons which I do not for a moment suggest are not completely conclusive.'

Mr Churchill immediately supplied the information sought. ³ He said that only shortage of shipping held troops in **Britain**, but that every month for more than a year past the equivalent of one New Zealand division had been sent from **Britain** to the **Middle East**. He was anxious to get the Australian and New Zealand troops into the Japanese theatre, and 'night and day we work to find more tonnage: all is continually filled.'

¹ *Documents*, Vol II, No. 122.

² *Ibid*, No. 123.

³ *Ibid*, No. 124.

‘Do not allow anyone therefore,’ he said, ‘to reproach the Mother Country with an undue regard for her own security.’ ¹

In the event, the New Zealand Division was not called for further operations in the desert. Concurrent with Mr Churchill's reply another message was received from **Freyberg stating: ‘Our proposed move forward was due to the fact that some of the formations which took part in the more recent operations in Western **Cyrenaica** will have to be replaced and brought back to refit The Commander-in-Chief sympathises with the point of view expressed in your telegram and has now altered his plans by bringing in another division in our place. There will be a short time-lag ... and to tide over this period he has asked me to place the 5th Brigade Group at the disposal of Eighth Army. I have agreed to this course.’ ²**

The Government accepted **Freyberg's decision, and on 11 February the brigade group, brought up to strength in transport by drawing on other formations, moved back to the desert by rail and road. It comprised:**

Headquarters 5 Infantry Brigade

21, 22, and 23 Battalions

5 Field Regiment

7 Field Company

32 Anti-Tank Battery

42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery

4 Company, 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion

5 Field Ambulance

2 Section Ordnance Workshops

C Section Ordnance Field Park

5 Brigade Group Army Service Corps detachment

6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Company

Brigadier Kippenberger was ordered to report to Eighth Army near **Gambut**, where he was further instructed to place the group with the utmost despatch at the disposal of Lieutenant-General 'Strafer' **Gott**,³ commanding **13 Corps**, who in turn ordered him to prepare and occupy a brigade box, 'an unhappy device fashion-

¹ The correspondence is an example of the wide repercussions that may follow exploitation of an opportunity in a theatre of war. The defeat of Eighth Army was Rommel's principal object, but the enemy's cause was also assisted by ill-based comments and recriminations which his operations inspired amongst the people of the British Commonwealth and **America**. These, as Fraser mentioned to Churchill, were even reflected in the secret session of the New Zealand Parliament. Similar incidents occurred at other stages of the war. While they did not prejudice relations between the Governments concerned, they point to some of the difficulties of leading democracies in war. Students may contrast the democratic system which fosters a healthy interest in the conduct of war, even to the extent of permitting every man to be his own strategist, with the blind obedience exacted by totalitarian regimes.

² *Documents*, Vol II, No. 125.

³ **Lt-Gen W. H. E. Gott**, CBE, DSO, MC; GOC 7 Armd Div Sep 1941–Feb 1942; comd **13 Corps** Feb–Aug 1942; killed in action 7 Aug 1942.

able at that time,'¹ at **El Adem**. The box, or strongpoint, was to be part of the defence in depth of the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** line and was to cover the Corps' main artery, the **Trigh Capuzzo**, against raids and attempts by the enemy to establish himself in rear of Eighth Army's

forward positions and the **El Adem** airfield.

All units were on the position by 16 February, and they dug, wired, and mined mutually supporting battalion boxes within a group perimeter of 14,000 yards. In ten days the engineers put down 16,944 mines, of which 13,000 were lifted from the outer defences of **Tobruk**. The mines were lifted with full authority as it had been decided that **Tobruk** would not be held if the enemy broke through the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** line. This particular weakening of the mine defences of **Tobruk** was thought in the Division, and elsewhere, to have been a factor in the rapid fall of the fortress in the following June.

On the completion of the defences at **El Adem**, a mobile column was formed to operate in the triangle **Acroma- Tobruk- Sidi Rezegh**. It was to hunt raiding parties and harass armoured groups should they break into the box. The column was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel **Russell**,² **22 Battalion**, and comprised a battery of the field artillery, a detachment of **44 Royal Tank Regiment** in Valentine tanks, a carrier platoon, an infantry company, anti-tank and antiaircraft troops, a machine-gun platoon and a signals detachment. The column acquired considerable skill in its exercises but its role was not taken seriously by the brigade commander.³

The brigade remained at **El Adem** until 22 March, when it was relieved by South African units. The box was later referred to by **29 Indian Brigade**, which occupied it effectively in the June fighting, as being 'particularly strong'.⁴ The diary of *90 Light Division* for the period 12–16 June also made references to the strength of the position.

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 114.

² Lt-Col J. T. Russell, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; CO 22 Bn Feb–Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

³ ‘The idea was that while we were beleaguered in our nice little box it would cavort around outside, biting at the rear of our besiegers. I thought that war should be taken more seriously.’—*Infantry Brigadier*, p. 115.

⁴ *The Tiger Kills* (English edition, HMSO), p. 127.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 3 – ALTERNATIVE ROLES

CHAPTER 3

Alternative Roles

THE thrice-deferred transfer of the Division to **Syria** began on 26 February with the closing of advanced headquarters at **Fayid** and its reopening at **Wavell Barracks, Baalbek**, next morning. Oftrepeated rumours among the troops of a move to green fields at last were coming true.

Shortage of transport due to the needs of **5 Brigade Group** at **El Adem** and to other demands from Eighth Army made a tactical move impossible. It was in fact unnecessary. The camps along the Canal were tented, and each unit's tents and camp stores had to be taken to **Syria** with its normal stores and equipment. Scarcity of trucks compelled as many men and as much of the baggage as possible to be sent by rail.

In general, each unit loaded its trucks to capacity with stores and sent them off with guards as an advance party. Heavy baggage was put on railway trucks with guards to each truck. The main body of each group, with such equipment as would be needed immediately on arrival, moved by passenger train. Thus the transfer was more akin to a gigantic house-moving than to a military operation.

Traffic on the roads and railways between **Egypt** and **Syria** was heavy. In addition to the excess traffic normal to war, the Australian 6th and 7th Divisions were being concentrated on the Canal from **Syria** and **Palestine** for their return to **Australia**, and the New Zealand Division, less **5 Brigade Group**, was preparing to move north. The concentration of the Dominions' forces on the Canal did not escape the notice of the Germans although they made wrong deductions from the fact. On 25 February **Berlin** radio reported that the New Zealanders had left for home.

In the sum of its travels the Division saw part of **Sinai**, over which the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade had fought in 1916, the coastal regions of **Palestine**, **Lebanon**, and finally **Syria** to the border of **Turkey**.

Halts at staging points, some only overnight but others up to two and three days, permitted inspection of various areas in detail and enlarged acquaintance with the people. There was general awareness among the troops that they were passing over storied ground, but, whatever else they had in their equipment, a wide knowledge of biblical and military history was not included. But men who could fit modern place names to biblical stories found ready audiences.

Such were the piecemeal methods enforced by the transport situation that nearly three weeks were required for the transfer, the last main group, **Rear Divisional Headquarters, leaving **Kabrit** on 12 March. The leisurely move was in marked contrast to the speed with which the Division returned to the **Western Desert** in the following June when, within a week of receiving orders, it was in battle positions at **Mersa Matruh**.**

On completion of the shift to **Syria, **Divisional Headquarters** was at **Baalbek**, **4 Brigade** was in the right sector of **Djedeide** fortress, and **6 Brigade**, now commanded by Brigadier Clifton, was deployed in and about **Aleppo**, near the Turkish frontier. The Division was in **10 Corps** and under Ninth Army, commanded by General Sir H. M. Wilson. It had a fourfold task: (1) Demonstrating strength in **Syria** to obscure the real strength of the Allies now seriously depleted in the theatre by transfers and diversions to the **Far East**; (2) completing the construction of **Djedeide** fortress and demolition schemes north to the frontier; (3) preparing to advance into **Turkey** to the Hellespont or to a defensive line in the **Taurus Mountains** and, alternatively, an advance into **Persia**; (4) training.**

General Auchinleck had devoted considerable thought to the northern flank which, with the necessity of destroying the enemy in **North Africa, he placed high above all the numerous other problems of the **Middle East** command.¹ The danger he saw was the possible, if not probable, collapse of **Turkey** under a German attack. The enemy's deep advance into **Russia** also created a threat to the northern flank from the **Caucasus**. However, in November 1941 Auchinleck considered himself**

strong enough in forces and equipment in the theatre, and in promised reinforcements, to conduct an offensive in the **Western Desert** and to turn in time to stave off an attack from the north.

He intended, if the need arose, to stand on the defensive in the west and to hold the general line of the Tabriz-Mosul-Syrian-Turkish frontier with **Cyprus** and to despatch a force to help **Turkey** in northern **Anatolia**. For this comprehensive task he estimated he would need a minimum of 5 armoured divisions, 17 infantry divisions, and 34 heavy and 55 light anti-aircraft regiments. On 28 December he reviewed the forces available and promised, and submitted to the Chiefs of Staff an estimate of deficiencies as on 1 April, the earliest date he thought a threat from the north was likely to reveal itself.

¹ Opinions, strengths, and plans attributed to General Auchinleck in this chapter are taken from his Despatch.

Within a month of making these calculations, diversions of formations from the **Middle East** and of reinforcements required the Commander-in-Chief to make a further estimate of shortages which, in turn, compelled drastic revision of plans for the northern front. On 20 January, incidentally the day before Rommel unexpectedly debouched from **Agheila** to upset again the estimates of forces needed to hold him and **Cyrenaica**, Auchinleck reported that on 1 April he would be short of one and a half armoured divisions, 5 infantry divisions, and 19 heavy and 37 light anti-aircraft regiments. Besides this deficiency in formations and anti-aircraft artillery, there were indications that deliveries of armoured fighting vehicles and trucks would fall so far short of requirements that some formations in the **Middle East** would not be complete in transport and therefore would be unable to take part in active operations.

This situation led Auchinleck to decide that 'our only course will be to fall back on defences in rear in **Persia**, Central **Iraq** and Southern **Syria** and to fight a defensive battle, thus surrendering to the enemy all

air bases and landing grounds north of this line, the effect of which will be greatly to increase the scale of enemy air attack on our bases.'

A fortnight later, on 4 February, when **Middle East Headquarters** was examining its resources for a resumption of the offensive in the **Western Desert**, it was decided that all available tanks and armoured units could be withdrawn from the northern front. 'There is a risk,' Auchinleck observed in a note for the **Middle East Defence Committee**, 'but one which can be taken, unless there is a rapid change on the Russian front, as it now seems most unlikely that **Germany** will be able to mount an attack against **Syria** and **Iraq** through **Anatolia**, or against **Persia** through the Caucasus, before the beginning of August.' ¹

An operation instruction issued on 23 February to Ninth and Tenth Armies was of more immediate interest to New Zealand Division, then moving into **Syria**. Once more Auchinleck had to note still further diversions and projected transfers of troops which, if completed, would reduce the infantry strength for the whole of the **Middle East** theatre to eight divisions and five brigade groups. After providing three infantry divisions and one brigade group to secure the western front and one division for **Cyprus** to deny the

¹ Many opinions were held concerning the date when the enemy could attack the **Middle East** from the north. In February 1942 the first Russian winter offensive was coming to an end. Early in May, the Russians launched a 'spoiling offensive' on the South-Central front from Kharkov sector. It was not until June that the Germans resumed their large-scale operations which carried them to **Stalingrad** and the foothills of the Caucasus. In his despatch General Auchinleck says, 'We were always handicapped in our calculations by lack of knowledge of Soviet capabilities and intentions.'

island to the enemy as an air base, there would remain only four divisions and, at most, four brigade groups to meet the requirements of Ninth and Tenth Armies and a general reserve.

General Auchinleck thereupon stated that 'this force would be inadequate to stop an enemy attack in strength through **Persia** and **Syria**, directed on the Persian Gulf and the **Suez Canal**.' But this did not mean that the British and Allied forces were to throw in their hand. In General Wilson Ninth Army had a commander to whom the norm of war was scarcity of everything usually considered essential for success. In the early years of the First World War he had experienced the vicissitudes of scarcity. He knew scarcity again when he commanded in **Greece** and in the advance into **Syria** against the Vichy French. The New Zealand Division, then coming under his command, and **9 Australian Division** of **Tobruk** fame, had been trained to do much with little. Scarcity was the accustomed lot of the two Free French brigade groups, the **Polish Brigade** and the Greek brigade group, the last of which was to be under New Zealand command.

Ninth and Tenth Armies were ordered in the instruction of 23 February to impose the greatest possible delay on an enemy advance and thus gain time for the arrival of reinforcements. The Turks were to be supported if they resisted and if the necessary air forces were available. Airfields in northern **Syria** and **Iraq** were to be held as long as possible to permit attack on the enemy's communications through **Turkey**. When retreat became imperative, the withdrawing forces were to destroy communications and oil installations north of the line **Dizful-Paitak**¹ (in the highlands of western **Persia**)–Little Zab River (Upper Mesopotamia)–Ana–Abu Kemal (**Iraq**) and **Damascus– Ras Baalbek– Tripoli** (**Syria**). While withdrawing to prepared positions on this general line, the forces available were to be used boldly in attacking the enemy in flank and rear. If the armies were forced off the **Dizful– Tripoli** line, they were to fight a series of delaying actions on ground of their own choosing back to positions in southern **Iraq** and southern **Palestine** covering the ports on the Persian Gulf and the **Suez Canal**.

Auchinleck emphasized that 'it is of paramount importance that we avoid disclosing our weakness or our intentions to the enemy, to **Turkey**, or to the local populations, because by so doing we may encourage the

enemy to attack, drive **Turkey** into submission, and bring about a serious internal security situation.' Troop movements in the northern frontier area were to be maintained on the same scale as in the past to avoid giving an impression of a change in

¹ Probably another spelling of Taktak.

plans. Construction of roads in the northern areas on which a start had been made was to be continued but only slowly. No new works would be started. The main effort was to be concentrated on the completion of the defences on the **Dizful- Tripoli** line, local labour being used to the greatest possible extent 'to free formations for the training in manoeuvre which will be so essential to success.'

In the first six weeks of its sojourn in **Syria** the New Zealand Division did duty conforming to the policy of the Commander-in-Chief. However, by the close of April, the outlook for troops and equipment had improved a little and Auchinleck amended his operation instructions to provide for more aggressive action against an enemy attack from the north. In the new plan the Division was allotted a hazardous role.

If **Turkey** resisted, an air striking force with an army component from Ninth Army would move into northern **Anatolia** to airfields which the Turks had permitted the British to build and equip. At the same time, Ninth and Tenth Armies would advance into **Turkey** to the general line El Aziz (Kharpur)-Malatya- **Taurus Mountains** to improve communications, prepare demolitions on the main Turkish communications, and cover the withdrawal of the British forces from **Anatolia** should this become necessary.

If **Turkey** acquiesced in German aggression or collapsed quickly, Ninth and Tenth Armies were to enter **Turkey** and seize and hold the general line Diyarbekir-Siverek-Gaziantep (Aintab)-Bulanik (Baghche)-Payas to demolish communications and delay the enemy as far forward as possible. Should the Turks openly side with the Germans or

strengthen their forces on the Syrian frontier with the evident intention of co-operating with the Germans, the British armies were to carry out demolitions as far forward as possible and delay the enemy's advance.

Although General Auchinleck still considered that the forces likely to be at his disposal could not prevent an enemy penetration of northern **Iraq** and **Syria**, he believed the enemy could be kept away from the ports of southern **Palestine**, the Canal and the Persian Gulf. Accordingly he gave an explicit direction to the Army commanders that 'the enemy will not in any event be allowed to establish himself south of the general line Little Zab River-Ana- **Amman**-Jericho-Nablus-Haifa.'

In these plans New Zealand Division was marked for the advance into **Anatolia** with the air striking force and the alternatives of delaying actions in and south of **Turkey**. The positions on the left of the line of last resort, Little Zab River- **Haifa**, were about 120 miles south of the **Djedeide** fortress which the New Zealanders were completing.

Similar instructions aimed at holding the enemy in north **Persia** were given later to Tenth Army. These concerned New Zealand Division to the extent that it was assumed the attack would come only through the Caucasus and that the Division could be spared from Ninth Army for an offensive role in **Persia**.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 4 – DIVISION IN SYRIA

CHAPTER 4

Division in Syria

DJEDEIDE fortress was one of a series of five areas in the **Lebanon** and **Anti-Lebanon** ranges intended to be made into keeps designed to deny the enemy the use of the main arteries of communication in southern **Syria**, **Palestine** and **Transjordan**. The others were about **Tripoli** on the coast, **Barada Gorge** and **Qatana-Bourouch** near **Damascus**, and **Merdjayoun**, south-west of **Mount Hermon** on the central highway. Sorties were to be made against the enemy's communications should he bypass the keeps, which were also to be the bases for counter-attacks when the enemy had expended himself in his efforts to press forward.

Djedeide fortress covered the northern entrance to the **Bekaa** valley between the two ranges and was centred on the village of **Djedeide**, about five miles north of **Laboue** and 20 miles north of **Baalbek**. The fortress was designed for four infantry brigades and an army tank battalion, an army field regiment and a medium battery. **Tripoli** fortress was held by **9 Australian Division** with, under command, **Free French Troupes Speciales** to guard the rugged **Lebanon** range between **Tripoli** and **Djedeide**. This area could be traversed by infantry but was considered to be almost tank-proof.

Administrative instructions reveal the type of defence being developed against a fast mechanised attack likely to bypass the main points of resistance which the enemy was expected to leave to be mopped up later. The division within the fortress was to be selfcontained for sixty days. Five days' supplies were to be held in each company area, five days' reserves with each brigade, and the remaining fifty days' supplies were to be under divisional control. Every man was to have a four-gallon water container at his post and a series of water cisterns was planned, including one to hold 6000 gallons in each brigade sector. The main dressing station at **Divisional Headquarters** was to have an operating theatre so that, if the fortress were invested, surgical operations could be done. All transport was to be dug in and cages made

for prisoners of war.

An elaborate system of section posts, protected dugouts for sleeping, pillboxes, gun emplacements and observation posts was designed within a perimeter of anti-tank ditches, minefields and barbed-wire entanglements. Each section post was to be self-contained in sleeping accommodation, sanitation, stores, rations and water. The extent of the works and the nature of the terrain made concealment impossible and the deception principle was adopted for camouflage. The whole area was to be roaded and a network of mule tracks built to connect the less accessible parts.

Some work had already been done at **Djedeide** but there was still much to do, and at speed, to comply with an order by the Commander-in-Chief that the fortress should be completed by 15 May. Continuous rain and cold winds made conditions most unpleasant during the first few weeks of the Division's tenure of the fortress. Roads became bogs, signal lines were broken, and camps were flooded and blown down. The weather reached its worst on the night of 22 March when, after three days of heavy rain and gales, snow fell over the whole of the area and blocked all roads out of the valley. The temperature in **18 Battalion's** huts was three degree below freezing point. In **19 Battalion's** tents in the hills, water, limejuice and even eggs froze. The Maori Battalion had three to four inches of snow on its positions and the wind reached gale force on exposed hill faces. Statements by the inhabitants that such cold weather had not been experienced for sixty years were poor consolation for the arduous conditions. The troops appreciated the more solid comforts of rum, extra blankets, balaclavas, mittens and leather jerkins that were issued.

The storm was winter's parting gesture. By 25 March the mountain passes were clear of snow, and at the end of the month the valley was enjoying mild spring weather.

Construction of the fortress was mainly a job for the engineers but one infinitely more complex than any the field companies and field park

had previously been called upon to undertake. Most of the weapon pits and gun positions had to be dug in solid rock in high, hilly country exposed to the weather and often difficult of access. The infantry's picks and shovels were inadequate for such work and the engineers had to use compressor drills and explosives. Tools, equipment, and rations were taken as close as possible to each area by truck and were then manhandled to the company sites or packed in on mules of 6 Cypriot Pack Transport Company.

Besides supervising and helping the infantry battalions and artillery batteries in their battle positions and camps, the engineers employed 600 Bechuana pioneers and 600 civilian labourers, the latter working mostly with civilian contractors. The contractors had been engaged before the New Zealanders moved in. Examination showed that some of their work was so unsatisfactory that non-commissioned officers were detailed to make daily rounds of the contracts. Occasionally, work was held up by labour troubles among the villagers and the engineer officers became adept at settling disputes.

There was ample scope for ingenuity in **Djedeide** although not to the same extent as in the more urgent and trying conditions of the later campaign in **Italy**. Owing to the shortage of timber in the **Middle East**, the engineers designed a model dugout requiring only corrugated iron and sandbags. A machine for curving the iron was borrowed from Ninth Army and the model was shown to units so that they could copy it for section posts in the outer defences.

Again, a deviation on the **Laboue**—Arsal road presented an awkward filling problem at a dry watercourse along which the road was to be built. An engineer officer found a simple solution. He placed rows of natives on the hillsides to work down to the watercourse, pitching stones ahead of them as they moved. His report adds a picturesque note to an otherwise prosaic military file:

It made a colourful picture with the hillside streaked with lines of gaudy colours and a perpetual rain of stones coming through the

air. The formation appeared like magic in the watercourse as holes became filled and large boulders disappeared into the roadway. The strangest sight was the women who squatted in the rows, holding and suckling their babies in one arm and throwing rocks with the other.

In northern **Syria 6 Brigade**, and later **5 Brigade** which rejoined the Division and relieved **6 Brigade** in mid-April, had a more varied role. The brigade's primary responsibilities were frontier control and the preparation of demolitions on the main approaches from **Turkey**. These were the main road and railway in the Kara Sou valley in the north and a road from the coastal plain at **Alexandretta** through Harim in the west. Should withdrawal become necessary, the brigade was to cover demolition parties and fight delaying actions back to its allotted position in **Djedeide** fortress.

The brigade's secondary role was more difficult to carry out. Over an area of more than 10,000 square miles from the western border of **Syria** at **Antioch** to Deir ez Zor on the Euphrates, the brigade was required to simulate Allied strength and the omnipresence of British forces as part of Auchinleck's deception plan. In addition, the brigade was called on to suppress banditry, thefts of military stores and the activities of fifth-columnists, and also to cultivate the goodwill of the inhabitants. The last was considered most important.

The troops soon became conscious that the British forces in **Syria** were in an invidious position. Although the fact did not disturb them, they were aware that they represented a nation which had conquered the country but which had no desire to appear as a conqueror. Nor could the forces assume the guise of liberators. **Syria** and **Lebanon** had been separated from the control only of Vichy France, not of **France** as the people desired. The liberation, if it could be so called, had been in the larger interests of the Allies, not those of the native people. No promises could be made concerning their political future other than that **Britain** would use her good offices with the French post-war government on their behalf. In the meantime, French laws were upheld and enforced

through French officials, who were kept in office so long as they were not proved to be pro-Vichy or pro-Axis, even although they might not be ardent supporters of the Free French movement. The population could see little difference between the new administration and that of the past which they disliked.

Nor was there any liking for the British except perhaps by the Christian minority of 530,000, a fifth of the total population. It was even questionable whether this liking was genuine or whether it was inspired by hatred and fear of the Moslem majority. The Moslems, who hated the French and despised them after the collapse of 1940, were firmly convinced that **Britain** had betrayed the Syrian-Arab cause after the First World War. They also mistrusted the British attitude to the Jewish-Arab rivalries in **Palestine**. In general, the Moslems were pro-Axis. **Homs**, an important communications centre north of **Djedeide**, was a hotbed of their nationalist and anti-Ally activities.

Two political groups fostered attitudes and action inimical to Allied interests. A sovereign **Syria** as part of an Arab empire was envisaged by the nationalist bloc parties. The bloc was opposed to the Government and was both anti-French and anti-British. An independent **Syria** within **Hitler's** new order was hoped for by the Syrian Popular Party, which was definitely pro-Nazi and had been declared illegal. The party worked underground and it was from its adherents that most fifth-column activity was feared. Although some 3000 German and Italian agents and agitators had left **Syria** as the British entered, there was reason to believe that others had gone underground to organise and stir up feeling against the Allies.

As if these opposition elements were not enough, the British forces had to contend with the peculiarities of the Syrian outlook. 'The Levantine, generally speaking, is suspicious, dishonest and very greedy,' the New Zealand Division's field security officer noted. 'Life is cheap, justice the prerogative of the highest bidder, business methods are shady, and intrigue, whether for personal gains or for the advantage of

particular sections of the community, is the sauce of existence. This outlook is bred in the bone, and for that reason, the local inhabitants impute the very lowest of motives to everyone else, and, in particular, refuse to admit that the occupying army or administration can have different ideals and methods from their own.'

This official appreciation to the contrary, the troops saw that the Syrian and Lebanese Arabs were superior in intelligence, had greater stamina and were more independent than the mobs of **Cairo**, the hangers-on around **Maadi**, and the fellaheen of the Delta. An officer reporting on the labourers employed on roadmaking described them as 'splendid workmen—and women. In all their work and play they conduct themselves with a dignity, a reserve and courtesy which are in marked contrast to the servility of the Arabs in **Egypt**.'

The Division had to learn to distrust the Syrians and, in their distrust, to differentiate between the indigent native who succumbed to the temptation to steal from the Allies' seeming abundance, the thief to whom theft was the normal way of life, and the aggressive bandits and marauders inspired by political motives. When villages were raided for stolen army equipment and suspects against security, the security officers, **Provost Corps**, and supporting troops had difficulty in deciding whether the non-cooperation of the headmen and inhabitants was due to a natural desire to protect blood relatives, political animosity, fear of starting a feud, or to the Syrian predilection for intrigue. In such circumstances, cultivation of the good will of the population was not easy.

There soon was evidence of the existence of an active and often efficient fifth column. At **Laboue**, which was within **Djedeide** fortress, a man was arrested while inciting the populace with anti-British propaganda. Reports of the dropping of enemy agents were confirmed when three parachutes were found not far from the Division's southern boundary. Prices far in excess of market values were offered to soldiers by civilians for army stores and equipment, suggesting that the goods were sought not for profit but to inconvenience the army or to equip

enemy agents and supporters.

Thefts of equipment, especially arms and ammunition, were numerous, serious and often daring. A train was held up at Ras Baalbek, about four miles north of Djedeide, and 25-pounder ammunition was stolen. Almost every unit reported losses of rifles, including thefts from huts in which men were sleeping. Tommy guns, pistols, gelignite, detonators and tents were favoured loot, but the thieves would lift anything not closely guarded.

The daring of enemy agents and the need for vigilance were emphasized in a Ninth Army report of a raid on an ammunition dump under the care of a New Zealand unit. The report was circulated as a warning to all British forces and said:

A man dressed as a British warrant officer and speaking perfect English drove up in a civilian lorry at 0100 hours. He had a pass and stated that he was going to a certain officer's quarters to get authority to draw 36,000 rounds of small arms ammunition. He was allowed to go in that direction and returned shortly afterwards saying it was all right and producing an army form with a signature and stamp on it. He was allowed to enter the depot. The lorry was loaded with 36 boxes of ammunition.

The suspicions of the guard were aroused but nothing was done in the way of waking an officer. On the lorry coming to the exit gate the alleged warrant officer went off again towards the officers' quarters to get an exit pass, came back, said it was OK and was allowed to leave the depot. Neither he, the lorry nor the ammunition have been seen since.

This blot on the Division's escutcheon stimulated action against the enemy agents and thieves. Since this action was at the expense of construction, training, leave and recreation, and as comparatively little of the stolen property was recovered, the enemy, on balance, was the beneficiary. Fourth Brigade had to maintain a complete company on

mobile duty in the **Bekaa** valley between **Baalbek** and **Homs**. In one raid on a suspected village, no fewer than 240 men were required as supporting troops. The reserve battalion at **Aleppo** was a reserve only in name, as one company had to be sent to the frontier post at **Azaz**, some 30 miles north, and another to Nirab airfield. The battalion also had to supply guards for a number of dumps and installations, including the main railway station, the engineers' dump, a petrol dump at the quarries, and the ammunition caves outside the town.

Thieves and marauders quickly learned, however, that it was unwise to molest patrols camping out overnight. The patrol bivouacs were laid out as if in the presence of the enemy and sentries were ordered to shoot without hesitation. Some did.

As another means of impressing the natives with Allied strength and efficiency, the troops were ordered through talks and routine orders to be on their best behaviour at all times, the high standard of conduct of 20 Australian Infantry Brigade which the New Zealanders had relieved at **Aleppo** being cited as an example to be followed. Where guards were posted in public places the reliefs were made with ceremony and units made 'flag' marches wherever possible. Hospitality was exchanged with local officials and sheikhs.

In safeguarding the physical health of the Division, the **Medical Corps** could not ignore the incidence of such diseases as malaria and typhus in the civilian population. As far as possible the doctors assisted civilian practitioners and officials in control and curative measures. This work, and the establishment of medical posts, was one of the most practical methods of encouraging the natives to trust and show friendliness to the Allied troops. Once suspicion was overcome, the villagers took full advantage of the benefits of free medical treatment and co-operated in the inspections and other measures taken to control malaria.

An account of the work of a medical detachment at **Djerablous**, a village on the Euphrates near the Turkish border, described the medical

post as a hut

with a bevy of children around it while inside the RAP orderly treats sores, cuts and all the ailments found in such villages. After the first visit they bring him along as a present a few eggs which the orderly accepts if the 'kids' seem well off. Later he will visit his other patients in the village. There is, however, plenty of need for discretion as it is foolish to take on anything beyond his capabilities, but, even so, this is possibly one of the best ways of winning the villagers' goodwill.

The New Zealand Division, while making its own traditions, could claim that in **Syria it fulfilled the traditions of the British regular soldier. There was much hard work, but such was the contrast to conditions in the desert that the troops looked upon their sojourn in **Syria** as a rest. What they could have done against an attack from the north is a matter for speculation. It is enough that when the enemy was at the gates of **Cairo**, in the Caucasus and penetrating **Burma** towards **India**, when, in brief, the enemy appeared to be triumphant everywhere and the northern front was bereft of troops to meet the dangers elsewhere, **Syria** remained quiet.**

Although Divisional Headquarters was relieved of the pressure concomitant with close contact with the enemy, its ease was offset by the volume of work to be done. Besides directing the construction of the defences and controlling the normal activities of the Division, **General Freyberg and his staff had three important problems to study. These were:**

- 1. Possible roles for the Division in **Turkey** or **Persia**.**
- 2. The future of the Division in relation to the Japanese advance in the South Pacific.**
- 3. Organisation and training to knit the Division into a fighting entity.**

In a detailed appreciation for the Prime Minister, **General Freyberg¹ said the evidence showed that **Germany** had made administrative**

arrangements to resume the offensive on several fronts either simultaneously or in succession. The possible fronts were: (1) **Russia**; (2) **Turkey** by land, sea and air; (3) **Cyprus** and **Syria** by sea and air; and (4) **North Africa**.

Everything would depend on the results of the battle in **Russia** in the approaching summer, as **Germany's** first objective must be the removal of the threat of the Russian Army. If this were achieved, Japanese successes in **Burma** would tend to draw the German effort

¹ *Documents*, Vol II, No. 136; **General Freyberg** was promoted to temporary Lieutenant-General on 1 Mar 1942.

south as soon as possible to break the Allied hold on the **Middle East** and the **Mediterranean**. **Germany** would aim at a winter campaign attacking **Iraq**, **Syria** and the **Western Desert**.

General Freyberg estimated that from the start of a German offensive in **Russia**, 14 to 15 weeks would elapse before the enemy could place four divisions on the Persian frontier for an attack on **Iraq** through the Caucasus. He allowed a month for the advance to and capture of **Stalingrad**, two to three weeks for consolidation and regrouping, and another eight weeks for the advance through the mountains to the frontiers of **Turkey** and **Persia**. Assuming the offensive started in mid-May, as then seemed probable, the enemy would be on the Persian frontier at the end of August.

For an attack on **Syria** through an acquiescent **Turkey**, a month was again allowed for the capture of **Stalingrad**, another month to withdraw troops from **Stalingrad** and concentrate in **Thrace**, and a further two and a half months to move four divisions through **Turkey** to the Syrian frontier, making the date of arrival mid-September.

Freyberg warned the Prime Minister of the difficulties facing the Allies, of the need to be prepared for loss of territory, and of the

possibility of very heavy fighting during the late summer. 'Come what may,' he said, 'we must be prepared to fight very hard during 1942, either in defence of the **Middle East** or in attacking the Axis wherever possible to support our ally **Russia** and possibly **Turkey**.'

The assistance to be given **Turkey** on the appearance of German concentrations in **Thrace** was named, somewhat aptly, Operation **SPRAWL**. The New Zealand Division with, under command, an additional brigade, probably from **4 Indian Division**, was to advance some 700 miles to a road and railhead at Ishmid in northern **Anatolia**. From this point detachments were to be sent up to 250 miles further on to provide ground defence of airfields then under construction for the **Royal Air Force**, and on which there was already Air Force equipment. Thus sprawled over the landscape, the Division was to secure the landing fields against airborne attacks and possible land raids across the sea of Marmora. From these fields the **Royal Air Force** was to bomb the Roumanian oilfields and enemy concentrations in **Thrace**.

Middle East Headquarters expected no more of these operations than that they would delay an enemy advance and gain time for reinforcements to reach the theatre. The three services, in a joint appreciation, estimated that the Germans would need three weeks to acquire control of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus and that a Turkish capitulation would not accelerate their movement to any extent. Assuming that the enemy moved unopposed through **Turkey**, a 'blitz' attack by three divisions against **Syria** could not be developed in less than five weeks from the date the enemy obtained possession of the straits. The alternative to a 'blitz' of three divisions was a deliberate offensive calling for ten divisions which, for their deployment, would need three and a half months from the date control of the straits was obtained.

Freyberg did not like the plan for operations in **Turkey**. He also doubted whether it would be put into force as the **Royal Air Force** did not have sufficient bombers in hand or in sight. Consequently, when he was asked to obtain the Government's reactions to the proposed employment

of the Division, he replied that as it was fully occupied with local defences and the plan might never be put into operation, the matter should not be pursued.

Middle East Headquarters, however, pressed for the Government's views. It suggested that even if the Russians were not defeated, the Turks might let the Germans into their country. In that event, the plan might have to be put into operation without time for consultations. Moreover, an immediate move might stiffen the Turks if they showed indecision.

General Freyberg had already stipulated that the Division must be made fully mobile with the transport under his command before he would take it into **Turkey**. Experience in **Greece**, where civilian train crews had often decamped whenever a bomb was dropped near a train, had convinced him that he could not depend on the railways for troop movements and supply.

This condition and the terms of the Government's consent illustrate the manner in which the reserved powers were exercised. The Government's reply ¹ said:

We have given most careful thought to the considerations to which you call attention. On the following assumptions, namely:

- (1) that the move is undertaken only with the full support and approval of **Turkey**;
- (2) that an assurance is given by the Commander-in-Chief (a) that adequate air support is provided sufficient to ensure that the Division does not have to go through another **Greece** or **Crete**, and (b) that adequate forces will be available to protect the Syrian flank and, if necessary, to assist in supporting and extricating the Division, we agree that the Division should be used for the operational role proposed.

The Japanese advance southwards in 1942 created a five-fold political, military, logistical, manpower and morale problem concerning the Division.

By March, when the Division had settled down in **Syria**, the Japanese had captured **Singapore** and were in Lae and Salamaua in **New Guinea** and **Rabaul** in **New Britain**. Darwin in Northern

¹ *Documents*, Vol II, No. 139.

Australia had been bombed and the enemy was reaching for the Solomon Islands and the **New Hebrides**. **Australia** had been chosen by the Americans as their main army base in the **Pacific**. In consultation with the United States Navy, the American Army had given priority to the security of the communications between the **United States** and **Australia**. To this end, New Zealand had been incorporated in the United States South Pacific Command. There was a project to develop **Auckland** as a battleship and cruiser base. Supply authorities in the **United Kingdom** gave New Zealand first call on equipment for the defence of the Dominion and its approaches.

News bulletins posted the Division and the public on the enemy's advance. Counter-measures necessarily had to be kept secret. The Government was deeply concerned for the security of the Dominion. The Territorial Force had been mobilised and expanded. Extensive and increasing demands were being made by the American forces on the manpower and resources of the country. By March it was clear that, after meeting requirements for home defence, the Royal New Zealand Navy, the Royal New Zealand Air Force, the Empire Air Training Scheme and of the American forces, there would be considerable difficulty in reinforcing the Division in the **Middle East**.

In this situation, the Government had to notice a growing public agitation for the return of the Division to New Zealand, but for security reasons could not reply clearly and convincingly to it. The recall of two Australian divisions and the strain beginning to be felt by the Dominion were substantial arguments in favour of its return. So also was the contention, which could not be refuted, that the Division, fully equipped

and trained, would be a considerable accretion to the **Pacific** forces.

Opponents of the recall, who probably were better informed on the problems of a nation at war and the difficulties of the situation, had to argue their case only in broad terms as they, also, were restricted by security requirements. They were not helped by the reports supplied to the newspapers of the Division's activities in **Syria**. These emphasized the Division's garrison role, its recreation and rest, its sightseeing tours and hostels. Even the ski-ing schools were referred to more as a sport than as military training. New Zealand as a whole was pleased that the Division was having a change in a non-operational role in more or less congenial surroundings. But it did not seem to be in keeping with the gravity of the crisis that the Dominion's best fighting force should appear to be kicking its heels on garrison duty.

In the circumstances the Government was courageous in agreeing to leave the Division in the **Middle East**. The war in the **Pacific** at this period was not in the balance. It was almost wholly in favour on the enemy. As later events were to prove, the only Allied division available in the South-West Pacific, the 1st Division United States Marines, had to be sent to the **Solomons** to halt the Japanese advance. Such was the narrowness of the margin of the Dominion's safety.

The Governments of the **United Kingdom** and the **United States** urged with all the power at their command that the Division should be left in the **Middle East**. They submitted that for its fighting qualities alone the Division in the **Middle East** was more valuable to the Allied cause than it would be in the **Pacific**. Mr Churchill emphasized that the presence of Dominion forces in the **Middle East** would help to maintain the morale of the British troops in the theatre. They also were fighting away from their homeland. They had been sent from the **United Kingdom** when their homes and kin were in grave danger.

On the other hand, the Government had to consider the effects on the morale of the Division of its retention in the **Middle East**. Week by week from January, the Field Censorship Summary noted increasing

anxiety among all ranks and a growing desire for the return of the Division. The consensus of opinion, as revealed in soldiers' letters, was that the defence of New Zealand was a task for New Zealand troops. If more forces were needed at home, the Division should be recalled. The letter writers argued that if shipping could be found for the Australians and Americans it should also be available for the Division.

Anxiety in the Division was not allayed by reports that American forces were being sent to the Dominion. Married and affianced men said their womenfolk should not be subjected to the hazards which the troops, with remarkable frankness, associated with occupation forces. Their regard for the well-being of New Zealand women was also expressed in adverse comments on the policy of sending New Zealand VADs to the **Middle East**.

The future of the Division and the defence of New Zealand were discussed at length in correspondence between **Britain**, the **United States**, New Zealand and the **Middle East**.¹ Eventually the Government yielded to the outside pressure and accepted a promise that an American division would be sent to the Dominion.

To allay apprehension in the Division, **General Freyberg** issued a circular letter pointing out that the Dominion was being adequately defended, that there were no forces other than New Zealanders stationed there for defence purposes but that the Dominion was being used as a base for American operations. Emphasizing that the Division was giving much better service to New Zealand and the Allies in its present role overseas, the letter continued:

¹ *Documents*, Vol II.

It is natural for us to want to be at home while there is a threat of any kind but even if the threat to New Zealand became much greater the return of the NZEF might not be practicable. There are shipping problems.... We have also to realise the importance of the

Middle East.... This spring she [**Germany**] will without doubt launch an offensive against **Russia** and possibly against the **Middle East** with every man, gun, tank and aeroplane she possesses.... If our Division... trained and experienced in fighting Germans both in the desert and in hill country such as **Syria**, were to be moved from the **Middle East** at the present juncture we would be doing exactly what the German Higher Command wanted....

The letter stilled rumours and did much to restore confidence. Incidentally, the admission of the troops into the sphere of higher strategy and the councils of Governments showed how far the Army had departed from its older attitude of 'Their's but to do or die.'

General Freyberg, his brigadiers, and senior staff officers were united in opposition to the brigade-group and battle-group theories which dominated British tactics in the **Western Desert**. In this they clashed with the opinions and directives of Auchinleck and **Middle East Headquarters**, 'who believed they had a right to break up divisions and that it was the right thing to do.' ¹ At the reorganisation and training conferences in **Syria**, the divisional command had before it further directives outlining brigade and battle-group organisation and tactics and orders for their adoption. The conferences firmly resolved that brigade groups should be used only for movements and that in battle the Division should fight as a division. **Freyberg** intimated that never again, if he could avoid it, would he permit the Division to be committed to action piecemeal.

Although New Zealand Division cannot claim that it alone was responsible for the subsequent abandonment of brigade-group and battle-group tactics in **North Africa**, it was a most active pioneer of the opposition. The decision to oppose the theatre commander and the considerable body of expert opinion which supported him was not made lightly. It was based on study of theory and practice. Nor could the decision have been made effective had not organisation and training been reserved to **Freyberg** in his 'charter'.

The origin of brigade groups as tactical entities is difficult to trace. Several factors appear to have influenced their evolution. Probably the most important was pre-war apprehension of the effects of air reconnaissance and bombardment on large concentrations of ground forces concurrent with, or followed by, assaults by armoured formations. Dispersion, the obvious counter, was not merely a matter of increasing the distances and intervals between battalions of infantry and batteries of artillery. The dispersion had to be made

¹ General Freyberg to author, 3 May 1948.

in self-contained groups capable with their own resources of defending themselves against air or armoured attack, and so organised that they would fit readily into higher formations for larger operations.

The brigade group of two or more infantry battalions, a regiment of field artillery, a battery of anti-aircraft artillery, two or more troops of anti-tank guns and a proportion of the ancillary services was thought to be the solution of the problem. The theory proved to be sound. Later, however, the overriding principles appear to have been forgotten or disregarded. These were that the brigade group was a device to ensure safe movement and manoeuvre, and that the three groups provided by a standard infantry division should always be within mutual support of each and under the close control and direction of the divisional command.

Pre-war economies imposed on the Army were probably another factor. Because of the shortage of troops and equipment and the cost of assembling divisions and corps, field exercises were generally restricted to brigade groups pitted against each other by their divisional commander. Repeated exercises with the groups created the habit of thinking in terms of the groups rather than in those of divisions and corps. In Britain, divisional and corps training was largely a matter of theory to which only a few officers with vision appear to have given

thought. In New Zealand even brigade training was more nominal than real.

Operations by brigade groups in the early days of the war, some of them outstanding, led to a widespread belief in their value as tactical formations. The British actions in **Norway** were fought largely by brigade groups. At Furnes in May 1940 the **7th Guards Brigade Group** held the enemy for three days to keep open the road to **Dunkirk** and successfully extricated itself against seemingly overwhelming odds. The defence of **Britain** in the first critical months after the evacuation from **Dunkirk** was organised on a brigadegroup basis, although the groups were under divisional control. In **North Africa** Wavell carried the pursuit of Graziani's Italians into **Cyrenaica** with brigade groups. General Cunningham's victories in **Abyssinia** were won mostly with swift-moving columns of brigadegroup strength and under. The pursuit of Rommel to **Agheila** had been made with brigade groups. When Rommel advanced again into **Cyrenaica** he had been held on the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** line by brigade groups. The brigade-group battles, however, were generally directed by the divisional headquarters of the several groups.

Thus there was a formidable amount of combat experience to be challenged by the Division in its opposition to the group theory. The Division's case was based chiefly on its experiences in **Greece, Crete, and at Sidi Rezegh and Bardia**, but it might well have pointed out that organisation was not the sole or even the dominating factor in the successes claimed for brigade groups. The Division did not object to the use of a brigade group when it was sufficient for a specific operation or when, as with Wavell's pursuit, Cunningham's operations and the early defence of **Britain**, there was no alternative. It did challenge the theory held stubbornly by Auchinleck, supported by Gott who was later designated commander of Eighth Army, that the brigade group was the ideal tactical formation.

In his original report on the operations in **Cyrenaica**, **Freyberg** said:

The Brigade Group organisation is necessary for movement in the

desert, but is unsuitable for attacking organised positions in daylight as it has insufficient field artillery to cover an adequate frontage of attack. Further, a Brigade Group gets into immediate trouble if it is attacked. The normal divisional organisation should therefore be reverted to if possible as soon as organised opposition is met.

These passages leave no doubt as to **Freyberg's** views. Auchinleck's attitude was made equally clear by his order that the remarks should be deleted from the report with other comments on the danger of committing small forces piecemeal and the inadequacy of reserves.

In December 1941 **Middle East Headquarters** produced 'Lessons from Operations in **Cyrenaica**, No. 6.' There was no comment, favourable or otherwise, on the use of brigade groups, but there was an interesting paragraph on reserves. This said:

Lack of reserves was seriously felt on a number of occasions. Any det of Bde Gps from Div should be avoided whenever possible. The operations of NZ Div westwards towards **Tobruk** were seriously hampered by the fact that only two Bdes were available throughout the operation. The 5 NZ Bde which was of necessity temporarily detached was never able to rejoin the Div.

These remarks led **Freyberg** to make the bitter comment, 'Our operation was sabotaged.' He was convinced that had he had the complete Division at **Sidi Rezegh**, Rommel would have been decisively defeated.

New Zealand Division continued to receive brigade-group and battle-group directives and with equal persistency ignored them. **Middle East** and Army Headquarters in the desert did not force the issue, possibly in the knowledge that **Freyberg** could and would defy them in the matter and that if he appealed to the **New Zealand Government** he would receive support which might embarrass the theatre command with the British Government.

By the middle of May sufficient progress had been made in reorganisation and training and on the **Djedeide** works to permit the withdrawal of formations for advanced exercises. These were planned on a divisional scale as the culminating effort in freeing the Division of the idea of brigade groups as fighting entities. Shortage of transport, however, prevented the training of more than one brigade at a time. But the exercises were so arranged that the participating brigade operated within a divisional plan as if the other brigades were on the flanks, in support or in reserve. Although short of the ideal, the exercises were the nearest approach to divisional training since the Division was formed.

The desert formations for movement which the Division used so successfully in later campaigns in **North Africa** were improved and practised in moving to and from and within the training area at **Forqloss**, a few miles east of **Homs**. Advances and withdrawals, wheels, turns, and day and night formations were practised until the drivers reached near perfection in keeping station. Officers and men became accustomed to the sight of a brigade group spread in orderly array. They learned how to locate any company, troop or headquarters by reference to the position of their own trucks. Despatch riders by day or night had merely to establish their own identity and that of the occupants of any truck or car to find their way immediately to their destination.

Rapid movement and keeping station on the roads were also practised. Sixth Brigade, in moving from the **Bekaa** valley to **Aleppo** to relieve **5 Brigade** for the divisional exercises, did unit training to perfect attacks at speed. Each unit moved in its vehicles to within a short distance of chosen objectives, when the men debussed to complete the assault on foot. Drivers learned to maintain uniform speeds and to keep fixed distances according to the nature of the country. The infantry learned to debus quickly and to deploy from long columns for attack. The experience was to prove valuable.

Forqloss was a milestone in the history of the Division's field artillery. Hitherto, except on two brief occasions at **Molos** in **Greece** and

at **Belhamed in Cyrenaica**, the artillery had fought only on regimental levels. At **Forqloss** the field and medium guns were concentrated to fight as a division. Brigadier Weir, who had succeeded Brigadier Miles as CRA, became more than an advocate of the concentration of the fire power of the artillery. He was a wrathful opponent of the dissipation of the fire power in the brigade-and battle-group tactics.

With **General Freyberg's** encouragement and full support, Weir took each field regiment in turn into the desert, where it was initiated into a divisional artillery manoeuvre and deployment drill, communication drill and, most important, a divisional artillery fire drill. Quick barrages, the putting down of smoke screens, and other forms of close support of the infantry were also practised. In this training the foundations were laid of the 'stonk' and 'murder' concentrations of artillery fire, which were later widely adopted throughout the British Army and which became the joy of New Zealand infantry especially when they were hard-pressed in defensive positions. Although these early exercises were carried out by regiments, each regiment as it passed through the training camp had to learn its part and place in the divisional artillery machine. They were well practised by the time they took their places in the divisional training at **Forqloss**.

The New Zealand Engineers, under Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson, ¹ also made substantial contributions to the theory and practice of a division in modern battle, besides developing many techniques peculiar to their arm. The engineers believed that in spite of the experiences in **Cyrenaica**, the Division was not sufficiently conscious of the value of mines, of the formidable obstacles they were against attack. For the **Forqloss** exercises, the sappers made and laid practice mines loaded with small charges of black powder which exploded with a bang and a lot of smoke. Clearing drills for antipersonnel and anti-tank mines devised before the Cyrenaican campaign were improved and practised. Drills were also devised for laying minefields rapidly from trucks. The practice mines and drills were later adopted throughout Eighth Army.

Thus there was much to absorb, to practise and to polish when, on

21 May, Divisional Headquarters, 4 Brigade (with 28 (Maori) Battalion under command), 4 and 6 Field Regiments, the Divisional Cavalry and 6 Field Company moved into the desert. Over the next three weeks these and most other formations and units manoeuvred in realistic set and encounter battles, often with live ammunition and supported by 451 Squadron of the **Royal Australian Air Force**. Fifth Brigade was on its way to the training area, and Brigadier Weir was about to take all the artillery and 64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, on a final combined exercise, when the Division's sojourn in **Syria** was brought to an abrupt end by an urgent call to the **Western Desert**.

In little more than a fortnight the refreshed and spirited Division was for the fourth time to be in peril of its existence.

¹ Brig F. M. H. Hanson, DSO and bar, OBE, MM, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 1896; resident engineer Main Highways Board; Wellington Regt in First World War; comd 7 Fd Coy, NZE, Jan 1940–Aug 1941; CRE 2 NZ Div May 1941, Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, **2 NZEF**, 1943–46; wounded three times; Deputy Commissioner of Works and Chairman National Roads Board.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 5 – ROMMEL STRIKES

CHAPTER 5

Rommel Strikes

THE lull at [Gazala- Bir Hacheim](#) ended on 27 May when Rommel attacked on plans which called for the destruction of Eighth Army and the capture of [Tobruk](#) in four days. Eighth Army lost the battle. It was decisively defeated, but not in the contemptuous fashion Rommel envisaged. [Tobruk](#) did not fall until 21 June, twenty-five days later.

For Eighth Army the battle ended in disaster. A crisis was created with far-reaching strategic and tactical repercussions which, incidentally, involved the New Zealand Division and the Dominion's subsequent contribution to the war in [North Africa](#) and [Europe](#). From the crisis, all that followed in eastern [North Africa](#) was inevitable.

Yet within the disaster that befell Eighth Army there was victory. The valour and endurance of the British, Indian, French and South African troops at [Gazala- Bir Hacheim](#) and in the fighting back to the Egyptian frontier, rather than the last-ditch stand at [Alamein](#), saved the [Middle East](#) base. Rommel refreshed himself with the loot of [Tobruk](#) and received there the incentive to push on into [Egypt](#). But such heavy toll was taken of his divisions in [Cyrenaica](#) that, when they arrived at [Alamein](#), they lacked the strength to burst through to [Cairo](#), [Alexandria](#) and the [Suez Canal](#).

Indecisiveness in the British command contributed to the defeat. Auchinleck's direction of the campaign developed at times into detailed direction of phases of the battle. When he was not at Eighth Army Headquarters, he sent signals, letters, and staff officers to convey his views to the Army Commander, Lieutenant-General Ritchie. ¹ Events often outpaced the signals and instructions. Doubts and hesitations at Army Headquarters concerning the Commander-in-Chief's ideas and wishes added to the normal confusion of the battlefield. The fighting formations sensed the indecision and envied the enemy not only his equipment and tactical skill, but also the apparent firmness of his

direction. To the regimental officers the battle lacked a theme. The legend of Rommel's invincibility, of his

¹ Appendices to Despatch and also *Operation Victory*, de Guingand (Hodder and Stoughton), pp.118–19.

superiority over British generals, became firmly grounded at **Gazala-Bir Hacheim**.

Eighth Army's confidence was also shaken by the manner in which formations were broken and their components shifted from command to command. In the vital set-piece attack of 5 June in the 'Cauldron', an operation intended to turn the scales against the enemy, units and formations from no fewer than four divisions and two corps were committed on a plan prepared by two divisional commanders who were to succeed each other in command during the fighting. Neither Army nor corps headquarters co-ordinated the operation.

The speed and number of these moves dazed brigade, division and corps headquarters. The cohesion and unity of purpose and practice that transform individual men and their equipment into the welltried entity of a division were again deliberately forfeited. The multiplicity of formations in which the British and Indian units of the Indian divisions found themselves baffles their historian. 'Some-times [5th Division] had two brigades, sometimes one, on occasions none at all. Brigades of the 4th and 10th Indian Divisions also came under command, only to disappear again, while the gunners were for ever changing.' ¹

Eighth Army lost the battle although Rommel's plans were presented to it as if on a platter. It had ample warning of the imminence of the attack. The enemy's approach march to the open southern flank of the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** position was observed from the air and by armoured-car reconnaissance squadrons. On the night 26–27 May the enemy's armoured divisions were seen in laager 15 miles south-east of **Bir Hacheim**. And in the early stages of the battle captured documents

revealed the complete plan of attack. ²

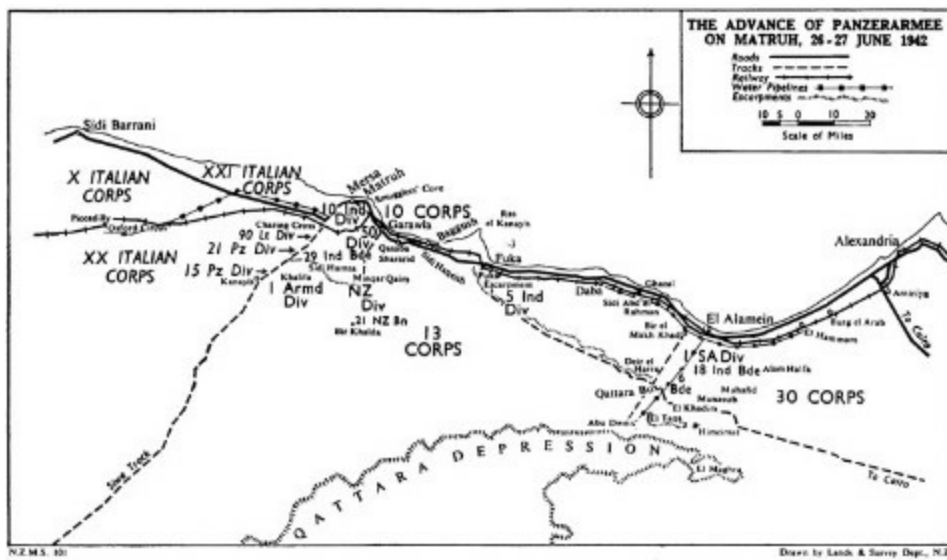
Yet Rommel won the battle. He won against an army that outnumbered him by nearly two to one in men, was stronger in field artillery, and whose numerical superiority in tanks and anti-tank guns was expected to offset the superior mechanism and fire power of the enemy's equipment. He won against an army encouraged by its command to believe that the approaching battle would be a welcome prelude to its own crushing and possibly final offensive. Rommel won because, in spite of his apparent dispersions, he concentrated superior forces against isolated British formations.

One such formation was the staunch 150 Brigade of 50 Division. The brigade, with field and anti-tank artillery, held the **Sidi Muftah** box between the **Trigh el Abd** and **Trigh Capuzzo**, along which the

¹ **The Tiger Kills**, English edition, p.117.

² **Despatch**, p.354.

enemy cut supply lines through the British minefields. The brigade kept the supply lines under artillery fire and, although it was unable to stop the flow of traffic, it made the route so ineffective that the enemy armoured divisions to the east of the minefields were reduced to a parlous state for petrol, ammunition and food. Their water ration was down to half a cup a man.



The Advance of Panzerarmee on Matruh, 26-27 June 1942

Against this isolated brigade, the enemy committed parts of 15 Panzer, Trieste Motorised and 90 Light Divisions, supported finally by heavy bombing attacks. ‘The encircled enemy, supported by numerous infantry tanks, again resisted most stubbornly,’ Panzerarmee Afrika said in its daily battle report. ‘Each separate element within the fortress-like strengthened defences had to be fought for. The enemy suffered extraordinary heavy, bloody losses. Eventually the operation, which also caused considerable losses to our troops, ended in complete success.’¹

Mention may also be made of 9 and 10 Indian Brigades which, with four regiments of field artillery, were overrun in the enemy's armoured counter-attack following the uncoordinated attack referred to earlier in this chapter. They went under in a ‘mournful and unmitigated disaster’, redeemed only by the heroism of the British and Indian soldiers who, ‘confronted with every mischance of battle, thirst, wounds and isolation, matched their bare flesh against steel machines and stood to their duty to the last.’²

When Rommel cleared his supply lines through the minefields and made an end to the ‘Cauldron’, he proceeded from success to success and Eighth Army from disaster to disaster. Although out-numbered on the field as a whole, the enemy commanders produced concentrations which gave them local superiority. Eighth Army's brigades and units,

armoured and infantry, were truthful when they said they had yielded only to vastly superior force. The evacuation of **Bir Hacheim**, the **Gazala** positions and **El Adem** box, stubbornly defended by **29 Indian Brigade**, led to the final disaster of **Tobruk** and the invasion of **Egypt**.

Rommel's offensive had been limited to clearing **Cyrenaica** and pursuit into **Egypt** with light mobile forces to prevent British air interference with a projected German-Italian assault on **Malta**. He had been given six weeks for this task, and the **Malta** operation was to be undertaken by mid-August at the latest. The German naval

¹ Battle report *Panzerarmee Afrika*, 1 Jun 1942. See also *Rommel*, Desmond Young (Collins), pp. 266–7.

² *The Tiger Kills*, p. 123.

staff in **Rome** disagreed with an advance deep into **Egypt** because of supply difficulties, but Rommel's confidence carried the day. ¹

On 22 June Rommel reported to **Rome** that the first object, that of 'smashing the enemy's field forces and taking **Tobruk**', had been completed. In the same message he said: 'The condition and morale of our troops, the supply position (as a result of the quantities captured), and the enemy's present weakness, all make it possible for us to pursue him deep into **Egypt**. I therefore request the Duce to release me from the limitations so far imposed on my liberty of movement, and to make all the troops now under my command available for the continuation of the campaign.'²

In the early hours of 24 June, General von Rintelen, the German general at Italian General Headquarters, advised Rommel that the 'Duce is in agreement with the Panzerarmee's plan of following the enemy into **Egypt**' and that General Count Ugo Cavallero, Italian Chief of Staff, would return to **Africa** next day to issue further instructions. ³ **Hitler** agreed that 'now is the historic moment in which **Egypt** can be

conquered and that it must be seized.’ On instructions from the Italian Supreme Headquarters, the attack to capture **Malta** was postponed until September, but **Mussolini** impressed on **Hitler** that ‘the neutralisation of **Malta** was unconditionally necessary if supplies were to be kept up to the **Panzerarmee** and the advance to the **Nile Delta** assured.’ He stressed that the resumption of **Royal Air Force** operations from **Malta** had led to a critical supply situation in **Africa**.

Cavallero, accompanied by Field Marshal **Kesselring**, German Commander-in-Chief South, met **Rommel** at **Sidi Barrani** shortly before midday on 26 June, by which time *Panzerarmee* was assembling for the attack on **Matruh**. He passed to **Rommel** the following orders from **Mussolini**:

- (The main body of **Panzerarmee** is to occupy the defile between the
 - a) **Arabian Gulf** and the **Qattara Depression** [otherwise the **Alamein Line** or bottleneck] immediately. These positions must be the base for all future operations.
 - b) The first step is to capture the fortification in the **Matruh- Baggush** area and to destroy the enemy garrison of **Mersa Matruh**. The advance cannot go on until these fortifications are taken.
 - c) Further operations from the base mentioned in (a) are to be coordinated with the general situation in the **Mediterranean**.

¹ The **Malta** project and the German and Italian navies' difficulties in supplying **North Africa** are discussed in considerable detail by **Vice-Admiral Weichold**, Chief German Naval Liaison Officer at **Rome** and Flag Officer, German Naval Command, **Italy**, in an essay, *The War at Sea in the Mediterranean*, written for the British Admiralty and issued on 24 Feb 1947 under serial number 12.

² Message No. 558, **Rommel** to **GHQ**, 22 Jun, appendices to German War Narrative (African Campaign), Jun–Jul 1942.

³ Message No. 644, **Rintelen** to **Rommel**, 24 June, *ibid*.

Cavallero also told Rommel that the utmost advantage should be taken of the successes to date but warned him that the supply situation was difficult. As a result of air activity from Malta, the route to Tripoli must be abandoned in the meantime and the route to the Cyrenaica ports was threatened. Plans had been made to neutralise Malta again and air formations were being moved from Germany to that end. This would take time 'and a period of crisis [concerning supplies] in the immediate future cannot be avoided.' ¹

In the light of later developments, the importance should be noticed of the instructions to seize the Alamein Line as a base for further operations and of the warning concerning supply problems.

Next day, while the attack was being made on Matruh, the Italian Supreme Command gave Rommel the following additional orders: ²

After the enemy now opposing our advance is defeated, operations from the base between the Qattar Depression and the Arabian Gulf will be continued on the following lines:

- (1) Objective: the Suez Canal. Advances will be made on Suez and Ismailia and from Ismailia on Port Said as soon as possible. Aim: to block the canal and prevent the enemy from receiving reinforcements from the Middle East.**
- (2) If this advance is to be carried out it will first be necessary to occupy Cairo firmly, including the southern front and the airfields in that area.**
- (3) The roads from Alexandria are to be blocked to secure us from attacks from there before we can occupy the city.**
- (4) The army's rear must be secured against any enemy landings. This will be done by occupying key points on the coast and having an adequate mobile reserve to go to the help of any threatened points.**
- (5) The Duce expects German and Italian troops in equal numbers to take part in the advance to the canal. Directives on the behaviour of our headquarters towards the Egyptian Government and people will follow very soon.**

¹ **Report by General Rintelen to German War Ministry, 26 June.**

² **Ibid, 28 June.**

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 6 – FORCED MARCH TO THE DESERT

CHAPTER 6

Forced March to the Desert

GENERAL Freyberg was reconnoitring the mountains of south-west **Persia** in view of possible operations there when, in the evening of 10 June, he heard on the broadcast news service that **Bir Hacheim** had been evacuated. These adverse tidings so impressed him that he remarked to **Colonel Gentry**¹, the G1, that the Division would be wanted in a hurry in the **Western Desert**. **General Freyberg** decided to fly to **Cairo** and to send his staff officers to **Syria** at once with orders to prepare the Division to move secretly and with the utmost speed.

Arriving in **Cairo** in the evening of 13 June, **Freyberg** reported to **Middle East Headquarters**. He was greeted by Auchinleck with the remark: 'I want to talk to you. You are to move your division at once to the **Western Desert** and concentrate near the frontier.' After the situation had been outlined to him, **Freyberg** decided that this was a case for exercising his discretionary power to commit the Division without awaiting the prior consent of the Government.

Orders for the move reached the Division next day. As security measures, shoulder titles and hat badges by which the Division could be identified were removed, unit location signs and all tents were left standing, farewell parties were forbidden, and the divisional signs on transport were painted over before each convoy left.

In spite of these precautions, the news leaked out. A Syrian dealer, who had lent furniture to the officers' mess of **19 Battalion**, called to collect his furniture and account before many of the officers of the unit knew that a move impended. Natives in the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment's** area wished the regiment farewell 'and good shooting in **Libya**.' Officers and men in all units speculated concerning their destination. Some asserted they knew officially they were going back to the desert, others guessed their destination, while some optimistically believed the Division was moving to the Canal

¹ **Maj-Gen W. G. Gentry, CBE, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Greek), Bronze Star (US); Lower Hutt; born London, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO 2 NZ Div 1939–40, AA and QMG Oct 1940–Oct 1941; GSO 1 May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (in NZ), 1943–44; comd NZ Troops in Egypt, 6 NZ Div, and NZ Maadi Camp, Aug 1944–Feb 1945; 9 Bde (Italy) 1945; Deputy Chief of General Staff, Jul 1946–Nov 1947; Adjutant-General, Apr 1949–Mar 1952; Chief of the General Staff 1 Apr 1952–.**

to embark for New Zealand. As all ranks followed the war news closely it is probable that most suspected the reasons for the move. As a soldier remarked in a letter a few days before, apropos of the battle in the desert: 'It is about time the Division was invited to the party.'

Stirred by the urgency of the call, the Division showed what it could do when it was in a hurry. Main Headquarters left **Baalbek** at 6 a.m. on 16 June and reopened a few miles west of Mersa **Matruh** at 9 p.m. on the 20th, having taken only four days 15 hours to make the journey by road, a distance of approximately 900 miles. Convoys of 4 and 6 Field Regiments and **14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment** left the **Bekaa** valley on the same day as **Divisional Headquarters** and, following the same route but with different staging points, reached Mersa **Matruh** on 21 June, in five days. Fourth Brigade, with **6 Field Company** and **7 Anti-Tank Regiment** in its convoy, got under way on 17 June and reached the vicinity of Mersa **Matruh** on the night of the 21st, having taken only four days 18 hours to cover the distance. The 28th (Maori) Battalion did the journey by rail from **Haifa** and was in Mersa **Matruh** in about two and a half days.

Fifth Brigade was already on wheels in the desert east of **Aleppo** carrying out brigade exercises, when it received orders to concentrate in **Djedeide** fortress. The move to the fortress was a good rehearsal for the days to come, as the brigade had to move in intense heat and find its way over difficult wadis and through many village bottlenecks in making

the most direct route to **Djedeide**, where it arrived on 16 June. Because the roads were fully occupied, the brigade had to stay in **Djedeide** for another day, which was spent in repairing vehicles, drawing rations and in other preparations. With reinforcements from Advanced Base, the brigade group, including **5 Field Regiment** and **7 Field Company**, began the move to the desert at 4 a.m. on 18 June in transport supplied by **4 RMT Company**. Following the road taken by the previous convoys, the main party reached Smugglers' Cove at Mersa **Matruh** on 22 June, little more than four days later. **Fifth Field Regiment** rejoined on 23 June and **5 Field Park** on 24 June.

Sixth Brigade, in the **Aleppo** area, had a company from each of its three battalions in the rest camp near **Latakia** when the orders for the move were received. These companies had to be recalled and the brigade had then to hand over to **20 Brigade** of **9 Australian Division**. With the assistance of **6 RMT Company**, the relief was completed by 18 June and next day the brigade commenced its move. The **26th Battalion** went by rail and arrived at Mersa **Matruh** on 22 June. The other units of the group travelled by road and were halted at El Amiriya on the 25th.

Middle East Headquarters expected that ten days or more would be required to concentrate the Division in the desert. It is a tribute to the excellence of the staff work, the physical fitness and discipline of the units and the high standard of maintenance in the Division's ageing transport, that the task was accomplished well within the period. As in March 1918 when the New Zealanders in **Flanders** were called upon in a hurry to help stem an enemy attack, the Division was dispersed over a wide area when the movement orders were received. Several Army units attached to the Division had to be disposed of and arrangements made to leave the Division's two malaria control units, **36 Survey Battery**, and the Salvage Unit in **Syria**. Congestion on the roads and the small facilities of the staging points prevented concentration to move as a Division. Timetables had to be prepared for the movement of units and groups by road and rail, and in such order that they arrived in the concentration area ready to go into battle.

As soon as the Division reached the desert road out of **Alexandria**, it encountered Eighth Army in retreat. Transport of **1 South African Division**, moving head to tail to the **Alamein** defences, filled the road. The **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, which had a particularly arduous journey from **Syria** and was the last unit to arrive, ran into other Eighth Army convoys seemingly devoid of order and discipline. Hundreds of vehicles were parked along each mile of the road and a constant stream of traffic moving in the opposite direction, estimated at 750 vehicles each hour for the whole day, impeded progress.

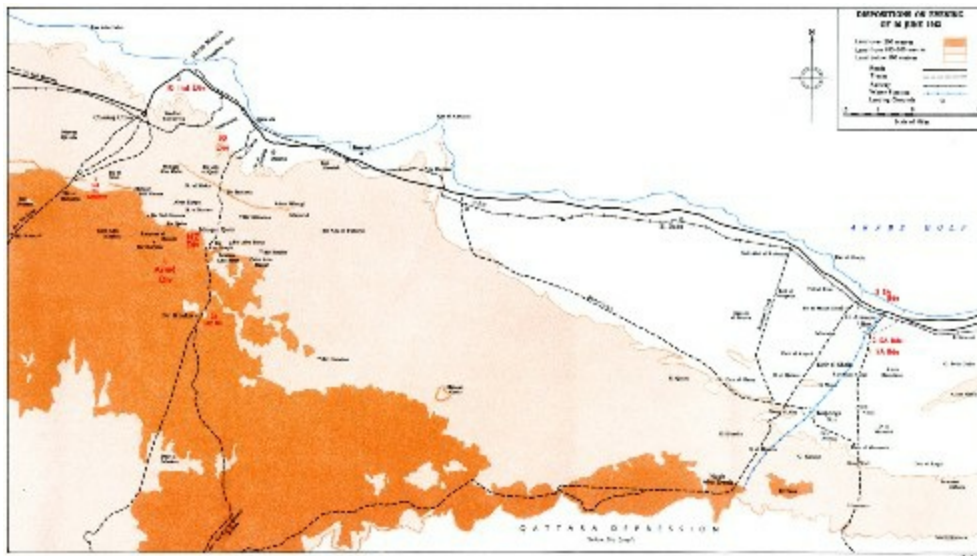
The congestion became worse as the units and groups neared **Mersa Matruh**. Some senior officers bitterly described Eighth Army as a rabble. They were then meeting the flotsam and jetsam of an army in headlong retreat. These troops were at a loss to understand why an army which had been promised victory had been so incontinently defeated. Another factor was the perverse, pawky humour of the British soldier who, in times of stress, finds an outlet for his feelings in the Cockney habit of delighting in the worst possible news and rumour. 'You are going the wrong way, chum!' was typical of the greetings given the Division as it moved forward. To the fresh, physically fit New Zealanders the greeting was more irritating than humorous.

Nevertheless, Eighth Army was in a bad way. How bad, the Division had yet to learn.

As the Division moved by road and rail to its concentration area west of **Mersa Matruh**, it became involved in a situation which was changing rapidly and still deteriorating.

On the withdrawal of Eighth Army to the frontier, General Ritchie relied on **Tobruk** to hold the attention of some part of the enemy's armour and thus give time to re-equip and reorganise the British armour. Eighth Army would then relieve **Tobruk** and pass to its counter-offensive. On the night of 20 June, however, when it was apparent that **Tobruk** was about to fall, Ritchie realised that Rommel would be free to concentrate his full weight against the frontier defences. These

positions were untenable without a strong mobile armoured force operating on the open desert flank. He therefore sought permission to withdraw to Mersa **Matruh**.



Dispositions on evening of 26 June 1942

Auchinleck was reluctant to abandon the frontier. He pointed out to Ritchie that the argument that an armoured reserve was essential to the successful defence of the frontier applied with equal force to the **Matruh** position, which could easily be isolated by a movement past its southern flank. In Auchinleck's opinion withdrawal from the frontier was a question of general policy to be decided in consultation with the other two Commanders-in-Chief. In the meantime, since Ritchie alone was in a position to know whether the immediate situation made it imperative to withdraw, the decision was left to him. ¹

Ritchie decided to withdraw to **Matruh** in the belief that with the time thus gained it would be possible to build up an armoured force. This decision was subsequently endorsed by the **Middle East Defence Committee**, but 'he was instructed to prepare to fight a decisive action round **Matruh** and to delay the enemy as far west as possible with a covering force. ² Command of the covering force was given to Lieutenant-General Gott, **13 Corps**. Lieutenant-General C. W. M. Norrie, with **30 Corps** Headquarters, was sent to organise the **Matruh** position until he was relieved by Lieutenant-General W. G. Holmes and **10 Corps**

Headquarters from **Syria**. Norrie was then to take **30 Corps** Headquarters to control the completion and occupation of the El **Alamein** defences, 120 miles to the east.

General Freyberg left **Cairo** on 21 June for the desert. He called at **Middle East Headquarters** to hear that **Tobruk** had been lost and that the situation 'was said to be obscure.' He had no inkling of a change in the plans for the Division and believed it was still to concentrate on the coast ten miles west of **Matruh** and move to the frontier to come under **30 Corps**. Only when he arrived at **Matruh** and reported to **30 Corps** by telephone did he learn that the plans had been altered and that the Division was to go into the **Matruh** box. Occupation of the box was urgent, but there was then no state of emergency.

The **Matruh** defences consisted of a fortified perimeter, a covering position to the west of the town at **Charing Cross** near the edge of

¹ Despatch, p. 362.

² Ibid.

the coastal escarpment, and a detached strongpoint about 20 miles to the south on the inland escarpment near **Minqar Sidi Hamza**. A deep minefield ran south from the coast to **Charing Cross** and then turned eastward. There were two other minefields separated by a gap of about six miles between **Charing Cross** and **Sidi Hamza**.

The defences had been built early in the war against the advance of the Italian Army under Graziani. Since then there had been no occasion to divert labour and materials to keep them in repair. The anti-tank ditch and most of the positions were full of sand and camouflage was almost non-existent, but Army Headquarters was advised by the CRE, **Matruh**, that once the posts were occupied they could be made defensible within forty-eight hours. Many of the mines were sensitive and all fences, whether marked as minefield fences or not, had to be regarded

with the deepest suspicion. Posts were short of water containers, which were stated to have been filched by previous occupants.

Pending the arrival of the remainder of the Division, **4 Brigade Group**, under Brigadier **Inglis**,¹ on 22 June took over the defence of the fortress perimeter from the **Sidi Barrani** road to the coast, and **20 Battalion**, with **28 Field Battery** and a troop from **31 Anti-Tank Battery**, was sent to the outpost at **Charing Cross**. The battalion was joined next day by a platoon of Bren carriers from **6 Brigade**. Orders were given to **4 Brigade** to establish road blocks with anti-tank defence in depth, to take full battle precautions with sections dispersed, and, at night, to post double sentries and patrol the front of the positions.

While **4 Brigade** was moving into its sector, unit commanders of **5 Brigade Group** arrived and with Brigadier **Kippenberger** made a daylight reconnaissance of the eastern sector preparatory to occupying it by moonlight. Each of the brigades had four battalions, **28 (Maori) Battalion** being under **4 Brigade** and **26 Battalion**, from **6 Brigade**, under **5 Brigade**. In the completed scheme **6 Brigade**, less one battalion, was to take over the western outposts and Divisional Cavalry was to cover the northern and eastern ends of the minefields. Other troops provisionally allotted to **Matruh** were **5 Indian Division**, with one brigade group only, and **151 Infantry Brigade** from **50 Division** when it should be released from the covering force.

On 23 June all the troops were working with a will restoring the defences. The engineer companies had to meet incessant demands

¹ **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, m.i.d., MC (Greek); **Palmerston North**; born **Mosgiel**, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn, Jan–Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde, 1941–42 and 4 Armd Bde, 1942–44; 2 NZ Div, 27 Jun–16 Aug 1942 and 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British Zone of Occupation, **Germany**, 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate.

for sandbags, coils of wire and pickets, and their minelaying sections had to mark and improve existing minefields and put down new ones. Divisional Signals took over the communications of the fortress, and 4 and 5 Field Ambulances were called upon to treat casualties from the battle area almost as soon as they opened their stations.

At this period **7 Anti-Tank Regiment** was replacing its two-pounder guns with the new six-pounders as they became available, the two-pounders being handed over to the newly formed anti-tank platoons of the infantry battalions. A school to instruct the infantrymen in the use of the guns was opened by **95 Anti-Tank Regiment** at Smugglers' Cove, but the course was cut short when the role of the Division was changed.

A light note in an otherwise serious occasion was provided by **4 Brigade Band**. The band had been ordered to make its way to **Maadi** by any available means but could not find transport either by road or rail. It filled in the time with marches through **Matruh**. This apparent disregard of the prevailing spirit of alarm caused considerable comment, the sight and sound of a band display surprising many of the retreating British and South African troops who, the band's diary notes, 'seemed to expect the enemy over the escarpment at any moment.'

Until this time, however, the only signs of the approach of the enemy had been the increasing number of bombers over the rear areas and the trains and convoys filled with men and materials being taken to the rear. All the roads leading into and out of **Matruh** were jammed with traffic moving back. On its way to **Charing Cross**, **20 Battalion** had great difficulty in moving against the solid stream of transport in retreat—'a weird mixture of vehicles that were being driven, towed or pushed, nose to tail and four abreast'—that converged from the **Siwa** and **Sidi Barrani** roads in a confusion which was increased when enemy bombers appeared over the crossroads.

Although **General Freyberg** had put the Division into the fortress and had set it at work restoring the defences, he had made up his mind that he would not permit it to be held in the **Matruh** or any other box. He

regarded box defences as traps in which isolated defenders were overrun by the enemy at his convenience. He also doubted whether in the prevailing circumstances **Matruh** could be held. A suggestion that the Division might support the defence of **Matruh** from the adjacent **Naghamish Box**, a wadi incorporated in the 'Kiwi' anti-tank ditch dug by **4 Brigade** in 1940, was equally disliked.

On more specific grounds, **Freyberg** thought it wrong to confine the highly trained, mobile **New Zealand Division** in a fortress. The Division was up to strength in men and arms, it was the only complete division then available in the desert, and in numbers and fire power was the equal of any other two divisions in **Eighth Army**. Some additional transport, however, was needed to make it fully self-contained.

Freyberg put these views to **General Norrie**, **30 Corps**, and again to **General Holmes**, **10 Corps**, when the latter took command of the fortress on 23 June. That afternoon he went with **Holmes** to **Ritchie's** headquarters prepared to bring the issue to a head. He was ready to say that the **New Zealand Division** would be thrown away if it were kept in the **Matruh** fortress, and that, if necessary, he would refer the matter to the **New Zealand Government**. He told **Holmes** he realised this attitude might precipitate a crisis, but that risk would be taken for the sake of the **Dominion** and the **Division**.

Holmes saw **Ritchie** alone. When **Freyberg** was called in he was told the **Division** would be relieved in **Matruh** by **10 Indian Division**, then withdrawing from the frontier, and would have a mobile role in the desert. **Freyberg** was impressed by **Ritchie** at this interview. It was obvious that he had had a very trying time, but he was calm and deliberate. If he knew that he was about to be relieved of his command, he showed no signs of the knowledge.

There was another matter that disturbed **Freyberg**. He had learned the previous day that all infantry divisions were to be reorganised forthwith into battle groups. The basis of each group was to be a battery of 25-pounders and two infantry companies, in which the sections were

to consist of one non-commissioned officer and five privates. The groups would include troops of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, carrier, mortar, machine-gun and infantry anti-tank platoons, a sub-section of engineers, and an ambulance detachment. Each group was to be commanded by a battalion or field regiment commander with a skeleton headquarters, three groups to be in a brigade and three of the brigades in a division.

The New Zealand brigadiers and other experienced officers were again at one with their GOC in rejecting this organisation, which was merely a variation of the brigade group.¹ Orders on co-ordination, mutual support and attacking the enemy's flanks and rear, notwithstanding, there was in their opinion no surer way of losing a battle than by dispersing the army's resources in small packets over the landscape. **Freyberg** advised Army and Corps that if the

¹ A South African staff officer later defined a battle group as 'a brigade group which has been twice overrun by tanks'.

New Zealand Division was to take part in the approaching battle it would fight as a division. As organisation was expressly reserved to him in his 'charter', there was little they could do about this intransigent attitude. The need for the Division in the battle was more pressing than a question of organisation.

The Division, however, had to undergo considerable reorganisation before it could undertake the proposed mobile role. Its own organic transport, that of a standard infantry division, was sufficient to sustain it in a static battle. With its own Reserve Mechanical Transport companies and the supply columns maintaining a shuttle service, the Division could be kept mobile in an advance, or when the enemy was not pressing. But these resources could not lift the Division and its equipment in one load. In the situation then impending, it was imperative that the Division should be completely self-contained in transport.

As a quick solution of the problem, it was decided to borrow vehicles and to reduce the infantry component of the Division to the transport available. At a divisional conference on 24 June, 6 Infantry Brigade, to Brigadier Clifton's undisguised chagrin, was ordered to concentrate at **Amiriya** and to send 6 RMT Company and as much as possible of its unit transport to the Division at **Matruh**.¹ Each of the seven other battalions of 4 and 5 Brigades and the **Divisional Reserve Group** was ordered to send one company to **Maadi**. Headquarters and the signals section of **14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment**, **4 Field Hygiene Section** (less twelve men distributed between 4 and 5 Field Ambulances), **4 Brigade Band**, and the **Divisional Postal Unit** were also ordered to **Maadi**. With a number of trucks borrowed from **10 Indian Division**, which was to have a static role in **Matruh**, and some from Eighth Army, the reduced Division was made complete on wheels.

It may be mentioned that experience convinced a number of officers that in the desert, at least, the standard infantry division had too many infantrymen for adequate support by the field and anti-tank guns. In the operations to which the Division was then being committed it could not have achieved more had it had all its infantry and full transport them, and it is certain the losses would have been greater.

For movement only, the Division was divided into four groups:

DIVISIONAL HQ GROUP

HQ NZ Division

Divisional Defence Platoon

5 Field Park Company

Administration Services, or Rear HQ (to operate from **Matruh area)**

¹ 26 Bn was sent back to rejoin 6 Bde at **Amiriya**.

4 INF BDE GROUP (Brigadier Inglis)

HQ 4 Inf Bde (with Light Aid Detachment)

4 Bde Defence Platoon

19 Bn

20 Bn

28 (Maori) Bn

4 Field Regiment

31 A-Tk Bty

41 Lt AA Bty

6 Field Coy

2 MG Coy

4 Fd Amb

5 INF BDE GROUP (Brigadier Kippenberger)

HQ 5 Inf Bde (with LAD)

5 Bde Defence Platoon

21 Bn

22 Bn

23 Bn

5 Fd Regt

32 A-Tk Bty

42 Lt AA Bty

7 Fd Coy

4 MG Coy

5 Fd Amb

DIVISIONAL RESERVE GROUP (Lieutenant-Colonel J. R. Gray, 18 Bn)

18 Bn

6 Fd Regt

33 A-Tk Bty

43 Lt AA Bty

1 MG Coy

All surplus gear, including one blanket from every man, unessential kit and clothing, anti-malaria stores brought from Syria, and unwanted secret codes and documents were collected and sent to Maadi. The

Divisional Supply Company collected and filled 10,000 water containers and, in the three days from 23 to 25 June, issued 47,777 rations as normal supply and to make up deficiencies in the three-day reserve to be carried by the Division. The daily water ration for each man was fixed at three-quarters of a gallon. Unless wells and cisterns were found, this ration was to meet all requirements—drinking, washing, cooking, vehicle radiators and all other uses.

Relief by **10 Indian Division** was to be completed by the night 25–26 June, when the Division would move to the escarpment south of **Matruh** in the vicinity of **Minqar Qaim**, carrying water and rations for three days, petrol and oil for 200 miles, and first-line ammunition.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 7 – PREPARATIONS FOR DECISIVE BATTLE

CHAPTER 7

Preparations for Decisive Battle

WHATEVER differences of opinion may have existed in the enemy higher commands concerning the future employment of Rommel's victorious army, Eighth Army had no doubt Rommel would try to advance deep into **Egypt**. Consequently, when he reappeared in strength on the frontier on 23 June and attacked the British rearguards immediately, the reorganisation of Eighth Army and the preparation of the **Matruh** defences became matters of great urgency. General Gott was ordered to impose the maximum delay on the enemy, but with the small forces available to him and their condition, little more could be expected than that he would observe or, at the most, harass the enemy advanced guards which were soon operating ten to twenty miles ahead of their main bodies.

General Holmes had explicit orders that **Matruh** was to be held at all costs. Pending the arrival of Gott with **13 Corps** Headquarters and the rearguard, **10 Corps** was responsible for positioning the troops and the general policy for fighting the battle. On 24 June the forces at Holmes' disposal, their location and proposed dispositions for the battle were:

10 CORPS:

10 Indian Division, of three infantry brigades and four field and one medium artillery regiments, withdrawing from the frontier to relieve the New Zealand Division in **Matruh**. The division had been brought from **Iraq** during the **Cyrenaica** battle but, although it had suffered some losses, it had not been seriously engaged. In the movement from the frontier, the division was 'shadowed, harassed and ground-strafered constantly by [the] enemy....' ¹

50 (Northumbrian) Division, also known as the 'Tynesiders', withdrawing from the frontier to positions east and west of **Wadi el Tawawiya**, south-east of **Matruh** and north of Minquar Qaim. The division was now reduced to 69 and 151 Brigades through the loss of 150

Brigade, which had been overrun in an isolated box at **Sidi Muftah** in the fighting in the Cauldron. **69 Brigade** had been sorely tried in the counter-attacks in the Cauldron and, on 24 June, was rearguard on the coast road. Among its other achievements, **50 Division** had made a spectacular breakaway from the **Gazala** line

¹ *The Tiger Kills*, p. 138.

by advancing westwards through the Italian defences and then wheeling south and east clear of the battlefield. It had two field regiments and some Royal Horse Artillery under command and was to be given any Army tanks which might become available. The division was to have a mobile role based on **Matruh** and Wadi Tawawiya.

13 CORPS:

5 Indian Division, less two brigades, moving to the **Matruh- Siwa** Road area to operate in a mobile role in the gap between the **Matruh** outposts at **Charing Cross** and the escarpment at **Sidi Hamza**. The division had suffered severely in **Cyrenaica** and on 19–21 June had been withdrawn for line of communication duties at **Baggush**, where it was together for the first time since coming to the desert. **29 Brigade** and the **Highland Light Infantry** of **10 Brigade**, organised in three weak battle groups, were given the mobile role, **9 Brigade** and the remainder of **10 Brigade** being retained at **Baggush** and later being ordered to the Delta. General Holmes hoped to find another brigade and a third field regiment for the division in its new role.

New Zealand Division, less one infantry brigade and one company of each of the remaining battalions, restoring **Matruh** defences and reorganising preparatory to handing over to **10 Indian Division** and moving to the area south and west of **Minqar Qaim** for a mobile role.

1 Armoured Division, with 4 and 22 Armoured Brigades, **7 Motor Brigade** and **Guides Cavalry**, to take over from **7 Armoured Division** and

operate in the area south and west of Bir Qaim on the escarpment west of **Minqar Qaim**. The division had suffered severely in **Cyrenaica** and was in the rear areas resting preparatory to moving to the Delta to re-equip when it was given its new role. In the event only its **2 Armoured Brigade** was sent to the Delta. When 1 Armoured relieved 7 Armoured, 3 Indian Motor Brigade, which, with **7 Motor Brigade** was covering the retreat, was to move to **Fuka**. For the battle of **Matruh**, 1 Armoured had 159 tanks, of which sixty were Grants.

Eighth Army's Operation Instruction No. 82, issued close on midnight of the same day, set out five courses open to the enemy in his attack on **Matruh** and proposed counter-measures. These were:

- (**Enemy may attack **Matruh** from the West North of the minefield**
 - a) **gap, protecting his flank with mines or an anti-tank screen from an attack by us West through the gap. In this event: 10 CORPS will hold the enemy frontally and will employ 50 Div in conjunction with 13 Corps to prevent the enemy, by the concentration of all available fire power, from passing through the minefield to **Matruh**. 13 CORPS will employ 5 Ind Div to co-operate with 50 Div as above. 13 Corps will employ 1 Armd Div and N.Z. Div to attack the enemy in the rear by moving North and West of the minefield.**
 - b) **Enemy may attack through the minefield gap. In this event: 10 CORPS will place 50 Div and 13 CORPS will place 5 Ind Div and N.Z. Div to bring their combined fire power concentrated on the gap in the minefield to prevent enemy movement to the East. 13 CORPS will direct 1 Armd Div to strike at the enemy Southern flank, East of the minefield.**
 - c) **Enemy may attack South of the minefield directed on **Sidi Hamza**. In this event: 13 CORPS will employ 5 Ind Div to hold this advance frontally and will move 1 Armd Div and N.Z. Div to strike at the enemy Southern flank. 10 CORPS will hold 50 Div in readiness to move to support 5 Ind Div.**
 - d) **Enemy may advance, going wide to the South with the object of making a deep enveloping movement. In this event: 13 CORPS will strike at the enemy from the North, cut his L of C, and drive him into the Desert. 10 CORPS will hold 50 Div in readiness to support 13 Corps.**
- (**The enemy may combine any of the above courses and make a**

- e) **feint and a main attack. In this event the above instructions will have to be modified to meet the situation. The ruling principle will be to employ the minimum force against the feint attack and the maximum against the flank or rear of the main attack.**

Notes made by General Holmes also on 24 June show that he had similar ideas of offensive action against the enemy as soon as the battle disclosed Rommel's dispositions and the direction of his main thrust. Among his general conclusions, he said the mobile divisions must be made as strong as possible in artillery and anti-tank weapons, and that they should dig themselves in to withstand heavy shelling but be prepared to move when required.

To complete the picture of 24 June, 30 Corps Headquarters with 1 South African Division, 2 Free French Brigade, and surplus infantry from the formations in the forward area reorganising into battle groups, were re-establishing the defences of Alamein, and 9 Australian Division was being called from Syria.

The orders and plans of 24 June suggest calm, orderly preparation for the battle. The reverse was the case. Communications were poor and there were long delays in transmitting orders and messages. The forward area was cluttered with transport, some moving to the rear and some arduously engaged in the defensive works. With the exception of the New Zealand, 1 South African and 10 Indian Divisions, divisions and brigades were such in name only. They were considerably under strength in men and equipment, they were tired, they had lost faith in the higher command, and they were sceptical of orders that positions were to be held 'at all costs.' While moving to battle positions or working on defences, the British and Indian divisions had to reorganise into battle groups and assimilate the tactics prescribed.

It was impossible in the circumstances, even if it were contemplated, to give the units a complete understanding of the position. Orders and counter-orders, marches and counter-marches, works started and stopped were seen by other ranks and many officers only as evidence of

the apparent inability of higher formations to make up their minds what was to be done. Even in divisional headquarters the rapid changes from command to command, although provided for in the plans, were bewildering. Thus, on 24 June, **1 Armoured Division** passed from General Headquarters' reserve to **10 Corps** and then under the direct command of Eighth Army. Next morning it came under **13 Corps**. In the move from **Matruh**, New Zealand Division received orders from **10 Corps**, from **10 Corps** on behalf of **13 Corps**, and finally from **13 Corps**.

Nevertheless, on 24 June, the dominant fact impressed on all headquarters and on all men so far as it was possible to tell them was that a decisive battle was to be fought in the **Matruh** area, that **Matruh** was to be held at all costs, and that opportunities would be created for the mobile forces to deal the enemy effective and perhaps mortal blows.

Within twenty-four hours, on the very eve of battle when the enemy was making his dispositions to close on the outposts, General Auchinleck was to take personal command of Eighth Army and completely change the plans for the battle.

Relief of the New Zealand Division in the fortress commenced early on 25 June, and as the incoming **10 Indian Division** took over the released units moved to their brigade group assembly areas. In the move to **Minqar Qaim**, **4 Brigade Group** was to lead, leaving the fortress at 1.30 in the afternoon, followed by **Divisional Headquarters** at six o'clock, the **Divisional Reserve Group** at seven and **5 Brigade Group** at 9.30 p.m. Groups were to move in column of route on the **Matruh- Garawla** road and the **Khalda** track to the railway, where they would shake out into desert formation for the remainder of the journey.

While the Division was assembling for the move, minelaying sections of 6 and 7 Field Companies were called for an urgent job in closing the gap in the western belt of minefields south of **Charing Cross**. In conjunction with **5 Indian Division**, they were to put down 9000 mines. As a covering force for the New Zealand sappers, 20 Battalion, which had returned from the outposts only that morning, was sent out again with

25 Field Battery and two troops of two-pounder and one troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns.

The work was delayed when an expected supply of mines was not delivered. It was not until 6 p.m. that laying was started, the CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson, having decided to use the Division's reserve stock and to replenish in **Matruh**. The minefield was old and, without plans from which to work, the engineers suffered a number of casualties when their vehicles ran over hidden mines. Three trucks of 6 Company and one of 7 Company were destroyed or severely damaged but without loss of men. Just after the laying had been completed, however, a 6 Company truck carrying 350 mines blew up, two men being killed and five wounded. No trace could be found of the eighth man in the party.

Seventh Company completed its share of the work and was back at **Matruh** by 10 p.m., but 6 Company stayed on to help the Indians, who had run out of mines, and did not leave until early next morning. The covering forces rejoined the Division on the march.

General Holmes was loth to part with the Division while his forces were unbalanced. On 24 June he had asked Eighth Army whether, in view of the rapid approach of the enemy, there would be time for **10 Indian Division** to take over. When Army replied in the affirmative, the orders for the relief were sustained. Shortly after midday on 25 June, Holmes again communicated with Eighth Army on the subject. He intimated that **10 Corps** was still in command of all forces in the **Matruh** area and mentioned that a covering party from New Zealand Division was on the western minefield. He asked for a decision concerning the remainder of the Division to be given that afternoon. Should it be held in **Matruh**, move to **Minqar Qaim**, or concentrate within **10 Corps'** area in anticipation of a new role being given next day? Eighth Army was advised that the relief was going on but that the Division had been stopped from moving out of the Corps' area pending further orders.

The situation facing Holmes was formidable and gave reasons for his apprehensions and desire to retain the Division. Tenth Division was only

in the process of taking over **Matruh** and becoming familiar with the defences. Only one brigade of 50 Division was in position. Its other brigade, the 69th, was still with the rearguard and there was a chance that it might be cut off. It had had one narrow escape already. It was doubtful whether **5 Indian Division**, now reduced to one brigade, could hold the **Sidi Hamza** area. The other brigade he had hoped to obtain for the division, the 18th Indian from **Iraq**, was being held on the **Alamein** line. Once the New Zealand Division was gone, the eastern flank of the **Matruh** position would be open. Moreover, with the exception of the 18th, the British and Indian brigades were little more than weak battalion groups.

General Freyberg became aware of these further discussions early in the afternoon when he was told by **10 Corps** that, on relief, the Division was to go into the **Naghamish** area. He was advised that the Army Commander had promised a decision by midnight whether the Division would stay there or go to **13 Corps**. **Freyberg** stated his objections to **Naghamish** as a tactical position and the difficulties of recalling **4 Brigade Group**, then moving south in desert formation. However, in accordance with Corps' orders, he altered the route for the remainder of the Division to take it east of **Naghamish Wadi** by way of the **Garawla** railway station and thence by another desert track to a concentration area at **Bir el Sarahna**. Difficulties with transport delayed some units, but by 7.30 a.m. on 26 June all the main units of the Division were concentrated in the area **Bir el Sarahna** and **Bir Ali el Qadi**. The movement received enemy attention, one man of **21 Battalion** and four of **22 Battalion** being wounded when **5 Brigade** was bombed on the main road near **Garawla**.

An hour before midnight on 25–26 June the transfer of the Division to **13 Corps** was confirmed and the Division was ordered to be in position at **Minqar Qaim** by 5 a.m., or before first light, on 27 June. Its orders from **13 Corps** were:

- (1) Secure a box in the general area **Minqar Qaim** with the object of
(Denying the escarpment to the enemy,

- a) (Commanding with fire the approaches from the west both
 - b) north and south of the escarpment;
- (2) Maintain a mobile reserve of columns with the task of
- (Delaying any enemy advance from the west,
 - a)
 - (Preventing any enemy from moving up the **Khalda** track
 - b) from the south, and
 - (Attacking any enemy within striking distance.
 - c)

The Division spent the morning of 26 June making itself administratively secure. Ammunition and supply trucks had had to be used for the move from **Matruh** and fifty more trucks were required to make the Division fully mobile. More six-pounder anti-tank guns and their ammunition were awaited. Field artillery ammunition dumped in **Matruh** had to be picked up and the Division's stock of mines replenished. The location of rear divisional headquarters and supply lines and refilling points also had to be fixed. The Division could have moved during the morning, but it was deemed better to attend to these administrative details in the concentration area rather than in the tactical position at **Minqar Qaim**. When they were completed the Division would be able to move anywhere quickly.

General Freyberg was given a large measure of discretion in choosing a battle position at **Minqar Qaim**. For some miles to the west of the **Minqar Qaim** feature the escarpment was impassable to wheeled transport and there were few places tanks could climb. But the **Khalda** track, two and three-quarter miles east of **Minqar Qaim**, and the escarpment east of the track could be easily negotiated by any desert-worthy transport.

In his reconnaissance **Freyberg** paid special attention to two points. He sought positions which offered natural obstacles to tanks or which could be adequately covered by mines and anti-tank guns. But such positions would be useless if, within them, he could not deploy the field artillery to take the fullest advantage of its range and the

concentrations of fire practised in **Syria**. In addition, the ground, while being defensible, should not retard movement. The CRA, Brigadier Weir, was encouraged by the attention given to the requirements of the artillery. He believed this was the first time in the history of the Division that such a priority had been given to the guns. He regarded it as another milestone in the development of divisional artillery practice.

Fifth Brigade led the move from the concentration area, starting at 2 p.m. and travelling south along a telegraph line until it reached the escarpment. Here a column comprising **21 Battalion**, **27 Field Battery**, No. 2 Section **7 Field Company**, and a troop from **32 Anti-Tank Battery** was detached to guard a field maintenance centre at **Bir Khalda**, 12 miles farther south. The column was placed under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, ¹ **21 Battalion**. The rest of the brigade group turned west and the troops were debussed in their defence area close to **Minqar Qaim** feature, by which brigade headquarters was established at 4.30 p.m.

Fourth Brigade left the **Bir el Sarahna** area at 5 p.m. and less than two hours later was disposing itself about **Bir Abu Batta**, a small feature and re-entrant five and a half miles east of **Minqar Qaim**. While thus engaged, the troops noted with satisfaction a large formation of **Royal Air Force Boston** bombers pass over their area on the way to attack the advancing enemy. Within a few minutes, however, they themselves were attacked by about twenty-five enemy bombers which, after turning to get the darkening eastern sky behind them, swept in on a medium-level attack on the group's positions. The troops replied with weapons of all kinds, but by bombing and machine-gunning the enemy killed seven men, wounded

¹ Brig S. F. Allen, OBE, m.i.d.; born Liverpool, 17 May 1897; Regular soldier; CO 2 NZEF Sigs Sep 1939–Sep 1941; 21 Bn 7 Dec 1941–10 May 1942, 12 Jun–15 Jul 1942; comd 5 Bde 10 May–12 Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

fifty-five others, and destroyed or damaged a number of vehicles. The anti-aircraft gunners claimed three of the enemy aircraft. ¹

Apropos of this attack, it is worth comment that there is no record in the diaries of the German ground forces that the **Luftwaffe** reported the concentration of British troops and transport in the **Minqar Qaim** area. After passing over **4 Brigade** about **Bir Abu Batta**, the German airmen must have seen **5 Brigade** at **Minqar Qaim**, while the **Divisional Reserve Group** and **Divisional Headquarters**, then moving to the escarpment, should also have been sighted by alert observers. Had this intelligence been conveyed promptly to Field Marshal Rommel or *Afrika Korps*, it is highly probable the New Zealand Division would have been subjected to much more vigorous attention next morning.

By midnight on 26–27 June the Division was disposed on the escarpment, with **5 Brigade** Group on the western flank and **Divisional Headquarters** and **Divisional Reserve Group** next to it west of the **Khalda** track. There was then a gap of over two miles to **4 Brigade** at **Bir Abu Batta**. This gap was considered too dangerous and the group was ordered to shift itself bodily to the west and close on the **Divisional Reserve Group**. The move was made on foot between 3 a.m. and 6.30 a.m. On its completion, the Division was disposed in six mutually supporting positions in an area approximately five and a half miles long by one and a half to two miles in depth on the top and face of the escarpment. ²

In detail, **22 Battalion** faced north and west on the extreme western flank. Fifth Brigade Headquarters was alongside **Minqar Qaim** feature, and then came **23 Battalion** with two companies facing north and one south. Fifth Field Regiment, less 27 Battery with the column at **Bir Khalda**, was deployed in this area. The **Divisional Reserve Group** was given a defensive task adjoining **23 Battalion**. **Divisional Headquarters** was originally located below and to the north of the escarpment between **Minqar Qaim** and **Khalda** track, but when advice was received that the enemy had penetrated the minefields on the **Siwa** road, it was moved three-quarters of a mile south on to the escarpment. This new position

also permitted a better deployment of the artillery to meet possible enemy advances from the north-west.

In **4 Brigade** Group's new positions, **19 Battalion** covered the southern approaches, **28 Battalion** the northern and **20 Battalion**, on the extreme eastern flank, those from the north-east. Brigade Headquarters was in **19 Battalion's** area.

¹ No fewer than eighteen reports were made of this incident, most of them differing in detail. The report given here is from **4 Brigade's** Intelligence Log.

² See map on p. 84.

The Division's supply line was from **Matruh** and other army depots on the coast road through **Rear Divisional Headquarters**, which was set up in the neighbourhood of Bir Abu el Fakarin, about 17 miles east of **Minqar Qaim** and due south of **Sidi Haneish**. Headquarters of the New Zealand **Army Service Corps** travelled with Rear Division.

While the Division was taking up its positions, advice was received of an enemy attack on the **Siwa** road minefields and the noise of battle in the distance was heard. These gave urgency to the defensive preparations. Fifth Brigade sent a patrol of carriers from **22 Battalion** to make contact with **5 Indian Division** to the west, and also sent other patrols 12 miles to the north and northeast to look for signs of an enemy breakthrough. Fourth Brigade sent a column comprising **20 Battalion** less one company, **46 Field Battery**, and B Troop of **31 Anti-Tank Battery** north along the **Khalda** track for three and a half miles to the junction of the roads and telegraph lines. The column left the brigade area at **Bir Abu Batta** at 9.30 p.m. On the patrol it passed several groups of British transport which were unaware that the enemy might be near at hand. Parties bringing six-pounders to the Division were met and given guides to **Minqar Qaim**. As no contact had been made with the enemy by 11.p.m., the column took up a defensive position for the

remainder of the night.

In the meantime, the troops on the escarpment toiled with a will to make weapon pits and gun positions. The hard, rocky ground made the work laborious. Where it was impossible to dig, the men scraped shallow holes and built parapets of stones. Few of the guns could be sunk into pits. In the dark, **7 Field Company** put down a minefield covering the northern approach to **5 Brigade's** area. This was prolonged by **5 Field Park** to cover **28 Battalion's** west and north flanks, and **6 Field Company** carried the minefield north and east of **20 Battalion** to **Bir Abu Batta**.

Although there was still much work to do in improving the minefields and other defences, the Division greeted the dawn of 27 June with confidence. At long last, after more than two and a half years of war, it was disposed to fight as a division. Each infantry battalion felt it had tried and trusted comrades on its flanks, and there was the utmost faith in the gunners. True, there was an air of novelty in the anti-tank defences. The anti-tank batteries were still receiving the new six-pounders. These had not been zeroed and parts were missing from some. But the gunners took them over and prepared them for action in their allotted battle positions. Waiting infantrymen who had had a course on the two-pounder in **Syria** took over the two-pounder guns for the anti-tank platoons then being formed in each battalion. They knew that the gun made the German panzer divisions a little more cautious in attack, that in favourable circumstances it could knock out a tank, and with a hint or two on tactics, the infantrymen went off triumphantly to reinforce their battalion defences.

The men were vaguely aware that **1 Armoured Division** and **5 Indian Division** (how little of the latter they did not know) were west of them. Seven miles north, **151 Brigade** of **50 Division** was in the area where the **New Zealand Division** had concentrated on 25–26 June, and beyond the 151st was the same division's **69th Brigade**. Above all, however, the men knew the battle had started and, in the *élan* of well-found troops, they were certain that the enemy was about to receive a knock which would change the tide of fortune.

Freyberg considered one really hearty blow was all that was needed to put the enemy off his balance and Eighth Army on top again. But the idea was not put to the test. Last-minute changes in the British plans reduced, if they did not eliminate, the chances of giving a knockout blow. Indecisive, spiritless command on the day of battle made its delivery impossible.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 8 – AUCHINLECK TAKES COMMAND

CHAPTER 8

Auchinleck takes Command

IN the evening of 25 June, when the enemy was a day's march from the **Matruh** outposts, General Auchinleck took direct command of Eighth Army. He had decided that day 'the position of the Eighth Army was so critical and the danger to **Egypt** so great', ¹ that he must assume personal command. With the change, he also reversed the decision that a decisive battle should be fought round **Matruh**.

Reasons for the altered policy are given in Auchinleck's despatch. 'I realized that we were so weak in tanks and field artillery, two of the essentials for success in desert warfare, that it was very doubtful whether we could hope to hold the **Matruh** position, any more than we could the positions on the frontier,' he reported. 'With his superiority in tanks, it seemed that the enemy might either envelop our open southern flank or pierce our centre, which we could hold only lightly. In either event, he was likely to isolate part of our forces and defeat them in detail, and this I was determined to avoid. I was convinced that it was necessary above all to hold together the much depleted Eighth Army and to keep it as a mobile force, retaining its freedom of action. I decided, therefore, that I could not risk its being pinned down at **Matruh**.' ²

After discussing the disadvantages of yielding **Matruh** and the advantages of the **Alamein** positions, including the shortening of Eighth Army's supply lines, the despatch continues: 'I therefore cancelled the orders to stand at **Matruh** and gave instructions for Eighth Army to withdraw on El **Alamein**, delaying the enemy as much as possible in its retirement.'

Shortly after midnight on 25–26 June, General Holmes, his Brigadier General Staff (Brigadier Walsh), and Brigadier Erskine (BGS **13 Corps**) were informed of the new plan at Headquarters Eighth Army at **Baggush**. Detailed orders were set out in Eighth Army Operation Instruction No. 83 which was being prepared while the conference was being held. This

instruction, and an addition to it issued by Auchinleck personally on 26 June, are important in understanding much that happened in and about **Matruh** and are quoted here in full.

¹ Despatch, p. 327.

² Ibid, p. 328.

26 June 42

EIGHTH ARMY OPERATION INSTRUCTION No. 83
Ref Map MATRUH 1/500,000

INTRODUCTION.

1. EIGHTH ARMY Operation Instruction No. 82 ¹ was based on the intention to fight a decisive battle on the **Matruh** position.

This intention has now been changed and a new plan formulated to take effect as soon as the necessary orders can be promulgated.

INTENTION.

2. EIGHTH ARMY will stop the enemy's eastward advance and defeat him in the area MATRUH-EL ALAMEIN-NAQB ABU DWEIS-RAS EL QATTARA.... ²

METHOD.

3. EIGHTH ARMY is divided into two elements:—

- (The Forward element comprising 10 and **13 Corps** in the MATRUH area.
a)
(b) The Rearward element comprising the formations in the EL ALAMEIN area.

4. The role of the Forward element EIGHTH ARMY is 'To seize any opportunity which may arise of delaying and defeating the enemy but to withdraw from the MATRUH position should the enemy threaten to

overwhelm our forces in this area.'

5. The principles on which the actions of the Forward element of

EIGHTH ARMY will be based are as follows:—

(Formations will be mobile and will maintain in the forward area the
a) whole of their Fd and R.A. A/Tk arty assisted by the minimum of
infantry and the other supporting arms.

(MATRUH will NOT be held as a fortress, and steps will be taken to ensure
b) that formations will NOT be cut off by an enemy thrust to the coast
about MAATEN EL GARAWLA....

(Units and stocks NOT required for the battle in the MATRUH area will be
c) evacuated forthwith to positions east of EL ALAMEIN.

6. The Forward elements EIGHTH ARMY will comprise the following:—

10 CORPS.

(Div HQ and Sigs, equivalent of one Bde Gp and all the Div Fd and
a) R.A. A/Tk arty of 50 Div and 10 Ind Div.

(64 Med Regt.

b)

13 CORPS.

(Div HQ and Sigs, equivalent of one Bde Gp and all the Div Fd and R.A.
c) A/Tk arty of N.Z. Div and 5 Ind Div.

(1 and 7 Armd Divs. The remainder of 50, N.Z., 5 Ind and 10 Ind
d) Divs will be sent to **EL ALAMEIN** position as follows. On arrival they
will be met and be given instructions by **30 Corps**.

¹ See pp. 60–1. This instruction dealt chiefly with possible enemy courses of action and proposed counter-measures.

² Map references omitted throughout.

(Remainder 50, N.Z. and 10 Ind Divs by desert route to DEIR EL
e) QATTARA....

(Remainder 5 Ind Div by desert route to NAQB ABU DWEIS....

f)

(On arrival on the **EL ALAMEIN** position all elements of the forward g) echelon of **EIGHTH ARMY** will be received by **30 Corps** which will come under comd BTE from 1200 hrs 26 June.

(This movement from **MATRUH** to the **EL ALAMEIN** position will be h) dispersed and spaced evenly over the hours of daylight by **10** and **13 Corps**. It will be started immediately on receipt of these orders.

7. During the hours of daylight on 26 June the policy governing the action of **10** and **13 Corps** in the event of an enemy attack will be as laid down in **EIGHTH ARMY** Operation Instruction No. 82 except that **10 Ind Div** will NOT be required to hold **MATRUH** but will fight in a mobile role West and South of the **MATRUH** perimeter defences.

8. After 2100 hrs 26 June the policy governing the action of **10** and **13 Corps** will remain the same but the inter-Corps boundary will be: ¹

DEMOLITIONS.

9. It is most important that installations and stores, which can NOT be evacuated, are destroyed.

10 Corps are responsible for arranging for the demolitions at **MATRUH** port, **MOHALFA**, **QASABA** and the stocks within the **MATRUH** perimeter including water supply.

Acknowledge. (Sgd.) J. F. M. **WHITELEY**,
Brigadier,
General Staff.

Time of signature 0415 hrs.

Method of issue. **10** & **13 Corps** by SDR [Special Despatch Rider].

To this Operation Instruction, General Auchinleck issued the following ' MOST IMMEDIATE, MOST SECRET' addition over his own signature on the same day:

1. Although para 4 of this instruction [No. 83] says that forward troops of the **EIGHTH ARMY** now in the area **MATRUH**, **MINQAR QAIM**, **SIDI HAMZA**, will

withdraw from the MATRUH position should the enemy force threaten to overwhelm them, this does not mean that the strongest possible resistance is not to be offered to the enemy around the minefields which constitute the major part of the defences.

2. Should the enemy attack it is my intention to inflict the heaviest possible losses on him in this area and, if possible, so cripple him as to make him incapable of further offensive action for a considerable time.

3. The means at our disposal include:—

- (The divisional artilleries of four divisions with an infantry brigade
 - a) from each division organised into mobile battle-groups strong in field and anti-tank guns.
 - b) regiments.
 - c) A covering force comprising motor and light tank (Stuart) units.

¹ The boundaries are fixed by map references and are not material to this discussion.

4. The principles on which the battle will be fought are:—

- (The fullest use will be made of the minefields to embarrass and fix
 - a) the enemy. Mobile battle-groups are to watch the minefields closely and prevent enemy interference with them, inflicting the maximum loss on him should he try to do so.
 - b) Should the enemy pass round the SOUTH flank of the minefields or penetrate them, he will be at once engaged with all available artillery by the division or divisions nearest the threatened spot. Other divisions, while continuing to watch their own allotted front and flanks, will move at once to the threatened front and attack the enemy boldly and quickly with all available artillery, this movement being co-ordinated by Corps Commanders.
 - c) If battle-groups have to give ground it should be with the object of coming into action again at the earliest possible moment on the flank or rear of the enemy. There must be NO continued rearward movement. The enemy must be attacked by artillery fire continuously

from all sides until he is brought to a standstill.

(The armoured force will be in Army reserve and will not be committed
d) to battle against enemy armour until a really favourable opportunity
has been created for it by the action of the infantry divisions.

(The covering force will operate vigorously from the SOUTH against
e) the enemy flanks and rear doing its utmost by bold and rapid action
to destroy the enemy's transport and dislocate his supply
organisation.

5. An essential part of this method of defence is close control and
co-ordination of the action of battle groups by divisional commanders
who must make their direct personal influence felt on the battlefield. It
is their duty to supply the driving power necessary to enable the artillery
to ATTACK the enemy wherever he is and whatever he does.

6. The Corps Commanders must be in the closest possible touch so
as to ensure that if one Corps or part of it has to give ground the other is
immediately able to take advantage of this situation by rapidly and
boldly attacking the enemy in flank.

7. This system of battle calls for the maximum of mobility on the
part of the troops concerned and the greatest alertness and quickness of
decision on the part of all commanders. I hope to confront the enemy
with a situation new to him and to cause him heavy loss, perhaps even
destroy him, before he can accustom himself to these new conditions.

8. The contents of this instruction are to be impressed most firmly
at once on ALL commanders.

Acknowledge. (Signed) C. J. AUCHINLECK,

General,

Commander-in-Chief,

Comd. Eighth Army.

However clear Auchinleck may have been in his own mind
concerning his plans, these instructions made a difficult situation still
more confusing. The intention to withdraw on **Alamein** is precisely
stated in the despatch. It was the keynote of the midnight conference. It

is the dominant note in paragraphs two and four in Operation Instruction No. 83. Certainly there is a *caveat* that previous orders would hold good should the enemy attack during daylight on 26 June. An intention to fight in the **Matruh** area may also be deduced from the order to 'stop the enemy's eastward advance and defeat him in the area **Matruh-El Alamein- Naqb Abu Dweis- Ras el Qattara.**' But neither *caveat* nor deduction overruled the principal idea of packing up and getting out of **Matruh** and of fighting a delaying action back to **Alamein**.

Auchinleck's additional instructions expressed another view. The forward elements were to withdraw only 'should the enemy force threaten to overwhelm them', and then only with the object of coming into action again at the earliest possible moment. There was to be no continuous rearward movement. In brief, there was to be mobile defence based on the minefields to inflict the heaviest possible losses on the enemy 'in this area' and 'if possible,...cripple him'. An important proviso was that the armoured force was to be held in Army reserve and not committed to battle against the enemy armour until a really favourable opportunity had been created by the infantry divisions.

There was a still further view of the impending operations. According to Brigadier Whiteley, the 'whole plan was that 13th Corps should attack northwards to help 10th Corps out of **Matruh**' in the event of enemy penetration between the two corps. ¹ Again, at the midnight conference, Brigadier Erskine arranged with Brigadier Walsh that **13 Corps** would stay on the escarpment as long as possible to give **10 Corps** somewhere to make for when it broke out of **Matruh**.

This confusion, of course, was not apparent, but nevertheless it was characteristic of **Middle East** and Eighth Army administration at this period. The vital necessity of checking and re-checking to ensure harmony of ideas and orders had still to be learned.

In addition to this feature of the planning, there was the obvious question of whether there would be sufficient time to promulgate the new orders and make them effective. When the change was made, the

movements and reorganisation called for in Eighth Army orders from 22 to 24 June were still uncompleted. Now the infantry divisions had to undergo further reorganisation and assimilate new plans and new battle tactics. Moreover, **10 Indian Division** in **Matruh** had to be converted from a static role to a mobile one.

Eighth Army Headquarters had ample information concerning the proximity of the enemy and no doubt of his intention to attack.

¹ Evidence before Court of Inquiry into encirclement of **10 Corps** at **Matruh**.

Its own intelligence reports stated that the enemy could be expected to reach the minefields at 6.30 a.m. On 26 June. Orders issued by **5 Indian Division** to its battle groups in the outpost line at 4.30 p.m. on 25 June, on the authority of a **13 Corps**' order, reported an enemy concentration of mechanised transport a short distance to the west, and stated that an enemy advance against the minefield was expected 'possibly this afternoon.'

Mention has already been made that communications were poor and that there were long delays in transmitting orders and messages. General Holmes did not get back to his headquarters at **Matruh** until 5 a.m. after the midnight conference. He at once put in hand plans for making **10 Indian Division** mobile and for demolitions and evacuation. There is no record that **10 Corps** received a copy of Instruction No. 83, but it is possible it was destroyed with other secret documents during the battle. Brigadier Erskine returned to **13 Corps** Headquarters about four o'clock, when he gave the news to General Gott. Their copy of Instruction No. 83 did not reach them until 1.10 p.m. on 26 June.

What happened to the instruction after that is not clear. Fifth Indian Division appears to have received it, as its own operation order issued at 5.30 p.m. on 26 June makes the definite statement that 'The Commander-in-Chief has decided NOT to hold **Matruh** at all costs but to

use it to delay the enemy as long as possible and then to withdraw to the El **Alamein** position.’ There is no reference, however, to the instruction in a detailed log kept by **1 Armoured Division**.

There is no record in division or corps documents that NewZeland Division received Instruction No. 83, although a copy of Auchinleck's additional instruction was preserved in the Division's archives. Four years after the war the instruction was brought to the notice of **General Freyberg** and Brigadier Gentry but, important as it was, it did not strike a responsive chord in their memories. On the contrary, they insisted from their records at the time and their recollections of this decisive occasion, that the first they heard of a general retreat from **Matruh** to **Alamein** was when they received an order to move during the battle on 27 June.

In this they are supported by a contemporary document. In the early hours of 27 June **13 Corps** issued Operation Order No. 133 in which the ‘intention’ paragraph said: ‘**13 Corps** will delay enemy as long as possible in present position and stop his advance in area **Matruh-El Alamein- Naqb Abu Dweis- Ras el Qattara**. Special determination is required at the present time and a personal message from the Commander-in-Chief has been received calling on all ranks for a supreme effort to achieve this intention.’ Divisional tasks were those set out in an order of 25 June. These, in brief, were that the corps, in conjunction with **10 Corps**, would destroy any enemy forces which penetrated the area between them.

The order then named axes of retreat and new concentration areas ‘in the event of a withdrawal from the forward positions becoming necessary.’ Withdrawal was to be controlled by Corps Headquarters by means of a special code included in the order. In other words, there was to be no withdrawal unless it was authorised by Corps.

To sum up the position on 26 June:

At the top, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army had been removed

from his post and his place taken by the Commander-in-Chief of the theatre. In some circumstances, such action emphasizes the seriousness of the situation and the change restores confidence. In Eighth Army, the lack of confidence in the higher command due principally to the disasters of the previous month, extended beyond Army Headquarters. Few, if any, of the units, however, were aware of the change in command.

The Army's new orders were contradictory. At the midnight conference and in Operation Instruction No. 83 the emphasis was on further withdrawal to **Alamein** to avoid the risk of the Army being split by the enemy and defeated in detail, and to secure the benefits of flanks which could not be turned and of shorter supply lines. In Auchinleck's additional instruction the Army was ordered to offer the enemy the strongest possible resistance with the object of crippling him in the area about the minefields. The Army's chief staff officer envisaged a battle on a corps basis in which the mobile **13 Corps** would be a hammer to crack the enemy against the anvil of **10 Corps** in the **Matruh** defences. The Commander-in-Chief thought in terms of artillery battle groups whose actions would be directed by divisional and corps commands.

In **10 Corps** the previous plans for the approaching battle were being reversed and stores were being collected for evacuation or destruction. The former suggested indecision in the higher command; the latter expectation of further defeat. But all were working with a will in a race against time.

In **13 Corps 5 Indian Division's** small battle groups on the outpost line awaited the decisive hour, but as it neared, they were told that **Matruh** was not to be held 'at all costs' and that the Army was to withdraw to **Alamein**. First Armoured Division had absorbed the armour of the covering force in the retreat from the frontier. The advanced units, **7 Motor Brigade's** armoured cars, were in contact with the enemy west of the **Siwa** road. The division had a precise role in counter-attacking the enemy should he penetrate the minefields. New Zealand Division was concentrating in defensive positions at **Minqar Qaim**. It was

confident of its ability to hold its own against the enemy and expected to play a decisive part in a co-ordinated corps counter-attack when the enemy committed himself against **Matruh.**

In all the Army area there was more than the usual friction of the battlefield. Much of it was inevitable as a result of the retreat. The greater part was due to attempts to impose new organisation and tactics while preparing to give battle to an enemy bent on denying his opponent time to reorganise and deploy.

On 26 June, while it was yet light, Rommel's spearhead, *90 Light Division*, pierced the minefield defences. The Battle of **Matruh was on.**

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 9 – ROMMEL'S BATTLE PLANS

CHAPTER 9

Rommel's Battle Plans

WHEN the attack on the frontier defences revealed that Eighth Army was withdrawing to **Matruh**, Rommel, now a field marshal as a reward for his recent prowess, ordered 'ruthless pursuit.' *Afrika Korps* and *90 Light Division* were given as their objective for 24 June the general area south-east of **Sidi Barrani**, some 60 miles east of the frontier and 35 to 40 miles from the regrouping areas after the attack on the frontier defences.

Afrika Korps' orders to *21 Panzer Division* illustrate the emphasis placed on speed, with the object of overtaking Eighth Army and denying it time to reorganise at **Matruh**. Shortly after starting the pursuit, the division reported that it had only one-third of a fuel unit as the fuel supply columns had not come up. ¹ *Korps Headquarters* promptly responded with the order: 'Division will advance in such a manner that shortage of fuel will not impair its fighting power. Set yourself an interim target you can reach. There you will form a pursuit group composed of all weapons. This group will be supplied with all the fuel still in the division. Division will advance after refuelling.' ² Next day *21 Panzer* was further advised that, if it was short of fuel, it must push forward at least parts of the division.

For the advance the Italian *XXI Infantry Corps*, partly motorised, was placed on the coast road and was followed by *X Italian Infantry Corps* which also had a motorised component. The Germans had the inland route on top of the escarpment, with *90 Light Division* on their left flank in contact with the Italians, and *21 Division* was south of the railway. The latter was followed by *15 Panzer Division*. Still further in rear came the Italian *XX Corps*, comprising *Ariete* and *Littorio Armoured Divisions* and *Trieste Motorised Division*. The whole were grouped under the title *Panzerarmee Afrika*.

The enemy knew at this stage that the New Zealand Division had

returned to the desert but his intelligence service erred concerning the dispositions of Eighth Army. It placed '2 NZ Div in Mersa

¹ The Germans reported their petrol position in terms of fuel, or consumption units. One unit was sufficient petrol to move the whole formation 100 Kilometres, roughly 65 miles.

² *21 Division diary, 24 Jun 1942.*

Matruh along the **Siwa** track, next to it 10 Ind Div and 1 South African Div, and on the southern flank 7 Armd Div. In the area **Garawla** and south probably the remains of 50 British and 1 Armd Divs.' ¹

Owing to lack of fuel, *Afrika Korps* (15 and 21 Panzer Divisions) could not pursue at the speed demanded and by the evening of 24 June was only in the area south-east of El Hamra. The 21st Panzer, however, had formed and pushed forward a pursuit group. This group appears to have been responsible for a further severe blow suffered by 3 Indian Motor Brigade of the covering force. The brigade was caught off balance near **Sofafi** and lost most of its field and anti-tank guns. The best progress was made by 90 Light Division whose reconnaissance units reached the area south-east of **Sidi Barrani** by nightfall. On the coast road, motorised units of *XXI Corps* got as far as six miles from **Sidi Barrani**.

Panzerarmee's daily report for 24 June had a note of regret that, in spite of the rapid advance, 'it had not been possible to bring the enemy's main body to battle.' But the headquarters consoled itself with the thought that 'a deep penetration had been made into the west Egyptian area without appreciable loss' and that 'the enemy divisions in **Matruh** had been denied the time for the organisation of the defence.'

Vigorous reconnaissance by Eighth Army's covering force was reported by *Panzerarmee* on 25 June, but the numerous skirmishes between advanced and rear guards did not impede the march of the

enemy's main body. Most of the enemy's difficulties were created by **Royal Air Force** bombing and by petrol shortages due to lack of supply vehicles. *Panzerarmee* made light of the bombing, reporting that, generally speaking, the losses suffered were inconsiderable. Most of the divisions, however, were more explicit with details of supply columns destroyed or dispersed. For example, *21 Panzer Division* reported that because a supply column had been dispersed, the division had been reduced to half a fuel unit, or enough for little more than 30 miles. Continuous bombing attacks were reported by *90 Light Division*, whose diary for 25 June has the ironic entry: 'At 0915 hours, welcomed with great joy, the first German fighters appear.'

Concurrently, indirect but deadly pressure was being applied against *Panzerarmee* by the **Royal Air Force** in another part of the theatre. Aided by the withdrawal of considerable units of the **German Air Force** from **Italy** and **Sicily** for a new offensive in **Russia**, the British temporarily recovered air supremacy over the Central Mediterranean. **Vice-Admiral Weichold** noted an immediate

¹ *Panzerarmee* report to GHQ, **Rome**, 24 June.

result. In June, supplies to the German forces in **North Africa** dropped to barely 5000 tons, compared with 34,000 tons in May. Against 2000 vehicles delivered in May, only 400 got through in June.

'Once again the threatening monster of reduced supplies for **Africa** loomed on the horizon,' Weichold laments in his essay. 'While at the front the soldiers of **Afrika Korps** fought and conquered, far from the decisive area of the land fighting the British were systematically throttling the supplies of the German-Italian *Panzerarmee*.' Weichold regarded this revived **Royal Air Force** activity over his domain as a shrewd and timely British counterstroke to the defeat in **North Africa**.

There was another ominous cloud on Rommel's horizon as he closed on **Matruh**. When, after **Tobruk**, he had advised **Rome** that his supply

vehicle situation was 'very critical', he had asked for more trucks and 'continuation and reinforcement of the German naval protective forces in **North Africa**.' A steady flow of munitions and equipment from **Italy** was vital. It was equally essential in *Panzerarmee's* march to **Cairo** and **Suez** that the strain on land transport should be relieved by lighters operating between the small ports of **Cyrenaica** and **Egypt**.

On 25 June Rommel reported to **Rome** that he had been advised by German naval headquarters that it was intended to remove the German naval forces soon for special duty. He asked that all these, but especially the supply lighters, should be left with him 'at least for the duration of the operations because, if they are lost, all sea transport east of **Benghazi** will be stopped and the supplying of *Panzerarmee* in its present area will become impossible.'

This was probably the first hint Rommel received that the German Supreme Command did not intend to exploit his success to the full. His reflections on the North African campaigns ¹ suggest that he anticipated difficulties with the Italian supply authorities, but that 'All that was wanted was a man real personality to deal with these questions in **Rome**, someone with the authority and drive to tackle the problems involved.' Rommel could not believe that the German Supreme Command would not see the glittering prizes awaiting *Panzerarmee* and fail to give his forces every help in seizing them. His opponents in the field had similar views.

If Rommel had cause to doubt the future, he did not check the speed of *Panzerarmee's* advance or revise his administrative arrangements. On 25 June he issued orders designed to convert the pursuit without pause into a decisive battle. His plan, simple and elastic

¹ R *ommel*, p. 259 et seq.

enough to cope with the unknown, was based on the belief that 'the beaten enemy has withdrawn with what remains of his forces into

Matruh which he intends to defend stubbornly with a New Zealand Division and the remainder of his troops, as has been learned from captured enemy documents.’¹

In the north, on *Panzerarmee's* left flank, the Italian X and **XXI Corps** were ordered to attack the fortress perimeter defences from the west and south-west. The *90th Light Division* was instructed to cross the **Siwa** road midway between **Charing Cross** and the inland escarpment and advance to **Minqar Abu Gabr**. East of that height, the division was to turn north-east and find the quickest route down the coastal escarpment to cut the main road about **Garawla**. Thus the garrison of the fortress would be encircled.

Afrika Korps, commanded by Lieutenant-General W. Nehring, was ordered to move on *90 Light Division's* right on and below the inland escarpment. The *Korps* placed **21 Panzer Division** below the escarpment with **Bir Shineina**, east of the **Khalda** track, as its objective. The *15th Panzer Division* was to climb the escarpment about the **Siwa** road and move along the top to **Bir Abu Shayit**, a well which, unknown to *Panzerarmee*, was to be included in the New Zealand area at **Minqar Qaim**.

The Italian **XX Corps**, which had been following **Afrika Korps** from the frontier, was brought forward and ordered to have two divisions, **Ariete** and **Trieste**, in line on the inland escarpment three to four miles west of **Kanayis** and **Sidi Husein** ready to attack by five o'clock the next afternoon. The corps was thus placed on *Panzerarmee's* right flank and was instructed to contain the British forces on the escarpment by infantry attacks and heavy artillery fire. It was also to be ready to follow **Afrika Korps**, at first with elements and later with its main body. As a further guard on the right flank, *3 Reconnaissance Unit* was instructed to reconnoitre to the southeast of the escarpment. **Littorio Armoured Division** was taken from **XX Corps** into army reserve under orders to fill its tanks and be prepared to exploit the breakthrough.

The plan was not bold in the sense Rommel used the term.

Nevertheless, it complied with the core of his definition of a bold operation in that, in case of failure, he would be left 'with sufficient forces in hand to be able to cope with any situation.'² As will be seen, he had sufficient forces in hand to cope with the situation when 1 Armoured and the New Zealand Divisions were unexpectedly encountered on the inland escarpment.

¹ *90 Light Division diary, 25 June.*

² *Rommel, p. 255.*

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 10 – GERMANS BREAK IN

CHAPTER 10

Germans Break In

PANZERARMEE completed its advance to the assembly area during the night 25–26 June and next morning. On the ground, it was lightly opposed by the squadrons of **7 Motor Brigade** operating against the enemy's southern flank on a wide front on the inland escarpment. These squadrons and patrols from **29 Indian Brigade** were then the only British forces west of the **Siwa** road.

Zero hour for the attack on **Matruh** was five o'clock ¹ in the afternoon of 26 June, which would give about two and a half hours of daylight to reach and reconnoitre the defences. The moon would then provide enough light for **90 Light Division** and **Afrika Korps** to make their encircling moves but not sufficient to disclose them fully to Eighth Army.

From the assembly area, **Afrika Korps** and **90 Light Division** fanned out south-east in a triple thrust against the **Siwa** road and inland escarpment defences. The **90th Light Division**, which had advanced one of its groups earlier to secure the small height Nizwat Qireida, west of **Siwa** road, moved on a front of four miles to a point midway between **Charing Cross** and the inland escarpment where it expected to find a gap in the minefield. The **21st Panzer Division** was to breach the defences between **90 Light Division** and the inland escarpment, and **15 Panzer Division** was sent to turn the minefield on and below the escarpment.

The two pitifully small columns of **29 Indian Brigade** covering the minefield were quickly and valiantly in action against this formidable array. Each group had a company of infantry, a field battery, a troop of anti-tank guns and two troops of light anti-aircraft guns. In the fashion of the time they were named after their commanders, 'Gleecol' (Lieutenant-Colonel Gleeson) and 'Leathercol' (Major Leather). They had a fluid role but definite, although impossible, orders to 'prevent passage of the enemy through the southern minefield.'

The columns conducted a running fight with *90 Light Division* until, at a quarter past seven, Gleeson reported that '100 tanks have broken through the minefield and are moving eastward.' Leathercol

¹ All times quoted in enemy reports are altered to local British Army time which, at this period, was one hour ahead of the time used by *Panzerarmee*.

had been completely overrun, only a few men and guns getting away. Gleecol, according to a **5 Indian Division** report, fared little better.

In the dusk, dust and confusion, Gleecol appears to have mistaken *90 Light Division's* trucks and other transport for tanks or associated *21 Panzer Division* with the breakthrough. The German records carry no indication that *90 Light Division* had any tanks at this stage. Besides the opposition of Leathercol and Gleecol, *90 Light Division* was fired on from the outposts at **Charing Cross** and from **29 Brigade's** other positions on the inland escarpment. The German engineers, however, quickly cleared a passage through the minefield and the division sped eastwards. It was next heard of near midnight when it was held up by **151 Brigade** about **Bir el Sarahna**. What had happened was not appreciated by any headquarters save that of **29 Indian Brigade**, upon whom the blow had fallen.

The *21st Panzer Division*, commanded by Major-General von Bismarck, a cousin of the 'Iron Chancellor', made a more cautious approach to the **Siwa** road. The hard core of the division was *5 Panzer Regiment* with thirty tanks. Eight of these were damaged in the **Siwa** road minefields. One was repaired during the night, thus giving the regiment twenty-three tanks, the majority of them Mark IIIs, for the resumption of the advance next morning.

The *104th Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of three battalions, with a total strength of under 1000 all ranks, provided the division's infantry component. ¹ Each battalion had its own anti-tank guns and a small

number of field guns, including self-propelled guns. Some of the field guns were captured 25-pounders. The main artillery strength was concentrated in *155 Artillery Regiment* of three batteries equipped with light and heavy guns. The division also had an anti-tank unit, a panzer engineer battalion and a signals unit.

In contact with *90 Light* and *15 Panzer Divisions*, the *21st* reached the minefield at a quarter past seven, sufficiently close to the escarpment to see British troops in position and to come under what was reported as strong artillery fire. The nearest British troops were **1 Mahrattas of 5 Indian Division** on Bir el Hukuma, on the **Siwa** road near the face of the escarpment. They appear to have been responsible for holding up *15 Panzer Division*, but about

¹ The exact strength of the regiment at this date is unknown. The estimate is based on the number buried at **Minqar Qaim**, about 300, and a strength return of 300 on 1 July. The regiment was also known as *Infantry Regiment 104* (I.R. 104) and as *Rifle Regiment 104* (R.R. 104). *Panzer Grenadiers* was at first an honorary title used to distinguish the infantry serving with panzer, or tank, divisions, although the Germans were not consistent in this. In **North Africa** the *Panzer Grenadiers* did not appear to be armed differently from other infantry regiments, but in **Italy** and **Normandy** there were marked differences in equipment.

half-past eight they were pushed off their positions by *21 Division's* infantry, supported by artillery. At the same time, the division's tanks probed for gaps in the minefield. After having eight tanks damaged, the division went into hedgehog positions for the remainder of the night while its engineers cut gaps through the minefields.

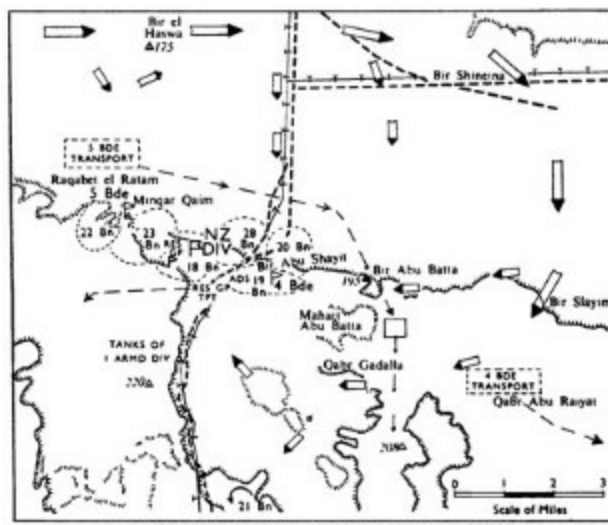
There was some other fighting in the neighbourhood that night. A battle group of the **Highland Light Infantry** at **Sidi Hamza**, and the remainder of the battalion and the headquarters of **29 Brigade** near **Bir Sidi Hamza**, were scattered by tanks said to have appeared on both sides of them. The assailants were probably from *15 Panzer Division*. The

90th Light Division reported that during the night march part of its right battle group and the whole of the rear group had remained behind, having encountered enemy forces coming from the south. The Germans claimed that these forces had been pushed back and that 400 prisoners had been taken.

These engagements provided the 'noises off' heard by New Zealand Division at **Minqar Qaim**. They permitted *Panzerarmee* to report to **Rome** at midnight that the British forces had been pushed east of the **Siwa** road, and also encouraged another faulty appreciation of the situation. The enemy still had no inkling that the New Zealand Division had moved out of **Matruh** fortress and that it, or any other large infantry formation, was on the escarpment about **Minqar Qaim**.

New Zealand Division, however, was alert to the possibilities. Prompt advice had been received of the enemy breakthrough on the **Siwa** road and a number of patrols were sent out to the west and north as already mentioned. Under this protection against surprise, the Division worked throughout the night on its defences. The first contacts with the enemy were fortuitous encounters by parties making their way to **Minqar Qaim**.

When the Division moved out of **Matruh**, the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** was still without its tanks and carriers, which were being railed from **Syria** and had been held up at **Alexandria**. It was decided, therefore, to equip B Squadron with carriers and transport available in **Matruh** and to send the remainder of the regiment to **Fuka** to reorganise. B Squadron left **Matruh** late in the afternoon to join the Division. Heavy traffic on the road and enemy air raids made progress so slow that **Garawla** was not reached by the first carriers until nine o'clock. There a halt was made for two hours to permit the squadron to close up. The march was resumed shortly before midnight, and at 1.40 a.m. the squadron in the dark ran into a 'German column which included 15 Mark IV tanks.'



21 PANZER DIVISION'S ENCIRCLEMENT OF 2 NZ DIVISION
AT MINQAR QAIM ON 27 JUNE 1942

21 Panzer Division's encirclement of 2 NZ Division at Minqar Qaim on 27 June 1942

Two carriers were damaged by fire from this column and had to be abandoned before the squadron could disengage by a rapid detour to the east. When clear, the squadron turned south again. On this stage of the journey it encountered British field artillery, later identified as 293 Battery of 74 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery. The battery was urged to accompany the squadron to the Division but stayed in the area to support the Durham Light Infantry of 151 Brigade. Later in the morning the battery was knocked out by 90 Light Division and its personnel taken prisoner.

B Squadron's positive identification of fifteen Mark IV German tanks illustrates the tank consciousness of the British troops at the period. The only enemy in the vicinity at the time of the encounter was 90 Light Division, which did not have any tanks on its establishment. Nor, according to the division's diary which gives the composition of the battle groups, were any tanks attached to it for the attack on Matruh. Moreover the two panzer divisions had thirty-nine serviceable tanks all told on 27 June, of which no more than half a dozen were Mark IVs.

Unquestionably, the squadron had a fight. It is possible that in the dark it was mistaken for the enemy by a British Crusader tank command. British tanks were in the neighbourhood. The 293rd Field Battery lost some men when its gun positions were overrun by Crusader

tanks withdrawing under enemy anti-tank fire at 2 a.m. on 27 June. It is also possible that the squadron was the victim of German anti-tank guns fired from portées or perhaps of self-propelled guns, but it is doubtful whether any part of *90 Light Division* was so far east at the time. ¹

A party of twenty-eight drivers from **6 Field Regiment** traversed the same area as B Squadron without any vicissitudes, except the trials of searching the depots at **Matruh** and on the coast for twentyeight six-pounder anti-tank guns for the Division and of a prolonged journey for which it had not been prepared with clothing and rations. Another group of seven men and an officer from the regiment was not so fortunate in its attempt to rejoin the Division from **Matruh**. It ran into Germans driving British anti-tank portées and was made prisoner.

When B Squadron and the anti-tank guns party reached the Division they could merely confirm happenings then apparent from **Minqar Qaim**. From this grandstand, the Division could see forces moving across its northern front with signs of battle beyond.

The *21st Panzer Division* left its hedgehog positions west of the **Siwa** road at 7.30 in the morning of 27 June. An hour later it was through the gaps cut in the minefields and had reached **Bir el Gibb**. There it turned south-east towards Abar Zahya. On the way the division noted and reported what it took to be British tanks on the inland escarpment. It was also advised that *15 Panzer Division* was involved in a battle with strong British tank forces well up on the escarpment. This engagement is not mentioned in **1 Armoured Division's** detailed log of the day.

Reports of British tanks on the escarpment appear to have given *Afrika Korps Headquarters* some concern. Instead of finding only reconnaissance units of the British armour west of the **Khalda** track, as it expected, the *Korps* headquarters had a report of forty to fifty tanks with six batteries in the neighbourhood of Karima, six miles west of **Minqar Qaim**. This news was flashed to *21 Panzer Division* with the additional note: 'We are worried about 21 Pz Div.' *Afrika Korps*

Headquarters, however, had little cause for anxiety as, at that time, Rommel was travelling with the division. He appears to have been satisfied with the progress and position of the division for he extended its orders to include cutting the 'escarpment descent' south-west of **Bir Shineina. This was a preliminary move to cut the line of retreat of the British armour on the escarpment.**

¹ **In some conditions of visibility, self-propelled guns were mistaken for tanks. The *90th Light Division's* records of the period, however, contain only one reference to these guns, three being credited to *288 Special Force* on 29 June.**

It was also an example of taking advantage of circumstances as they developed.

These additional orders were given more than half an hour before the divisional headquarters learned there was something substantial on its right flank on the escarpment. Although flanking artillery and tanks had come into action some time before, it was not until eleven o'clock that the division reported to *Afrika Korps* that a large concentration of motor transport of approximately divisional strength had been sighted. The significance of the concentration apparently did not strike General von Bismarck for, after passing on the suggestion that 'this would be a promising Stuka target,' he left further action to his flank guard while he carried on with the main body to **Bir Shineina, which was reached by his infantry half an hour after midday.**

From dawn, the New Zealand Division had been paying special attention to the activity on its northern front. It had seen considerable movement in the neighbourhood of **Raqabet el Sikka where **151 Brigade** still held up *90 Light Division*. British tanks which passed through **28 Battalion** on their way westwards, and other sources, gave news of the presence of the enemy north of the Division and of the fighting.**

An interesting report, and also a small but useful reinforcement, was brought to the Division by Major D. J. M. Smith, second-in-command of

1/4 Battalion, The Essex Regiment, who during the night had traversed the greater part of the battle area and had had some tense moments with the enemy.

With an infantry company and section of carriers from his battalion, a troop from 121 Field Regiment, a troop of anti-tank guns, an ambulance car and a wireless link, Major Smith was sent from 5 Indian Brigade of 10 Division in Matruh to patrol the minefields south of Matruh, harass the enemy and establish contact with 5 Indian Division and its 29th Brigade. Moving from the fortress down the Siwa road, the column found that the minefield had been penetrated and ran into 90 Light Division. It broke clear of artillery and machine-gun fire and then passed eastwards along the south face of the fortress. Moving south again, it was attacked a little before dusk by enemy aircraft and at the same time was fired on by enemy mortars. The mortars were silenced by the column's guns. The column carried on after dark and encountered two enemy laagers, from one of which it captured a German officer.

This band of stalwarts, after searching in vain for 5 Indian Division, came into the New Zealand lines at 7 a.m. The Division was happy to advise 10 Indian Division: 'Your Smith column reported here 0700 intact except for 2 anti-tank guns broken down— remaining under command.' The column was ready to join the New Zealanders. The infantry and carriers went to 19 Battalion and the guns to 4 Field Regiment.

Thus spurred to increased vigilance and activity in completing the defences, the Division awaited events. At 8.30 the enemy opened the Battle of Minqar Qaim with artillery fire from a column about five miles north of the escarpment. Although it was not positively identified, the column was almost certainly from 90 Light Division, then completing the overrunning of 151 Brigade's forward positions and moving eastwards preparatory to descending to the coast road. The 21st Panzer Division at that hour was still at Bir el Gibb, 15 miles to the west.

The enemy action against the Division provoked suitable counter-measures. The defences on the face of the escarpment were

strengthened with a troop from **4 Field Regiment**, and a column comprising 30 Battery of **6 Field Regiment** and two sections of carriers from **18 Battalion** under the battery commander, Major **Lambourn**,¹ was sent towards Bir el Haswa to engage the enemy guns at closer range.

Upon the appearance of a German tank column, the enemy battery yielded the target to it and moved off to the east. Under the fire of the tanks, Lambourn conducted a fighting withdrawal troop by troop back to the Division. The foray cost 30 Battery five men killed.

The tanks heralded the arrival of ***21 Panzer Division***. Increasing heat haze and dust raised by the artillery action and movement of transport over the desert deprived the Division of its grandstand view of the lower ground, but it was left in no doubt of the proximity of considerable enemy forces. About 10.30 a.m. a 28 Battalion carrier patrol sighted an enemy column of up to a thousand vehicles, carrying lorried infantry and led by tanks, moving on a front a mile wide. At a range of roughly three miles, the enemy opened fire on the Division with captured 25-pounders, their own 210, 105, and the notorious 88-millimetre guns.

In spite of the vigour of the artillery on both sides, casualties numerically were light. *The 21st Panzer Division* did not record or report the action, and its diary makes no reference to three tanks put out of action and three others damaged which 30 Battery claimed. Most of the enemy fire fell in **5 Brigade** and **Divisional Headquarters'** areas. One shell which destroyed the signals' remote control wireless-telephone annexe also killed five and wounded seven of **Divisional Headquarters'** staff. Among the killed was Lieutenant-

¹ **Lt-Col A. E. Lambourn**, DSO, ED; **Petone**; born Aust 7 May 1906; clerk; 2 i/c **6 Fd Regt** Sep 1942–Jun 1943; CO **32 Fd Regt** Jun 1943–Mar 1944; 7 A-Tk Regt Mar–May 1944.

Colonel **Ross**,¹ the AA and QMG, a highly-skilled staff officer whom

the Division could ill afford to lose.

Another serious effect of the enemy's fire was felt by **5 Brigade**. The brigade's B echelon transport, with two platoons of **6 Reserve MT Company** and headquarters of **7 Field Company**, was dispersed forward of the escarpment under orders to move if shelled. The enemy action impelled departure at high speed east across the Division's front and up the escarpment near **Bir Abu Batta** to a supposedly safer spot. In their haste, the officers failed to note that they were taking with them an essential part of **5 Brigade's** fighting equipment, the battery-charging plant of the brigade's signals.

The action at this period is perhaps given better perspective by the phlegmatic manner in which it was treated by the engineers of the field companies and field park. They carried on to complete their minelaying across the Division's northern front and eastern flank. The steadfastness of the Field Park Company was especially meritorious, as minelaying was an unusual task for the unit and dangerous for men not fully trained in the work. Inspiring examples were set by Major **Anderson**,² the company commander, and Sergeant **Duckworth**.³ Neither they nor their men were deterred even when a shell exploded a truck of mines, damaging other trucks and causing casualties.

A section of **7 Field Company** on **5 Brigade's** front was equally calm under a severe trial. It was fired on by the tanks which had forced the 30th Battery column to withdraw. Although five sappers were killed and four wounded in a few minutes, Lieutenant **Foster**⁴ encouraged the others to continue the work. When at length the section was ordered to withdraw, Foster sent the survivors to safety but stayed behind himself to bring in a truck of wounded and equipment.

Although enemy lorried infantry had been seen lining up as if for attack, the artillery fire slackened towards midday and the main enemy forces passed to the north-east of the Division. This was in accordance with the order received by General von Bismarck to reach **Bir Shineina**. Some artillery, tanks and infantry were left on and west of the **Khalda**

track fronting the New Zealand Division and flanking *21 Panzer Division's* axis of advance. From Bir

¹ **Lt-Col A. B. Ross**, MBE, ED, m.i.d.; born NZ 25 Apr 1899; civil servant; DAQMG NZ Div Jul 1941–Jun 1942; AA and QMG 1–27 Jun 1942; killed in action 27 Jun 1942.

² **Lt-Col J. N. Anderson**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Te Awamutu**; born Okaihau, 15 Apr 1894; civil engineer; OC 19 Army Tps Coy May–Jun 1941; 5 Fd Pk Coy Sep 1941–Oct 1942; 6 Fd Coy Oct 1942–Jul 1943; CRE 2 NZ Div Sep 1942, Apr–Jul 1944, Aug–Nov 1944; Engr Trg Depot, **Maadi**, Jan–Aug 1945.

³ **S-Sgt A. J. Duckworth**, MM; **Cambridge**; born **Rotorua**, 9 Apr 1916; cheesemaker.

⁴ **Lt F. E. Foster**, MC; **Auckland**; born NZ 24 Sep 1903; engineer; three times wounded.

Shineina the division commanded the descents from the escarpment east of **Minqar Qaim**. Von Bismarck appears to have thought this was enough, for he contented himself with a report for transmission to Rommel that the ‘descent between the road and **Bir Shineina** has been cut’ and that an ‘enemy group of considerable strength is on the escarpment track.’ This lack of enterprise may be contrasted with the attitude of *90 Light Division*, whose commander and chief staff officer had decided before the advance that, if stubborn resistance were encountered, they would push on without awaiting army orders. No attempt seems to have been made by von Bismarck even to learn which British formation had been found from Eighth Army's resources to sit in obvious strength at **Minqar Qaim**.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 11 – NEW ZEALAND DIVISION ISOLATED

CHAPTER 11

New Zealand Division Isolated

UP to this stage, midday, nothing had occurred within the knowledge of New Zealand Division, **13 Corps**, or Eighth Army Headquarters to justify apprehension concerning the position of the Division. **General Freyberg**, in his wide experience of artillery action, dismissed the bombardment with the comment: 'Proceedings opened with a searching strafe of the area early with the usual lack of success for amount of shooting.'¹ Fifth Brigade, which had sent its vehicles away, got no shelling of consequence.

No fearful significance had been given to the subject matter of a divisional conference which broke up two minutes before the disastrous shell fell on headquarters. The brigade and other formation commanders were given **13 Corps'** instructions for the battle, and a provisional plan was made for withdrawal eastwards should this become necessary.² The withdrawal plan was thought to be merely a precautionary measure, something to be considered while there was time for unhurried reflection on all possibilities. The emphasis was on fighting the enemy and inflicting the maximum damage on him.

Within a few minutes of the conference General Gott and Brigadier Erskine visited the Division. No record was made of the conversation with **General Freyberg** and post-war recollections it are at best hazy. It seems unlikely that Gott did not discuss the corps plan, but if he suggested the probability of an early withdrawal, the fact left no impression on **Freyberg**. The latter's recollection of the talk was that it was concerned mainly with combined action by New Zealand Division and **1 Armoured Division** with which, he informed Gott, he had been unable to get into touch. Brigadier Erskine's recollection that a plan was made for 1 Armoured to close on and support New Zealand Division gives some confirmation. Colonel Gentry, upon whom rested responsibility for taking executive action, was certain after the war that he was given

¹ GOC's diary, 27 June.

² Details of this plan, later confirmed in a written order, are given in more appropriate perspective on pp. 103–5. Here it may be said they afford ample confirmation of the fact that the Division received **13 Corps** Operation Order No. 133, signed at 1.20 a.m. on 27 June, and discussed on pp. 74–5.

no further orders concerning a change in plans or the possibility of early withdrawal.

These differences, which are material to subsequent developments, were of course not apparent at the time. The visit was cordial and ended in an atmosphere of mutual confidence. The only trying point was the fact that enemy shelling made it advisable to talk in a slit trench.

Gott, however, on his return to **13 Corps** Headquarters, telephoned Brigadier Whiteley at Eighth Army about 12.30 'that the situation of New Zealand Division was not satisfactory as it was being heavily shelled by the Germans and was suffering considerably. He had refused **Freyberg's** request for some infantry tanks as he wished to concentrate his armour. He had, however, told **Freyberg** to side-step if necessary and not to regard the ground which he was at present holding as vital. **Freyberg** intended to attack the enemy tonight should this prove possible. ¹

On receiving this news, Whiteley said he would arrange with **10 Corps** to attack south to relieve the pressure on the New Zealand Division. ²

Even if Gott had had an inkling of all that was impending, there was no cause for worry. But on the information then available to him and to Eighth Army, and, indeed, on that possessed by the divisions in contact with the enemy, the battle was developing on lines for which provision had been made in the Army and **10 Corps'** appreciation of 24 June.

Panzerarmee had struck in the centre between **10 and 13 Corps**, with a holding attack against **Matruh** fortress and its armour protecting the southern flank. The known situation was sufficiently near to the expected to warrant the belief that the time was approaching, if it had not already arrived, for **13 Corps** to counter-attack northwards against either the enemy's fighting formations or his soft-skinned transport, perhaps both.

The decision to call on **10 Corps** to help the New Zealand Division was the product of an unrealistic appreciation by Gott and Whiteley. **Freyberg** certainly expected the co-operation of **1 Armoured Division** in beating off an enemy attack and he had asked if heavy infantry tanks were available. But he had not sought any other assistance, least of all relief from **10 Corps**. On the contrary, he believed it to be part of the New Zealand Division's task to attack under **13 Corps'** direction to help the garrison of **Matruh**. He did not consider that the attacks so far made on the Division had prejudiced this plan.

General Holmes was not consulted. He was given an order to attack south between defined boundaries which left him no alter-

¹ Eighth Army war diary, 26 June.

² Ibid.

native but to use 50 Division, whose **151 Brigade** was still engaged with **90 Light**. The 69th Brigade, although free at the moment, was handily placed to deal with the enemy should he debouch on to the coast road. No attention appears to have been given to the extension of **90 Light Division's** operations east and then north-east to the coast. Even although the Army and the two corps headquarters might have been unaware of the threat from **90 Light Division**, Holmes had more than enough to do with his meagre resources without being asked to help a corps which was free to move anywhere in the desert against or

out of reach of the enemy.

There was yet another weakness in the new plan. Gott had told **Freyberg** 'to sidestep if necessary and not to regard the ground which he was at present holding as vital.' This suggests the possibility that **10 Corps** might find itself deeply involved in operations for the relief of a division which, in the meantime, had moved away. Finally, it does not seem to have occurred to the higher commanders that a division pinned to its ground, and suffering so considerably that it needed relief, could exercise little influence on the battle. There was no suggestion that by standing at **Minqar Qaim** New Zealand Division was easing the pressure elsewhere, or that it was depriving the enemy of freedom of manoeuvre and so paving the way to his destruction by other forces.

In sum, on a faulty appreciation of the situation, resort was had to counter-attack as a matter of habit rather than of judgment. There is no consolation in the fact that the Germans were prone to this habit.

Although the enemy was still labouring in the dark concerning some important matters, a succession of orders given about the same time by Rommel in person and by the headquarters of *Panzerarmee* and ***Afrika Korps*** revealed a clearer conception of the battle than that held by Eighth Army.

From ***21 Panzer Division*** Rommel went forward to ***90 Light Division*** and, after repeating congratulations he had telegraphed to the division on its fast advance, discussed its next operations. He agreed that the division 'should swing further to the east on its drive to the coast so as to avoid artillery fire and losses, asking only that the division should reach the coastal road by night and cut it.'¹ Rommel also ordered ***Littorio Armoured Division***, still in army reserve and then moving eastwards, to hold the positions won by ***90 Light Division*** astride the **Garawla- Khalda** track. In this area, ***Littorio*** would be a barrier against an attempt by **10 Corps** to break out from **Matruh** between the escarpments, an additional guard against a counter-attack from the south, and would also be

well placed to continue the advance to **Alamein**. Incidentally, although Rommel was unaware of the projected movement, the division would be fairly astride the route of **10 Corps'** relief operation.

Other orders by *Panzerarmee* and *Afrika Korps* were more portentous for New Zealand Division. At eight minutes past one **21 Panzer Division** received an urgent instruction by wireless from *Afrika Korps* to operate against the enemy on the escarpment. Within half an hour, at 1.37, the division was ordered to cut the road [the **Khalda** track] immediately and to move parts of the division on to the escarpment at Bir Slayim, roughly four miles east of **Bir Abu Batta**. The division's artillery was instructed to operate on both sides of the road and, in conjunction with **15 Panzer Division**, carry out a flanking move. *Afrika Korps* also advised that it had asked for a Stuka attack.

Half an hour later, at ten minutes past two, *Panzerarmee* sent **XX Italian Corps** an urgent order that it had been placed under the command of *Afrika Korps* 'to clear the area ahead of 15 Panzer Division and surround the enemy groups.' Again, at 2.20 p.m., **XX Corps** was ordered by *Panzerarmee* to 'attack the enemy to the south-east immediately in co-operation with *Afrika Korps*.'

Such was the enemy action provoked by the New Zealand Division's presence at **Minqar Qaim**. Instead of waiting at **Bir Shineina** ready to continue the advance to **Fuka** and **Alamein**, **21 Panzer Division** was diverted to an enclosing attack from the north, east and south. A squeeze on the defenders from the west was to be applied by **15 Panzer Division**, then being engaged some eight to ten miles to the west of **Minqar Qaim** by **1 Armoured Division**. To facilitate the progress of **15 Panzer**, **XX Italian Corps** was placed at the disposal of *Afrika Korps* and given a task against **1 Armoured Division**. The Italian corps had moved at dawn from its overnight positions west of the **Siwa** road to an area

approximately the same distance east of the road, under orders to 'organise in depth ready for battle with divisions one behind the other.'

Thus, because **13 Corps** thought only in terms of relief and further retreat, the initiative was left to the enemy. Rommel and Nehring used their freedom to organise an attack by four armoured divisions on **1 Armoured Division** and the New Zealand Division.

Although unaware of the attention it had attracted in the higher levels of *Panzerarmee*, New Zealand Division soon knew that more vigorous enemy action was under way. The volume of the enemy artillery fire increased, the New Zealand batteries being the target. Then, as further enemy forces assembled to the north of **Minqar Qaim**, the infantry defences, including the headquarters of 4 and 5 Brigades, were subjected to shell and mortar fire. Next, tanks approached from the north on a line directed at the centre of the Division. These and lorried troops debussing and deploying to the east of the tanks were engaged by **4 Field Regiment**.

By two o'clock there was every indication of a full-scale attack developing. At five minutes past two the Division reported to **13 Corps** that enemy infantry were debussing all along the front. The message was followed a quarter of an hour later by a situation report stating that 'eight possible tanks' moving south from a point a mile and a half north-east of **Bir Shineina** had been joined by other vehicles from the west, but had been driven off by artillery fire.

The report was unduly optimistic concerning the results of the shoot. The target comprised tanks and lorried infantry then making the turning movement southwards to gain the escarpment as ordered by *Afrika Korps*. Little more than an hour later, at 3.40 p.m., the enemy column, now seen to comprise 20 tanks and about 200 other vehicles, turned westward on and below the escarpment towards the Division. A section of **19 Battalion** carriers was sent to investigate. **Divisional Headquarters** advised caution in opening fire until the column was identified, as supply convoys for the Division were expected from that

direction.

Almost concurrently with the receipt of this advice, **20 Battalion** signalled **4 Brigade** Headquarters that swastika flags could be seen on the vehicles. At the same time heavy firing broke out in **19 Battalion's** area. The three batteries of **4 Field Regiment** had opened fire on the tanks. Their fire was later supplemented by that of four two-pounder anti-tank guns which **19 Battalion** was ordered to send to strengthen the eastern flank.

On the Division's north-eastern flank, **20 Battalion** revealed the high standard of its morale and training. It calmly awaited the descent of the enemy infantry in their trucks until the leading vehicles were within a range of about 400 yards. Then the infantry and anti-tank gunners opened fire, which put a number of the enemy vehicles out of action and halted the advance. To the credit of the Panzer Grenadiers, the fire was returned in considerable volume from the cover of low scrub into which they dropped when their trucks were halted.

This action proved the value and enterprise of the newly formed infantry anti-tank platoons. Lieutenant **Moodie**¹ had command of crew that had had little experience with the gun but which, under his direction, destroyed two trucks before the gun was damaged by enemy fire and he was wounded. Leaving the gun on its portée,

¹ **Maj J. F. Moodie**, MC; **Nelson**; born Dunedin, 3 Jan 1917; student; twice wounded

Moodie directed the crew to the safety of slit trenches and then returned under fire to retrieve the gun, which he drove up the escarpment, had repaired, and then taken back to the forward positions for further action. Sergeant **McConchie**,¹ directing another of **20 Battalion's** guns, was responsible for destroying or immobilising a captured two-pounder on portée, a light tank, a troop-carrier and two trucks. When fire from the infantry in the scrub wounded some of his

crew and damaged the firing mechanism of his gun, McConchie coolly walked out to the captured portée and salvaged the firing mechanism, which he fitted to his own gun. Thereupon Moodie and his sergeant drove out to the captured portée and brought it into the battalion's lines. Only then did Moodie report to the regimental aid post to have his wound treated.

While **20 Battalion** was bearing the brunt of the attack, another enemy column advanced down the **Khalda** track against **28 (Maori) Battalion**. The column had been seen forming up much earlier and had been engaged by the New Zealand artillery. The haze created difficulty in assessing its strength until it neared the Division. Even then it was impossible to determine whether nine or ten suspected light tanks covering the infantry advance were in fact tanks, armoured cars, or half-track troop-carriers. As **4 Field Regiment** was fully engaged with the enemy attack from the east, **6 Field Regiment** in the **Divisional Reserve Group** was called on to assist in arresting the advance of the new arrivals.

This spirited response by **4 Brigade** and the supporting artillery was noted by the enemy. At twenty minutes past four the Panzer Grenadiers reported that 'the attack does not go well owing to strong enemy artillery fire.' Another message a few minutes later said: 'The enemy pulls out in front of 1/R. Regiment 104 [1 Battalion, 104 Panzer Grenadiers] but the artillery fire remains as strong as ever.' The battalion was deployed on a front opposite **20 Battalion** and the right flank of the Maoris, about a mile and three-quarters from the face of the escarpment. The reference to a withdrawal on the battalion's front was probably to the movement of some of the Essex men who were being severely shelled and who were given a wrong order to move back. When the order was corrected, they reoccupied their posts and continued the fight. Hard on the heels of the report, the German battalion asked that it should be reinforced by the 3rd Battalion and that a flanking movement should be made from the east. Engineers were also asked for to clear gaps in the minefield which the Grenadiers reported they had

located all along the front.

¹ 2 Lt P. A. McConchie, DCM; Atawhai, **Nelson**; born **Taihape**, 21 Aug 1916; builder; p.w. 1 Dec 1941; escaped Jan 1942; wounded 27 Jun 1942.

Summarising the situation about this time, *21 Panzer* reported that it had encircled a large concentration of transport on the escarpment. After noting the position of the Grenadiers, the report added that 'units of the enemy resist most stubbornly; our tank attack gains ground slowly.' The division was encouraged by *Afrika Korps*' recognition that the measures it had taken were correct and was advised that *15 Panzer Division* would attack at six o'clock. *Korps Headquarters* wished to know whether *21 Panzer* would be able to give direct support to this attack at the time stipulated. At 4.30 the division also recorded receipt of a message from Rommel that 'the enemy seems to try to withdraw in the **Khalda** area; the division will prevent his doing so.'

The claim that the division had encircled the motor transport on the escarpment was hardly correct. On reaching the escarpment, General Bismarck directed one tank column almost due west against the New Zealanders' eastern flank and sent another one on a southwesterly course to attack from the south. Fifth Brigade's B echelon transport was between these columns and some of *4 Brigade*'s vehicles were a short distance to the south, outside the enemy movement, at **Qabr Abu Raiyat**, where the Division's replenishment point was to have been located. Both groups of transport were fired on by the German tanks, but quickly broke clear. The 300 to 400 vehicles in the *5 Brigade* group made off at high speed and in confusion to the south until they were brought under control again some nine miles from the scene of action. The 4th Brigade transport, which had not been in such a hazardous position, made a more orderly withdrawal to the east towards Rear Division Headquarters. Among the prizes thus snatched from the enemy were three six-pounder guns on their portées which Lance-Sergeant Mantle ¹ of *5 Field Regiment* saw were being abandoned. With Gunners Mullooly ² and

Watkins,³ with whom he was escaping from the tanks, Mantle took over the guns and drove them to safety.

From this encounter with the transport, the southern column of tanks and lorried infantry continued westward until it crossed the **Khalda** track about two miles south of the Division. Here the column turned north against the **Divisional Reserve Group's** positions, defended in the area by C Company of **18 Battalion**. Fire from the tanks identified them as hostile and anti-tank guns were turned upon them. The crossfire placed in jeopardy yet another group of transport, that of **Divisional Reserve** and **Divisional Headquarters**. The vehicles were parked outside C Company's area and,

¹ Sgt P.I. Mantle, MM; **Hamilton**; born **London**, 18 Jun 1914; driver.

² Sgt K. M. Mullooly; **Hamilton**; born NZ 12 Sep 1919; driver.

³ Gnr **A. W. Watkins**; Pairere, Tirau; born **Cambridge**, 13 Jun 1917; farmhand; wounded 1 Dec 1941.

on the alarm that tanks were upon them, the drivers lost no time in moving to the west out of the danger zone. Some of this transport returned to the Division later, but many of the vehicles, which included Bren carriers, were taken in a circle to the south and east until they were clear of the battlefield.

This thrust from the south was dangerous as penetration of the defences would have carried the enemy tanks and infantry on to **Divisional Headquarters** and bisected the Division. The enemy, however, was vigorously engaged by **30 Field Battery**, which had made the sortie to Bir el Haswa in the morning, and by **33 Anti-Tank Battery**, which now fledged itself with its six-pounders. Also in the area were six of the new guns for **32 Battery**, which had been too busy to make the change from two-pounders. Five of these guns were removed to safety and the sixth

was manned by a scratch crew from the battery headquarters, **6 Field Regiment**, and **No. 1 Machine Gun Company**. This crew claimed one tank destroyed and direct hits on a number of other vehicles. The 30th Battery devoted most of its attention to the tanks, one troop alone claiming at least four victims.

Events now hurried upon each other to reveal that the Division was in a serious position, one which might become precarious.

While the attack from the south was developing but before the enemy's intentions had become clear, **General Freyberg** at last managed to make radio-telephone contact with **1 Armoured Division**, whose two brigades were then six to seven miles west of **Minqar Qaim**. To his astonishment and alarm, he learned that the Armoured Division had no knowledge of the attack on the New Zealanders and that it was withdrawing independently without thought of supporting or co-ordinating its movements with the Division. He protested that the armour should come to the support of the Division.

Lieutenant-Colonel R. Peake, GSO 1 of **1 Armoured Division**, replied that the division had orders to concentrate at **Bir Khalda** that night and that, in the circumstances then prevailing on the division's front, he could not see how a regiment or a brigade of tanks could be disengaged to help the New Zealanders. He was sure, also, that the divisional commander would not agree to send a 'few tanks' to the New Zealand Division. ¹

Although Colonel Peake could not divert **1 Armoured** to the New Zealanders' assistance or promise help of any nature, never-

¹ **General Freyberg** was under the impression he was talking to Major-General Lumsden, commanding **1 Armoured Division**. The latter, however, was not at his headquarters at the time. The conversation is recalled in notes supplied by Brigadier Peake to the British Historical Section.

theless he acted promptly on **Freyberg's** representations. At 4.15 p.m. ¹ he advised **22 Armoured Brigade** that the New Zealand Division was being attacked and required immediate assistance. The brigade forthwith despatched 3 Sharpshooters followed by 4 Sharpshooters ² to **Minqar Qaim**. Nearing **Minqar Qaim**, the leading squadron found New Zealanders between them and the enemy tanks. A patrol was sent forward to find a way to the target, but was unfortunately engaged by New Zealand field gunners who were unaware of the proximity of British tanks. One tank was knocked out in this untimely incident. 'Owing to poorness of information and lack of suitable targets,' ³ the British tank attack was not pressed. The appearance of the British armour, however, added to the determined fire of the field and anti-tank gunners, caused the enemy tanks to withdraw. They were followed back by the German infantry, but not before C Company of **18 Battalion** had made a sharp counter-attack in which eleven prisoners and two trucks, both ex-British, were captured.

Concurrently with the attack from the south, the light tanks which had been seen forming up on the track to the north of **28 Battalion** opened heavy fire, under cover of which the infantry advanced. The Maoris' fire discipline was good. Itchy fingers were kept off the triggers of rifles, Brens and tommy guns during a trying period of waiting until the enemy was close enough to make the fire effective. Then, when bursts of controlled small-arms fire stopped the advance, B and C Companies made a sortie with the bayonet. Ten prisoners, including three non-commissioned officers, of *1 Battalion 104 Panzer Grenadiers* were collected and many dead were seen. The Maoris lost only one man killed and two wounded.

This, so far as the Division was aware, was the last attempt of the day to penetrate the defences.

In the meantime, **General Freyberg** took fresh stock of the situation. He now had cause to be apprehensive. The Division was being attacked on three sides and enemy armour was astride the line of retreat to the

east. The enemy was also astride the route which the ammunition columns should take to replenish the field regiments which, in the expectation of supplies, had used their guns freely. No further orders or information had been received from **13 Corps** since Gott's visit in the morning. This was disturbing, although not alarming. The significance of the lack of

¹ The time is taken from **22 Armoured Brigade's** diary and helps to fix the hour at which **Freyberg** established contact with **1 Armoured Division**, of which there is no precise record.

² Tank squadrons of the County of London Yeomanry.

³ **22 Brigade** diary.

interest by **13 Corps** became apparent only when it was learned that **1 Armoured Division** had not been advised of the attacks and that it was withdrawing independently.

These facts forced **Freyberg** to the conclusion that if the Division was to retain its power of manoeuvre, indeed if it was to avoid being overrun or cut off from the remainder of Eighth Army, it would have to break clear. Moreover, it would have to rely on its own resources for the operation. Accordingly, at 4.40 p.m. detailed orders were issued defining assembly areas, the rearguard, order of march, speed by night and day, and fixing **Deir el Harra**, 90 miles east, as the final divisional rendezvous.

Having given the basis of these orders, **General Freyberg** left his headquarters to make a personal appreciation of the enemy attack from the south, which he regarded as the most serious threat. At five o'clock, while he was watching the attack from a forward position, he was wounded in the neck by a shell splinter. As his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant **Griffiths**,¹ was attending to the wound and assisting the General back to his car, other shells landed close by, but fortunately in soft ground

and without causing further casualties. At Divisional Headquarters **General Freyberg** was attended by Colonel **Ardagh**,² the Assistant Director of Medical Services, and made as comfortable as possible in a slit trench. Brigadier Inglis was called to command the Division, Lieutenant-Colonel J. T. Burrows, of **20 Battalion**, taking over **4 Brigade**.

At five minutes to five **13 Corps** sent a curious message to **1 Armoured Division**. It said: 'As far as I can see New Zealand Division has fallen out of the bedstead. I advise you to Iodine as soon as possible at your discretion.' Decoded, the message meant that so far as could be seen, New Zealand Division had either been pushed out of **Minqar Qaim** or had withdrawn, and that **1 Armoured Division** should withdraw east of the **Khalda** track as soon as it could do so. The corps' log does not say who sent the message but Major-General Lumsden ascribed it to General Gott. Lumsden interpreted the message as, 'the battle was all over and that the New Zealand Division did not exist.'³

Another curious message follows this one in the corps' log: it is addressed to New Zealand Division and is not timed. It reads: 'Bedstead [i.e., withdraw east of **Khalda** track] at your discretion.'

¹ **Maj J. L. Griffiths**, MC, m.i.d.; Feilding; born NZ 9 Apr 1912; bank officer; ADC to GOC 1941–45.

² **Brig P. A. Ardagh**, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; born Ngapara, 30 Aug 1891; surgeon; **1 NZEF** 1917–19, Capt 3 Fd Amb; wounded three times; in charge surgical division 2 Gen Hosp, Aug 1940–Oct 1941; CO 1 CCS Nov 1941–May 1942; ADMS 2 NZ Div May 1942–Feb 1943; DDMS **30 Corps** Feb 1943–Apr 1944; died (England) 6 Apr 1944.

³ Court of Inquiry, Vol. II, pp. 328–9.

I require an acknowledgement from a senior officer.' There is no acknowledgment, but there is no doubt this message was received.

The possibility of a withdrawal was envisaged in **13 Corps** Operation Order No. 133. Each division was given an axis of retreat, a rendezvous at **Alamein**, and was told it would have to furnish its own rearguard. On the other hand, the order stated specifically that the battle would be fought on the lines previously agreed upon. There was no mention that Auchinleck had taken command of Eighth Army and had changed the plans—only his exhortation to all ranks to make a supreme effort. ¹ Essential detail for the retreat was taken from this order for the Division's own precautionary instructions issued that morning. ²

It is difficult to understand the pessimistic report to **1 Armoured Division** or the reason for allowing that division to continue under the impression that the New Zealanders had been knocked out. At six minutes past five New Zealand Division asked: 'Shall we join you at second destination [i.e., **Deir el Harra**]?' The question carried in itself an implication that the Division was master of its fate and therefore available for an intermediate task in the retreat. Moreover, Gott was at Corps Headquarters at the time and was aware of the message and the reply. If any doubts remained they should have been dispelled by the Division's message to Corps at 6.30: 'Have we got any further orders?' The answer was: 'No fresh orders.' ³

At 7.20 p.m. **13 Corps** sent the following to all of its formations:

LOUNGE, BEDSTEAD, IODINE. A rearguard posn will be held for as long as possible on the line escarpment four miles west of **Fuka**.... Right 5 Ind Div left 1 Arm Div.... If **10 Corps** arrive **Fuka** area they will be responsible from right.... This line will be known as HERRING.

LOUNGE, was an instruction to **5 Indian Division** to withdraw east of the 710 grid which ran north and south through **Minqar Sidi Hamza**, an area then well behind the enemy's advanced formations and over 20 miles west of the positions **5 Indian Division** had occupied since dawn. BEDSTEAD was an instruction to New Zealand Division to withdraw. The Division was already supposed to have fallen out of the 'bedstead', had been given permission to BEDSTEAD at its discretion and, when the

instruction was sent, was making ready to move. When **1 Armoured Division** received its order to IODINE over the **Khalda** track, it was already on the track on its way to **Bir Khalda** to refuel.

At the same time as these orders were given, Gott reported to Eighth Army that he had given permission to the New Zealand and

¹ **13 Corps** Operation Order No. 133. See also p. 74.

² **NZ Division** Operation Order No. 9. See also p. 103.

³ **13 Corps'** diary.

1 Armoured Divisions to withdraw, that he was attempting to carry out **PIKE**, ¹ and that he hoped things would work out as in his operation order of the early morning.

To this it may be added that Lumsden called on New Zealand Division at 9.15 p.m. His purpose, according to his recollections later, was 'to ask which way the New Zealanders proposed going out if they had the order' and if there was anything he could do to help. In the recollection of a staff officer who accompanied him, however, 'it was just to be a sort of friendly visit with nothing particular to discuss except to see where the New Zealanders were and what sort of day they had had.' Brigadier Inglis told Lumsden of the Division's intention to break out that night and suggested that the armoured division might cooperate in the operation. As **1 Armoured Division's** brigades were then separated and the division had to go to **Bir Khalda** to refuel, Lumsden could not agree to the suggestion. However, he agreed to see out the B echelon and troop-carrying transport of **5 Brigade**, the Divisional Cavalry and **21 Battalion**, which were then south of the Division in the area in which he had to refuel and separated from the Division by enemy armour.

There was also some confusion on the enemy's side. The warm

reception given tank and infantry attacks by the artillery and the firm front presented by the infantry surprised *21 Panzer Division*. On the frontier and in the advance to **Matruh**, the British rearguards had given way before firm pressure. The Germans appeared to have forgotten the many examples of determined defence up to the fall of **Tobruk**. Notwithstanding the size of the concentration at **Minqar Qaim**, they appeared to think that, on deployment and assault, the defence would yield as other rearguards had done.

Experienced New Zealand officers, although aware that the Division was being placed in a hazardous position, were not awed by the enemy attacks. They saw that the attacks were not pressed with determination. They appeared to be more in the nature of probes for weak spots on the Division's eastern flank, both tanks and the infantry assailants withdrawing when heavy fire was maintained against them.

The Germans had different ideas. Their divisional log records that at five minutes past six 'the attack of the rifle regiment is stopped', but the entry does not say whether this was due to the vigour of the

¹ The code name of a possible development of the battle. Looking ahead during the morning of 27 June, Auchinleck sent a personal, most secret message to his corps commanders saying that, should it become necessary, both corps were to disengage and resume the fight on the general line of the escarpment four miles west of **Fuka**. They were to ensure that during the disengagement and withdrawal their corps acted in concert.

defence or a voluntary action upon higher orders. However, ten minutes later, the Panzer Grenadiers advised that they regarded their position as critical. They said their right wing needed support and their left wing required flank protection. Just on seven o'clock they pleaded for immediate artillery and tank support. If nothing more, these reports are at least testimony to the aggressive defence that was offered.

Also at this time, seven o'clock, Bismarck was encouraged by a

message from *Afrika Korps* that it 'regards the chances of the attack by the division as extremely promising.' He replied that he intended to launch an attack from the east that evening 'and to destroy the enemy.' He gave the location of his battle headquarters as 10 kilometres south-south-west of *Bir Shineina*', a position about a mile and a half from **19 Battalion**. Further encouragement was given about an hour later by a 'most immediate' message from *15 Panzer Division* that, since a quarter past six, it had been attacking and would continue until it linked up with *21 Division*. The message was accompanied by a request for details of *21 Division's* foremost lines.

Shortly afterwards, however, Bismarck received information which seems to have induced him to change his mind about the projected assault 'to destroy the enemy' that evening. At 8.15 he advised *Afrika Korps* that interrogation of prisoners had confirmed the presence of the New Zealand Division. The next entries in the divisional log record a series of orders and movements designed to place the division in defensive positions 'with the intention of preventing the enemy from breaking out.' *Korps Headquarters* was advised that the attack had been discontinued. It, in turn, approved the division's intention 'to destroy the enemy next day.' The destruction of the New Zealanders, however, was to be effected under *Korps'* direction, the main attack being launched by *15 Panzer Division* and the Italian *XX Corps* from the west, with *21 Division* standing by to take up the pursuit.

In favour of Bismarck it should be said that his divisional log records at nine o'clock that the division was short of ammunition and fuel. But convoys were on the way and arrived half an hour later.



Wire for defensive positions in Syria

Wire for defensive positions in Syria



Machine-gunners digging in, Syria

Machine-gunners digging in, Syria



Sappers digging a gunpit, Syria

Sappers digging a gunpit, Syria



Convoy at the ruins of Palmyra

Convoy at the ruins of Palmyra



Leaving Syria on the Damascus road

Leaving Syria on the Damascus road



Dumps on fire at Mersa Matruh after a raid

Dumps on fire at Mersa Matruh after a raid



Unloading on the escarpment at Minqar Qaim.
Dispersion is bad on the first return to the desert

Unloading on the escarpment at [Minqar Qaim](#). Dispersion is bad on the first return to the desert

Digging in on the rocky escarpment



Digging in on the rocky escarpment



Looking east from 5 Brigade HQ during the artillery duel

Looking east from [5 Brigade HQ](#) during the artillery duel



This photograph makes a panorama when joined with the one on the opposite page

This photograph makes a panorama when joined with the one on the opposite page



Shells bursting on New Zealand gun positions

Shells bursting on New Zealand gun positions

Observing shellfire



Observing shellfire



A 25-pounder in action at Minqar Qaim
A 25-pounder in action at Minqar Qaim

Lieutenant-General Freyberg in a slit trench after he had been wounded



Lieutenant-General Freyberg in a slit trench after he had been wounded



The break-out—from the painting by Peter McIntyre
The break out - from the painting by Peter McIntyre



Wrecked vehicles at the foot of Minqar Qaim—from the painting by
J. Crippen

Wrecked vehicles at the foot of [Minqar Qaim](#) - from the painting by J. Crippen



Headquarters of 5 Infantry Brigade halted after the break-out at
Minqar Qaim. The 3-ton truck held German prisoners

Headquarters of 5 Infantry Brigade halted after the break-out at [Minqar Qaim](#). The 3-ton truck held German prisoners



After an early morning
conference at Munassib,
July 1942—Majors M. C.
Fairbrother and R. B.
Dawson, Brigadiers H. K.
Kippenberger and C. E.
Weir

After an early morning conference at Munassib, July 1942 - Majors M.C. Fairbrother and R.B. Dawson, Brigadiers H.K. Kippenberger and C.E. Weir



The northern edge of the Qattara Depression

The northern edge of the Qattara Depression



19 Battalion advancing against *Ariete Division* on 3 July 1942

19 Battalion advancing against **Ariete Division** on 3 July 1942



Enemy shells falling across 4 Field Regiment observation posts on Alam Nayil ridge

Enemy shells falling across **4 Field Regiment** observation posts on **Alam Nayil** ridge



Some of the guns of *Ariete Division* captured by the CRA's column and 19 Battalion

Some of the guns of **Ariete Division** captured by the **CRA's** column and **19 Battalion**



German 88-millimetre guns captured on Alam Nayil. New Zealand engineers have blown the barrels

German 88-millimetre guns captured on [Alam Nayil](#). New Zealand engineers have blown the barrels



Ruweisat Ridge, photographed in September 1944

[Ruweisat Ridge](#), photographed in September 1944



18 Battalion transport bombed south of Ruweisat Ridge

18 Battalion transport bombed south of Ruweisat Ridge



25-pounders of 6 Field Regiment firing on Ruweisat Ridge—from the painting by C. Hansen

25-pounders of 6 Field Regiment firing on Ruweisat Ridge - from the painting by C. Hansen



21 Battalion Signal Office on 16 July

21 Battalion Signal Office on 16 July



El Mreir Depression—from the painting by J. Crippen

El Mreir Depression - from the painting by J. Crippen

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 12 – TWENTY-FOUR TENSE HOURS

CHAPTER 12

Twenty-four Tense Hours

A TIDY, orderly withdrawal in desert formation was envisaged in the tentative precautionary order issued by Headquarters New Zealand Division in the morning as the battle opened, and in the instructions of late in the afternoon before **General Freyberg** was wounded. Fifth Brigade was to be in the van, followed by **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group. Fourth Brigade and the Divisional Cavalry carrier squadron were to be the rearguard. Guides were to be sent to the **Alamein Line** for information on the minefields and brigade sectors and were to meet the Division at the rendezvous at **Deir el Harra**.

Some important differences in emphasis marked the two orders. The first stressed delaying the enemy as long as possible at **Minqar Qaim** and inflicting the maximum damage on him. Withdrawal would be made only if it were forced. While the Division's ultimate destination was a prepared position in the **Alamein Line**, there was no suggestion it would go straight there or that it would not have further action in the retreat. The second order was precise that the move to **Deir el Harra** was to be made in one bound unless opposition was encountered. Against this possibility, the groups were ordered to take full tactical precautions while on the move.

The situation at dusk compelled a review of the plans which Brigadier Inglis discussed with the formation commanders and senior staff officers at a conference. As the road to the east on the projected line of withdrawal was barred by the enemy, the question was raised whether the Division should fight its way out on this line over **Bir Abu Batta** or bypass the enemy by moving south and then east. A disadvantage of the latter course was that it would take the Division in the dark with unreliable maps on a tortuous route over unknown country. The east route was over known 'good-going' to well-defined tracks. On these and logistical grounds Inglis decided that, although a fight to break out would be necessary, the eastern route was preferable.

A more important factor, and the decisive one, was the relation of the problem to the general Army plan. Brigadier Inglis considered that while a wide detour around the southern flank would ensure the safety of the Division, it would take the Division too far from the fighting area. Thus it would be side-stepping its task of halting the enemy's advance. Moreover, like **General Freyberg**, he believed it was high time the Germans received some discouraging punishment. They were at their thickest immediately east of **4 Brigade**. A blow there would do them most harm and could be inflicted without jeopardising the Division's move.

Having decided on the route, the next most important question was the nature of the attack to break out. There was not much choice. The artillery was down to thirty-five rounds a gun, including smoke and armour-piercing shell, and there was no possibility of additional supplies being received that night. Because of the shortage of ammunition, the enemy concentration at **Bir Abu Batta**, an attractive target, had not been engaged. The high-explosive shell left was not sufficient to support an attack, and if it were used it would do little more than advertise the Division's intentions. Moreover, it was desirable to husband the artillery resources against the dangers of the march to **Alamein** and until contact was re-established with the supply services. Mortar ammunition was also short.

The alternative, a silent approach and then assault with bayonet, bullet and grenade, was accepted. Inglis gave the task to **4 Brigade** under Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows. The brigade was experienced in the art of silent night attack which the Germans hated. Inglis had no doubt that the enemy could be taken by surprise or about the final issue. To attack and break through, doing all the damage possible on the way, was to his mind clearly the proper course.

Burrows was ordered to attack with the whole brigade on a narrow front and punch a hole through the enemy positions on a neck of ground between **Bir Abu Batta** and **Mahatt Abu Batta**. When the hole had been made the remainder of the Division would follow him. Zero hour was

fixed at half past eleven, but at Burrows' request a little later it was altered to half past midnight. He had little time to spare for making his detailed plans, issuing orders, and concentrating the brigade and its associated units.

Even with the breakout attack, the Division might have withdrawn tidily by groups but for another complicating factor. Fifth Brigade's troop-carrying transport was 'out in the blue' and contact could not be established with it. Nor could contact be made with **21 Battalion** at **Bir Khalda**. To preserve the thread of the main narrative, these matters will be dealt with in detail later. The problem was how to overcome the difficulty the brigade commander had reported. General Lumsden's agreement to pass on word that the Division was withdrawing and to see out **21 Battalion** and the transport solved one part of the problem. The other part was met by ordering **5 Brigade Group** to put as many men as possible on its first-line transport and anything else that would carry them, including the guns, and to bring the remainder on foot to the assembly area where they would be distributed among the **Divisional Reserve Group** vehicles. An inevitable consequence was that while transport would be provided for all men, **5 Brigade Group** would not be mobile as a group and, therefore, it could not operate tactically.

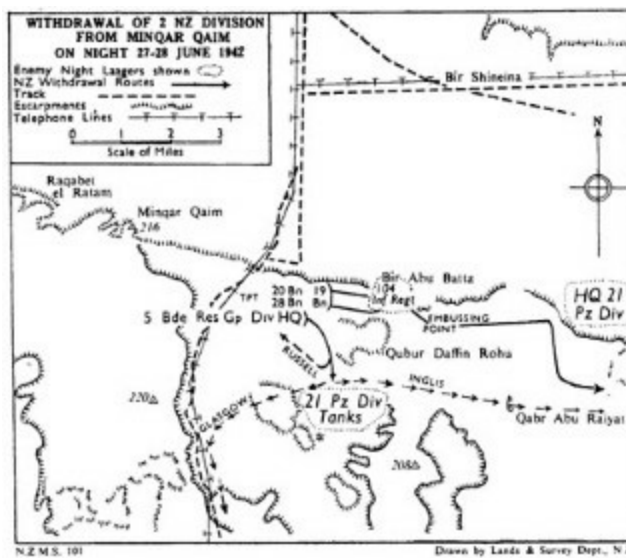
Fifth Brigade was again unfortunate when moving to the Reserve Group's area where the distribution among other transport was to be made. In order to avoid broken ground south of **Minqar Qaim** feature and to give the transport from the most western positions a clear run, it was necessary to clear a passage through the mines laid north of the defences. As only a few engineers were available, the mine-lifting had to be done by the infantrymen, many of whom had never lifted mines before, much less searched for them in darkness. They were not wholly successful and several vehicles were damaged when crossing an uncleared area. The explosions caused a number of casualties, C Company of **22 Battalion** alone losing about twenty-five men when a carrier belonging to **5 Field Regiment** was blown up.

Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows' plans and orders for the attack were

relatively simple in view of the heavy responsibility placed upon him and **4 Brigade Group**. His task was considerably lightened, however, by the brigade's experience in night attacks, the confidence and, strange as it may seem, enthusiasm for the operation. There were no obvious loose ends in plans or orders but, on the other hand, none of his commanders or staff had need to press for that attention to detail which wastes time when every fleeting minute has value.

The neck, or col, between **Bir Abu Batta** and **Mahatt Abu Batta** was about a quarter of a mile wide, a front suitable for a battalion but no more. The enemy, however, were also known to be in the **Bir Abu Batta** re-entrant on the face of the escarpment and might be expected on **Mahatt Abu Batta**. These were the decisive factors in choosing the dispositions for the attack, a broad arrow formation with **19 Battalion** in the centre as the point, and **20** and **28 Battalions** echeloned slightly to the left and right respectively to support the advance by flanking movements.

The brigade's first-line transport was ordered to assemble in tight night formation behind the infantry, with the **B** echelon and attached units farther in rear. The field and anti-tank batteries of the group were placed on the flanks and across the rear of the transport column. So placed, they could give quick protection to the transport. Time would not be lost in deploying, and in the moonlight the guns could be fired over open sights at the close targets which, in the circumstances, would be available. The batteries would also be handy to take up their positions for the march across the desert after the attack. The potential fire screen was further strengthened by mounting the **Vickers** guns of **No. 2 Machine Gun Company** in trucks and dispersing them around the transport column. Brigade Headquarters was to move in the centre behind **19 Battalion**, and a field ambulance car was detailed to follow each battalion. The start line for the infantry, to be laid out and marked with screened lights by the brigade intelligence officer, was set across the forward defended localities of **19 Battalion**.



Withdrawal of 2 NZ Division from Minqar Qaim on night 27-28 June 1942

Being closest to the forming-up area, **19 Battalion** was first in position. It was deployed with A and D Companies in the front line. B Company was to the right rear of A Company, and Major Smith with his men of the **Essex Regiment** behind D Company. The battalion covered a front of between 300 and 400 yards, with a depth of 200 yards.

A period of anxiety then developed. The 20th Battalion was only beginning to show up and there was no sign of the Maoris. Zero hour approached and passed with **20 Battalion** still moving into its assembly area. It was not ready until 12.45, a quarter of an hour after zero. The battalion was deployed in column on a front of 200 yards with A Company in the lead, followed by C Company and part of Headquarters Company, with D Company in the rear. Each rifle company put two of its platoons on the left so that the greatest part of the battalion's fire power was concentrated on the brigade's northern flank.

Burrows had now to meet one of the sternest tests that can face a commander in battle. Should he wait for his remaining battalion or attack with what he had in hand? Further delay involved the risk that the Division would not be clear of the gap before daylight and might be caught by enemy tanks in the open and without adequate ammunition. On the other hand, an attack by two battalions might not be successful, in which case the whole Division would be trapped. There was the

further danger that if the Maoris were left they might be lost.

Once before, at **Maleme in Crete**, Burrows had had to meet a like situation. His problem there was whether he should evacuate a vital area to reach another point at a decisive hour or await the relief whose arrival had been delayed? Then higher authority had told him to stay and try to make up the lost time with speed in movement after the relief. On the present occasion, part of the lost time might be retrieved through the impetus of an attack by three battalions. There would be less chance of making up lost time if the plans were revised and new dispositions made for an attack by only two battalions.

Burrows decided to wait and, because there was little else to engage his mind, suffer the additional anxiety of wondering whether the decision was the right one. ¹

The Maoris were not to blame for being late. The brief interval between the receipt of the brigade order and zero hour was a factor. Patrols on their front had to be recalled and also parties which were destroying abandoned enemy vehicles. The battalion had a long way to come. It is possible, too, there was something in a rumour that more than a few men were making an 'investigation' of what the enemy had left behind. Eventually, however, the battalion reached its assembly area but not until a quarter to two, an hour and a quarter after zero hour.

By this time Brigadier Inglis had become very concerned at the delay in launching the attack. He, also, was worried lest the Division would not be clear of the area before daylight. As time passed without any sign of action, he went forward to investigate, but as he reached **4 Brigade** the advance started. He thereupon

¹ Commenting later, General Inglis said: 'Burrows was absolutely right in waiting for 28 Battalion.'

returned and brought forward the remainder of the Division until the

head of the column was level with and to the south of **4 Brigade** transport.

In **4 Brigade** company and platoon commanders spent the waiting time in giving final instructions and checking details. But many of the men were so nonchalant that they dozed in their positions. A non-commissioned officer of **4 Field Regiment** recalled later that **Minqar Qaim** was one of the two places in the war where he felt perfectly happy. The other place, strangely, was **Sidi Rezegh**. His duty done for the time being, this young NCO climbed into his truck and promptly went into a deep sleep, from which he did not waken until the transport was passing through enemy fire. Then he woke with a start, to the relief of the driver who thought his passenger surely must have been killed.

As soon as the Maoris reached their start line, **4 Brigade** advanced. Probably definite orders to move were received by the companies poised on their lines. No one remembers them. The start seemed to be automatic, as if a familiar spirit had whispered that there was a rendezvous to keep and it was time to be on the way. With bayoneted rifles at the high port and Bren and tommy guns ready for action, the brigade stepped forward. An occasional rattle of equipment, an occasional slither over an outcrop of rock, sounded above the muffled tread of heavy boots in the sand and dust. Each man was aware of the presence of his neighbour and of the march of a host.

A hundred yards passed, then two hundred; now five hundred and then a thousand yards were gone. The slit trenches and the defence positions which had spelt security during the day seemed distant in the rear. The brigade was in the open, naked and exposed. The 'point of no return' was passed. Whatever happened, the brigade must go forward. There was now no alternative.

Then the enemy sprang to life. A few odd shots swelled rapidly into a cacophony of fire from rifles, automatics of all types, and anti-tank guns. Lines of tracer bullets crossed and recrossed with the appearance of a perfect fire pattern. Apparently the Germans had been waiting. It

seemed impossible for any troops to get among the enemy without suffering heavy casualties. What would happen? In the face of such a blaze of fire would the brigade check? Would it falter? There was only one chance. Close with the enemy as fast as possible.

Fourth Brigade did not falter. To quote from Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows' report, 'a most amazing and thrilling thing happened. To a man the whole brigade charged forward. No orders were given; no urging forward by officers and non-commissioned officers. With shouting, cheering and war cries every man broke into a run as if he knew exactly what was expected of him.'

The shouting and cheering were more of a frenzied yell. The pent-up emotions of the last minutes on the assembly line and of the steady march were freed. The yell was heard above the din of the fire. It carried **4 Brigade** as on a wave into the defences. With a few yards to go, some men checked as if to return the enemy's fire and beat it down. What was their purpose, no one knows precisely, for check and sweeping on to close with bayonet, bomb and bullet were almost simultaneous.

On the right flank, the Maoris swung a little further out and drew level with **19 Battalion**. From column, the companies changed into line and made short work of some machine-gun posts. On the main objective, the neck between Bir and **Mahatt Abu Batta**, little opposition was found by **19 Battalion**. In a splendid exhibition of the characteristics of spirited troops, **19 Battalion** immediately turned down into the **Bir Abu Batta** re-entrant to give **20 Battalion** a hand. There, among the parked German transport, the greatest resistance was met.

Using bayonets, rifles, tommy guns, Brens fired from the hip and the newly-issued bakelite grenade, the two battalions penetrated into the centre of the close-parked laager. Here, for a few minutes, there was the 'impassioned drama' of war. No chances could be taken. Kill or be killed. The bayonet was used with terrifying effect. The German slumped in the corner of a trench or lying on the ground might be shamming. He might fire a shot or throw a grenade when backs were turned. A thrust or a

bullet eliminated the risk.

In the slit trenches, most of the Germans had their boots off. Some were undressed. While some Germans attempted to surrender and some to make off by foot and in trucks, others fought hard. Machine-gunners who used the light of burning trucks or of deliberately lit petrol fires to help their aim were dealt with by the simple process of assault from all points except on the line of fire. Truck drivers used wheeled and half-tracked vehicles as tanks in efforts to overrun the attackers. Some got away, but most fell victim to bullets and bombs, including the sticky grenade.

The flashes of explosions, the blaze of burning vehicles, the smoke, dust and the yells and screams made an inferno through which 19 and 20 Battalions fought their way to the far side of the laager. They had punched the required hole. On the eastern side of the wadi, the companies and battalions reformed while the transport came up in response to the success signal. As the advance had been drawn off its axis by the greater resistance on the left, the majority of the troops were some distance to the north of the embussing point. Spasmodic fire caused a number of casualties while the troops were marching to the transport and in embussing, but the now calmer troops quickly got into the trucks and the whole brigade moved off in night formation to the east.

In this climax to the Battle of **Minqar Qaim**, **4 Brigade** added unfading lustre to the story of New Zealand arms. Proof was given, if proof were needed, that the New Zealand citizen soldier, adequately trained and equipped, was equal to any situation. Physical fitness was a factor. The men of **4 Brigade**, since leaving **Matruh** on 25 June, had been travelling in trucks, marching or digging defences, with little time for sleep or even rest until the morning of 27 June. During that day they had stood the strain of continuous attack under a broiling sun. Their discipline—the discipline expressed in the willing subordination of the individual for the good of the whole—made them a proud command. This discipline, and their confidence, also made it relatively easy to impose

on them one of the severest tests of battle—the evacuation of secure defensive positions for the hazards of open warfare attack.

Major Smith's company of the **Essex Regiment** shared equally in the glory of the breakout as it had been steadfast in the trials of the day. Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows' report closes with a special paragraph on the company. 'I should like to pay a tribute to the company of the **Essex Regiment** which attacked with the leading battalion,' he wrote. 'The conduct of the men throughout was excellent. They attacked with the same fury that was shown by all troops and this assistance contributed considerably towards the success of the operation.'

For an action in which so many men distinguished themselves, decorations had to be sparingly awarded. But there were no two minds in the Division that it had the right to claim on behalf of one of its officers the most jealously guarded award, a bar to the Victoria Cross. Neither wounds nor enemy fire deterred Captain **Upham**¹ from carrying out what he conceived to be merely his duty. That was the case in **Crete** when he had been given the Cross. In **Bir Abu Batta** he entered the thickest of the fighting and his men followed him. He saw a truck full of the enemy trying to escape. In spite of heavy automatic fire, he approached close enough to destroy the truck and all of its occupants with grenades. Although wounded in both arms, he continued to lead and control his company. The highest award for bravery, however, was not made for this

¹ **Capt C. H. Upham**, VC and bar, m.i.d.; Conway Flat, Hundalee; born **Christchurch**, 21 Sep 1908; Government land valuer; wounded three times; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

action alone. It came later for like conduct at Ruweisat. But the foundation of the Division's claim to the signal honour was laid at **Bir Abu Batta**.¹

While waiting for **4 Brigade** to move and the remainder of the

Division to assemble, Brigadier Inglis gave further thought to the problem of the breakout. His reflections led to the conclusion that while there was no doubt **4 Brigade** would cut a gap and pass its own transport through, the alerted enemy might trap the remainder of the Division in the gap. By the time the divisional column entered the gap, the enemy on the flanks should be aware of what was happening. Whatever else they might do, they should at least be pouring fire into the gap.

The delay in getting **4 Brigade's** assault under way was also disturbing. Brigadier Inglis did not know how deeply the enemy was disposed about **Bir Abu Batta** and therefore how long **4 Brigade** would take in breaking through. The midsummer night was short. The desirability of the Division's being clear of the area by daylight presented itself as an imperative necessity when it was related to **5 Brigade's** dispersion in the transport of other formations. If a further emergency arose it would be difficult to put the brigade on the ground to fight. Certainly the operation could not be carried out with the speed an emergency would demand.

Inglis decided that while the enemy was apparently fully engaged about **Bir Abu Batta**, the remainder of the Division should bypass the battle area by moving south for about two miles and then turning east parallel with the route to be taken by **4 Brigade**. The column would move in tight formation on a front of about 80 yards, and if any enemy were encountered it would crash through them on wheels.

This solution of the problem appears to be so bold, indeed so potentially risky, as to call for examination of the factors which led to its adoption. If nothing else, they emphasize the truth that almost every tactical problem is unique and must be solved on its merits, and that the art of war has no traffic with rules to be slavishly followed in every situation.

Inglis had not been impressed with the weight or vigour of the enemy's attacks during the day. It was not likely, therefore, that resistance to the breakout would be stronger. Probably it would be

weaker. As the enemy appeared to have disposed most of his forces for the night about **Bir Abu Batta**, his defences elsewhere should be thin. A surprise, solidly packed punch should break them.

¹ Other awards for the action included the DSO to Lieutenant-Colonels Burrows and S. F. Hartnell (**19 Battalion**), the MC to Captain D. S. Thomson (**19 Battalion**), and the MM to Driver C. C. Robinson (NZASC, attached to **4 Field Ambulance**).

The divisional column was suitably composed to deliver such a punch. It comprised about 900 vehicles and guns assembled nine abreast on a front of about 80 yards, with **18 Battalion** (Lieutenant-Colonel Gray) leading. The battalion had its Bren carriers and its platoon of two-pounder anti-tank guns deployed across the front. There was thus a front rank capable of delivering a heavy volume of fire if it were needed. The battalion's troop-carrying vehicles were disposed in rear of this front line. The flanks of the column were held by **5 Field Regiment** on the right and **6 Field Regiment** on the left. Their guns and vehicles were disposed head to tail with the leading vehicles tucked in behind **18 Battalion's** flanking trucks. Some Vickers machine guns in their 15-cwt trucks were also on the flanks of the column.

Inside this array were packed **Divisional Headquarters**, the **Divisional Reserve Group**, two field ambulances, the detachment of **American Field Service** ambulances, some three-ton vehicles carrying the less severely wounded and **5 Brigade's** infantry on their A echelon, and the Reserve Group's trucks. The mass was manoeuvrable but was far from a homogeneous entity like a brigade group which had practised night and day battle-manoeuve on wheels. Control of the column was given to Lieutenant-Colonel Gray, whose car had a shaded guiding light fixed to its differential casing. This car, and that of Brigadier Inglis carrying the divisional commander's flag on the bonnet, were the only 'soft-skinned' vehicles in the front rank.

Because no orders were given for a reconnaissance of the route and

for advanced and flank guards, it may be thought that important principles of security were disregarded. This was not so. The enemy was quiet. If he were probed either by reconnoitring patrols or an advanced guard, he would be roused and thus the vital element of surprise would be lost. The hour was late, and any useful reconnaissance by patrols would have taken more time than could be spared. Again, in the dark, it would be difficult to maintain contact with an advanced guard sufficiently far ahead to give the main body real protection. If, as might be expected, the route had to be changed, advanced guard and main body most likely would lose touch with each other. Moreover, there was no question of giving the main body time to deploy and fight if the enemy were encountered, a course also made impracticable by **5 Brigade's** dispersion. Finally, as it would be necessary to know instantly whether any obstacle met was friend or enemy, it was essential to keep the projected route clear of any troops not readily identifiable in the dark.

It is somewhat ironical that a week later the Division was to deal the Italian *Ariete Division* a devastating blow because its commander ignored the orthodox principles of security on the march in circumstances when they should have been closely observed. ¹

A few minutes before **4 Brigade** made contact with the enemy, Inglis warned the brigade's staff captain of his intentions and then told Gray: 'I am going to take this column two miles south and then turn east and make a break parallel to the 4th Brigade one. If we strike the enemy, we will charge straight through on wheels. Pass that to your own battalion and the rest of the column. All vehicles to follow the head of the column whatever it does. Tell me as soon as you are ready to move.'

Unfortunately, these orders did not go right down the column. The staff officer responsible for passing them found he had time only to shout them to the next unit and jump into his truck as it moved off. As the head of the column swung away from **4 Brigade's** transport, some of the brigade's drivers mistook the movement for that of their own group and joined up. Prompt intervention by Major **Pleasants**, ² leading the

brigade transport, prevented a merging of the two groups and thus confusion, but a few of **4 Brigade's** vehicles went with the divisional column. Their absence caused some difficulty when the brigade embussed after the attack.

Again, as the rearmost units came up to the turning point they became aware of **4 Brigade's** battle ahead. Under the impression that their own column had run into opposition, they halted and sent forward carriers and guns. When, however, they found the route was clear they reformed and hurried after the column.

The head of the column had moved about a mile and three-quarters when Gray halted to intimate: 'There is something just in front. I am sending a carrier section forward to see what it is.' That 'something' was extra shadows in the dark about 80 to 100 yards ahead. Gray's words were hardly spoken when the shadows opened fire to disclose themselves as tanks. In the light of their gun flashes and of a hit by one of **18 Battalion's** anti-tank guns

¹ These comments on the factors which influenced Brigadier Inglis are based on a discussion with him on his return to New Zealand in 1952 after serving with the **Allied Military Government in Germany**. They are given fully because a bare narrative of this phase of the breakout based on reports, logs, diaries and some personal accounts can lead to a complete misconception of the operation. As a further contribution to the adaptation of principles to particular circumstances, it may be added that when **6 Brigade** was confronted with a somewhat similar situation at **Wadi Matratin**, a small advanced guard disappeared. It was replaced by another with more strict instructions about reporting. While this one functioned, the procedure was far too slow to meet conditions at **Minqar Qaim**.

² **Brig C. L. Pleasants**, CBE, DSO, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Halcombe, 26 Jul 1910; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn and Armd Regt Jul 1942–Mar 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Sep–Nov 1944; 5 Bde Nov 1944–Jan 1945, May 1945–Jan 1946; twice wounded; Commander Fiji Military Forces, 1949–53; Commandant

which fired off its portée, Brigadier Inglis saw a closely packed laager of tanks and trucks. The column had run into *21 Panzer Division's* tank laager.

The flanks of the laager could not be discerned and the tanks and trucks were so closely parked as to suggest a reef on which the divisional column would pile up if the laager were charged. Inglis thereupon ordered Gray to 'turn the whole show left', in other words to make the contemplated turn to the east. Under Gray's lead, *18 Battalion* conformed at once. Looking back across the angle of the wheel, Brigadier Inglis saw some burning trucks and strings of pink and green tracer shells floating over the column and gained the impression that the column was following in orderly array. This was not wholly correct, although there was not the confusion suggested in some contemporary accounts.

When the leading vehicles halted, those in rear continued moving forward until they could go no further. Thus the mass of transport became more compact. To many of the men in this mass the enemy appeared to be pouring on them a heavy volume of tank tracer shells and tracer machine-gun bullets. *General Freyberg*, who was a stretcher case in his caravan, which incidentally was hit, looked out to remark: 'Another Balaclava.' Some men jumped from their trucks to hug the ground. Some attempted to return the fire with their rifles and automatics.

It was soon noticed that the enemy fire was on clearly defined fixed lines. Most of the shells and bullets passed over the vehicles or down the lanes between. The men who hugged the ground in the lanes did so without hurt and regained their trucks by crawling or rolling to them. Even when burning vehicles, including petrol wagons, illuminated the scene, the Germans did not take advantage of the light to destroy the compact target. Losses were extremely low but included some of the

vehicles, personnel and patients of **5 Field Ambulance**, which was carrying about 300 wounded. ¹

Although the enemy failed to use the opportunity to inflict a heavy blow, the encounter caused the column to break into three more or less distinct parts. Most of the vehicles in the centre and on the left followed the command into the turn across the enemy's front. Gray set a moderate, steady speed, but he had not moved very far before he was passed by the leading trucks, whose drivers appear to have put their feet hard down on the accelerators. The actual speed was not very high, but it was too great for the darkness and the rough ground and led to a stringing out of the column. It was probably this burst of speed and the efforts of the drivers

¹ An exact total cannot be given as the records were destroyed in the encounter.

in rear to travel even faster to catch up, that gave diarists the impression that the column was thrown into confusion. ¹

Order, however, was soon restored when Brigadier Inglis pressed to the head of the column in his car and weaved to and fro across the front shouting to the drivers to slow down. When the column was well clear of the enemy it was halted and closed up, and a rearguard was formed under **Brigadier Kippenberger** with the main task of collecting stragglers and directing them. Most of these rejoined the column at a long halt made about seven o'clock for breakfast and attention to the wounded. It was then found that **5 Field Regiment** and **5 Brigade's A echelon** had not arrived. They represented only a small proportion of the Division, but their absence caused considerable anxiety. With the reorganisation of the column after breakfast, the march to **Alamein** was resumed and completed without further incident.

Although separated from the Division, **5 Field Regiment** was in excellent shape. It was on the right flank of the column in the move

south from **Minqar Qaim** and was brought to a halt almost exactly opposite a point where the left flank of the enemy laager turned southwards. Lieutenant-Colonel Glasgow² quickly saw that if he remained immobile under the enemy fire, the Germans would have time to recover from their confusion and at the close range would probably devastate his formation. Burning and disabled vehicles on his left precluded a turn to the east with the remainder of the Division. A turn to the right was also impossible owing to the tight packing of his trucks and guns and the probability that his exposed flank would be raked by the machine guns he could see were firing on fixed lines.

The bend in the enemy line suggested the solution of the problem. **Glasgow** climbed to the top of his command car and gave the order and signal to advance and then 'Right Take Ground.' Drivers in his vicinity grasped the intention and acted promptly. This quick move was accompanied by rifle and revolve fire and so disconcerted the enemy in the immediate front that they abandoned their machine guns, thus permitting the column to make the 'Right Take Ground' manoeuvre without coming under enfilading fire. Other vehicles followed and a large body moved off at a rapid pace. As in the **Divisional Headquarters** column, the vehicles became strung out.

¹ 'We scrambled back and followed the trucks ahead, all bolting like wild elephants. For a few moments we ran on amid a pandemonium, overtaking and being overtaken by other frantic vehicles....'— *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 135.

² Col K. W. R. Gasgow, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Wellington**, 15 Nov 1902; headmaster; CO 14 Lt AA Regt May–Dec 1941; 5 Fd Regt Dec 1941–May 1943; OC Tps 6 NZ Div May–Aug 1943; GSO 1 NZ **Maadi** Camp 1944; Rector, Scots College, **Wellington**.

Glasgow thereupon pressed through to the front and within a few minutes the drivers picked up his signals and formed themselves into

five compact columns behind his car. Speed was reduced to four miles in the hour and exceptionally good battle discipline was displayed.

Colonel Glasgow subsequently reported that the casualties were extraordinarily light, mainly because of the fact that the enemy tank and anti-tank gun fire which was maintained from the remainder of the laager during the turning movement was too high. To the best of his knowledge only two German prisoners were left behind and none of his own troops who had gone to ground at the halt had been run over on the resumption of the advance. In his view, the success of the desperate manoeuvre was due to the skill and nice judgment of the drivers and the steadiness of all under fire.

Breaking clear was one thing. What to do next was another. **Glasgow** first thought his best course would be to turn round and lead the group through the gap being made by **4 Brigade**. Noises from that area, however, suggested that the fight was still going on, while enemy signal flares indicated that there were enemy groups between him and the gap. But the flares also showed that the German positions were not continuous. **Glasgow** decided that if the group travelled quietly and slowly it should be possible to slip between the posts to the neighbourhood of the **Bir Khalda** telephone line. Guided by the enemy flares, the group changed course no fewer than five times before it got clear. At one stage it passed a laager estimated to contain twelve to twenty German tanks only 20 yards away. The group was not challenged and **Glasgow** was tempted to attack, but as he did not know precisely what troops he had with him, he decided that the better course would be to get the group safely away and organised tactically before risking an engagement.

Shortly afterwards, **Glasgow** encountered an Indian unit disposed in a defensive position. He had some difficulty in establishing his bona fides with the Indian sentries who did not speak English, but eventually was permitted to pass. Two miles further east, the group was halted and all officers were called to the command car. **Glasgow** then discovered the composition of the force that had followed him. He had 22 field guns of

his regiment, 6 anti-tank guns, 4 light anti-aircraft guns, 4 machine guns, 14 Bren carriers and 3 ambulances, all with their crews, and about 300 of **5 Brigade's** infantry disposed in trucks and the other vehicles of the group. In the faint moonlight, this mixed force rapidly reorganised into a powerful unit in desert formation. The advance was then resumed until first light when a halt was made in a deir for breakfast.

During this halt some twenty tanks of an unknown type appeared to the south and east. Major **Stewart** ¹ was sent in a carrier to investigate and the group was ordered to take up defensive positions. **Glasgow** said later that the preparation for action was one of the quickest and most efficient he had ever seen. The tanks were Honeys and were part of a battle group of **Green Howards**, field artillery, and South African anti-tank guns from **7 Motor Brigade**.

After breakfast the march to **Alamein** was continued on a route a little to the north of the **Qattara** escarpment. In the late afternoon the group was met by Brigadier Inglis and Colonel Gentry and directed into a bivouac outside **Kaponga**.

This phase of the withdrawal was marked by an incident which increased the already high regard in which officers and other ranks of the New Zealand **Medical Corps** were held for their devotion to the care of the wounded. The regimental aid post vehicles of **5 Field Regiment**, consisting of three trucks, were in the group carrying the more severely wounded. The regiment's medical officer, Captain **Bryant**, ² had distinguished himself at **Minqar Qaim** by keeping his aid post open within a few hundred yards of the gunline and by moving round the gun positions to attend the wounded. He now decided that his patients in the trucks could not bear the jolts of a swift movement over the desert. He consulted Colonel Glasgow and it was agreed that he should take over the ambulances and any trucks needed and bring the wounded on slowly in his own time. Although there were cases of severe internal wounds and haemorrhage, Bryant saved the lives of all his patients.

The third of the groups into which the divisional column had

become divided was not so well-founded. It comprised trucks and other vehicles from the rear of the column which had turned about on the encounter with the laager and made a hasty departure from the scene. They were followed by Lieutenant-Colonel Russell, commanding **22 Battalion**, who spent the remaining hours of darkness in collecting stragglers before setting out to the east. ³

An historian of the Peninsula War says that the deep French attacking columns broke up from the rear, almost never from the front, when they came under the British fire. Those in front could see what was happening and feel they could do something about it, while those in rear could only sense the check, hear the noise, see

¹ **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.

² **Maj A. L. Bryant**, MC, m.i.d.; Otokia, **Taieri**; born NZ 25 Apr 1917; medical practitioner; **MO 5 Fd Regt** Dec 1941–jun 1943; **5 Fd Amb** Jun 1943–Jul 1944; **1Mob CCS** Jul–Dec 1944; **1 Conv Depot** Dec 1944–Aug 1945.

³ The size and composition of this group are not available in the Division's records.

the smoke, fear the worst and feel helpless to do anything useful. The situation among the rear vehicles that night was probably very similar to that in the rear ranks of a French column.

It will be recalled that the order to charge through on wheels if the enemy were encountered did not go down the column when it was leaving **Miniqar Qaim**, and also that the rear vehicles were halted at the turning point until it was established that the battle noises ahead were being created by **4 Brigade**. After this the rear vehicles hurried on to catch up with the divisional column. To do so they would have to travel

at considerable speed, a task which at night calls for concentration on driving to the exclusion of thoughts on the tactical situation. In this frame of mind they closed on the remainder of the column.

A characteristic of night moves by large bodies of transport was probably another factor in leading to disorganisation. When a large column moves at night, all vehicles do not start simultaneously. The order to advance, as it were, trickles down the column, and it often happens that the leading vehicles have gathered speed and have moved a considerable distance before those in rear realise what has happened. This occurred in the encounter with the tank laager. The onward move of the head of the column and its turn to the east were almost concurrent with the outbreak of the enemy fire, but for varying periods the vehicles behind the leaders were immobile.

To the drivers in the rear the strings of tracer bullets and shells, the noise, the glare of burning trucks and the apparently prolonged halt seemed to have made it appear that the head of the column had run into a holocaust. But whatever the cause, some driver or drivers turning about created a general withdrawal of a block of vehicles. It was fortunate that there was a leader of Colonel Russell's calibre on the spot to regain control.

At first light Russell led his party south-east and met **1 Armoured Division** whose GSO 1, Lieutenant-Colonel Peake, gave him the location of **5 Brigade's** B echelon. Russell informed the transport officers of the events of the night, and taking command of the combined group, led it eastwards to find the Division.

The picture of the Division on the morning of 28 June was not attractive. Only a few hours before it had been a compact fighting formation ready for anything. Now it was dispersed in groups varying in size and composition far and wide over the desert.

Tactical Divisional Headquarters, with the greater part of the **Divisional Reserve Group** and portions of **5 Brigade** Group, was making

its way eastwards on the grid line prescribed by **13 Corps**. At daylight Brigadier Inglis had sent **General Freyberg** to an airfield near the coast from which a pilot hurried to **Cairo** to obtain an air ambulance. By evening **General Freyberg** was in **2 New Zealand General Hospital** at **Helwan**. At midday Inglis sent a brief situation report to **13 Corps** and then, handing over the column to Brigadier Weir, pressed on to make the Division's dispositions on the new defence line.

Rear Divisional Headquarters was an entity at large in the desert rather than part of the Division. From midday on 27 June it had been cut off from the Division at **Minqar Qaim** and had been unable to push the supply columns through to the troops. From about five o'clock it had been completely out of touch with Tactical Divisional Headquarters. Rumours abounded, but it could not obtain any definite information about the Division's position or intentions. In the circumstances Colonel **Crump**,¹ commanding the New Zealand **Army Service Corps**, and Major **Barrington**,² who had tried unsuccessfully to reach **Minqar Qaim** to replace Lieutenant-Colonel Ross at headquarters, decided to hold their overnight position. At daylight Rear Headquarters packed up and moved eastward toward **Alamein** and to find the Division.

Fourth Brigade Group was tactically complete except for gun ammunition. After embussing, the group had moved eastwards in tight night formation. Twice it had deviated from the planned route to avoid parties of the enemy, one of which shelled the group. After breakfast the march was resumed in desert formation, initially towards the first rendezvous near **Fuka** until contact was re-established with Division and orders were received to take the group to the **Alamein** Line.

Also making their way to **Alamein** by various routes were the columns led by **Glasgow** and **Russell**, the **21st Battalion** group (now in two parties), **B Squadron** of the Divisional Cavalry which had been sent to relieve **21 Battalion** at **Bir Khalda**, and some companies of the **Army Service Corps** near the coast. Finally, there was Captain Bryant's pathetic convoy of wounded. These were the organised groups. In addition, there were some isolated trucks whose occupants had but one

thought, that of finding their comrades at the earliest moment.

Thus during daylight on 28 June the Division was not available for operations. It could play no further part in the battle then

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.

² **Brig B. Barrington**, DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Marion**, 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 and QMG 2 NZ Div Nov 1942–Dec 1944; DA and QMG NZ Corps Feb–Mar 1944; died 17 Apr 1954.

reaching its climax at **Matruh**, where **10 Corps** was preparing to break out. General Gott had no knowledge of its fate until after midday. The Division's departure from the scene was unknown at Eighth Army Headquarters, which believed it was still available under **13 Corps** for action near **Fuka** to cover **10 Corps'** withdrawal. Army Headquarters was surprised to learn that Gott had sent it to **Alamein**.

Although the Division was widely dispersed and withdrawing, it was not making the retreat of defeated men. There was no thought anywhere of defeat. Rather, the firmly held belief was that the Division had given Rommel a hard knock and had upset his plan to encircle and wipe it out. Possibly each of the several groups and parties thought that it alone was separated from the Division and that it was only a matter of forming up again for another round. Thanks to the warning order of early on 27 June and the precaution of asking General Lumsden to pass on the information concerning the withdrawal, the group leaders knew in which direction to head. The Division's discipline was well able to withstand the stresses being put on it.

All the fighting formations of the Division, including 6 Infantry Brigade, reached the rendezvous on the **Alamein** Line by midnight on 28–29 June, and the rear services were being re-established. The late afternoon and evening were hours of happy reunions and tales of adventure as group upon group and individuals came in and rejoined units and brigades. The arrival of **4 Brigade** Group, its great mass of trucks moving in perfect formation, was a thrilling experience. It represented a solid core, the Division again in being. Fifth Brigade, too, was glad to see its transport come home but was even more pleased to greet **21 Battalion**, concerning whose fate rumour had been rife.

That night the New Zealanders bedded down content, once more a fighting division ready for aught the morrow might bring.

An evil spirit bent on frustration seemed to hover over the **21 Battalion** column on the **Khalda** track. Enthusiasm could hardly be expected for the prosaic task of guarding another formation's field maintenance centre in the depths of the desert when the Division was about to engage in thrilling enterprises. Consequently, the column shared the reluctance with which the command of **5 Brigade** detached it for the duty.

The column soon learned that it was still within the battle area. Near **Bir Khalda**, when transport was congested after climbing an escarpment, the column was bombed and machine-gunned by enemy aircraft which probably broke off from the formation which attacked **4 Brigade** at **Bir Abu Batta** a few minutes later. The transport scattered in all directions, but not before 14 men were killed, 45 wounded, and 14 vehicles, including three ammunition trucks of 27 Battery, destroyed. A further result of the attack was that only three of the battalion's three-inch mortars could be provided with complete crews. Some of the wounded were evacuated in the two ambulances with the column and the remainder were removed by six more ambulances sent by the Division during the night. The losses were the heaviest suffered by any single battalion of the Division in one bombing attack.

The column was relieved in the afternoon of 27 June by B Squadron of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** under Major **Sutherland**,¹ who also took the anti-tank guns and a troop of the field guns under command. With **21 Battalion** and the remainder of 27 Battery, Lieutenant-Colonel Allen set out shortly before four o'clock to rendezvous with **5 Brigade's** B echelon, then believed to be still on the escarpment near **Bir Abu Batta**.

After travelling roughly five miles, the column was met by Captain **Dugleby**,² Staff Captain **5 Brigade**, who was following the brigade's now dispersed transport. His information, by the time it reached Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, was to the effect that the brigade had been driven from **Minqar Qaim** by enemy tanks. When this news was proved false through the wireless link and by the timely arrival of **23 Battalion's** transport officer, who was also looking for the fugitive vehicles, the column got under way again. As it moved off, advice was received through a British armoured unit nearby that enemy groups were now in both front and rear, the latter probably being *3 Reconnaissance Unit*.

As if this were not disturbing enough, it was found a few miles further on, when the column was halted to reconnoitre the ground ahead, that tactical formation had been lost. Most of the battalion's carriers and some of the leading trucks had turned with the carrier commander, Captain **Dee**,³ when he had come down the column for orders. They were now in rear instead of leading the march. While tactical formation was being restored, the battalion intelligence officer, Lieutenant **Abbot**,⁴ returned from a reconnaissance with a report that he had been fired upon by the enemy. Major **McElroy**,⁵ commanding A Company, who had tried to push

¹ **Lt-Col J. H. Sutherland**, MC; **Masterton**; born **Taieri**, 10 Dec 1903; stock inspector; 2 i/c patrol of LRP and LRDG; CO 2 NZ Div Cav 1942–43.

² **Maj L. W. Dugleby**, m.i.d.; born **Wairoa**, 6 Jun 1914; clerk; SC 5 Bde Jun–Nov 1942 killed in action 13 Apr 1943.

³ **Capt K. G. Dee**; born **Onehunga**, 6 Apr 1914; farmer; wounded 4 Jul 1942; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

⁴ **Maj R. B. Abbott**, MC; **Ngaruawahia**; born **Auckland**, 16 Feb 1919; insurance clerk; wounded 6 Jul 1942.

⁵ **Lt-Col H. M. McElroy**, DSO and bar, ED; **Auckland**; born **Timaru**, 2 Dec 1910; public accountant; CO 21 Bn 4 Jun 1943–21 Jun 1944; wounded four times.

on to the brigade from the first halt, also came back with information supplied by the commander of an Indian unit with **7 Armoured Division**¹ that the brigade was moving south from **Minqar Qaim**. Although the information was given in good faith, it had no foundation. It may be surmised that it was the sum of reports and deductions gleaned from the movements of **5 Brigade's** dispersing B echelon and **1 Armoured Division's** intention to move south to **Bir Khalda**. As it was then only about six o'clock, the information could not have been in response to the Division's request to Major-General Lumsden to advise the units south of **Minqar Qaim** of the projected withdrawal.

Lieutenant-Colonel Allen's cogitations on these matters were interrupted by the arrival of enemy armoured cars, trucks, and small guns which deployed for action. They were not identified but, again, were probably from **3 Reconnaissance Unit**. Allen decided to turn west to seek the protection of the Indian column. To cover the turning movement, he sent forward the only two sections of carriers which had come up. Travelling fast and in line, the six carriers opened fire with their machine guns. The enemy permitted them to approach to within 200 yards and then subjected them to heavy fire from small arms, anti-tank guns and mortars. Four of the carriers were quickly put out of action. The remaining two picked up survivors and then withdrew to the battalion.

As the action opened, A Company wheeled to the left under fire. Seeing this movement and the return of the carriers, the rest of the battalion turned about and withdrew rapidly southwards, leaving Allen, two carriers under Dee, and one anti-tank gun and the troop of 27 Battery as the sole occupants of the field. While the battalion adjutant hurried off to stop the withdrawal, Allen directed the guns on to the enemy, their fire being supported by the two carriers. He then broke off the action and withdrew his small party to the area the battalion had occupied the previous night. There he was joined by McElroy and most of A Company. There was no sign of the rest of the column.

On learning from Major Sutherland that he was out of contact with the Division and intended to withdraw to the **Alamein** Line, Allen tried in vain to re-establish a wireless link and then decided to follow the cavalry squadron. About midnight he encountered the B echelon of **7 Motor Brigade**, with which he harboured for the remainder of the night. Next morning he moved eastwards in its company. At a halt about eight miles south of the **Fuka** escarpment, he received news that the Division was on its way to the **Kaponga**

¹ Probably 3 Indian Motor Brigade.

Box, to which point he then directed his course and arrived without further incident.

The remainder of the column had turned up about four hours earlier. It had been rallied by Major **Adams**, ¹ commanding B Company, who, after a fruitless effort to find battalion headquarters, set out eastwards and sheltered for the night with **5 Brigade's** B echelon and some British armour. Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson, CRE of the Division, who had been prevented from returning to **Minqar Qaim** after reconnoitring the southern front, travelled with the party. South of **Fuka** they met Major **Crisp**, ² a New Zealander on the staff of **10 Corps**, on whose advice they continued to the **Kaponga Box**.

Major Sutherland took the cavalry squadron on a more circuitous route to rejoin the Division. Leaving **Bir Khalda** shortly before eight o'clock after handing over A Troop of 27 Battery to Lieutenant-Colonel Allen, he travelled all night along the northern edge of the **Qattara Depression**. Soft sand impeded progress, but on the morning of 28 June the squadron was on the firmer ground of the **Taqa Plateau**, from which it moved north to the divisional area.

The **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, however, was not reunited until 30 June. The men left in **Matruh** when B Squadron moved to the desert moved from the fortress on the morning of 27 June and, at **Baggush**, met a detail with twelve new carriers. The combined parties then withdrew to **Fuka**, where the new carriers were prepared for use. In the early hours of 28 June, they gathered from reports and rumours that the Division had withdrawn and, accordingly, they also made their way to **Alamein**. The regiment's rail party which had reached **Amiriya** on 26 June was caught in the confusion of congested railway sidings, but finally managed to extricate itself and unite with the last detail of the regiment, which had been drawing new equipment at **Abbassia**, and so rejoin the regiment.

Fifth Brigade's B echelon is the last substantial section of the Division to be accounted for in the dispersion of 28 June. The precipitate withdrawals and failure of the transport to rejoin the Division were criticised at the time, and some inferences were drawn which fuller knowledge of all the circumstances would have corrected. The term B echelon may convey the impression of an organised and controlled entity. The composition of such an echelon, however, varied from time to time, as did the personnel within it. At **Minqar Qaim** 5 Brigade's B echelon comprised trucks of the Reserve Mechanical Transport, the engineers and infantry battalions, a

¹ **Maj R. W. Adams**; born NZ 4 Jan 1909; company manager; killed in action 4 Jul 1942.

² **Maj A. J. Crisp, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born NZ 9 Mar 1906; accountant.**

heterogeneous collection of some 300 to 400 vehicles driven by men who were accustomed to acting on their own initiative rather than as a group.

There can be no doubt that exercise of individual initiative saved the transport when it was attacked in front of 5 Brigade on the morning of 27 June and again in the afternoon near Bir Abu Batta. Had the drivers moved in formation they would have presented the enemy with a target of his dreams. By rapid dispersal and moving at varying speeds they disconcerted the enemy gunners. Their discipline showed up in the manner in which they rallied on both occasions when seemingly clear of the enemy.

It was a misfortune that the transport took with it the battery-charging set of 5 Brigade's signals. Batteries were being recharged when the first attack was made and the apparatus was driven away in a truck. Counsel of perfection suggests that the signals officer, Second-Lieutenant Sidey, ¹ might have returned the charging set and batteries from Bir Abu Batta. But he was not to know that the transport would be driven still further away from the brigade. He knew, however, that there were fully charged spare batteries at Brigade Headquarters which should suffice until the brigade and transport were reunited. It was again unfortunate that the truck driver in whose care the batteries reposed was unaware they were wanted. Such things happen in battle, as indeed they may in even the best regulated business.

When the transport was brought under control after the second dispersal, it was formed into a convoy to return to the neighbourhood of the Division. On this occasion there was indiscipline on the part of a few drivers. When some armoured cars appeared across the route these drivers broke away without orders, producing a disorganisation which was not straightened out until about five miles to the east had been

covered. The assistance of a British armoured unit was sought to cover the return journey to the Division but it was unable to comply with the request.

After repeated attempts to get into touch with the brigade for orders, wireless contact was established at seven o'clock when the Brigade Major, **Major Monty Fairbrother**,² instructed the transport to return by the most direct route. However, before the convoy could move it learned from **21 Battalion** that the route was held by the enemy. When reconnaissance revealed that a battle was in

¹ **Maj T. K. S. Sidey**, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 8 Oct 1908; barrister and solicitor; company commander Div Sigs Sep 1944–Feb 1945.

² **Col M. C. Fairbrother**, DSO, OBE, 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 2 2 NZ Div Jun–Oct 1944; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base **2 NZEF** Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Associate Editor, NZ War Histories.

progress to the north, it was decided not to move until further information could be had from **5 Brigade**.

Then followed the period when both Brigade Headquarters and transport tried in vain to get into touch with each other. Even a high-powered set borrowed by the transport from an armoured car failed to make contact. Eventually about midnight, when the men of **5 Brigade** had been allocated to other vehicles, faint touch was re-established. The wireless link at **5 Brigade** Headquarters was so weak that it was impossible to discuss the situation, use a code, or give the customary verification numbers. The best the Brigade Major could do in the circumstances was to give the simple order, 'Go east to **Amiriya**', a point well known to the transport, and the signals officer instructed the operator to use 'Monty says so', as verification.

This order was received with the deepest suspicion by the officers with the transport. They had no knowledge of the impending withdrawal of the Division. Only a few days before a warning had been circulated that the Germans were sending false messages in English on Eighth Army wave-lengths. Now, when the customary verification code numbers did not come back, the officers suspected an enemy ruse to misdirect the transport and so immobilise the brigade. Some imaginations were vivid enough to picture the brigade staff as captured and sending the order under the duress of German revolvers in their backs. The fact that anyone could possibly think the brigade staff would be so amenable did not contribute to calm appraisal of the circumstances when the events of the day were discussed later.

In view of the doubts and suspicions, it was decided not to move the transport until confirmation of the order was obtained. This was given early next morning on the appearance of Lieutenant-Colonel Russell, and the two groups then proceeded in company to join the Division.

German reactions to the escape of the Division from **Minqar Qaim** were philosophical concerning its effects on the campaign, but were bitter towards the New Zealanders. There was a somewhat whimsical idea that the Division should have recognised it was trapped, and that it had not played the game fairly in depriving *Afrika Korps* of the victory the *Korps* had arranged to garner next morning. Prisoners of war gathered the impression that some of the troops had celebrated the expected victory in advance. The bitterness was a reaction to the carnage in **Bir Abu Batta**. All formations and even Rommel himself were affected.

The diary of *21 Panzer Division* records that at 28 minutes past two a 'most immediate' wireless message was received from regimental headquarters of the Panzer Grenadiers 'that, after an unexpected artillery preparation, the enemy attacked regimental headquarters and penetrated into the positions of the right wing of 1/R Regiment 104.' The report clearly refers to **4 Brigade's** attack. The reference to an

artillery preparation, of course, was wrong but may be attributed to the confusion. By the time the headquarters was alarmed there would have been enough grenade and other explosions to suggest a bombardment.

At first, divisional headquarters regarded the attack on **Bir Abu Batta** as a feint, 'but,' the diary continues, 'it soon develops into a number of violent assaults launched on all parts of the front. The enemy tries, with all the forces at his disposal, to break through to the south in the direction of **Khalda**.'

An hour later General Bismarck reported to *Afrika Korps* that 'all attacks have been completely repulsed. In some places, however, the enemy, supported by tanks, succeeded in breaking out. It is very likely that he escaped through these gaps with the bulk of his forces.' This diary entry adds that the Panzer Grenadiers had been ordered to comb and mop up the terrain to the north of the escarpment, and that 1 Battalion 'has suffered very heavy casualties as the enemy succeeded in surprising the battalion and cutting it to pieces in a hand-to-hand fight.'

The report is an unconscious tribute to the violence of the divisional column's unexpected collision with the German laager south of **Minqar Qaim**. No comment is needed on the obvious errors in the report other than that they are normal to the confusion of a night action. It is striking, however, that Bismarck does not appear to have been concerned that, on top of his failure to carry out his intention of the previous evening to destroy the encircled enemy, he had now failed in his second intention of preventing a breakout. The confession that 1 Battalion had been surprised and cut to pieces is naive. But neither Rommel nor *Afrika Korps* took the division to task for permitting the prize to escape or dealt with 1 Battalion for the cardinal sin of being surprised in a battle position. *Afrika Korps* closes its diary note of the occasion with the laconic comment: 'The encirclement was not a success.'

There was no philosophical consideration of the carnage which daylight revealed in **Bir Abu Batta**. The last sounds heard by **4 Brigade** as

it embussed after the breakthrough were the cries and calls of the wounded enemy. They came over the still air like the pathetic bleating of sheep disturbed in the night. But the agonising appeals for help aroused the Grenadiers to anger, which deepened when they found that many of their stricken comrades had multiple wounds plainly showing they had been bayoneted or shot, often both, several times.

Perhaps in the circumstances calm acceptance of the situation could not be expected of the rank and file. The division, however, had had considerable experience and had fought many night actions. At least its senior officers might have known that multiple wounds were common to hand-to-hand fighting, especially at night. If in the comradeship of arms, they were affected by the distress of their men and thus shared their feelings, a more detached view might have been taken by *Afrika Korps*' headquarters. On the contrary, the *Korps*' diary placed on record for all time the false charge: 'During these actions violations of International Law, such as slaughter of the wounded, occur.' Had the entry been made for propaganda purposes, or to arouse the fighting spirit of all ranks, it might be understood, although not condoned. There is nothing to suggest it was made otherwise than as a solemn statement of fact.

This view is supported by other circumstances. A belief which Rommel shared spread through *Panzerarmee* that the New Zealanders fought like gangsters, with no thought or understanding of chivalry. Discriminatory action was immediately taken against New Zealanders captured in the battle. They were separated from other prisoners, stripped of personal possessions and made to stand in the hot sun for six hours without rest. Personal indignities were also heaped on some of them. In subsequent battles on the *Alamein* Line, the Germans fought with an intensity strongly suggestive of a desire to 'get even' with the New Zealanders. The feeling was different from that usually held towards a foe whose fighting qualities are respected. Broadcasts from *Berlin* referred to the New Zealanders as 'Freyberg's butchers'.

It is strange that Rommel did not make a personal investigation of

events in the breakout as he had a high regard for the ethics and chivalry of war. He appears to have accepted the reports without question. When Brigadier Clifton was brought before him on his capture in the following September, Rommel gave vent to a harangue about the 'gangster' methods of the New Zealanders at [Minqar Qaim](#). Clifton has recorded that Rommel listened to his explanations and, in the end, replied, 'Well, that is reasonable and could happen in a night battle, but'¹

There is no need to defend let alone apologise for the actions of [4 Brigade](#) in the breakout. Let it be repeated, it was a glorious feat of arms. But a false charge incorporated in the enemy archives cannot be passed over by anyone having access to all the facts, lest default in meeting the charge should be taken as an admission of guilt and thereby leave a stain on the proud record of a hard-fighting yet chivalrous division.

¹ *Rommel*, pp. 156–7.

It should be added that the Division was not disturbed by the broadcasts from [Berlin](#). The attitude was: 'When the Germans bleat, you know you have hit and hurt them.'

Rommel had another wrong impression of the breakout. In his notes on the campaign in [North Africa](#) he made brief reference to meeting the New Zealand Division at [Matruh](#) and of his headquarters becoming involved in the breakout.¹ The details supplied, however, show conclusively that the honour of disturbing him and of compelling him to move hastily to a safer area belongs to 50 Division which, during the night 28–29 June, broke out southward from the coastal escarpment.

Panzerarmee's battle report of the day also erred in reporting that the New Zealand Division had broken out southwards from the fortress of [Matruh](#).

Although the New Zealand Division had no further part in the battle

of **Matruh** and the fighting up to the enemy's arrival at **Alamein**, the principal features of the operations from 28 June to 1 July must be understood to appreciate the drama of the **Alamein Line**.

On the morning of 28 June the enemy quickly recovered his tactical aplomb after the confused events of the night. The Italian **X** and **XXI Corps**, attacking **Matruh** from the west and south-west, and **90 Light Division**, which had cut the coast road five miles east of **Garawla** at 8.30 the previous evening, were ordered to close in on the fortress. **Afrika Korps** was directed to take up the pursuit eastwards, with orders to reach the area 25 miles south-west of **Daba** and to cut off the British motorised forces by a push southwards. The **3rd Reconnaissance Unit** was instructed to advance south-east through **Khalda**. The Italian **XX Armoured Corps**, which had been under the command of **Afrika Korps** for the operations against **1 Armoured** and the **New Zealand Divisions** on 27 June, was ordered to protect the supply routes on the escarpment about the **Khalda** track.

In contrast to the enemy's grip of the situation, obscurity still reigned at all headquarters in **Eighth Army**. **Auchinleck**, at 6.15, greeted the morning with an urgent inquiry of both corps for their situation, and two hours later **10 Corps** asked through **Air Support Control** for news of **13 Corps**. But the perilous position in which his corps had been placed was apparent to **Lieutenant-General Holmes**. At 10.35 a.m. he sent a signal to **Eighth Army** giving the location of **50 Division** as east of **Wadi el Huraiqa**, and stating that the two brigades of **10 Indian Division** were being concentrated in

¹ *Rommel*, p. 269.

the area north of **Wadi el Zarqa**. He also said the enemy was astride the coast road. **Holmes** then stated that he was faced with the choice of an organised attack to open the coast road which would have to be made that night, a breakout to the south and then east, or the concentration of both his divisions to 'fight it out.' He said his choice was governed

largely by the help he could expect from **13 Corps** and asked if that corps could come as far north as Shararid. If not, was any other course possible? Holmes added that, in any case, it was impossible to expect organised bodies from **10 Corps** to arrive at the **Fuka** line. If Eighth Army expected to reorganise on the **Fuka** line, a screen must be provided west of it. This was in reference to the 'Pike' plan of a further stand at **Fuka**.

The signal was not received at Eighth Army until 12.40, over two hours after its despatch. In the meantime, at 11.45, Auchinleck had sent the following message to his corps commanders: '1. The enemy intention today clearly is to attack north of **Matruh** and **Baggush**. Enemy detachments are reported to have reached **Baggush**. 2. 10th Corps will on no account be cut off in **Matruh** area but will withdraw towards the **Fuka** line keeping south of **Qasaba** [the coastal] escarpment. Immediate and bold action by both of you is essential.'

Even when Eighth Army received Holmes' alarming signal of 10.35 a.m., more than two hours elapsed before a reply was sent. At ten minutes to three the following message was sent to **10 Corps**: 'No question of fighting it out. No time to stage a deliberate attack along the road for which there is probably no objective. You will slip out tonight with whole force on a broad front, turn east on high ground and rally **El Daba**. **13 Corps** will cover you.'

The details of the last phase at **Matruh** are outside the scope of this work. Suffice it to say that a fighting breakout was made that night and that the remnants of 50 and 10 Indian Divisions with Corps Headquarters set a course for **Alamein**. On their way they were set upon by **21 Panzer Division** with further heavy losses. The fate of the corps was unknown to the Eighth Army until parts dribbled into **Alamein**, from where they were sent to the Delta to rest, reorganise and refit.

With the overrunning of the last gallant handful of **29 Indian Brigade** by **21 Panzer Division** at **Fuka** the previous evening, only **1 Armoured Division**, with the addition of **7 Motorised Brigade**, was now

left to oppose the enemy's advance. On Army orders, three columns of the division had moved north from **Khalda** to help **10 Corps** and strengthen the defence of **Fuka**, but they had arrived too late to intervene. The division, however, was effective in what proved to be its final role as rearguard. Fighting as brigades rather than as a division, the three brigades, 4 and 22 Armoured and 7 Motor with its armoured cars, harassed **Afrika Korps** so much that *Panzerarmee* acknowledged that the delay in the arrival of the *Korps* at **Alamein** was due to the actions, 'sometimes heavy and costly', which had to be fought. ¹ The armour also engaged the Italian **XX Corps** to such effect that its divisions 'were thrown into considerable disorder', and 'eventually it was necessary for the C-in-C to give a very sharp order to get the corps to move on.' ²

In the meantime, **90 Light Division** and the Italian **X** and **XXI Corps** moved eastwards from **Matruh**. After its strenuous performances, **90 Light** decided it was entitled to rest and bathe in **Matruh's** pellucid waters. But while the men were luxuriating in their first spell since the campaign opened a month before, Rommel appeared and ordered the division to resume the pursuit immediately.

At 6.15 a.m. on 30 June, Auchinleck, having realised the impossibility of halting the enemy further west, ordered the final withdrawal to the **Alamein** Line. At approximately the same time, Rommel gave his orders for the day's march of *Panzerarmee* to assembly positions from which it was to attack the **Alamein** defences at four o'clock next morning.

Eighth Army's stand at **Matruh**, and particularly that of the New Zealand Division at **Minqar Qaim**, created a belief that these were decisive influences in arresting the enemy's advance at **Alamein**. Discussions of advantages gained at **Alamein** because of the supposed delay and casualties imposed on the enemy at **Matruh** generally neglect the reverse side of the picture, which shows Eighth Army as suffering another serious defeat.

Panzerarmee was occupied from two and a half to three days at **Matruh**, that is from about three o'clock in the afternoon of 26 June, when it left its assembly positions, to 1 p.m. on 29 June, when *90 Light Division* resumed the advance on the coast road after the fall of the fortress. The net loss of time by the enemy, and by corollary Eighth Army's net gain, was less. Allowance must be made for the time *Panzerarmee* would have required to traverse the area had its movement been opposed only by a rearguard. *Afrika Korps*' operations suggest that up to one day might have been needed.

On this hypothesis, *Afrika Korps* would have been clear of **Matruh** and on the way to **Alamein** in the afternoon of 27 June instead of 28 June as was the case. The *Korps* provided the spearhead of

¹ *Panzerarmee* battle report, 30 June.

² *Ibid.*

the advance for **Matruh** and, assuming similar delaying action by 1 **Armoured Division** to that which occurred, it would have arrived before **Alamein** on 29 June, or one day ahead of the actual time. This supposition may be challenged by the suggestion that even had the enemy armour reached **Alamein** on 29 June, Rommel would have had to await *90 Light Division* and the Italian *X* and *XXI Korps* before making his attack. The facts are that, in spite of the fighting for the fortress of **Matruh**, these formations arrived in **Alamein** about the same time as the armour.

The battle of **Matruh** gained for Eighth Army at the outside a day and a half for manning and improving the defences on the **Alamein** Line. The price paid was heavy. Tenth Indian Division, which had arrived at **Matruh** in fairly good order, was so shattered that it had to be withdrawn to the Delta to refit. Only three eight-gun battle groups were left of 50 Division. Fifth Indian Division's 9th Brigade was available for a small

fortress role, but there was little left of the remainder of the division. The enemy claimed from the battle 'more than 6000 prisoners and, in addition to large supply dumps, war equipment of all sorts sufficient for about one division.'¹ Even though it may be idle speculation, reflection is inevitable on the difference the presence of these divisions and their equipment might have made to the opening phases of the battle on the **Alamein** Line when the enemy was stretched to the limit of his resources.

Major-General de Guingand records contemporary impressions concerning the value of the action at **Minqar Qaim**. 'The New Zealand Division,' he says, 'had come straight up against the crack German Panzer 15 and 21 divisions, south of **Matruh**. Here a memorable engagement took place, and I believe this mauling of the enemy's spearhead probably went a long way to saving the situation.'²

Afrika Korps' tank states of the period, however, present another view. In its daily return for 25 June, *21 Panzer* reported that it had 30 tanks. The return submitted in the morning of 27 June showed 23 tanks, a total which makes allowance for the losses in the **Siwa** road minefield the previous evening. Next morning, that of 28 June after **Minqar Qaim** had been fought, the division reported 20 tanks. Analysis of the returns shows that the division lost two Mark II and two Mark III tanks at **Minqar Qaim**. Of the tanks damaged in the **Siwa** road minefield, one was repaired sufficiently to join the march at first light and another, a Mark IV, appears to have joined the division during the action at **Minqar Qaim**. When the division arrived at **Alamein** it had 26 tanks.

¹ *Panzerarmee* battle report, 29 June.

² *Operation Victory*, p. 124.

The tank strength of *15 Panzer Division* on the eve of the battle cannot be stated so precisely. *Afrika Korps*, however, reported on 25

June that it had about fifty serviceable tanks. As the strength of *21 Division* on that date is known, *15 Panzer Division* must have had about twenty tanks. After being in action against *1 Armoured Division* throughout 27 June, *15 Division* reported next morning that it had 17 tanks, two consumption units [fuel for approximately 130 miles], and half of its ammunition establishment. When the division arrived at *Alamein* on 30 June it had 25 tanks. ¹

A German cemetery at *Minqar Qaim* containing about 300 graves, most of them with the distinctive emblem of the Panzer Grenadiers, is the only guide to *Afrika Korps'* losses in personnel in the battle. Probably all the Germans buried at *Minqar Qaim* lost their lives fighting the New Zealand Division.

The New Zealanders' casualties in the engagement cannot be stated definitely either, as many of the unit returns for the period give only 'balnket' dates owing to uncertainty of the exact time the casualty occurred. Some time after the battle, however, 2nd Echelon compiled a return showing the Division's losses for the period 20 to 30 June, that is from the commencement of the return to the desert to the day before the fighting started on the *Alamein* Line. These figures cover casualties from all battle sources, including bombing. They show:

	<i>Officers</i>	<i>Other Ranks</i>
Killed in action	8	86
Died of wounds	1	55
Wounded and safe	23	641
Missing and prisoners of war	9	140
Total	41	922

The casualties in and around *Minqar Qaim* would account for about nine-tenths of the losses.

On this analysis of time factors and comparative losses it cannot be said that the Division's stand at *Minqar Qaim* mauled the enemy spearhead or that it went a long way in saving the situation.

Although *Minqar Qaim* is thus shown to have had little effect on the

battle of **Matruh** or on Rommel's advance to **Alamein**, the stand and breakout added greatly to the prestige of the New Zealand

¹ The tank strengths for 25–28 June have been extracted from the *Korps* and divisional diaries. That for 30 June has been compiled by the Union of South Africa War Histories from the returns of preceding and subsequent days, as a complete return of *Panzerarmee's* strength on that day is not available. Although the analysis for 30 June may not be exact, it challenges General Bayerlin's statement that Rommel had only 12 serviceable tanks when he arrived at **Alamein**. (See *Rommel*, page 130.) According to the Historical Section of the Italian General Staff, there were also 92 tanks in the Italian armoured divisions on 30 June. The number of serviceable tanks, however, was almost certainly lower according to other evidence.

Division. A tribute was paid by Mr Churchill in the House of Commons on 2 July when he was replying to a challenge on the Government's direction of the war, with particular reference to the reverse in **North Africa**. After stating that 'most authorities expected that ten days to a fortnight would be gained by the withdrawal to **Matruh**,' Churchill briefly referred to some of the steps being taken to rectify the situation. He then said:

Although I am not mentioning reinforcements there is one reinforcement which has come, which had been in close contact with the enemy and which he knows all about. I mean the New Zealand Division. (Cheers) The Government of New Zealand, themselves under potential menace of invasion, authorised the fullest use of their troops whom they had not withdrawn or weakened in any way. They have sent them into the battle where, under the command of the heroic **Freyberg**, again wounded, they have acquitted themselves in a manner equal to all their former records. (Cheers) They are fighting hard at this moment. ¹

There is, however, another aspect of **Minqar Qaim** which cannot be passed over. The Division must be identified with what has been

described as 'the flight of 13th Corps from **Minqar Qaim**' and its consequent effect on Eighth Army's direction of the battle. It has also been suggested that the Division's arrival on the **Alamein** Line caused some surprise as it was not expected there so soon. The facts, as they have been brought out in this narrative, prove that New Zealand Division was ordered by **13 Corps** to **Alamein**, that **1 Armoured Division** covered the retreat of the remains of **10 Corps** from **Matruh**, and that **13 Corps'** other component, **29 Brigade** of **5 Indian Division**, was finally wiped out at **Fuka**.

Nevertheless, **13 Corps'** direction of its part of the battle and the departure of New Zealand Division surprised Eighth Army. Brigadier Whiteley was examined on this phase of the battle by the Court of Inquiry into certain phases of the retreat and the battle of **Matruh**. Questions by the Court and his answers are given in full as they appear in the proceedings:

Q. At the time of the withdrawal from **Matruh**, **13 Corps** were then in the area Qaim. Was it thought possible that **10 Corps** could get out of **Matruh** unless **13 Corps** held on to Qaim and Hamza?

A. No. The whole plan was that **13 Corps** should attack north to help them out. My very firm impression is that the New Zealand Division, having been attacked and overrun, was ordered away. Who gave them this order, I don't know. There was virtually nothing left of **13 Corps** bar the very weak **5 Indian Division** and, of course, the armour which was being very widely deployed in the south.

Q. I have read the reports of **10 Corps** and there was no co-ordination of the withdrawal. **13 Corps** just disappeared and left **10 Corps** up the pole.

¹ *The Times*, 3 July 1942.

A. They had not been intended to go. When they pulled out that morning

it was a great surprise.

Q. Commander New Zealand Division told me that he got permission to withdraw in the afternoon, ¹ whereas 10 Corps did not get it from Army until 2200 hours. Can you explain it?

A. I cannot. My contention is that it was not intended that New Zealand Division should withdraw at that time. I cannot understand how they got orders to withdraw in the afternoon. It was not the C-in-C's intention.

When it was known that the New Zealand Division had withdrawn, Army Headquarters was very surprised. They were also surprised that 13 Corps had gone back. 10 Corps was left to fight its way out of a very difficult position. They had to get up the escarpment which was very difficult.

Q. It was intended then that 13 Corps should hang on to Sidi Hamza longer than they did?

A. Yes, very definitely. They were to hold the high ground until after 10 Corps had started.

This pertinent evidence should be read with reservations. Brigadier Whiteley was the only senior staff officer of Army Headquarters who appeared before the Court. Thus it fell to him to explain whatever shortcomings there may have been in the highest echelon. He was closely examined, but it would be unfair to infer from the examination that he was a reluctant witness or that he was in any way on trial. It would also be unfair to attribute to him, because of his frank statements and answers to questions, an undue share of responsibility for errors at Eighth Army.

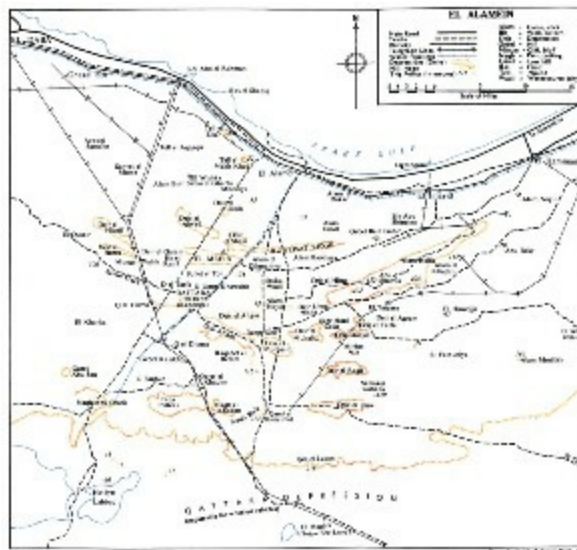
Neither Lieutenant-General Gott nor his chief staff officer, Brigadier Erskine, gave evidence, a fact which the Court may have had in mind when it opened its report with the statement that, 'Owing to their being engaged in active operations, certain commanders whose actions may

appear to have been called in question were not able to attend the sittings of the Court and no evidence was taken on oath.’ Because of this and other circumstances, the Court made it clear ‘that its work should be considered as of an exploratory and preliminary nature only.’

Although even with these reservations all the circumstances point to **13 Corps'** responsibility, this is subsidiary to the fact that the failure to make full use of the Division at **Matruh** and in the subsequent retreat was not due to any fault of the Division. There is little profit except for students in re-fighting the battle. Yet it may be observed that had **13 Corps'** Tactical Headquarters remained on the scene to co-ordinate the operations of its divisions, ***Afrika Korps***, which was much weaker in tanks, guns and infantry, could

¹ ‘Bedstead at your discretion.’ See pp. 99 and 100.

have been dealt a punishing blow. Again, New Zealand Division was available for a further delaying action at **Fuka** had **13 Corps** so desired. All that was required was an order to break out to **Fuka**, or the first rendezvous, instead of to **Deir el Harra**. Although the Division disintegrated in the breakout, it was as capable of rallying at **Fuka** as on the more distant **Alamein Line**.



El Alamein

The outstanding feature of [Minqar Qaim](#) was not its impact on the enemy or its contribution to Eighth Army's operations, but that the Division escaped annihilation. The Division's concentration on the escarpment made it vulnerable to air attack. Dive-bombers could have done much towards destroying the transport and silencing the guns. Very little, if any, protection was available from the [Royal Air Force](#) as its ground organisation was also moving back. Had the Division, its gun ammunition almost exhausted, been pinned to the ground by the destruction of its transport, it is difficult to see how it could have escaped the enemy armoured divisions assembling for the kill at first light on 28 June.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 13 – EIGHTH ARMY IN LAST DITCH

CHAPTER 13

Eighth Army in Last Ditch

ONE after the other six defensive lines had fallen. **Gazala- Bir Hacheim, Acroma- El Adem, Tobruk- Belhamed- El Adem**, the frontier, **Matruh- Hamza**, the **Fuka** descent—each told a tale of defeat and most of disaster. Now the remains of Eighth Army were on the **Alamein** Line, the gateway to **Alexandria, Cairo**, the Delta, the Great Middle East base. They were in that last ditch sometimes glamorously termed ‘the spiritual home of the British Army.’ Here they turned at bay while General Auchinleck sought to ‘regain the tactical initiative’, ¹ to convert defeat into victory.

Ever since the British occupation of **Egypt**, the **Alamein** Line had been recognised as the best position on which to defend the cultivated area against attack from the west. The line was sited between the sea coast north-east of **Alamein** and the northern edge of the **Qattara Depression** at **Naqb Abu Dweis**. It straddled the narrowest part of the coast belt on a front of about 38 miles and rested its flanks on the sea and the **Qattara Depression**. The few natural obstacles and marked features on the line had an importance which explains much of the course of the fighting.

On the coast there is a strip of salt marsh and then a belt of sand and dunes about 200 yards wide. The land then rises about sixty feet in a ridge along which the coast road runs. Below the road on the landward side there is the railway. From the road and railway the ground gradually rises over a wide and rather featureless plain to the escarpment, which drops precipitously some 600 feet into the **Qattara Depression**. This relatively narrow strip between the sea and the depression canalised all land traffic. The line could be penetrated, but not turned.

Of the sparse features, the most notable are the depressions such as **Deir el Shein**, **Deir ei Mreir** and **Deir el Munassib**. The depressions provide cover and their low ridges a degree of observation. **Miteiriya**, south-west

of **Alamein**, and Ruweisat, running eastward from near Deir el **Mreir**, are the main ridges Towards the **Qattara Depression** the ground is broken into small flat-topped hills.

¹ Despatch, p. 364.

The approaches to the position follow three main lines—the coast road and railway, the Barrel track from **Fuka** through **Deir el Munassib** and **Qaret el Munassib** and **Qaret el Himeimat** to the **Cairo— Alexandria** road, and, in the south, along threads of good going north of the escarpment. The escarpment is almost impassable to wheeled or tracked vehicles for about 125 miles west of **Naqb Abu Dweis**. Salt marsh and sand dunes make the **Qattara Depression** a complete obstacle to the passage of vehicle columns of any size. Throughout the length of the line the ground generally is rocky and power tools and explosives are required for excavation. Patches of scrub and soft sand complicate movements by transport.

On assuming the **Middle East** command in August 1939 General Wavell inherited reconnaissance reports and plans for the **Alamein** Line prepared under the direction of General Sir John BurnettStuart a few years earlier. But like his immediate predecessor, Major-General (later General Sir R.) Gordon-Finlayson, Wavell preferred to fight as far west as possible and to regard the **Alamein** Line as a back-stop It was decided in 1940 under the threat of Graziani's advance to prepare the line for defence, and Lieutenant General Marshall Cornwall laid out three boxes or defended localities around **Alamein** station, at Qaret el Abd, ¹ and at **Naqb Abu Dweis**. Work on the line was speeded under the direction of Major-General Evetts after the unfortunate BATTLEAXE operation on the frontier in June 1941, and the two South African divisions, were earmarked by Wavell to hold it. At that time it was thought the line would require a minimum garrison of an army corps of two infantry divisions and an army tank brigade, with a strong armoured force in reserve.

Lieutenant-General Norrie, with Headquarters **30 Corps**, having handed over **Matruh** to **10 Corps**, took command of the line on 26 June. Next day he reported to Eighth Army that up to ten days would be required to complete the defensive works Mines had to be laid, wiring completed, and the localities stocked with water, rations and ammunition. General Norrie also considered that additional defensive localities should be made to fill the gaps of 16 to 18 miles between the **Alamein** and Qaret el Abd boxes and between Qaret el Abd and **Naqb Abu Dweis**. As the gap between **Alamein** and Qaret el Abd was the more dangerous, he decided to construct a position for a division less one brigade group in **Deir el Shein**.

Alamein Box had been designed to hold a division and a corps headquarters. The box was roughly semi-circular with the flanks resting on the sea, the coast road diameter being $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles and the

¹ ‘**Kaponga**’ to the New Zealanders who built the defensive box there in September 1941; also called the **Qattara Box** or **Fortress A**.

perimeter $15\frac{1}{2}$ miles. **Alamein** station was approximately in the centre. There were twenty forward company positions backed by a further seventeen, all mutually supporting and designed for all round defence. Concrete pillboxes had been built. General Norrie allotted the box to **1 South African Division** under Major-General D. H. Pienaar.

The South Africans had many criticisms of the box. In their operational report they said: ‘Topographically it was NOT a good position. The Box was dominated in the north by the high ground [due east of **Tell el Eisa** station], ¹ a fact of which the enemy was NOT slow to take advantage. Centrally, two ridge Trig Points [two to three miles from the south-western segment of the perimeter], later to become the key feature of the Division defences, gave good observation of the Box. ... A serious ‘soft’ spot in the Box was the gap between localities 15 and 17 [in the south-western segment], another fact which the enemy was quick

to realise. To these tactical points, must be added the fact that although 2 SA Division had contributed largely to the **Alamein** defences in 1941, in June '42 the defences had either been filled in or were incomplete. The Eastern sector was at no stage of the campaign a serious obstacle to a determined enemy attack from the East.'

Norrie Ordered **18 Indian Brigade**, newly arrived from **Iraq**, into **Deir el Shein**, a saucer-like depression with' good observation from the rim. The choice of the deir was largely, dictated by the fact that it was the only place in the area where it was possible to dig. **Ruweisat Ridge**, the western end of which was immediately south of the deir, was solid rock. The brigade was at first under command of **1 South African Division** which, recognising its difficulties in building defences in the deir, gave it first call on the rock-drilling compressors.

For Fortress A at Qaret el Abd (**Kaponga**) Norrie called 6 New Zealand Brigade from **Amiriya** on 27 June. When Brigadier Clifton reported at **30 Corps** Headquarters, Norrie was surprised to learn that instead of the brigade group Eighth Army had led him to expect, there were no guns, 'just three infantry battalions and one field company in borrowed transport which has orders to dump us and go.' ² Clifton was assured that mines would be provided for the box and that the New Zealand Division, with its guns, should reach the position in good time. If anything went wrong, guns for the brigade would be found elsewhere.

The brigade moved into the box at seven o'clock next morning and was deployed with the three battalions on the northern, western

¹ Authors interpolations are in square brackets. Map references have been omitted.

² *The Happy Hunted*, by Brigadier Clifton (Cassell).

and southern faces, with **8 Field Company** closing the back door on the eastern face. The box was an oyster-shaped depression whose rocky

edge was 30 feet above the wind-scoured centre and the surrounding stony desert. This small height was sufficient to provide observation in most directions. Nobody outside could see into the centre except through two small gaps. A pipeline was ready to deliver water to the box, but between **Kaponga** and Fortress B at **Naqb Abu Dweis** the extension was filled with salt water for testing.

During the day petrol and ammunition for the armoured divisions were dumped into the box. The empty transport went back swarming with Egyptian labourers who had been working in the box, and who departed abruptly when the news spread that the enemy was approaching. **Barrel Track** ran past the northern face of **Kaponga** and, at its junction with the track to **Alamein**, General Norrie set up a post to collect stragglers and direct traffic. Brigadier Clifton put out a telephone line to the post and from this useful contact acquired three anti-tank guns and a detachment of 64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, with three 4.5-inch guns. The most welcome acquisition was 11 South African Field Company with 10,000 mines which, according to the officer in charge of the collecting post, 'they refuse to give up except to someone who is willing to fight.' Clifton took 5000 of the mines and sent part of the field company and the rest of the mines to **18 Indian Brigade** in **Deir el Shein**. Great as were his own needs, Clifton considered the Indian brigade had more pressing claims on the mines and the assistance of the South African sappers.

Ninth Indian Brigade of 5 Division was put into **Naqb Abu Dweis** but without expectations of having to stay there as they had hardly any artillery and were short of water.

These dispositions were changed considerably by Auchinleck on 29 June. The South Africans were ordered to hold **Alamein** Box 29 June. The South Africans were ordered to hold **Alamein** Box with only one brigade group and a British medium gun regiment under command. This small force could man only twelve of the forward positions and one of the supporting posts covering the western and south-western face of the perimeter. There were no troops for the remaining twenty-four positions.

Consequently, the eastern face of the box was undefended and the principle of all-round defence had to be thrown overboard.

The divisions other two brigades were reduced to battle groups and stationed in the gap between the **Alamein** defences and **Deir el Shein**. All surplus infantry were sent back to the Delta. South African critics of these dispositions consider it was wise to place the battle groups in the gap, but that the surplus infantry should have been placed in the **Alamein Box**.

In **Deir el Shein** 18 Brigade was ordered to restrict itself to building a brigade position, instead of one for a division less a brigade. It was also to reduce itself to a battle group and send the surplus infantry to the rear. Of New Zealand Division, **6 Brigade** was left to hold **Kaponga** and **Divisional Headquarters** and 4 and 5 Brigades were given a mobile role based on **Deir el Munassib**, some nine miles in rear. The Division was again ordered to organise itself into battle groups and again ignored the order.

Summarising his orders and dispositions, Auchinleck says in his despatch: ' On the 30th June I ordered our armoured and motor brigades which were still operating far to the west and well behind the line reached by the enemy's advanced elements, to withdraw into reserve. The 13th Corps took over the southern half of the El **Alamein— Qattara Depression** line with what was left of the New Zealand and 5th Indian Divisions, while the 30th Corps, with the 50th and 1st South African divisions, concentrated on the defence of the northern sector and especially of the **Alamein** fortifications. Not needing a third corps headquarters on the El **Alamein** position, I sent General Holmes with his 10th Corps Staff back to command Delta Force which was forming in **Egypt** to defend **Alexandria** and the western edge of the Delta.' ¹

The summary hardly outlines the picture. At midday on 30 June 1 **Armoured Division**, with 7 Brigade of **7 Armoured Division** under command, was in the midst and on the southern flank of the German and Italian armour south of **Daba**, more than 30 miles west of **Alamein**.

Many local but worthwhile actions were fought as the division, in its rearguard role, gradually worked its way eastward. During the morning 7 Brigade had two engagements with the Italian *XX Corps* which so hampered the corps' movements as to provoke Rommel's ire. The 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades ran into *Littorio Armoured Division*, with such unpleasant results for the Italians that they reported '30 of our tanks hit and damaged. At present division has no tanks and only six guns left.' These blows on the enemy had important results, as during the first days at *Alamein* the Italian armour was ineffective.

Late in the afternoon 4 and 22 Brigades ran into *Afrika Korps* south-west of *Tell el Aqqaqir* when the *Korps* was making ready to move to its assembly area. According to Brigadier Fisher, then commanding 4 Brigade, the enemy was engaged inconclusively for about an hour. *Afrika Korps*, however, had a different tale to tell. It recorded that the *Korps* and its headquarters had come under heavy artillery fire and that the *Korps' Kampfstaffel* had to be sent into action to prevent a breakthrough. A sandstorm was raging at

¹ Despatch, p. 364.

the time, and the *Korps* further noted that contact with the British armour was lost.

This engagement also had important results. First Armoured Division was thrown off its course and, when darkness fell, it was disorganised and unable to take up its appointed position in the vicinity of *Ruweisat Ridge*. The 22nd Brigade neared its allotted area, but 4 Brigade was compelled to go into laager near *Deir el Abyad*, where it stuck in soft sand. Consequently the brigade had to spend most of the night towing vehicles and guns out of the sand so that by first light General Lumsden reported, 'all troops and commands were dead tired.' The brigade's position was perilous as it was in the area designated for *Afrika Korps'* assembly. In the event, the brigade completed the march eastward almost in company with 90 *Light Division* which, in the early hours of 1

July, was trying to encircle the **Alamein** Box. As the brigade came up to 22 Brigade, it again got stuck in the sand.

The net effect of these hazards was that in the morning of 1 July 1 **Armoured Division**, instead of being in Army reserve and immediately available for action, was badly placed tactically and administratively insecure. It was unable to play an effective part in the opening phase of the battle.

On 30 June also, 1 **South African Division** had completed the reorganisation required by Auchinleck, but there was still much work to be done in the defensive positions. In **Deir el Shein** 18 Brigade was in difficulties. The brigade had to rearrange the at they could be manned by one brigade instead of two and the work were far from completed. On top of this the brigade commander, his staff, and unit commanders had to reorganise into a battle group. This reorganisation was in hand and there was a mass of soft transport in the deir waiting to carry out the surplus troops when the enemy struck.

The 50th Division, which the despatch says was 'concentrated on the defence of the northern sector', was in fact 30 miles in rear of **Alamein** reorganising into three eight-gun battle groups. Thus, instead of there being two divisions in this vital part of the front as the despatch implies, there was less than the fighting power of one division.

Why Auchinleck should write 'what was left of the New Zealand ' Division is incomprehensible. On 30 June the Division was fully rested and restored, with 6 Brigade in **Kaponga** and **Divisional Headquarters** with 4 and 5 Brigades in mobile reserve in **Deir el Munassib**. It was true, however, that there was very little **Deir el Munassib**. It was true, however, that there was very little left of 5 **Indian Division**. The relics were in the neighbourhood of **Qaret el Himeimat** trying to form themselves into some sort of battle groups. The division's 9th Brigade was in **Naqb Abu Dweis**, a hostage to fortune in its isolation, its inadequate artillery and lack of water.

Seventh Motor Brigade, with a squadron of 4 South African Armoured Car Regiment under command, reverted to the command of 7 Division late on 30 June and moved to Qaret el Himeimat.

For even such a comparatively short front as the Alamein Line, Eighth Army was woefully thin.

Eighth Army's morale was as disturbing as its apparent thinness on the ground. Concurrently with his reorganisation of the Army and his orders for the approaching battle, Auchinleck provided for the defence of the Delta, lines of retreat from Alamein, and the evacuation of the Middle East base. The Royal Navy, except for a few light units, left Alexandria, which was now within close bombing range. At Middle East Headquarters and among the base units there was what Major-General de Guingand has described as 'a pretty good flap' as the transfer of the various installations, organisations, and documents was arranged and papers now deemed unimportant were burned. Reports of these activities reached Eighth Army in the field and the tales lost nothing in the telling. As the first battles were fought at Alamein, the dangerous 'looking over the shoulder' policy again obtained.

Auchinleck's wisdom in taking additional precautions cannot be questioned. The fault was in making them so obvious. Little harm might have been done had he and his staff kept the plans for further retreat to themselves, or restricted their circulation to the corps commanders under the highest degree of secrecy. As it was, the orders were freely distributed. It was natural that in absorbing details of positions in rear to be held, of routes for withdrawal and administrative instructions, commanders and staffs overlooked the vital paragraphs that the orders were merely precautionary and would become operative only in the most dire circumstances. Subsequent orders emphasizing these points could not overcome the impression that the Alamein Line might be abandoned as readily as the others on the long road from Gazala and Bir Hacheim.

Writing in September 1949 to the Union of South Africa War Histories, General Norrie said:

It is easy to be wise after the event, but at the time I thought it was dangerous to have hinted at the possibility of withdrawing to the Delta (however remote these possibilities might be considered). ... **Alamein was the last ditch, and it was a real case of Do or die' with every chance of stopping the enemy whose armour had been reduced to a shadow of its former self.**

Having been given the task of defending the **Alamein position, my whole time was spent in organising the defences and in going round the troops encouraging them to fight to the last man and round. The orders issued by 30th Corps on 2 July ¹ were done at the direct instructions of Eighth Army, but it was made clear that the intention was 'Definitely to fight and stand on the position.'**

It is also fair comment to say that on some other occasions there had been a tendency to look round over the shoulder, but this was not made any easier by Auchinleck's later policy of 'thinning out' and keeping transport handy for possible withdrawals.

New Zealand Division felt the impact of this indecisive attitude of the Army and theatre commands.

On his arrival on the line, Inglis, temporary major-general since 28 June, was annoyed to find **6 Brigade in **Kaponga** without artillery, anti-tank guns and transport. He considered the move was stupid in that it might well have tied the Division down to the protection of an immobile brigade. He was annoyed both with the Army for giving the orders and with Brigadier Clifton for acting on them. However, he accepted Clifton's explanation that when he got the orders they seemed to be urgent, and that he had not known where the Division was or what had happened to it and therefore had not been able to ask for confirmation.**

Early on 29 June General Inglis, having failed to find General Norrie, went on to Eighth Army's tactical headquarters to see Auchinleck. He protested about the situation in which **6 Brigade had been placed and obtained authority to draw transport and antitank guns for it.**

Auchinleck told him that the Division would be under 13 Corps and that he was to reorganise it into battle groups. When he objected, he was told he was being given an order. To this Inglis replied that he was sorry but it was an order with which he must refuse to comply.

‘The expected explosion did not follow,’ General Inglis said some time later. ² ‘I was merely asked why I objected and what I proposed to do. The reason was that, if I broke up the Division and dispersed it over a wide front, I had about as much chance of stopping Rommel as a piece of tissue paper would have had; and my intention was to keep the Division concentrated in a central position so that it could fight if it were attacked and could have at the enemy if the latter tried to by-pass us. ... The matter ... was dropped there and then so far as we were concerned.’

If Inglis was astonished that Auchinleck still favoured battle groups, he was astounded at the appreciation of the situation and the outline of Army intentions which was given to him on

¹ Precautionary order prescribing lines of retreat

² Letter to War Branch, 14 Oct 1952, amplifying diary entries of this period.

Auchinleck's instructions by the Deputy-Chief of the General Staff, Brigadier Dorman Smith.

‘This Army,’ Dorman Smith said, ‘is the only effective fighting force the C-in-C has and he is determined not to lose it whatever happens. If he cannot stay here, he will withdraw to the Delta and fight there and, if necessary, in Sinai and Palestine. I am now considering whether I should advise him to withdraw on Alexandria or on Cairo or partly on one and partly on the other.’

Inglis could hardly believe his ears. He considered, and said so

Plainly, that all Eighth Army needed to do was to face westwards and fight. Its continued existence was useless if it did not hold **Egypt** and the Canal. The **Alamein** position had to be the limit of withdrawal eastward. These forthright views were not well received. Dorman Smith said they were unwarranted and were disrespectful to the Commander-in-Chief. They did not part harmoniously.

Brigadier Kippenberger had a similar disconcerting experience when, while temporarily commanding the Division, he called on General Gott. Gott handed him a short letter from Auchinleck's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Corbett. The opening sentence said: 'The Chief has decided to save Eighth Army', and the note then went on to say that the South Africans would retire through **Alexandria** and the rest of the Army down the desert road to **Cairo**.

'I asked what was meant by the first sentence,' **Kippenberger** has recorded. ¹ ' "It means what it says—he means to save the Field Army," the General said. He went on to explain: a general retirement and evacuation of **Egypt** was in contemplation and Inglis had gone to **Cairo** to arrange for the evacuation of **2 NZEF** rear installations and hospitals; he supposed we would go back to New Zealand. ² I protested that we were perfectly fit to fight and that it was criminal to give up **Egypt** to 25,000 German troops and a hundred tanks (disregarding the Italians)—the latest Intelligence estimate—and to lose as helpless prisoners perhaps 200,000 Base troops. Strafer replied sadly that N.Z. Division was battle-worthy but very few other people were and he feared the worst.

'I returned to Division and told Gentry of this unpleasant conversation. We said nothing to anyone else and were both sorely perplexed and depressed. In the evening a provisional order for our retirement arrived from **13 Corps**. It certainly envisaged the abandonment of **Egypt**.'

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 139.

² As a fact General Inglis had gone to **Cairo** for precisely the opposite reason of ensuring that the New Zealand base formations were not taking part in the 'flap' and that they were sticking to the job. See pp. 145–6.

At this interview and also later to General Inglis, Gott conveyed the doubts of the higher commands on whether Major-General Pienaar would stay in the **Alamein** Box with his South Africans. After asking **Kippenberger** whether he knew Pienaar, Gott said: 'Well, he says he is not going to fight in the **Alamein** position.' To Inglis he intimated that a great deal depended on whether Pienaar would stay and fight in the box and that Auchinleck and the corps commanders had grave doubts as to whether he would.

This was hardly a correct interpretation of Pienaar's attitude. He was bitter about the reverses suffered by the Army, had no confidence in the command and was pessimistic about the result of the approaching battle, so much so that he was reported to be saying openly that it was wrong to fight at **Alamein** and that the best place was behind the **Suez Canal**. On the other hand Major-General Theron, personal representative of Field Marshal Smuts, found Pienaar indomitable in spirit and determined to fight. ¹

These matters had a decisive influence on Inglis' subsequent actions and, therefore, on what New Zealand Division did. He had no knowledge of the contents of **General Freyberg's** 'charter' and thus none of his powers as **Freyberg's** deputy in dealing with the British commanders. His stand against battle groups and on the necessity to fight at **Alamein** had been inspired by the practical issues in the field. The question of his legal authority to be so forthright had not entered into the matter.

'It was evident that the British thought they had to treat us tactfully,' General Inglis said later, 'for I was sure that no British divisional commander could have jibbed at the battle-group order without being awarded a bowler hat; but it was equally clear that one

would have to give the fullest co-operation unless there were absolutely decisive reasons for withholding it. To act otherwise might result in the Army packing up, and to avoid that irreparable disaster one might have to go a long way.’²

These reflections are of particular moment when considering General Inglis' approach to the battles on **Ruweisat Ridge** a fortnight later.

In the meantime there were some matters of domestic concern demanding attention. Inglis did not know how badly **General Freyberg** had been injured and whether it would be necessary for him to take over NZEF affairs as well as command the Division in the field. Disquieting rumours of the **Cairo** ‘flap’ had also reached him and he wished to make certain that Headquarters

¹ Pienaar's attitude to the high command is dealt with in *Crisis in the Desert* (**Oxford University Press**), the Union of South Africa official history, at pp. 276–8 and elsewhere.

² Letter to War Histories, 14 Oct 1952.

2 NZEF and the New Zealand Base were sticking to their jobs. With Auchinleck's permission he visited **Cairo** on 30 June.¹ Although he did not have time to call at **Helwan**, he learned that **Freyberg** wished to carry on with NZEF matters and that with his staff he was capable of doing so. Affairs at the base were also satisfactory.

The return journey which it was hoped to complete before dark was troublesome and also disconcerting in its implications. General Inglis thus describes it:

We set out at 4 o'clock expecting to reach the Division well before dark. But we found the asphalt road to **Amiriya** now crammed with panicking transport from the battle area—British, South African

and Free French trucks and vehicles of all kinds bustling one another **Cairo**-wards on a two-vehicle front and often locked in traffic jams several miles long. What an opportunity the **Luftwaffe** was missing. Only my car and an occasional **RAF** truck were making against the stream which forced us off the road to run in soft sand that cut our speed down and removed all prospect of reaching the Division before dark. I decided, therefore, to travel by the coast road and then by the **Alamein- Qattara** track instead of risking a cross-desert journey with one car in the dark when a breakdown might have marooned me.

It took us so long to make headway on the **Lake Maryut** causeway that it was already dark when we turned west along the coast road which was crammed with unlighted, eastward-bound traffic, including tank transporters, which once more forced us to travel off the road in the sand until, somewhere between the Burg el Arab turn-off and the beginning of the Hog's Back, the road emptied. There we switched on the lights and put on speed until we got near the Imayid area when we switched them off again. From the time we passed the last of the traffic we saw nobody at all until, several miles south of **Alamein**, we passed some laagered British tanks.

When we reached the area where we had left the Division in the morning there was only empty desert. Deceived several times by what looked like bodies of dispersed transport in the moonlight, we found only clumps of camel heather. As there could be no doubt that the Division had moved while we were away, we camped until daylight and then struck east for a few miles until we encountered one of our Divisional Cavalry patrols who directed us to the Division some miles further still to the east. We had spent the night in No-Man's Land.

The effect on Eighth Army's morale of the successive defeats and the retreat to **Alamein** was surveyed at some length in the Field Censorship summary. ² There were few letters from New Zealand Division for the summary, and by the time the flow of correspondence to the Dominion

¹ The ‘secrecy’ of this visit mentioned in *Infantry Brigadier* (p. 139) was inadvertent. Permission to make the visit was received late the previous night, and as there was no need to wake **Kippenberger** and Gentry, the duty staff officer was told to advise them next morning. Apparently this was not done.

² Field Censorship Weekly Summary No. XXXIV (for period 1–7 Jul 1942, inclusive).

the heartening background of the breakout at **Minqar Qaim** and the stabilisation of the line at **Alamein**.

The correspondence from other divisions, however, led the Chief Field Censor to observe: ‘The Eighth Army is without doubt a very angry army.’ All ranks sought to explain the defeat. The censor noted it as extraordinary that few writers criticised the quality or quantity of British equipment. The reverses were attributed by a number of writers ‘from field rank to trooper to the fact that “Rommel seems to be the better general”’. A field officer is quoted as saying that the Germans would require time to reorganise and ‘by then some better generals and also in some cases, colonels, will be found to replace those who I am afraid have made some ghastly mistakes.’ The same writer is further quoted that ‘there must be something wrong with the training of our staff officers in peacetime because it stands out a mile that our staffs and commanders have not shown up at all well.’

Another officer wrote home that a few American generals might be an improvement—‘they certainly couldn't be worse than our own.’ The summary also said that ‘other ranks pray their people not to blame them for being outnumbered by tanks. ... If anyone is to blame it is the “higher-ups”.’ The distrust of the Army command, however, did not produce a defeatist attitude, for the censor reported that in spite of the ‘expressions of very bitter disappointment from all ranks. ... seldom have

writers not concluded with the assurance that the Axis advance would be halted and the enemy eventually compelled to give ground once again.'

Such was the moral and physical condition of Eighth Army when it turned at bay at **Alamein** on 30 June. Little more than a month earlier it had stood at **Gazala- Bir Hacheim**, rested, refreshed and expecting victory, with four complete infantry divisions and an infantry brigade group. Another division was on its way to the front. There were two armoured divisions, an army tank brigade and two independent motor brigades. Behind the Army were immense stores and well-established lines of communication.

Now there was only one complete infantry division and a reduced division, one brigade group new to the field and another without guns. The remnants of two other divisions could provide only small battle groups. One armoured division, short of tanks, could function as a division, but the other was less than a brigade command and was to disperse its efforts in small columns. Behind the Army, between it and the great **Middle East** base, there was but one complete infantry division, the 9th Australian, and it was still assembling and short of equipment—a thin core in a host of hastily organised base formations striving to build yet further defensive lines. And the roads and tracks, instead of carrying transport to sustain the Army, were congested with fleeing vehicles of all types.

To the relics of Eighth Army General Auchinleck on 30 June sent a message: 'The enemy is stretching to his limit and thinks we are a broken army. His tactics against the New Zealanders were poor in the extreme. He hopes to take **Egypt** by bluff. Show him where he gets off.' Much of the effect of the message was lost because it did not reach all the troops ere the battle opened and they still did not know that Auchinleck had taken personal command of the Army. Only a few realised that **Alamein** was the 'last ditch'. The most widespread knowledge was of more defensive lines being built in rear and the possibility, indeed the probability, of further retreat.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 14 – THE ENEMY PLAN

CHAPTER 14

The Enemy Plan

IN the advance from **Matruh** and in the plan for breaking the **Alamein** Line, Rommel underestimated the effects of his losses in men and equipment, particularly in tanks. He overestimated the endurance of his troops and the ability of his supply services to sustain his forward divisions in fuel and ammunition. He again relied on speed to complete his victory instead of mounting a carefully prepared set-piece battle against the British in their 'last ditch'. He failed to realise the capacity of a British Army to rally and endure when its back is to the wall.

Rommel was with *90 Light Division* on the eastern outskirts of **Matruh** at 1 p.m. on 29 June when the fortress fell. Within the next eighteen hours, some of which must surely have been given to sleep, he made his appreciation of the British dispositions at **Alamein**, conceived his battle plan, and issued to his formations an outline of the plan with detailed instructions concerning their assembly areas and the time by which they were to be occupied.

Panzerarmee's daily appreciation of 29 June shows fore-knowledge of the resistance likely to be encountered at **Alamein**. The appreciation has a triumphant tone concerning the fall of **Matruh** and the continuation of the pursuit, but closes with the guarded note: 'It now remained to deal with the fortifications in the narrows of **Alamein**, the improvement of which had recently been remarkably stepped-up by the British.' Rommel's personal awareness of the importance and strength of the **Alamein** Line is revealed in his report to **Rome** on 30 June: 'The enemy apparently intends to hold the **Alamein** Line, the possession of which is of decisive importance for the defence of the **Nile** delta. ... The enemy has been strengthening the already strong defensive line built a long time ago between the impassable **Qattara Depression** and the coast by constructing a large number of field positions between the main strong points.'

Rommel correctly assumed that the British would fight on a two-corps front and he was not far wrong in defining the boundaries between the corps. He gave the northern sector, however, to 'the newly arrived 10th Corps' instead of to **30 Corps** and he placed 50 Division in the **Alamein Box**. Neither his battle map nor his report had any reference to the presence of the South Africans on the front. He misplaced a brigade of **10 Indian Division** in **Deir el Abyad** instead of **Deir el Shein**, a mistake of the gravest consequences in the subsequent battle. He did not know that 1 and 2 South African Brigades were covering the gap between the **Alamein Box** and **Deir el Shein**. Rommel also placed **7 Armoured Division** in the northern sector.

In the southern sector, which was correctly allotted to **13 Corps**, the battle map had New Zealand Division in the Qaret el Abd or **Kaponga Box**, whereas, as has been stated previously, only **6 Brigade** was there, the remainder of the Division being about the **Deir el Munassib**, nine miles further back. First Armoured Division was shown far to the west of **Kaponga** instead of well to the north and moving east into reserve about **Ruweisat Ridge**. There was no reference to the condition of **5 Indian Division**, which the battle map placed in and about **Naqb Abu Dweis**.

Rommel planned his battle on this faulty appreciation. He ordered **90 Light Division** and **Afrika Korps** to penetrate the gap between the **Alamein Box** and the supposed defences in **Deir el Abyad**. The penetration was to be made under cover of darkness, and **90 Light** was then to turn north to the coast to envelop **Alamein Box** from the east while **Afrika Korps** moved south over **Ruweisat Ridge** to attack **13 Corps** in rear. One division of the Italian **XXI Corps** was ordered to attack **Alamein Box** from the west, astride the coast road and railway. The other was to follow **90 Light Division** to attack the box from the south and keep the gap open. The Italian **XX Armoured Corps** was to move on the same axis as **Afrika Korps** with the specific task of dealing with New Zealand Division, supposedly in **Kaponga Box**. The rear of these two corps was to be covered in the gap by a division from the Italian **X Corps**. The battle map also suggests that this division was to bar the line

of retreat of the British force supposedly in Abyad. *Littorio Armoured Division* was held in army reserve to guard the southern flank and to be ready to exploit the expected breakthrough.

In the light of Eighth Army's known dispositions, Rommel's plan had serious defects. This, however, is not the basis on which the plan should be judged. It has been said: 'It matters little what the situation actually was at any particular point or moment; all that matters is what the commander thought it was.'¹ Although there are cautious notes in the enemy's appreciations of the natural and improved strength of the **Alamein** narrows, there is no doubt Rommel believed that Eighth Army would again yield to swiftly applied pressure in spite of its command's intention to hold the line. Delays imposed on the advance from **Matruh** of his armour,

¹ *Thoughts on War*, Liddell Hart (**Faber and Faber**), p. 218.

particularly the Italian armour, irked Rommel but only because he considered his tank divisions were tardy and hesitant in dealing 'with so insignificant an enemy force.' Rommel's personal belief that the British were still of little account reflected the opinion expressed in *Panzerarmee's* report on **Matruh**: 'The British units, already badly mauled, had again suffered heavy losses. Even New Zealand Division, newly moved up from **Syria/ Palestine**, could not stave off a fresh defeat.'

On the premises that Eighth Army was incapable of holding a defensive line, either through lack of resources or lack of will, perhaps both, Rommel had reason to believe that a bold, swift attack would yield another handsome dividend.

Rommel's failure to learn more of the British dispositions was a weakness in his plan. Precise knowledge of his opponent's dispositions was not vital in the eruption from **Agheila** in January, in the fluid fighting following the collapse of the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** line, and in

the battles on the frontier and at **Matruh**. These operations were within Rommel's definition of tactical boldness. Although most, and generally all of his forces were then given specific tasks, they were not so committed that he could not, cope with any unexpected situation.

In the decisive battle at **Alamein**, a reverse or even a delayed victory would offset all his previous successes. But Rommel left himself without any forces in hand to influence the course of the fighting. His best formations— *90 Light Division*, *Afrika Korps*, and the Italian armour— were given tasks from which they could not be taken without prejudice to the battle as a whole. Rommel also accepted the risk of setting these formations on divergent courses. As soon as *90 Light Division* was committed against the eastern face of **Alamein Box** and the German and Italian armour against the rear of **13 Corps**, they were likely to become so tied to their ground that they could not march to the support of each other. The plan demanded concurrent successes in all parts of the field. Failure in one place would be difficult to redeem by success in another.

These ingredients of defeat were present even had Eighth Army been disposed as Rommel thought it to be. If **7 Armoured Division** had been in the north, as Rommel supposed, it could have been directed against the flank of *90 Light Division*. The march required of *Afrika Korps* and **XX Corps** looks attractive on the battle map. The two corps are shown bypassing the Indian brigade supposed to be in **Deir el Abyad** and moving unopposed over **Ruweisat Ridge** to attack **13 Corps** in rear.

The march, however, was to be made in the dark over unknown ground, factors which would deprive it of the speed essential in outflanking operations. Nothing was arranged for pinning the New Zealand Division to **Kaponga Box**, or for depriving **1 Armoured Division** of its power of manoeuvre from its supposed location some eight miles west of **Kaponga** and 18 miles west of *Afrika Korps'* axis of advance. Rommel evidently presumed that **13 Corps** would remain inactive while his forces positioned themselves in its rear. Further, he demanded of *Afrika Korps* at the end of its march the difficult and hazardous operation of forming front to a flank.

Whether Rommel should have risked the delays inherent in mounting a set-piece battle is a question of opinion. It might have been better for him had he delayed another day. Rommel was well aware that the **Alamein** Line was the last one on which Eighth Army could make a decisive stand, and his knowledge of history might well have warned him what the British were likely to do when they came to the last ditch. Whatever else he did, however, it seems unquestionable that he should have taken the time to concentrate his forces instead of allowing them, tired and jaded as he knew they were, to enter the battle in dribs and drabs.

Rommel would have been well advised to have stifled his craze for speed in favour of more time for reconnaissance. He might then have found that instead of the battle-worn 50 Division, the refreshed South Africans were at **Alamein** holding the box and covering the gap. He would have located **18 Indian Brigade** in Deir el Shein and so arranged the march of **Afrika Korps** and **XX Corps** to avoid that deir as he intended to avoid **Deir el Abyad**. Ground or air reconnaissance would have disclosed the bulk of the British armour about **Ruweisat Ridge**, with the result that further thought might have been given to the wisdom of sending **Afrika Korps** on its long march. Rommel might have learned also that there was only a brigade group in **Kaponga** and that the remainder of the New Zealand Division in the **Deir el Munassib** was astride **Afrika Korps'** path at the point where the **Korps** was to form front to the west.

Rommel's written orders of the morning of 30 June were characteristically brief and, by British standards, vague. They stated merely: 'Army is preparing to attack enemy positions on line 720 left 7 – 711 right 14 – 700 right 45.' These map references included the whole of the **Alamein** Line from the coast to the **Qattara Depression**. The orders defined in detail the corps and divisional assembly areas for the attack. Every order included the imperative instruction: 'Preparations must be completed before 1700 hours'. ¹

The assembly areas concentrated *Panzerarmee* against the northern sector of the **Alamein** Line. The Italian **X** and **XXI Corps**

¹ 6 p.m. Eighth Army time.

were brought forward to provide a screen for the massing of the striking force comprising **90 Light Division**, **Afrika Korps**, and **XX Italian Corps**. The **XXI Corps** had two divisions in line from the high ground on the coast east of **Tell el Eisa** station to the **Bir el Makh Khad** area, approximately four miles west of the South African outposts in **Alamein Box**. The corps was shepherded into its positions by **90 Light**, which was earlier on the scene and concentrating between the Rahman track and **Tell el Eisa**. The Italian **X Corps**, also with its two divisions in line, screened the assembly areas of **Afrika Korps** and the depressions west of Alam Burt Sabai el Gharbi and of **XX Corps** in **Sanyet el Murra** behind **Afrika Korps**. **Littorio Armoured Division**, in its role of army reserve and guard of the southern flank, was given an assembly area north of El Quseir well to the rear. The heavy Italian army artillery was placed in the centre of **X Corps** and the heavy German army artillery on the right wing of **XXI Corps**.

Rommel appears to have devoted 30 June to personally briefing his formations on their roles in the attack and to flogging the Italian armour forward. Thus at 10.40 a.m. he signalled **XX Corps**: 'I demand that the corps attack and destroy the enemy and reach its objective. The enemy has orders to withdraw.' Twenty minutes later he signalled: 'I hope the corps has dealt with so insignificant an enemy force.' This 'insignificant force' was **7 Motor Brigade**, which was operating with sufficient vigour to induce the corps' headquarters to report to Rommel: 'Advance cannot be continued. Attack quite hopeless.' As the corps on its own admission had twice as many tanks as **7 Brigade**, Rommel's annoyance can be appreciated.

Nor had Rommel any sympathy for **Littorio**, to whom he signalled a little after midday: 'Enemy withdrawn in front of us. **Afrika Korps**

destroying him. Division must reach assembly area under all circumstances.' The message suggests that Rommel knew the division had been attacked that morning although the division's detailed reports did not reach him until night.

Rommel's confidence in his German divisions was in marked contrast. He had ordered *Afrika Korps* to move south-east during the day to give Eighth Army the impression that the main point of the *Korps*' attack was to be on the southern end of the line, as at *Matruh*. The approach to the *Korps*' assembly area was to be made under cover of darkness. Noting the distance it would be required to travel, the *Korps* recorded in its diary: 'The fuel state of the divisions just allows them to reach the areas ordered.' Bad going and the interference of *1 Armoured Division* delayed the *Korps* considerably. At 2.30 a.m. on 1 July, *Panzerarmee* was advised that the *Korps* could not reach the assembly area in time to commence the attack at the zero hour of 4 a.m. The divisions were still on the move at 5.30 and the *Korps*' headquarters intimated to *Panzerarmee* that the time the attack could be mounted was not yet certain. The *Korps*' private view, expressed in its diary, was that the attack might be started by 7 a.m., three hours late.

Rommel was not disturbed by these messages. His only response to them was an order that *Afrika Korps* should launch its attack from the move if necessary.

Examination of the diaries, orders, reports and messages indicate clearly that *Panzerarmee* was far from ready for the battle although the fact is not explicitly stated. The faults in Rommel's plans due to his haste have been set out. He has been credited with some virtue in fixing 1 July for the attack, rather than the evening of 30 June as Eighth Army expected. The truth appears to be that he could not reach *Alamein* in time to attack on 30 June.

Only one division, *90 Light*, reached its assembly area with time in hand. But the division was tired and nervous. It had been called back to the road at *Matruh* the previous afternoon when its men craved sleep

and a swim. They had been kept on the move until midnight and had been up again at dawn to resume the advance. On the road, the division was harassed from the air to such an extent that 'the excellent morale of the morning was somewhat sobered.'¹ The sandy terrain made the going difficult and a strong sandstorm, increasing in violence towards noon, added to the discomfort. In its assembly area, reached about 1.30 p.m., the division had to take up outpost positions pending the arrival of the Italians. There was little time for rest and refreshment before the attack.

The battle now about to be joined was the real turning point of the Allied fortunes in the **Middle East**, more so than the **Alamein** of the following October which cleared the way for the victorious advance to **Tunisia**. Two armies, almost equal in strength and in an almost equal state of exhaustion, faced each other. One, having overreached itself in its initial successes, struggled to revive the slackening impetus of its advance; the other, sobered by defeat, was soon to realise that further retreat would mean irretrievable disaster.

Contemporary accounts and records of the period pass quickly over the plans and action of July with such expressions as 'successful stabilisation' and 'recovery of morale.' This was in fact a month of almost continuous and often heavy fighting in which Eighth Army lost some 750 officers and 12,500 men, took some 7000 prisoners, and stopped the enemy advance. It was a period of partial success and partial failure from which perhaps more lessons may be learned than from total victory or total defeat.

¹ *90 Light Division diary.*

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 15 – EIGHTH ARMY HOLDS THE LINE

CHAPTER 15

Eighth Army Holds the Line

PANZERARMEE'S attack got under way at 4.20 a.m. on 1 July when **90 Light Division**, mounted and in desert formation, rolled forward in the dark and in a sandstorm for the gap between the **Alamein Box** and **Deir el Shein**. The division had a fighting strength of no more and probably fewer than 76 officers and 1603 other ranks. Its artillery was down to 19 field guns, including 4 British 25-pounders and 7 Russian 76.2 millimetre guns, and 32 anti-tank guns of which 2 were British six-pounders and 12 were Russian. This small force was expected to traverse the gap and place itself astride the coast road and railway and opposite the whole of the eastern face of the box.

Not surprisingly in a turning movement in the dark and in a sandstorm, the division got a little off course. At dawn, 6.10 a.m., two of the battle groups, Briebl and Marcks, became involved in a fire fight with the South Africans in the southern segment of the box. The division's diary leaves the impression that a continuation of the advance with the remaining units was contemplated but that it was decided the force would then be too small. Accordingly, Briebl and Marcks were disengaged about midday under cover of another sandstorm and were transferred to the right wing. The regrouping was completed about two o'clock. Half an hour later the division, again mounted and in desert formation, resumed the advance.

Four miles further on, **90 Light** ran into the South African battle groups covering the gap. Failure to sight the groups in time to avoid or deploy against them is attributed in the division's records to the poor visibility due to the sandstorm. Be this as it may, the division found itself under fire from field and anti-tank guns, mortars and machine guns. Its nerve gave way. The diary says a panic broke out and that even parts of the fighting units rushed back. Disaster was averted only by the prompt action of the division's commander and the senior officer of the supply columns, who rallied the fleeing troops and restored them, with

few exceptions, to their units, which proceeded to dig in. The diary adds: 'The situation has been clarified, a rout prevented but the attack has broken down under the concentrated enemy fire.'

The division had another unnerving experience late in the afternoon when it judged itself, wrongly, to be the victim of a British tank attack which it claimed, again wrongly, was smashed before it was fully developed. An account of the day's proceedings closes with the comments: 'As a consequence of the violent sandstorm, the division had gone off the axis of attack too far to the north-east, thus approaching the enemy strongpoint positions too closely. Apart from that, the division was short of heavy artillery. The divisional artillery detachment, with the 7.62 (Russian) and 8.62 (British) guns still in action, had not been able to pin down the enemy artillery.'

While this important phase of Rommel's plan was being nullified, *Panzerarmee* was suffering a more vital upset at **Deir el Shein**.

Rommel intended *Afrika Korps*, followed by the Italian *XX Armoured Corps* and later by an infantry division from *X Corps*, to bypass the British position he believed to be in **Deir el Abyad**. The course plotted for the armoured forces brought them within artillery range of Abyad but this potentially dangerous area was to be traversed in the dark. Rommel expected that by dawn his armour would be over **Ruweisat Ridge** and well clear of interference by British troops in the northern sector. He did not alter his plans when *Afrika Korps* intimated that it could not cross the start line until 7 a.m., an hour after dawn. Nor, apparently, was he concerned by the fact that *XX Corps* was not on hand to follow *Afrika Korps*.

Neither of the panzer divisions, 15 and 21, appears to have attached any significance to the discovery that **Deir el Abyad** was empty. Certainly they had a great deal else to occupy them. They had tangled with each other in the approach to the assembly positions. They were late in arriving there. They had to refuel. They were being urged on by *Afrika Korps*. And just as they were starting their advance they were

subjected to what *21 Division* described as 'a colossal bombing attack.'

Afrika Korps had 55 tanks for the attack. Its artillery, divided between two regiments, was a mixture of 54 German, British and Russian field guns and howitzers. There were only 21 guns of various sorts for the two anti-tank detachments. *Rifle Regiment 104*, with *21 Division*, had about 300 riflemen, a British and a Russian field gun, and 23 anti-tank guns, including four British. *Rifle Regiment 115*, with *15 Division*, had about 200 riflemen, eight anti-tank guns, and two 25-pounders.

The *Korps* advanced in parallel columns, with *15 Division* on the right. At a quarter to eight *15 Division* sighted the **Deir el Shein** strongpoint and intimated its intention to attack. Before developing the assault, however, two captured officers of *50 Division* were sent forward with a demand for the surrender of the strongpoint. They gave an impressive report of the strength and resources of *Afrika Korps* but were told the 'brigade will fight it out.' The attack was then mounted under the direction of *Afrika Korps'* headquarters.

The 18th Indian Brigade was in no condition to withstand the full weight of *Afrika Korps*. It had a temporary commander and its brigade major was newly joined after a year in the adjutant-general's branch at base. Two of the three battalions, 2/5 Essex and the 2/3 Gurkhas, had never been in action. During the previous three days, the men had averaged eighteen to twenty hours a day digging and mining on a scanty water ration. The commanders and staff had been up the whole night 30 June–1 July working out the new battle-group organisation and the position was cluttered with transport waiting to take the surplus infantry to the rear.

Mines had been put down around the perimeter of the deir, but the only completed minefield was on the north-west sector manned by the 4/11 Sikhs. The artillery was short of wireless equipment and cable, ammunition was short for both guns and small arms, and there had been little opportunity to train the infantry battalions in handling the two-

pounder anti-tank guns.

The fight for **Deir el Shein** lasted from 11.30 in the morning until 7.40 in the evening, when *21 Division* signalled *Afrika Korps* that the strongpoint had been taken. Unfortunately no one in Eighth Army outside 18 Brigade knew until early afternoon that the deir was being attacked. At 11 a.m. the brigade sent an 'S.O.S.' message to **30 Corps**, but the call was not given any priority and was sent in cipher. It was not decoded at Corps Headquarters until five o'clock that night. At 1.30 p.m., however, the South Africans received a call for help which was sent immediately to **30 Corps**.

On this, **30 Corps** ordered 1 Armoured and New Zealand Divisions to intervene. Neither did so effectively. The British **4 Armoured Brigade**, with the greater number of its division's tanks, was still stuck in soft sand north-east of **2 South African Brigade**. It did not free itself until after ten o'clock that night. The 22nd Brigade, with only eighteen serviceable tanks, was on **Ruweisat Ridge**. This brigade made ready to move, but at 2.30 p.m. the counter-attack was called off as the division's armoured car regiment, the Royals, reported that all was quiet in **Deir el Shein**. At 4.30 p.m. General Lumsden ordered the brigade to move at once to the help of 18 Brigade. This appears to be the tank movement which caused some consternation in *90 Light Division*. The brigade engaged the enemy near **Deir el Shein** from about five o'clock until darkness fell about eight o'clock, when it withdrew to laager on **Ruweisat Ridge**. It claimed eight enemy tanks for the loss of four of its own.

New Zealand Division played only a minor role in this opening phase of the battle. In the afternoon of 29 June while General Inglis was at Army Headquarters, General Norrie called on the Division and explained the plan for the defence of the southern sector. He required the Division to put out a mobile outpost line up to 12 miles west of **Kaponga** to cover itself and **5 Indian Division**. **Kaponga** was to be held by a brigade group and the rest of the Division was to occupy **Deir el Munassib** as a base for mobile operations. In the course of taking up these new dispositions

next morning the Division had some brief contacts with the assembling enemy.

Later it was arranged that if, as Auchinleck expected, the enemy attacked in the north, the Division should co-operate in the defence by sending mobile artillery columns to act against his flank. To this end a column of two batteries from **5 Field Regiment**, two troops from **32 Anti-Tank Battery**, a machine-gun platoon and a platoon of carriers, all under Lieutenant-Colonel Glasgow, was organised. It is not clear from the records of **13 Corps** and the Division when these arrangements were made, when the column was organised, and whether the role was more precisely defined. The facts, however, are that when HINDU, the code-word for action, was received by the Division shortly after two o'clock on 1 July, the column promptly moved out. But it moved only some two miles north over **Alam Nayil**, where it was still seven miles from **Deir el Shein**, did not fire a shot, and returned to its brigade area at dusk.

There was a little more action on **6 Brigade's** front. Late in the afternoon the brigade saw through a sandstorm carriers and portées moving south-west and firing back into the haze. As visibility improved, eighteen to twenty tanks and a large number of trucks were seen at extreme field-gun range. The target was engaged by **6 Field Regiment** until dusk. Although not identified at the time, the target was probably **15 Panzer Division** moving across the southern face of **Deir el Shein** to meet the counter-attack by **22 Armoured Brigade**. There is no truth in a number of reports that the Division was attacked and that the assailants were driven off by this artillery fire.

The situation at nightfall may be briefly stated. *Trento Division* and *7 Bersaglieri* of the Italian **XXI Corps** were outside the western and south-western sectors of the **Alamein Box**, their attack at dawn having been easily repulsed by machine guns. Since then they had been largely immobilised. The *90th Light Division*, which according to Rommel's plan should have reached the coast and enclosed the box from the east, had dug itself in in the gap between the box and **Deir el Shein**. *Afrika*

Korps, instead of being behind the British **13 Corps** from Munassib to **Qaret el Himeimat**, had gone into laager in its battle positions in **Deir el Shein**. The Italian **XX Armoured Corps** (**Ariete** and **Trieste**) was in rear of **Afrika Korps** near EI Mreir. As planned, it should have been enclosing the New Zealanders at **Kaponga** from the north-east. The Italian **X Infantry Corps** was at **Abyad** instead of astride **Ruweisat Ridge**. **Littorio Armoured Division** was in the neighbourhood of **Tell el Aqqaqir**.

On the British side all positions were intact except that of **18 Indian Brigade** at **Deir el Shein**. The South Africans, however, were worried about the position of their 1 Brigade which was under fire from **Ruweisat**. They thought there was a danger of their flank being turned.

Impressions left on the rival commanders by the day's fighting are as important as the actual situation. In this respect, Auchinleck was much closer to realities than Rommel. His communique reported the repulse of enemy tanks and lorried infantry in all-day fighting with results 'not unfavourable to us.' A 'temporary breakthrough in a defended locality' was admitted, but the report claimed that 'later the enemy tanks were driven off and engaged by our columns.' According to General Norrie, Auchinleck took the loss of 18 Brigade and **Deir el Shein** 'calmly and philosophically.'

The South Africans had no idea they had played a decisive part in thwarting Rommel. Their reports of the day speak only of engaging targets as they presented themselves or of firing on enemy transport. They had not the slightest suspicion that they had dealt **90 Light Division** a severe blow, still less that the division had been thrown into a state of panic. This is understandable when it is recalled that a khamsin with its enervating heat and thick clouds of sand and dust was blowing throughout much of the day. Even during breaks in the storm, vision was restricted to the immediate front.

Contemporary records do not do justice to 18 Brigade. Auchinleck mentions its 'stalwart resistance' and that 'the stand made by the brigade certainly gained valuable time for the organisation of the

Alamein Line generally.’¹ Post-war revelations of all the facts show that the brigade did much more than this. Tactically and administratively insecure though it was, the brigade fought with a vigour that upset Rommel's battle plan. Just as the fighting in July marked the turn of Allied fortunes in the **Middle East**, so the action of 18 Brigade on 1 July may be said to have marked the turn of the battle on the **Alamein** Line. Had Eighth Army been able to avail itself of the opportunity created by the brigade, a crushing defeat might have been imposed on Rommel.

¹ Despatch, p.364

At 11.40 that night Auchinleck issued the following orders to 13 and **30 Corps**:

General conduct of action on 2 July. Thought likely that the enemy will renew attacks on 30 Corps with view to taking high ground south of **IMAYID** station, the **Gebel BEIN GABIR**. **30 Corps** will prevent this with all available means.

Meanwhile 13 Corps will be prepared to attack **NORTH** in general direction of coast road supported by all available arty of both corps and by such armoured tps as can be made available with a view to disrupting his attack and destroying his rearward tps, particularly arty.

This attack by 13 Corps will be ordered by C-in-C on codeword **LATTON**. The attack will begin two hours after codeword is **ACKD**. For this attack 1 Armd Div will move to any jumping off place ordered by Comd **13 Corps**.

Rommel, in contrast to his usual ability in sizing up a battlefield, drew a false picture on which he made plans his forces could not carry out.

Afrika Korps was primarily responsible for Rommel's first error on 1 July. General Nehring did not tell him the *Korps* had encountered a

British strongpoint in **Deir el Shein** and that his two divisions were deploying for the attack. The first news Rommel received from the *Korps* after it had crossed the start line was a message at 12.55: 'Advance of 21 Panzer is proceeding well.' Doubtless Nehring meant no more than that *21 Panzer* was bombarding **Deir el Shein** and that its infantry had reached the wire defences, which it was trying to breach with Bangalore torpedoes.

The message, however, seems to have given Rommel the impression that the battle was virtually over. He had seen *90 Light Division* enter the **Alamein** gap on its appointed course, and during the morning he had ordered *Littorio* to come well forward and to be under his command. At one o'clock, after receiving *Afrika Korps*' message, he signalled *Littorio*: 'Advance goes well. 20 Corps and Littorio may expect to start pursuit towards 1400 hours. Direction of pursuit 290 left 5 [EI Hammam] 300 left 47 as far as road crossing 20 km south-west of **Alexandria**.'

So far from *Panzerarmee* being ready for further pursuit, *90 Light Division* was still regrouping in the gap, *Afrika Korps* was fully engaged at **Deir el Shein**, *XX Corps* was about 12 miles behind *Afrika Korps*, and *Littorio* was so badly supplied that a staff officer made a laconic note on Rommel's signal: 'Littorio has fuel for only 20 km, to **Alexandria** 150 km!'

Even by nightfall Rommel was unaware that his army had suffered a severe reverse. According to his daily report, he believed *Panzerarmee* had broken into the British front and had 'enlarged the breach in a north-easterly and south-easterly direction with the aim of rolling up the enemy positions to the north and south.' He expected that next day he would complete his plan of thrusting deep into **13 Corps**' rear and of sending *90 Light Division* round the **Alamein** Box to the coast. He ordered *90 Light* to continue its attack by moonlight as far as the coast road, with the support of *3 Recce Detachment*, his own *Kampstaffel* and *XX Corps*, which were to attack about 5.30 a.m. on 2 July. *Afrika Korps* was ordered to continue the attack to the south and south-east. *Littorio*

was told to join **XX Corps** in Sanyet el Miteiriya and to be ready to move at 5.30 a.m. The **XXI Corps**, facing the **Alamein Box**, was ordered to attack at 5.30, and **X Corps** was told to take over the front held by **Afrika Korps**.

Thus the day ended with Rommel optimistic but blind to the realities of the situation. His spearhead, **90 Light Division**, had been blunted and was likely to break against firm opposition. **Afrika Korps**, which had started the day with 55 tanks, now had only 37. The Italians were slow in moving and in some cases frankly sceptical of the prospects. Supply shortages so menaced **Panzerarmee** that **Afrika Korps** noted in its diary: 'The supply position regarding fuel and ammunition is precarious. Replenishment is urgently needed'. But replenishment was not made. During the night British bombing attacks scattered the German supply columns.

Rommel's German forces suffered heavy material losses on 1 July and, in the case of **90 Light Division**, their morale was affected. But the loss of time was more important. On 1 July **1 Armoured Division** and **7 Motor Brigade** were largely out of action. Next day both of these formations were ready for battle.

The 2nd July, and the second day of the battle, was even more fateful for Rommel and his **Panzerarmee**. It brought admissions and complaints from his German troops of fatigue, distress, depression, and distrust of the Italians, and compelled Rommel to doubt his ability to break through the line without resting and refreshing his army.

At five o'clock in the morning **90 Light Division** got under way to enclose the **Alamein Box** and cut the coast road. According to the division's diary, the attack, which was launched against the South African battle groups without artillery preparation, was broken up 'by the concentrated fire of all enemy weapons' after an advance of a mile and a quarter. At 7.30 the division reported to **Panzerarmee** that it was not advancing as it was faced with 'strong artillery and machine-gun fire.' At eleven o'clock it said it was pinned down but would resume the

attack, with the main effort on the right flank, 'after softening up by the army artillery.' At 1.30 p.m. *Panzerarmee* was advised that the attack had been called off in consequence of the departure of the army artillery.'

Rommel appears to have accepted these reports at their face value. They suggested a situation in the gap which could be redeemed by deploying additional forces. He cancelled *Afrika Korps'* drive to the rear of **13 Corps** and ordered it to march east and then north to Alam el Dakar, where it was to make contact with *90 Division*, reconnoitre to the east, and attack the **Alamein** Box astride the road and railway and thus open the coast road. *Littorio* was ordered to advance on *Afrika Korps'* left wing. The inside running nearest the box was given to *90 Division* with the army heavy artillery. Zero hour was 4 p.m. The Italian *XX Corps*, earlier marked for the pursuit eastwards, was given the role previously assigned to *Afrika Korps*, and *X Corps*, with *Brescia* and *Pavia Divisions*, was ordered to occupy EI Mreir where, in conjunction with *XX Corps'* operations, it was to secure *Panzerarmee's* southern flank.

During the morning Auchinleck noted the continued concentration of the enemy forces in the northern sector. Although he was not aware of the causes, he correctly deduced that an attack was likely to be made in the afternoon with the object of isolating the **Alamein** Box, and that the time had come to counter-attack. At midday he ordered **30 Corps** to stop any advance eastwards and **13 Corps**, with 1 Armoured and New Zealand Divisions, to attack north through the Qaret el Abd area 'to destroy the enemy wherever he is met and to attack his flank and rear.' This was the executive order for the LATTON operation envisaged in Auchinleck's overnight instructions.

The New Zealand Division was ready for whatever the day might bring. At 7 a.m. a column comprising **4 Field Regiment**, four troops of anti-tank guns from 31 and 33 Batteries, a platoon from **2 Machine Gun Company** and the three rifle companies of **20 Battalion**, all under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows, was moving north. It was

followed by a column from **5 Brigade** comprising B Company and the carriers of **23 Battalion**, **28 Field Battery** and a troop from **32 Anti-Tank Battery**, with Major Snadden ¹ in command. Carriers from 21 and 22 Battalions covered the movements of both columns.

At 10.45 the columns, then in the vicinity of **Alam Nayil**, were amalgamated under the command of the CRA, Brigadier Weir, with orders to relieve a detachment of **1 Armoured Division** on the eastern end of **Ruweisat Ridge**. As this movement would have taken the artillery too far away from the remainder of the Division in

¹ Maj J.P.Snadden, MC; **Wellington**; born **Te Kuiti**, 24 May 1913; salesman; 2 i/c 5 Fd Regt Mar–Oct 1944; twice wounded.

Munassib, Weir was ordered to take up a position from which he could cover both the Division and the eastern end of Ruweisat by fire. Shortly after midday Weir found his way to the north blocked by the enemy and, coming under fire, turned east towards a better tactical position from which to engage. At 1.30 he was ordered by Division to engage enemy tanks approaching from the north. He led the column in a circuit to the south and west to get within range, but the tanks withdrew before fire could be brought to bear on them. They were probably from **15 Panzer Division**, which was reconnoitring or deploying after the refuelling which had been interrupted during the night by the British bombers.

Rommel's concentrated effort to break the line and enclose **Alamein Box** started on time. This was its sole achievement. The **90th Division** treated itself to an artillery preparation for half an hour before sending in its infantry. Their further advance was no more than 400 yards before they went to ground and dug themselves in. **Littorio** did not get up. **Trento Division** and the Bersaglieri of **XXI Corps** reported that their attacks on the box had been halted by violent artillery fire.

First Armoured Division was making its way south-west towards

Kaponga to reach Rommel's rear when it sighted *Afrika Korps* moving east on Ruweisat. In compliance with Auchinleck's order to destroy the enemy wherever he might be met, the division, postponed its westward march and attacked, calling on the New Zealand artillery column to assist. Support was also given on the ridge by Robcol, a battle group from the relics of **10 Indian Division**. These formations had no difficulty in halting *Afrika Korps*, whose, division were soon calling for help and explaining to each other and to Nehring why they could not advance. The engagement continued until nightfall when the armoured forces withdrew into laager.

So far from encircling and subduing the **Alamein Box**, *Afrika Korps* had advanced only two to three and a half miles from its start line over undisputed ground. It had lost eleven more of its tanks and there were now only twenty in *21 Division* and six in *15 Division*. Replacements for the latter, however, were expected from the repair shops that night. The *Korps* consoled itself for not having reached its objective with the customary diary note of defeated formations that it had inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. The diary also had these interesting entries: 'It must be remembered that for days past the troops have been in action day and night. Signs of fatigue become evident among leaders and troops alike. ... During the night the English air activity is again very lively. The continued attacks by day and night harass our troops very much; nothing is to be seen of our own fighter protection.'

The *90th Division* was more depressed. Its summary of the day in its war diary says:

There is nothing to indicate that the enemy is considering withdrawal. On the contrary, the impression is created that he intends to halt the assault of the German-Italian Africa Army in front of the Alamein Line with all the forces at his disposal. The German units, badly exhausted through the heavy fighting and the hardships suffered (day and night marches) during the preceding days and weeks, do not seem able to take this last fortress of the English in front of the **Nile Delta** with the available forces.

The enemy throws all the Air Force at his disposal against the attacking Africa Army. Every 20 or 30 minutes 15, 18 or sometimes even 20 bombers, with adequate fighter protection, launch their attacks. Although the visible success of these heavy and continuous bombing and low-flying attacks is negligible owing to the dispersion of the fighting—and supply—units, the moral effect on the troops is so much the more important. Everyone prays for German fighter protection, knowing only too well that the German Africa Force cannot advance so very quickly. Sometimes German fighters appear singly, greeted by the roaring applause of the troops, but naturally they are not in a position to attack such heavy formations.

The last hope that remains is the Italian Divisions (10th and 21st Italian Infantry Corps and the 20th Italian Motorised Corps) which, so far, have seen but little action and are therefore more fit. However, from such comrades there is but little to be hoped. The Italian I.R. 62 of the Division Trento, in position to the left and rear of the 90th Light Infantry Division, had received orders on 2 July to advance a little further inside the frame of the attack of the 90th Light Infantry Division, in other words, to attack on the left wing of the division. As it was learnt later on, eight 10-centimeter batteries had taken up positions and two infantry battalions had gone into the line but they neither fired a shot nor had they attacked, excusing this inaction with the words that they did not want to bring the enemy fire down on themselves.

Rommel and his *Panzerarmee* were spared the humiliation of knowing that their efforts were so ineffective that Eighth Army did not know it was being seriously attacked, let alone that a concentrated endeavour was being made to crash the gate to **Cairo. British front-line reports of the day tell only of light shelling which developed into 'fairly heavy' shelling in the afternoon. The South Africans barely mention the Italian attacks supposed to have been halted by 'violent artillery fire.'**

The 'concentrated fire of all enemy weapons' and the strong artillery and machine-gun fire' reported by *90 Light Division* is dismissed in the South African divisional report of the day as 'light shelling by both sides.' To this may be added the fact that *90 Division's* casualties for the day were only 10 killed and 12 wounded. The 'concentrated fire of the enemy' which halted the division 'after several hours of embittered fighting' appears to have existed only in the imagination of the weary and dispirited Germans. First Armoured Division considered that *Afrika Korps* did not show its usual initiative.

In his report to *London* that night, Auchinleck briefly surveyed the day and added, 'but the expected attack had not developed by last light though some enemy tanks were seen.'

Rommel admitted later that he had made 'extraordinary demands' on his forces, that he had 'spared neither the rank and file nor their leaders,' and that in the advance into *Egypt* 'the deeds performed by officers and men reached the limits of human efficiency.' But until the evening of 2 July he ignored the exhaustion of his troops. His decisions at this period show signs of personal strain. He appears to have fortified himself with the doctrine that success attends the commander who imposes his will on the enemy, and he expected his own strong willpower to manifest itself in his German troops.

That night Rommel still thought the victory might be won. He ordered the attacks to be resumed on 3 July. But all his orders to the striking formations had a significant addition: 'from daybreak until 0900 hours [10 a.m. British Army time] test out the enemy positions and find out the weak ones.' In effect, the orders admitted that Eighth Army could not be pushed out of the *Alamein* Line but suggested there might be some weak joints from which it might be prised loose.

Eighth Army rested for the night in its battle positions ready for further parry and counter-thrust tactics on the morrow. While so doing some minor reorganisations and regroupings were completed. As *9 Indian Brigade* in its isolation at *Naqb Abu Dweis* was a hostage to

fortune, Auchinleck withdrew it to **Qaret el Himeimat** to organise as a battle group under **5 Indian Division**. He decided also that **Kaponga** fortress had served its purpose and might become a liability. New Zealand Division was ordered to reduce the garrison to a battle group, which was to hold the fortress for another day to cover the evacuation of stores and the demolition of the defences.

A battle group was organised of **6 Field Regiment**, **28 Battalion**, **33 Anti-Tank Battery**, a troop from **43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery**, a platoon from No. **3 Machine Gun Company**, and an ambulance detachment. Lieutenant-Colonel Walter ¹ was given command with orders to ensure the destruction by any means other than fire of all stores, especially petrol, which could not be removed. Under cover of darkness, the rest of the brigade moved in trucks and afoot to **Munassib**.

¹ Lt-Col C L. Walter, DSO, ED; **Hamilton**; born **Christchurch**, 10 Dec 1902; electrical engineer; CO 6 fD Regt Dec 1941–Nov 1943.

This operation set in train further reorganisation within the Division to facilitate command and improve its effectiveness. The CRA's column, which was staying overnight in the battle area about **Alam Nayil**, was not a normal tactical formation in command, composition, or for supply. General Inglis decided to make it a **4 Brigade** entity under Brigadier Gray, newly appointed to the command of the brigade, and to restore the **5 Brigade** units to their own brigade command, which was also to assume responsibility for the battle group in **Kaponga**. Concurrently, the **Divisional Reserve Group** was reconstituted. Sixth Brigade infantry, considered by Auchinleck to be surplus under the battle-group policy, were marked for withdrawal to **Maadi**. Inglis, however, decided to keep them with the Division until the situation became clearer.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 16 – DEFEAT OF ARIETE DIVISION

CHAPTER 16

Defeat of Ariete Division

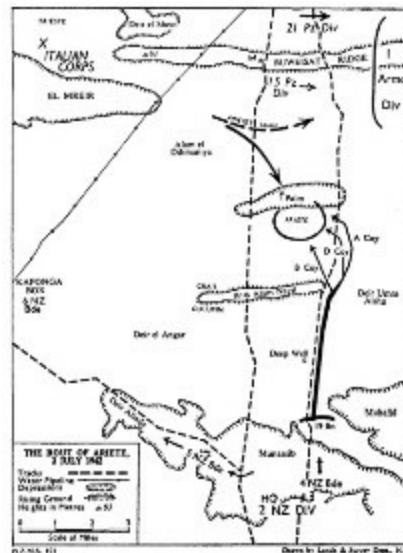
NEW Zealand Division's destruction of the Italian *Ariete Armoured Division* on 3 July is an outstanding episode in the Dominion's military history. The victory had wider repercussions than those felt immediately on the battlefield, where it was wrongly ascribed by the Germans as the principal cause of *Afrika Korps*' further defeat. It seriously disconcerted both Germans and Italians and made the latter more fearful in subsequent conflicts with the New Zealanders. It increased German distrust of the fighting qualities of their allies and Italian cynicism concerning Rommel's leadership. It was also possibly one of the main factors which led Rommel to plan an operation with the sole purpose of eliminating the New Zealand Division. The story of the occasion is best told in the perspective of the battle as a whole.

Overnight, the mobile forces of both armies lay close to their last battle positions of the previous day. First Armoured Division was about a mile and a half west of *Alam Baoshaza*, with 22 Brigade on the eastern end of *Ruweisat Ridge* and 4 Brigade in the lower ground to the south. Seventh Motor Brigade was a little farther to the south and roughly in line with the armoured brigades. The New Zealand column was on *Alam Nayil*, with its batteries deployed on the reverse slope and observation posts on the crest of the ridge.

First Armoured Division had a total of 120 tanks, 63 being in 4 Brigade and 57 in 22 Brigade. The tanks, however, were not in the well-organised units of 27 May. Rather, the British official narrative notes, they were a collection of fragments of units. All had administrative difficulties. For example, at two o'clock in the morning of 3 July when 22 Brigade received its detailed orders for the day, it reported that it had only just reached laager and that some of its tanks had strayed in the dark. Fourth Brigade also reported that it was still on the move and that so far it had not refuelled. Nevertheless, both brigades were ready at dawn to start again on the encircling march to the west and north in

the **13 Corps**' counter-attack ordered by Auchinleck the previous day.

On the enemy side, **21 Panzer Division** was on the northern slopes of Ruweisat and **15 Panzer** in the valley to the south, **Afrika Korps** as a whole being between **Deir el Shein** and the western track from **Alamein** to **Qaret el Himeimat**. The Italian **XX Armoured Corps**, with **Ariete** and **Trieste Divisions**, had moved forward. At dawn **Ariete** was deployed south of **15 Panzer**, with **Trieste** to the left rear behind the Germans. The Germans, as has been previously mentioned, had only 26 tanks. How many tanks the Italians had cannot be stated precisely. According to the Historical Section of the Italian General Staff, **Ariete** had 40 and **Trieste** 30 medium tanks on 30 June, but in the morning of that day **XX Corps** itself reported that it had only 15 'runners'. They had not been in action since then.



The Route of Ariete, 3 July 1942

In numbers, therefore, **1 Armoured Division** had a margin of 24 tanks over Rommel's combined armoured forces. Against **Afrika Korps**, its most active opponent, **1 Armoured** had an overwhelming superiority.

The day's fighting began with an almost simultaneous advance at first light by the armour of both sides, **1 Armoured Division** to the counter-attack, **Afrika Korps** probing for weak spots, and **Ariete** on its way to **Alam Nayil**. First Armoured Division saw the enemy moving

forward on the general axis of **Ruweisat Ridge** and placing anti-tank guns in suitable positions. The British tanks thereupon took up hull-down positions, against which a series of attacks was made throughout the day. All were defeated without any severe fighting.

Rommel's orders required **XX Corps** to send *Ariete* and *Trieste* to **Alam Nayil** as a preliminary to cutting off **13 Corps**. He gave the corps the explicit instruction: 'Ensure that the enemy positions are surrounded by making aggressive reconnaissances after daybreak.' If *Ariete* received this instruction it did not obey it. Nor does the division appear to have taken elementary security precautions when on the move to make contact with the enemy. Shortly after starting, the division's tanks became involved with **4 Armoured Brigade**. The artillery of the division, comprising *132 Artillery Regiment* and other troops, with about forty-eight heavy guns became separated from the tanks.

A few minutes after seven o'clock the movement was sighted from **Alam Nayil**, and at 7.15 the four New Zealand batteries opened fire on the main concentration of the enemy, then about four miles to the north-east of **Alam Nayil**. *Ariete*'s guns returned the fire, but it was soon evident that the New Zealand batteries had the upper hand. Thereupon Brigadier Weir called to Division for infantry to attack the concentration at close quarters.

By this time Brigadier Gray was ready with the remainder of **4 Brigade** to move out from Munassib. His departure was hastened by the news from **Alam Nayil**, and at 9.15, with **19 Battalion** in the lead, the brigade defence platoon as a reserve and Brigade Headquarters in the rear, he took the eastern **Himeimat- Alamein** track which passed the **Alam Nayil** feature two and a half miles to the east. Some three miles along the track, reconnaissance disclosed the enemy about another four miles due north. The brigade was halted while **19 Battalion**, still in transport, formed up with A Company in the lead, B Company to right, and D Company to the left rear. Screened by the carriers, the battalion drove at top speed for another three miles to deliver a surprise assault.

First contact was made by the carriers under Captain Stewart, ¹ who drove through a small group of enemy vehicles towards the main concentration. This swift assault so unnerved the Italians that, waving pieces of paper or white cloth, they came forward to meet the New Zealand infantry now advancing on foot with fixed bayonets. After dealing with the prisoners, the foremost infantry were halted near the captured vehicles when the carriers reported that they were pinned down by heavy fire from the main enemy concentration and needed help.

A Company, closely followed by D Company, moved to a low ridge about 900 yards to the east and south-east of the main point of resistance. The enemy had by now opened heavy fire with machine guns and mortars which the platoon of No. 2 Machine Gun Company endeavoured to subdue, one section firing over the heads of the companies moving to the flank and the other giving supporting fire from the south. The battalion's three-inch mortars and four two-pounder guns were also brought forward. These engaged the enemy gun lines and, with the help of the small-arms fire, prevented the Italians from manning their artillery. Three tanks were also engaged by the two-pounders as they withdrew through the gun lines.

As this supporting fire developed, A and D Companies advanced over the ridge and down the slope under a certain amount of enemy fire. On the appearance of B Company from the south resistance collapsed. Part of the enemy escaped, but about 350 prisoners were counted and sent to the rear. Their captors described them as 'a dirty, greasy unkempt mob, without fighting spirit.'

Captured equipment included twelve 105-millimetre guns, eleven 88-millimetre and Russian 76·2-millimetre, sixteen 75-millimetre and five 25-pounders, a total of forty-four heavy artillery pieces, as well as some 20-millimetre dual purpose (anti-aircraft and anti-tank) guns, mortars, and other small arms. One M13 Italian tank and another which could not be identified were found damaged and

¹ Capt F. M. Stewart, MC, m.i.d.; **Lower Hutt**; born NZ 24 Jul 1916; printer; wounded May 1941.

abandoned. A mass of transport, of which no tally was taken, was also captured and absorbed by the Division to relieve its transport problem, but in contravention of Army orders which required all booty to be sent to the rear for redistribution on an army basis. Among the loads taken was a quantity of valuable medical stores and also goods the Italians had picked up from **Naafi** and **YMCA** canteens abandoned in the retreat. New Zealand gunners put into commission a number of the enemy guns and four of the 25-pounders which were still serviceable. All badly damaged equipment, and that which was of no use at the time, was destroyed later in the day by 5 Field Park engineers under escort of a platoon from **19 Battalion**.

The New Zealanders' losses in the action were very light, only two men of **19 Battalion** being killed and twenty wounded.

The Italian General Staff's Historical Section takes up the story from the enemy's point of view. It says:

The Division Ariete, having just arrived in the positions assigned to it at dawn on the 3rd July and without any support from the Division Trieste, which had been unable to occupy its respective positions owing to delays caused by aerial bombardments, had been compelled to face a concentric attack from the east, the south and from the west, launched by the 2nd New Zealand Division and supported by the 4th Armoured Brigade (1st Armoured English Division).

After strenuous resistance, with ammunition exhausted and practically all the guns lost and the left wing completely open, the remnants of Ariete withdrew to the assembly area of the Division Pavia.

The Division Trieste, on account of the delay, was unable to mount a counter-attack and received orders to assemble to the east of Alam Dihnamiya [Alam el Dihmaniya] in the rear of the German Panzer Divisions.

Another version of the affair is given in the Italian Army report of 5 July. This says:

The Division Ariete, which had been surprised on 3 July in its positions at Deep Well [[Alam Nayil](#)] owing to a mistaken communication from the [German High Command](#), which allowed the Division to assume that it was covered from the south and east by the German Recce Detachments 3 and 33 respectively, was withdrawn into the area of Deir el Dhib for reorganisation. Division Trieste was placed instead in the area of Deir el Shein to form Army Reserve.

The Germans, however, were under no more illusions than the New Zealanders concerning the vigour of *Ariete's* resistance. In a confidential signal to Field Marshal Kesselring in [Rome](#) the following morning, Rommel said: 'The fighting value of the Italian troops is so low that on 3.7, during an attack by inconsiderable enemy armoured forces, 360 men of Div. Ariete were captured without having offered resistance worthy of the name. In addition the division lost 28 guns and 100 M.T.'

***Panzerarmee* in its battle report for 3 July made *Ariete* the scapegoat for the failure to break through the [Alamein](#) Line. The report says:**

Although the attack of the German Divisions had gained some ground, even on this day no decisive breakthrough had been achieved. The reason lay in the complete failure of Panzer Div. Ariete which had offered no serious resistance to the enemy attack, but had withdrawn immediately. The forces which had to take over the protection of the flank in Ariete's stead were therefore not available for the assault which was to secure a

breakthrough to the north-east.

***Ariete's* destruction, however, was not such a decisive factor in the battle. Certainly, *15 Panzer Division* did not throw its full weight into the morning attack because of the absence of flank protection, but in the afternoon attack the flank was adequately covered by *3 Recce Detachment*. In Rommel's plan for the day, this detachment was to follow *Afrika Korps'* left flank and hold itself ready to pursue and overtake the British to the north-east. *Panzerarmee*, therefore, was wrong in asserting that *3 Recce Detachment's* revised role reduced the forces available for the assault which was to break through Eighth Army. The facts are that *Afrika Korps* was so worn out that a decisive success was beyond its grasp.**

The Historical Section of the Italian General Staff ascribes *Panzerarmee's* defeat on 3 July to 'an erroneous calculation on the part of Rommel.' The criticism is just of the day and of Rommel's conduct of affairs from the time of his arrival at *Alamein*. In the light of events, Rommel might have done well on 3 July had he used *Ariete's* substantial artillery to support the advance along *Ruweisat Ridge* instead of committing *XX Corps* to the drive south-eastwards to encircle *13 Corps*.

Primary responsibility for the loss of *Ariete* rests with the corps and divisional commands. The two divisions, *Ariete* and *Trieste*, were supposed to move together. Only *Ariete* advanced. Adequate reconnaissance was not made. The division was permitted to become divided, thus inviting destruction if not making it inevitable. *Ariete* bared its neck. An axe fell with decisive speed.

When Major-General Inglis received news of the successful action against *Ariete*, he ordered *5 Brigade* to intercept the fleeing remnants at *El Mreir*, then thought to be unoccupied. Previous orders to the brigade to take over *Kaponga* were cancelled and a column from *21 Battalion* with a battery from *5 Field Regiment*, made ready to help at *Alam Nayil*, was broken up.

The brigade left Munassib at 11.30 and at **Kaponga** was joined by **6 Field Regiment**, **33 Anti-Tank Battery**, and **43 Light Anti- Aircraft Battery**. It now had under command its own **21, 22 and 23 Battalions**, the artillery enumerated, **4 Machine Gun Company**, a company from **5 Field Ambulance**, a section of the **Divisional Provost Company**, and **K Section** of the **Divisional Signals**. **Seventh Field Company**, which had accompanied the brigade from Munassib, was left at **Kaponga** to help the **Maoris** and **8 Field Company** complete the demolitions. Cover for the movement of the column around the southern and western faces of the box was provided by **24 and 25 Battalions**, whose evacuation of the box was suspended until late in the afternoon. Additional protection was supplied by the **Maoris**, whose patrols operated to the north towards **Mreir**.

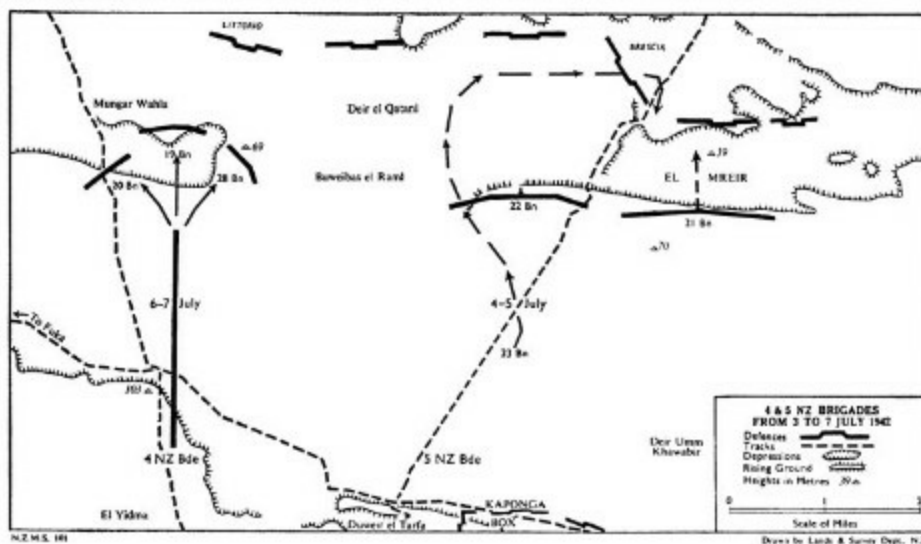
Patches of soft sand on a single track hampered progress from the rendezvous at **Kaponga**. When the head of the column reached the junction of the **Alamein** and **Barrel** tracks at **Duweir el Tarfa**, the rear had hardly started moving. From the track junction, the ground fell away in open desert with good going to **Mreir**, plainly visible three and a half miles to the north. **Brigadier Kippenberger** was disturbed that the guns were miles away and, because of the bad going on the track, perhaps hours behind. The carrier screen, however, was two miles ahead and moving steadily over the clear country towards **Mreir** without signs of opposition. It was now near four o'clock and speed was essential if the enemy were to be intercepted. He decided, therefore, to accept the risk of continuing the advance without immediate artillery cover.

As soon as **21 and 22 Battalions** cleared the ridge and were in open ground, they deployed abreast in desert formation on a mile front with the track as the axis of advance. An alert enemy in **Mreir** could not have failed to see the snake-like column moving over the ridge and the deployment, but there was at first no interference. The battalions were ordered to cross **Mreir** on either side of the track and take up corresponding positions on the far side of the northern lip of the depression.

Still in their trucks, the battalions were about half-way to the depression when four shellbursts in the midst of **22 Battalion** proclaimed that the objective was occupied. The shelling quickly increased but failed to stop the advance. Short of the southern lip of the depression, the infantry debussed and continued on foot.

By this time **6 Field Regiment** was coming over the ridge, and Lieutenant-Colonel Walter brought the guns into action, battery by battery, well forward and gave supporting fire. The regiment was covered by **23 Battalion**, now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel **Watson**,¹ who had special orders to watch the brigade's open left flank.

¹ **Lt-Col C. N. Watson**, MC, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Tinwald, 8 Jan 1911; school teacher; CO 26 Bn 20–29 Jun 1942; 23 Bn 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.



4 & 5 NZ Brigades from 3 to 7 July 1942

The 22nd Battalion reached the southern side of the depression with little loss but found that the northern lip was strongly held. The artillery and mortar fire was so heavy that Lieutenant-Colonel Russell judged it impossible to continue without making a set-piece attack and he ordered the battalion to dig in. When the shelling eased after dark, the position was consolidated. On the right, **21 Battalion** entered the depression and

secured a slight escarpment on the main floor.

After a personal reconnaissance, **Brigadier Kippenberger** decided it would be unwise to make a further night attack in strange ground with so little time for preparation, and that it would be better to maintain pressure with 21 and 22 Battalions and look for a flank with the 23rd the following night. ¹

While **5 Brigade** was engaged in these operations, **Divisional Headquarters**, the Reserve Group, and the Divisional Cavalry moved from Munassib a few miles north-west to **Deir Alinda**. Fourth Brigade, which had completed its regrouping early in the afternoon, also moved west from **Alam Nayil** and laagered shortly before midnight near the eastern side of **Kaponga**. Thus with **5 Brigade** at **Mreir**, the groups at **Kaponga** and close by, and **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group in the **Deir Alinda**, the Division was fairly poised for its part in the Army operations planned for the next day.

Auchinleck was well satisfied with events on 3 July, although the counter-attack by **13 Corps** against *Panzerarmee's* southern flank and rear had not developed as he had hoped. At 6.40 that evening he signalled in clear: 'From C-in-C to all ranks 8 Army. Well done everybody. A very good day. Stick to it.' The New Zealanders, knowing only what had happened on their own front, thought the message applied solely to their action against *Ariete*. The Division's operations, however, had been more spectacular than arduous, successful though they were. The burden of the day's fighting had fallen on **1 Armoured Division**, two small columns of 50 Division on the northern slopes of Ruweisat and, to a lesser extent, on **2 South Africa Brigade**.

The solid resistance of these formations compelled Rommel to acknowledge that his exhausted army could not break through the **Alamein** Line without rest and refreshment. On 3 July he used the last ounces of their energy. He tried to flog them on with imperative orders but without avail.

The diaries of *Afrika Korps* and *21 Panzer Division* reflect Rommel's intensity of purpose. At 10.20 a.m. he is reported as

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 143.

again ordering '90 Light Division to co-ordinate their attack.' At 12.10 he instructed *15 Panzer Division* to use its rifle units against the British tanks. *Afrika Korps* noted at the same time: 'The Army repeatedly urges that the attack be carried forward.' Within two hours, Rommel signalled *Afrika Korps*: 'I demand energetic action by the whole of D.A.K.' The *21st Division* received this message as, 'The C-in-C orders that the attack must be carried out with utmost energy.' Ten minutes later the division heard *15 Panzer Division* receiving the rough edge of Rommel's tongue: 'C-in-C demands that 15th Panzer Division carry out the attack at all costs and to the very end. Exert yourself to the utmost.'

But the situation in the afternoon was painfully apparent to *21 Division* even if *Afrika Korps*' headquarters and Rommel failed to appreciate it. 'In spite of new instructions and orders, the attack does not gain further ground,' the division's diary says. 'The fighting power of the division is exhausted. The battalions of Rifle Regiment 104 have suffered many casualties. Numerically the enemy tank force is superior to ours. The enemy throws in everything he had to stop our attack. For 1600 hours a new attack is ordered. ... The following order is issued to all units: "Attack will commence at 1600 hours. You will advance non-stop until the target is reached".'

This attack, and yet another that followed in the evening, failed as had those earlier in the day. The great offensive started on 27 May, thirty-seven days before, had ended. Even Rommel was incapable of squeezing another effort out of his exhausted troops. A few minutes before midnight he sent the following order to all his formations:

Enemy counter-attack must be expected tomorrow, mainly from

east and south-east, but also from south-west. Corps and divisions will organise themselves for defensive action and will hold their positions. D.A.K. is responsible for the defence of today's line of attack. Regrouping during 4.7 can be anticipated.

In his report to the **German High Command**, Rommel said:

The strength of the enemy, our own decreasing fighting strength, and the most precarious supply situation, compelled us to discontinue for the time being attacking on a larger scale. A rapid moving up of personnel and equipment is most urgently needed. The fighting strength of the divisions at present amounts to no more than 12-1300 men. The Italian units are also very low regarding fighting strength. The bulk of the infantry are still in the rear army area and unmotorised.

Rommel disclosed his immediate intentions in the confidential message he sent to Kesselring:

The intention is first of all to hold the front and regroup in such a manner that **2 New Zealand Division** can be encircled and destroyed, then to occupy the oasis of **Siwa** with a highly mobile group. The Italian High Command has been asked to bring all available forces to the front in the shortest possible time so that the very thinly-occupied line can be strengthened. In order to ward off the enemy attacks which are already beginning it is urgently requested that 8.8 A/A batteries be sent.

General Auchinleck's orders ¹ that night had a new note. He thought Rommel, to avoid defeat, might withdraw and in so doing 'will probably go fast and far.' The best signs of such an intention, he said, would be withdrawal from **Deir el Shein** and the removal of tanks from contact. If these happened, 'the enemy will be pursued and destroyed.' Leaving the coast road and railway to the **Royal Air Force, 30 Corps** would move westward with all speed, bypassing the retreating enemy so as to cut off and dislocate his formations. Thirteenth Corps would make an indirect

pursuit with two columns, one to secure the landing grounds at **Daba** and block the road, and the other to secure the escarpment defile six miles west of **Fuka**.

The operation was to be known as **EXALTED**. It was indeed an exalted idea of the possibilities. Eighth Army had halted *Panzerarmee's* advance only by the most strenuous efforts in spite of the enemy's exhaustion. It was as nearly exhausted itself, and still an army of shreds and patches. Some formations might counter-attack effectively, but the Army as a whole was not fit to conduct a pursuit to destroy its foe. In the wisdom that comes with knowledge of events, it may be suggested that one of Rommel's greatest errors was his failure to withdraw sufficiently far to entice Eighth Army out of the **Alamein** bottleneck. Auchinleck would have taken the bait. *Panzerarmee's* recuperative powers had proved so superior that almost assuredly it would have turned on Eighth Army with every prospect of decisive victory.

While these plans were being made an important reinforcement, **9 Australian Division**, reached Eighth Army. The division had been ordered from **Syria** on 25 June. It was the last infantry formation at Auchinleck's disposal, and its transfer to the desert increased his anxiety concerning the dangerously weak northern front. The Australians were short of desert equipment and had to be held back until the deficiencies were made good. On 3 July they were placed under the command of **30 Corps**, but, except in an emergency, they were not to be used without Auchinleck's permission.

¹ Eighth Army Operation Order No. 89, 3 Jul 1942.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 17 – THRUSTS, PARRIES, AND PLANS

CHAPTER 17

Thrusts, Parries, and Plans

ROMMEL commenced regrouping on 4 July under cover of **Luftwaffe** attacks mainly against the New Zealanders' threat to his southern flank, and of local tank and infantry actions with **1 Armoured Division** on **Ruweisat Ridge**. He received his greatest help, however, from Eighth Army's slowness in divining his intentions and its failure to perceive that during the greater part of the day much of *Panzerarmee* was unbalanced. *Afrika Korps*, especially **15 Panzer Division**, was nervous and apprehensive of a British counter-attack. No action, however, was taken by any British commander to give *Panzerarmee* the jolt that might have made it reel. By evening the opportunity had passed. Rommel still retained the initiative.

From first light until the evening, when an anti-tank screen on the **Alamein- Himeimat** tracks was encountered, **1 Armoured Division** probed westward along **Ruweisat Ridge**. Many of the division's tanks were mechanically unsound and troubles with wireless sets and batteries made control difficult. Both brigades and 50 Division's Ackcol battle group north of the ridge had a number of engagements with *Afrika Korps'* few tanks and infantry. These engagements and enemy transport movements led to the conclusion that *Panzerarmee* was thinning out. But there was nothing to suggest preparations for a general withdrawal.

In the course of the contacts an incident loosed a spate of rumours throughout Eighth Army that the Germans had had enough. Early in the afternoon **22 Armoured Brigade** reported that 600 German infantry had attempted to surrender. The British tanks were halted and an officer went forward to receive the surrender. The report said that a German 88-millimetre gun then opened fire on the British and also on the German infantry, thus preventing the surrender. Some of the Germans were captured and heavy casualties were inflicted on the remainder. A subsequent report said that between 100 and 200 men of the German **115 Lorried Infantry Regiment** surrendered to Robcol, another of 50

Division's battle groups.

The affair remains one of the mysteries of the battle. Auchinleck thought the attempted surrender was an enemy ruse. The Germans, who heard the reports over the British broadcast, officially denied that it had occurred. There is no doubt, however, that 22 Brigade's report had some substance, although the figures quoted must be accepted with reserve. The exact numbers of the regiment concerned are not available, but all enemy units were considerably under strength at that period. It was extremely unlikely there would be up to 600 men in a compact body. A possible explanation is that some men attempted to surrender but changed their minds when the German gun intervened, and that the divisional commander hushed up the incident.

Shortly after midday, New Zealand Division received from 13 Corps orders for its part in the projected counter-attack should Rommel withdraw. The Division was to be ready to advance on Daba, cut the coast road west of the town, capture the landing ground, and then operate mobile columns against any enemy within striking distance. On its left 7 Armoured Division, with 7 Motor Brigade and some tank units to be provided by 30 Corps, was to have the task of securing the Fuka defile and then harass the enemy's communications from the south. The 5th Indian Division columns were to be in corps reserve ready to assist 7 Motor Brigade at Fuka and take over the defile.

The orders then said:

The pursuit will be carried out with the greatest vigour. Problems of supply will be simplified by stripping the pursuing force of all unnecessary personnel and vehicles. As large reserves of petrol, water and ammunition as possible will be carried with pursuing force. Captured material and supplies will be used to the greatest extent possible.

New Zealand Division was already stripped for highly mobile operations and there was little to do other than await the executive

order to move and, in the meantime, suffer the enemy bombing attacks which came intermittently throughout the day. The most damaging of these occurred at 9.30 in the morning, when a small force of Stukas with a fighter escort descended on **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group. Several men were killed, more were wounded, and a quantity of transport, including five of **5 Field Regiment's** vehicles, was destroyed or damaged. Another raid in the afternoon, this time by Me110s, was less effective.

In its area to the east of **Kaponga**, **4 Brigade** received some desultory long-range shelling, to which **4 Field Regiment** replied by firing on transport, tanks, and any hostile batteries which could be located. Two major air raids were made on the brigade, one in the middle of the afternoon and the other toward dusk. Casualties were few although some vehicles were destroyed or damaged. It is recorded that mail from New Zealand was being distributed to **19 Battalion** when the second raid occurred, and that, when the attack passed, the men found the light from a burning ammunition truck convenient for reading their letters.

At **Himeimat** **6 Brigade** was subjected to ineffectual high-level bombing. The units of the brigade spent the day in reorganising on a three-company basis, the transport and spare weapons from the three companies to be 'left out of battle' being distributed among the remainder. The LOB companies, A of **24 Battalion**, D of the 25th and C of the 26th, were sent to **Maadi**. The reorganisation was completed by evening and the brigade, especially its commander, Brigadier Clifton, waited hopefully for a role with the rest of the Division.

In contrast, **5 Brigade** at **Mreir** had a day of suspense and activity. Daylight revealed that some of the positions taken up in the dark the previous night were insecure. The 22nd Battalion, dug in on a forward slope west of the track, was under direct artillery observation. On its right **21 Battalion**, which had crossed to the far side of the depression in the early morning, had its flanks more or less in the air. It was considered, however, that the positions could and should be held pending further operations. But as the light improved C Company of the

21st, on the extreme right flank, came under increasing fire from machine guns, mortars and snipers, which could not be subdued from the battalion's positions or without claiming an unprofitable share of **6 Field Regiment's** attention. Lieutenant-Colonel Allen therefore withdrew the company to the southern lip, the movement being covered by two regimental concentrations by the guns.

During the remainder of the day any movement by either side immediately brought down artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire. There was also considerable air activity. Three times between noon and three o'clock, the brigade's B echelon was bombed by Stukas for the loss of five men killed, fifteen wounded, and five trucks damaged. **Royal Air Force Boston** bombers on similar duty against the enemy and fighter interception of the Stukas were compensating sights.

The brigade's open western flank, thinly covered by patrols supplied by A Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, caused some anxiety. The squadron was reinforced with carriers of **23 Battalion**, and several reports were received of a stream of enemy vehicles moving into the **Mungar Wahla** area some five miles to the west. This enemy did not evince immediate interest in the brigade. Its proximity, however, suggested caution and also speed in clearing up the situation at **Mreir**. To this end **Brigadier Kippenberger**, after satisfying himself that the forward battalions could hold their positions, went ahead with plans for using **23 Battalion** in another night attack.

A daring carrier reconnaissance in the morning disclosed that the enemy's right flank rested on the northern lip of the depression opposite **5 Brigade's** left flank. This was the open flank **Kippenberger** had in mind when he decided the night before not to press home the initial attack. The new plan, briefly, required Watson to take **23 Battalion** in its trucks well to the west of the brigade positions, turn north across the depression, and then, when behind the enemy line, swing right and sweep down on the enemy to the well-defined **Alamein** track, along which the battalion would return to the brigade area. The attack would

be supported by **6 Field Regiment** firing concentrations from west to east on the northern lip when the infantry had completed their turning movements and were ready to pounce.

Lack of time for preparation, particularly for reconnaissance of the going and plotting a secure route, prejudiced the enterprise. In the event, bad going proved the greatest obstacle to success. The battalion became stuck in the dark in soft sand on the floor of the depression and did not reach the projected turning point beyond the northern lip. As the start line could not be reached on foot within the time available, the three rifle companies were formed up to advance along the floor of the depression. With A Company on the left and D on the right on a front of 900 yards, and with B in reserve, the battalion synchronised its advance from the new start line with the first lift of the concentration.

No opposition was met in the first 2000 yards of the advance. Then enemy troops on and about the northern lip opened fire with mortars, machine guns and rifles, and were quickly supported by artillery. The fire, however, did not unduly disturb **23 Battalion**, which pushed on until it reached the **Alamein** track. Enemy sections were found in trenches covering the track. These were attacked with bayonet and hand grenades.

By midnight the whole of the battalion was at the track and it then withdrew southward on to **22 Battalion**. In spite of shellfire on the road, the withdrawal was accomplished without material loss. Two prisoners from *Pavia Division* and a **Breda** machine gun were brought back. The battalion reported that two other Bredas and their crews had been destroyed and that a large number of casualties had been inflicted. Fifth Brigade's losses in the action were two killed, ten wounded, and five missing. No doubt **23 Battalion** was unlucky in missing the Italian main positions, but fortune was with it in that the Italian fire was mostly too high or was directed on **22 Battalion's** known posts.

These early operations by **5 Brigade** at **Mreir** have been linked in some reports and analyses with **13 Corps'** projected counter-attack

against *Panzerarmee's* rear. They constituted in fact an isolated affair, ordered in the first instance by General Inglis to trap the fleeing remains of *Ariete Division*, and then, on the brigade's own initiative, to disconcert the enemy with a characteristic New Zealand raid. It is true that at 8 p.m. on 4 July Inglis was told by Gott that the attack by **30 Corps** in the north had been postponed and that the New Zealand Division should restrict its activities to a 'limited advance' by **5 Brigade**. This order may be better interpreted as an instruction to the Division that, while it was not to move on **Daba** in the meantime, there was no need to interfere with **5 Brigade's** business at **Mreir**. It will be shown in more appropriate sequence that, plans, orders, and reports to the contrary, no substantial effort was made at this period to counter-attack *Panzerarmee* let alone initiate a counter-offensive against its communications.

By nightfall on 4 July *Panzerarmee* had completed only part of the first stage of its regrouping. In the centre, *90 Light* and *15 Panzer Divisions* extended their right and left wings respectively to cover a gap caused by the withdrawal of *21 Panzer Division* to the **Alam el Dihmaniya** area. *Recce Units* 3 and 33 were sent to the neighbourhood of **El Kharita**, some nine miles west of **Kaponga**, and *Recce Unit* 580 to **Mungar Wahla** to operate against the flanks of a British turning movement. These were probably the forces seen by the Divisional Cavalry patrols operating with **5 Brigade** at **Mreir**.

Rommel intended *Pavia* to relieve *90 Light Division*, which he planned to concentrate in **Deir el Harra** during the night 4–5 July. Advanced units of *Pavia* were taking over *90 Light's* positions and the route to **Deir el Harra** was being reconnoitred when orders were received early in the afternoon postponing the relief. This move, and one projected for *21 Panzer Division*, have some interest for New Zealand Division.

Brescia was undoubtedly the chief victim of **5 Brigade's** assaults at **Mreir** but it was thought at the time that, as the prisoners taken were from *Pavia Division*, the assaults must have upset the relief of one

division by the other. The German records show, however, that there were some companies of *Pavia* attached to *Brescia* and it must have been on these companies that *23 Battalion*'s attack fell. Fifth Brigade's aggressiveness caused *Afrika Korps* to order a detachment from *Kampstaffel Kiehl* to support the Italians at *Mreir*.

Rommel's dislike of the threat to his flank is evident from orders given to *21 Panzer Division*. At 11 a.m., while it was being relieved, the division was told to form two forward detachments which were to start immediately, one to *Alam Nayil* and the other 'to attack from the east the enemy opposing *Brescia* at *El Mreir*.' The orders added that the rest of the division was to follow the forward detachments by 4 p.m. at the latest. *Afrika Korps*' diary hints at the urgency of these operations with the entry: 'The instructions are repeated by W.T.' Again, when *15 Panzer Division* protested that it would be unable to hold the extended sector unaided, it was told in no uncertain terms that the relief must go on.

In the event, the attack towards *Alam Nayil* was cancelled when *21 Division* reported that the British forces in the area (columns of *7 Motor Brigade*) were too strong to be subdued without a set battle. *Afrika Korps*' diary also records at 9.35 p.m. that 'as the battle group which was to roll up the enemy in front of Division *Brescia* could not carry out this task, its withdrawal is ordered.' No reasons are given. Had the attack been made the proposed axis of advance would have deposited about ten tanks on *21 Battalion*'s right flank. Almost certainly, the assault would have been supported by the army heavy artillery deployed north-east of *Mreir* as these guns were called on to repel *23 Battalion*'s raid. Incidentally, *Littorio Armoured Division* was also within easy striking distance north-west of *Mreir*.

At daybreak on 5 July Rommel had *Panzerarmee* on a thinly-held line from the coast to the southern slope of *Ruweisat Ridge*, where the line turned westwards to *Mreir*. In the north *XXI Corps*, with *Sabrata* and *Trento Divisions*, was opposite the western face of *Alamein Box* held

by the South African 3 Brigade. Then came *90 Light*, opposed by 1 and 2 South African Brigades and Ackcol, a 50 Division battle group. Next there was a gap, covered only by flanking fire, to *15 Panzer Division*, which had *1 Armoured Division*, two more 50 Division battle groups, and *24 Australian Brigade* on its front. The line was then carried westwards by *21 Division* to the Italian *X Corps'* divisions, *Brescia* and *Pavia*. *Trieste Motorised Division* was about *Deir el Shein* and the remains of *Ariete* were behind it.

Regrouping plans for the day required *21 Panzer Division* to extend its flank to relieve *Pavia* and to usher this division into two strongpoints to be built behind *15 Panzer Division*. Nothing more was done about the projected relief of *90 Light* or with a proposal that *Brescia* should take over from *15 Panzer*. The Italian infantry left about the frontier in the drive to *Alamein* were to be brought forward with all speed to release the armour and motorised formations for mobile operations. The divisions were advised that reinforcements were being flown from *Italy* to *Tobruk*.

There was a fly in this ointment for their wounds. Each division was to assign twenty-five trucks with which the Army would run a shuttle service to bring the reinforcements forward. When, on top of this, *Afrika Korps* was required to put a new regiment, *IR 382*, on wheels and each division was to find fifty vehicles for the *Luftwaffe*, the protests were too loud even for Rommel to withstand. The *21st Division* was particularly incensed and listed in its diary six reasons why it refused to hand vehicles to the *Luftwaffe*. Those concerning the division's own shortages in trucks and trained drivers could not be questioned, but there were suggestions of indiscipline and lack of perspective in the statement: 'All the vehicles taken by the division in *Tobruk* have been appropriated by the O.C. of army supplies.' Such a view, however, is probably characteristic of most front-line formations.

Late on 4 July Eighth Army was vaguely aware of the enemy regrouping and made new plans based on the deduction that Rommel was concentrating his best troops in his right centre with a view to outflanking the coastal positions. The reported construction of defences

as far back as **Sidi Abd el Rahman** suggested that Rommel intended to hold his positions until sufficient supplies and reinforcements were brought forward to ensure the success of a further attack. Early in the morning of 5 July Gott called on the New Zealand Division with details of the revised Army and Corps' plans, of which the keynote was: 'Eighth Army will attack and destroy the enemy in his present positions.'

The plans differed from those previously issued in that, instead of driving deeply into *Panzerarmee's* rear, **13 Corps** was to roll up the enemy from his southern flank while **30 Corps** held the road eastwards, but ready to attack if and when opportunity offered. In the new scheme, New Zealand Division was to advance on a line from west of **Kaponga** to the **Sidi Abd el Rahman** railway station, with **5 Indian Division** on its left directed to **Ghazal** station. Seventh Armoured Division, taking over **7 Motor Brigade** and **12 Lancers** from **30 Corps**, was to deploy along **Ruweisat Ridge** to protect **13 Corps'** right flank. The division was then to keep pace with the infantry attack and be ready to make a dash for either **Fuka** or **Daba**.

New Zealand Division's first duty was to put itself in position for the attack. General Inglis ordered **4 Brigade** to take **28 (Maori) Battalion** in **Kaponga** under command and move at once round the south of the box to **Qaret el Yidma**. **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group were to follow and occupy positions behind the brigade. Sixth Brigade was ordered to reoccupy **Kaponga** by 4 p.m.

Fourth Brigade left its forming-up area shortly after 10.30 and moved south over country badly broken by wadis and escarpments to the neighbourhood of **Raqabet el Retem**, where it turned due west. The group had negotiated an escarpment on to more even going over a stony area of open desert when enemy aircraft dived out of the sun on to the columns of vehicles.

This was a successful raid from the enemy's point of view and one of the most unfortunate suffered by the Division. Brigadier Gray and Major **Bassett**,¹ his brigade major, were killed. The liaison officer from 28

Battalion, Lieutenant **Maloney**,² died of wounds, and three other ranks in Brigade Headquarters were killed. In 28 Battalion Major **Chesterman**³ and 14 men were killed and 21 others wounded. Two men were killed and 14 wounded in 4 Field Regiment, and 1 was killed and 6 wounded in 20 Battalion which was leading the brigade, making a total of 24 killed and 41 wounded. Fourth Field Regiment lost one of its guns. Several vehicles of the group were destroyed and many damaged.

Lieutenant-Colonel Burrows again assumed command of the brigade, his place in 20 Battalion being taken by Major **Manson**.⁴ Captain **Pearson**⁵ was made brigade major. At this stage, the only officer in the group who knew its destination was Captain **Sullivan**,⁶ the intelligence officer of 20 Battalion, who was plotting the route and acting as guide. Burrows had to take command without knowing where the group was going and what it was to do when it arrived at its destination. This fault in disseminating information was common in the Army at this period. It was due mainly to excessive zeal concerning security but sometimes to procrastination.

After burying the dead and attending to the wounded, the brigade continued its journey to the **Alamein**-Abu Dweis track, where it turned north to **Qaret el Yidma** which was reached about three o'clock. The three battalions were deployed roughly in line, with 28th to the north-east, 20th to the north, and 19th to the north-west of Brigade Headquarters, which was set up on a slight rise to the south-east of the depression. Three more air raids were made on the group. Although some vehicles were damaged, casualties among the men were slight. A 500-pound bomb was

¹ **Maj B. I. Bassett**, m.i.d.; born NZ 12 Sep 1911; barrister and solicitor; BM 10 Bde May 1941; BM 4 Bde Aug 1941–Jan 1942, Jun–Jul 1942; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

² **Lt H. T. Maloney**; born NZ 26 Feb 1914; school teacher; died of wounds 5 Jul 1942.

³ **Maj E. R. Chesterman**, m.i.d.; born NZ 21 Aug 1914; school teacher; killed in action 5 Jul 1942.

⁴ **Maj I. O. Manson; Invercargill**; born Otautau, 9 Jul 1905; clerk; 2 i/c 20 Bn Apr–Jul 1942.

⁵ **Maj R. S. Pearson**, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born NZ 28 Feb 1908; civil servant; BM 4 Bde Jul–Nov 1942; DAQMG 4 Armd Bde Mar 1943–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Feb 1945; wounded 10 Jul 1942.

⁶ **Capt J. G. Sullivan**, DSO, m.i.d.; Cobb Valley, **Nelson**; born **Greymouth**, 1 Aug 1913; survey assistant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

dropped close to **19 Battalion**'s headquarters but did not explode until the engineers fired a charge under it.

Sixth Brigade reoccupied **Kaponga** late in the afternoon and was greeted with fire from enemy 105-millimetre guns. **Divisional Headquarters** and the Reserve Group, the latter now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam, ¹ left **Deir Alinda** in the evening to take post behind **4 Brigade**. The Reserve Group had some difficulties with the going and did not reach its area until after midnight.

While these moves were being made, **5 Brigade** remained on the south side of **Mreir** ready to move at thirty minutes' notice. There were several exchanges of artillery fire until the heat haze after midday made observation too difficult. About the same time as **4 Brigade** suffered its heavy air attack, four men were wounded and six vehicles severely damaged by bombs dropped on the brigade headquarters. These losses were annoying as special orders had been issued in the brigade concerning the dangers of concentrating transport in exposed positions. At last light the enemy bombarded the forward battalions, possibly to discourage another night raid.

It would be reasonable to suppose that at this stage all thoughts

throughout Eighth Army were concentrated on attack and fulfilment of Auchinleck's order to 'destroy the enemy in his present positions.' On the contrary. On 5 July the Division received a further order from **13 Corps** on a new Army plan for withdrawal in the event of the collapse of the **Alamein** Line. Under the revised plan, **30 Corps** was to retreat to **Alexandria** by the coastal roads while **13 Corps** fell back on **Cairo** by the desert routes. New Zealand Division would remain with **13 Corps** and retreat by desert routes to **Wadi Natrun**.

The order ² contained a warning that it was not 'to be interpreted as a weakening of our intention to hold the present position or as an indication that our efforts have or are likely to fail.' Nevertheless it was unlikely to inspire confidence in the projected operations. It made a platitude of the intention paragraph of Eighth Army's attack order and encouraged the dangerous looking-over-the-shoulder policy. Moreover, while the provisional plans for further retreat were being circulated, Auchinleck was confidently reporting to **London** that the enemy had been forced 'temporarily at any rate to abandon his offensive plans', and that Eighth Army was ready at once to pursue and cut off the enemy if and when he starts to go.' ³

¹ Lt-Col F.J. Gwilliam, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 9 May 1904; assistant town clerk; CO 27 (MG) Bn Jan 1941–Jul 1942; 24 Bn Jul–Nov 1942.

² **13 Corps** Operation Order No. 137, 5 Jul 1942.

³ Situation report, 5 Jul 1942.

During the night 5–6 July, Auchinleck became more impressed by the increasing strength on Rommel's right wing about **Mreir** and revised his plans. New orders issued in the morning of the 6th offered Eighth Army alternative proposals for a general attack to be mounted on or after the following day.

The first proposal, known as LUKE, required **1 Armoured Division** to pass through the New Zealand Division and, moving north on the New Zealanders' open left flank, turn eastwards behind **Mreir** to attack the enemy's positions in co-operation with diversionary attacks by **30 Corps**. New Zealand and 5 Indian Divisions were to co-operate by increasing their pressure to the north and by being ready to exploit any success gained by the armour. The alternative proposal, REVELATIONS, gave **30 Corps** the main role with a general attack westwards, New Zealand Division and **5 Indian Division** again to co-operate with pressure to the north.

When Gott made his customary visit to the New Zealand Division during the morning he left the impression that the alternative plan would be adopted. However, at half past three, he sent an instruction cancelling both proposals in favour of a further plan. This required **1 Armoured Division**, with two companies of the Australians and some of their brigade's anti-tank guns, to make an attack that night along **Ruweisat Ridge** as a preliminary to securing the ridge to **Point 63**,¹ south of **Deir el Shein**. New Zealand Division was called on to support the attack with artillery fire ahead of the armour, and to increase its readiness to exploit success by moving **4 Brigade** to positions level with those held by **5 Brigade**.

In **30 Corps'** orders for this operation, Major-General Morshead, commanding **9 Australian Division**, was told that if he considered there was insufficient time to prepare for the attack he was to ask for a postponement. In the event, **30 Corps** postponed the attack and advised **13 Corps**, but the information did not reach New Zealand Division in time to stop it from carrying out its allotted part. The guns of 5 and 6 Field Regiments and the detachment of 64 Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, fired concentrations on the areas defined in **13 Corps'** orders. No doubt, as General Inglis noted in his diary, this was a waste of ammunition, but *Afrika Korps'* headquarters in **Deir el Abyad**, **15 Panzer Division**, and Briehl battle group from **90 Light Division**, which were at the receiving end of the bombardment, had an uncomfortable period

according to their reports.

Normal consolidation and harassing duties occupied the Division throughout the day. The artillery was active chiefly against

¹ Also known as Point 64 on some maps. See p. 224.

transport moving westwards and then south opposite the Division's open flank.

For **4 Brigade's** advance, General Inglis set a feature overlooking the **Mungar Wahla** depression as the objective, with exploitation across the eastern edge of the depression. It was agreed that the attack should be made silently under cover of darkness, but that **4 Field Regiment** should advance battery by battery ready to support and to cover the infantry on the objective against counterattack. The infantry were to advance on foot. Zero hour was 3.30 a.m. on the 7th, but the brigade was not to move unless it received a confirming order from Division before 1.30 a.m.

Burrows decided to attack 'two up' with **28 Battalion** on the right, **20th** on the left, and **19th** in reserve. The leading battalions were ordered to halt on the main objective and consolidate. Exploitation was given to **19 Battalion** which, after mopping up any enemy posts bypassed by the leading units, would move over the depression. Thus, at dawn, the brigade, fully covered by the field regiment and anti-tank guns, would be deployed in an arc on high ground overlooking the enemy-held area to the north.

The go-ahead signal was received from Division at 11 p.m., with zero hour advanced half an hour to 3 a.m. The battalions started to form up at one o'clock and moved off at ten minutes past three with enemy flares in the direction of the objective as an additional guide. The distance to be covered had been calculated at 3200 yards. This was paced in the dark and brought **28** and **20 Battalions** fairly on to the

objective. No opposition was met and there were no signs of the enemy other than the flares to the north. The 19th Battalion was close up and, having no mopping up to do, passed easily through the leading troops to reach the high ground on the far side of the depression. There was still no contact with the enemy, and with an hour to go before dawn the brigade dug itself in. Fourth Field Regiment had all its guns in position before dawn.

Daylight revealed a tactician's dream target. Some 600 to 700 yards north of **19 Battalion**, the enemy was engaged in his morning chores as if all were peace in the world. According to a report, the enemy

was completely oblivious to our presence and it was very interesting to watch his troops getting up, folding their blankets and preparing the morning meal at their slit trenches.

This peaceful scene was violently disturbed by **4 Brigade**. Light machine-gun fire from the rifle companies grounded all the enemy within range. A troop of four 75-millimetre guns in plain view about 1000 yards away was engaged by **19 Battalion's** mortars and a machine-gun platoon to such effect that it did not fire a shot. Tanks and trucks clearly visible in the distance were dealt with by the field batteries.

By eight o'clock the enemy had recovered sufficiently from his surprise to engage **19 Battalion** with mortar and small-arms fire. Carrier patrols on the flanks reported preparations for a counterattack. The field guns and all other available weapons in the brigade were turned on the assembly areas and dispersed the enemy infantry. The fire fight was kept up throughout the morning until the heat and haze of midday brought a calmer atmosphere.

Panzerarmee's battle report of 7 July establishes *Littorio Armoured Division* as **4 Brigade's** opponents. The report says: 'On 7 July, towards noon, elements of the New Zealand Division broke into the positions of the Littorio Division; during the afternoon they were forced out again.' The obvious error in the time of the assault is offset by the correct

appreciation of the time of withdrawal and may be construed as evidence of the brigade's aggressive spirit in the morning.

Fifth Brigade was also active during the night with fighting patrols. Second-Lieutenant **Grant**, ¹ of **23 Battalion**, took 12 Platoon north-west to reconnoitre **Deir el Qatani** and do any damage possible. The platoon found an outpost of *Recce Unit 580*, destroyed a truck, killed four Germans, including an officer who would not surrender, and returned with a wounded prisoner for the loss of one man missing and three wounded.

Lieutenant **Perks** ² took **22 Battalion's** 18 Platoon about a mile up the **Alamein** track and came upon about thirty trucks parked closely, with many men standing around. Challenged, the platoon went to ground without making reply. It then worked silently to the rear of the trucks and charged in line through the crowd, shooting, bayoneting and bombing, and so home again. Casualties were one missing and one wounded, against which the platoon claimed about thirty of the enemy put out of action. Both patrols were 'cloak and dagger affairs, socks over boots, grenades, tommy guns and bayonets.' ³

While **4 Brigade** was moving to its start line, **Divisional Headquarters** received from **13 Corps** at 2.50 a.m. an emergency operations signal which suggested the possibilities of more extended action. The message said there were indications that the enemy might be pulling out and withdrawing westwards. Corps required New Zealand and 7 Armoured Divisions to continue providing protection for **30 Corps'** southern flank and to harass the

¹ **Lt-Col D. G. Grant**, MC, m.i.d.; **Invercargill**; born NZ 29 Feb 1908; school teacher; CO 23 Bn May-Sep 1945; wounded Jul 1942; Rector Southland Boys' High School.

² **Capt W. E. Perks**; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 17 Oct 1914; assurance clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

enemy. But should circumstances allow, they were to be ready immediately to put into effect the plan for driving deeply into the enemy's rear at **Daba** and **Fuka**. The two divisions were also ordered to push patrols forward fast at first light and make every endeavour to obtain and pass back information of enemy westward movement during the night.

Daylight, however, brought the Division information of a totally different nature. Headquarters learned that **1 Armoured Division** had not attempted the attack along **Ruweisat Ridge** the previous night, thus incidentally fulfilling **Brigadier Kippenberger's** prophecy that the tanks would not attack in the dark whatever Corps might order. ¹ The advance to **Mungar Wahla** and the artillery bombardment, therefore, had been to no purpose. The Division's appreciation of its new position was not comforting. The operations map at headquarters showed, in the words of a senior staff officer, that 'the Division was sticking out like a sore thumb miles away from any other substantial part of the Army.' This situation, when linked with reports of further enemy movements southwards past the Division's open flank and of tanks in that neighbourhood, caused General Inglis to warn **4 Brigade** shortly after dawn to be ready to withdraw to **Qaret el Yidma**.

Later, Inglis learned from the Corps Commander that Army Headquarters was concerned about the gap between the two corps in the area **Alam Nayil**, **Deir el Hima** and **Munassib**. An enemy drive in that general direction from the south-east corner of his salient might cut off **13 Corps**. Accordingly, it had been decided that New Zealand Division should 'take ground to the eastward', as Auchinleck says in his despatch, ² or, as Gott said, **13 Corps** should shorten its front. In other words, the idea of attacking was given up.

Gott ordered the regrouping of the corps to be made in two phases. Columns of **7 Motor Brigade** and **5 Indian Division** were left to observe

and harass the enemy on the western flank, while New Zealand Division reassembled in the area east of **Kaponga** to **Deir el Munassib**, facing generally north so that its guns might operate against the enemy on Ruweisat. The reshuffle involved another abandonment of **Kaponga**, in which a small guard and demolition party were to be left until relieved by a column from **7 Motor Brigade**.

As the first phase of the reorganisation had to be completed by six o'clock the next morning, the withdrawal of **4 Brigade** to **Qaret el Yidma** became a necessity rather than a matter of discretion. Orders were given shortly after midday and the move was started

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 150.

² Despatch, p. 365.

about three o'clock. It was completed within two hours. The only enemy interference was by air attacks in which three men of **20 Battalion** were wounded. Fifth Brigade was not given notice of the withdrawal and was somewhat disconcerted by the re-exposure of its left flank. Shortly afterwards, however, it received its own orders to break clear from **Mreir** and move during the night to the neighbourhood of **Kaponga**.

The night move of the Division over the broken country was strenuous for all concerned. **Divisional Headquarters** started at 7.30, and although **Tactical Headquarters** was reopened at Munassib at 3 a.m., it was nearly first light before the whole of the group reached the new position.

Fifth Brigade sent its B echelon transport with B Company of **5 Field Ambulance** to move independently around the west and south sides of **Kaponga**, while the rest of the group took a more direct route past the northern and eastern faces of the box. The start was made shortly before nine o'clock under enemy shellfire, which killed one man, wounded

three, and damaged more trucks. The brigade now had a high proportion of damaged trucks which had to be towed. Difficulties with these and with patches of soft sand which were unavoidable in the darkness hampered the movement. However, by 2 a.m. Brigade Headquarters was set up near the **Kaponga- Alinda-Munassib** track to the south-east of **Kaponga**, and by dawn the three battalions were deployed with 23rd facing east, 22nd the north, and 21st guarding the southern approaches.

Fourth Brigade left **Qaret el Yidma** at 9.30 p.m., with **20 Battalion** in the lead, to make a march of nearly 20 miles to the positions it had occupied earlier in **Deir el Munassib**. It was after daybreak before all the units arrived at their destination. The **Divisional Reserve Group** made an early morning march from 2.30 a.m. until shortly after dawn to take post in **Deir Alinda**, about a mile and a half south-east of **5 Brigade**.

Once again **6 Brigade** was given a reserve role, but on this occasion it was ordered clear of the battle area to **Amiriya**, which was reached on the afternoon of 10 July. A platoon from A Company **25 Battalion** under Major **Hutchens**¹ was left to hold **Kaponga** until it was relieved by **7 Motor Brigade**.

Thirteenth Corps' regrouping marked the end of the second phase of the **Alamein** operations, in which General Auchinleck credits the corps, and New Zealand Division, with having played the decisive part.

¹ **Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens**, DSO, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Hawera** 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO 27 (MG) Bn Feb–May 1944; 26 Bn 8 May–8 Jun 1944. 24 Bn Jun 1944–May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

Auchinleck says in his despatch¹ that on 2 July he ordered the corps to counter-attack by wheeling north with its right flank based on **Kaponga**, in order to deprive *Panzerarmee* of its power to deliver a concentrated blow against **30 Corps** and to recover the tactical initiative for Eighth Army. This attack, according to the despatch, was started on the afternoon of 2 July and was continued until the 7th, the corps in

the meantime 'occupying **El Mreir** and approaching our former defensive locality at **Deir el Shein**.' Rommel's riposte, according to the despatch, was hurried entrenchment of his southern front and extension of his defences westwards to prevent his communications with **Daba** being cut.

Auchinleck then says:

I had no reserves with which to reinforce the 13th Corps and, in face of the rapidly stiffening enemy opposition, their advance came to a standstill. Although the operation did not succeed in rolling up the enemy and destroying him, as at one time I had hoped it might, it succeeded in drawing off enemy troops from the north, which greatly relieved the pressure on our right and centre and gave us time to consolidate these important sectors.

This is a fair inference from the facts as they were known to **Auchinleck**. Had he examined **13 Corps'** operations more closely, however, he might have revised his opinion. The truth is that **13 Corps** constituted no more than a standing threat to Rommel's flank and rear. It was never committed to a counter-attack, let alone having its advance brought to a standstill 'in face of the rapidly stiffening enemy opposition'.

Apart from minor patrols, the New Zealand Division, the one substantial formation in the corps, was in contact with the enemy on only three occasions. Throughout 2 July and up to midday on the 3rd, the Division was acting defensively in support of **1 Armoured Division** on **Ruweisat Ridge**. *Ariete's* destruction on the morning of 3 July was due to the fact that the Italians walked blindly into trouble. The affair was no part of a **13 Corps** counter-attack.

Further, **5 Brigade's** advance to **Mreir** was ordered by General Inglis for the express purpose of catching the escaping remains of *Ariete*. There was no suggestion that the brigade was fulfilling a counter-attack role in a corps' plan. Again, the concentration of the remainder of the Division near **Kaponga** and in the **Deir Alinda**, and the moves to **Qaret el**

Yidma and Mungar Wahla, were all preparatory to corps operations on an extended scale. Numerous plans were made by Army and Corps for action against the enemy's rear and flank. Orders to execute them were never given.

¹ Despatch, pp. 364–5.

On 2 July Rommel was spared the humiliation of knowing that his decisive attack on **30 Corps** had passed unnoticed by Eighth Army. Thirteenth Corps' ineffective operations, enlarged upon by Auchinleck, balanced the account. Rommel's battle reports, checked with *Panzerarmee's* operations, show that he persisted with his attacks against **30 Corps** until the night of 3 July, when he was at last convinced that 'a replenishment of men and material was urgently needed if the *Panzerarmee* was to continue to attack successfully.' ¹

Rommel paid close attention to his southern flank only after he had abandoned his attack in the north. He had then gone over to the defensive to cover regrouping in which the armoured and motorised formations were to be withdrawn from the front line and prepared for mobile operations. His intentions for the next phase were to attack 'the New Zealand Division to the south, to destroy it and eliminate the standing threat from the south. Further, the occupation of the area as far as the **Qattara Depression**, and the seizure of the terrain to the east, of consequence to the defence, was to be carried out.' ²

Subsequent reports show that **13 Corps'** activities had little impact on *Panzerarmee*. There are references to precautions to protect the flank, such as the assignment of *Littorio* and *Recce Units 3, 33, and 580* to these duties. Parenthetically, it may be noted that the reconnaissance units had among them no more than 15 reconnaissance cars, 20 troop-carriers, and 12 British 25-pounders. ³ These meagre units were responsible for the considerable transport movement so often reported on New Zealand Division's open flank.

The enemy battle reports summarily dismiss the fighting. Thus, of 5 July, the report says: 'No substantial actions took place, so that the improvement of the positions could go on undisturbed. Only elements of New Zealand Division undertook a thrust against Panzer Division Littorio.' The report of the 6th records a raid against *90 Light Division* and slight activity by the *Recce Units* about **El Kharita**. Fourth Brigade's advance to **Mungar Wahla** and its alignment with **5 Brigade** is mentioned as a minor engagement with *Littorio Division*. Apparently the Germans expected more of the New Zealanders for, in a report to the War Ministry on 6 July, General Rintelen at Italian General Headquarters commented that the Division 'has shown very little initiative so far.'

Summed up, Rommel was defeated in the first phase at **Alamein** by **18 Indian Brigade** and **1 South African Division**. In the second phase, as noted by Eighth Army chronologists, he was defeated

¹ *Panzerarmee* battle report, 3 July.

² *Ibid*, 4 July.

³ *Panzerarmee* strength return, 8 July.

chiefly by **1 Armoured Division**, supported by 1 and 2 South African Brigades and battle groups of 50 Division. The armoured division throughout this period operated aggressively but not in a counter-attacking role, although on one occasion it was moving for this purpose when it became engaged with the enemy. Auchinleck correctly deduced that Rommel had been defeated in the north and on **Ruweisat Ridge**, but post-war examination of all the evidence, much of which, of course, was not then available, suggests he was not wholly correct concerning the cause. He believed Eighth Army had regained the tactical initiative, that Rommel had been forced to react to its movements and was being drawn to the south by **13 Corps**, thereby laying himself open to a decisive blow on a weakened left, or coastal, flank.

Whether Rommel had unwittingly ceded the initiative or had had it taken from him is of less moment than that Auchinleck quickly saw that the enemy was making himself vulnerable on the coastal flank and might be made to dance to Eighth Army's tune. So opened the third phase at **Alamein**, the Battle of **Tell el Eisa**. This in turn led to **13 Corps'** disastrous engagements on Ruweisat in which the New Zealand Division suffered severely. The net result of the fighting was a stalemate brought about by the exhaustion of both armies.

Because of the parlous state to which Eighth Army was further reduced physically, technically and in morale, Auchinleck's policy in pressing these successive attacks has been questioned. He may have expected too much of Eighth Army in asking it to defeat *Panzerarmee* and pursue it to the frontier. Yet on some occasions *Panzerarmee* was placed in imminent danger of such decisive defeat on the spot that pursuit might not have been necessary.

Why Eighth Army was deprived of this success is the theme of the following chapter.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 18 – BOTH ARMIES PREPARE ATTACKS

CHAPTER 18

Both Armies Prepare Attacks

AUCHINLECK saw in Rommel's switch southward an opportunity to crush *Panzerarmee's* Italian left wing opposite **Alamein Box**, thereby retaining 'the initiative we had gained' and forcing the enemy 'to continue ... to conform to our movements.' ¹

On 7 July **30 Corps**, now commanded by Major-General Ramsden, formerly of 50 Division, ² was ordered to capture the **Tell el Eisa** mounds overlooking the **Alamein Box** and the enemy's rear area. The Italian defenders were to be destroyed and success exploited south-west against Rommel's communications and headquarters' zones. The corps was permitted to use the newly arrived **9 Australian Division** and **1 South African Division**, each less a brigade group, and zero hour was fixed as 3 a.m. on 10 July.

Consequential regrouping in **30 Corps** involved the relief of **24 Australian Brigade** on Ruweisat by **5 Indian Brigade**, which had reformed outside **Alexandria**. The return of this brigade was a marked step in the restoration of **5 Indian Division**, which was to become New Zealand Division's neighbour and close associate in subsequent fighting. At this time, also, **4 Light Armoured Brigade**, later to become for a while almost an integral part of the Division, was created in a general reorganisation of the armour.

Auchinleck held that the Germans used their tanks as the decisive weapon in close co-operation with the other arms, while the Italian tanks were used either against unarmoured troops or to cover *Afrika Korps'* flanks or rear. The British Grant tank was the equivalent of the German types and the Crusader, Stuart, and Valentine were the counterparts of the Italian tanks. In his reorganisation Auchinleck concentrated the Grants in **1 Armoured Division**, whose main tactical functions thereafter would be to neutralise the German armour and to take part in decisive attacks with infantry and with the Valentines,

which were not as mobile as the Crusader, Stuart, and Italian tanks. In defence and attack, the division was to be supported by the greatest possible concentration of artillery.

¹ Despatch, p. 365.

² Vice Lieutenant-General Norrie, recalled to England to an appointment in the **Royal Armoured Corps**.

The Crusaders and Stuarts were passed to **7 Armoured Division** with the role of striking at Italian armour and unarmoured troops, and of operating wide of the main battle and to a considerable depth. The division was not to be launched against German armour unless in exceptionally favourable circumstances. The armoured car regiments were sent to **4 Light Armoured Brigade** to undertake offensive operations against exposed flanks and enemy installations far to the rear and, alternatively, to perform protective or reconnaissance tasks. The brigade was not designed to fight German or Italian armour.

In the meantime, *Panzerarmee* had completed most of its regrouping and had received assurances of supplies and reinforcements. By the night of 8–9 July Rommel had committed the care of the forward area in the northern and central sectors to the Italian infantry. In the north **XXI Corps**, with *Sabrata* and *Trento Divisions*, covered the **Alamein Box** and the gap into which *90 Light Division* had penetrated. The *X Corps* had *Pavia* astride **Ruweisat Ridge** and *Brescia* carrying the line westward through **Alam el Dihmaniya**. The *15th Panzer Division*, also astride Ruweisat, and the German heavy artillery, deployed in an arc around the southern and eastern faces of **Deir el Shein**, gave depth and strength to the defences in the central sector.

The *21st Panzer Division* was again mobile on the tracks between **Mreir** and **Kaponga**. *Littorio* was to its right rear. *Recce Unit 580* was south of **Kaponga** providing a link between the armoured divisions and groups of *90Light* which, with *Recce Units 3 and 33*, were probing

eastwards towards **Gebel Kalakh** and **El Taqa** plateau against columns of **5 Indian Division** and South African armoured car squadrons.

Afrika Korps now had 50 tanks, of which 32 were with *21 Division*. The Italians had about sixty. Up to 5 July, 2250 German reinforcements had been flown to **Tobruk**, and by late on the 7th 1300 men had reached the forward area. *Afrika Korps'* share of these up to 8 July was only 130, of whom 89 were posted to *21 Division* and 41 to the *15th*. Part of the reinforced *382 German Infantry Regiment* had been landed at **Matruh** from **Crete** and was marching to the battle zone to join *21 Panzer Division*. The Italians had been promised seven battalions, four artillery units and tanks, armoured cars and self-propelled guns for *Ariete*, *Trento*, *Pavia*, and *Brescia Divisions*.

Although Rommel was confident that with regrouping and replenishment he could wipe out Eighth Army, **Mussolini**, who was waiting behind the lines to make a triumphal entry into **Cairo**, was now not sure *Panzerarmee* could reach the Canal. He told a conference at his headquarters on 6 July that if further attack were delayed from ten to fourteen days, surprise would be lost and it would not be possible to push light forces through **Cairo** to the Canal. He thought, therefore, that Rommel should concentrate on taking **Alexandria** first and use the port and base for later operations to the Canal through the **Nile Delta**. 'Even if we do not reach this last objective,' he said, 'we will have **Alexandria**. This is an important centre, and its capture will make an impression on the world.'

Mussolini instructed his Italian generals to confer with Rommel. Marshal Cavallero disagreed with the suggestions. He said that although the advance to the Canal would now be more difficult, it must be made, otherwise the Delta would be very hard to defend. **Alexandria** alone was not of much use as it could hardly be used as a port unless *Panzerarmee* had possession of all the airfields between it and the Canal. An advance to the Canal via the Delta was too difficult—the **Nile** must be crossed near **Cairo**. In his view, *Panzerarmee* must reach the Canal and the area

south of Cairo.

General Rintelen at Italian General Headquarters, from whose report to the **German War Ministry** these extracts have been taken, said he had agreed with Cavallero. He thought the most important thing was to defeat the British west of the **Nile** and to destroy them there as far as possible. ¹

Thus it was with the intention of smashing Eighth Army in its positions at **Alamein** that, on the morning of 9 July, Rommel sent *21 Panzer, Littorio, 90 Light*, and the *Recce Detachments* against **13 Corps**. They were to advance to the neighbourhood of **Alam Nayil** and there turn northwards to roll up Eighth Army into **Alamein**, where it was to be destroyed.

New Zealand Division spent only the daylight hours of 8 July in the areas to which it had moved from **Qaret el Yidma** and **Mreir**. Most of the men overtook arrears of sleep, but there was enough activity, news, reports, and rumours to prevent the day from being too restful and boring.

On the tactical side, the Division provided its own screen towards Ruweisat thus permitting the March, April, July, and August columns of **7 Motor Brigade** to cover north and west of **Kaponga**. Freddy Column, consisting of **46 Field Battery**, a troop of anti-tank guns and a company from **18 Battalion**, occupied **Alam Nayil**, and Rufus Column, similarly constituted with **26 Field Battery** as its core, moved into the area south-east of that feature. A Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry was sent to the north of **Deir el Angar**. The Cavalry found sixteen M3 (Stuart) tanks awaiting

¹ Report to **German War Ministry**, 7 July.

them at Munassib and five were issued to each squadron. All the tanks, especially the guns, needed considerable repairs before they could

be used. During the day the rear party in **Kaponga** was shelled and dive-bombed. At dusk the box was approached by twelve enemy trucks, which withdrew when fired upon.

On the administrative side, the day was notable for a change in the Division's official designation to Second New Zealand Division, with the abbreviation '2 NZ Div'. This was part of a deception scheme produced by **Middle East Headquarters** earlier in the year to confuse the enemy on the number of formations in the theatre. Under the plan, base and training groups with their units were given titles and names similar to those of fighting formations.

In the original proposals for the New Zealand forces in the **Middle East**, it was suggested that the Division should become Second New Zealand Division and the base and training units should be known as Third New Zealand Division. Army Headquarters in **Wellington**, however, pointed out that New Zealand had a Third Division in **Fiji** and that the Territorial Force in New Zealand had been mobilised as the First, Fourth, and Fifth Divisions. Consequently, the base group at **Maadi** was given the title of Sixth New Zealand Division.

The change in names was circulated to the Division on 8 July by message, with instructions that it was not to be published in unit orders but might be communicated verbally to all ranks. Outside the Division it had some amusing repercussions. Morale in the base camps was raised considerably. Even hardened 'base-wallahs' preferred to be known as members of a '6 NZ Div' unit rather than of a 'base and training' unit. Cynics, unaware of the high command's plot, saw in the scheme an example of 'empire-building' and self-glorification among the base units. And in distant New Zealand a story was freely circulated that Rommel had been so deceived that he had told *90 Light Division* during the advance to **Alamein** that it would not meet the veteran Division but only a hastily formed division made up from scraps at the base. People who liked additional details said *90 Light Division* swallowed the story and was tremendously upset when it ran into the real, fighting New Zealanders.

Another news item circulated on 8 July was disquieting. This advised that the enemy had captured the Division's radio-telephone code in some unexplained manner and that a new one was being prepared. Better news was of the success of a raid by April Column of **7 Motor Brigade** on the **Fuka** airfield, where 200 rounds from 25-pounders were fired into forty dispersed aircraft and the landing ground installations. The Air Force sent a message that the flares put out by 4 and 5 Brigades at Mungar Wahla and **Mreir** had been of great value as guides for night bombing of the enemy.

Early receipt of orders for the second phase of the corps regrouping made another pleasing feature in the day. This permitted daylight reconnaissance of the Division's new areas, the marking of difficult routes with signal lamps, and the appointment of platoon and company guides. Consequently, when the Division moved that night, all units were in position before midnight, more than five and a half hours ahead of the time allowed for the operation. Fourth Brigade was deployed at the western end of **Deir el Muhafid**, the Reserve Group ahead of **Divisional Headquarters** in Munassib, and **5 Brigade** on the Munassib- **Alinda** track. The artillery was deployed to fire to the north and north-west.

The Division's left flank was covered by **7 Motor Brigade's** columns and its left rear by columns from **5 Indian Division**.

In their varied experiences from **Greece** to **Trieste** the New Zealanders saw many odd incidents, but rarely one so entertaining and instructive as the enemy's full-scale attack on the empty **Kaponga Box** on 9 July.

The prelude was staged the previous day. At 3.45 p.m. **21 Panzer Division** reported to **Afrika Korps** 'as a complete surprise that the enemy strong-point on the **Qattara Track** south-west of **El Mreir** has been taken.'¹ This was the first the Germans and the Italians, who were supposed to maintain contact, knew of **5 Brigade's** withdrawal from **Mreir** the previous night. The news compelled **Afrika Korps** to cancel

hurriedly a Stuka attack which was about to fall on **5 Brigade's** positions. A little later **21 Division** reported that the **Mungar Wahla** area was also clear.

After making these investigations and reports, **21 Division** reconnoitred southwards to **Kaponga**, sending against the box towards dusk the patrol reported that night by **6 Brigade's** rear party of a platoon from **25 Battalion**. In a message to **Afrika Korps** at 10.50 p.m., the division said its recce troop had reported that **Kaponga** apparently had been evacuated and that several serviceable vehicles had been left behind. No mention was made of the patrol having withdrawn under fire, as was stated by the rear party. On a request for instructions, **Afrika Korps** ordered the division to leave a strong reconnaissance troop in the box, the troop to withdraw only if strongly attacked. At the instance of **Panzerarmee Headquarters**, the division was ordered just on midnight to put not less than one company with an artillery observation post in the box.

The next incidents in the comedy-drama reinforce the lesson that neither side in war has a monopoly of virtues and vices in

¹ **Afrika Korps'** diary, 8 July.

command and staff work. In spite of **Afrika Korps'** prompt report to **Panzerarmee** the night before, it was not until Rommel telephoned Nehring at 7.10 in the morning that he learned that **Kaponga** appeared to have been evacuated. The tone of the **Korps'** diary suggests that the succeeding few minutes were rather stormy. The diary notes: 'It is regarded of the utmost importance that an immediate thrust be made so as to get a firm grip on the strong-point. This thrust, however, could not be ordered by **Afrika Korps** as, up to the present, the policy has been to defend the present southern front and to strengthen it by further mining. The long-range intentions of Army were unknown to **Afrika Korps**; moreover, the previous evening, Army had expressly approved the despatch of our strong recce troop to this place.' ¹

Rommel's annoyance brought prompt action, for within ten minutes of his call coming in, *Afrika Korps* ordered *21 Division* to form an advanced guard from the troops at *Mreir* and push it forward to *Kaponga*, covered by artillery. The task was defined as the 'capture of the enemy strong-point which appears to be lightly held.' Shortly afterwards, the division reported that its recce unit operating at the box 'has retired to the north under pressure of superior enemy forces.' On this, and possibly spurred by Rommel's interest in the box, Nehring went to *21 Division* to adjust details of the operations of the advanced guard.

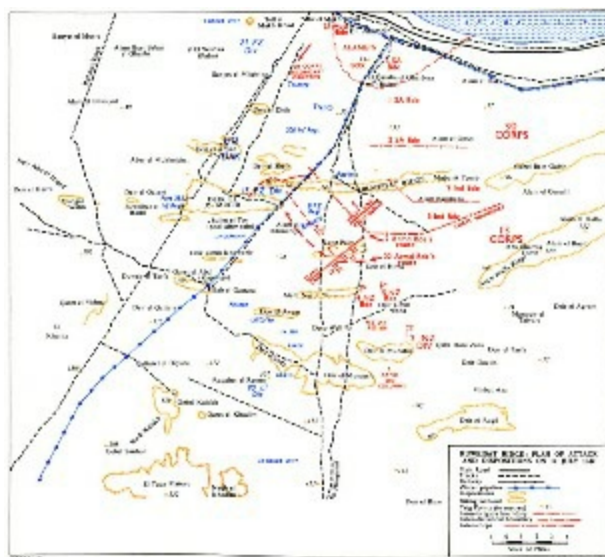
The third act in the comedy opened at ten o'clock when Rommel arrived at the *Korps*' battle headquarters and, according to the diarist, 'starts nagging because the enemy strong-point is still not occupied.' He took over the telephone and personally ordered *21 Division* to attack *Kaponga* at eleven o'clock, with the support first of a howitzer battery from the Army artillery and later of three batteries of captured guns. He also demanded a report from the division on why it had not occupied the strongpoint in accordance with the orders issued just on midnight.

On Rommel's departure the *Korps*' staff officer in charge of operations varied the orders by bringing *Littorio Division* into the picture, with instructions to operate against the box from the west. And then Nehring on his return from *21 Division* added the weight of another German battle group and co-ordinated the operations of flanking formations.

So it came about that late in the morning and throughout the afternoon, *21 Panzer Division* and *Littorio Armoured Division*, directed by *Afrika Korps Headquarters* and supported by Stukas and part of the German army heavy artillery, rolled forward and carried out a full-scale attack with engineers, infantry, and tanks against the

¹ *Afrika Korps*' diary, 9 July.

empty fortress. Most of the operation was done by *21 Division*, which complained that *Littorio* was slow in moving. *Afrika Korps* ordered *21 Division* to make a left hook against the box. The attack was developed by *5 Panzer Regiment* and *3 Battalion* of *Rifle Regiment 104* against the eastern and southern faces, while *1 Battalion* was deployed against the outer defences near the *Qattara* track and *2 Battalion* against the northern segment. Under cover of the artillery, the engineers lifted mines and blew and cut gaps in the wire, after which the infantry assaulted. At 6.15 the division reported that the strongpoint had been taken, 'with the enemy falling back to the east.'¹



Ruweisat Ridge: plan of attack and dispositions on 14 July 1942

Logical reasons other than those pertaining to the human frailties ever present in battle cannot be found for persisting with an armoured corps' attack in full detail on the abandoned fortress. Possibly *Afrika Korps* and *Panzerarmee Headquarters* could see no apparent reason why the box should be evacuated and therefore decided to take precautions against surprise. But *21 Division* knew from its patrol report of the previous evening that the British had gone. Even if this report was discounted, there is the overriding fact noted in the division's diary: 'At 1250 hours [1.50 p.m. British Army time] the foremost lines have reached the wire obstacle of the strong-point. It seems that the enemy has vacated the fortification.'² It seems also that a corporal's patrol

could have verified this impression and thus avoided another five hours' waste of time and substance in attacking a box from which there was not the slightest sign of resistance.

Fifth Brigade and **7 Motor Brigade's** March Column had grandstand seats for this exhibition of enemy tactics in assault. During the morning the **6 Brigade** rear party had been relieved by a detachment from **21 Battalion** under Major McElroy, pending the arrival of the **7 Motor Brigade** column. When the enemy was seen closing the box, the artillery trucks carrying ammunition and the troops were sent out of the area, while McElroy withdrew to a good vantage point to watch developments. The attack was attributed to Italian bravado against a position known to be empty and was enjoyed as a piece of comic relief. No one had any idea that the operation had been ordered by Rommel and had been carried out mainly by the veteran *21 Division*, or that the 'capture' of the box was regarded by *Panzerarmee* as a decisive event which precluded further efforts by Eighth Army to turn the flank.

After its 'capture' **Kaponga** was given to the custody of *Littorio Division* and *Recce Detachment 580*, while *21 Division* regrouped under orders to advance to the **Alamein-Munassib** tracks. The route

¹ *21 Panzer Division* diary, 9 July.

² Ibid.

prescribed for the division was through **Deir el Angar**, and thus between **5 Brigade** and the Divisional Cavalry screen. Its objective was the area between **4 Brigade** and the **Divisional Reserve Group** south of **Alam Nayil** to that occupied by Divisional Headquarters. *Afrika Korps'* headquarters battle group, Lindemann, was put under the division's command in **Deir Umm Khawabir**, north-east of **Kaponga**, to guard the left flank of the attack, on which there was a gap of about five miles to the nearest units of *Brescia Division*. In the south, *90 Light Division's*

battle group Marcks, with a battalion from *Trieste Division* under command, and *Recce Detachments 33 and 3* were ordered to push eastwards through and south of **Gebel Kalakh** to prolong the line on *21 Division's* objective.

Rommel did not press the advance that night. He halted it at last light with orders to resume the march at dawn. When *21 Division* went into laager south-east of **Kaponga**, it claimed that *Rifle Regiment 104* had pushed strong standing patrols far in advance. It was probably these patrols which probed into **Deir el Angar** and, with mortar fire, forced A Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry to withdraw slightly. The division's situation report also suggests it was in contact with March Column to the north-west of **5 Brigade**.

In the advance from **Mreir** to **Kaponga**, *21 Division* left half of *5 Panzer Regiment* to operate towards **Alam Nayil**. These tanks, with some infantry in trucks, were seen about midday moving across the Division's northern front. By two o'clock some of the tanks reached the ridges north of **Alam Nayil**, close enough to threaten the infantry with Freddy Column. Under fire of the New Zealand guns, the tanks withdrew, **4 Field Regiment** claiming two Mark IIIs destroyed. The only other enemy activity in the neighbourhood was an attack on **4 Brigade** by a formation of Ju88 bombers at dusk, in which three men were killed and some trucks destroyed.

For the night New Zealand and 1 Armoured Divisions were given harassing roles to distract the enemy's attention from the northern sector, on which **30 Corps** was to attack in the early hours of the morning. New Zealand Division was ordered to produce maximum harassing and observed artillery fire on the front between the **Alamein-Munassib** track and **Mreir** up to nine o'clock, after which **1 Armoured Division** would harass and patrol along **Ruweisat Ridge**. The artillery fire was then to be confined to the west and south-west of **Mreir** in conjunction with similar bombardments further south by the **7 Armoured** and **5 Indian Division** columns. The fire of these columns was to be intensified for half an hour after midnight as part of the deception

plan.

New Zealand Division was also ordered to harass the enemy with patrols. Daylight reconnaissances were made, and after dark 4 and 5 Brigades each sent out three patrols of an officer with four or five other ranks and some sappers in trucks. Fourth Brigade's patrols penetrated as far as **Alam el Dihmaniya** and those of **5 Brigade** reached the eastern edge of **El Mreir**. Newly dug infantry and gun positions told four of the patrols where the enemy had been, but only two of them found where he was then. The 21st Battalion's patrol, commanded by Lieutenant **Trounson**,¹ located an Italian gun position which it rushed. It was busy inflicting casualties when small-arms fire from other gun positions compelled it to withdraw. The patrol from **22 Battalion** was fired on, but the approach of daylight and the distance to be travelled to its trucks prohibited investigation.

The patrols were hampered in their operations by the flares dropped by **Royal Air Force** bombers in the area ahead of the Division's forward defended localities. In the fluid fighting of the period, the tactical bombing squadrons had great difficulty in distinguishing friend and foe, especially at night. To assist them the Division put out guiding lights made from petrol tins set in a 'V' which was directed towards the enemy. The lights were much appreciated by the bombing formations.²

¹ **Lt R. D. Trounson**, MC; Bulls; born **Dargaville**, 1 Oct 1916; farmer; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

² As a postscript to the record of the day's events, it may be added that it was on 9 July that 'Captain (Hon.) Major, No. 1 Dog', belonging to **19 Battalion**, had to be evacuated to **4 Field Ambulance** advanced dressing station for treatment of a gunshot wound he had received five days earlier. At the dressing station his field medical card noted him as, 'Comfortable; do not disturb. Leave to lick wound. Evacuate when possible to MDS [Main Dressing Station].' At the MDS he was reported to be still comfortable and was directed to be attached to the cookhouse

for rations until he could be evacuated to the base at **Maadi**.

Rumour later reached the Division that Major, like other veteran front-line soldiers sent to the base, transgressed the camp rules and was court-martialled and reduced in rank. Another rumour had it that his life was cut short at **Maadi** by a 3-ton truck. Major, however, survived **Maadi** and its temptations and moved with the Division to **Italy**. He died of pneumonia at **Rimini**.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 19 – BATTLE OF TELL EL EISA

CHAPTER 19

Battle of Tell el Eisa

ROMMEL'S satisfaction with his progress and prospects in the south was dimmed on 10 July when **30 Corps** broke into his defences in the north. He lost the **Tell el Eisa** mounds and, with them, artillery command of the **Alamein** Box. Eighth Army could now fire its guns into *Panzerarmee's* headquarters area and had a salient from which it might debouch into *Panzerarmee's* rear. The reverses were offset somewhat by the fact that in the late afternoon and next day the attack was halted and the line stabilised, Eighth Army thus being denied opportunity to exploit its success.

These physical results of the battle, although serious to the enemy, were not beyond repair. The worst feature, from Rommel's point of view, was the revelation that his Italian formations were no longer able to hold their positions. *Sabrata Division* either surrendered or fled to the rear when attacked by the Australians. A battalion of *Trieste Division* was overrun and wiped out.

The first consequence of this revelation was that 'Panzerarmee was forced to call off its very promising attack in the southern sector.' It had then to accept as an obvious conclusion 'that in future the German formations, weak in strength though they might be, would have to bear the brunt of the fighting alone.'¹

Thirtieth Corps' final plan for the operation required the Australians to advance roughly five miles along the coast road from **Alamein** Box to the area north of **Tell el Eisa** station, and then secure **Tell el Eisa** feature and the railway line south of the axis of advance. The South Africans were given two 15-metre contour features opposite the south-western segment of the box as their first objectives. From the line thus gained, both divisions were to exploit automatically into the enemy's gun and headquarters area on the rising ground on either side of Sanyet el Miteiriya. A raiding party of Stuart tanks and armoured cars was

attached to the Australians for operations against **Daba** landing grounds and the enemy workshops in the **Sidi Abd el Rahman** area.

A second phase of the battle envisaged full-scale operations to be ordered by **30 Corps** with all available forces against objectives to be decided later. Thirteenth Corps was warned that it might have

¹ *Panzerarmee* battle report, 11 July.

an active part in the second phase, and on 9 July New Zealand Division was once again told to hold itself ready to carry out Operation **SEEDLING**, the outflanking advance to **Daba** and Rahman.

In the event, there was no automatic exploitation and consequently no second phase. The course of the battle is succinctly outlined in *Panzerarmee's* battle report:

A reinforced brigade of the enemy with tank support attacked Sabrata Division north of the coast road after a very heavy bombardment lasting an hour. The Italian troops in this sector (whose artillery appeared to consist only of a light battery and a heavy unit) either surrendered or fled to the rear. Sabrata Division was almost completely wiped out or captured and lost all of its artillery except the heavy unit.

The first line of resistance to be established was only three kilometres south-east of Army Battle Headquarters [on the coast near **Ras el Shaqiq**] ¹ where machine-guns and anti-aircraft guns of Army Headquarters and elements of Infantry Regiment 382 (just arriving along the coast road) went into position. The enemy was stopped from penetrating further along the coast road. It was most unfortunate that this headlong flight allowed the enemy to advance so fast that Long Range Recce Company 621 was destroyed almost entirely.

To restore the situation the Commander-in-Chief brought up a

hastily-formed battle-group of 15 Panzer Division and his headquarters' battle-group [Kampstaffel Kiehl]. This force was to attack the enemy's [30 Corps'] southern flank and cut him off from **Alamein** fortress. The battle-groups advanced to the attack about midday [against the South Africans on their captured contour features actually about three o'clock] but made very slow progress because of terrific shellfire from **Alamein** fortress. Two battalions of Trieste Division were brought forward to seal off the enemy penetration to the south and south-west [in the Miteiriya area].

Early next morning the enemy [**24 Australian Brigade**] again attacked [Tell el Eisa feature] after a very heavy preliminary bombardment. In this attack two Bersaglieri strongpoints, which had held firm the previous day, fell very soon. A battalion of **Trieste** which was committed to plug a gap was overrun and wiped out. This made the situation so serious that almost the whole of the Army artillery had to be committed in the northern sector. Before evening all the other battalions of Trieste Division were brought forward to the Point 21 area [west of Tell el **Makh Khad**] to seal off the advance. Recce Detachment 3 [transferred from the southern sector the day before] was moved into the area south-west of Point 23 [Tell el Eisa] to prevent the enemy from breaking through to the west.

As far as **13 Corps** could perceive, the attack on 10 July had no immediate repercussions on the enemy in the southern sector. Both sides were awakened before dawn by the cannonading in the north, which veterans of the First World War in **Afrika Korps** said was 'even stronger than the drumfire of the West Front.'² Shortly after

¹ In the early hours of 10 July Rommel was at **Kaponga**, to which he summoned his headquarters' battle group for orders. He then called at **Afrika Korps'** battle headquarters and from there went to Sanyet el Miteiriya, where the hastily formed battle group of **15 Division** was to meet him. The interpolations in square brackets have been made by the author to clarify the

battle report.

² *Afrika Korps'* diary, 10 July.

daylight the enemy in the south was again on the move to create what has been described as a stormy and thoroughly harassing day, during which there were constant warnings of imminent assault and reports of enemy movements on all sides. ¹ The enemy's records show that he was equally confused and harassed by the day's events.

The *5th Panzer Regiment's* eastern wing was the first to show up against New Zealand Division. This force had approached **Alam Nayil the previous afternoon and had withdrawn towards **Alam el Dihmaniya** under the fire of **4 Field Regiment**. Soon after daylight it again advanced on **Alam Nayil** from Dihmaniya with a strength reported as twenty light tanks, followed at a distance by thirty to forty heavier armoured vehicles and lorried infantry. The estimated armoured strength was roughly twice that of *21 Division*, which bedded down the previous night with only thirty-two tanks all told. ²**

The New Zealanders had only artillery observation posts on **Alam Nayil ridge. These were vacated on the approach of the enemy, who went to ground on the ridge with his tanks well dispersed in hulldown positions. His intentions were not clear, but it seemed to the New Zealanders that he was either consolidating the position or preparing an attack. A little later enemy light tanks probed to the east of **Alam Nayil**. They were opposed by carriers, and then 4 and 5 Field Regiments put down regimental concentrations which appeared to halt any further attempt to advance.**

****Alam Nayil**, however, was the wing's objective. It had been told to seize the ridge and remain there at the disposal of *21 Division*, which regarded the capture of the feature as an essential preliminary to the advance of the main body. At 7.10 a.m. the wing reported that it had taken the ridge and that it was under severe artillery fire. It also asked**

where the next attack would be launched. During the next hour it supplied the division with the information that thirty to forty British tanks supported by artillery were operating on its left front, and that infantry positions with anti-tank and field-gun support had been encountered on the higher ground south of **Alam Nayil**. The division was informed that the tank attack could not be continued without strong artillery support. On this the wing was instructed not to continue the attack, but to hold its positions with a flexible defence and to avoid casualties.

The enemy remained on **Alam Nayil** until early afternoon when, under an artillery and bombing attack, he withdrew slightly to the north-west. In the late afternoon, tanks of **1 Armoured Division** came across New Zealand Division's front and cleared the ridge.

Events were not so sharply defined on the Division's western flank

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 153.

² *21 Division* tank return, 9 July, showed 29 Mark II and III tanks, 1 Mark IV, 1 Mark IV Special, and 1 command tank.

where the main position, **Deir Alinda**, was held by **5 Brigade**, with A and B Squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry providing a screen to the north, west, and south-west. March Column of **7 Motor Brigade** was between **5 Brigade** and **Kaponga**, July was south-west of the brigade, and August and April still further south. The active enemy comprised *21 Division*, less *5 Panzer's* eastern wing, *90 Light Division* and *Recce Detachment 33*. *Littorio Division* took no part in the day's fighting.

The New Zealanders thought little of **7 Motor Brigade's** 'monthly' columns with their roving commissions, and the hit-and-run tactics imposed on them. It seems, however, that **5 Brigade** owed much of its immunity from serious attack on the morning of 10 July to the operations of March Column, and possibly also of July Column.

The *21st Panzer Division's* main body moved at daylight with the intention of passing through **Deir Alinda** to Deep Well. This route was a little to the south of the axis of advance prescribed the previous day, and may have been chosen to avoid the British forces with whom there had been a brush in **Deir el Angar**. Within two miles of its start line, *Rifle Regiment 104* reported that it was engaged in a skirmish with British reconnaissance troops, and an hour later, at 8.25, that *1 Battalion* was pinned down in front of a strongpoint.

Fifth Brigade's first contact with the enemy was shortly after ten o'clock when lorried infantry, supported by three tanks, approached **23 Battalion** in the brigade's eastern sector. This small force, which was easily driven off by the gunners of **6 Field Regiment**, was probably *5 Panzer Regiment's* advanced guard. The encounter is not recorded by *21 Division* in its diary, although an earlier entry against an appeal from the rifle regiment for tank support notes that 'it would appear the Panzer Regiment has moved very far to the east.'

It may be inferred that March Column's resistance, the encounter with **23 Battalion**, and the reconnaissances of the previous evening gave *21 Division* the impression that there was a strongpoint of considerable size from **Deir el Angar** to **Deir Alinda** and on to the high ground to the west between the depressions. *Afrika Korps'* report to *Panzerarmee* that night supports the inference. The report says: '21st Division's attack was halted by an apparently reinforced enemy group in dug-in positions and by heavy shellfire west and north-east of **Deir el Angar**. During the afternoon the division swung out to the south and launched a new attack in conjunction with 90 Light Division which was advancing from east of Qattaret el Diyura towards **Raqabet el Retem**.' ¹

¹ *Afrika Korps'* messages out, 10 July.

This concentration of force to the south-west was seen by **5 Brigade** when the midday heat haze dissipated. During the morning the brigade

had heard desultory shelling to the south and conflicting reports of attacks and intentions to attack **El Taqa**. Then, early in the afternoon, **Divisional Headquarters** reported having intercepted a wireless message from Rommel to *90 Light Division* urging it to advance. ¹ The concentration, the intercepted message confirming the presence of *90 Light Division*, and the knowledge that there were only scanty British forces to the south suggested a danger of the brigade being cut off from the rest of the Division. There was an additional anxiety in the fact that all the brigade's guns, in accordance with the **13 Corps** order, had been sited to fire to the north towards **Ruweisat Ridge**.

A serious attack was not developed against **5 Brigade** although there were some exciting moments. B Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, which was patrolling the area south-west of **5 Brigade**, came under fire and attempted to lure the enemy tanks into range of the New Zealand guns. A platoon of machine-gunners on trucks was taken out by the brigade commander to engage a *90 Light Division* column of armoured cars, guns, and lorries which was making a swift advance along the foot of the plateau. The machine guns opened fire at 3000 yards but had to withdraw to the brigade area under the fire of enemy field guns which switched on to the brigade positions at six o'clock. Under the counter-bombardment of **6 Field Regiment** and 64 Medium Battery, the enemy fire died down. An enemy patrol which came within 2000 yards of **21 Battalion** suggested the imminence of an infantry attack and the brigade stood-to in its defences. However, nothing more happened, and with the fall of night all was again quiet.

New Zealand Division considered the attacks of 10 July lacked direction and vigour and that the quiet at dusk was due to the Germans believing they had gone far enough for the day. The impressions were well founded.

Shortages of equipment, particularly transport, and of personnel beset the Germans. On 10 July they were subjected to the additional trials of absentee direction, confusion of ideas and plans, undue apprehensions concerning the strength of the opposition, and what *90*

***Light Division* bluntly described as ‘bad unit leadership.’²**

Rommel's presence at **Kaponga** in the early morning suggests that he intended to direct the operations personally. His rapid move to

¹ ***90 Division* diary for 10 July records: ‘A most urgent Army order 1240 hours [1.40 p.m. British time] insists “Forward ! Continue the attack ! Reach the objectives!” The Divisional Commander goes forward himself to get the attack going again.’**

² ***90 Light Division* diary, 10 July.**

the north and his call for German formations to plug the gaps and to counter-attack **30 Corps** also suggest that he was aware of the danger on the coast, and that the threat would demand his personal attention. In the circumstances, he would have been well advised to have given command of the southern sector to General Nehring of ***Afrika Korps***. Instead, while he was attending to details in the north, he also attempted to direct the operations of ***90 Light Division*** and ***Recce Detachment 33*** in the distant south.

Rommel's order to ***90 Light Division*** to reach its objective conflicted with an earlier instruction given to ***Afrika Korps***. The division's objective was the **Alamein- Himeimat** track south of Munassib, where it was to prolong the line to be reached by ***21 Panzer Division***. At 11.45 a.m., that is two hours before Rommel's exhortation to ***90 Light Division***, ***21 Division*** issued as a general instruction: ‘After today's objectives have been reached troops will go over to the defensive. Reconnaissance in a south-easterly, easterly and north-easterly direction; contact will be made with both neighbours.’¹ The authority for the order is not stated in the division's diary, but the division is hardly likely to have changed an offensive to a defensive on its own initiative.

An hour later, however, ***Afrika Korps*** sent the following order to ***21***

Division: 'According to Army instructions we are to form a definite eastern front in co-operation with 90th Light Division. It is not, therefore, absolutely necessary, but desirable to reach the objective west of **Deir Umm Aisha [**Alamein- Himeimat** track]. The north-south line held is to be defended, wired and mined. Material for this will be taken from the captured strongpoints.'** ²

This order was probably confirmation and amplification of a verbal message to *21 Division* on which the division's general instruction was issued. Be this as it may, it was unlikely to encourage the troops in brushing aside the opposition to reach the objective. In the event, *21 Division* made no real effort to come to grips with **5 Brigade in **Deir Alinda** or to bypass the position by a wide outflanking move.**

Besides the bad unit leadership, *90 Light Division* attributed its lack of success to supply difficulties which held up the battle groups for many hours without fuel, ammunition, and water. These difficulties were created by the destruction through bombing and artillery fire of considerable numbers of the groups' vehicles, and the inability of the division's supply column to reach the area before the evening of 10 July. Consequently, the division's diary notes, the attack 'progressed only hesitatingly and spasmodically. Had the attack been carried out with more energy, it would have been

¹ ***21 Panzer Division* diary, 10 July.**

² ***Afrika Korps*' messages out, 10 July, and *21 Division* diary.**

possible to drive the enemy units operating in the southern sector to the east.' ¹

The division, however, found some consolation for its inability to win through to its objective. A postscript to the diary of 10 July says: 'As the position on 11 and 12 July shows it was actually a good thing that

90th Light did not reach its prescribed objectives on 10 July as otherwise it would have had its supply routes cut by enemy forces from the north and from the south.' ²

On the British side on 10 July, Gott was more interested in preparations for co-operation with 30 Corps' automatic exploitation than in the enemy advance on his front. On his daily visit to New Zealand Divisional Headquarters, he outlined his intentions and the further regrouping of 13 Corps which would be required. The plan called for an attack on Ruweisat Ridge by New Zealand and 1 Armoured Divisions. Inglis recorded later that at this stage when the enemy was weak the operation was easy and advisable, but he had told Gott he did not consider it practicable against thickened-up enemy without close support by the armour. He had then asked if he could have tanks under his command. Gott replied that none was available and that 1 Armoured Division had been trained to act independently and not in close co-operation with infantry. ³

This was the first hint of the Ruweisat operations which were to prove disastrous to the Division. At this stage, however, the attack was to be merely a disconcerting operation in conjunction with the main operation—the automatic exploitation into the enemy's rear by 30 Corps which was to pave the way for a second phase still to be decided. The Battle of Ruweisat became Eighth Army's chief operation only when that at Tell el Eisa failed to achieve all the expected results.

Apart from the corps' project, Inglis considered it desirable to bring the Division closer together. Gott ordered him to concentrate east of the Alamein- Himeimat track, with the Division's left flank on Deir el Munassib and its right on the western edge of Deir el Tarfa. That night, on a route plotted and lighted by the Divisional Provost Company, 5 Brigade moved north-east to the right flank and 4 Brigade adjusted its defences to cover the now open western approaches. Divisional Headquarters established itself on the northern edge of Deir el Muhafid and the Reserve Group moved to a position south-east of headquarters.

The Division's immediate role in the new sector required it to harass the enemy with mobile groups and thus control the south-

¹ *90 Light Division diary, 10 July.*

² *Ibid.*

³ *Major-General Inglis' diary, 14 July.*

west face of **Deir el Hima**, and to cover the approaches to **Point 102** to the north-east where **1 Armoured Division** was to assemble. The Division's southern and south-western flanks were watched by the **7 Armoured Division** columns which also were moved east of the **Himeimat** track.

This reorganisation marked the close of the Division's peregrinations in the southern sector. In whole or in part, the Division had been on the move almost continuously since its arrival on the **Alamein** Line on 28 June. The movements had been confusing and, in some degree, disheartening because they had failed to produce apparent material results. No one in the Division had a complete picture of Eighth Army's plans and dispositions, let alone those of the enemy. The Division's sense of frustration and its appreciation of the general situation were expressed by General Inglis in a letter to **General Freyberg** written on 11 July:

Gott of XIII Corps is very good, but the strategic direction of the show as a whole beats me and I think Gott agrees. Since we came into the **Alamein** line I have had orders to go to **Daba** and another time to Sidi Abd el Rahman to exploit attacks by XXX Corps. Those are the occasions on which I probed north-west but on neither occasion was there the slightest possibility of exploiting to the named places because the lastmentioned Corps provided nothing to exploit.

Both sides' conception of 'attack' seems to be to shoot with artillery and stop when suitably shot up. The only trouble is that our (not NZ) mobile columns when approached have eastward leanings all the time. These columns are too weak in infantry, rather tired and have been retreating too long. They are scattered all over the landscape so that their own divisional headquarters never seem to know where they are or just what they are doing.

After mentioning the destruction of *Ariete* and the enemy advances in the southern sector, Inglis' letter continued:

The Australian punch seems to me to have taken a wrong direction comparatively harmless to the enemy—perhaps even advantageous to him—and not at all the sort of thing we understood it was going to be. It was eccentric from us and gave us no chance to cooperate effectively from nearly 20 miles away....

The troops (NZ) are in good fettle. Every time we have had a go at anything it has come off. What we want now is the general battle decently tied up to give us a chance of doing something decisive....

Information from aloft is scanty and late. I get most of ours personally from Gott, and they seem to leave him a bit vague....

I feel very much that we need a commander who will make a firm plan, leave his staff to implement it, crash through with it; and once the conception is under way move about the battlefield himself and galvanize the troops who are looking over their shoulders. I think our arrival and initial performance did a lot to put heart into people, but, unless more is done, the effect won't last. I feel that penny packets of enemy who could easily have been destroyed, have been allowed to make progress instead and that time has been frittered away over and over again.

The letter leaves the impression that Inglis, like many other commanders and staff officers who served under Gott, was susceptible to

his charm and confident manner. Nevertheless it is remarkable for its clear perception of Eighth Army's condition and needs when these were obscure not only to the enemy but in Eighth Army itself.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 20 – ARMIES SPAR FOR POSITIONS

CHAPTER 20

Armies Spar for Positions

IN the main, both armies on 11 July sparred for positions from which to deal decisive blows.

On **30 Corps'** front, **24 Australian Brigade** and a squadron of **44 Royal Tank Regiment** attacked **Tell el Eisa** at first light and completed the capture of the feature about midday with some 350 Italian prisoners. The strongpoint was consolidated and held against counter-attacks, after which the enemy appeared to with-draw to the west and south. Also during the morning, a column from **20 Australian Brigade** with a squadron from **6 Royal Tank Regiment** attacked out of **Alamein Box** on the track to **Sanyet el Miteiriya**. Near **Bir el Makh Khad** the column met heavy artillery fire and lost four guns and three tanks. The Australians withdrew into the box, but the tanks patrolled outside until early evening.

In the afternoon the South Africans sent a column of infantry, guns, armoured cars, and Valentine and Matilda tanks from the southern sector of the box toward Miteiriya. The enemy inflicted considerable casualties with shelling and bombing and the column retired to the box. Another attack by a South African infantry battalion through the **Alamein** gap was also stopped by the enemy.

At three o'clock Ramsden advised Army that although consolidation was well in hand it was not likely to be completed before night. Therefore, his proposed exploitation to Miteiriya and **Deir el Dhib** could not be made that night.

In the meantime, Gott made preliminary moves for an attack by **13 Corps** over **Ruweisat Ridge** to **Deir el Abyad**, where he hoped to join hands with **30 Corps'** exploitation forces. At first light on the 11th, **2 Armoured Brigade** completed the occupation of the **Alam Nayil** feature. With this position firmly in hand, Gott called on Inglis at midday with orders for New Zealand and 1 Armoured Divisions to secure a start line

running north-east from **Alam Nayil** to a point on **Ruweisat Ridge** three-quarters of a mile east of the junction of the northern extension of **Barrel track** and the eastern **Alamein- Himeimat** track. The start line, with **New Zealand Division** on the left, was to be secured immediately.

In the second phase of the operation to be known as **BACON**, a name which will recur frequently, **New Zealand Division** would be required to secure a bridgehead on **Ruweisat** at **Point 63**, a feature about half a mile south of **Deir el Shein** overlooking that depression and about a mile north of the eastern end of the **Mreir** depression. In a third exploitation phase, **1 Armoured Division** would attack from the bridgehead to **Deir el Abyad**.

Gott said that the times for the second and third phases would be fixed later. Whether they would be carried out would depend entirely on **30 Corps'** exploitation and the progress it made. He thought that **BACON** might be fought that night or at first light next morning.

Inglis considered the idea was sound if **30 Corps** created the necessary favourable situation by its intended exploitation. But he was disturbed by the vagueness of Gott's plans. He pressed Gott for support from the armour, especially to cover the **Division's** left flank in its advance to **Point 63** and to sustain the **Division** on the objective during consolidation.

Gott considered Inglis overestimated the risks and difficulties but he conceded in principle that the **Division** should have armoured support for its advance. This was defined in a subsequent instruction ¹ as 'full fire support and flank protection from **1 Armd Div.**' Although Inglis was not told at the time, Gott's and Lumsden's notion of this support and protection was that **1 Armoured Division** should wait in readiness on the start line until either enemy counter-action developed or it was decided whether and how the armour should be launched on its exploitation task.

Gott's information concerning the enemy on the ridge and in its

neighbourhood was extremely scanty. Army and **13 Corps** believed that only **15 Panzer Division** was holding the ridge, with **Trieste** and **Pavia Divisions** to its west.

Rommel, however, had been paying special attention to the defences of the ridge. He had put **Pavia** astride the crest of the ridge, facing east, and **Brescia** on the approaches, facing south-east and south. To the west of **Brescia** and connecting that division with the area occupied by **21 Panzer Division**, he put part of the German **382 Infantry Regiment**, newly arrived from **Crete**. Direct command of this front was given to **15 Panzer Division**, which was made responsible for seeing the Italians into their positions, strengthening the posts with some German troops, and for siting its artillery so that it could cover the approaches to the defences. All the positions were to be mined and wired, again under the supervision of **15 Division**, which was told explicitly that it must not withdraw into a supporting position until this work was done.

When Gott was issuing his orders, **Pavia**, **Brescia**, and **382 Regiment** were firmly placed, and **15 Panzer Division's** tanks were

¹ **13 Corps'** message No. 96 issued at 2.10 p.m. on 11 July in confirmation of Gott's verbal orders.

behind **Brescia** between Ruweisat and **Alam el Dihmaniya**, close to the western **Alamein- Himeimat** track. The division had about twelve tanks, the remainder having been sent north the previous day as a battle group against the Australians and South Africans. Part of the army artillery between **Deir el Shein** and Abyad and some German engineers and headquarters troops in the neighbourhood of **Point 63** gave depth to the defence.

This was not all. The mobile forces operating under **Afrika Korps** were also handy while Gott was arranging his attack. The **5th Panzer Regiment**, with practically all of **21 Division's** thirty tanks, was in a series of small depressions west-north-west of **Alam Nayil**, roughly half-

way to **Kaponga**, and Lindemann battle group from *Afrika Korps Headquarters*, which had been operating with the regiment, was about two miles further east below **Alam Nayil**. *Littorio* was near **Kaponga**. In the south, advancing towards New Zealand Division's rear, *90 Light Division* with *Recce Detachment 33* under command was at **El Taqa**, **Gebel Kalakh**, and **Kaponga**.

Rommel appears to have suspected that the British might make a thrust at Ruweisat while he was engaged in the north. Shortly after midnight on 10–11 July he sent orders to *15 Panzer Division* that, 'If the enemy makes a thrust the division will counter-attack on its own initiative. Any thrust, even by a superior force, must be halted. Fifth Panzer Regiment is also ready to operate in the gap [between the right flank of the fixed positions on Ruweisat and *21 Division's* area centred on **Kaponga**].

Similar orders were sent to *21 Division*, which Rommel contemplated diverting to the northern sector. The division was instructed to cover **Kaponga** with a mobile group, site *5 Panzer Regiment* in the gap, to counter-attack on its own initiative, and to keep in close contact with *Brescia* and *15 Divisions*.

Eighth Army, of course, could not be expected to know Rommel's orders, but it is a matter for comment that its information concerning a sector he had been strengthening for a week was so vague and that Gott was so ready to dismiss Inglis' suspicions and apprehensions. In view of these, it might be surprising that Inglis did not ask for more detailed planning and co-ordination of the operation but for the fact that he doubted whether the Division would be called on for BACON that night. The purpose of the operation, like that of each of the other moves made by the Division since it arrived at **Alamein**, was represented to him as being to assist, or poise himself to exploit, offensive operations by **30 Corps**. This 'condition precedent' had not been fulfilled before and he did not think it would be on the present occasion. However, he welcomed the revival of the offensive spirit and thought that at that stage he should not do anything to restrain it. No harm would be done in securing the

start line. Subsequent events would depend on developments in which he would have a decisive voice.

Now thoroughly accustomed to quick changes in plans and orders, taking up and abandoning positions, packing up and embussing, 4 and 5 Brigades commenced their move at five o'clock. On the right with three to five miles to go, **5 Brigade** had **22 Battalion** in the lead, 23 to the left rear, and 21 in reserve. Fourth Brigade on the left was led by **20 Battalion**, with 28 to the right rear and 19 to the left rear.

Enemy reaction to the advance confirmed Inglis' suspicions concerning his strength and readiness to resist. Both brigades were heavily shelled on the debussing line, during the remainder of the advance on foot to the start line, and while taking up their positions. The start line was easy to define on the map; the almost featureless terrain made it hard to locate on the ground. The going was uneven and some units became mixed as the truck drivers avoided soft patches. Consequently, there was confusion on the debussing line and again on the start line. All this was visible to the enemy, who put down artillery concentrations and reported that 'the whole of **Brescia's**, Lindemann's and 5th Panzer Regiment's front was attacked by an enemy force of an infantry regiment and at least 40 tanks.' The enemy claimed that the attack was stopped by his artillery.

The *15th Panzer Division's* diary, from which these notes are taken, also records that the 'division expected the attack to be continued later in the night or at first light', and that 'the headquarters liaison officers kept observation over the battlefield.' The diary also notes that application was made for air support, particularly against the British guns. It was probably in response to this appeal that **5 Brigade's** headquarters was bombed shortly before six o'clock.

The advance is described in *Infantry Brigadier*: ¹

We set off in desert formation at 5 p.m., looking very impressive, passed through the tanks who seemed very surprised to see us, and

came under heavy artillery fire. Parts of the Twenty-third on my left and the Maoris on Jim's. [Brigadier Burrows] right had lost direction a little and were mixed up and thickly bunched. The fire was heaviest on this target but heavy all along the front, the enemy gunners thoroughly roused and with the target of their lives. Several trucks were hit and there were many casualties, but we trundled steadily on for another mile. A mile from the assembly position both brigades halted and debussed. The men shook out into long, extended lines and went forward steadily and unflinchingly. It was an archaic sort of movement but it was beautifully done and a fine thing to watch. We did not have a single gun in action; the enemy gunners, unmolested, switched on to the infantry and fired their fastest; but the

¹ p. 157.

men kept their seven paces intervals, never wavered, and trudged on line after line through the spouting bursts. From where I halted, ahead of the transport among some enthusiastic tank officers, I could see the whole of **5 Brigade** and most of **4 Brigade**. The advance went on steadily, disappeared into the wadi in which we were to assemble for the real attack, and halted.

Lieutenant-Colonel Love,¹ commanding the **Maori Battalion**, and his adjutant, Captain **Wood**,² were wounded in the advance, the former succumbing to his injuries some hours afterwards. Major **Baker**³ later took command of the battalion.

At 7.35 the brigades were advised that no further advance would be made that night but that **BACON** might be carried out at first light. Shortly before midnight, Division was advised by **13 Corps** that **30 Corps** would not resume major operations until the following night and that **BACON** would be off until then. In the meantime, the enemy was to be kept 'guessing' and the strongest pressure was to be applied along the front, particularly to the north and west.

Much earlier, however, Inglis had made up his mind that he would have to tell Gott that so far as New Zealand Division was concerned **BACON** could not be carried out that night. The advance to the start line in daylight had telegraphed the punch to the enemy, whose reaction clearly demonstrated that the opposition to an attack would be more in accord with that forecast by Inglis than by Gott. The advance to the start line had also been too long and too late to permit immediate night operations to be mounted. The start line itself was unsatisfactory because it was oblique to the objective. Further, no corps' conference had been held to arrange co-operation between the armour and the Division. The news of the postponement of **BACON** was therefore received with relief.

Nearly three days of suspense in which the Division hovered between offence and defence followed the first postponement of **BACON**. At 8.30 a.m. on the 12th, Division warned the brigades that the assault would almost certainly be made that night and that during the day the enemy was to be harassed with fire. But when Gott at ten o'clock made his customary morning call, both his information and his forecast as to when the next move would be made were vague. As, however, **BACON** was still contemplated, Inglis asked for a corps' conference which Gott held that afternoon at Headquarters New Zealand Division.

This conference had a more than usually decisive bearing on subsequent events. As will be shown in due course, New Zealand

¹ Lt-Col E. Te W. Love, m.i.d.; born Picton, 18 May 1905; interpreter; CO 28 (Maori) Bn May–Jul 1942; died of wounds 12 Jul 1942.

² Capt A. C. Wood, DCM; Wakefield; born Nelson, 24 Aug 1916; Regular soldier; wounded 11 Jul 1942.

³ Lt-Col F. Baker, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; Wellington; born

Kohukohu, Hokianga, 19 Jun 1908; civil servant; CO 28 Bn Jul —Nov 1942; twice wounded; Director of Rehabilitation 1943—54; Public Service Commission 1954—.

Division planned its attack on Ruweisat according to arrangements definitely made at the conference and ordered by Gott. But when the attack was made 13 Corps and 1 Armoured Division operated on almost completely different plans which were not made known to New Zealand Division. This is the key to understanding why disaster fell upon the Division four days later, and why Rommel was able to snatch a victory out of an impending decisive defeat.

Inglis was surprised when he learned the nature of the flank protection and support which Gott and Lumsden contemplated giving the Division. This was that 1 Armoured Division should remain at the start line until either the enemy counter-action developed or it was decided whether and how it was to be launched on its exploitation task. He refused to accept this plan and asked for tanks under the command of his brigades for close co-operation with the infantry. Gott and Lumsden in turn refused the request on the ground that 1 Armoured Division had not been trained in close tank-infantry co-operation.

Inglis thereupon asked that the armour should advance at first light, 22 Armoured Brigade to seal off the New Zealanders' open left flank and 2 Armoured Brigade to close up to the infantry on their objective on the ridge. When Lumsden demurred, Inglis stressed that such action was necessary to clear up any pockets of resistance that might be missed by the infantry in a night advance, and to deal with any enemy tanks that might be bypassed between start line and objective or which might intervene. It was also essential, he insisted, that the British tanks should support the infantry on the ridge against counter-attack while they were consolidating and until the New Zealand artillery closed up. He pointed out that the batteries would not be able to advance and take up supporting positions until daylight, and that in the meantime the infantry on the ridge would be beyond effective artillery cover.

After some discussion, Lumsden agreed to this action on the part of the armour and Gott ordered accordingly. Inglis also raised the question of the start line, a subject which had troubled **Kippenberger** and **Burrows**, but Gott refused to make any change.

These plans had hardly been made when, shortly after four o'clock, **BACON** was again declared off, and the Division was ordered to consolidate its positions in expectation of a stay of two or three days.

The whole of the 13th was devoted to improving the positions on the start line, notably by wider dispersion of units and companies, some of which Inglis considered were too close to each other. He was also concerned with the shallowness of individual posts and ordered that the slit trenches should be made deep enough to permit the men to fire from them standing. The practice of scratching mere depressions and heaping sand and stones around them was a by-product of the Division's constant movement and also of the difficulties of digging. Such cover could be made with comparatively little effort and, generally, was considered sufficient for a stay of a few hours. This attitude to defences was dangerous in that it created a tendency to look upon all positions as temporary until orders to the contrary were received. In the fluid fighting of the desert, the orders might be issued too late to be effective.

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The unexpected lull gave the Division time to attend to its economy. Pay became available, and from the **YMCA** and unit canteens which operated well forward, the troops bought the desert luxuries of chocolate, tinned milk, coffee and milk, and tinned fruit of all kinds, as well as cigarettes and tobacco above the weekly issue. The manner in which the canteens were run and their goods made available to the men in the front line was a feat of organisation and a great builder of morale.

A draft of over 1000 reinforcements from the base at **Maadi** was absorbed. From 27 June, the day of **Minqar Qaim**, up to 11 July no fewer than 888 officers and other ranks had been evacuated as battle casualties and a further 716 as sick, some of the latter later being

classified as battle cases. Although the draft did not restore the Division to full strength, it helped to bring sub-units up to operational strength. General Inglis also ordered **6 Brigade** to return to the Division, with the intention of restoring **18 Battalion** to **4 Brigade** and of providing reliefs.

In spite of considerable artillery activity on both sides, the impression on the 13th was one of relatively peaceful routine made more so by the almost complete absence of air attacks. The Luftwaffe was fully engaged against **Alamein Box**.

Then **BACON** came with a rush.

¹ The German command was concerned with a similar failing in *Panzerarmee*. A few days previously, *Afrika Korps* drew the attention of its units 'to the fact that effective defence requires the construction of positions without regard to the probable duration of the conflict.'— *Afrika Korps*' diary, 5 July.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 21 – PLANNING FOR RUWEISAT

CHAPTER 21

Planning for Ruweisat

THE fighting at **Tell el Eisa** and during the following week gave glimpses of Rommel at his tactical best. To seal the penetrations made by the Australians and South Africans, he had only elements of *382 Infantry Regiment* then arriving on the battle-field, his own headquarters' Kiehl battle group with three or four tanks, *Recce Detachment 3*, part of *Trieste Division*, and *15 Panzer Division's* Kirsten battle group which was sent to the coast with twelve German and two Italian tanks.

These small forces could not recapture the important tactical features that had been lost, but boldness in counter-attacking prevented the Australians and South Africans from exploiting their success. Once again Auchinleck reported: 'I had hoped to be able to exploit this success to the west and south, but the enemy offered strong resistance and I had no reserves available with which to reinforce the attack.' ¹

On the 11th Rommel decided to make a counter-stroke. He ordered *21 Panzer Division* to disengage unobtrusively from the **Kaponga** area, and on the afternoon of the 13th he launched it in successive attacks against **Alamein Box** with the object of cutting off the British forces stretched out to **Tell el Eisa**. All the attacks were preceded by heavy air and artillery bombardment but the defences held firmly. Rommel thought the failure was due to the late arrival of the infantry and he made yet another attack late the next day, the 14th, on the tip of the salient. This also failed.

Rommel's apparent concentration in the northern sector was noted by Auchinleck. He decided in the evening of the 13th that 'on 14 July the situation may become favourable for a counter-stroke.' ² He ordered his two corps commanders to complete arrangements forthwith for an extended 'Operation **BACON**' to be carried out at short notice. Instead of **BACON** being contingent on **30 Corps'** exploitation from the new **Alamein-Tell el Eisa** line, it was now made Eighth Army's main operation.

In the intention paragraph of the Army order, Auchinleck declared the purpose of the operation to be: 'To break through the enemy's

¹ Despatch, p. 365.

² Eighth Army Operation Order, No. 96, 13 July.

centre and destroy his forces east of the track El **Alamein-Abu Dweiss** and north of **Ruweisat Ridge**.' He gave the leading role to **13 Corps**, which was ordered to secure the high ground about **Point 63** by a night attack and then to exploit to the north-west. At the same time, **30 Corps** was to seize the eastern end of **Ruweisat Ridge** to secure **13 Corps'** flank, and also Sanyet el Miteiriya as well as any ground elsewhere on the corps' front as opportunity offered. Gott was ordered to fix the time the infantry of both corps were to arrive on their objectives on the ridge.

Many of the reasons for the failure of the operation, especially the disaster that befell the infantry of New Zealand Division after they had taken their objectives, fall under the heading of wisdom after the event. On the other hand, it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that the project was hastily conceived, loosely coordinated, and abounded in examples of poor staff work on matters which might be supposed to be within the knowledge and experience of those responsible. An appreciation of this background is needed to follow the course of the battle.

Auchinleck's despatch ¹ deals with the fighting on Ruweisat under the prosaic heading: 'Consolidation of the position.' The scale of the operations is further minimised in the despatch by the opening paragraph: 'In order to improve our position against a possible enemy offensive and to set the stage for a further attack on our own part, the Eighth Army maintained its pressure along the whole front.'

Auchinleck's order of 13 July, however, leaves no doubt that a decisive success was sought with **BACON**. The attack might be deemed

maintenance of pressure on the enemy. But it was neither subsidiary to other operations nor preparatory to further battle. Had **BACON** fulfilled the Army Commander's intention as set out in his orders, there would have been nothing left of *Panzerarmee* to fight on the **Alamein Line**.

Although important, this difference between despatch and order concerning the intention is a minor matter when compared with **13 Corps'** interpretation of the object. The Army and also **30 Corps'** orders emphasized the destruction of the enemy. The written orders of **13 Corps** contained no hint of the larger enterprise. The **13 Corps'** orders said merely: ' **13 Corps** will secure Point 64.' ² The objective was not mentioned as a bridgehead from which the armour would issue to smite the enemy. First Armoured Division was not encouraged in the order to play a decisive part in winning the success sought by Auchinleck. Its role, according to the order, was

¹ Despatch, pp. 365–6.

² **13 Corps** Operation Order, No. 140, 14 July. Point 64 is also **Point 63**. See page 224.

to protect the New Zealanders' southern and western flank from first light on 15 July, with exploitation to the north-west 'if a favourable opportunity occurs after first light.'

The order was signed by a subordinate staff officer on behalf of the Brigadier General Staff. Doubt has been raised as to whether Gott saw it. ¹ Be this as it may, the facts are that when Gott called on Inglis at 7.30 a.m. on 14 July he confirmed the general idea and plans made at the conference two days before. The only variation was an intimation that **5 Indian Division** of **30 Corps** would co-operate with an attack on the New Zealanders' right flank. This confirmation led Inglis to note in his diary: 'The whole object of the operation is that we should clear the way up to **Ruweisat Ridge** in order to provide an opportunity for the armour either

to cross the ridge or move round the west end of the ridge to exploit.’

Concerning the protection to be given the Division by the armour, the diary note continues: ‘If the armour does exploit our infantry will be protected against counter-attack by the exploitation. In case exploitation is not possible, an armoured brigade is to be *in close support*² south-west of **4 Brigade** and another *in 5 Brigade area* to protect our infantry against armoured attack *from first light*.’

On this base, that of the decisions at the conference on the 12th and Gott's confirmation on the 14th, New Zealand Division planned the detail of its attack.

If **13 Corps**' written order watered down the Army plan, that issued by **1 Armoured Division**³ emasculated the intention. The information paragraph of this order said: ‘Eighth Army is going to carry out an attack during the night 14/15 July with the object of securing Point 64 feature’, while the intention paragraph ordered: ‘**1 Armoured Division** will co-operate in the attack of the two Corps.’ Instructions to the division's two brigades also fell short of the plan envisaged by Army and arranged at the corps conference. Those to **2 Armoured Brigade** said: ‘**2 Armd Bde** *will be prepared to move* on centre line of the inter-corps boundary with the tasks of (*a*) exploiting success of the N.Z. Div. to the NW; (*b*) countering any counter-attack by the enemy armour against NZ Div which may develop from the NE, North or NW.’ The 22nd Armoured Brigade was also told that it ‘*will be prepared to move*’ on a centre line from **Deir el Hima** to an area between **Alam el Dihmaniya** and **Point 63**⁴

¹ ‘I find it almost incredible that Gott lost sight of the main objective of his own operation and doubt whether he ever saw the “watering down” order issued by his Corps.’—Letter to War Histories from Major-General Inglis, October 1952.

It was also Gott's practice to settle important operational matters with his divisional commanders personally and without any of his staff present. This could easily lead to divergences between his verbal orders and the confirming orders issued later

by his staff.

² Author's italics in all cases.

³ **1 Armoured Division** Operation Instruction No. 15, 14 July.

⁴ The area was precisely defined by map references.

with the task of protecting 'the southern and western flank of the NZ Div attack from first light to 15 Jul, particularly against attack by enemy armed forces.'

In these orders there was no suggestion of urgency or of rallying the division to the task of breaking through Rommel's centre and destroying his forces. In this they reflected **13 Corps'** written order rather than Gott's verbal orders given at the conference on the 12th and confirmed to Inglis on the 14th. Moreover, the instruction to both brigades that they 'will be prepared to move' implied a waiting role and allowed the brigade commanders a discretion which, with fateful consequences, they exercised in the operation.

No one at Eighth Army or at **13 Corps** appears to have noticed the marked differences between the Army and Corps' orders and, at **13 Corps**, the divergences between Gott's verbal orders and those committed to writing by his staff and at **1 Armoured Division**. The New Zealand Division paid a heavy price for this lack of co-ordination. ¹

Information held by Eighth Army and its two corps concerning the enemy varied in quantity and quality. The start line prescribed by the Army order reflected ignorance of the enemy's positions on Ruweisat. The line laid down for **13 Corps** ran hard by one enemy defended locality and through another to join the line for **30 Corps** which was set in rear of an enemy position. In necessary adjustments, Gott left New Zealand Division on the line it had occupied for two to three days, and General Ramsden set the start line for **5 Indian Division** back about a mile on

the left flank.

In the result, both infantry divisions started from much further back and consequently had much further to go in the dark than Auchinleck contemplated. Representations by the New Zealand brigade commanders that the start line should be closer to the enemy were not adopted. The effect on the artillery plan for covering the infantry on their objectives has already been noted. Moreover, the adjusted lines for the two corps did not prolong each other as the Army order intended. Fifth Indian Division's left flank was placed about a mile and a half in advance of the New Zealanders' right. It was perhaps only incidental that 5 Division's operation order gave a start line which projected 500 yards over the inter-corps boundary.

New Zealand Division had pressed for air photographs of the enemy area but they were not available. Some photographs, however, reached the Division at 7 p.m. on the 14th, but due to

¹ The failure in this respect may be attributed to a practice of regarding written orders merely as confirmation of verbal instructions and therefore not calling for detailed study. More importantly, because an operation often started before the written orders were circulated, the written orders were often filed without being examined in detail.

over-exposure there was no detail in the area of the Division's operations. Good photographs might have revealed that enemy posts, located by reconnaissance and fighting patrols, which were thought to be his forward defensive localities constituted in fact his main line of resistance, and that there were no other strong-points between them and the crest of the ridge. The New Zealand Division believed that the whole of Ruweisat and the ground down to **Kaponga** was covered only by **15 Panzer Division** and a few Italian posts. Fifth Indian Division, on the other hand, had been told that *Pavia* and *Brescia Divisions* held the ridge and its approaches, with *15 Panzer* in support. The attacking infantry were expected to make contact with the enemy on a line which

proved to be well behind the defended localities.

Assessments of the enemy tank strength and the dispositions of the armour were also faulty. First Armoured Division's operation order reported *21 Panzer Division's* attacks on **Alamein** Box and then said: '15 Armoured Division is believed to be in the general area north of **Point 63**; ¹ strength in tanks not likely to be more than 35 German tanks. The bulk of the Italian armour is probably in the south with elements included in the German armour as makeweight.' As a fact, less than half of *15 Division*—the Kirsten group withdrawn by Rommel on the 10th to counter the Australian attack—was north of Ruweisat. The remainder of the division with thirteen tanks ² was on the southern slopes of Ruweisat, the tanks being mainly in the area to be traversed by the New Zealand 5th Brigade. The thirty-five tanks credited to the division were nearly the total runners in the whole of *Afrika Korps*. Fifth Indian Division had wrong information concerning the location of *15 Panzer Division*, which its operation order placed vaguely north-west of *Brescia Division*, roughly somewhere beyond New Zealand Division's objectives.

Intelligence was further at fault in not warning the formations of the possibility of error in identifying features in the battle area. The Army had no fewer than five series of maps covering Ruweisat and at least two, possibly more, were used in the operation. Army and **13 Corps'** orders named the infantry objective on Ruweisat as Point 64. The New Zealand Division order gave it as **Point 63**. This was not a clerical error. There were three trigonometrical points on the ridge and their designation varied according to the editions of the maps used, **Point 63** in one edition being Point 64 in another. Map reading in the desert was difficult in any circum-

¹ That is, north of **Ruweisat Ridge** and the infantry objectives.

² Two Mark II, 10 Mark III, 1 Mark IV, 1 command vehicle—*15 Division* tank return, 10 p.m. 14 July.

stances. The task was not made easier when the same features had different numbers or names. ¹

It should be repeated that these notes and observations represent, in the main, wisdom after the event. They are the product of detailed search for the reasons why a promising project went wrong. In their sum they appear to stress the importance of checking plans and orders at all stages to ensure that there are no loose ends. Later Eighth Army, and in it the New Zealand Division, went from success to success as a result of careful planning and preparation of attacks on such positions. Ruweisat did not teach new lessons. It emphasized old ones, at a bitter price.

New Zealand Division made its final preparations for the battle at a divisional conference held by General Inglis at 10 a.m. on the 14th.

The Division was ordered to attack that night on a two-brigade front on a bearing of 320 degrees from the start line. This axis of advance passed close to and east of **Point 63**. Fourth Brigade's objective was defined on the sketch attached to the order as an arc stretching from the south-west corner of **Deir el Shein** to the eastern tip of **El Mreir** and covering about 4000 yards. A similar arc slightly to the east of **Point 63** and about 3000 yards across its chord was defined for **5 Brigade**.

The brigades were ordered to advance on two-battalion fronts with their third battalions in reserve. In compliance with **13 Corps'** orders, they were to make contact with the enemy forward defences at 1 a.m. and to reach their objectives at 4.30 a.m. Each brigade was given a quota of field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, machine-gunners, engineers, and signallers under command so that, in effect, they attacked as brigade groups. It was not intended, however, that they should operate independently in the accepted brigade-group fashion. Direct command was to be exercised by the Divisional Commander. Ruweisat, incidentally, was the first occasion on which the Division attacked as a division, with two brigades shoulder to shoulder and with all the resources of a division at their disposal except a reserve brigade.

General Inglis confirmed earlier proposals that the infantry assault should be made silently. This gave rise to some discussion on the artillery programme, particularly on the question of support for the infantry when they reached their objectives. The Army and Corps' plans for the artillery were designed to deceive the enemy. Up to 9 p.m. on the 14th, the guns of 13 and 30 Corps were to engage in counter-bombardment, or counter-battery, fire,

¹ To avoid confusion the point will be referred to in this narrative as **Point 63**.

a not unusual activity. From 9 p.m. until first light they were to fire normal harassing tasks as if nothing additional were impending. After first light, by which time it was expected the objectives would have been taken, all artillery was to support New Zealand Division under the direction of 13 Corps. The programme was accepted with two amendments—maximum harassing fire up to 9 p.m. and then normal fire until 12.30, when all artillery action would cease.

The conference discussed the risk that, because of the great depth of the advance, the infantry might be supported on their objectives for a time by only part of the artillery firing at nearly maximum range with super-charges. It was agreed that the risk would exist only for a brief space and was not likely to be dangerous because of the advance of the British armour. Nevertheless, as a precaution, specific orders were given that at least two-thirds of the guns should be ready to support the infantry on the objectives at first light. No one, of course, envisaged the possibility that the supporting arms might be prevented from moving forward. The decision reflected the confidence of the infantry in the field regiments. This confidence was not shaken when, as happened, the forward movement of the guns was held up and the infantry were deprived of their support.

As no difficulties were expected with minefields, the engineers were given only a precautionary role in their attachment to brigades. General

Inglis, however, warned **5 Brigade** that a suspected minefield about **Point 63** would have to be investigated and cleared to permit the armour to go through. This warning may be cited as additional evidence of the understanding that the armour would be on hand to break out as soon as **Point 63** was captured.

The conference was told that **5 Indian Division** would attack the ridge on the New Zealanders' right but details of its plans were not available. Fifth Indian Division had been advised only during the previous night that it was to take part in the operation. All of its preparations, including reconnaissance of the battlefield and an inter-brigade relief in the rear area, had to be started from behind scratch. The division's operation order, confirming verbal instructions given to lower formations during the day, was signed at four o'clock, and though a copy was sent to New Zealand Division, it apparently arrived after the advance had started so that the Division entered the fight without knowing the plans and detailed objectives of its neighbour. This lack of knowledge is reflected in General Inglis' diary, which notes that an Indian brigade was to attack along the crest of the ridge from east to west to link with 5 New Zealand Brigade. As a fact, the Indian advance was to be parallel with that of New Zealand Division. The principal elements in the New Zealand order of battle as finally approved were:

Fourth Brigade (Brigadier J. T. Burrows): 18, 19 and 20 Battalions,

4 Field Regiment, 31 Anti-Tank Battery, 41 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery,

6 Field Company, 2 Machine Gun Company, J Section Signals, B Company

4 Field Ambulance.

Fifth Brigade (Brigadier H. K. Kippenberger): 21, 22 and 23 Battalions,

6 Field Regiment, 33 Anti-Tank Battery, 43 Light Anti-Aircraft

Battery,

7 Field Company, 4 Machine Gun Company, K Section Signals, B Company

5 Field Ambulance.

Divisional Reserve Group (Lieutenant-Colonel F. J. Gwilliam): 26 Battalion, Divisional Cavalry Regiment, 5 Field Regiment, 27 Machine Gun Battalion less 2 and 4 Companies, 32 and 34 Anti-Tank Batteries, 42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery.

The 28th (Maori) Battalion was relieved in **4 Brigade** in the afternoon of the 14th by **18 Battalion**, whose place in the **Divisional Reserve Group** was filled by **26 Battalion** from **6 Brigade**. The Maoris were then sent back to prepare defences on **Alam Halfa**, some 13 miles to the rear. Even at this advanced and supposedly decisive stage when Army Headquarters had ordered the complete and final destruction of Rommel's forces, it was still thinking of a reverse and tacitly encouraging the looking-over-the-shoulder policy. Sixth Infantry Brigade, less **26 Battalion**, was still at **Amiriya**.

Orders in the brigades were given verbally before noon and were later confirmed in writing. On the left, Burrows decided to attack on a front of 400 yards with **18 Battalion** in the lead, its right flank resting on the inter-brigade boundary. This battalion was also charged with checking the direction of the advance. The 19th Battalion was ordered to move in echelon on **18 Battalion's** left, and **20 Battalion** was held in reserve to move with brigade headquarters on the brigade axis, roughly in rear of **18 Battalion**. The rate of advance was fixed at not more than two miles in the hour. Tools and one day's water and rations were to be carried by each man in the assaulting infantry.

Burrows ordered **4 Field Regiment** to be in position on the objective at first light, the move from the start line to be made on a signal from the regiment's liaison officer with brigade headquarters. He retained three troops of **31 Anti-Tank Battery** under his own command and placed

the remainder, **41 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery**, and **6 Field Company** less two sections under the command of the field regiment. The two-pounder anti-tank guns, two sections of the engineers, and two platoons of **2 Machine Gun Company** were put with the reserve battalion.

Transport was divided into two groups. The fighting vehicles, including carriers and mortar carriers, were to rendezvous at brigade headquarters at 9 p.m. under the staff captain. The B echelon was ordered to follow **4 Field Regiment** to rejoin the brigade at first light. An ambulance car was attached to each battalion, reserve ambulance cars to brigade headquarters, and the remainder of the ambulance company to the B echelon.

On the Division's right, **Kippenberger** ordered **23 Battalion** to deploy on the right, **21** on the left, and **22** in reserve. The forward battalions were instructed to cover a total front of 1000 yards, an order misunderstood by **21 Battalion** which attempted to cover a front of 1000 yards by itself. The reserve battalion was ordered to follow the forward units at a distance of 1500 yards, with its leading companies widely deployed to mop up centres of resistance which might be left by the advanced troops. The rate of advance was not to exceed two miles in the hour.

Sixth Field Regiment, with **43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery** under command, was ordered to be ready to step up its batteries and to give supporting fire on the objective with two-thirds of the guns at first light. One troop of **33 Anti-Tank Battery** was held with brigade headquarters, the remainder of the battery and the two-pounder anti-tank guns being ordered to move in rear of the reserve battalion. The machine-gun company was placed with the A echelon transport which, under brigade command, was ordered to follow brigade headquarters along the axis of advance. One officer and five other ranks of the engineers were put with each of the battalions.

The concentration of **4 Brigade** on a front of 400 yards and **5 Brigade's** comparative dispersion was the most marked difference in the

respective plans. Neither brigade expected serious opposition in the advance, and both commanders wished to arrive on the objective with their units compact and well in hand. Fourth Brigade, however, was not so compressed as the order might suggest. Literal interpretation of the instructions to 18 and 21 Battalions to rest their flanks on the inter-brigade boundary would have denied the units room for manoeuvre. It was sufficient that they were in contact with each other on the boundary. In the event, **18 Battalion** took ample room on its right flank and it had all it was likely to require on its left, where **19 Battalion** was in echelon. Similarly, **19 Battalion** had plenty of space in which to move, especially to the left.

Lieutenant-Colonel Allen's misunderstanding concerning **5 Brigade's** frontage had serious consequences. Instead of occupying roughly 500 yards of the intended brigade front of 1000 yards, he deployed his A and C Companies forward with their sections at intervals of 60 yards, the eighteen sections thus attempting to cover a front of 1000 yards. Even with good light and no opposition, control by the battalion commander in an advance of over six miles would be difficult with such dispersion. It was likely to be more difficult, and proved to be so, for the platoon and company commanders. The misunderstanding was not revealed until after the battle.

Signals communications, especially in **5 Brigade**, broke down in the battle, and their almost complete collapse at vital stages was later severely commented on. The plans may have been over-elaborate and, in the final haste of preparations for the battle, their technical aspects may have been beyond ready understanding by unit and formation commanders. However, they were in keeping with the optimistic spirit which pervaded the Division. Had the battle developed as expected, the signals communications probably would have functioned with perhaps only brief interruptions. The men of the Divisional Signals became involved in the reverses suffered by units and brigades. They were not the cause of the setbacks.

Three types of wireless sets were available at Ruweisat. The battalions had the No. 18 of limited range and doubtful efficiency for inter-unit communications, and the more powerful and reliable No. 11 set for communications with brigade headquarters. Brigade headquarters maintained contact with Division with No. 9 sets. It was also standard practice to link all headquarters by field telephone cable at every opportunity, including short halts.

The No. 11 set was heavy and cumbersome. Normally it was carried on a truck. For portage at least five men were required, and if the carry was a long one they needed reliefs to permit them to keep pace with the unit tactical headquarters. In **5 Brigade** the battalions could not spare riflemen as carriers, and as the necessity of perserving silence in the advance to the assault forbade the use of transport, it was decided to leave the No. 11 sets with the vehicle column and rely on the No. 18 sets for unit-brigade signals. Events proved the decision to be wrong.

The cable-laying plans were complicated. Signal section cable-layers, carrying three miles of single earth-working line on a barrow drum, were to march behind the headquarters of the leading battalions paying out a line to brigade headquarters into which unit signals were to plug their lines at halts. This was simple provided the cable-layers kept pace, marched on the correct compass bearing, and the unit signallers knew where to find the line. The line was also to serve as a guide for the brigade signals office. As the office moved forward, the unwanted line in rear was to be reeled in and eventually carried forward to the advanced laying party for their further march to the objective. Concurrently, another cable party was to pay out a line connecting with Divisional Headquarters. A weakness in the plan was the effort to be economical in the use of telephone cable by incorporating some lines used in the assembly positions and in salvaging cable during the advance.

Ruweisat was to emphasize the need of extreme simplicity in signals communications, and also how easy it is during a long night advance for headquarters and signallers to deviate from plotted courses and become

widely separated.

The failure of *21 Panzer Division's* attacks on the **Alamein Box** appears to have convinced Rommel he could do no more. An appreciation of the situation attached to his battle report of 14 July says: 'The continuous actions of 13 and 14 July proved that the two months of continuous hard campaigning had reduced the strength of the German formations to such a degree that they could not resume the offensive immediately. This fact, and the failure of the Italians, forced Panzerarmee to the decision to go over to the defensive in its present positions until the formations were completely refreshed.'

Rommel, however, did not intend to be wholly passive. He urged *21 Division* to continue its attack in the north and, at midnight on the 14th, he ordered *Afrika Korps*, X and XX *Italian Corps*, and *90 Light Division* to carry out a limited offensive on the southern front on 15 July. His orders noted that in the extreme south the British forces had been pushed back to **Qaret el Himeimat**, but that 'there was still an enemy group of about 40 tanks with artillery and infantry at 917 right two.' These were some of *1 Armoured Division's* tanks and New Zealand Division on the start line running north-east from **Alam Nayil**.

The order then continued: 'Early on the 15th *Afrika Korps*, co-operating closely with 20th Corps, **10 Corps** and 90 Lt. Div., is to drive this enemy force back, mainly by concentrated fire of all weapons. The line 921-927 [roughly the area Deep Well to Munassib] must be won. Carry out strong recces eastward. Do not advance your main bodies past 900. ¹ On the southern front the passes to the **Qattara Depression** are to be mined.'

Afrika Korps describes these projected operations as a feint. ² However, they were not carried out. By 'early on the 15th' New

¹ 900 was one of the German thrustlines from which map references were given at **Alamein**. The 900 thrustline ran almost due south from the **Alamein Box** through **Deir el Munassib**

² *Afrika Korps*' diary, 14 July: 'The C-in-C arrives at battle headquarters of D.A.K. and issues the following orders: "As a feint the whole southern front is to attack at 0830 hours." ' At this stage the German southern flank was held by *90 Light Division* and *33 Recce Unit*, which had been carrying out thrust and parry operations against the small columns of *7 Armoured Division*. By the night of 14–15 July, most of *90 Division's* battle groups and the *Recce Unit* were closing on the 900 thrustline and were ready to swing north towards Munassib and Deep Well. This manoeuvre, if successful, would have brought them against the left rear of New Zealand Division.

Zealand Division's infantry had overrun *Brescia's* and *15 Panzer Division's* forward defences and were on the top of *Ruweisat Ridge*. Far from resting his formations and strengthening his positions, Rommel had again to gather fragments of his German forces and throw them into the fight in a desperate effort to prevent the collapse of his centre and the destruction of his army.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 22 – CAPTURE OF RUWEISAT RIDGE

CHAPTER 22

Capture of Ruweisat Ridge

THE Division was in good heart as the leading companies of the four forward battalions, followed closely by the reserve companies and the reserve battalions, crossed the start line at the appointed hour, 11 p.m. Perhaps the keen edge of enthusiasm for battle had been dulled a little. The thrill, excitement, and eager anticipation inspired by the call from the desert and the forced marches from **Syria** to **Matruh** had given way to the enervating routine that is the greatest part of war. The New Zealand Division of the First World War had had a similar experience when it plugged the gap in the line on the Ancre in March 1918.

But as the start line for Ruweisat was crossed, no man doubted that the Division was about to fight a winning battle. In any case, it was a relief to be again up and doing, to move from an area subjected to too much shelling and bombing without apparent effective retaliation. These enemy attentions were now to be repaid, with interest.

The night was still, quiet, cold and dark. From the start line, roughly on the 75-metre contour, the ground in the darkness fell away almost imperceptibly by one in 300 to a shallow depression enclosed by the 50-metre contour about five miles away at the foot of **Ruweisat Ridge**. Except for a lone palm three-quarters of a mile ahead of the start line, the western of the **Alamein**-Munassib tracks, a patch near the ridge marked on the maps 'very stony ground', and the water pipeline and track between **Alamein** and **Kaponga**, there were no easily recognised features on which to check distance and plot positions. The ridge was only 35 to 45 feet above the depression, the angle of ascent varying between one in 40 and one in 60. As the ground further north also fell away gradually, the top of the ridge was far from being clearly defined in the dark. Ruweisat was not a long finger descending evenly on both sides and to the west as the map contour lines suggested.

These factors compelled resort to an advance on the Pole Star and a

compass bearing, 320 degrees, with a rough equivalent of a mariner's dead reckoning for estimating distances traversed. The Division had been trained in such marches and the system had proved satisfactory in **4 Brigade's** advance to **Mungar Wahla**. In **20 Battalion** the intelligence officer, Captain Sullivan, reduced the distance between start and objective to paces and kept the tally on his rosary beads.

Thirteenth Corps' orders said the Division was to time its movements 'to make contact with the enemy at 1 a.m. at selected points on the enemy line 882278-875275.' This line was three and a half miles from the start line. The Division, however, knew the enemy posts were much closer. Consequently, there was no surprise when, shortly after midnight and after about two and a half miles had been paced, minefields were encountered over most of the front. The advance slowed as the fields were investigated. Almost immediately, the enemy put up flares and opened fire, mostly with machine guns on fixed lines. The volume of fire and its pattern suggested awareness or apprehension in the forward posts of a major attack rather than an affair of patrols.

Guided by the lines of the tracer bullets, the leading troops deployed from sections in file to sections in line and moved at the double towards the nearest centres of resistance. With bullet, bayonet, and grenade they cleared a way through the posts, their primary task. Mopping up was to be done by the reserve battalions. Anything these left would be dealt with by the tanks as they came through. The spirited conduct of the infantry in this initial encounter caused them surprisingly few casualties. But, unfortunately, it caused them to lose cohesion and control.

These matters, however, were of relatively little moment. It was much more important that, at this time and point, when only a little more than an hour from the start line and less than halfway to the objective, the Division began to suffer from the faults in planning.

Had the **13 Corps'** divisions been supplied with air photographs when they were first lined up for the contemplated battle on the 11th, they

would have known that these enemy posts were not merely the forward defence localities. They formed the main line of resistance. The photographs would have revealed that there was little, if anything, between the strongpoints and the ridge. The Division was to pay a heavy price for the omission and the lesson. In their rapid clearance of passages through the enemy posts and in pressing on to their objectives, the infantry battalions left behind them as much as, possibly more than, they subdued. This was of more fateful consequence than the loss of cohesion and control, as the remaining enemy posts prevented the advance of the support weapons and left the infantry on the ridge naked and exposed to the counter-attacks of the German tanks, armoured cars and artillery. ¹

On the Division's right flank, **23 Battalion** had a comparatively easy passage through the enemy. Posts in the gap between New Zealand Division and **5 Indian Division** fired on the battalion, and B Company swung to the right to deal with them. The company commander, Captain **Begg**, ² was killed and the platoons split. Some of the sections continued to engage the posts on the flank and others carried on the advance in small groups under the section and platoon commanders. Most of these were rallied by the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel C. N. Watson, and taken by him to the battalion objective.

D Company, on the battalion's left flank, also separated. Some of the men on the company's right endeavoured to keep in contact with B Company, others carried on independently, and one large group under the company commander, Captain Ironside, ³ maintained touch with its left-hand neighbour, A Company of **21 Battalion**. The reserve company, A Company commanded by Captain **Norris**, ⁴ had little trouble from the enemy and in advancing on the correct bearing, but near the objective it saw some tanks on the move.

These tanks belonged to **8 Panzer Regiment** and were then probably the most eastern of the enemy armour on the ridge. The regiment had been ordered just before midnight to move to an area three to four miles north-west of **Alam Nayil**. There it was to fill a gap between **15 Panzer**

Division and **Ariete Division** (the latter then being south-west of **Alam Nayil**), and cover **Ariete's** flank and rear and the positions about **Kaponga**. As the regiment was required to pass through the **Kaponga** minefield at 5.30 a.m., the most distant troops were likely to be starting the move when they were sighted by A Company about three o'clock.

Captain Norris decided about half an hour later that he had reached his company's objective. While he was disposing his company he was joined by Lieutenant-Colonel Watson, who added a mixed party from B Company and Headquarters Company to the defence scheme and set up his own headquarters some 600 yards in rear. Later, **Brigadier Kippenberger** arrived, bringing with him K Troop of **33 Anti-Tank Battery** under Lieutenant Ollivier ⁵ with the troop's four six-pounders.

¹ It should be noted that the detail of the enemy positions and movements shown on the maps accompanying the history of this operation has been copied from captured enemy documents. Such detail was not available to the Division when it fought the battle.

² **Capt T. F. Begg**; born NZ, 17 Jul 1912; stock agent; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

³ **Capt C.G.Ironside**; born **Oamaru**, 15 Oct 1917; civil servant; wounded 27 Jun 1942; killed in action 15 Jul 1942.

⁴ **Capt P. T. Norris**, MC; born NZ, 18 Apr 1914; law student; wounded 27 Jun 1942; killed in action 17 Dec 1942.

⁵ **Capt C.M.Ollivier**; Kaikoura; born **Christchurch**, 27 Aug 1918; clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

It was then about five o'clock. The battalion had halted short of the crest of the ridge. Because of the approach of daylight it was decided not to move further on but to get the troops and guns dug in at once. There

23 Battalion, intact and confident of the outcome, may be left in the meantime.

On **5 Brigade's** left **21 Battalion**, deployed and advancing on its front of 1000 yards, was too dispersed for effective control. It encountered the enemy at the same time as **23 Battalion**. But instead of fire mainly from a flank, it ran into an extended defended position, called by the enemy Strongpoint No. 2, held by Germans and Italians. No undue difficulty was experienced in dealing with the enemy posts and in cutting passages through them. Behind the strongpoint, however, the battalion ran into more of *8 Panzer Regiment's* tanks.

It is a moot point whether the enemy's dispersion in his wide strongpoint was an advantage or disadvantage to **21 Battalion**. The dispersed enemy in his small posts quickly fell under the resolute assaults of the sections with bullet, bayonet, and grenade. Many of the Italians fled. But the series of section fights against unevenly spaced posts, first in front and then to the right and left, caused sections to lose contact with their platoons and platoons with their companies. Further, the pace of the assault led to differences of opinion on the time consumed. Later, this factor was decisive in discussions on the ridge concerning whether the battalion had reached its objective or had further to go.

A Company's platoons and sections maintained reasonable contact, but when the commander, Captain **Butcher**,¹ reorganised after the assault, he found he had with him a number of groups from D Company of **23 Battalion** on his right and from his own battalion's B Company on his left. He put them with his platoons and resumed the advance.

Some distance further on, the company ran into the enemy tanks. These opened fire with their machine guns and attempted to move away. Such, however, was the spirit of the infantrymen that they attacked the tanks. One was set afire with a sticky bomb placed by a **23 Battalion** man who cannot be more definitely identified than as Private Clark. Two more tanks fell to Sergeant Lord,² of **21 Battalion**, who, after shooting

the commanders standing in the open turrets, climbed aboard and killed the other occupants with his tommy gun and grenades. But during the encounter Captain Butcher's left platoon lost contact with the company in following up a retreating tank.

¹ **Capt E. B. Butcher**; born **Napier**, 3 Dec 1904; schoolmaster; wounded 29 Jul 1942; died 26 Nov 1949.

² **Lt S. V. Lord**, DCM; Frankton Junction; born **Wellington**, 22 Mar 1906; labourer.

An Italian field battery astride the line of advance was the next obstacle. The gun crews quickly surrendered under assault with the bayonet and were sent to the rear. This enterprise cost the company another platoon which lost contact in the dark and in the excitement.

The battalion's left-flank troops, B Company under Captain **Marshall**,¹ moved level with A Company through the first opposition but became badly scattered on meeting the tanks. Some groups joined A Company, some waited and joined the reserve company under Captain **Wallace**,² and the remainder went on with Marshall to overrun an Italian headquarters and capture a colonel, several other officers, and a number of men who were sent to the rear under the escort of one man.

Marshall's group had been joined by Lieutenant-Colonel **Lynch**³ and some of the headquarters of **18 Battalion** from the left. They advanced together until about two o'clock when they met a single tank which, although eventually set alight, caused the men to break into small groups and scatter. Marshall was left with about ten of his own men and some stragglers whom he took forward until he met A Company of **23 Battalion** digging in. He fired a success signal and added his men to Captain Norris's defence scheme.

C Company also became dispersed when it followed close behind the leading companies into the confused fighting among the enemy posts.

When he emerged on the far side of the defences, Captain Wallace found himself with only one platoon and his headquarters. Wallace had several further encounters with machine-gun posts and transport, until at length he found **19 Battalion** reasonably organised about **Point 63**. Men from other battalions who had joined the group were sent to their own units, and Wallace took up a position near **19 Battalion's** eastern flank.

The picture of **21 Battalion** from about two o'clock is of about ten separate platoon, company, and headquarters groups comprising their own men and parties and individual stragglers from other units, all searching for the objective and for each other. Some of these groups were to confound and confuse the enemy and to perform valorous deeds. But from shortly after that hour, **21 Battalion** as a unit was lost to **5 Brigade**. As the subsequent operations of the most substantial groups were beyond the scope of the brigade and divisional plan, they are recorded separately in a later chapter in order to preserve the thread of the main narrative.

¹ **Capt J. R. B. Marshall**; born **Auckland**, 15 Feb 1913; clerk; wounded 6 Sep 1942; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

² **Capt L. N. Wallace**; **Auckland**; born Nohukohu, 8 Jan 1917; clerk; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

³ **Lt-Col R. J. Lynch**, MC; born **Waihi**, 24 Oct 1909; sales manager; CO 18 Bn 29 Jun–15 Jul 1942; wounded and p.w. 15 Jul 1942; died of wounds while p.w. 26 Sep 1942.

Fifth Brigade's reserve battalion, the 22nd commanded by Major **Hanton**,¹ crossed the start line about 1500 yards behind the leading troops. It advanced steadily along the given bearing without encountering direct opposition or finding much mopping-up to do. The brigade commander, however, caught up with the battalion as it was passing through the enemy defences and told Hanton that the ground was not being searched thoroughly for further enemy posts. The

battalion appears to have struck gaps cut by the leading units and to have passed through them on a compact front with the companies keeping good formation.

As it pushed on, the battalion closed the distance separating it from the forward units. It collected numerous prisoners from posts which had been bypassed and sent these and others taken by the leading troops to the rear. It also collected groups and individuals from the brigade's other battalions and from **18 Battalion and took them forward. The scene is well described by a rifleman of the battalion:**

We could hear tanks beginning to rumble back. We could hear shouts of Italians crying 'Mamma mia - Mamma mia'. ... Mortar commenced to fall around us. There were some slight casualties. ... There seemed to be some of our tanks on the right flank. ² I saw two tanks apparently bumped into each other fire short vicious bursts directly at each other. The tracer ricocheted off each turret and the tanks hurriedly withdrew.

The scene before and around us was a mad and weird pattern of coloured tracer. There was the hoarse shouting of our men using the bayonet and the frightened 'Mamma mia' of the Italians. We were moving forward in slow easy stages spending waiting time on our stomachs while mortar landed about us. ...

Shortly after crossing the **Alamein-Munassib track, Hanton thought the battalion had covered the prescribed distance. Brigade headquarters, however, ordered him to resume the advance until he joined the leading units on the ridge. He was then to set his men in position immediately to their rear.**

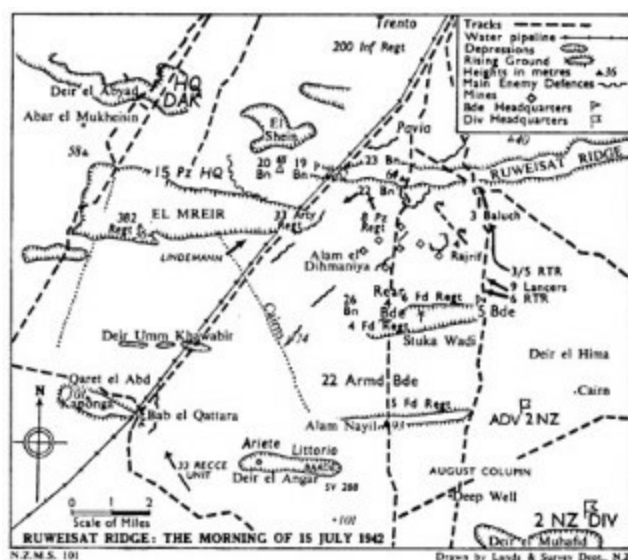
As the march continued, heavy enemy machine-gun fire developed on the right flank. An investigating section reported that it came from a tank which it had been unable to approach. Hanton thereupon endeavoured to report to Brigade the proximity of enemy tanks, with a request that the anti-tank guns should be hurried forward. But by this

time the batteries in the wireless set were failing and communication could not be established. A runner who never arrived was then sent back with the message and request.

¹ Vice Lieutenant-Colonel Russell, evacuated sick during the morning of the 14th. **Maj S. Hanton**, ED; **Wanganui**; born Forfar, **Scotland**, 6 Aug 1908; printer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

² These were enemy tanks.

Major Hanton took the battalion forward until he reached the southern slope of the ridge. Here he was again met by **Brigadier Kippenberger**, who ordered him to lay out defences on a 1200 yards front covering rising ground ahead and to make contact with **23 Battalion** and the Indian troops expected to be up on the eastern flank. After visiting **23 Battalion** and placing K Troop between the two battalions, **Kippenberger** set off in his carrier for brigade headquarters.



Ruweisat Ridge: the morning of 15 July 1942

Little was then known of the situation of **21 Battalion**, but as numerous bodies of prisoners had appeared from its sector, it was thought the battalion was on the ridge some distance to the west. Lieutenant-Colonel Watson visited **22 Battalion** a few minutes after the

brigade commander had left. He and Major Hanton agreed that their battalions were on the objective and that the situation generally appeared to be satisfactory. It would be made secure as soon as the supporting arms arrived. The time was about half past five.

In the meantime, **5 Brigade** Headquarters, with supporting arms and the A echelon or fighting transport of the units, was making its way forward. The column included, as ordered, the Brigade Defence Platoon, the detachments of **7 Field Company** and K Section signallers, three platoons of No. **4 Machine Gun Company**, the Bren and mortar carriers, the trucks carrying the No. 11 wireless sets, and some ambulance cars.

The anti-tank position was not satisfactory. The infantry two-pounders on portée joined the column instead of travelling with **22 Battalion** as they had been instructed. Of 33 Battery's four troops, only one, M Troop in brigade reserve, was in its correct place. The other three troops had been ordered to move behind **22 Battalion**. Only Lieutenant Ollivier had his K Troop on the start line before **22 Battalion** moved. He waited some time for the other two troops, and when they failed to appear he went on independently until he met **Brigadier Kippenberger** and was taken forward to the ridge. The other two troops, J and L, missed the start line and were led into **4 Brigade's** line of advance by the liaison officer detailed as their guide. They did not rejoin **5 Brigade** until some hours later.

These errors were to have fateful consequences. Had the antitank guns been in their correct positions, that is with and hard on the heels of **22 Battalion** in its quick and comparatively easy advance to the ridge, they would have been on hand to deal with the enemy tanks which wrought havoc on the ridge about first light. At the time, however, the advance of the brigade appeared to be proceeding in orderly fashion. Brigade headquarters was in touch with **22 Battalion**, which reported that it was not meeting with any direct resistance and that it had not received any requests for assistance from the forward battalions. The disarray of the anti-tank guns was annoying, but there was nothing to suggest it would place the operation in danger.

What was more annoying and more disturbing was the breakdown in communications that followed soon afterwards. The No. 9 wireless set connecting the brigade with **Divisional Headquarters** developed a fault and then the truck carrying the set broke down. Communication was re-established only by using the emergency control on a No. 11 set to the CRA's office at **Divisional Headquarters**, where the messages had to be sent on by runner in the dark to the 'G' office some hundreds of yards away.

Then wireless contact within the brigade was lost. The risks inherent in the limited range and known defects in the No. 18 set had been accepted. The new batteries supplied for the operation proved so defective that they ran down shortly after being put into use. Communication with **23 Battalion** failed soon after the first opposition was encountered, and with **22 Battalion** when it reached the ridge. The 21st Battalion remained on the air until the brigade major, **Major Fairbrother**.

... discovered to my consternation that the wireless operator was not with Sam Allen or the battalion headquarters but had gone to ground away back behind us and didn't know where he was, what direction his unit had taken, or where to go.

Sympathy might be spared for the unfortunate signaller who, while packing a No. 18 set, would have some difficulty in keeping pace with a spirited advance let alone keep close contact with a commanding officer, an adjutant and an intelligence officer, all of whom went different ways. Nor in the circumstances was he likely to assimilate the lesson on how to find the Pole Star which the brigade major tried to give him 'over the blower.'

Finally, the planned line communication forward and to the rear broke down. When a cable party laying a line from brigade headquarters to the start line found a fault, the officer in command went back to locate it. He became lost. The rest of the party awaited his return until

about half past four when another signals officer, following the line from **Divisional Headquarters**, picked them up and took them on to brigade headquarters. Later the cable was broken several times by traffic in the rear area.

The K Section detachment detailed to carry a line forward of brigade headquarters put down two and a quarter miles and then halted to await further supplies to be furnished by another detachment reeling in the line behind the headquarters as it advanced. Ill luck dogged these detachments. A mechanical fault in the equipment delayed the second detachment near the start line. By the time it caught up with the first detachment, the battalions were well ahead. Consequently there was no line for them to tap into at halts as had been arranged. Moreover, brigade headquarters, moving independently on its own reading of the compass, deviated from the line of the cable and did not meet the laying detachments.

The headquarters and vehicle column reached its allotted area at **Point 65**¹ on the **Alamein**-Munassib track about four o'clock. Several wounded Italians crying for help were found as well as a number of enemy and New Zealand dead. The sounds of battle had died down but shortly afterwards fire broke out afresh, especially from the neighbourhood of Strongpoint No. 1 on the headquarters' right. Some of the two-pounders were deployed to cover the flank and the defence platoon was despatched to deal with any enemy posts it might find. The platoon was not heard of again for some hours.

From this area **Brigadier Kippenberger**, taking K Troop with him, visited the forward area. He had some brushes with the enemy on the way and he ordered Major Hanton to send a platoon to clean out the posts. After noting the positions on the ridge, the brigade

¹ Also marked as **Point 66**.

commander set out for his headquarters to speed the advance of the

supporting arms against the near approach of dawn and the danger it might be expected to bring.

Thus between five and six o'clock **5 Brigade** was consolidating most of its objective on Ruweisat. On the right **23 Battalion**, consisting of A Company, elements of B, D and Headquarters Companies and two parties from **21 Battalion**, was holding the crest of the ridge about 1000 yards east of **Point 62**. A few hundred yards to the south and below the crest, **22 Battalion** in full strength was preparing to dig in. K Troop, with its four six-pounders, was between the two battalions. Between **22 Battalion's** left flank and **4 Brigade's** defensive sector there was an unprotected gap of more than a mile. The 21st Battalion was thought to be in this area. Brigade headquarters had reached its area but was still under fire.

The general impression was that the attack had gone well. Certainly some confusion was apparent, but the objective had been reached in quick time with surprisingly few casualties. With the speedy arrival of the supporting weapons and the British tanks, the ground won could be secured and the units made tidy against any action the enemy might take.

As **4 Brigade** crossed the start line, also promptly on time, there was no thought that this would be the last action it would fight in **North Africa**. And if the brigade was more fortunate than the 5th in arriving on the objective in greater strength, it was more exposed to the enemy's counter-thrusts and thus riper for the kill. The 15th July was to be another sad day for the Division's senior brigade.

Some important changes in the disposition of the brigade had been made after the issue of the written orders for the battle. As finally arranged, **18 Battalion** advanced on the right, **19 Battalion** a little to its left rear, and **20 Battalion** in reserve behind the 18th. Brigadier Burrows had his advanced brigade headquarters behind **20 Battalion**, and he was followed by the A echelon vehicles in three columns under Major **Reid**,¹ **6 Field Company**, who had with him a party of sappers and two trucks of

mines.

The main vehicle column came next. Its principal constituents were three troops of **31 Anti-Tank Battery** and detachments of the infantry two-pounder platoons, the Brigade Defence Platoon, Nos. 4 and 5 Platoons of No. **2 Machine Gun Company**, and two **American Field Service** ambulance cars. One carrier, the brigadier's,

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.

started the advance but was sent back early because it made too much noise. The other Bren carriers, the three-inch mortar carriers, No. 6 Machine Gun Platoon, and a party of **6 Field Company** sappers were held near B echelon to await orders to join the assaulting troops.

The brigade artillery group, comprising **4 Field Regiment**, **41 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery**, A Troop of **31 Anti-Tank Battery**, part of No. 3 Section **6 Field Company**, and the remainder of the two-pounder platoons, were held on **Alam Nayil** under orders to be ready to advance when called upon.

To **18 Battalion**, the fire and then the conflict in the enemy's Strongpoint No. 2 and subsidiary posts proved irresistible magnets. D Company, on the right on the brigade boundary, turned to confront the resistance and was followed by B Company. Thus almost as soon as contact was made with the enemy, both of the leading companies veered half-right off the course. Then, as other enemy posts ahead and on the flank opened fire, sections and platoons assaulted with such dash and spirit that little attention was given to direction and formation. Consequently, in a short time the two leading companies became widely spread and mingled. In spite of the efforts of Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch,

the commander, and other officers, the battalion did not regain its formation during the battle. Major **Brett**,¹ commanding D Company, brought part of the company together but found himself on the battalion's left flank next to **19 Battalion**, with which he carried on the advance. Lieutenant **Bush**,² with part of his platoon, eventually reached the objective in company with the reserve battalion. Sergeant **Aitken**,³ of 18 Platoon, kept two of his sections together, and after clearing some machine-gun posts found he had a number of prisoners but only eight of his own men left. He handed over the prisoners to three **21 Battalion** men who were guarding prisoners of their own, and then led his small party through several more skirmishes until, with only three men, he joined Major Brett on the objective. There he was placed in charge of about 150 captive Italians.

The dispersion of B Company was even greater. From their positions on the battalion's left flank, some men moved across the front to become mingled with D Company and scattered parties from **21 Battalion**. Others moved to the left and joined **19 Battalion**'s advance. Still others were caught up by **20 Battalion** as it came forward in reserve. One platoon, under Lieutenant

¹ **Maj C. L. Brett**, ED, m.i.d.; **Hamilton**; born **Cambridge**, 4 Oct 1906; stock and station agent; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

² **Capt R. G. Bush**; **Auckland**; born **Nelson**, 3 May 1909; salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ **S-Sgt H. J. A. Aitken**; **Dunedin**; born **NZ**, 30 Jul 1908; school teacher; wounded Jul 1942.

Burridge,¹ advanced independently, gathering **19 Battalion** stragglers, until it joined the battalion's reserve company near the objective.

By contrast, the advance of C Company under Captain Sutton ² was a model of orderliness and firm control. Keeping to the correct course, the company soon encountered enemy posts missed by the leading companies. Sutton dealt with these by co-ordinated fire and movement, the Bren gunners giving frontal fire while the riflemen attacked the posts from the flanks. Prisoners were collected and taken forward.

When fire developed on the left flank, Sutton despatched Lieutenant de Costa ³ and his platoon to deal with it. The fire, however, came from a tank which the platoon was unable to assault successfully. Ahead of the main body of the company, a burning vehicle illuminated the desert and, according to Captain Sutton:

Into the scene came two tanks firing machine guns at all and sundry. We moved out of the way of this well-lit area but the tanks moved too and so down we went. They seemed to come straight for us but they stopped. I looked up and saw someone with head and shoulders above the hatch and behind the tank there were three or four figures, one with a tommy gun. The gun was lifted and the German took the whole burst.

The company moved past the tanks and crossed an area pitted with slit trenches in which were lying the bodies of many bayoneted Italians. It then came under heavy mortar fire. Sutton's account continues:

We used these trenches and our Italian prisoners who were still with us had to flop down beside them [i.e., their dead compatriots]. I decided we must be off our line of advance and turned half-left, eventually meeting a provost sergeant of 19th Battalion who had more prisoners than he could handle. I asked him to take mine and he said he had thousands already. I gave him mine and left him still protesting. Moved on, hearing terrific screams on our right. There was a queer lull or hush at the time so we made off in the direction of the noise.

Before a tank there was a soldier of 18th Battalion with two

Germans pinned against the side. He had his bayonet and was saying 'What about **Belhamed**?' and the Germans were screaming.

...

The company eventually reached the ridge accompanied by Lieutenant Burridge's platoon. Guided by a success signal, it rallied on Major Brett and the adjutant, Captain **Batty**.⁴ The group was then to the east of **19 Battalion** with which were found most of Brett's D Company, as well as other men from **18 Battalion**.

¹ **Capt W. H. Burridge**; Papatoetoe; born NZ, 12 Sep 1913; salesman; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

² **Capt H. B. J. Sutton**; London; born England, 24 Feb 1908; civil engineer; p.w. Apr 1941; escaped; reported safe 30 Nov 1941.

³ 2 Lt R. G. de Costa; born **Gisborne**, 14 Mar 1910; bank clerk; died of wounds 15 Jul 1942.

⁴ **Capt J. E. Batty**, m.i.d.; Whangawa, **Northland**; born **Tonga**, 17 Nov 1910; hardware assistant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

The two companies and part of battalion headquarters were reorganised under Brett's command and, by arrangement with **19 Battalion**, took over the defence of the eastern flank of that battalion's position. Nearby was Captain Wallace's group from **21 Battalion**.

Although **18 Battalion** lost cohesion, the isolated small parties, sections and platoons, like those of **21 Battalion**, carried on the fight. When Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch saw that his leading companies were deviating from their course he hurried forward, but by the time he reached them the fighting had spread over too wide a front. Lynch was then compelled to lead the few men he could rally in successive attacks on machine-gunners who continued in action after the leading troops

had passed them. When these had been dealt with the small party found itself on the left of Captain Marshall's group from **21 Battalion**, with whom the advance was continued. The groups separated in the confusion following an encounter with a tank. Lynch then moved on to the objective. As he did not find any considerable body of his battalion there he turned back in the hope of meeting the reserve company and eventually reached the advanced headquarters of **4 Field Regiment**, where he organised an attempt to take the supporting arms forward.

Lieutenant de Costa's platoon, after its unavailing effort against a tank, found that the rest of the company had gone on. The platoon thereupon advanced independently. It had several successful encounters with enemy posts until, on meeting stiff resistance from enemy gun crews and failing to find supporting troops to assist, the platoon withdrew in the belief that it had overshot the objective. With about a dozen prisoners, the platoon joined **20 Battalion** and accompanied it to the objective.

The disintegration of **18 Battalion** in the battle's early stages may be compared with that of **21 Battalion**. It appears to be indisputable that **21 Battalion's** dispersion over a front of 1000 yards in the dark and on terrain devoid of landmarks contributed largely to the loss of cohesion. On the other hand, **18 Battalion** attacked on a narrow front of about 200 yards, its share of the brigade front of 400 yards. Thus it was compact when it crossed the start line and encountered the enemy. The battalion, however, had ample room on both of its flanks in which the platoons and sections had freedom of manoeuvre.

The common factor was the spirit of the men in both battalions. Collectively and, in many cases, individually they attacked the enemy wherever he showed fight. Direction and cohesion were subordinated to the task of subduing the enemy posts as they revealed themselves in front, half-right, half-left, full-right, full-left and often behind. It is true that the officers and men had been told that the most important task was the cutting of gaps through the defences and gaining the ridge, and that mopping-up would be done by the reserve companies and battalions.

Both units cut their gaps and gained the ridge with few casualties, but not on the precise frontages at which they had aimed. They were also without considerable numbers of their men who had lost touch during the advance and did not rejoin until some time after daylight.

On **4 Brigade's** left, **19 Battalion** kept good formation and, although it had several encounters with the enemy, arrived on the objective almost intact. However, **18 Battalion's** dispersion and the activity in that battalion's area caused the 19th to concentrate on the resistance on its right flank, with the result that it gradually moved over to the right and reached the ridge in the area prescribed for the 21st.

After dealing with several enemy outposts, the battalion reached an extensive Italian position in a slight depression to the right of its line of advance and to the left rear of Strongpoint No. 2. Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell laid on a controlled attack. He sent his left company, D, around the left flank, Major Brett with his D Company of **18 Battalion** around the right, and, keeping A Company still in reserve, led B Company in frontal attack. The Italian resistance collapsed rapidly under this pressure and a number of trucks, 20-millimetre **Breda** guns, and about 150 prisoners were taken.

The battalion had a few more skirmishes before it reached the southern slope of the ridge shortly before dawn. The first troops over the ridge were met by heavy small-arms fire, most likely from Germans guarding **15 Panzer Division's** artillery, and suffered a number of casualties. From the forward slope facing north, the leading companies engaged an enemy convoy passing from east to west and destroyed several trucks. A body in the leading vehicle was later identified as that of the German liaison officer with *Pavia Division*. The German accounts suggest he was on his way to headquarters to report on the events of the night.

Hartnell fired a success signal to proclaim his arrival on the ridge. As wireless communication had failed and no other troops appeared, he decided to take up a position for all-round defence where he was,

although in the brigade plan he was to guard the western flank. In the chosen position, the battalion's left flank rested against **Point 63** with B Company facing north, D northwest, A west and south, and D Company of **18 Battalion** facing east. The area contained numerous deep dugouts, and battalion headquarters was set up within a small field of scattered mines.

At first light **20 Battalion**, with some more of **18 Battalion's** men and Advanced Brigade Headquarters, arrived on the battalion's left flank. Their advance had also been well co-ordinated and controlled. Under Brigadier Burrows' direction, Major I. O. Manson, in command, had halted the battalion and the A echelon transport while the leading battalions dealt with the first opposition. The column waited half an hour, during which enemy shells from the west caused a few casualties, until Burrows returned from a reconnaissance with orders to resume the advance.

About a mile further on, D Company on the right found a defensive position consisting of a network of weapon pits and dugouts. The position appears to have been missed by **19 Battalion** through its deviation to the right. Captain **Maxwell**¹ and his men quickly closed on the enemy with the bayonet and rounded up 300 Italians, who were sent to the rear under the escort of a single infantryman. D Company had only minor opposition once past this area. It picked up **21 Battalion's** anti-tank platoon, which was instructed to join the brigade's A echelon, and then Lieutenant Bush and his platoon from **18 Battalion** who were taken under command.

Captain Upham had C Company on the left flank. At the first halt the brigade commander, concerned about the delay and the lack of definite news from the leading battalions, ordered him to send someone forward to learn what was happening. Upham undertook the mission himself in the brigade liaison officer's jeep. When he came under fire, he set up an enemy machine gun on the jeep and returned the fire while the driver picked a way forward. Of his reconnaissance, Upham said:

... I could not find 19th Battalion when going forward and 18th and 21st were in confusion. So were the Germans. They were getting trucks out, pulling guns back by hand. All this went on under cover of fire by tanks which in groups of three were covering the withdrawal. It was a very colourful show with flares going up, tanks firing red tracer bullets from machine guns. Two German tanks were put out by 18th Battalion with sticky bombs. They went up close to me. The German troops were being badly cut up while the Italians were surrendering in hundreds. They were out of all proportion to our people and really broke up the attacks with their crowds. ... All the time this was going on, and even before it, there was a rumble of tanks on our exposed left flank. We thought it came from our tanks which were supposed to be there.

The detail shows that Upham covered a considerable area. He reached **19 Battalion** when it was near its objective and then made his way back to report to the brigadier before resuming command of his company and taking it forward.

Near the objective, C Company came under heavy machine-gun fire from the left flank. As the company breasted a slight rise it

¹ **Capt P. V. H. Maxwell**, DSO; **Christchurch**; born Londonderry, 14 Feb 1906; manufacturer's representative; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

saw a force of guns, trucks, and troops in some confusion. Upham ordered an attack, and with one accord the men made a bayonet charge for about half a mile down the slope into the depression. Major Manson directed Captain Maxwell to assist, and 18 Platoon was detached to take part in the charge. At the same time A Company, under Captain **Washbourn**, ¹ having caught up with the leading troops from reserve, was ordered to support.

The enemy comprised German artillery, including two of the

formidable 88-millimetre triple-purpose guns, which were deployed a little to the east of **15 Panzer Division's** headquarters. There were also, as D Company's platoon reported, 'odd men on foot, machinegun posts and several snipers.' All were overrun in the bayonet assault. When the battalion consolidated in the area, it found itself possessed of two German officers, forty to fifty German other ranks, and well over a hundred Italians. Upham was wounded in the arm, and while the injury was being dressed, Captain Sullivan, the Brigade IO, took command of the company and directed its consolidation.

By dawn the whole of **20 Battalion** was on the objective in good shape but in the area that should have been occupied by **18 Battalion**. D Company faced north on the forward slope to the north of **Point 63**. C Company held the west front of the area on a rather exposed forward slope and under tank fire from the west. On the reverse slope to the south-east of C Company, A Company held the southwest part of the area. It also was under tank fire.

Advanced Brigade Headquarters reached the ridge with **20 Battalion**. The A echelon vehicles, in their three columns under Major Reid, arrived at the southern slope hard on the heels of the battalion shortly before first light. As **20 Battalion** made its bayonet attack the vehicles were fired on from the west. Reid directed them to turn half-right into cover over the crest of the ridge which, by this time, was showing clearly in the dawn light. Barbed wire, suspected to mark a minefield, held up several of the trucks, which remained on the exposed slope until a gap was found. Most of the anti-tank portées reached the reverse slope and quickly go into positions from which they could fire at the enemy.

This dash over the ridge is graphically described by Sergeant Robinson ² of **20 Battalion's** anti-tank platoon:

... The dawn was well on the way as we came in sight of the ridge and also in sight of some Huns who must have come in on our [western] flank. Get a picture in your mind of about 100 guns and trucks in three columns moving slowly up the ridge. ... and all of a

sudden hell breaking loose among them. ... Gay Fawkes night is not a patch on the noise that was going on, nor of the different colour tracer and anti-tank shots he

¹ **Capt G. W. Washbourn; Christchurch; born Timaru, 13 Jul 1916; bank clerk; p.w. 15 Jul 1942; now Regular Force.**

² **Sgt W. J. Robinson; born Blenheim, 17 May 1918; labourer; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.**

[the enemy] was using. The dash to the ridge was made in great style and once over the top we were only a matter of seconds getting our guns into action.

Although the signals communications within the battalions broke down chiefly because of defects in the batteries of the No. 18 wireless sets, the brigade signal plan for the advance functioned satisfactorily, the only breaks being due to the normal hazards of battle. No. 11 sets carried by the battalions in trucks provided links with Advanced Brigade Headquarters and with **4 Field Regiment** in the rear, but **19 Battalion** lost its link when the signals truck was damaged by enemy fire early in the advance. J Section, Divisional Signals, maintained communication direct with **Divisional Headquarters** with a No. 9 set. Another link was provided by the artillery liaison officers through their battery and regimental headquarters to Rear Brigade Headquarters. Line communication would also have been established from the ridge had not a cable-laying party been captured by Italians when awaiting fresh supplies of cable about half a mile from the ridge.

By dawn **4 Brigade** was on the objective in reasonably good shape. Two of the battalions were practically intact and there were parts of the third. The brigade commander and his advanced headquarters were up and were in communication by wireless or runner with the battalions, the artillery and Division. There were three troops of six-pounder anti-tank guns, and a number of two-pounders and two platoons of Vickers

machine guns. Although liaison had not been established with **5 Brigade** to the east and the brigade was still in contact with the enemy on the north, west and south-west, the situation was considered satisfactory. The British tanks were expected shortly, and the artillery would soon be up to give close support and deal with the enemy threatening the communications.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 23 – THE FIRST DISASTER

CHAPTER 23

The First Disaster

THE time is a quarter past five. Dawn has broken. Every minute brings a perceptible increase in the light. Within another quarter of an hour, New Zealand Division will receive a tragic blow, the first of a series. Ere it falls, there is time for a quick survey of the battle zone, to record briefly other movements and operations during the night to present a complete picture. But it is vital in understanding subsequent events that it should be noted that this picture as a whole was not then available to any formation commander on either side.

On the right, **5 Indian Brigade** had crossed its start line at midnight. By first light **3/10th Baluch Regiment** was near the ridge, but on its left the **4/6th Rajputana Rifles** were in trouble. This battalion had missed direction in the approach to the start line, and soon after it had run into the enemy Strongpoint No.1. Control and cohesion had been lost and at dawn the battalion was still pinned down.

In **Deir el Hima**, about two and a half miles behind the Indian Brigade's start line and to the right of the inter-corps boundary, **2 Armoured Brigade** awaited orders to advance. Its companion brigade, the **22nd**, which was to protect the New Zealanders' left flank against interference by enemy armour, was in the vicinity of **Alam Nayil**. It also was awaiting orders. New Zealand Division had expected that both brigades at first light would be up with the leading infantry.

Headquarters New Zealand Division had moved during the night from **Deir el Muhafid** to the position vacated by **5 Brigade** Headquarters in **Deir Umm Aisha**, and at first light was preparing to advance further along the axis of attack. The code word **DOG**, announcing penetration of the enemy's forward positions, had been received from both brigades but later than had been expected. This, and the continued noises of battle in which heavy mortar and tank-gun fire could be recognised, suggested to headquarters that the enemy defences were in greater depth than had

been suspected.

The Division's diary records that **4 Brigade** signalled the capture of the objective with the code word TIGER at 4.15 a.m. The report, if it was received at that hour, was a little premature in so far as it applied to the whole brigade. However, General Inglis knew at dawn that **4 Brigade** was on the objective, and from **5 Brigade** Headquarters that brigade's leading troops were believed to be there but that the situation was not clear.

Divisional Reserve Group had been under half an hour's notice during the night and had been warned to be ready to move at 1 a.m. to its allotted area in **Alam el Dihmaniya**, about half-way between the start line and the objective and to the left of **4 Brigade's** axis of advance. There it was to protect the Division's left flank. The order to move was sent some time later, and it was not until between 3.30 and four o'clock that the group started its advance. At 5.40, when the leading troops of **26 Battalion** were about a mile and a half short of their objective, progress was stopped by the enemy in Strongpoint No. 3 and subsidiary posts linking that strongpoint with No. 2. Lieutenant-Colonel **Peart**¹ thereupon deployed the battalion for defence with B Company facing northeast, A north-west, and D west. A and C Squadrons of the Division Cavalry were ordered to cover the group's western flank and B Squadron was left to patrol the Division's southern flank.

These dispositions were being taken up at daybreak. As the light improved, the group was under enemy fire of varying intensity from all sides except due east and south.

Fourth Field Regiment and **4 Brigade's** Rear Headquarters were also in this neighbourhood at dawn. They had crossed the start line in the dark in response to a signal from Brigadier Burrows to come forward, but they had soon discovered that the enemy still controlled the ground well south of the ridge. Posts that had survived the night assault and others to the west contested the advance. When progress became impossible, Rear Brigade Headquarters took up a position about a mile and a quarter east of **26 Battalion** and **4 Field Regiment** deployed between them. The

congestion of guns and vehicles in the area was such that **5 Field Regiment**, in the Reserve Group, could not be brought forward. At dawn the regiment was deployed in support on **Alam Nayil**.

Up on the ridge, Brigadier Burrows was awaiting the arrival of the expected tank and artillery support. He had the anxieties natural to the circumstances but as yet no cause for alarm. His subordinate commanders, however, were making the startling discovery that the ridge was almost solid rock and therefore unyielding to the picks and shovels of the infantry and the anti-tank troops. Cover hardly worth the name, let alone the effort, could be obtained

¹ **Lt-Col J. N. Peart**, DSO, m.i.d.; born **Collingwood**, 12 Feb 1900; schoolmaster; CO 18 Bn Nov 1941–Mar 1942; 26 Bn 1 May–20 Jun 1942, 29 Jun–4 Sep 1942; died of wounds 4 Sep 1942.

by individual soldiers only by scratching away the few inches of sand and gravel and making small sangars of such loose stones as could be found. Few, if any, of the enemy's fire positions were useful, while those that had been occupied by Italians repelled because of lack of attention to the first principles of sanitation and hygiene.

No one in Eighth Army had thought to pass on to New Zealand Division the information that Lieutenant-General Norrie had earlier placed **18 Indian Brigade** in **Deir el Shein** because it was impossible for infantry to entrench themselves on the better tactical feature of Ruweisat.

There was still a big gap between 4 and 5 Brigades in the area supposed to have been occupied by **21 Battalion**. No one knew what had happened to the battalion other than vaguely that it was somewhere out in front. The full story is to be told later, but it may be stated here that at dawn the largest group, now under the command of Major McElroy, was about two miles in front of the crest of the ridge, and that Lieutenant-Colonel Allen was lying mortally wounded in a temporary aid

post set up by two stretcherbearers in the area occupied by the battalion's company close to **19 Battalion**.

On the right of the Division's sector, **22 and 23 Battalions** had the satisfaction of having completed the first part of their task. They were in touch with each other by runner but not with brigade headquarters. However, they had been visited by **Brigadier Kippenberger** and had seen him depart to hasten the advance of the support weapons. Like the support columns of **4 Brigade**, these at dawn were in difficulties.

In the dark and under spasmodic fire, **Major Fairbrother** had taken **5 Brigade** Headquarters and the infantry support weapons forward to **Point 65**. Here the Brigade Defence Platoon had been sent to deal with obnoxious enemy posts on the right flank. The enemy interference did not stop nor did the platoon return. As dawn broke, the vehicles came under such fire that **Fairbrother** had to withdraw the column. Before doing so, he ordered a platoon of machine guns, some Bren carriers, and a troop of two-pounders to make an effort to join the infantry on the ridge.

The column withdrew to the slight shelter offered by a depression later to become well known as ' **Stuka Wadi**'. The wadi was about half-way between **5 Brigade's** start line and Strongpoint No. 2. Here **Fairbrother** found **6 Field Regiment**. The regiment had crossed the start line about four o'clock. After advancing about two miles, a quad of **30 Battery** which was leading received a direct hit from a shell, some of the personnel being wounded. On this evidence that the enemy was occupying the ground ahead, the advance of the regiment was halted. When the enemy fire continued, the guns were withdrawn to **Stuka Wadi** where, at first light, they were deployed while reconnaissance groups were sent forward. None of these succeeded in penetrating the enemy positions or in making contact with the OP parties which had advanced with the infantry.

Such was the general situation at the break of day. Groups of men in varying numbers and vehicles appeared to be wandering aimlessly in the

area between the ridge and the halted artillery and transport columns. But appearances were deceptive. Some of the parties and vehicles were enemy seeking to escape. Others were captive. Some were New Zealanders held by the enemy. Still others were New Zealand groups striving to rejoin their units.

Prisoners and captors changed roles with the gathering light. Thus the platoon of machine guns sent forward by **Major Fairbrother**, No. 11 of **4 Machine Gun Company**, rescued the Brigade Defence Platoon which had penetrated an enemy position. The platoon had found itself surrounded on all sides. The commander had surrendered in the confident anticipation that not only would he avoid unnecessary casualties but that his captors would become captives when daylight revealed their isolation.

While the battlefield at daybreak was untidy and strewn with loose ends, there was no apparent cause for alarm. So far as the forward commanders could discern, the situation appeared to be more or less normal, or only what was to be expected at that stage of a prolonged fighting advance in the dark against an entrenched enemy. The remainder of the battle plan had yet to be developed. The guns and tanks were due on the ridge, but it was still too early to say they were late in arriving. They should show up at any moment to unfold the next phase of the plan and make the victory complete and decisive.

These sustaining thoughts, however, were valid for only a few minutes. In the growing light but before the sun rose, the enemy delivered a powerful, devastating blow.

The companies of **22 Battalion** had barely completed deploying and few of the men had dug more than the scantiest cover when enemy tanks, making good use of the natural cover, cautiously approached the ridge from the south. Their numbers cannot be stated precisely, but the most reliable estimates suggest there were eight to ten. They advanced in two groups, one against the battalion's western flank and the other swinging to the east to enclose the eastern flank.

In the half-light the tanks could not be easily identified. Many of the New Zealanders were certain that they must be the expected British armoured support. Before they could be clearly recognised by their markings, the tanks opened fire with their machine guns. Streams of bullets swept low over the battalion, forcing the men to hug the ground in the scratchings of weapon pits and behind the stones of uncompleted sangars. The limited value of this shelter was further reduced because the posts were being constructed as cover against fire from the opposite direction. Above the staccato br-r-r-r-p of the German machine guns, the bullets sweeping over the position created the sizzling noises of a giant frying pan. As the tanks closed in, enemy anti-tank guns in unsubdued posts in the vicinity joined in the action and Italian infantry came out of hiding to add to the volume of fire.

Lieutenant Ollivier's four six-pounders were still on their portées when the action opened and he had no time other than to swing them round to bring them to bear on the tanks, which were only about 1000 yards away when he ordered the troop into action. In the first few moments of the fight and before the gun had been brought to bear, the first of the six-pounders received a direct hit from one of the tank guns which set the portée on fire. Two of the crew tried to smother the flames with sand but were compelled to desist by the heavy tank-gun and machine-gun fire. The crew of gun K2 claimed one tank set afire before shells and bullets from the flank wounded the gun sergeant and put the gun out of action.

While the whole of K Troop worthily upheld the finest traditions of the Royal Regiment of Artillery, two gunners on K3 may be specially mentioned. The layer was wounded soon after bringing the gun into action, but not before he had hit a tank. Gunner [Davies](#),¹ the loader, took his place and Gunner [Paulger](#)² took up the loading. These two carried on, claiming two more tanks, oblivious to the fact that the bedroll and ammunition on the portée were burning. By this time both the gun commander and Davies were wounded. An order was given to abandon the gun. Davies climbed down, but Paulger stayed aloft to

throw off the burning material. Davies then climbed back into the layer's seat and got away several rounds before a direct hit on the gun made it useless.

Still under heavy fire, Paulger took the driver's seat and essayed a dash with gun and portée for the shelter of the ridge to the north. On his way he heard that the sergeant of another gun crew had been left behind wounded. Paulger thereupon returned with the portée to find him. While making the search, a tank nosed over a slight crest less than 400 yards away and put two shells into the portée's engine, forcing Paulger to dash to cover on foot.

¹ **L-Bdr W. F. Davies**, MM; Wellsford; born **Auckland**, 5 Nov 1916; farmhand; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

² **Gnr A. D. Paulger**, MM; Taupiri; born NZ, 23 Nov 1918; fruiterer; wounded 9 Oct

The last of the guns, K4, claimed a tank before an armourpiercing shell killed the gun-layer, wounded the sergeant, and put the gun out of action.

This action between the guns and tanks lasted probably no more than fifteen to twenty minutes. Several of the tanks were hit and probably two of them were damaged beyond repair. ¹ K Troop lost its four guns, one man killed and four severely wounded, besides several men with lighter wounds. Of the survivors, ten escaped over the ridge and rejoined the Division later in the day. The remainder, including the troop's two officers, were taken prisoner.

With the destruction of the guns, the tanks closed on **22 Battalion**. Some of the men had supported the guns with their rifles and Brens, but in its exposed and unprepared position under the storm of machine-gun fire, the battalion could do nothing effective. When the tanks loomed above them, men rose in increasing numbers with their hands up until

Major Hanton and his adjutant, having destroyed the battalion's records and documents, came forward and made the surrender official. The tanks also surrounded **23 Battalion's** headquarters and captured it with Lieutenant-Colonel Watson.

According to the Division's casualty return, a total of 21 officers and 334 other ranks were taken prisoner, the details being: **22 Battalion**, 14 officers and 261 other ranks; **23 Battalion**, 3 and 55; **33 Anti-Tank Battery**, 2 and 13; **7 Field Company**, 2 and 5. ²

A private of C Company, after describing the gun v tank fight, has left this record of the final minutes:

The end was getting close by this time. The tanks came rumbling and clanking towards us with nothing to stop them. Their machine guns were going all the time at anyone they saw moving while behind them were infantry and more tanks. We could do nothing but kept hoping some of our own tanks would turn up to the rescue. ... Some of our chaps were right under the monster (the leading tank) and I can still see clearly the silly little bits of white paper they waved for a white flag. Then all seemed to rise out of the desert with their hands up. I think we all felt rather silly and self-conscious. Dick, Joe and I walked over to the tank trying to crack jokes but without much success. ...

The tank commander was sitting up on the turret looking cool and efficient with his earphones still on his helmet and an eagle and swastika on his right breast. He spoke good English and told us to go over to another tank where the prisoners were collecting. ... Some of our men had been escorting about 30 Italian prisoners. The boot was now on the

¹ Claims of tanks knocked out and set on fire must be treated with reserve. If the German tank returns are correct and if the claims in the Division's records of tanks destroyed are even approximately correct, **15 Panzer**

Division should have had a minus quantity of tanks at this time.

² ***15 Panzer Division***'s records claim a total of 500 prisoners.

other foot. The Italians helped to line us up and they didn't fail to see the joke.

As we got to the next group of tanks a bit of looting was starting and I saw an Italian grab a watch from a chap in front of me. We were all searched. An Italian sergeant searched me. He was a friendly man. ... A German stretcher bearer attended to our wounded. An ambulance and a truck also arrived for them. They were in a great hurry to get us out of it. ...

Major Hanton and several of the men insisted on their right to retain personal possessions and were roughly treated in consequence. The German commander was in a hurry to get his prisoners away and told Hanton that, if he and his men would consider themselves prisoners of war, they could keep their water bottles but must throw away the rest of their equipment and arms. The men were then quickly formed into groups and, under guard of the tanks, were marched off in columns of threes at a fast pace due west across the desert south of the ridge. The column of prisoners, although not recognised as such, was seen by **4 Brigade** and fortunately was not fired on. It passed through an enemy gun area where the number of British trucks in use was noted. Nearby, at what appeared to be a German headquarters, probably that of ***15 Panzer Division***, many of the men claimed that they had recognised Field Marshal Rommel. It is very doubtful whether they saw Rommel. The enemy at this time had only a very confused idea of events and the German records are clear that the duty of restoring the situation had been left to ***Afrika Korps***. Had Rommel been with ***15 Panzer Division*** at that hour, it is difficult to believe that he would not have received the report of the tank commander and ordered the division to take

immediate advantage of the New Zealanders' state of unbalance. The tank column's action was good from the German point of view. It would have been better had the commander probed the other positions on the ridge and exploited his success.

Other troops on the ridge did not realise immediately the extent of the disaster, and it was not until much later in the day that **5 Brigade Headquarters** received authentic news that practically the whole of one of its battalions had been 'put in the bag.'¹

The Germans did not get everybody away from the neighbourhood of **22 Battalion's** position. They had captured Captain Thompson,² **18 Battalion's** medical officer, who with the regimental aid post truck had followed the night advance picking up wounded. Thompson insisted on attending to the wounded, and three Italians

¹ The subsequent movements of **22 Battalion** are dealt with in Appendix II.

² Capt S.B. Thompson, DSO; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 19 Dec 1916; medical practitioner; 1 Mob Surg Unit Nov 1941–Mar 1942; RMO 18 Bn Mar 1942–Feb 1944; 2 Gen Hosp May 1944–Jan 1945.

were placed in charge of the truck with instructions to load it with wounded and follow the prisoner column. Thompson thwarted this move by having the rotor arm removed surreptitiously from the truck's distributor. For some hours he collected and treated wounded, his truck parked close to an enemy battery which became a target for New Zealand guns. Later in the day, when the Italian guards showed willingness. Later in the day, when the Italian guards showed willingness to leave the exposed position, Thompson had the distributor reassembled and the truck, loaded with wounded and the guards, was driven safely to the New Zealand lines.

Corporal Blackett,¹ the aid post corporal of **22 Battalion**, and five

stretcher-bearers who had collected two stretcher cases and eight walking wounded were also left behind by the tanks under Italian guard. As the area came under shellfire, Blackett had the wounded removed to an abandoned Italian aid post. When the shelling increased, the Italians retreated hurriedly, leaving the stretcher-bearers and wounded to their own devices. Later in the day they were recovered by three carriers from **21 Battalion and brought to the rear. Although these carriers, which had been sent forward by **Major Fairbrother**, did not reach the ridge, they brought back the first detailed stories of the capture of **22 Battalion**.**

No. 11 Platoon of **22 Battalion's B Company, commanded by Sergeant Elliott,² was also fortunate enough through his courage and initiative to avoid capture. The nineteen men of the platoon were digging in on the battalion's extreme right or eastern flank when Elliott saw tanks and infantry approaching from the south-west. He conferred with neighbouring platoon commanders, who suggested that the tanks were the expected British armoured support. As he regained his platoon area, Elliott was left in no doubt that the tanks were enemy. He could see their markings, and their fire inflicted a bullet wound across his chest.**

As the position was obviously untenable under tank attack, Elliott ordered the platoon to move by section rushes to the shelter of a low ridge 300 yards to the north. Although bullets whipped about the platoon, it gained the ridge without loss but had to move further on to avoid the line of fire of one of K Troop's guns and the tanks. The platoon saw the destruction of K Troop and watched their battalion being rounded up and marched off. It was joined by men of **21 and **23 Battalions** who also had moved northwards to escape the tanks. Elliott's wound was dressed, and he then deployed the platoon on **23 Battalion**'s right flank alongside one commanded by Lieutenant **Shaw**³ from **21 Battalion**.**

¹ Sgt F.G. Blackett, MM; Lower hut; born NZ, 16 Sep 1913; engineer.

² 2 Lt K. Elliott, VC; Pongaroa; born Apiti, 25 Apr 1916; farmer; twice wounded; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941–2 Jan 1942.

³ **Capt R. A. Shaw**; Taumarunui; born NZ, 8 Jun 1912; commercial traveller; twice wounded.

This incident was the beginning of a series of stirring deeds which earned Sergeant Elliott the Victoria Cross, a story which belongs to a later phase of the narrative.

When **Brigadier Kippenberger** left 23 and 22 Battalions to return to his headquarters he was well pleased with the situation. ¹ But his satisfaction was short-lived. He had barely drawn clear of **22 Battalion** in his carrier when ‘a solid shot screeched overhead in a streak of flame. I poked my head up and to my horror saw in the half-light five tanks, 300 yards away, heading towards us and all shooting hard, spitting flame like dragons.’ ²

This encounter completely changed his view of the situation. The problem now was not merely one of consolidation and sending forward the support weapons, but of finding the British tanks and getting them up ere the enemy tanks fell on the exposed battalions on the ridge. The carrier was turned half-right to avoid the enemy fire only to run into another three tanks a hundred yards away. Turning again, the carrier made for the gap between the two groups of tanks, and at its top speed of twelve miles an hour, the best the driver could get out of it, drove through the cross-fire without injury to the vehicle or occupants. The two liaison officers with the brigadier also got clear, although one jeep was hit and the officer had to make his way back on foot.

Looking back, **Kippenberger** saw K Troop in action. He was well aware that against the number of tanks he had seen the four guns were not likely to last long. The speed of the carrier on its way back to headquarters seemed in the circumstances to be exasperatingly slow. **Kippenberger** met Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch who was searching for his

18th Battalion, and after noting dead, wounded, and abandoned equipment about **Point 65**, pressed on through **6 Field Regiment in Stuka Wadi** and eventually found his staff and headquarters. He approved **Fairbrother's** action in withdrawing the headquarters and vehicles and the arrangements he was making to push the support weapons forward. He then went on to report to General Inglis, who was in **Deir el Muhafid** awaiting the establishment of headquarters further forward.

From Inglis **Kippenberger** learned that **Divisional Headquarters** had received only scant and vague reports of the fighting and of the situation on Ruweisat. He gave all the information he had, stressing the decisive fact that the troops on the ridge were being attacked from the rear by tanks. Inglis could give only an approximate location of **2 Armoured Brigade**. With instructions to find the brigade and urge it forward to the support of the troops on the

¹ *Infantry Brigadier*, p.167.

² *Ibid.*

ridge, **Kippenberger** set off again. With the perversity that often seems to mark such occasions, his car engine was missing in one cylinder and its best speed was about ten miles an hour.

Kippenberger, who was accompanied by his intelligence officer, **Captain McPhail**, ¹ found the armoured brigade north of **Deir el Hima**. His reception was far from encouraging. Rather it was enough to cause despondency. The meeting is thus described in *Infantry Brigadier*: ²

After ages, perhaps twenty minutes, we reached a mass of tanks. In every turret someone was standing gazing through glasses at the smoke rising from **Ruweisat Ridge** four miles and more away. I found and spoke to a regimental commander, who referred me to his Brigadier (Brigadier Raymond Briggs). The Brigadier received

me coolly. I did my best not to appear agitated, said that I was Commander of 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade, that we were on **Ruweisat Ridge** and were being attacked in the rear by tanks when I left an hour before. Would he move up and help? He said he would send a reconnaissance tank. I said there was no time. Would he move his whole brigade?

While he was patiently explaining some difficulty, General Lumsden (commanding 1st Armoured Division) drove up. I gave him exactly the same information. Without answering he walked round to the back of his car, unfastened a shovel and with it killed a scorpion with several blows. Then he climbed up beside the Brigadier, who was sitting on the turret of his tank. I climbed up beside them and McPhail stood within hearing. The General asked where we were and the Brigadier pointed out the place on the map. 'But I told you to be there at first light,' General Lumsden then said, placing his finger on Point 63. I jumped down and did not hear the rest of the conversation but in a few minutes the General got down and in a soothing manner which I resented said that the Brigade would move as soon as possible. I asked for urgency, which both he and the Brigadier promised, and drove off.

The British historical narrative of this period says:

2nd Armoured Brigade had meanwhile been waiting to advance but by 0615 hours it had received no orders to do so. At 0625 hours Brigade Headquarters received through 6th Royal Tank Regiment a vague report that the New Zealand forward troops were being attacked by tanks and at 0635 hours the brigade therefore advanced with 3rd/5th Royal Tanks on the right, 9th Lancers in the centre and 6th Royal Tanks on the left.

The differences between this record and that given by **Brigadier Kippenberger**, who is supported by Captain McPhail, are most marked. So far from the brigade commander receiving 'a vague report' from one of his regiments, he and his divisional commander had precise information

and a definite request for urgent assistance from **Kippenberger**. The British account implies that the brigade advanced promptly, that is within ten minutes of the alleged report

¹ **Lt-Col E. A. McPhail**, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Rangiora; born **Wanganui**, 31 Dec 1906; bank official; CO 23 Bn 6 May–10 Jun 1944, 4 Aug–13 Oct 1944; 21 Bn 30 Oct 1944–25 May 1945; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

² Page 169.

from 6 RTR. This report, if it was made, must have come to hand while **Kippenberger** and Lumsden were at brigade headquarters. It is remarkable that no mention of it was made at the time. The supposedly prompt advance may also be contrasted with Brigadier Briggs' offer to send a reconnaissance tank forward.

Further, it may be asked why the brigade was waiting for orders in broad daylight up to half an hour after sunrise and about five miles distant from the ridge when, according to Lumsden and as expected by Inglis, it had been told to be at **Point 63** at first light. Perhaps it should be recalled that Lumsden's written orders did not prescribe any specific directions in time and place for the brigade. Whether he amplified these orders with verbal instructions is not known. At **Deir el Hima**, however, he was specific enough, and he was not contradicted in the hearing of **Kippenberger** and McPhail.

The British narrative records the brigade's difficulties in getting past unsubdued enemy localities, and adds that it 'was thus too late to assist 5 NZ Brigade or to drive away the enemy tanks which were hampering consolidation. ... None the less by 1400 hours contact had been made with 5th NZ Brigade and 5th Indian Brigade.'

Headquarters of **Afrika Korps** and **15 Panzer Division** appear to have had little better grasp of the situation at daylight than the headquarters

of **13 Corps** and 1 Armoured and New Zealand Divisions. Yet in spite of the confusion, the enemy was well aware of the vital fact that their centre had been broken and might collapse to the peril of the whole army unless the breach was sealed immediately. To this end, the front was scoured for reinforcements. At daylight the initiative still rested with **13 Corps** and its formations but was about to pass to a few more energetic Germans.

Strangely, the enemy had lost New Zealand Division on 14 July. At the very hour when the New Zealanders were fighting their way through the Ruweisat defences, *Panzerarmee* was reporting to **Rome**: '2 NZ Div's whereabouts is not known. The division is not in the front line.'¹ This reflected on the intelligence service. The enemy had not noted the eastern movement of the Division from the **Kaponga- El Mreir** area to **Munassib** and **Muhafid**. The advance of a substantial infantry formation from **Muhafid** to the start line area on the afternoon of the 11th had been reported. Since then this mass, probably the largest on the front, had been under more or less constant air and artillery bombardment. A deduction that it was the New Zealand Division would seem to be logical.

¹ *Panzerarmee* daily report, No. 1081, 14 July, 11.35 p.m. (12.35 a.m. 15 July, Eighth Army time).

The enemy, however, had evidence to confirm the presence of the Division in the offing. On 12 July one of **23 Battalion's** carriers, with Captain **Mason**¹ and a crew of three, had not returned from a reconnaissance. It was found in the middle of the enemy defences, riddled with fire from all sides, on the afternoon of the 15th. In the carrier were the bodies of Mason and his men.

Although Rommel had taken special measures to protect his centre and had placed *Brescia* and *Pavia Divisions* under the supervision of *15 Panzer*, the attack was a surprise. The Germans apparently were deceived by **13 Corps'** artillery programme. In contrast with voluminous entries for other days, *15 Panzer's* diary has for 14 July only the brief

line: 'Nothing to report except for artillery harassing fire.' But from midnight onwards there was plenty to report.

According to the division's diary for 15 July:

About 2300 hours [midnight Eighth Army time] the noise of fighting was heard from **Brescia's** sector and inquiries were made of the liaison officer at **Brescia** divisional headquarters. He answered that nothing special had happened yet, but that the strong points were on the alert and the artillery and reserves had been alerted also. This report, however, came only from the forward Italian artillery; there was no contact with the foremost strongpoints, and the report was false.

The noise of fighting continued, and suddenly the report came in that fleeing artillerymen of **Brescia** Division had arrived at divisional battle headquarters. The three eastern-most strongpoints had been overrun without a single report from the Italians. By first light the enemy had advanced as far as Point 63, very close to **Divisional Headquarters**, and had knocked out some motor transport and guns belonging to the anti-tank unit which was in protective positions just forward of Battle Headquarters. No other troops of the division except the tanks had been directly attacked.

Afrika Korps Headquarters in **Deir el Abyad** also heard sounds of battle about midnight and was promptly advised by **15 Panzer Division** that 'an attack against **Brescia** is on its way and that the enemy has broken in on the left wing. Divisional Battle Headquarters of **Brescia** knows nothing of this penetration.'² This early information of the break-in on the left wing probably came from **8 Panzer Regiment's** tank troops, which were seen or attacked by 23 and 21 Battalions as they burst through the strongpoints. Whether *Afrika Korps* established direct contact with **Brescia** or recorded in its diary information passed on by **15 Panzer** is not clear. However, half an hour later at 11.30 p.m. [12.30 a.m.] the diary notes: 'Only now **Brescia** has a report of this break in. Army is informed and D.A.K. is to restore the position.'

¹ **Capt C. T. Mason**, MC; born Pukerau, 9 Sep 1915; school teacher; killed in action 12 Jul 1942.

² *Afrika Korps*' diary, 14 July.

The South African translator of the diary reported that in the original against this last entry there are two pencilled lines in the margin, 'evidently', he comments, 'to stress the strange fact that Brescia Headquarters received the news of the enemy break-in half an hour after it had actually happened.' This may well be the case, as the next entries in the diary, made ostensibly at 1 a.m., record Nehring's opinion that the penetration was only a local one made by a strong reconnaissance troop which was then 'trying to find a way out.' On the other hand, the marks may stress *Afrika Korps*' responsibility for restoring the situation as subsequent entries suggest there was some argument with *Panzerarmee* on this question.

Be this as it may, at one o'clock Nehring saw no reason to alter the plans he had made for the conduct of the general battle on the southern front. At daylight *90 Light Division*, operating on the 900 thrust line with six battle groups, including Group Baade from *15 Panzer Division*, was to turn Groups Menton (SV 288) and Baade against Deep Well and capture that feature. Afterwards Baade was to stand by ready to swing north-east. These operations were being opposed by *7 Motor Brigade*'s 'monthly' columns. New Zealand Division was aware of this threat to its rear but was not perturbed by it.

At two o'clock, roughly when the leading elements of the New Zealanders were emerging from the strongpoints, *Afrika Korps* again communicated with *Panzerarmee Headquarters*. The chief operations officer pointed out that an accurate appreciation of the situation was not possible and also that *Afrika Korps*, at the moment, had no reserves which could be used for a counter-attack. The bulk of the riflemen of *15 Division* [*115 Rifle Regiment* in Group Baade] were with *90 Light*

Division, and *21 Panzer Division* was still in the northern area.

This news does not appear to have impressed the chief of the army staff. He again told *Afrika Korps* that it must restore the situation and do so from its own resources. He refused to withdraw Group Baade from *90 Light* but promised to reconsider the matter later. Nehring thereupon turned to Colonel Menny, now commanding *15 Division*. He asked Menny to consider whether the recently arrived battalion of *Infantry Regiment 382* then with Group Lindemann, *Afrika Korps'* *kampstaffel*, could be used for a counterattack.

By 5.20, again according to the diary, Nehring had more definite information. Menny transmitted a report from the liaison officer with the *Italian X Corps* that *Pavia's* strongpoints were still occupied by the British. Menny intimated that his own division then had a front running approximately from **Point 63** south-south-east to the group which was holding up the New Zealand **Divisional Reserve Group**. West of this line, his divisional artillery had taken up positions from which it could be withdrawn in time without loss of guns. Less precise but more alarming was the supposition at *Afrika Korps Headquarters* that the line of *Brescia's* strongpoints no longer existed.

These facts and rumours led Nehring to believe that the penetration of his defences was greater than had been supposed. It seems, however, that he learned at daylight that some of *Brescia's* strongpoints were still holding out. This being the case, the advance of Menton and Baade Groups on Deep Well would assume added importance as a means of easing the strain on *Brescia*. Nehring had no sooner reached this conclusion than he was advised that 'the enemy, about one battalion strong, has established himself in **Deir el Shein**.' ¹ It then became clear to him that the situation could not be restored with the forces available to *Afrika Korps*.

The information concerning the **Deir el Shein** was sent by *15 Panzer Division* and was received at five minutes to seven. The message said: 'Enemy infantry (one battalion strength) and anti-tank established

themselves in **Deir el Shein**.' This was not quite correct. It seems that during the night one or more parties from **21 Battalion** probably entered **Deir el Shein** to cause considerable alarm among the Italians there, and that this event was linked by *15 Division* with the appearance of **4 Brigade** and its anti-tank guns on the ridge overlooking the deir. The **20th Battalion** was close to the deir.

The report, however, was substantially correct, and when it was transmitted to *Panzerarmee* was sufficiently alarming to cause that headquarters to view the situation more seriously. Within a quarter of an hour of *Afrika Korps*' receipt of the report, *Panzerarmee* ordered *21 Division* to 'Have a force with tanks and artillery ready to operate in a south-easterly direction.' The *3rd Recce Unit*, then in the neighbourhood of **Tell el Eisa**, and *33 Recce Unit*, on the the army's extreme right flank at **Himeimat**, were sent to *Afrika Korps* with all speed. Later Baade Group was withdrawn from *90 Light Division* and directed to the relief of the situation on Ruweisat.

In brief, the Germans saw at daylight a confused situation accentuated by swarms of fleeing Italians in the rear areas. These had so lost their discipline that even when they were threatened with German fire they would not rally. Communications with the forward positions on Ruweisat had broken down. Nevertheless, the breach in the line appeared to be closed although not tightly sealed.

¹ *Afrika Korps*' diary, 15 July.

Counter-attack was imperative but, in Nehring's view, was possible only if reserves could be dredged from other parts of the front.

Nehring might have done better had he turned *15 Panzer Division*'s few tanks against the infantry about **Point 63** at daybreak. On the other hand, was it reasonable to think that the British would so bungle their attack that, after seven to eight hours of fighting, their infantry would be left naked and exposed on the objective unsupported either by

artillery or tanks? Nehring evidently did not think so. But he did not repeat the error when he caught the New Zealanders in similar circumstances a few days later in a night attack on **El Mreir**.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 24 – FIGHTING ON THE RIDGE

CHAPTER 24

Fighting on the Ridge

SO many tasks confronted 4 Brigade at dawn and during the morning that there was little time for thought that the brigade might be in a hazardous situation. This attitude reflected the spirit of all ranks. They were confident that their part of the operation had been successful and that they had only to hold their positions and endure the hostile fire and discomfort for the short period needed to move up the artillery and British tanks. In the meantime, there was enough to do without worrying about other phases of the battle.

Three facts impressed themselves when daylight permitted the commanders to take stock of the position. The most forceful was perhaps the unaccustomed view of the enemy's rear area in which could be seen numerous guns and vehicles and groups of Italians moving about apparently aimlessly. The next was that within the rough perimeter taken up in the dark there was still a large body of enemy troops. Some of these had surrendered and had been left for collection by the supports. Others had been bypassed. The third definite impression was that the cover chosen in the dark was not effective in the light and that movement provoked enemy fire.

Fourth Brigade, however, had no thought of lying down under the fire and thereby surrendering the initiative. A number of sorties were made from the perimeter to destroy abandoned trucks and other equipment and to gather prisoners. But it soon became obvious that the German gunners had not fallen to the general panic. They also had good observation over the area and their well-directed and prompt fire made sorties by organised bodies too expensive. Individual men then carried on the work. Some of the Italians did not need rounding up. They came into the brigade area to escape the increasing fire of both sides.

Although the majority of the prisoners were Italians, there were many Germans. These included two officers and the other ranks of an

anti-aircraft battery deployed in an anti-tank role that had been overrun by **20 Battalion**.¹ While C Company of the battalion was

¹ Probably 3/53 Battery of *135 Anti-Aircraft Regiment* which had been detached from Rommel's headquarters group to stiffen *Brescia's* defences. It had three 88-mm and two 20-mm guns.

consolidating near the site of the battery's 88-millimetre guns, a German officer rode swiftly into the area on a motor-cycle towards a truck in which had been found maps and documents. He was taken prisoner before he could complete what was thought to be a suicidal attempt to destroy the documents. A little later two more Germans in cars drove into the area, possibly on the same errand or because they were unaware that the area had been captured.

Among the Italians were at least four who claimed the rank of general, including a General Lombardi, and about ten colonels. Credit for these captures was claimed by several parties from various units. This was to be expected as, in the confusion normal to the arrival of an assaulting force on its objectives, the same prisoners were often taken two or three times by successive waves or groups. Probably D Troop of **31 Anti-Tank Battery** has the best claim. In the early hours, the troop drove into the middle of a headquarters' area when it was moving over a slight rise into cover from fire from the south. A solitary German opened fire with an automatic gun but was quickly dealt with by the troop's Bren-gunner. The surprised Italian staff showed immediate readiness to surrender. From the German records it may be inferred that the staff was part of the headquarters of *Brescia Division*.

Disposal of the prisoners was a problem. A sergeant of **18 Battalion** at one time had 150 Italians in his care. Sappers of **6 Field Company** had another 300 and 'three surly Germans.' When this second group was being mustered to be taken to the rear, the prisoners asked permission to fill their water bottles from drums on captured trucks. A certain

irresponsibility that developed among the prisoners led to investigations. The drums had held wine.

In the opinion of **4 Brigade** three thousand or more prisoners could have been taken in its area had the attack been supported as planned and the lines of communication been kept open. As it was, scores taken in the advance and sent back under light escort, often one man, either escaped or were released by the enemy left in the rear. Other groups of prisoners, held on the objective during the day, had to be left to their own devices when enemy fire fell heavily on the area. Many more who could easily have been captured north of the ridge if tanks or artillery had been available to give covering fire had to be allowed to drift back to their own lines.

Some of the prisoners were conveyed to the rear and handed over to the armour, the Indians, or New Zealand Divisional Headquarters, but no records were kept to show by which brigade or in what area the prisoners had been taken. The divisional intelligence summary of July stated that 'By early morning 400 prisoners had been brought in', and that 'By 2.30 New Zealand troops had captured 1600 prisoners.' The records make no mention of a group of senior Italian officers and some Germans sent back by **4 Brigade** during the morning.

There was a reverse side to the prisoner picture. Shortly after eight o'clock several men of **20 Battalion** reported a long column of troops marching to the west, about a mile and a half to two miles to the south. Field-glasses disclosed that these men were wearing greatcoats, equipment which **4 Brigade** had not carried in the advance. It was therefore assumed that the prisoners were Italians captured or bypassed in the advance and since released by their escort of German tanks. As the column was out of Bren-gun range, the Vickers were instructed to fire. By this time, however, more careful observation revealed that the column comprised British troops under enemy guard. This disconcerting sight would have been more so had it been known that it was **22 Battalion** which was being marched off.

Concurrent with these activities, the brigade defence layout was being tidied. The anti-tank guns and the Vickers machine guns provided the backbone of the defence. Most of the guns had been in vigorous action since the brigade arrived on the ridge, directing their fire in the dark and in the early morning haze against the flashes of the enemy field guns, mortars and automatics. One target that engaged the early attention of the machine guns revealed itself as tanks which were thought to be preparing the enemy's expected immediate counter-attack. The anti-tank guns were called on and drove the tanks into hull-down positions. The anti-tank gunners at this stage also claimed that they had put another three tanks out of action. These were seen at a range of about 2000 yards to the south and were identified later as two Grants and a Valentine captured from the British.

The Germans often labelled captured tanks as Mark IIIs, and there is evidence that on the morning of 15 July *Afrika Korps* sent three Mark IIIs to help *15 Division*.¹ These tanks are not mentioned again in the enemy records and may have been 31 Battery's bag. On the other hand, there was a group of derelict British tanks in the neighbourhood which, in the later investigation, may have been assumed to be the battery's victims. Any doubt on this matter, however, should not detract from 31 Battery's actions, which may well have been a factor in deterring General Nehring from ordering *15 Panzer* to push home an attack at that time.

In the brigade defence plan, 4 Platoon of No. 2 Machine Gun Company was left in 20 Battalion's area. No. 1 Section was on the slope to the south of Point 63 covering the south-west corner, while

¹ Lindemann Battle Group, *Afrika Korps'* *kampstaffel*, mentions in its report of 15 July that it sent three tanks to *Afrika Korps*.

No. 2 was on higher ground north of the point where the guns had an arc of fire stretching from the north-east to due west. No. 5 Platoon

was near the centre of the position close to the ridge crest and covered the ground to the north and south.

These medium machine guns constituted the main defence of the brigade and their gunners earned high praise for the manner in which they kept their guns in action. The shelter of their shallow trenches was inadequate and they were under continuous fire from captured 25-pounders and also probably from 5.9-inch guns whose shells burst in the air. Notwithstanding their exposed positions and casualties, the Vickers gunners engaged enemy machine-gun and mortar posts and, at extreme range, the enemy's heavier guns and transport. They did much to sustain the brigade in most trying hours.

Disposal of the anti-tank guns was a more difficult problem. Of 31 Battery's 12 six-pounders which crossed the start line, 11 reached the ridge where they were dispersed in whatever cover was available around **Point 63**. Several of the guns at once went into action against the enemy to the west and south. The guns were still on their portées and were backed into 'hull-down' positions on reverse slopes for protection against the enemy's anti-tank fire. The guns, however, were vulnerable to mortar and small-arms fire and the crews suffered several casualties.

Later in the morning the battery commander, Major **Nicholson**,¹ organised an anti-tank layout that included the infantry two-pounders. He sent C Troop near to brigade headquarters to cover the northern approaches and placed B and D Troops around **Point 63** covering the north, south, and west. The two-pounders were also deployed with the battery troops.

Attempts to dig pits for the guns were abandoned in most cases. Positions offering the best fields of fire were invariably near the tops of the minor ridges where the rocky outcrops made digging too slow and laborious. These positions were also under enemy observation and movement of any sort provoked direct fire of all types. Even when on portée the guns had to be moved after each engagement as enemy retaliation was immediate and accurate. This fire was sufficient to keep

most of the anti-tank gunners under cover when there were no targets peculiar to their trade. However, it also at times provoked them into retaliation.

On one occasion a German mortar was dropping accurate and persistent fire on B Troop under the direction of an officer who could be seen using a cane to control the crew's activities. Two of the troop's

¹ **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.

guns 'sniped' at the mortar but, although the volume of fire was reduced, it could not be put out of action as the guns with their flat trajectory could not drop their shells into the mortar pit. Vickers gunners completed the job. C Troop pumped several rounds into a group of four guns the enemy was bringing into action on a slope about 2000 yards north of the ridge. The enemy gave up the effort. Men of this troop also tried to bring in Italians who were sheltering just outside the main defence area, but the move brought such fire that the gunners had difficulty in regaining their own lines.

The two-pounders had little action early in the day as few targets appeared within range and their ammunition was limited. When the infantry positions at the western end of the ridge were rearranged some of these guns were left in front of the perimeter because, in the words of **20 Battalion's** anti-tank platoon commander, 'There was just nowhere else to go.' Any movement of the portées in the area drew immediate fire and several casualties to men, guns, and vehicles were suffered.

Although **4 Brigade** arrived on the objective with twenty-one anti-tank guns, the anti-tank defences could not be much improved during the day because of the difficulties of the terrain and the enemy's good observation. The gun crews also believed that the British tanks would appear at any moment, and that when they arrived the guns would be

switched from a defensive to a mobile role in support of an advance by the armour.

Some of the infantry dispositions were also rearranged in the morning. Daylight revealed that A and C Companies of **20 Battalion** were separated from D Company and battalion headquarters on **Point 63** by about a thousand yards of flat ground under enemy observation. In C Company, which had suffered a number of casualties in the dawn attack and had been under fire ever since, Captain Upham and most of his officers had been wounded. It was decided to withdraw the company as opportunity offered to the south-west of **Point 63**. After Upham had seen that the captured enemy guns had been made useless, he directed the company to fall back in small parties to the new area. During this movement several men were hit by machine-gun fire. Later in the day, one man drove back in a 'pick-up' and brought in the wounded who had been left behind.

A Company was given a new position to the north of **Point 63**. The move was started about 10.30. As groups of the company assembled in a shallow wadi they were fired on by artillery and mortars. When the fire eased the company was led in small parties to its final position. Here some of the men found abandoned enemy pits but the majority had to scrape what cover they could in very stony ground.

While these moves were being made a report was circulated that the enemy appeared to be on the point of attacking. For some minutes there was a brisk exchange of small-arms fire, probably with *3 Recce Unit*, which at that time was reporting on a reconnaissance of the ridge with the additional advice that it had engaged a company of the enemy which had withdrawn to the point. No attack developed, and after the new positions had been manned the men of **18 Battalion** who had been with **20 Battalion** were released to rejoin their own unit.

Towards midday conditions became very trying. In the exposed positions it was impossible to improvise shelter from the direct rays of the sun; water bottles were empty and could not be refilled as the men

had to remain in the cramped cover of their shallow trenches and insecure sangars. Men who had taken over Italian pits found the dirt, the stench, and the flies so unbearable that they took the risk of searching for cleaner quarters, even to scraping fresh pits. Enemy activity slackened although observed fire was still directed against any movement. As midday passed, visibility became worse. Heat haze and shimmer and the dust raised by shellfire made observation difficult for any distance, especially towards the sun.

The condition of the wounded was especially trying. It was impracticable to collect the wounded at a central point where a regimental aid post might be established, nor was it possible to evacuate them to the rear. As the casualties mounted several small aid posts were set up by medical orderlies and other men. The wounded in the immediate vicinity were collected at these posts and made as comfortable as possible while awaiting their turn to be visited by one of the two medical officers with the brigade, Captains **Swallow**¹ and **Feltham**.²

Typical of such shelters was that organised by two men of the machine-gun company, Sergeant **Morgan**³ and Private **Luxford**.⁴ They took it on themselves to carry those wounded early to a slight hollow, where with the help of some transport drivers they dug slits, improvised protection from the direct rays of the sun and made tea. At the same time the company's medical orderlies gave such aid as they could.

Another dressing station was made by the engineers near brigade headquarters. Of this post, Major Reid wrote:

¹ **Capt C. K. Swallow; Palmerston North; born NZ, 3 Nov 1914; medical practitioner; 7 Fd Amb (Fiji) 1940–41; RMO 19 Bn and Armd Regt Jan 1942–Mar 1944.**

² **Maj R. J. Feltham; Hunterville; born Ohakune, 5 Jul 1914; medical practitioner; RMO 20 Bn Dec 1941–Jul 1942; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.**

³ **Sgt F. G. Morgan; Lower Hutt; born Scotland, 9 Dec 1914; storeman; wounded Apr 1941; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.**

⁴ **Pte R. L. Luxford, m.i.d.; Rotorua; born Te Awamutu, 13 Jul 1916; farmhand; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.**

The number of wounded was beginning to increase, and as we had no medical personnel with us we had to set up our own little advanced dressing station. Two small Italian tents were found and pitched in a little hollow, and our wounded carried in out of the sun. It was a terrifically hot day, with what seemed to be more than the usual number of flies. We had only our field dressings. ... I had difficulty in finding a sapper to take charge of the wounded, but in the end arranged for one of the corporals to take over. We were sitting behind a sangar while I gave him his instructions when an air burst exploded overhead. The corporal was hit in the leg by a big piece of shrapnel and finished up in the advanced dressing station all right, but not in his intended capacity. ¹

Reid has also recorded:

To the rear of our position another makeshift dressing station had been established. The wounded were in shallow slit trenches or just lying on the sand in the full glare of the sun. Their position was most unenviable, and there was little we could do to ease their pain. Evacuation was not possible. ²

At this stage, the early afternoon, there were probably about seventy wounded in the aid posts scattered throughout the brigade area. They were hanging on waiting for the tanks and support weapons and equipment to arrive. Word had got around that Brigadier Burrows had established wireless contact with **Divisional Headquarters and had reported that the brigade was dug-in on the objective, and that he had been advised of early tank support.**

The wide gap separating 4 and 5 Brigades on the ridge should have been filled by **21 Battalion** with the 22nd in support. But **22 Battalion** had 'gone into the bag' and the 21st was scattered far and wide, although parts were deployed with 18 and 23 Battalions. Yet while **21 Battalion** was scattered and thus unable to fulfil its role in the brigade and divisional plan, it was not ineffective. Its main group played considerable havoc among the enemy.

After the breakthrough Lieutenant-Colonel Allen sent his adjutant, Captain **Butland**,³ off to the right to re-establish contact with **23 Battalion**. He then continued forward until he caught up with Captain Butcher's group about 1.30 a.m. Most of the men in the group were then fatigued. The last part of the advance had been over soft sand and through scrubby bushes which made walking arduous. As no enemy appeared to be in sight, Allen gave the men a rest. A check showed that the group comprised Allen, Butcher, most of No. 9 Platoon under Lieutenant **West-Watson**,⁴ and Captain

¹ *The Turning Point*, by Lieutenant-Colonel H. Murray Reid (Collins), p. 79.

² *Ibid*, p. 81.

³ **Capt W. C. Butland**, MC; born Hokitika, 29 Aug 1915; journalist; killed in action 24 Oct 1942.

⁴ **Capt K. C. West-Watson**; **Sudan**; born England, 16 Aug 1914; stage director; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

Ironside of D Company, **23 Battalion**, with some of his headquarters and his No. 17 Platoon commanded by Lieutenant **Cooper**,¹ a total of nearly fifty.

At a conference during the halt most of the officers considered they

had reached the area of the objective. They pointed out that the rate of advance had been high as the men had tackled the opposition at the double. Further, the ground to the north appeared to slope downwards, suggesting that the crest of the ridge had been passed. Allen, however, refused to be convinced. He argued that the distance between the start line and the objective could hardly have been covered within the time. He therefore ordered the group to proceed still further.

It is impossible to determine precisely where the group halted. Had the advance been made only at the rate prescribed in the battalion orders, 44 yards a minute, the party would have been over the ridge at two o'clock. The soft sand and scrub which made arduous going for the infantry may have been in the shallow depression at the foot of the crest. However, there appears to be no doubt that the resumed advance, which was maintained for another three-quarters of an hour, carried the group up to two miles into the enemy area beyond the ridge and probably a little to the right of the axis of the advance.

A double-apron and dannert wire fence covering a minefield, and a large gun emplacement and the noises of tracked vehicles moving and truck engines being started, halted the group. These signs of the enemy convinced Allen that he had reached the expected main line of resistance on the ridge. He ordered Butcher to hold the men on the position while he went back to bring up the rest of the battalion. Allen also left instructions that if he did not return or the group was not joined by other troops within an hour, Butcher and his officers should confer on a further plan of action.

Accompanied by Staff-Sergeant **Philip**² of **23 Battalion**, Allen retraced his steps. They were joined by five Italians and ran into an enemy post. Philip, with one of the prisoners, investigated and was shot and bayoneted by the defenders while Allen was hit by machine-gun bullets. The New Zealanders were robbed and left lying where they fell. At daybreak an Italian officer came out of the post with a water bottle but was driven under cover by artillery fire. Allen and Philip saw German tanks taking New Zealand prisoners away, and later in the morning the

Italians evacuated the post under machine-gun fire. The two then attracted the attention of

¹ **Capt G. S. Cooper, MC; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 31 Mar 1911; accountant; twice wounded.**

² **S-Sgt R. J. Philip; Dunedin; born Dunback, Otago, 1 Oct 1914; commercial traveller; wounded 15 Jul 1942.**

three men from **23 Battalion**, who put them in an abandoned truck and, after avoiding another enemy post, eventually found the temporary aid post set up in the area held by Captain Wallace.

While awaiting the remainder of the battalion, Butcher laid out company defences and sent West-Watson and one man to reconnoitre the enemy position. As they were examining the fence, which continued unbroken for 200 yards on either side of the point of contact, they destroyed three trucks and took some prisoners.

About four o'clock, as there was no sign of the battalion commander or the other companies, Butcher decided to withdraw on the route taken by Colonel Allen. The group had not gone very far when it met Major McElroy, who had with him some of Headquarters Company, including the signals officer, Lieutenant **Judd**, ¹ and a few of his signallers, and Lieutenant **Hawkesby** ² and his platoon, No. 7 of A Company, which had become detached in the encounter with the Italian field battery. Like all other groups and parties moving on and about the ridge that night, McElroy and his men had had a fair share of adventure.

After moving through the first enemy defences and picking up 7 Platoon, McElroy led the party forward for about an hour on the 320 degree bearing, dealing with some enemy posts and taking several prisoners on the way. He then changed direction to due north for about a mile in the hope of converging on other parts of the battalion.

Instead of meeting friends, the party found itself 'among limitless and undisturbed Italian transport.' As he thought the group had either missed or overstepped the objective, and principally because his men had by this time almost run out of ammunition, McElroy decided it would be unwise to engage the enemy unless it became necessary. The Italian sentries were far from alert. Some challenged the party but appeared to take little action when their challenges were not answered. The New Zealanders then tried challenging first with 'Qui va la?' to which the sentries replied and allowed them to pass unmolested.

About four o'clock McElroy again changed direction, this time to the north-east. Half an hour later his party encountered a strong-point enclosed by a triple dannert-wire fence. Avoiding this took the men over a slight rise and across the pipeline and track between **Alamein** and **Kaponga**. Here the party halted for a rest and was joined by Butcher and his men. Under McElroy's command, the combined party, now numbering seven officers and about sixty men, and their prisoners moved on a bearing of 140 degrees and in half

¹ **Maj L. E. Judd**, m.i.d.; Hastings; born NZ, 20 Feb 1919; commercial traveller.

² **Maj G. H. Hawkesby**, DSO; **Howick**; born **Auckland**, 18 Apr 1915; manufacturer's representative; wounded 28 May 1944.

an hour reached the crest of the ridge in the neighbourhood of Point 64. The bearing and the identification of Point 64 suggest that the point of union on the pipeline was just over the crest of the ridge, and that had the party moved a little further to the south it would have met **23 Battalion**. It seems that in the dark it missed that battalion by only a few hundred yards.

When he had satisfied himself that he was on the crest of the ridge, McElroy checked the ammunition. There was little more than about five rounds a man, a quantity obviously insufficient to hold a defensive

position unsupported. McElroy thereupon led the party along the ridge to the east in search of other troops. On the way, he attacked a group of trucks in a wadi and took some more prisoners. This action provoked fire from both flanks of the party, which then moved further to the east into another depression.

The way forward from this depression was blocked by an extensive defensive position facing generally south. McElroy ordered the remaining ammunition to be evenly distributed and then directed a series of bayonet charges against the position. A small group of Germans about fourteen in number offered determined resistance until all were killed or wounded. Thereupon some thirty to forty Italian officers and several hundred other ranks gave up the fight.

As the wadi was under fire from British guns, the New Zealanders and their prisoners continued towards the east guided by an intelligence officer from **5 Indian Division** who had been held prisoner by the Italians. On reaching the edge of the enemy's minefield, an Italian officer indicated the gap and the whole group passed through to be met by armoured cars from **30 Corps**. McElroy handed his prisoners to **5 Indian Division** before leading his men back to the New Zealand sector, where shortly after midday he reported to his own brigade headquarters.

Casualties in the group had been remarkably light since they had broken away from the main body of the battalion. Captain Ironside had been killed by a machine gun and about eight men had been wounded. Major McElroy officially reported that he handed over about 500 prisoners, but the total was believed to be more.

In contrast with many other encounters, these activities cannot be directly related to the enemy reports and actions. It is possible, however, that McElroy's move eastwards along the ridge was linked in the enemy's mind with the advance of the 3rd Baluchis on the extreme right. *Afrika Korps* recorded in its diary at 1.30 p.m. that 'another piece of bad news is received; Pavia also retreats to the west. The situation grows more and more critical.' The German *Infantry Regiment 200 of 90 Light Division*,

which filled a gap between *Pavia* and *Trento*, was also apprehensive of an attack in its rear. Further, the movements of aggressive groups in the enemy's rear area in the early hours of the morning was doubtless disconcerting and added to the confusion, especially in the neighbourhood of **Deir el Shein**, a defensive area of great importance. In its daily battle report *Panzerarmee* said: 'Had the enemy succeeded in capturing the work of Deir el Schein, the whole front of the *Panzerarmee* would have been split in two.'

The exploits of 11 Platoon of B Company, **22 Battalion**, under Sergeant Elliott may be added to those of **21 Battalion**, as they occurred largely in the same area about the same time and caused much discomfort to the enemy.

Upon the escape of the platoon from the tanks which rounded up his battalion and after having had the bullet wound in his chest attended to, Elliott deployed his sections on the far right flank of **23 Battalion** alongside two platoons from the 21st under Lieutenants Shaw and **Horrocks**.¹ Here they dug in under spasmodic fire, mostly from the north.

While thus engaged a report was received that a New Zealand officer was lying badly wounded somewhere to the north. Shaw sought a truck while Elliott took eight men to search the ground. As they left their positions, they were fired on from an enemy post in a slight depression about 500 yards distant. About half-way to this post heavy fire from the right menaced the search. Corporal Garmonsway² took four of the men to deal with this opposition, while Elliott and the remaining three men pushed straight ahead.

As Elliott's party closed to within 50 yards of the first opposition, the Italians in the post, about eleven in number, ceased fire and put up their hands. Elliott found an anti-tank gun and some machine guns in the post. He was dismantling these when two supporting posts, one about 100 yards to the north and the other slightly farther away, opened fire.

It was now obvious to the attackers that they had penetrated a defended area. Whether to go on or withdraw became an urgent problem. Elliott decided that, in the circumstances, attack was the better form of defence. Shepherding their prisoners with them, the men moved on to assault the new posts. As these surrendered, yet another post on a gently rising slope ahead opened fire on the assailants and prisoners alike.

There were now about fifty prisoners. Sergeant Elliott sent one of his men back for reinforcements and with the other two worked his way up the slope. Once again there was new fire, this time from the left rear to the west.

¹ **Capt R. E. Horrocks**, MC; born NZ, 9 Sep 1916; clerk; wounded 24 Oct 1942; killed in action 28 Nov 1943.

² **2 Lt R. F. Garmonsway**, DCM; Rangiwaea, **Taihape**; born **Taihape**, 29 Jun 1911; shearer.

Leaving his two men to engage the enemy ahead and look after the prisoners, Elliott dashed across 200 yards of open desert to engage this flank post. Heavy machine-gun fire forced him into cover behind an abandoned water truck near the post. When he sniped the enemy from this cover several of the defenders put up their hands, but the machine-gunner maintained his fire and succeeded in wounding Elliott in the thigh with a bullet that passed through the truck.

The shock of the wound compelled Elliott to rest for a few minutes, which he spent in watching his two men make their attack and then supporting them with fire. Next he dashed to the cover of a small hummock on his left closer to his own objective. From this position he lobbed a hand grenade into the post, and followed its explosion with a bayonet assault to dispose of the machine-gunner and take the rest of the defenders, about fifteen, prisoner. Taking these with him, Elliott made his way back to his two men and helped them to finish off the post they had been attacking.

A check of the prisoners revealed that they included two German medical officers, some German soldiers and over sixty Italians, some of whom had been wounded by their own men. By this time Elliott had received another wound in his leg, and one of his men, Private **Jones**,¹ had also been wounded. Elliott now decided to withdraw.

On the way back he met Lieutenant Shaw with a truckload of reinforcements. Near the positions on the ridge, they were rejoined by Corporal Garmonsway and his men who, after accounting for three enemy posts, had collected another sixty Italians and a German officer and sergeant. Among them, the sergeant and his eight men had accounted for almost two hundred of the enemy, including the prisoners. It was well after midday when they regained their platoon position. Indian troops were then appearing from the south-east. Elliott checked on his men and handed the platoon over to Garmonsway before he was taken through the Indian lines to a dressing station.

For his leadership of the platoon when **22 Battalion** was attacked by the tanks and his skill, example, and great personal bravery in the subsequent actions, Sergeant Elliott was awarded the Victoria Cross. His exploits were all the more remarkable in that he was still suffering from the after-effects of a bad bout of malaria. Corporal Garmonsway, who so ably supported his platoon leader, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

¹ **Sgt R. G. Jones**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born Mananui, 2 Dec 1913; policeman; p.w. **Bardia** 27 Nov 1941 – 2 Jan 1942; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 25 – ENEMY PREPARES COUNTER-ATTACK

CHAPTER 25

Enemy Prepares Counter-attack

AFTER the loss of **22 Battalion**, **5 Brigade** was represented on the ridge by only about 200 riflemen, comprising some 120 men of **23 Battalion** from A Company with elements of B and Headquarters Companies, approximately a platoon from each of A, B, and C Companies of **21 Battalion**, and Sergeant Elliott's platoon of **22 Battalion**. A recaptured two-pounder manned by a scratch crew was the group's only anti-tank defence. Other **5 Brigade** men, notably those organised by Captain Wallace of **21 Battalion**, were in **4 Brigade**'s sector and were commanded by that brigade.

Upon the capture of Lieutenant-Colonel Watson, Captain Norris, as senior officer, took command of the mixed group and laid out a position in which the men dug in to await the arrival of the supporting weapons and British tanks. The western end of the area was taken by **23 Battalion** with the other platoons to the east. The position was under fire from several directions. Elliott's exploits disposed of annoying posts to the north and Lieutenant Shaw made further patrols of the same area and brought in more prisoners. Any attempt to move to the south or south-east, however, was stopped by heavy fire. As he had no wireless communication with brigade headquarters, Norris could not send a situation report or receive further orders. Later, a patrol searching for **21 Battalion** located Wallace's company and **4 Brigade**, whereupon Captain Marshall went to Brigadier Burrows, through whom he sent a report to **Divisional Headquarters** on the No. 9 wireless link. Burrows gave him the latest advice from Division—that tanks were on the way up and that the infantry were to hold their positions until they arrived.

In the meantime, repeated attempts were being made by **5 Brigade** Headquarters and the commanders of the supporting weapons and supply columns to find a safe route to the ridge. These efforts were frustrated by determined enemy in Strongpoint No. 2, from which such a volume of fire was directed on the flat, exposed area south of the ridge that the

advance of even single vehicles was prevented. In this area, however, good work was done by 11 Platoon of **4 Machine Gun Company** commanded by Lieutenant **Frazer**,¹ who had been sent

¹ **Maj K. J. Frazer**, MC, m.i.d.; Gambia; born **Auckland**, 28 Jul 1914; clerk; wounded 15 Apr 1945; Colonial Service.

forward by **Major Fairbrother** when he withdrew the brigade vehicle column.

The platoon had gone only a short distance when three enemy tanks were seen. After the tanks moved off, Frazer set up his Vickers guns and engaged an enemy gun position about 3000 yards away. When British artillery also ranged on the same position and forced the enemy to abandon their guns, No. 11 Platoon continued to fire on the retreating men. On examining the abandoned area, the machine-gunners rounded up a party of Italians who were holding the Brigade Defence Platoon prisoner. Frazer and his men remained well forward for the rest of the day in an isolated and very exposed position and engaged guns and strongpoints that were blocking communications with the ridge.

As soon as **6 Field Regiment** had deployed its guns in **Stuka Wadi**, battery observation parties reported that several centres of resistance stretching south-west from Point 64 on the ridge could be seen. One of the main centres was later identified as probably the German core of Strongpoint No. 2. It was a little to the north of the regiment's gunline and practically on the Division's axis of advance. The 25-pounders were turned on the position a few minutes after daylight. Later in the morning some of the Divisional Cavalry's Stuart tanks were put against the position under cover of the field guns in the hope that the enemy would surrender. The enemy, however, fought with spirit and drove the light tanks off.

Major Sawyers,¹ commanding 48 Battery, then tried to arrange an infantry attack but was informed that no infantry were available. He

thereupon collected a scratch force from all the men who could be spared from the battery and led it against the enemy, calling on them to surrender. Once again the resistance was firm and the gunners had to withdraw. Fire from the 25-pounders was now intensified, so much so that the strongpoint, about 500 yards long by about 300 deep, received over 1000 rounds from 48 Battery alone. This settled the issue. Between one and two o'clock white flags were shown in the defences and Sawyers advanced again to take the surrender of about 20 Germans and 160 Italians.

The strongpoint was protected by a minefield and contained a large number of machine guns and several anti-tank guns, including two 88-millimetre guns probably from 6/25 Battery of the German *135 Anti-Aircraft Regiment*. The gunners recovered one of their trucks and Captain [Pountney](#)² and his driver, who were lying

¹ [Lt-Col C. H. Sawyers](#), DSO, m.i.d.; [Auckland](#); born Aust 17 Feb 1905; sales manager; CO 14 Lt AA Regt Dec 1943; 5 Fd Regt Aug–Oct 1944, Nov 1944–May 1945.

² [Lt-Col J. A. Pountney](#), MBE; [Korea](#); born [Hamilton](#), 17 Feb 1915; Regular soldier; [6 Fd Regt](#) 1942; wounded 15 Jul 1942; GSO 2 RNZA. Army HQ, 1951–54; CO 16 Fd Regt, [Korea](#), Apr–Nov 1954; Commander K Force, Nov 1954–.

wounded in a slit trench nearby. Pountney reported that his observation party, which had moved forward with the infantry in the first advance, had run into the enemy position in the dark, and that all except himself and his driver had been killed by small-arms fire. The two survivors, both wounded and made prisoner, had spent a very uncomfortable morning under the fire of their own guns. The gunners also collected the bodies of Captain Mason and his men from [23 Battalion](#) who had been killed three days previously when on a carrier patrol.

As this post gave in, other posts along the inter-corps boundary fell to **5 Indian Brigade**. After their initial failure during the night, the 4th Rajputana Rifles had reorganised near their original start line. At 11.20 a.m. the battalion attacked again and by two o'clock, with help from the tanks, had overcome most of the resistance south of the ridge. By 2.30 it was reported that the Indians had made contact with **5 New Zealand Brigade** on the ridge and were digging in around Point 64.

These successes opened a route to **5 Brigade's** forward troops through the Indian sector. The progress of the Indians had been watched by **Brigadier Kippenberger**, and as soon as the route was opened several groups of vehicles left for the ridge. In one of the first of these groups was Captain **Dasler**,¹ the brigade signals officer, who took forward some wireless sets through which he gave to brigade headquarters the first comprehensive account of the day's events on the ridge. Captain **McPhail**, the brigade intelligence officer, led the first column of anti-tank guns, carriers, mortars and ammunition through to the ridge. Several of these vehicles and those following were held up by minefields, actual or suspected, but the majority reached the area south of **23 Battalion** by four o'clock. At the same time, Major **Romans**,² second-in-command of **23 Battalion**, went forward and took over from Captain **Norris**.

Fourth Brigade's support columns made equally strenuous efforts to break through to the ridge. They were more fortunate than **5 Brigade** in that they had some communication with the advanced headquarters. The links, however, were tenuous. Fourth Field Regiment received a few messages from its forward observation officers, but the No. 11 wireless set with Rear Brigade Headquarters could not maintain communication with the set with Brigadier **Burrows**. An attempt to supply the observation officers with a new wireless set by carrier was frustrated by the enemy. The only channel then left was from the ridge to **Divisional Headquarters**,

¹ Maj **R. Dasler**; **Christchurch**; born **Oamaru**, 26 May 1912;

mechanician; OC 3 Coy 2 NZ Div Sigs Jul 1942–Jan 1943; 4 Sqn Sigs Jan–Jun 1943.

² **Lt-Col R. E. Romans**, DSO, m.i.d.; born Arrowtown, 10 Sep 1909; business manager; CO 23 Bn 1942–43; twice wounded; died of wounds 19 Dec 1943.

which relayed the messages first by wireless and later by cable to Rear Brigade. When the cable was broken too often by traffic, shelling and bombing, **Divisional Headquarters** supplied a No. 9 set. Such was the perversity of the occasion that the operator could not break in on the almost continuous flow of high priority messages on the set's wavelengths.

In spite of these difficulties, the artillery responded to a call at 8.13 a.m. for a concentration on targets in **Deir el Shein** at a range of about six miles. This was within the range of supercharges but the shells fell short. It proved impossible to give the necessary corrections and the regiment was compelled to desist from its efforts to give direct support. Thereafter it gave attention to targets closer to hand.

During the morning the carrier officers of all three battalions led parties forward. They were forced to return, chiefly by the fire from Strongpoint No. 3 in front of the **Divisional Reserve Group**, the flank posts of Strongpoint No. 2, and enemy tanks near the route. By midday some of **22 Armoured Brigade's** tanks, squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry, and the artillery were fully in action against these posts and several small groups of prisoners were brought in. In the early afternoon Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch decided to make a final, determined dash for the ridge under cover of these actions and **6 Field Regiment's** bombardment in **5 Brigade's** sector. He set out about two o'clock with a section of **19 Battalion's** carriers loaded with ammunition. He left instructions that, should he not return or send a report within an hour, the other columns should follow him.

The venture was hazardous but succeeded. Lynch delivered his

ammunition and then resumed command of **18 Battalion**. However, all attempts by wireless and runner to send back word of his safe arrival were unsuccessful. When the stipulated interval had expired other convoys set out for the ridge. Some of the vehicles in the first of the columns neared the ridge only to be compelled by enemy action to withdraw through **5 Brigade's** sector. Others became involved in fire between the British tanks and the enemy and had to fall back.

By this time **5 Brigade** had a route to the ridge and the enemy in the main post opposite the **Divisional Reserve Group** had surrendered. This post yielded 100 prisoners and six anti-tank guns. Later another 37 prisoners were rounded up. Concurrently, it was reported that British tanks were advancing to the north-west. This was encouraging, although it was noticed that the tanks did not advance until the enemy posts began to fall. However, the circumstances seemed favourable for advancing all the support columns. The hours of anxiety appeared to be ending.

But it was now too late. No sooner had **5 Brigade's** columns reached the ridge than the enemy showed signs of mounting a counter-attack. The situation ahead of **4 Brigade's** columns became so obscure and the reports of returning drivers were so ominous, that it was decided to defer the advance until definite information could be received concerning the position on the ridge. About the same time, **Divisional Headquarters** advised that the enemy was attacking towards **Point 63** and that British tanks were moving forward to assist.

Although the enemy posts on the approaches to the ridge yielded perhaps a little too readily when subjected to pressure, their resistance until the early afternoon was of some value in giving General Nehring time to draw in reinforcements and mount a set-piece counter-attack. Nehring's decision not to commit **15 Panzer Division's** few tanks and the recently-arrived battalion of **382 Regiment** in a counter-attack when **Point 63** was lost, or at daybreak, can be criticised only in the light of after-knowledge. The tanks were then plugging the gap. They might

have been used offensively at first light and it is practically certain that, with the support of the German infantry and the guns still available, they would have had little difficulty in overrunning, perhaps annihilating, the New Zealanders on the ridge.

But at this time Nehring knew only that the British had broken through his front into the heart of the defences. He did not know the strength of the assailants. However, the tanks which captured **22 Battalion** could report that there were anti-tank guns on the ridge, a fact leading to the reasonable deduction that the British were present in force and had other support weapons at hand. As has been already mentioned, Nehring discussed with Colonel Menny, commanding *15 Division*, the possibility of using *382 Regiment* for a counter-attack. This was just on three o'clock. The diary entry refers to the discussion as 'detailed' and to 'the' counter-attack.

The wording of the entry suggests that Nehring had ruled out the possibility of an immediate counter-attack. In so doing, he would probably be influenced by cardinal principles in defensive tactics laid down by Ludendorff in 1917 after a close examination of the defensive campaigns on the Western Front in that and the previous year. Ludendorff issued an inflexible order that an immediate counter-attack was to be undertaken only on the initiative of the commander in the front line and that 'immediate' was to be interpreted literally. If the front-line commander applied to a rear headquarters for permission to counter-attack, refusal was to be automatic. According to Ludendorff, the delay in seeking permission would give the enemy time to consolidate and thus be ready to beat off a hastily prepared counter-attack. Failing an immediate riposte by the front-line commander, the counter-attack was to be delayed until it could be mounted as a prepared set-piece battle.

The New Zealanders were familiar with this practice. Experience had taught that if the counter-attack did not come within an hour of winning an objective, it would be mounted later in more formidable form. Note of this was taken in the orders for Ruweisat that at least two-

thirds of the artillery were to be ready to support the infantry on the objective at first light and in the expectation that the British tanks would be up at the same time. The knowledge that a heavy counter-attack would surely come gave urgency to the task of clearing the approaches to the ridge.

Nehring was not a commander to be upset by an emergency. Confidential reports by his superiors criticised him only for 'his coldness of character which keeps subordinates at a distance.' Otherwise, he was described as 'a man of clear judgment and mentally active'; 'very intelligent, good commander with good tactical and strategical knowledge'; 'has shown caution and great personal bravery in many difficult situations'; 'remains cool in the most critical situations'; a commander with 'strong nerves and good judgment.'

Some years after the war when the facts of Ruweisat, especially the details of German strengths and moves, became known, a senior New Zealand officer observed: 'It is heart-breaking to see how close we were to overwhelming victory.' Nehring had a large share in causing that heartbreak.

Nehring appears to have done little during the hours of darkness except rely on *15 Division* to stabilise the front and consider what he could do to comply with *Panzerarmee's* orders that he must restore the situation with his own resources. With dawn he seems to have decided that an advance by *90 Light Division* would turn the scale. At 6.45 he advised the division: 'It is most important for Baade and Menton [the division's battle groups nearest Deep Well] to advance and relieve the pressure on **Brescia**.' ¹ This was no more than a note of urgency in the operations projected for that day. As has been mentioned, New Zealand Division was unconcerned about these activities towards its rear.

Within another ten minutes, however, Nehring had reason to change his mind. At 6.55, *15 Division* reported: 'Enemy infantry (one battalion strength) and anti-tank have established themselves in **Deir el Shein**.' This was a turning point. The fact is not recorded, but it seems to be

clear that Nehring conveyed this serious news to *Panzerarmee*, which now accepted his view 'that the situation

¹ Unless stated otherwise, this and subsequent orders and reports are quoted from *Afrika Korps*' logs of messages in and out on 15 July.

cannot be restored with the forces available.' At seven minutes past seven *Panzerarmee* ordered *21 Panzer Division* to 'Have a force with tanks and artillery ready for use in a south-easterly direction.' Concurrently *3 Recce Unit*, which was operating between *21 Division* and the Australians at *Tell el Eisa*, was sent to *Afrika Korps*.

A quarter of an hour after sending the report concerning *Deir el Shein*, *15 Division* gave its dispositions and added, 'All troops engaged in heavy defensive action. Relief urgent.' Still another quarter of an hour later, at 7.25, the division reported: 'Enemy tanks attacking 15th Panzer Division from the south-east. We have protective posts out to the south.' As a riposte Nehring ordered his headquarters battle group, Lindemann, to 'Attack the enemy north of you immediately.'

These reports indicate the aggressive nature of *4 Brigade's* and *Divisional Reserve Group's* preparations for holding their respective areas, especially the sorties from the brigade's perimeter to secure prisoners and destroy enemy equipment. The tank attack reported was probably the initial moves of part of *22 Armoured Brigade* or of the *Divisional Cavalry* in the neighbourhood of the Reserve Group. Lindemann's attack was not pressed. It may have been the small attack by three tanks which was engaged first by the machine-gunners and then by *31 Battery* from *Point 63*.

Nehring now brought to the scene two small units which were destined to play decisive parts in the battle. These were *3 Recce Unit*, commanded by Second-Lieutenant H. Schroetter, and *33 Recce Unit* under Captain D. Lienau. Schroetter was not yet 22 years old. He had

fought as a private with his unit in **France** in 1940 and had been commissioned in February the following year. He was reported to be 'a good, energetic front-line soldier' who 'gives clear orders, makes decisions and carries them out with vigour.' Lienau had celebrated his 28th birthday in the fighting about **Acroma** and **Tobruk** and had done all his active service with reconnaissance units. The confidential reports on him are not available but his decorations and promotion suggest that *Panzerarmee* thought well of him. He held the Iron Cross, Classes 1 and 2, when he came to **Africa** and in October 1942 he was awarded the German Cross in Gold. In February 1943 he was promoted major, an unusually swift advance in an army notoriously slow in promotions. The equipment at the disposal of these young officers cannot be stated precisely, but it may be recalled that earlier in the month the three reconnaissance units of *Panzerarmee* had only fifteen armoured cars among them, a troop each of captured 25-pounders and some lorried infantry.

Schroetter was operating with Rommel's *Kampstaffel Kiehl* against the Australians at **Tell el Eisa** when *Panzerarmee* placed him at the disposal of *Afrika Korps* shortly after *21 Division* was ordered to prepare a battle group to move to Ruweisat. He travelled quickly and at 8.40 advised *Afrika Korps*: 'We are three kilometres west of **Point 63** with good observation north-east and south-east. **Point 63** is occupied by the enemy. A few infantry and four anti-tank guns seen. No more movement seen on the enemy side from divisional headquarters. ¹

Schroetter was then ordered to make contact with *200 Regiment* and *Trento Division's* batteries which were still in the line north of the eastern end of the ridge. While making his way to this area, he reported at five minutes past ten: 'Enemy infantry in company strength one kilometre south-west of **Point 63**. We engaged them and they withdrew to **Point 63**.' The withdrawal was probably Schroetter's mistaken impression of *20 Battalion's* regrouping. He is next mentioned in the German records at 11.50 when he was ordered to 'Push southwards to take **Point 63** south of Shein.' Schroetter, however, did not report

compliance with the order and there is nothing in **4 Brigade's** records to suggest that an armoured car attack was made about that hour. It may be that this young commander 'who makes decisions and carries them out with vigour' thought there was more urgent business further east where 3 Baluchis were then advancing to their objective. He was in the neighbourhood of the junction of **Barrel Track** and the western **Alamein-Munassib** track in the early afternoon, when he reported **2 Armoured Brigade's** advance against *Pavia Division*.

In the meantime, Nehring had reached out for further reinforcements for the sector. About 8.40 he ordered *90 Light Division* by telephone to send *33 Recce Unit* to the north at once and to direct *Baade Group* to the north. Lienau was then in the **Himeimat** area on the extreme southern flank. The division's executive order did not reach him until about an hour later. It stated forcefully, if somewhat vaguely: 'Withdraw whole unit immediately. Take your patrols with you. Report when you are assembled.' These instructions must have been amplified, for Lienau left almost immediately for **El Mreir**, some 20 miles distant over bad country, which he reached in the middle of the afternoon.

During most of the morning *90 Division* continued its probing against Deep Well, but at 9.50, in response to Nehring's instructions, it instructed *Baade Group* to 'Advance north. Of paramount importance.' This was apparently too vague for Colonel Baade, who ten minutes later asked the division: 'What do you mean by advance north? What is our objective and what is the object of the move? Our previous job is completed.'

¹ Presumably *15 Panzer Division*.

Such forthrightness seems in keeping with Baade's characteristics as they are noted in the confidential reports. These describe him as a 'strong personality, extremely independent nature', and again as an 'outstandingly forceful personality.' He was said to be 'not always easy to handle' and 'often too impulsive and touchy.' All of his superiors,

however, agreed that Baade was a sound, practical front-line soldier. On the eve of **Minqar Qaim** he had been given the Knight's Cross to add to four Iron Crosses and the German Cross in Gold. He was then 45 and commanded the *115th Panzer Grenadier Regiment* in *15 Panzer Division*. The New Zealanders were later to encounter Baade in **Italy** at **Cassino**.

On the present occasion, Baade had been detached with the two battalions of his regiment from *15 Division* to operate as a mobile infantry column with *90 Light Division*. He had about 200 riflemen and some light anti-tank and field guns. Small though it was, the value of the group as a fighting force was considered high according to the tenor of the messages sent it.

In spite of the urgency of his call, Baade did not move very quickly. He had, of course, to withdraw his troops from the operation in conjunction with *Menton Group* against Deep Well and put them into desert formation for the move. But it took him two and a half hours to travel little more than two miles into **Deir el Angar** to a point about two miles south-west of **Alam Nayil**. On the way he took under command *Littorio's Rochetti Group* of eleven tanks. From the enemy records it may be inferred that in this Baade acted with characteristic initiative as the only reference is a somewhat bland intimation to *90 Light*: 'Taking Rochetti Group north with us.'

From **Deir el Angar** Baade intended to advance due north against the rear of the New Zealanders, but he found his way barred by 'A very strong enemy force with tanks in front of us to the north; 15 tanks and 300 vehicles seen.' These tanks were from **22 Armoured Brigade**, then guarding the New Zealand left flank, which had sighted the remains of *Ariete's* armour and were chasing them back towards **Kaponga**. The vehicles Baade saw belonged to New Zealand Division and would readily be associated in his mind with the tanks on his front. Under *Afrika Korps'* orders, Baade turned left to **Kaponga** to avoid the British tanks and was then given as his immediate objective an assembly area in rear

of *15 Panzer Division's* headquarters to the east of **El Mreir**. As an inducement to hurry, Nehring advised him that 'The C-in-C expects that it will decide the day if you arrive quickly.'

By this time Nehring had planned his counter-attack but his diary indicates that he was becoming extremely anxious. At midday, the diary notes, 'The situation is decidedly critical. Everything depends on the prompt arrival in time of the units detailed for the operation.' Again, at 1.30, 'The situation grows more and more critical.' The fears were aroused by a report from *15 Division* that 'The Italians have abandoned **Brescia's** westerly strongpoints. We have threatened to fire on them but it has done no good. A company of German engineers has been pushed forward.' The strongpoints were probably those in the nest in front of the **Divisional Reserve Group** which, at the hour of *15 Division's* report, were being assailed by British tanks and the New Zealanders, supported by 4 and 5 Field Regiments. The second diary entry was inspired by 'another piece of bad news—Pavia also retreats to the west.' This entry may be associated with the activities of the 3rd Baluchis and the British tanks on the eastern end of the ridge.

These anxieties were reflected in an order to *90 Light Division* to give up its operations in an easterly direction and turn north with all available forces. It seems, however, that Rommel and Nehring were not confident as to the outcome of this move, for when they were next in touch, shortly after two o'clock, Rommel agreed that if strong pressure developed the division should withdraw on **Gebel Kalakh**, some nine miles to the rear and south of **Kaponga**. Rommel also intimated at this time that he had ordered the whole of *21 Panzer Division* to return to *Afrika Korps*.

Nehring's plan was issued direct to the several units between three and three-thirty. He ordered Lienau's *33 Recce Unit* to advance along the top of the ridge, capture **Point 63**, and then move further along the ridge to the pipeline crossing which was to be secured and held. Schroetter was instructed to move against the eastern end of the ridge and Baade to advance 'more or less along the old line of **Brescia's**

strongpoints.' The attack was to be supported by *15 Division's* artillery.

Shortly after the orders were issued, *21 Division's* battle group which had been made ready in the morning arrived. Known as *Group Bruer*, it comprised a battalion about 100 riflemen strong, six machine guns, and six light anti-tank guns. Nehring strengthened the group with the 1st Company, *39 Anti-tank Detachment*, less three guns. He noted in his diary, 'Up to now this company had been kept back in the vicinity of Korps battle headquarters as a last reserve.' The specific tasks given to *Group Bruer* are not recorded except that 'it will be thrown in immediately to the south of Ruweisat.' Events suggest it was kept fairly close to the ridge. Nehring also appears to have placed two companies from *382 Regiment* at the disposal of *15 Division*.

Strangely, Nehring did not set a time for the counter-attack in his recorded orders or forecast it in his diary. The diary, however, notes in the midst of a number of other entries at four o'clock: 'The attack begins.' Although doubtless only a coincidence, it is of interest that during the afternoon a German officer held by **19 Battalion proffered the information that an attack was likely to begin after four o'clock and then set to work energetically to improve his slit trench.**

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 26 – FOURTH BRIGADE OVERRUN

CHAPTER 26

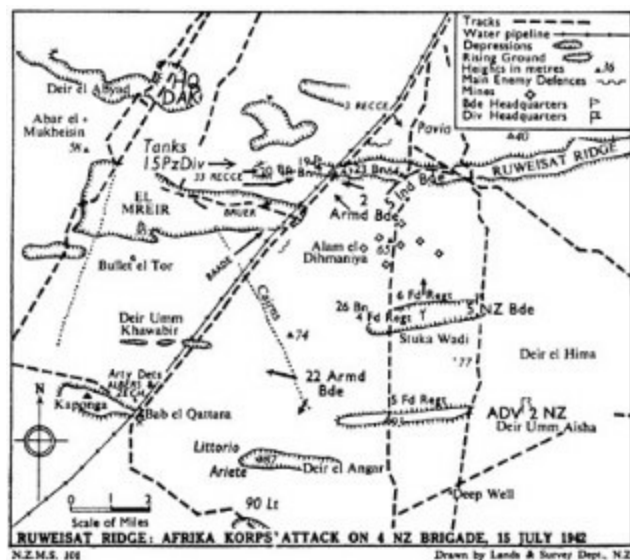
Fourth Brigade Overrun

FOURTH Brigade was well aware by the middle of the afternoon that a counter-attack was impending. From three o'clock the enemy shelling from the north-west and west increased considerably and troop and transport movements could be seen in the enemy's rear area. Detailed observation, however, was difficult as, in addition to the heat haze, a slight wind was blowing into the defences the dust raised by the enemy's transport and shellfire. This dust, extreme heat, flies, and the unhygienic state of much of the area made conditions most unpleasant.

When **20 Battalion's** forward posts reported that transport was assembling in the enemy's lines, Brigadier Burrows passed the information to **Divisional Headquarters** with urgent requests for more anti-tank guns and ammunition. The J Section signaller operating the wireless link, however, could not get his signals accepted as the divisional station was fully engaged with messages with a higher priority than that permitted the brigade. Realising the urgency of the situation, the signaller on his own initiative gave the Brigadier's message the second highest priority and thus broke into the continuous traffic on the link. **Divisional Headquarters** replied that the supply columns were on their way forward and that the brigade was to hold its positions until support arrived.

This message, sent in apparent ignorance of the position of the brigade's supply columns and support weapons as well as of the British armour, deprived Burrows of any initiative he might have exercised. The facts at that hour were that the brigade's supply and support columns were still held up, no one knew precisely what **22 Armoured Brigade** was doing, and **5 Brigade's** columns and **2 Armoured Brigade** had barely reached the top of the ridge. Possibly there was little that Burrows could do, but a message to the effect that the right was being made secure and that the situation on the left was obscure would not have left the false impression that support was at hand.

Besides the physical discomforts that had to be endured, the casualties were becoming heavy. As the enemy were mounting their attack, **20 Battalion** reported that since the morning more than half of its officers had been killed or wounded. Other reports indicated that few of the rifle companies throughout the brigade could muster more than half of the strength with which they had crossed the start line.



Ruweisat Ridge: Afrika Korps' attack on 4 NZ Brigade, 15 July 1942

Increasing enemy fire prevented the distribution of ammunition brought forward by a few vehicles that pressed onward when the supply columns were turned back. This fire also covered a reconnaissance of the brigade's north-eastern front by two enemy armoured cars. They were engaged unsuccessfully by a six-pounder and a two-pounder as they made fleeting appearances out of the cover of slight hollows and ridges. These cars cannot be definitely identified, but most likely they were from Lienau's unit, as at ten minutes past four Schroetter, who was then on the north-eastern slope, reported to *Afrika Korps*, '33 Recce Unit arrived here.'

About this time an officer from **2 Armoured Brigade** drove up to **18 Battalion** on the brigade's right or eastern flank and reported that a strong force of British tanks was then only two and a half miles to the east and was making its way forward along the south side of the ridge. The infantry situation was explained to him and he left, ostensibly to

bring the tanks forward. As the attack appeared about to fall, Burrows sent one of his liaison officers, Lieutenant **McLernon**,¹ to hurry the tanks forward. He found the leading tanks just over a mile away. After explaining the situation to the commander of the regiment, he returned with a British liaison officer. When heavy fire prevented this officer from making a detailed survey, he suggested that he should obtain his regiment's light reconnaissance tanks for the task. Burrows told him this was no time for such tactics and that the situation demanded full armoured support. The liaison officer set out for his regiment as the enemy attack developed against **20 Battalion**.

Captain Dasler, **5 Brigade**'s signals officer, also tried to hasten the advance of the tanks. He had brought **4 Brigade** the welcome news that a supply route through **5 Indian Division**'s sector was open. He also left as the attack commenced with the intention of urging the armour to advance. He found a group of tanks in cover only a short distance away, but his request for urgent action was met with the reply that the squadron had not yet received orders to advance. One commander, however, offered to send an officer to reconnoitre.

The enemy did not show comparable hesitation. Lienau's report to *Afrika Korps* at 4.45 that **Point 63** was held only lightly by infantry and anti-tank guns appears to have confirmed an impression that the objective was of the type specially favoured for the swiftonsslaught tactics of German armoured cars and tanks. During a slight pause apparently on the start lines, the enemy intensified artillery, mortar, and machine-gun fire on **4 Brigade**. The dust screen drifting over **Point 63** was thickened with the smoke of burning vehicles seemingly deliberately set alight. Against the setting sun, the screen reduced visibility from the defences to about 300 yards and sometimes to as little as a hundred yards.

Resisting the temptation to remain under their scant cover against the artillery and mortar bombardment and the hail of machine-gun fire which swept the area, the men of **20 Battalion** and the anti-tank and

Vickers gunners peered into the haze to engage every target they could see. Just on five o'clock Lienau's armoured cars, their machine guns blazing, struck out of the screen against the south-west corner of **20 Battalion's** sector and then swung northwards to the east of **Point 63** into **19 Battalion's** area. The cars moved so swiftly that they were among the posts almost before the defenders could realise what was happening. Their speed, the skilful manner in which they were manoeuvred, the volume of fire they produced and the smoke, dust and haze, created an impression that they were more numerous than was the case.

¹ **Capt C. R. McLernon; Gisborne**; born **Gisborne**, 3 Jun 1912; oil-well driller; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

Concurrently tanks, half-track trucks, self-propelled guns and captured British portées, most of them carrying infantry, attacked from the west. Further armoured cars were also reported to have advanced from the north, but whether this was so or not cannot be established.

In its exposed and unsupported condition, the brigade had little chance of withstanding the enemy's swift descent. The anti-tank gunners, normally the backbone of the defence, were particularly vulnerable as they manned their guns on the portées. First a gun and portée of D Troop and then another of B Troop were hit and set alight. A second portée of B Troop was next immobilised. The crew of the troop's third gun took the damaged portée in tow but their own vehicle received a direct hit and caught fire. A passing two-pounder then took over the tow and got away safely. This was the only gun of B Troop to be saved, the fourth gun which had been damaged in the night attack being lost later in the day. The remaining three guns of D Troop and all four of C Troop's were withdrawn successfully.

With the collapse of the anti-tank defence, the position of the infantry became hopeless. Most of **20 Battalion** was surrounded and forced to surrender. Men who attempted to withdraw into **19 Battalion's**

area found the armoured cars there also and **19 Battalion** being rounded up. A few men escaped by breaking out to the east and south, and one group of A Company **19 Battalion** was led out by Captain **Thomson**.¹ The remainder of the two battalions, 10 officers and 171 other ranks of **20 Battalion** and 11 officers and 195 men of **19 Battalion**, were made prisoner. Captain Upham was among those taken. Although badly wounded in the arm in the early morning attack, he had commanded his company throughout the day. He was again wounded in the counter-attack, this time by a mortar, burst that left him unable to walk. For his great gallantry and leadership at **Minqar Qaim** and on the present occasion, Upham was later awarded the most rare of battle honours, a bar to the Victoria Cross.

The two battalions also lost their headquarters except their commanding officers. Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell was at brigade headquarters when the attack opened and Major Manson had moved back to get support for his men.

The experience of the infantry is well described in the story of one of **19 Battalion's** more fortunate platoons. As the shelling increased, the men of the platoon had their first warning of the

¹ **Capt D. S. Thomson**, MC, ED; Stratford; born Stratford, 14 Nov 1915; clerk; wounded 26 Jun 1942; wounded and p.w. 16 Jul 1942. Thomson was wounded and taken prisoner when he returned to search for more men of his company.

enemy's approach when they saw an anti-tank gun crew move from cover in response to a call from the lookout man on top of their portée. Against the setting sun and the haze, the infantrymen in their slit trenches could see nothing ahead except the flashes of guns and exploding shells. Machine-gun fire continually swept the ground. An armour-piercing shell ricocheted out of the haze and set a nearby truck on fire. Although the anti-tank gunners had opened fire, the platoon still could not see the enemy. After they had fired a number of rounds, the

anti-tank gunners drove off, calling out as they passed that they had run out of ammunition.

At this stage the infantrymen saw several vehicles, either armoured cars or light tanks, in the haze about 100 to 150 yards away. Fire was opened in the hope of deterring the enemy from coming closer. However, when only a few rounds had been fired, they had to stop as men from their own battalion close to the vehicles rose to surrender. The platoon commander then ordered the platoon to withdraw. The men dashed over bare rocky ground to their rear. Machine-gun fire followed them until they reached cover.

Of the anti-tank action, Sergeant Parks ¹ of C Troop has recorded:

When the tanks came in the afternoon and we backed up over the rise, at first we could see no tanks. There were plenty of our chaps surrendering. There were many vehicles on fire and we knew that tanks must be close as only tanks could cause such a situation.

When we made out the tanks the range was 300 yards or less. I laid and loaded the gun (C1), observing the fall of shot over the shield. We knocked out two tanks and I was just sighting on a third when a party of 30 or 40 New Zealanders. ... walked between C1 and the tank. It was impossible for me to fire through them. The German commander must have been a good man. The tank also abstained from firing through the surrendered New Zealanders. While those men walked across the line, I laid on the tank and could see his gun laid on C1. The moment the last man passed the line of fire, both the tank and I fired.

The tank shell hit the metal plate at the back of the portee just below the gunshield, and threw pieces of metal under the shield among the crew. We were all wounded except the driver. Before we got away, our men saw the tank start to smoke and then burst into flame. [The driver] started up the portee and drove off straight away and got us out of trouble. On the way out [one man] slipped

off the portee and disappeared. ²

The infantry two-pounder sections, which had suffered losses in personnel and equipment under the bombardment, followed the lead of the nearest six-pounder crew. But as the attack developed communication became difficult and each gun commander had to

¹ WO1 C. H. Parks, MM; **Lower Hutt**; born Wales, 6 Mar 1919; Regular soldier; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

² For his handling of his gun in this action, Sergeant Parks was awarded the Military Medal.

operate independently. Lieutenant **Wood**, ¹ who was helping to man one of **20 Battalion**'s two surviving guns, has recorded:

The shelling intensified so much that dust was raised all round us and we had practically no visibility ... the only things visible were the AP shells shooting through the dust. ... We and Sergeant Thompson's portee fired a considerable number of rounds at the enemy gun flashes through the haze. One of our crew was shot by small-arms fire which penetrated the shield so I withdrew the portee eastwards about 100 yards. ... turned round and again fired at the gun flashes. We then advanced westwards again. ... We could not see much but knew there was some form of enemy attack on because the gun flashes kept changing position and approaching. ... Men in the area were moving east. We moved back a short distance till we came to where troops were attempting to stabilise the position. We were told to go and site ourselves on the ridge again. Shortly afterwards one of the infantry company commanders told us to withdraw further east. ...

The Vickers gunners from their commanding positions on the ridge probably had the best view of the attack. They had been in action throughout the day and by the late afternoon were running short of

ammunition. Several of the gunners had been wounded and at least two of the eight guns brought forward had been damaged. About five o'clock the gunners overlooking **20 Battalion** reported that the area was being attacked by five armoured cars and two light tanks. The gunners put down all possible fire to help **20 Battalion**, but the battalion was quickly overrun and the enemy closed on the gun positions. Some of No. 5 Platoon, including several wounded and men attending to them, were taken prisoner. The platoon's No. 2 Section under Corporal **Fraser**² did a good section withdrawal, each gun giving covering fire in turn as the other was carried back. The section found an Italian truck in going order, and in it the two gun crews with their guns and stragglers got away safely. No. 4 Platoon was also forced to abandon its positions when the enemy broke into **19 Battalion's** area. The platoon's guns and some of the men were lost and the survivors fell back on the brigade headquarters.

Lienau gave Nehring prompt advice of his progress. At 5.30 he reported: '**Point 63** taken. Haul of PW cannot yet be ascertained.' An hour later he signalled: 'Have pushed our way forward as far as Point 53 [a spot height about three-quarters of a mile south-east of **Point 63**.] So far 7 57-mm and 4 40-mm anti-tank guns and a scout car knocked out.'

On receipt of this news Nehring decided, according to his diary, 'Now we must achieve the envelopment of the enemy to the north of Ruweisat.' To this end he signalled Lienau at 6.40: 'Make for

¹ **Maj D. L. Wood**, MC, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born NZ, 15 Aug 1915; barrister and solicitor; wounded Jul 1942.

² **Sgt D. R. Fraser**, m.i.d.; born Feilding, 18 Nov 1915; wol clerk; killed in action 24 Mar 1943.

your objective with all speed and bottle up the enemy north of Ruweisat.' Bruer was told at the same time to 'Surround the enemy north of Ruweisat by swinging round and moving to Point 64. Hurry.'

Baade also was advised: 'The enemy north of Ruweisat is to be surrounded. Advance forthwith to the area east and south of 909 right 2 and then swing north. 21st Panzer Division [i.e., *Bruer Group*] will be on your left.'

These orders meant that Lienau's *Recce Unit* was to push along the top of the ridge while Bruer was to skirt the resistance by moving on the southern slope of the ridge and then turn north, against Point 64, where **5 Indian Brigade was consolidating itself. Baade, moving on Bruer's right, was to complete the envelopment by coming in on the Indian brigade's rear.**

Nehring's plan for the second phase of the battle, however, was too optimistic. No sooner had he issued his orders than he learned to his astonishment that Baade was still at **Kaponga, having been held there in reserve by *15 Division* which, contrary to instructions, had taken the group under command. At the same time, Bruer reported: 'Infantry and tanks streaming back from the sector where the attack is taking place. Trying to stop them. They say they are being attacked by Pilot ¹ tanks.'**

On the ridge the tide had again turned, but not before further severe damage had been done to **4 Brigade.**

After overrunning 19 and 20 Battalions, the enemy paused only long enough to assemble the prisoners and salvage weapons and other equipment before resuming the advance against the eastern part of **4 Brigade's position. Here there were only the Brigade Defence Platoon and the sappers of **6 Field Company** about brigade headquarters and, a little further to the east, part of **18 Battalion** and the company from **21 Battalion**. Most of the men who escaped capture in the first attack were halted in the area and given places in the defences. On receiving further reports that the British tanks were only a short distance away, Brigadier Burrows gave orders to stand fast.**

Because of the constant fire falling in the headquarters' area the pause in the enemy's advance was not noticed. About six o'clock the

turret of an armoured car appeared over the rim of a ridge to the south of headquarters. It was thought at first to be a British tank but the defenders were quickly disillusioned. The armoured car machine-gunned the area thoroughly but did not advance over the ridge. It was engaged by a two-pounder from **18 Battalion's** sector

¹ Pilot, a British code-name for American tanks, was used by the Germans to refer to Grants and to other British tanks equivalent to their own Mark IIIs.

without success. An effort was also made to bring into action the six-pounder left overnight by 31 Battery, but it was too badly damaged to be aimed.

As the armoured car withdrew, the defence platoon and sappers halted enemy infantry advancing over a ridge to the west on captured portées. At the same time, two armoured cars reached the eastern side of **18 Battalion's** area. They moved rapidly backwards and forwards across the end of a wadi opening into the position, machine-gunning the battalion immediately they could bring their guns to bear. A two-pounder was turned on to the cars but their appearances were too fleeting for success. The cars also cut short a reconnaissance by Captain Batty, **18 Battalion's** adjutant. He saw enough, however, to report that if a retreat eastwards were contemplated the battalion would have to run the gauntlet of armoured cars and possibly other enemy troops. Just before Batty returned to the battalion headquarters, three enemy tanks were reported on a ridge to the west. The two-pounder was turned against them and the tanks moved into cover.

Major Brett, who commanded the battalion while Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch was at the brigade conference, then assembled his surviving officers to discuss the situation. They agreed that there was little chance of breaking out to the east past the armoured cars and, in the light of other reports of enemy action, Brett decided the battalion would have to surrender. However, no sooner had he reached this decision than

tanks, armoured cars, and infantry swept into the area apparently from all directions. The solitary two-pounder was soon put out of action and, with little further resistance, the majority of the battalion was made prisoner.

Several men hid in their trenches hoping to escape detection in the approaching dusk, and others on the outskirts of the position dashed for freedom. In this a good example was set by Sergeant Kennedy,¹ who collected a number of men on the portée of the two-pounder and drove off under fire. Although the portée was hit, a tire punctured and several men wounded, Kennedy persevered and at length got out of the enemy's range.

At the same time as these events the brigade headquarters' area, a short distance to the south-west, was attacked by armoured cars. The cars were engaged by the sappers and defence platoon and for a time did no more than poke their turrets over the ridge surrounding the headquarters and spray the area with its machine-gun fire. Then a solitary car, braving the fire of the defenders, drove through the area with its machine gun firing and the occupants lobbing hand grenades into the trenches. Encouraged by Major Reid, the

¹ 2Lt W. J. Kennedy, MM, m.i.d.; [Tauranga](#); born [Thames](#), 29 May 1910; farmer.

defenders replied with their small arms and with Italian hand grenades found in the area. The car eventually withdrew to cover, from which it continued to machine-gun the defence.

In its passage the car passed close to the headquarters' trench in which were Burrows and most of the brigade's senior officers who had been prevented by the attack from returning to their units. Major Reid saw a grenade burst apparently in the trench, and when later there was no sign of survivors he concluded that the brigade staff had become casualties. He thereupon assumed command of the defence.

The situation now was obviously hopeless. There was no support of any kind at hand or in the offing. Reid therefore gave orders to withdraw. The order was obeyed as it was passed round, although as soon as the men rose from their cover the enemy fire increased. Undaunted, the men took over a truck and a staff car which had remained unharmed. They were loading their wounded into these, when both vehicles were put out of action. The wounded were placed in shelter and Reid then led the survivors in dashes to safety along the north side of the ridge. Although still under fire, the troops, by moving widely dispersed, managed to traverse nearly a mile of open ground without further loss before crossing the ridge again into shelter.

Here they found a number of British tanks whose crews, on being questioned very forcefully in some cases, said that although they were willing to help they had not received any orders to intervene in the battle. Near the tanks an abandoned truck was taken over and driven by the sergeant of the defence platoon back along the escape route, as it appeared that the enemy, on sighting the tanks, had begun to withdraw. The truck was loaded with wounded in the headquarters' area and was driven out safely. An attempt was made to repeat this meritorious performance, but by this time the British tanks had begun to take action and the battle had flared up again.

The 21st Battalion troops also withdrew in the face of the armoured-car attack. They were led out in two groups by their non-commissioned officers, the two company officers having been wounded and evacuated in the afternoon and the other, Lieutenant R. B. Abbott, intelligence officer, then being on his way to brigade headquarters. One group which moved on to flat ground south of the ridge was taken prisoner. The other escaped to **5 Indian Division** by moving along the north side of the ridge. Lieutenant Abbott also managed to escape capture.

The grenade that Major Reid thought had exploded in the headquarters' trench actually fell on the parapet. Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch was badly wounded but the others in the trench were unharmed.

As the area was still under fire, they remained in cover, expecting every minute that the attack would be resumed. When it was seen that all the troops nearby were either withdrawing or surrendering and when the cars again came in, Brigadier Burrows, having given up all hope of help from the British armour, decided to surrender. With Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell and several other officers he gave himself up.

The enemy made a perfunctory search of the area and was beginning to march the prisoners away when British tanks to the south-east opened fire and appeared about to advance. The Germans thereupon hastened their withdrawal. Dusk was falling and there was some confusion of which several of the prisoners took advantage. Among those who escaped were Burrows and Hartnell.

Back at the headquarters' site, Captain Paterson ¹ and his J Section signallers had been missed by the enemy. Paterson had already destroyed the wireless sets and documents and was arranging the escape of survivors in the area when he was badly wounded in the head. Major Johansen, ² who had escaped after having been taken with the brigadier, joined the group and made ready to lead it along the north side of the ridge to safety. Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch and several other wounded had been placed on a truck and Paterson was put with them.

As the group was ready to move off, it was joined by Brigadier Burrows and Lieutenant-Colonel Hartnell. A man was sent ahead to plot the route with a compass, but the party had covered only a few hundred yards when an armoured car appeared in the dusk. In the moment of confusion before identification, Burrows, Hartnell and Corporal Stevenson, ³ of the signallers, slipped away and went to ground to escape later in the night. The remainder were taken prisoner. After being joined by other armoured cars, the enemy withdrew and laagered for the night. In the morning the wounded were given attention. Paterson, however, was dead. Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch died later while a prisoner.

Other men who escaped capture by hiding in the trenches and ignoring German calls to surrender later reported that the enemy fell

back well to the west of **Point 63** on the approach of the British tanks. The tanks did not press their attack but, as darkness fell, withdrew under a smoke screen into cover to the east and south-east. On this the Germans again advanced rapidly on a broad front as far as the pipeline track.

At 5.30 p.m. Major-General Inglis had received a report, believed to have emanated from **1 Armoured Division**, that 4 and 5 Brigades

¹ **Capt T. M. Paterson**, m.i.d.; born NZ, 24 Dec 1912; farmer; died of wounds 16 Jul 1942.

² **Maj C. C. Johansen**, m.i.d.; Plimmerton; born Norsewood, 2 Oct 1910; civil servant; p.w. 15 Jul 1942.

³ **Sgt J. L. Stevenson; Kaiapoi**; born Fairlie, 22 Apr 1912; telegraphist.

were 'quite happy on the ridge.' This was not true even of **5 Brigade**, which felt the impact rather than the force of the enemy's attack. Schroetter's armoured cars operating on the brigade's northern flank, increased artillery fire on the brigade positions, and the rapidly increasing noises of battle to the west gave additional urgency to the task of disposing of the support weapons and distributing ammunition. Soon small groups and stragglers from **4 Brigade** arrived with stories that their positions had been overrun and that enemy tanks and armoured cars were close on their heels.

Major Romans, who had now taken command of **23 Battalion** and the other infantry groups which had attached themselves to the unit, had ample evidence that the stories brought from the west were not the usual exaggerated and unreliable tales of men seeking refuge in a rear area. The enemy fire and armoured cars cut off contact with **4 Brigade**, and more cars could be seen moving eastwards along the broken ground to the south of the ridge. These were turned back by the British tanks,

one of whose commanders exercised his initiative in pressing several of **4 Brigade's** anti-tank guns and some of **5 Brigade's** guns into service with the tanks.

After making a quick appreciation of the new situation, Romans concentrated his defences closer to **5 Indian Brigade's** position about Point 64. The consequential rearward movement and the influence of **4 Brigade** men passing through led several groups to believe they were withdrawing in face of an armoured attack. Accordingly, they fell back on to the Indian brigade or through the British tanks. The majority of **5 Brigade**, however, remained under control and set to work digging themselves in on the new position, where the digging was as difficult as elsewhere on the top of the ridge.

At nightfall, Romans reported to **Brigadier Kippenberger** over the radio that he thought he could hold his position until the next morning. The brigade commander, however, considered the position, projecting as a small salient on the corner of the main British line, was too insecure to be held by the small force of infantry available and advised **Divisional Headquarters** accordingly. General Inglis then described the situation to **13 Corps** and received permission to withdraw **5 Brigade** from its exposed position. At ten o'clock **13 Corps** circulated an order that from six o'clock next morning the corps' front would be covered by New Zealand Division from **26 Battalion's** present area to Point 64, where contact was to be kept with **5 Indian Division**. First Armoured Division was to protect this front, while **7 Armoured Division** covered the **Alam Nayil** area to the west and south.

During the night and the early morning of 16 July, **Kippenberger** brought the **5 Brigade** troops back from the ridge and placed **23 Battalion** on the right of **26 Battalion**, with **18 Battalion** prolonging the line to the north-east. The survivors of 21 and 22 Battalions were mustered and the two battalions set up headquarters to the right rear of **18 Battalion**. The headquarters of the brigade remained in **Stuka Wadi**.

Also during the night General Inglis ordered **6 Brigade** forward at

once and instructed the B echelon groups of 19 and 20 Battalions and **6 Field Company** to collect their survivors and move to Rear Division. The 18th Battalion, which appeared to have suffered the least casualties in **4 Brigade**, was placed under the command of **5 Brigade**.

On the enemy side, Nehring decided at 8.30 p.m. that it was useless to continue the fight in the dark as the units had become badly mixed. Orders, therefore, were given to 'hedgehog' for the night and to resume the attack next morning at 5.30. At 9.30 p.m. Nehring could note in *Afrika Korps*' diary, no doubt with some satisfaction: 'The crises of the day were mastered by throwing in the last forces available. The troops have again achieved great success and have inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. Recce Unit 33 has been particularly successful. The possibility exists that tomorrow the situation which had become so critical through no fault of the troops of *Afrika Korps* may be completely restored.'

Reflecting on the battle, *15 Panzer Division* also noted in its diary: 'It was most astonishing that the enemy could not exploit his penetration to a breakthrough by pushing his tanks forward. Reasons for this may have been (1) No accurate knowledge of the situation and the extent of the enemy's [British] success; (2) Perhaps the operation had only been intended as a limited one and had not been prepared on a large scale; (3) Lack of troops to exploit. It was most important to find out whether the last of these was correct.'



Regimental Aid Post of 28 Battalion in the New Zealand Box

Regimental Aid Post of 28 Battalion in the **New Zealand Box**



The hard summer of 1942

The hard summer of 1942



Lt-Gen W. H. E. Gott,
Commander of 13 Corps

Lt-Gen W.H.E. Gott, Commander of 13 Corps



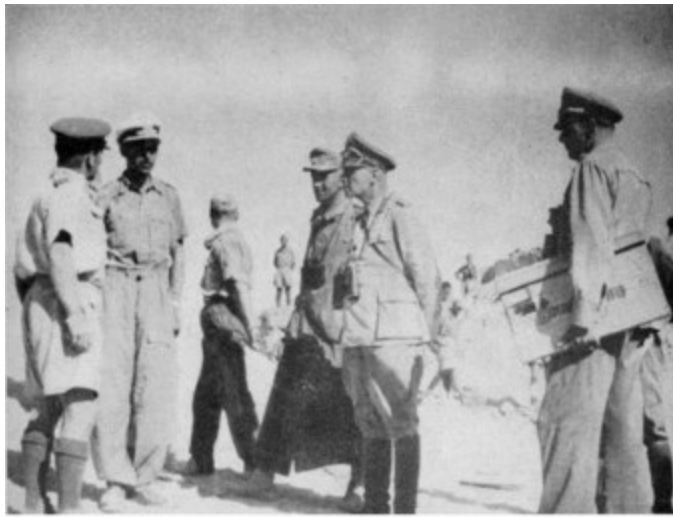
General Auchinleck, C-in-C Middle East, and Major-General Freyberg during exercises on Suez Canal, February 1942

General Auchinleck, C-in-C Middle East, and Major-General Freyberg during exercises on Suez Canal, February 1942

Brig G. H. Clifton and Col W. G. Gentry, GSO 1, before the El Mreir attack



Brig G.H. Clifton and Col W.G. Gentry, GSO 1, before the El Mreir attack



Rommel (centre) with staff. Brig Clifton (as prisoner) is on the left

Rommel (centre) with staff, Brig Clifton (as prisoner) is on the left



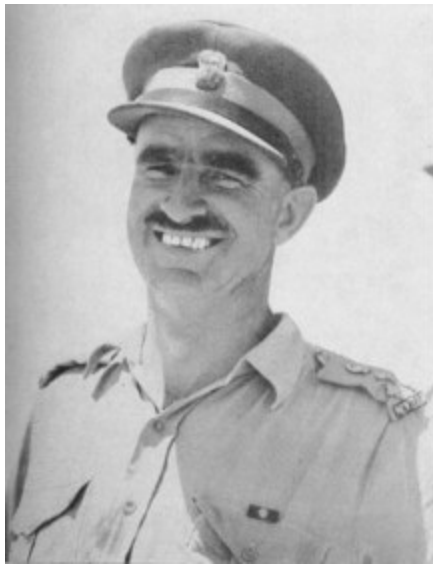
Brig. H.K. Kippenberger in July 1942

Brig H.K. Kippenberger in July 1942

Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis



Maj-Gen L.M. Inglis



Brig C. E. Weir

Brig C.E. Weir



Lt-Col G. L. Agar, Divisional Signals (1941)

Lt-Col G.L. Agar, Divisional Signals (1941)



Lt-Col R. C. Queree, 4 Field Regiment (September 1943)

Lt-Col R.C. Queree, 4 Field Regiment (September 1943)



Lt-Col K. W. R. Glasgow,
5 Field Regiment (May 1943)

Lt-Col K.W.R. Glasgow, 5 Field Regiment (May 1943)

Lt-Col C. L. Walter, 6
Field Regiment (August
1943)



Lt-Col C.L. Walter, 6 Field Regiment (August 1943)



Lt-Col J. M. Mitchell,
7 Anti-Tank Regiment
(August 1943)

Lt-Col J.M. Mitchell, 7 Anti-Tank Regiment (August 1943)



Lt-Col F. M. H. Hanson,
Divisional Engineers
(August 1943)

Lt-Col F.M.H. Hanson, Divisional Engineers (August 1943)



Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll,
Divisional Cavalry

Lt-Col A.J. Nicoll, Divisional Cavalry



General Auchinleck and Lt-Col R. J. Lynch, 18 Battalion (November 1941)

General Auchinleck and Lt-Col R.J. Lynch, 18 Battalion (November 1941)



Lt-Col C. L. Pleasants,
18 Battalion (August
1943)

Lt-Col C.L. Pleasants, 18 Battalion (August 1943)



Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell, 19
Battalion (November
1941)

Lt-Col S.F. Hartnell, 19 Battalion (November 1941)



Lt-Col J. T. Burrows,
20 Battalion (May 1944)

Lt-Col J.T. Burrows, 20 Battalion (May 1944)



Brig Kippenberger and
Lt-Col S. F. Allen, 21
Battalion (July 1942)

Brig Kippenberger and Lt-Col S.F. Allen, 21 Battalion (July 1942)



Lt-Col J. T. Russell,
22 Battalion (1940)

Lt-Col J.T. Russell, 22 Battalion (1940)



Lt-Col R. E. Romans, 23
Battalion (September 1942)

Lt-Col R.E. Romans, 23 Battalion (September 1942)



Lt-Col A. W. Greville (centre), 24 Battalion (July 1942)

Lt-Col A.W. Greville (centre), 24 Battalion (July 1942)



Lt-Col C. D. A. George,
25 Battalion (1941)

Lt-Col C.D.A. George, 25 Battalion (1941)



Lt-Col J. R. Gray of 4
Brigade and Lt-Col J. N.
Peart, 26 Battalion (1940)

Lt-Col J.R. Gray of 4 Brigade and Lt-Col J.N. Peart, 26 Battalion (1940)



Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam, 27
(Machine Gun) Battalion
(November 1942)

Lt-Col F.J. Gwilliam, 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion (November 1942)

Col S. H. Crump, Army Service
Corps (May 1941)



Col S.H. Crump, Army Service Corps (May 1941)

Brig H. S. Kenrick,
Medical Corps (August
1943)



Brig H.S. Kenrick, Medical Corps (August 1943)



Capt C. H. Upham,
VC and Bar

Capt C.H. Upham, VC and Bar



Sgt K. Elliott, VC

Sgt K. Elliott, VC

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 27 – REFLECTIONS

CHAPTER 27

Reflections

FIRST Ruweisat, as the battle is known in 2 New Zealand Division's annals, cost the Division 83 officers and 1322 other ranks, one of the heaviest casualty lists of its desert campaigns. Of these, only 14 officers and 276 other ranks were listed as wounded and safe. The remainder, 69 officers and 1046 other ranks, had been killed, taken prisoner, or were missing.

On the evening of the 15th the losses appeared to be even greater. There seemed to be few survivors of the rifle companies of 19, 20 and 22 Battalions; 18 and 21 Battalions were disorganised and their casualties were difficult to assess. Only 23 Battalion of the six battalions of 4 and 5 Brigades appeared to be fit for further operations.

General Inglis was particularly disturbed by the heavy losses in officers, especially among the senior commanders, who at that stage included Brigadier Burrows, Lieutenant-Colonels Lynch, Hartnell, Allen and Watson, and Major Hanton. It was not until later in the night that advice was received through 5 Indian Division that Burrows was safe. Hartnell and some other ranks also turned up next day, having spent the night with 2 Armoured Brigade and 5 Indian Brigade.

There was little if anything to put in the scale against these losses. Auchinleck says in his despatch: ¹ 'Our tactical position in this very important part of the front was improved by the operation. Moreover, we took some 2000 prisoners, mostly Italians.'

The tactical value of the ground gained may be questioned. Even if the foothold secured on the eastern end of the ridge about Point 64 had some value, it was not worth the price exacted by the enemy from New Zealand and 5 Indian Divisions. The price was not mentioned in the despatch. Further, there was no reference in the brief survey of the battle to its object—to break through the enemy's centre and destroy his forces. The gains, if any, in the battle ill compare with the failure to

achieve its object. Moreover, Rommel's riposte late on the 15th, continued against **5 Indian Division** next day, compelled Auchinleck to order both 13 and **30 Corps** to press

¹ Despatch, p. 365.

the enemy on the northern and southern flanks ' in order to reduce the pressure on our centre.' Instead of having destroyed the enemy, Eighth Army was again dancing to his tune.

The New Zealand Division was under no illusion that it had suffered a defeat and that the operation as a whole had been a ghastly failure. The Division, however, did not consider itself responsible in any particular for the turn events had taken. It believed it had carried out its part of the battle. Failure to consolidate the bridgehead, to beat off the counter-attacks to exploit, were attributed to the inaction of the armoured brigades.

Many men, and officers also, did not hesitate to accuse the armoured regiments from top to bottom of rank cowardice. The accusations were levelled principally against the regiments which had sat about Point 64 and even closer to **4 Brigade** when it was being overrun. All the goodwill held by the Division for the tank formations was wiped out. The admiration of the tank crews expressed in letters written at **Baggush** after the Division's campaign in **Cyrenaica** was forgotten.

This criticism influenced relations with the armour until the October battle at **Alamein**. It was too bitter and too intense to be ignored or made the subject of only passing reference. ¹ But it may well be that the bitterest of the critics did not take sufficient account of the trials to which the tank crews and the armoured units had been subjected since the German offensive began and the disabilities under which they were still carrying on.

The tank squadrons had been in almost continuous action since 27

May and they had fought many gallant actions. The survivors of the battles in the Cauldron, at **Acroma** and **Belhamed**, officer and men alike, were physically and mentally weary. They had had no outstanding successes to hearten them and fortify their morale. Defeat and retreat had been their portion. Although there had been a certain amount of reorganisation and refitting, the armour was still a collection of fragments when compared with the well-knit regiments at the opening of the campaign in May.

To the men in the tanks, Ruweisat was but another of many similar engagements in which they were being expected to sacrifice themselves. They had not inkling, because they had not been told, that a decisive victory was being sought or that it was within their

¹ 'At this time there was throughout Eighth Army, not only in New Zealand Division, a most intense distrust, almost hatred, of our armour. Everywhere one heard tales of the other arms being let down; it was regarded as axiomatic that the tanks would not be where they were wanted in time.— *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 180.

In his despatch (p. 368) Auchinleck notes an impression among junior officers that 'our armour had not altogether pulled its weight' in the Crusader campaign, and he also expresses his disapproval of 'the idea that the **Royal Armoured Corps** was an army within an army'

grasp. Some of the hesitation on the ridge may have been due to overestimation of the German tank strength. The armoured division had credited **15 Panzer Division** with having about thirty-five tanks in the general area north of **Point 63**, with **21 Panzer** not far distant. These were forces not to be taken lightly. The repeated desire to reconnoitre the position about **Point 63** may have been due to a suspicion that the Germans were using their armoured cars to lure the British tanks on to one of their combined tank and 88-millimetre anti-tank-gun screens which so often had exacted heavy toll.

The inaction of the armoured brigades may be attributed to the orders of their divisional command. General Inglis has recorded that at the corps conference on the 12th, Lumsden agreed 'rather grudgingly' to his demand that the tanks should be up on the ridge at first light to support the infantry on their objective. Lumsden's written order to his division suggests that he went back on this agreement. There was nothing in the order to suggest that **2 Armoured Brigade** was to be in 5 New Zealand Brigade's area from first light, nor was **22 Armoured Brigade** told it was to give 'close support' to **4 Brigade**. The armoured brigades might have been ordered to co-ordinate their first movements with those of the New Zealand brigades. Instead, they were given merely the permissive order 'will be prepared to move', a fatal expression in the circumstances.

On the other hand, there is Lumsden's statement to the commander of 2 Brigade in the presence of **Brigadier Kippenberger** and Captain McPhail: 'But I told you to be there [**Point 63**] at first light.' This statement deepens rather than clarifies the mystery. It implies that the brigade was to move in the dark through enemy held territory, an operation which, at that time, the British armour was notoriously unwilling to essay except under such dire compulsion as the retreat to **Alamein**. Moreover, Inglis had not expected that the tanks should advance to the ridge in the dark, only that they should be ready on their start line to move at first light.

It has to be said that **22 Armoured Brigade** carried out its written orders, although these were not what New Zealand Division expected them to be. Part of the brigade operated against the enemy opposing the **Divisional Reserve Group**, while the major portion drove *Ariete's* few tanks back towards **Kaponga** and incidentally prevented *Baade Group* from moving north out of **Deir el Angar** into New Zealand Division's rear. But it might have done all this and also saved **4 Brigade** had it been ordered to act in close support of the New Zealanders.

Examination of the tank role at Ruweisat has been undertaken at

some length in perhaps a vain effort to explain the inexplicable. The principal object, however, has been to deal with the harsh but understandable accusations against the tank crews. The mere lack of either positive or permissive orders certainly was no excuse for the tank squadrons holding back in the clear emergency of the late afternoon of the 15th. But it should also be said that, like the New Zealanders, the tank men were victims of faulty higher command and staff work over which they had no control. ¹

Was New Zealand Division wholly blameless for the failure of the operation? This question agitated some officers at the time and has been the subject of much post-war inquiry and discussion. The main issue resolves itself into a series of questions.

Was Major-General Inglis justified in accepting Gott's plan and in committing the Division to the battle, or, as the question should be put, should he have taken the exceptional and dangerous course (to discipline and morale) of refusing to obey orders? What more could have been done by the Division in the planning stage to ensure success? Were the forces at Inglis' disposal sufficient? What more could the Division have done when daylight revealed that the advance of the supporting arms was held up? Could the situation have been righted from the Division's own resources? Should the Divisional Commander have kept a reserve in his own hands against emergency? Would the presence of the artillery and mortars in close support of the infantry on the ridge have made much difference?

The success of the New Zealand infantry in reaching the ridge and *Panzerarmee's* extraordinarily narrow escape from disaster indicate that Ruweisat was 'on'. A deliberate, fighting, night advance over a distance of approximately six miles no doubt was the maximum possible distance for very good well-trained troops. Grounds for confidence in the ability of the New Zealand infantry to win their objectives in an attack of this nature were based on the actual experience of **4 Brigade** in the Crusader campaign and its subsequent training enlarging that experience. Fifth Brigade under its previous commanders, Brigadiers Hargest and Wilder,

had eschewed night attacks whenever it could in favour of dawn or daylight attacks. It, therefore, was not so directly prepared for Ruweisat as its sister brigade. But the troops of both brigades were determined and flexible in battle and thoroughly practised in night movements over the desert.

¹ The South African official history, *Crisis in the Desert*, notes (p. 13): ‘... it is no secret that personal relations between some of the British commanders—particularly in the armoured divisions—could not have been worse, and *there was a general tendency to regard orders as a basis, for discussion.*’ (Author's italics.) Later, Lieutenant-General Montgomery checked this tendency with a forthright direction in one of his orders: ‘Protesting or belly-aching about the matter is forbidden.’

Inglis' doubts concerning Gott's appreciation of the strength of the enemy defences have been mentioned. In Inglis' opinion, however, the defences were not what textbooks would deem ‘highly organised’. He thought, as events proved, that they were much nearer what would be called ‘hastily organised’. The Division knew that both Germans and Italians fought poorly in this type of defences and against the kind of attack projected. Moreover, their use of tracer ammunition would help in pinpointing the defensive localities and in avoiding the lines of fire.

The question whether the Division could have done more in the planning stage to ensure success bears on Inglis' wisdom in accepting the role assigned to **1 Armoured Division**. It is, however, only wisdom after the event to suggest that Lumsden's grudging agreement to his demands and Gott's orders for the armour at the corps conference on the 12th might have put Inglis on his guard. But it may be inferred that had **1 Armoured Division's** emasculated order been closely studied when it was received at New Zealand Divisional Headquarters, Inglis would have had cause to doubt whether the armour intended to fulfil the role agreed upon.

Against this is a fact which was paramount in the Division's

planning: Ruweisat was to be a corps' operation, directed and controlled by the corps commander. New Zealand Division could, as it did, suggest amendments to the corps' plan. But when the plan was adopted it was the corps commander's duty to ensure that it was carried out by his divisions. The basic cause of the defeat at Ruweisat was the failure of the corps command to co-ordinate the action of the infantry and armour. In the event, there were three commands on the one battlefield — 13 Corps, New Zealand Division, and 1 Armoured Division.

Criticism implied in the question, 'Were the forces at Inglis' disposal sufficient?' seems to be inspired by what was forced on the troops instead of what was planned for them. The six battalions were not too small a force to break through the enemy defences and capture the ridge. They did both. But it was accepted that they could do so only on such a narrow front that they could not with certainty clear the approaches without leaving some mopping-up to be done in daylight. This was one of the reasons why it was insisted that the armour should be on hand at first light. Had the armour moved as was arranged, it is highly likely that its mere appearance would have caused the enemy in the unreduced strongpoints to surrender, while the few enemy tanks which had captured 22 Battalion might have run away without their prisoners.

New Zealand Division did not contemplate that its infantry would have to clear the approaches, capture the ridge and then, alone and unsupported, hold its objectives against armoured counter-attack. As General Inglis has said: 'It would have been criminally stupid to launch ... [the infantry] in that particular attack without the assurance of armoured support.' ¹

Students who have a clear picture of the battlefield from daylight until early afternoon will have little difficulty in suggesting ways and means by which the Division might have overcome its difficulties. Because he has been told, the student knows there were only a handful of determined Germans manning a few 88-millimetre and machine guns among Italians in the posts blocking the advance of the supporting

arms. He knows there was nothing between these posts and the infantry on their objectives about **Point 63**. He knows there were no enemy tanks on the route to the ridge, and that the few tanks left to **15 Panzer Division** had been in haste to leave the scene and were being far from active against the Reserve Group on the left. The student will also be aware of the weak and parlous state of the enemy forces beyond **Point 63** and of the doubts, hesitations, and fears in the enemy command.

With this clear picture in mind, it is easy to succumb to the temptation of adopting the idea of some officers among the supporting arms that another infantry attack, this time supported by artillery, would quickly clear the route to the ridge. Means were at hand. The 26th Battalion might have been withdrawn from the Reserve Group or the Maoris brought back from **Alam Halfa**. Covering fire was available from 4 and 6 Field Regiments and **5 Brigade's** mortars. The commander and staff of **5 Brigade** could have been used to lay on the attack.

Such a clear picture of a battlefield, however, is seldom available to commanders. It was certainly not available at Ruweisat. After the customary clear light of sunrise, the fog of war became very dense. Smoke and dust from the artillery fire thickened the natural haze of the desert's midsummer heat. The curtain could not be penetrated by even the most powerful field-glasses. A fairly accurate picture might have been drawn had the signals communications functioned between the ridge and the start line. But they had broken down.

There were even more important factors. The student knows there was cause for apprehension, perhaps alarm, from daylight onwards. But what of the commanders? Burrows was content, as he had every right to be, on **Point 63**. His battalions had done well and had captured their objective with little loss. He knew the enemy tanks had moved off with some prisoners but he did not know that **22 Battalion** had gone into the bag. The enemy reaction to his

¹ Letter to War Histories, October 1952.

capture of **Point 63** was below normal. On the right, **23 Battalion** was reasonably happy as it consolidated. It had lost its commanding officer and may have noted the fate of **22 Battalion**, but it was not being molested. The 21st Battalion was widely dispersed, but each individual group no doubt thought it was the only one separated from headquarters, and that the battalion position would soon be found. McElroy was annoyed rather than alarmed at his inability to find the rest of the battalion. In the meantime, he was creating alarm and despondency among the enemy as were Sergeant Elliott and his group. The commanders on the ridge realised that the artillery and the British tanks were overdue but they expected them arrive any minute. The haze, smoke, and dust that obscured the ridge from the start line also prevented them from seeing what was holding up the advance of the supporting arms. It was not until the waiting minutes merged into hours and morning turned to afternoon that they became apprehensive and then alarmed at the hazardous position in which they were exposed.

So also about the start line. There was no lack of vigour among the commanders to get forward. As has been mentioned, some thought of another infantry attack. But in the main, the idea was that the enemy were offering mulish and ignorant opposition rather than deliberate, determined defence, and that they would capitulate as soon as they realised what they were up against. Possibly different ideas might have been held had it been suspected that the British armour was not carrying out its agreed-upon role.

This knowledge, and especially the suspicions it created, were restricted to very few. But, although behind timetable, **2 Armoured Brigade** had moved off in response to **Brigadier Kippenberger's** pressure. It was another of the perversities of Ruweisat that the tanks moved into **5 Indian Brigade's** sector, where little if any progress had been made by the infantry in subduing the enemy posts. Much easier going and less resistance could have been found a few hundred yards to the left in New Zealand Division's area. The armour would have been too late to save **22**

Battalion but it would have been on hand to do the remainder of its task.

The narrative of events shows that the enemy in Strongpoint No. 2 in 5 New Zealand Brigade's sector capitulated about two o'clock under the pressure of **6 Field Regiment's** bombardment and the appearance of the British tanks on the flank. The tanks were probably the deciding influence and therefore a factor in a consideration of New Zealand Divisional Headquarters' action and decisions during the morning.

When General Inglis moved forward he took stock of the situation. He had reports from the various commanders concerning their difficulties, but all were trying to surmount them and none 'belly-aching'. He also thought of mounting another infantry attack, but rejected the idea because there was ample armour well situated to do all that was required much more quickly and less expensively than infantry could hope to do it. The armour was then on the move, and in carrying out its tasks it would more or less automatically clear up the situation.

Another fact which led Inglis to rely on the armour was a belief that enemy tanks were still on the approaches to the ridge. It should be recalled that apart from Burrows' report that he had taken his objective, the only firm report Division had had concerning the situation on the approaches was from **Kippenberger**, who had seen the tanks moving towards **22 Battalion**. No one knew what had happened after that, although no stretching of the imagination was needed to picture the possibilities, or rather the probabilities. In the circumstances, to use the infantry in another assault would have been to expose them to a double risk of heavy casualties—that of assaulting a defended position and of being attacked in turn by the German tanks. And, as Inglis has pointed out, it might only have meant 'putting more infantry under the chopper'.

General Inglis, therefore, brought to bear all the pressure he could on the armour to galvanise it into action. Not until it was too late did he learn that the soothing assurances of action which met his approaches to **13 Corps** and **1 Armoured Division** were no more than that.

The considerations which led to the rejection of another infantry attack bear on the question whether Inglis should have kept a reserve in hand. During the night he had committed the whole of his forces, and in the morning he did not have the means to counter the unexpected—the unsubdued enemy posts which were strong enough to prevent the advance of the support columns. But although it was not under Inglis' command, a reserve was available in **1 Armoured Division**. The specific tasks allotted to the armour did not preclude it from moving to New Zealand Division's aid on any part of the battlefield. Inglis had allowed for this at the corps' planning conference, at which he visualised the battle being fought under the corps commander's personal direction. Both divisions were to operate over the same ground, with New Zealand Division in the lead and followed by a powerful armoured force to take care of any emergencies.

It is a reasonable supposition that had **4 Brigade** had the close support of 4 and 6 Field Regiments from daybreak it would have defeated the German counter-attack, even without any help from the British tanks. In spite of the haze and other difficulties, the New Zealand gunners would have had little difficulty in overwhelming the few German guns which prevented the anti-tank guns with **4 Brigade** from taking up better positions. It is problematical whether Lienau's armoured cars and **15 Panzer Division's** tanks would have pressed their attack against vigorous opposition such as could have been developed by the New Zealand artillery and well-sited anti-tank guns. No doubt Nehring would have thought of something else, although it is difficult to see what more he could have done with the forces at his disposal that day.

To sum up, Ruweisat was a battle which should have been fought and won. The idea was good—and it was within the resources of Eighth Army. The battle was lost partly because of weaknesses in staff work in the planning stage, but more because on the decisive day the planned and expected corps' direction and control were not given. Certainly, New Zealand Division saw no sign of any such activity after the battle started.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 28 – RAIDS, PATROLS, CONSOLIDATION

CHAPTER 28

Raids, Patrols, Consolidation

THROUGHOUT 16 July the enemy devoted most of his efforts to clearing **Ruweisat Ridge** as a preliminary to recovering the defensive localities previously held by *Brescia* and *Pavia Divisions*, and to relieving some strongpoints north-east of the ridge in which he believed elements of *Pavia* were still holding out.

Fighting was resumed at 5.30 a.m. when *33 Recce Unit* on the crest of the ridge, *15 Panzer Division* on the southern slope, and *21 Division* on the northern slope advanced on **5 Indian Brigade**. On this occasion the enemy encountered well dug-in infantry supported by anti-tank guns, the field artillery of *5 Indian* and *2 New Zealand Divisions*, **2 Armoured Brigade**, and **22 Armoured Brigade** which was deployed between the ridge and **Alam el Dihmaniya**. The attack made little headway against these forces, the advance being limited to more or less undisputed ground in the vicinity of **Point 62** where the pipeline crossed the ridge. Tank fighting stopped when the usual midday dust-storm arose, and about two o'clock General Nehring called off the advance in order to reorganise and lay on a more comprehensive operation for later in the day.

The New Zealand Division's share in the morning fighting was limited to artillery action. The chief targets were enemy tanks and infantry observed near the eastern end of **Mreir** at 8.30 and an artillery group seen moving up to join the tanks on the southern slope of the ridge about 11.30. This group was subjected to such heavy fire that the gunners withdrew in disorder and abandoned their guns. Enemy air activity caused the Division some losses. A raid in the early afternoon scored a direct hit on the crew of a Bofors gun from **43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery** which was protecting **5 Brigade's** headquarters, and also destroyed or set alight a number of vehicles. This raid was thought to be in retaliation for a heavy bombing attack by the **Royal Air Force** half an hour previously on the enemy's forward elements on the ridge.

Besides the vigour of the local defence, a diversionary attack by the Australians towards **Tell el Makh Khad** hampered Nehring's operations. While the advance of **Afrika Korps** was getting under way, the Australians overran the last remaining battalion of **Sabrata Division** and part of the 1st Battalion of **382 German Infantry Regiment**. The attack was halted by the survivors of the German battalion supported by artillery. To prevent the further breaching of the defences Rommel sent for **33 Recce Unit**, the 1st Battalion of **104 Regiment** from **21 Panzer Division**, and **Briehl Group** from **90 Light Division**.

Nehring timed his second attack for 7.25 p.m., when the setting sun would intensify the dust and smoke haze and thus severely restrict the vision of the defenders. He ordered his heavy dual-purpose anti-aircraft, 10-centimetre, and other single guns to engage the British tanks continuously before zero hour and, at 7.15, to change the fire to timed concentrations falling quickly on worthwhile targets. The concentrations were to be supplemented by two troops of heavy howitzers with, however, only twelve rounds each. The ground assault was to be preceded at 7.25 by what was described in the orders as 'powerful air support' spread over the general area from Point 64 south to **Brescia's** old line and **Alam el Dihmaniya**. This bombardment was to last for five minutes. Nehring specially ordered that when the last bombs fell the troops were to advance immediately 'in order to take full advantage of the enemy's confusion.' 'This will be decisive for the success of the attack,' he added. Nehring also said that it was important for the general situation to regain the entire strongpoint line and push the British into the minefield. ¹

The main assault was to be made by **21 Panzer Division**, on and just south of the crest of the ridge, and **15 Panzer Division**, on the southern slope with its tanks concentrated on its left hand against **21 Division**. The **3rd Recce Unit** was to conform to the attack on the northern flank. By this time **21 Division** was down to eight tanks and **15 Division** probably had no more than twelve. The precise British tank strength in the sector is not known, but examination of tank states before and after

16 July suggests that 2 and 22 Armoured Brigades had between them more heavy Grants than the total German tanks. The latter brigade, however, was operating towards **Kaponga** throughout the 16th.

Due possibly to the urgency of the situation, the Germans used their wireless a little too freely, with the result that **13 Corps** had a reasonably clear picture of Nehring's dispositions, intentions and plans. In the late afternoon the corps circulated a warning of the impending attack and also gave the artillery map references of areas believed to be the headquarters of **Afrika Korps** and **21 Division**. These areas were bombarded by 4 Field and 64 Medium Regiments. New Zealand Division was also warned of the Stuka bombardment to be made in its area in conjunction with the ground attack,

¹ Presumably the minefield forward of the enemy posts before the 15th.

although a small mistake was made in the timing, the warning mentioning 7.35 p.m. instead of 7.25. It may be added here that in the course of the fighting **21 Division** reported that the British appeared to be aware of the German plans.

As in the morning, New Zealand Division's artillery contributed effectively in repulsing the attack. In the opening phases the guns engaged targets on and to the north of the ridge, but when **15 Panzer Division** appeared on the southern slopes the fire was switched to what appeared to be a more direct threat to the Division. By 7.30 the guns were putting down exceptionally heavy fire. The diary of **4 Field Regiment** mentions that it alone used 2224 rounds during the day. In the expected Stuka attack, a formation of twenty bombers unloaded its bombs across **5 Brigade** and the **Divisional Reserve Group**, causing several casualties among men and vehicles before being chased off by **RAF** fighters.

With the fall of darkness about eight o'clock the fighting waned,

although Nehring urged his divisions to push their infantry ahead. These orders and their further transmission to the units were clearly heard by the British wireless interceptors. The urgings did not avail. The attack made no progress against the stubborn defence and at midnight the divisions were ordered to defer further efforts until daylight. However, between two and three o'clock in the morning Nehring and Rommel discussed the situation and decided to go over to the defensive again to permit the army to rest and refit. German and Italian infantry were to hold mined and wired strongpoints on the existing line and the armour was to withdraw behind them into mobile reserve. Creation of the reserve was made a matter of urgency.

Although the New Zealand infantry was on the fringe of the attacks, and therefore had to be alert to the situation, and was also bombed, its comparative freedom from enemy molestation permitted extensive regrouping to be carried out throughout the day.

Muster parades disclosed that **5 Brigade's 22 Battalion** had had the worst losses, its remaining riflemen totalling only 30. In **4 Brigade, 19 Battalion's** A Company had about 50 riflemen, B Company 21, and C Company only 17, a total of 88. The numbers in **20 Battalion** were about the same. These were the most badly hit infantry units.

General Inglis decided to keep **18 Battalion** in the field and to send the remainder of **4 Brigade** with **22 Battalion** to the rear to refit and reform. Sixth Brigade, less **26 Battalion** already in the line, was to come forward immediately. The units to be relieved were concentrated at **Rear Divisional Headquarters**, and on 17 and 18 July were moved in unit convoys first to **Amiriya** and then, on Brigadier Burrows' urgent representations, to **Maadi**. Inglis was loath to move his only reserve so far back. However, he agreed that **Amiriya** transit camp was unsuitable for refitting and reforming, and after consulting **13 Corps** he consented to the move to **Maadi**. On 20 July the brigade, now totalling only 50 officers and 1058 other ranks, in 156 vehicles, made the journey of 140 miles to **Maadi**.

On the initial withdrawal of **4 Brigade** on 16 July, the remainder of the Division was reformed on a line to the west and north of **Stuka Wadi**, with **5 Brigade** on the right and **Divisional Reserve Group** on the left, the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** and elements of **7 Armoured Division** covering the south-western and southern flanks. **Divisional Headquarters** was in **Deir Umm Aisha** and that of **5 Brigade** in the eastern end of **Stuka Wadi**.

The 18th Battalion, now under **5 Brigade**, held the northern front on a line roughly parallel with the crest of Ruweisat, about two miles south of the core of **5 Indian Brigade's** defences at Point 64. Facing north-west, **23 Battalion** with nearly 200 men prolonged the line on **18 Battalion's** left. The 21st Battalion was held in reserve to the north of **Stuka Wadi** in case action developed during the day. At first the battalion could muster only 90 all ranks in its rifle companies, but several groups which had fallen back through the Indians rejoined later in the day. The **Divisional Reserve Group** held the positions it had occupied on the 15th. Of the artillery, **4 Field Regiment** was taken under direct command by the CRA, **6 Regiment** redeployed its batteries to cover the new front, and **5 Regiment** remained at **Alam Nayil**. The CRA reported that the **RAF** was at call to cover the Division during the reorganisation.

Local operations to capture or recapture tactical features, raids with heavy artillery support, fighting and reconnaissance patrols, considerable air activity and extensive regrouping marked the four days 16 to 20 July. In Eighth Army the object was to prepare the way for a further decisive battle, provisionally fixed for 20 July and then postponed to the 21st. Rommel intended to hold his present line with a series of strongpoints and his armour in mobile reserve. As his tank regiments were refitted, he hoped to undertake aggressive defence to improve his positions and damage Eighth Army and, when *Panzerarmee* was rebuilt, to resume his advance to **Cairo** and the **Suez Canal**.

Although Eighth Army consistently overestimated the enemy's

strength, in this period *Panzerarmee* was reduced to its lowest in tanks and personnel. The **Royal Air Force** gained such ascendancy over the **Luftwaffe** that enemy air raids became hit-and-run affairs and dive-bombing by Stukas was made extremely hazardous. Eighth Army's wireless interception service also picked up many of the enemy's important messages and passed them quickly, to lower formations.

Nevertheless, as events were to prove, *Panzerarmee* still had plenty of sting and was vigorous in riposte. Perhaps the most outstanding impression of the period and of the remaining few days of the month is how much it was able to do with so little. This was particularly notable of Rommel's German forces, which, on 22 and 27 July, imposed worse defeats on Eighth Army than that at Ruweisat on the 15th. New Zealand Division was involved in the disaster on the 22nd. As the operations between the 16th and 20th provide the background it is necessary to follow them in some detail.

In the northern sector small Australian forces from 26 Brigade defeated counter-attacks near **Tell el Eisa** on the 15th, and that night, with the support of a squadron of tanks, gained a foothold on the eastern end of the feature from which they were forced to retire on the 16th under the enemy's artillery reaction. The Australians then sent their 24 Brigade, with fifteen tanks in support against **Tell el Makh Khad** and the ruin on **Miteiriya Ridge**. By 5.20 a.m. on the 17th **Tell el Makh Khad** was taken, but with the loss of six tanks on an uncharted minefield. The ruin was captured at 8 a.m. by a battalion and the remaining tanks, but it was impossible to consolidate the position owing to the enemy's artillery fire. A counter-attack by German and Italian tanks forced withdrawal on to **Tell el Makh Khad**, which also had to be abandoned in the late afternoon. After having suffered considerable infantry losses and with only six tanks left, the Australians finally consolidated near **Bir el Makh Khad**.

In these latter operations the Australians broke through the right wing of *Trieste Division* and overran a strongpoint held by the *6th Bersaglieri*. They claimed nearly 800 prisoners. The enemy admitted the

loss of a battalion from *Trieste* and an artillery unit from *Trento*. The counter-attacks were made by 33 and 3 Recce Units supported by *Briehl Group*, which had been taken from *90 Light Division* into Army reserve, and *Baade Group* of *15 Panzer Division*. In addition to the destruction of the British tanks, the enemy claimed 500 prisoners. The German and Italian tanks which took part cannot be identified. They may have been *15 Panzer Division's Kirsten Group*, which was sent to the coastal sector on the 10th, or a hastily assembled force of spare tanks. Again, Lienau's vigorous use of the armoured cars of *33 Recce Unit* may have created an impression that the enemy armour was stronger than was actually the case.

There was also some activity in the central sector at first light on the 17th. German infantry and tanks which had harboured over- night at the limit of their advance the previous evening awoke to find themselves in full view of *5 Indian Brigade*. They were promptly engaged by the Indians' field and anti-tank guns over open sights, support being given by the New Zealand 4 and 6 Field Regiments. The efforts of the enemy to withdraw into cover, of *3 Recce Unit* to relieve the *Pavia* strongpoints and then of the Italians in the strongpoints to get back to *Deir el Shein*, appear to have been construed by the Indians as offensive action. According to the German records no attacks were made or ordered. The enemy was then intent on carrying out Rommel's order to go over to the defensive, an order which was intercepted by the British and circulated to New Zealand Division during the morning.

The remainder of the day in the central and southern sectors was relatively quiet. In New Zealand Division's area defences were improved, salvage collected, and enemy weapons and equipment destroyed. The bodies of numerous Italians were buried and much of the litter of the Ruweisat battle cleared away. Brigadier Clifton, with Headquarters *6 Brigade* and *24 Battalion*, arrived in the afternoon and moved into the *Divisional Reserve Group's* sector. The 28th (Maori) Battalion was ordered to move forward from *Alam Halfa* to replace *22 Battalion*. A small draft of reinforcements reached *5 Brigade*. Of six officers of the

draft posted to **23 Battalion**, one was killed and another died of wounds within a few hours of joining the unit.

On the enemy side, the calls for relief against the attacks of the Australians strengthened the decision to abandon the effort to recapture the positions lost at Ruweisat. The *90th Light Division* was ordered to move to the southern flank of *Trento Division* north of the ridge, and the remnants of *X Italian Corps* were instructed to take up positions between **Deir el Shein** and **Alam el Dihmaniya**. The protection of **Kaponga Box** was given to the *288th German Special Force* and the Italian armour, and *3 Recce Unit* was marked to cover the ground to the south. Nehring ordered *21 Panzer Division* to develop **Point 62** on **Ruweisat Ridge** as a strongpoint to deny the British observation over **Deir el Shein**. This task was given to *3 Battalion, 104 Regiment*.

Huelsen Battle Group, comprising *Lindemann Battle Group* from *Afrika Korps Headquarters*, part of *155 Infantry Regiment* and part of *2 Battalion, 382 Regiment*, was under *15 Panzer Division's* command opposite *New Zealand Division*. Huelsen was a colonel who had seen service in the First World War and on the eastern and western fronts in the Second World War. He had joined *Panzerarmee* in June during the fighting in **Cyrenaica** as a regimental commander. His confidential reports spoke of him as an 'officer with plenty of brains, wide interests and vast general knowledge.' He was said to be very reliable but a little dependent on the help of others.

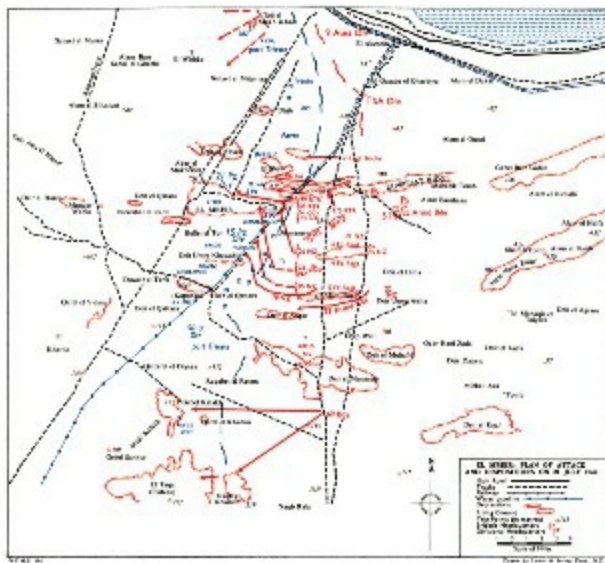
Towards evening on the 17th, Huelsen reported that a British attack was gaining ground. This appears to have been a misinterpretation of the entry of *6 New Zealand Brigade* into the line. The report led the enemy to expect a night attack on **Kaponga** and a warning order was issued. That night *New Zealand Division* initiated vigorous patrols which were to be a feature of its subsequent operations on the **Alamein Line**. The patrols confirmed that the enemy was building a new defensive line and also proved that the occupants of his strongpoints were alert.

On 18 July **25 Battalion** and the Maoris came into the line. With all

its battalions forward, **6 Brigade** took over from the **Divisional Reserve Group** with **5 Field Regiment** under command. The Maoris were sent to **5 Brigade** to relieve **18 Battalion**, which again reformed a divisional reserve group. In the evening, the 2nd Battalion of the West Yorkshire Regiment from **9 Indian Brigade** moved through **5 Indian Brigade's** positions and captured **Point 62**. The attack was supported by the artillery of 5 Indian, South African, and New Zealand Divisions. The West Yorks consolidated on a line about 500 yards west of the height under the protection of a screen in the vicinity of **Point 63**. The *21st Panzer Division* reported to *Afrika Korps* that its battalion on the height was too weak to withstand the assault and had withdrawn. At 9.30 p.m. the enemy claimed that a counter-attack had recaptured the strongpoint, but it did no more than compel the covering troops to fall back on the consolidated position at **Point 62**. While the Yorks were attacking, considerable activity was seen in the enemy lines facing New Zealand Division. These movements were engaged by **5 Field Regiment** and **22 Armoured Brigade**.

During the night the enemy was harassed by patrols along the whole of the line. A **5th Indian Division** patrol on Ruweisat brought back ten German and Italian prisoners. A patrol of twelve men from D Company of **26 Battalion** under Lieutenant **Gifford**¹ found a post held by fourteen Germans about 3000 yards west of the battalion's forward posts. Twelve of the Germans were killed in a bayonet charge and a sergeant and corporal from *382 Regiment* were taken prisoner. Another patrol from **23 Battalion** and some engineers were forestalled by the enemy when they went out to destroy abandoned guns and tanks. Germans blew up the weapons as the party approached and developed sufficient fire to prevent investigations.

¹ **Lt G. P. R. Gifford**; born NZ 26 Jun 1916; civil servant; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.



El Mreir: Plan of attack and dispositions on 21 July 1942

In the southern sector, **7 Armoured Division** columns had been observing the enemy's withdrawal since 16 July. During the night 18–19 July, June Column advanced through Naqb el Khadim to the Taqa plateau and captured four anti-tank guns and thirty Germans from **2 Battalion, 155 Regiment**. The column held its ground against counter-attacks during the day by about six Italian and one or two German tanks, but in the evening it had to withdraw on to Naqb el Khadim. August Column raided south of **Kaponga** in the morning of the 19th and captured twenty prisoners and a 105-millimetre gun.

Except for the customary bombing raids in the morning and late afternoon and the usual midday dust-storm, the daylight hours of the 19th were tranquil. The capture of **Point 62** permitted New Zealand Division to realign its front by swinging its right flank to face north-west instead of north. This shortened **5 Brigade's** front and enabled **23 Battalion** to extend its left to take over part of **26 Battalion's** area, a move which in turn allowed **6 Brigade** to spread its defences to the south to cover **5 Field Regiment** near **Alam Nayil**.

As now disposed, the Division held an arc of roughly six miles from about a mile and a half south of the crest of Ruweisat to **Alam Nayil**. The Maoris were on the right flank and in contact with **1 Armoured Division** and the Indians. Then came **23 Battalion**, with its right flank

resting on the western of the **Alamein- Himeimat** tracks. Roughly a mile ahead of **23 Battalion**, a detachment of **21 Battalion**, with a troop of six-pounder anti-tank guns and a platoon of machine guns under command, held an abandoned enemy strongpoint in **Alam el Dihmaniya** in order to deny a slight depression to the west as a forming-up position for enemy tanks. Sixth Brigade had **26 Battalion** on its right, **24** in the centre, and **25** on the left. Sixth Field Regiment covered **5 Brigade** and **5 Regiment** the **6th Brigade**, with **4 Field Regiment** still under divisional command. The **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** was operating on the southern flank and **18 Battalion** had moved to the neighbourhood of **Rear Divisional Headquarters**. Major C. L. Pleasants, from **19 Battalion**, succeeded Lieutenant-Colonel Lynch in command of **18 Battalion**.

By this time the **Royal Air Force** fighters had regained their ascendancy over the **Luftwaffe**, although the many complaints by the German ground forces suggest that from their point of view the **RAF** had been master of the air throughout the greater part of the campaign. The **Luftwaffe** bomber formations found they needed strong fighter protection and their bombing in hit-and-run Stuka raids was far from accurate. On 19 July the **RAF** claimed forty-three enemy aircraft destroyed in the air or on the ground, and messages of mutual satisfaction and appreciation were exchanged between the air and army commands.

In New Zealand Division's sector the most important event of the night, one which brought General Gott's congratulations, was a raid by **24 Battalion** on known enemy positions in a small depression where the pipeline crossed the eastern end of **Deir Umm Khawabir**. The raiding party was commanded by Major **Beyer**¹ and comprised thirty riflemen, a troop of six-pounders, a platoon of machine guns, three Bren-carrier sections, and a small detachment of sappers from **8 Field Company** to deal with mines. Support was given by six batteries of field guns and two troops of the medium artillery firing on the perimeter of the depression ahead of the attack. The objective was roughly three miles from **24 Battalion's** forward posts.

About 400 yards ahead of the start line, which was crossed at 8.30, the raiders encountered a minefield through which the engineers cleared a passage for the carriers. The noise of the carriers was attracting fire from the left and also on fixed lines from the north, but by this time the leading infantry had reached the objective. Freshly dug earth disclosed the enemy weapon pits, into which bakelite grenades were thrown and were followed by bayonet charges. Several groups of prisoners were taken, and with the help of the sappers a heavy gun, two of lighter calibre, an anti-tank gun, and four machine guns were destroyed.

When enemy armoured fighting vehicles were heard coming to the relief of the garrison, the carriers were called up to cover the infantry raiders and assist in getting the prisoners back. Three of the carriers were lost, one by an anti-tank shell and two on mines. With one carrier covering the withdrawal, the others took the riflemen and sappers and their prisoners back to the start line. When it was learned that several men were missing, Major Webb,² second-in-command of that battalion, and Lieutenant Andrew,³ of 8 Field Company, made a search in the course of which they spent some time observing the enemy in the raided posts. They noted that the gap in the wire about the posts had not been repaired and that the enemy troops were behaving as if they were convinced that no further activities might be expected. Webb reported that a second raid between two and four o'clock in the morning would probably have caught the enemy unprepared. Most of the men at first thought to be missing were brought back by the carrier which had covered the withdrawal and had come home by another route.

¹ Maj A. E. Beyer, MC; Auckland; born Adelaide, 1 Feb 1909; storeman; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

² Lt-Col R. G. Webb, ED, m.i.d.; Pukehou; born Stratford, 5 Aug 1906; schoolmaster; OC 2 NZ Fd Maint Unit Nov 1941–Jan 1942; CO 24 Bn 22 Nov–16 Dec 1942; wounded and p.w. 16 Dec 1942; headmaster, Te Aute College.

³ **Maj M. A. Andrew**, MC, m.i.d.; Northern Rhodesia; born **Wellington**, 19 Oct 1917; mining student; twice wounded.

The cost of the raid was two killed, two seriously wounded, one man missing and the three carriers. Against this loss the raiders could put the destroyed enemy equipment, 42 prisoners, and an estimated 30 killed. The prisoners were from 4 and 8 Companies of *8 Bersaglieri Regiment of Ariete Division*. They said their companies were about a hundred strong and that each had three 47-millimetre anti-tank guns and three heavy and three light machine guns. They asserted that their officers had withdrawn when the raid began. One prisoner reported that he had seen six M13 tanks and four guns on tank chassis at his headquarters and that he believed these represented *Ariete's* armoured strength. ¹

Reporting on the raid, Lieutenant-Colonel **Greville**, ² commanding the battalion, mentioned the difficulty of evacuating prisoners and recommended that in future enterprises of the kind a special party should be detailed to take them in charge and hurry them to the rear. He also suggested greater use of tracer ammunition to permit the Bren gunners to observe their fire.

In his message, General Gott said: 'Please convey my congratulations to the patrol commander and the patrol on their great work last night. It was a good show and gave us very useful information.' The German records of the raid had an opposite note. *Afrika Korps* diary mentioned that 'elements of Ariete flung away their arms', while *15 Panzer Division* reported that some of the Italians ran away. The division's diary also noted that 'the fact that the enemy had made a penetration at a part of the line held by Italians was again regarded as significant.'

The enemy records contain the further information that *Lindemann Battle Group* had an 88-millimetre gun destroyed by the raiders and that the crew of a 20-millimetre anti-aircraft gun went missing. A specific

reference to the fact that the 88-millimetre gun was blown up by the raiders suggests that it was on loan to the Italians. The route taken by the raiders was past the southern flank of Lindemann, and no mention is made in **24 Battalion**'s reports that any Germans were encountered. *Afrika Korps* was so perturbed by the penetration that *Baade Group* was sent forward to restore the situation, but before it arrived on the scene the raiders had withdrawn. The diary of *15 Division* contains a correct diagnosis of the affair as 'only a raid with a limited objective to harass us and destroy equipment.'

A useful reconnaissance was also made the same night by **25 Battalion**, which sent a fighting patrol to **Kaponga** to intercept

¹ An Italian tank return on the 17th credited *Ariete* with 15 tanks and there is nothing to suggest that it had lost nine in the meantime.

² **Lt-Col A. W. Greville**, m.i.d.; born NZ 5 Aug 1897; Regular soldier; comd Advanced Party **2 NZEF** 1939; DAQMG 1940–41; CO **24 Bn** 8 Dec 1941–22 Jul 1942; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

enemy who were believed to man a post on the south-east of the box during darkness. When the post was found unoccupied, the patrol worked its way forward to the edge of the box defences and watched the movement of men and vehicles within the perimeter just before dawn, when it returned to its own lines.

The daylight hours of 20 July were quiet but not without incident. During the morning **5 Indian Division** lost its hold on **Point 62** and thus observation over **Deir el Shein**. In New Zealand Division's sector the engineers by this time had marked the main minefields and with the help of the infantry had cleared the area of most of the debris of the Ruweisat battle. About 3500 mines had been lifted by **7 Field Company** in **5 Brigade**'s sector and stacked in a rear dump. The sappers had lost several men in this work, and on this day they lost another six when a

truckload of between 700 and 800 mines was blown up during unloading at the dump. No trace could be found of the truck driver and the sappers and blast knocked over several men some hundreds of yards away. The cause of the explosion was never satisfactorily explained.

The night of the 20th-21st was marked by extensive patrolling in preparation for an attack on **Mreir which all ranks of the Division knew was in the immediate offing. All six battalions sent out fighting and reconnaissance patrols to locate and test the enemy posts and his minefields. Most had brushes with Germans and Italians. A patrol from **25 Battalion** which tried to improve on the feat of the previous night at **Kaponga** was the only one which suffered misfortune. It was ordered to break into the perimeter of **Kaponga**, secure prisoners and destroy transport. After breaching two lines of wire, it was challenged by a sentry of Stein Company in the *288th German Special Force* and was then fired on with machine guns. The patrol was forced to withdraw with the loss of one man killed and four taken prisoner.**

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 29 – PLANS FOR EL MREIR

CHAPTER 29

Plans for El Mreir

PARADOXES and seeming illusions marked Eighth Army's thinking and planning leading to the Battle of **Mreir** which was fought during the night 21–22 July and throughout the following day.

For Mreir, as for Ruweisat, the Army orders stressed the destruction of Rommel's forces where they stood as the object of the operations. However, in case the destruction should not be complete and part of *Panzerarmee* should escape, elaborate plans were made for the pursuit of the fleeing elements. But while Eighth Army Headquarters thought in terms of Rommel's decisive defeat, it also thought of further disaster to the army and therefore of the need to build more and yet more defences back to the **Nile Delta**.

Thus on 15 July when 2 New Zealand, 5 Indian, and 1 Armoured Divisions were fighting on Ruweisat in pursuance of General Auchinleck's order to 'break through the enemy's centre and destroy his forces', two further orders were issued by Eighth Army concerning the back-area defences. One gave details of minefields to be laid down and the other ordered **20 Australian Brigade** to take over the construction of defences on **Alam Halfa**.

This conflict of ideas concerning the outcome of the Army offensives was not the only paradox. Men and materials were diverted to works in the rear at a time when Auchinleck was complaining that lack of troops prevented him from maintaining the impetus of his attacks and exploiting successes. But if Auchinleck's offensive intentions at **Tell el Eisa**, Ruweisat, and **Mreir** were to be taken at their face value, the rear defences would not be necessary. The dangers of the first days at **Alamein**, when it was doubtful if Rommel's advance would be stopped, were past. It was strange that while the Commander-in-Chief was trying to inspire his army with confidence in its prospects, he should exhibit pronounced signs of scepticism.

The illusions were founded on faulty appreciations of Rommel's strength, the movements and dispositions of his forces, especially the German formations, the length of his front and the results achieved by Eighth Army's counter-offensives.

Two Army orders were prepared for the Battle of **Mreir**. The first, issued on 17 July, said in its information paragraph: 'During the last few days the enemy has been conforming to our movements. He is clearly sensitive about our occupation of **Ruweisat Ridge** and of the **Tell el Eisa** area.' The second order was issued the next day. It cancelled the first and substituted a completely new plan. Its information paragraph said: 'The Italian infantry formations are at present north of **Ruweisat Ridge** with the German armour centred about **Deir el Abyad**. The enemy has been moving his German forces north and south to conform to our threats.' Additional ideas concerning *Panzerarmee* are contained in Auchinleck's despatch. ¹ Opening a review of the Battle of **Mreir**, Auchinleck says: 'Having made the enemy extend his front and disperse his reserves to some extent, I thought the time had come to strike hard at the centre of his line with the object of cutting his forces in half.'

Whether Rommel had conformed or reacted to Eighth Army's movements and threats may be a question of opinion. The evidence, however, suggests that ever since he had first gone over to the defensive on 4 July to regroup, he had reacted to Eighth Army's attacks with sufficient vigour to upset its plans and make it do a great deal of conforming. His seeming threat to the centre from the Ruweisat salient had induced Auchinleck to withdraw New Zealand Division when it was poised at **Mungar Wahla** and **Mreir** against the enemy's rear. Rommel had prevented the Australians and South Africans on 10 and 11 July from taking the objectives essential to their planned eruption into his rear in conjunction with the projected advance of **13 Corps** over Ruweisat in the night of 11–12 July. This, in turn, had induced Auchinleck to make **13 Corps'** attack over Ruweisat on 14–15 July the main Army operation, one independent of any action by **30 Corps**.

When the Battle of Ruweisat failed to achieve all that was hoped, Rommel's riposte was such that Auchinleck was compelled to order the Australians in the north and **7 Armoured Division** in the south to act offensively to relieve the pressure on **5 Indian Division** in the centre.² The Australians had still to capture **Tell el Eisa**, and after taking **Tell el Makh Khad** and the ruin on **Miteiriya Ridge**, they had been compelled to fall back almost to their start line. In the south, **7 Armoured Division** could not hold all of its gains and **5 Indian Division** had had to give up **Point 62** on Ruweisat.

Considerable violence had been done to *Panzerarmee* in these operations. Its commands and staff as well as the troops had been

¹ Despatch, p. 366.

² Ibid, p. 365.

subjected to severe strain. But Eighth Army's losses in men and equipment had also been heavy. It had not taken and held all of its objectives in any one of its attacks. Success in each case was only partial and, in most instances, was offset by a reverse. The significance of this feature of the operations appears to have been ignored at Eighth Army Headquarters. It may also be noted that Auchinleck did not mention in his despatch the decisive intention of the Battle of Ruweisat. That battle is subordinated to or made a preliminary to **Mreir**. Yet had it been won, as Auchinleck intended and hoped, there would have been no need to fight **Mreir** and, incidentally, to put further troops to work in the rear defences.

How Eighth Army reached the conclusion that Rommel had been compelled to extend his front is difficult to understand. The extension in the period 5 to 9 July when he tried to envelop the British southern flank had been halted by the Australians' attack towards **Tell el Eisa**. Since then there had been successive withdrawals of the enemy forces in

the south. This fact was clearly apparent to **7 Armoured Division's** columns, and was confirmed by prisoners taken in attacks and by raiders and from wireless interceptions. An estimate of the enemy dispositions was circulated by **13 Corps** on 18 July. Although it was out of date, being more true of the situation on the 15th, it recorded a belief that *361 Infantry Regiment* and the remainder of *90 Light Division* were shortly moving north from the southern sector. The fighting on Ruweisat and its environs on and after the 15th supplied additional confirmation of enemy concentration in the centre.

So far from having an extended front when the Battle of **Mreir** was projected, Rommel had contracted it. Against the strongest sector of this contracted front, a sector supported by the German armour, part of Eighth Army was now to be committed in yet another effort to win a decisive victory.

Eighth Army Operation Order No. 100, the first of the two orders previously mentioned, was issued in the evening of 17 July. It called for the envelopment of the enemy from both flanks on a date provisionally fixed as 30 July. In the meantime, **30 Corps**, by means of local actions, was to destroy the Italian forces on its front, 'as without these the Germans will be unable to hold an extended position and may give us an opportunity of surrounding them.' Thirteenth Corps was to improve its positions on Ruweisat but without giving the enemy a chance of making a successful counterattack. The corps was also to press vigorously in the south with the object of holding the maximum number of the enemy in that area, and generally carry out all possible deceptive measures to focus Rommel's attention on the centre and south.

In the main operation, to be carried out by **30 Corps** with **4 Light Armoured Brigade** and the newly arrived **23 Armoured Brigade** under command, the objectives were to be **Tell el Eisa**, **El Wishka** and **Sanyet el Miteiriya**, followed by disruption of the enemy's rear south of the objectives and west of the **Alamein-Abu Dweis** track. Maximum fire support was to be given by **13 Corps**, which was also to exploit north of the **Barrel Track** towards the **Alamein-Abu Dweis** track as opportunity

offered and, with its mobile troops, to endeavour to envelop the enemy's rear. Depending on how the situation developed, **4 Light Armoured Brigade** was to be prepared to move from **30 Corps'** front around the southern flank and strike at Rommel's communications about **El Daba** and **Fuka**.

In the light of subsequent events, it might have been well had Auchinleck adhered to this plan. However, it had no sooner been committed to paper and issued than it was cancelled and a plan for an almost immediate attack in the centre by **13 Corps** substituted. Why the change was made cannot be explained. Auchinleck makes no reference in his despatch either to the original plan or the change. No reason is given in the new Army order sent out on the 18th. There is nothing in reports from the front line or from wireless interceptions to suggest that the new plan was made to exploit an unexpectedly advantageous situation. It may be that Auchinleck was influenced by reports concerning the low state of the German panzer divisions and that he thought a decisive blow might induce them to withdraw and thus leave the Italians to be dealt with later. Against this is the fact that the German strength in men, guns, and tanks was overestimated by about 30 per cent.

Broadly, the new plan ordered **13 Corps** to capture **Deir el Shein**, **Deir el Abyad**, and **Buweibat el Raml** (between **Mreir** and **Mungar Wahla**) and exploit westwards. At the same time, the enemy's southern flank was to be thrown back and his rear area to the west of **Mungar Wahla** attacked. The corps was also ordered to be prepared to pursue towards **Daba** and **Fuka** and cut off the enemy's retreat should he withdraw. Thirtieth Corps was ordered first to contain the maximum enemy forces on its front and to be ready, on call from Eighth Army any time after noon on 21 July, to capture **Tell el Eisa** and a series of named points to the south of **Tell el Makh Khad**, and then exploit to the west and south-west as opportunity offered. The corps was also to be prepared to pursue towards **Daba** with the maximum forces available.

On 20 July, that is two days later and one day before the opening of the battle, another order gave the organisation and administration of the pursuit forces. ¹ Responsibility for the security and mainten-

¹ Eighth Army Operation Instruction No. 102, 20 July.

ance of the whole **Alamein** position was committed to the South African Division, while the remainder of **30 Corps** and the whole of **13 Corps** pursued the fleeing enemy. The pursuing divisions were to be organised in battle groups on a standard pattern based on two infantry companies and a field battery as set out in an appendix to the order. A further appendix gave the order of battle of the formations to take part in the pursuit. The operation order also contained instructions concerning the disposal of surplus troops and their subsequent moves forward as the pursuit developed.

At 9 a.m. on the 21st, Operation Instruction No. 103 giving details of army-air co-operation during the proposed advance was issued. The instruction included a list of eighty air landing grounds from **Egypt** as far west as **Cyrenaica** and the action to be taken by the ground troops on the capture of any of them. This instruction was followed at 12.30 by Instruction No. 104, covering the direct support to be given by the **Royal Air Force** before and during the initial attack. This may seem to be rather late in the day for the issue of such a vital order, but it was probably sent out in confirmation of arrangements made earlier. It is also possible that Army Headquarters had to await details of **13 Corps'** plans before those for air co-operation could be finally settled.

The **Royal Air Force** undertook to bomb located targets to the west of the front until 7.15 p.m. that day and then turn three-quarters of its bombing force on to **Point 63** and the eastern end of **Mreir**. The remaining bombers were to support the subsidiary outflanking operation against the Taqa plateau. During the night, bombing was to be confined to west of a line running through **Kaponga** to **Mreir**. Next day the air

assault was to be directed against **Miteiriya Ridge**. After a breakthrough had been achieved, the area from **Baggush** to **Garawla** was to be kept clear of ground troops and reserved to the Air Force as a target.

The Army's last instruction reached the New Zealand units late on the 21st as they were about to go into the attack. It said:

The C-in-C directs that it be impressed on all ranks that the success of the forthcoming operations may depend on our denying the use of MT to the enemy. If possible enemy MT will be captured and used, but if there is any possibility of it falling into enemy hands it will be destroyed.

In broad terms (the details are examined later), General Gott divided **13 Corps'** operations into four phases. In the first phase, to be carried out during the night 21–22 July, New Zealand and 5 Indian Divisions were to capture the eastern end of **Mreir** and the ground northwards to **Deir el Shein**. Within this area a gap 2000 yards wide was to be cut through suspected minefields. The 22nd Armoured Brigade was to cover the southern flank of the attack and **2 Armoured Brigade** was to 'be prepared' to protect the infantry on their objectives against counter-attack. Phases 2 and 3, an advance in two stages to the **Alamein-Abu Dweis** track at the western end of **Mreir**, were given to **23 Armoured Brigade** with such infantry and artillery support as might be required. Thereafter the corps was to be ready to swing north in rear of any enemy who might be still resisting **30 Corps** or pursue if the enemy retreated.

As Eighth Army did not win even the first phase of the battle, it seems obvious there must have been flaws in the general idea or the planning, perhaps both. The paradoxes and illusions already discussed were in the background of the operation. Others emerge from detailed study of the plans.

The newly arrived **23 Armoured Brigade** was given an important role. According to the author of *The Rifle Brigade*,

The preparations for the whole brigade were hasty in the extreme.

They began to land on the 5th of July and on the 18th of July the battalion [7th Battalion, The Rifle Brigade] began to move out of Burg el Arab. Three days later they were in the forward area and in two more days they were in the middle of a major battle. Apart from deficiencies in equipment ... there had been no time to learn about the desert, to practise navigation. ... To move armoured brigades after a long sea voyage straight from the boat into battle is to invite disaster ¹

Less a regimental group deployed with **30 Corps**, this raw and physically soft brigade in obsolescent Valentine tanks was committed in a sector where, on Eighth Army's own appreciation, it was certain to run into the veteran *Afrika Korps*. On its first day in battle the brigade was destroyed by the German mines, anti-tank guns, and tanks. The author of *The Rifle Brigade* says: 'But in those critical days risks had to be accepted.' There is no suggestion, however, in the Army, corps, or divisional orders, or at the several conferences preceding the battle, of any thought that a risk was being taken. On the contrary, the first Army order of the 17th says: 'It is estimated that the 23rd Armoured Brigade will be ready to go into action about 20 July.'

Besides the question whether Auchinleck was justified in thinking Eighth Army could smash *Panzerarmee* and chase the remnants at this stage of the campaign, it may be asked whether it was capable of laying on a set battle and organising itself for pursuit within the time he allowed. Speed in making appreciations, in planning and issuing detailed orders, was not a characteristic of the Army. This had been evident in some aspects of the

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campaign, in the decisive battle in the 'Cauldron' on 5 June, and at **Tobruk**. It was a factor in the loss of **Matruh**, in the failure to exploit **13 Corps'** advantageous position on Rommel's flank in the first days at

¹ *The Rifle Brigade*, Hastings (Gale and Polden), p. 142. This battalion provided the infantry component of **23 Armoured**

Alamein, and again at Ruweisat. There had been, of course, some notable exceptions, among which were 50 Division's breakaway from **Gazala** and New Zealand Division's escape from **Minqar Qaim**.

But considered as a whole, the Army required much more time than Auchinleck gave it to assimilate his ideas and work out the details of his plans. Its commands and staffs had to clear their minds of the first plan and then absorb and pass on the details of a veritable spate of new orders received almost up to zero hour. The fact that many of the orders were conditional did not facilitate the command and staff work.

Auchinleck's expectation that his Army could pass quickly from the defensive to an offensive and pursuit invites comment. This is recognised as one of the most difficult operations in war. It is generally considered desirable to have fresh troops available for the final breakthrough and to give such impetus to the advance or pursuit that they will carry the remainder of the army with them. No such reserve was available at **Mreir**. True, Eighth Army had been attacking for several days in varying sectors and may, therefore, be said to have been on the offensive. But whatever the objectives, the attacks, in effect, were local operations. The successes had been offset by so many reverses that the fighting spirit, the *élan* of the Army, had not been raised to such an extent as to give it reason to believe that with another hard punch *Panzerarmee* could be sent reeling.

The fact that Auchinleck's advisers and planners had the opposite idea suggests their remoteness from realities. In their remoteness they produced plans and orders more fitting to a tactical exercise without troops than to a situation which should have been known to them.

New Zealand Division received its first advice of the projected operation late in the afternoon of the 19th, when General Gott called with an intimation 'of [a] further attack—probably [the] day after tomorrow to give [the] armour another opportunity.'¹ The corps' written

order ² was received at 8.30 next morning.

The order announced that **23 Armoured Brigade**, less one regimental group, would arrive in the forward area on 20–21 July and would come under the command of **1 Armoured Division**. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade, earlier assigned to **30 Corps**, would remain with **7 Armoured Division** for operations in the southern sector. That division was to send 161 Indian Motor Brigade to **5 Indian Division** in exchange for the British **69 Brigade** which was

¹ Major-General Inglis' diary, 19 July.

² **13 Corps** Operation Order, No. 142, 19 July.

on loan to the Indians from 50 Division. The exchange was made on the 20th.

General Gott defined his intention as ‘**13 Corps** will secure the track El **Alamein**-Abu Dweis between 869280 and 867276 and exploit to destroy the enemy forces.’ In a later part of the order, however, the attack and capture of the final ground objective, roughly three miles of the track due west of **Mreir**, was made subject to the enemy's reaction to earlier phases of the operation. The Indian Division's task in the first phase of the attack was clearly set out as the capture and consolidation of **Deir el Shein** and **Point 63**. By contrast, the ground to be taken by New Zealand Division was vaguely given as ‘thence south-west’ of **Point 63**. It was later defined as the eastern end of Mreir Depression. The infantry divisions were to arrange their own start lines within their present forward defensive localities and zero hour was set as 7.30 p.m. ‘probably 21 July.’ The **1st Armoured Division** was ordered to protect the southern flank during the attack and to ‘be prepared to frustrate any enemy counter-attack up to dark.’ The task of **7 Armoured Division** was given as ‘active harassing with particularly vigorous action from 7.30 p.m.’ and to ‘create a gap for 4th Light Armoured Brigade.’

The **1st Armoured Division** was made responsible for carrying out the second phase of the attack, the capture of a line running south-westwards from **Point 59** (two and a quarter miles west of **Point 63**) to the southern escarpment of **Mreir**. The division was to fix its own start line, and zero hour was not to be before eight o'clock in the morning after the initial attack. In addition to capturing the second objective, the division was also to protect the southern flank and maintain one armoured brigade in reserve. The two infantry divisions were ordered to occupy the ground won by the armour as rapidly as possible and consolidate.

General Gott's view of subsequent possibilities differed from that held by the Army command. He was not sure whether the enemy would continue to resist on the corps' front after the completion of Phase 2, and whether, if resistance collapsed, Rommel would retreat immediately or try to extricate his forces opposite **30 Corps** in the northern sector. The corps' order endeavoured to provide for all these eventualities.

If resistance continued, **1 Armoured Division**, supported by the artillery of 5 Indian and New Zealand Divisions, was to make another set-piece attack with the **Alamein**-Abu Dweis track as the probable objective. If resistance collapsed but enemy forces were still in front of **30 Corps**, the armoured division was to break clear of Mreir Depression and move up the **Alamein** track to attack them in rear. At the same time, **7 Armoured Division** was to move between **Kaponga** and **Deir el Abyad** to **Sidi Abd el Rahman** station to prevent the escape of the enemy in the northern sector. During these enclosing movements, 5 Indian and New Zealand Divisions were to consolidate on the second objective and mop up in their areas.

On the other hand, if Rommel initiated a general retreat all along the line, every effort was to be made to cut off and destroy his forces. To this end, **1 Armoured Division** was to move on the centre line **Mreir-Fuka** escarpment with the task 'as opportunity offers' of preventing the escape of the enemy main and armoured forces. The **7th Armoured**

Division was to move to **Fuka** by the quickest route to prevent the enemy's escape. The 4th Light Armoured Brigade was to pursue and harass as far west as **Charing Cross**, and the whole division was to be prepared to continue the pursuit as far as the frontier without pause. Also in this eventuality, **5 Indian Division** was to secure **Daba** with a brigade of battle groups. New Zealand Division was to consolidate on the general line of the track between **Deir el Abyad** and **Mreir** and, as corps reserve, make itself ready to move westwards at short notice.

The order added that if and when the narrow envelopment or the pursuit developed, 'all commanders must be prepared to act with extreme vigour. Without waiting for precise orders they must act within the spirit of these orders and carry out the pursuit relentlessly to the complete destruction of the enemy forces.'

As might be expected, these voluminous orders and the attempt to provide for every contingency after the initial battle had been won did not contribute to clear and precise direction. In retrospect, it seems that the higher commands and staffs would have been better engaged had they devoted more of their energies to ensuring against any possibility of failure in the first phase.

An intelligence summary giving the enemy strengths and dispositions as they were estimated at 8 p.m. on 19 July was circulated with the order. It showed **21 Panzer Division** holding the **Point 63- Deir el Shein** area and **15 Division** in **Mreir** and to the south, with **2 Battalion, 382 Regiment**, on its right flank. **Brescia Division** was placed behind the panzer divisions in **Deir el Abyad** with **Pavia** on its northern flank. The Italian **XX Armoured Corps (Ariete, Trieste, and Littorio)** was shown as holding the **Kaponga** area. All this was reasonably accurate.

The estimated strengths of the German forces may be compared with a strength return compiled by the enemy on 21 July. The figures for the two panzer divisions, those of immediate concern to **13 Corps**; are shown in the following table, the estimates being given first and the actual

strengths according to the German return in parentheses below:

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Guns</i>	<i>A-Tk</i>	<i>Guns</i>	<i>Tanks</i>	<i>88-mm</i>	<i>A-Tk</i>	<i>Guns</i>
<i>15 Div</i>	4500	36	60		13	...		
	(2415)	(25)	(16)		(18)	...		
<i>21 Div</i>	4000	36	55		18	...		
	(2389)	(27)	(31)		(20)	...		

The summary also credited *90 Light Division* with 3500 men, 20 field guns and 80 anti-tank guns, while 12,000 men, 75 field guns, 12 anti-tank guns, 29 tanks, and 44 88-millimetre anti-tank guns were credited to army and corps troops including *382 Regiment*. The enemy report from which the strengths of the panzer divisions have been extracted does not give comparable figures for the other German formations. However, the report mentions that 'at present we have 45 tanks and in the next four weeks 100 more can be made serviceable.' Thus for the Battle of *Mreir* the Germans had 38 tanks forward and seven with the corps and army troops, against a total of 60 in the British estimate. The Italians had 51 tanks, or 19 fewer than they were credited with in the summary.

General Gott gave his divisions the whole of the morning of the 20th to make their tentative plans and then called the commanders to a corps conference at *1 Armoured Division*'s headquarters at 2.30 p.m. There he went through the corps' order paragraph by paragraph.

General Inglis was mainly concerned with the proposed zero hour and especially with the armoured support. He pointed out that at 7.30 p.m. the enemy would have the setting sun at their backs and thus the best observation of the day, while the attackers, looking into the sunset, would have no observation at all. He suggested that the opening of the artillery bombardment should be postponed until 8.30 p.m. and that the infantry should not move until a quarter of an hour later. These suggestions were accepted.

With the bitter experience at Ruweisat fresh in mind, Inglis went thoroughly into the question of armoured support. He said that *6 Brigade*

would attack the eastern tongue of **Mreir** during the night and that it would not be in a position to defend itself against enemy tanks until some hours after dawn. He therefore insisted that the British armour should be in **Mreir** at first light ready to deal with counter-attacks or with any enemy tanks overrun during the advance.

General Gatehouse, now commanding **1 Armoured Division**, vice General Lumsden who had been wounded a few days earlier, offered to provide additional liaison officers with **6 Brigade** Headquarters. Inglis accepted the offer but said it was not sufficient. In addition, reconnaissance tanks must be right up with the forward infantry and the armoured brigade should be in close support. Gott agreed that the reconnaissance tanks should be supplied, and Gatehouse gave an assurance that his supporting tanks would not at any stage be more than half a mile from the infantry. Inglis had to accept these arrangements, but before the conference broke up Gott recapitulated the role of the armour in the first phase as ‘to closely support and frustrate any counter-attack against **6 NZ Brigade**.’



El Mreir: The advance and dawn counter-attack, 22 July 1942

General Inglis issued his orders at a divisional conference at ten o'clock next morning, the main outlines being later confirmed in writing. ¹ The assault was given to **6 Brigade** with the support of

the three field regiments, 64 Medium Regiment, a battery of the Royal Horse Artillery, and the mortars and machine guns of **5 Brigade**.

The obvious route for the assault was through **5 Brigade's** sector on the front held by **23 Battalion** but Inglis ruled that it would be too risky to add to the congestion in that area. In addition, it was believed that there was a minefield of some depth and strength on the route which might severely hamper the advance of the brigade, particularly its supporting weapons. Brigadier Clifton therefore was left with the choice of moving out from **26 Battalion's** front, or of swinging his whole brigade out into the wide no-man's-land on to start lines facing north by north-east and at right angles to his forward defended localities. He proposed a compromise under which **26 Battalion** would have a start line close to its defences, while 24 and 25 Battalions moved out into no-man's-land on to start lines in 26th's left rear. This decision was approved.

The chosen axis of advance offered the advantage of easy and quick deployment on the start lines without undue hindrance from the enemy or the risk of creating congestion and confusion within the Division's lines. It also brought the brigade square on to the objective. The main disadvantages were the length of 24 and **25 Battalion's** approach marches—between 2500 and 3000 yards—and the fact that on the way to **Mreir** the brigade's left flank was likely to brush some enemy posts.

These posts were in the area held by advanced elements of *Ariete Division*, the *Lindemann Battle Group* and *Huelsen Group*. The defended areas had been located by patrols but they had not been probed. The posts, however, appeared to be widely scattered and were not considered a serious factor. It was thought that Clifton's proposed dispositions during his advance and on his objectives would take care of possible interference from this quarter. As an additional precaution, **18 Battalion** was ordered to move to the area occupied by **6 Brigade** Headquarters and, from 9 to 10 p.m., to cover the left flank of the

brigade's advance with machine-gun and mortar fire. Later, with a battery of **7 Anti-Tank Regiment**, two troops from **14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment** and two companies of machine-gunners under command, the battalion was to move out to the left flank of the brigade. The Division's operation order states that the group's role in this second position was to cover the redeployment of **5 Field Regiment** from **Alam Nayil** to the area vacated by **24 Battalion**. Contemporary reports and comments, however, suggest that this was a secondary role to the prime task of covering **6 Brigade's** flank and rear. As a further guard, patrols of the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** were ordered to cover the group's southern flank from first light.

Besides giving supporting mortar and machine-gun fire from 8.50 to 9.30 p.m., **5 Brigade** was ordered to send one battalion forward to **Point 69**, roughly half a mile south-east of the eastern end of **Mreir**, before dawn. The remainder of the brigade was to be in divisional reserve. The engineers were instructed to co-operate with **5 Indian Division** in clearing a gap 2000 yards wide between the crest of **Ruweisat Ridge** and **Mreir** up to the objective. This work was to be completed by 6.30 a.m. on the 22nd, after which the New Zealand sappers were to widen their portion of the gap to a mile south of their boundary with the Indians. The CRE, Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson, decided to supervise the operation personally and arranged with Divisional Signals for a No. 11 wireless set in a truck to be available to the lifting parties, which were to be drawn from **7 Field Company** and **5 Field Park Company**.

The artillery programme prepared by the CRA, Brigadier Weir, provided for timed concentrations on known enemy strongpoints on the brigade axis up to the first objective, and then a switch to the second objective, the programme to start at 5.30 p.m. and finish at 10.45 p.m. Each of the three field regiments was to reserve one battery for special tasks. The rate of fire was to be 'troop fire 10 seconds'—one gun in each troop firing every ten seconds—for two to three minutes on stated targets. It was expected that the field regiments would fire about 2400 rounds of high-explosive shells.

Signals plans were prepared by Headquarters of Divisional Signals. The wireless plan linked 5 and 6 Brigades, the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, and General Inglis' reconnaissance set through No. 9 sets to Main Divisional Headquarters. The reconnaissance set could also be switched to connect with **13 Corps'** tactical headquarters. The line communications provided for a cable to be laid from advanced headquarters of **6 Brigade** back to the brigade's rear headquarters to join existing connections with **Divisional Headquarters** and **5 Brigade**. The 18th Battalion was also to be linked by cable to Rear Headquarters **6 Brigade**.

Brigadier A. F. Fisher, commanding **22 Armoured Brigade**, represented Major-General Gatehouse at the conference and considerable pressure was put on him to move the supporting tanks forward during the night. He refused on the grounds that the tanks could not fight even in moonlight and were reluctant to move at all by night. He maintained this attitude even when Brigadiers **Kippenberger** and Clifton stressed that the German tanks moved and fought at night. Fisher also refused Clifton's request that one armoured regiment should be placed under his direct command for the advance. The infantry commanders had therefore to accept renewed assurances that the tanks would be ordered to move up in support as soon as there was light enough for them to move, and the arrangements Fisher made for tank liaison officers to be with **6 Brigade** during its attack. ¹

In spite of this defect in the plans and a belief that the artillery preparation was insufficient, ² Clifton was sanguine concerning the success of the battle. He was specially warned by General Inglis, on the example of **4 Brigade** at Ruweisat, against taking his headquarters too far forward among the assaulting troops. On the other hand, **Kippenberger**, with memories of the failure of the British tanks at Ruweisat fresh in his mind, was pessimistic. On his return to his command truck he turned everyone out except the brigade major and intelligence officer, and then ordered the following entry to be made in the brigade log: 'The Brigadier has returned from the divisional

conference and says there will be another bloody disaster.’³

Brigadier Clifton ordered his brigade to attack with **26 Battalion** on the right and **24 Battalion** on the left, the 25th to be in reserve on 24th's left rear. The 26th Battalion was to start from its forward defended localities at 9 p.m. and was to have the help of a party of sappers from **8 Field Company** in clearing its way through minefields ahead. Its objective was the eastern end of **Mreir**. The 24th Battalion was to move on the left of the brigade axis to an objective on the northern lip of **Mreir**, to the left and ahead of **26 Battalion**. The 25th Battalion was given as its objective an area where the pipeline crossed a line of cairns to the south of **Mreir**. Each battalion was to have under command two guns mounted on carriers from **3 Machine Gun Company**, the remainder of the company with six guns to be with brigade headquarters in reserve. The 24th and 25th Battalions were also to have one troop each of anti-tank guns from **32 Battery**, whose third troop and battery headquarters were to be in brigade reserve. The 8th Field Company was ordered to advance behind **24 Battalion** and to clear three lanes, each 40 feet wide, for the passage of the fighting vehicles of 24 and 25 Battalions and

¹ The insistence of the armour commanders that they could not operate at night is surprising in view of the fact that on three occasions in the preceding eight months 1 Army Tank Brigade had made successful night attacks, having trained for the purpose. At Ed Duda on the night of 26 November 1941 two squadrons of **44 Royal Tank Regiment** led 19 NZ Battalion in a completely successful attack, taking many prisoners and guns with the loss of one tank and two infantrymen wounded. At **Bardia** on the nights of 1 and 2 January, 8 and 44 Royal Tank Regiments led two South African battalions in completely successful assaults on strongly fortified German positions, in each case with very slight loss. These operations were apparently not sufficiently widely known, though it was known that the Germans' tanks frequently operated and moved at night. On later occasions, at **Tebaga Gap** in March 1943, at **Hammamet** in April 1943, in Operation TOTALIZE in **Normandy** in August 1944, and at **Rimini** in October 1944, large armoured formations attacked at

night with outstanding success. Special preparation and thorough training were of course necessary.—cf. an article by Major H. B. C. Watkins in the *Army Quarterly*, October 1953.

² Brigadier Clifton's personal diary, 21 July: 'Fair amount of artillery preparation but won't really be enough to help us in and must depend—as usual—on infantry mainly.'

³ *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 184.

brigade headquarters. Brigade headquarters was to move on the brigade axis.

An appreciation of the enemy in the opening paragraphs of **1 Armoured Division's** operation order ¹ is of special interest. It notes that the 'depleted German forces' had been dispersed over the whole front among the Italians and that the German armour had been concentrated in the centre and the Italian armour to the south, and then continues:

The enemy has made strenuous efforts to deny us **Ruweisat Ridge**, and has tried to counter every fwd move by us in that area. There is no reason to believe that he will not vigorously resist an attack in that quarter. For this reason he has made strong pts in the areas Deir el Shein, El Mireir, Qaret el Abd [**Kaponga**], covered by FDLs running SW from Pt 64 (876279) [i.e., Pt 63] to the 87-27 intersection [**Kaponga** area] and by what are suspected to be extensive minefields.

Thus it is clear that the armoured division knew that the infantry and tanks would strike directly against the main concentration of enemy armour and that the initial phases of the operation were likely to be severe. The appreciation may be contrasted with **13 Corps'** and Army orders, which briefly refer to the concentration of the German panzer divisions and, with the emphasis on pursuit, leave the impression that the all-important first phases would be more or less a walk-over.

General Gatehouse instructed **22 Armoured Brigade** to protect New Zealand Division's southern flank during the actual attack by fire and, if necessary, by armoured action. After the capture or partial capture of the first objective, **2 Armoured Brigade** Group was to prepare to frustrate any enemy counter-attack until Phase 2 began. For this purpose one armoured regiment was to be maintained on **Ruweisat Ridge** and the remainder of the group in readiness in the general area of **Alam el Dihmaniya**.

Instructions to the liaison officers to be appointed to the assaulting infantry formations laid down that their primary duty was to pass information of counter-attacks to their brigade headquarters which, in turn, would forward the reports to the divisional headquarters. As **22 Armoured Brigade** was to appoint the liaison officer with the New Zealanders, this arrangement meant that he would first report to his own brigade who would forward the report to the divisional headquarters, which in turn would give orders to **2 Armoured Brigade**. In an effort to overcome this complicated and slow process, Gatehouse issued an amending order on 21 July stating: 'One

¹ Armoured Division Operation Order No. 24, 20 July. The complete orders for the armour covering the whole of the operation required 12 pages of typing and 14 message forms. Only those parts of immediate concern to New Zealand Division are dealt with here.

armoured regiment of 2nd Brigade will be in immediate support of 6th N.Z. Brigade but will not be committed without the consent of the commander of 2nd Armoured Brigade unless communications fail when the decision will rest with the commander of the regiment.'

Gatehouse made Phase 2 conditional on the successful clearing of the minefield and the necessary artillery support being available. Provided these conditions were met, the attack was to be made even if Phase 1 were only partly successful. He ordered **23 Armoured Brigade** to

be on its start line for Phase 2 by not later than 7 a.m. The start line was not to be crossed before 8 a.m., and then only on receipt of an order from divisional headquarters giving the exact time the advance was to be made.

A separate order for the subsequent phases of the operation was issued shortly before midday on the 21st. By this order **2 Armoured Brigade** was to carry out Phase 3, the advance to the **Alamein-Abu Dweis** track, but at five o'clock, that is within four hours of zero, this arrangement was cancelled. The 23rd Brigade was made responsible for both Phase 2 and Phase 3 and 2 Brigade was given a reserve role.

The **5th Indian Division** gave its 161 Motor Brigade the task of capturing the first objective. The 9th Indian Infantry Brigade was ordered to move through the captured positions in the wake of **23 Armoured Brigade's** tanks and consolidate on the second objective.

In the third phase, the division was to help with artillery fire and in consolidating any ground won, or to start for **Daba** with a brigade of battle groups according to the way the enemy reacted. The 9th Brigade was made responsible for clearing the minefields in the divisional sector south of **Ruweisat Ridge**, and the 20th Field Company, Indian Engineers, was specially ordered to arrange for close co-operation in the work with the New Zealand engineers. It is of moment that the mine-lifting was made a brigade instead of a divisional task, and also that the work was given to a brigade which, with its engineers, was expected to move forward almost as soon as the gap was made in the minefield.

The condition and dispositions of *Panzerarmee* and Rommel's expectations are set out in a special appreciation he made on 21 July for his German superiors. Thus the situation at zero hour from the enemy point of view may be stated with unusual accuracy.

After mentioning that he had been compelled to go over to the defensive on 16 July, Rommel said the situation had eased as, by interspersing German units among the Italians, the danger of a

breakthrough on a broad front in the Italian sector had diminished considerably. The crisis, however, continued, and would continue until enough forces were available to permit the front line to be occupied more densely, the mobile troops withdrawn into reserve for mobile defence, and the construction of obstacles on the front line completed.

The German forces were down to 30 per cent of their authorised personnel, 15 per cent of their tank establishments, 70 per cent of the artillery, 40 per cent of the anti-tank guns, and 50 per cent of the heavy anti-aircraft guns. Their fighting quality had also suffered through diminishing resilience, the result of uninterrupted campaigning, heavy casualties among seasoned personnel, and the lack of weapons, particularly armour and anti-tank guns. Newly-arrived reserves were inadequately trained. The mobility of the divisions had been impaired by the losses of mechanised transport and by the increased diversion of trucks for supply purposes.

Rommel said that in the disaster of 10 July Italian units approximating the strength of four divisions had been lost, and that the Italian forces were down to between 20 and 30 per cent of establishments in men and equipment. None of the Italian formations, except the artillery, could be regarded as an addition to *Panzerarmee's* fighting strength.

Reviewing the British forces, Rommel said that the 1st and 7th Armoured Divisions and **5th Indian Division** had been badly mauled during the preceding operations [the fighting at **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** and in the retreat to **Alamein**]. Their fighting quality, however, had been considerably increased by recent reinforcement in men and tanks. The New Zealand and 9th Australian Divisions must be credited with extraordinary efficiency in battle as they had a long period of training and rest behind them. For this reason they were easily the best British infantry divisions at the time.

After acknowledging the mobility and versatility of the British field artillery and the heavy losses being inflicted by the **Royal Air Force**,

Rommel looked to the future. He thought reforming the British divisions would proceed rapidly and that new units would be available. The 50th, 1st South African, and 5th Indian Divisions might be fully battleworthy by the middle of August, by which time another armoured division and an infantry division, 'at present assembled in the home country for embarkation', could be expected.

'With the forces at present available in this war theatre,' Rommel continued, 'the enemy will hardly undertake a large-scale attack with a long-range objective. He will, however, attempt to continue with his recent tactics, i.e., attacks with a limited objective, namely the wrenching out of isolated front sectors, particularly Italian-occupied areas. These tactics will be the more employed as the enemy replenishment of the divisions progresses. After the arrival of the reinforcements, as soon as the British command has sufficient forces available, it can be expected to go over to the counter-offensive in order to eliminate the danger to **Egypt and the **Middle East** caused by the advance of Panzerarmee.'**

Rommel set out in detail his urgent requirements in troops and equipment and concluded his appreciation with a statement of his intention to remain on the defensive until his forces were fitted to resume the advance in the direction of **Alexandria or **Cairo**. During this period small-scale attacks might be considered in the framework of mobile defence or with a view to improving the positions. Should the political situation render necessary a withdrawal of British forces from **Egypt**, the offensive might be launched at an earlier date. Should this not happen, it would be necessary to destroy the British field army, if need be in separate operations, before the breakthrough to **Alexandria** and **Cairo**.**

To sum up the planning and situation as zero hour approached:

While Eighth Army Headquarters believed it had the whip hand of the enemy, it pessimistically strengthened the defences between the forward zone and **Cairo. Auchinleck appears to have ignored the defeat**

on **Ruweisat Ridge** the previous week and to have drawn from the operation only the obvious conclusion that the enemy was sensitive in that sector.

It might be deduced from the Army order of the 17th, with its policy of first destroying the Italians in the north, that Army Headquarters had appreciated some of the lessons of the earlier battles in which the Germans had invariably supplied the only effective resistance and by their vigorous ripostes had denied complete success to the attacking forces. There was also the special, indeed the outstanding, lesson that the British armour was showing itself, to say the least, extremely reluctant to use its overwhelming weight to destroy the few remaining German tanks.

How little these lessons were appreciated became apparent when the policy of the 17th was so quickly abandoned in favour of a hastily-drawn plan for an attack by part of the Army against the enemy's strongest sector. This sector, Eighth Army Headquarters knew, was supported by the concentrated German armour. It seems that the revived optimism at headquarters converted by thought alone distant possibilities into probabilities and then into established facts. So, in a spate of orders which flowed to the troops right up to zero hour, the winning of the preliminary battle at **Mreir** and on Ruweisat became subordinated to its possible aftermath of rolling up *Panzerarmee* or chasing its remnants to the frontier.

The winning of the preliminary battle—first catch your hare—was not taken lightly by the divisions engaged. They planned their operations in detail so far as they could. But the plans with which they were required to conform did not permit them to concentrate on a knockout blow. On the contrary, the enemy was to be given a series of more or less light punches with relatively long intervals between them. The fighting since 10 July had revealed that the Germans were skilled in taking advantage of these intervals and in delivering hard blows in return.

Numerically, **13 Corps** alone was strong enough to send Rommel's centre reeling with a concentrated knockout blow. Against four weak, tired, and widely dispersed battalions of the German *104* and *115 Infantry Regiments* about **Point 63** and in and south of **Mreir** and the remains of *Brescia Division* in **Deir el Shein**, it could put three infantry brigades, of which one, the 6th New Zealand, was fresh and up to strength. These could have the support of nine field regiments and one medium regiment, supplemented by the fire of **1 Armoured Division's** guns as well as supporting fire from **30 Corps** on the northern flank. Rommel was reduced to counting his guns singly, or at the most, in troops or batteries of three.

In tanks also, **13 Corps** had an overwhelming numerical superiority. The 2nd Armoured Brigade alone had 123 Grants, Crusaders, and Stuarts against Rommel's combined total of 96 German and Italian tanks. The 22nd Armoured Brigade had roughly the same number and, in addition, the two regiments of 23 Brigade had close on 100 Valentines. Again, **2 Armoured Brigade** had 60 Grants, which were superior to any of Rommel's tanks except his Mark III Specials, of which he had no more than six, and his Mark IV Specials, of which there were two or three but without ammunition.

Rommel was apprehensive of the increasing British strength. Although he considered the situation had eased, he doubted the ability of his army to withstand many more of the attacks of attrition to which it was being subjected. He did not know that Eighth Army was then thinking in terms of his complete destruction, or that he was on the eve of one of the best defensive victories of his career.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 30 – ADVANCE OF SIXTH BRIGADE

CHAPTER 30

Advance of Sixth Brigade

THROUGHOUT the 21st the **Royal Air Force** bombed *Afrika Korps'* sector on a scale described by **15 Panzer Division** as 'hardly ever seen before.' The division surmised that an effort was being made to knock out headquarters and guns in preparation for an attack. The evening 'rolling bombing' attacks and increased artillery fire were noticed by **90 Light Division**, which recorded in its diary that it 'is prepared for anything and awaits an attack.' These and other reports of increased British reconnaissance during the day, and what at the time were described as 'local thrusts' towards **Kaponga** and **Deir el Shein**, caused *Panzerarmee Headquarters* to report that night: 'It was not impossible that the enemy would try to launch another major attack in the central sector.'

Thus the enemy appears to have been on the alert when, between 8.30 and 9 p.m., **6 New Zealand Brigade** and **161 Indian Motor Brigade** moved into the attack under cover of artillery, mortar and air bombardment. Until about midnight the battle proceeded more or less according to plan. Thereafter it broke into a series of disconnected incidents. These are difficult to follow unless the picture of the operation as a whole is first drawn in broad terms.

The Indians attacked with two battalions forward and one in reserve. The forward battalions could not take their objectives and suffered so severely that they had to be withdrawn. A later attack by the reserve battalion captured **Point 63**, which was held during the morning until the failure of operations elsewhere also compelled withdrawal.

All three battalions of **6 Brigade** reached **Mreir**. On the right the **26th** ran into German tanks, some of which were destroyed. The battalion was unable to make contact with the remainder of the brigade and, because of its casualties and its inability to defend itself, withdrew on to **5 Brigade** before first light. In the centre, **24 Battalion** was joined by

brigade headquarters and **25 Battalion**. At first light enemy tanks which had been firing on them during the night closed in. Only a few officers and men got away. The 18th Battalion group on the left flank was driven back by tanks, but held its main position until it was ordered to withdraw.

After an early morning consultation between Gott and Gatehouse, **23 Armoured Brigade** was sent on its mission, notwithstanding that the gap in the minefield had not been cleared and the situation in Mreir Depression was unknown. The two regiments of the brigade made a latter-day Balaclava charge with guns to the right, left, and in front of them and the further striking parallel of a mistake in orders. The objective was reached, but the brigade was so shattered that the remnants had to be withdrawn by midday. Although **13 Corps** and **1 Armoured Division** were advised during the night that tanks in Mreir were attacking **6 Brigade**, **2** and **22 Armoured Brigades** waited until after daylight before they moved. By that time the infantry in Mreir had been overrun.

On **13 Corps'** right, the South Africans secured a small depression to keep **30 Corps'** left flank level with **13 Corps**. In the northern sector, attacks by the Australians to assist **13 Corps'** operations were only partly successful. The eastern end of **Tell el Eisa** was taken and held, but the feature itself could not be captured. The south-eastern end of the **Makh Khad** ridge was also captured. A hastily prepared attack against Miteiriya in the afternoon of the 22nd failed with the loss of half of 50 Royal Tank Regiment's tanks. In the south, the enemy stopped **69 Brigade** from taking the features which blocked an advance by **4 Light Armoured Brigade** and **7 Motor Brigade** to *Panzerarmee's* rear.

It was still daylight when 24 and 25 Battalions moved with widely dispersed sections from their defences to the assembly areas and start lines in no-man's-land. *Huelsen Group*, and probably *Lindemann*, saw the movement and engaged it with artillery and machine guns. The fire did some damage but generally was more disconcerting than anything else.

A little trouble of a nature fairly frequent in desert operations was experienced in adjusting the start lines chosen from the map to the situation on the ground. Reconnaissance by the intelligence officers of both battalions in the afternoon disclosed that the map lines were in full view of the enemy. They laid out new lines in the cover of a small depression about 400 yards south of **24 Battalion's** map line. As this brought the battalions side by side instead of in echelon as the brigade plan required, another line further in rear was fixed for **25 Battalion** later in the afternoon. These changes caused a little confusion and delay to one of the 25th's companies.

Having a much shorter distance to go, Lieutenant-Colonel Peart held **26 Battalion** in its defences until dark. The battalion was shelled in the evening and also had the misfortune to receive a few bombs the **Royal Air Force** intended for **Mreir**. The start line was crossed at nine o'clock, and fifty minutes later the leading troops, A and D Companies, reached the slope leading down into the eastern end of the depression. In the advance they encountered only a few isolated posts which were quickly subdued.

Confused fighting developed with infantry posts in a minefield on the lip of the depression and then with tanks as the companies moved down the slope to their objective. Lieutenant **Williams**¹ knocked out one tank with a sticky bomb and another was thought to have been damaged. The tanks withdrew across the floor of the depression but continued firing. By this time casualties were mounting and many men had lost touch with their companies. In D Company, which had been the first to meet the tanks, most of the officers including the commander, Captain **Young**,² were either wounded or missing. The remnants joined A Company under Captain **Richards**³ on the objective. A quick count revealed that the combined force had been reduced to about thirty-five men. Richards laid out a defensive area pending the arrival of B Company in reserve and battalion headquarters.

By eleven o'clock B Company, which had encountered little

opposition and suffered only a few casualties, was in position behind Richards, and Peart had set up his battalion headquarters. The vehicle column was not so fortunate. It had deviated from the axis of advance into the minefield, in which two carriers were blown up. While search was being made for the gap being cleared by the engineers, tanks destroyed a two-pounder portée and the battalion's ammunition truck, including the reserve supply of sticky bombs. The column was withdrawn under this attack. When eventually the gap was found another two-pounder was lost on a mine.

While the battalion was consolidating its position, patrols endeavoured to make contact with **24 Battalion** and brigade headquarters. The first patrol returned half an hour after midnight with the disquieting report that it had been unable to find any other New Zealand troops but that four enemy tanks were close to B Company. Peart did not have to reflect deeply to realise that his battalion was in a precarious situation. But there was no lack of spirit in the 26th. Infantrymen stalked the tanks and set one of them on fire with a sticky bomb. In the light of the flames, a two-pounder which had just arrived engaged another tank. Heavy return fire put the two-pounder out of action and forced the infantrymen into cover.

¹ **Lt-Col J. R. Williams**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 27 Jul 1911; solicitor; CO Div Cav Bn Jan–Apr 1945; three times wounded.

² **Capt R. M. Young**; **Christchurch**; born **Palmerston North**, 24 Jun 1913; solicitor; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ **Lt-Col E.E. Richards**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Nelson**; born **Kumara**, 6 Dec 1915; civil servant; CO 26 Bn Dec 1943–Apr 1944.

More patrols were sent out and Peart also sent his adjutant, Captain **Hall**, ¹ with Captain **McKinlay**, ² in a carrier down the axis of advance to report the situation and bring up support. Hall reached Rear Brigade

Headquarters at three o'clock and over the telephone gave General Inglis Peart's appreciation of the situation. He learned that Division had been advised at midnight that the battalion had reached its objective and had encountered tanks. Inglis told Hall that he had ordered Brigadier Clifton to send some six-pounder guns to the battalion, and that he had been in contact with **1 Armoured Division** which had promised to have its tanks in the depression at first light. Hall was to go back and give this information to Peart.

After collecting some carriers and a supply of sticky bombs, Hall and McKinlay, with the battalion's doctor, Lieutenant **Rutherford**,³ set out for **Mreir** which was reached just before first light. On the way Rutherford was dropped to attend the crew of one of the carriers which was blown up by a mine.

About four o'clock Peart called his remaining officers together to discuss the situation. All the patrols had reported that they had met only enemy. They had not found any sign of other parts of the brigade. They had also definitely established that there were at least eight or nine enemy tanks within a few hundred yards of the battalion. There might even be more, as a German prisoner had volunteered the information that 23 tanks had laagered in the depression. Peart was sure the Germans would counter-attack about five o'clock as soon as it was light enough, and that his battalion, in its depleted condition and without anti-tank guns, would not survive more than a few minutes. Before taking the drastic step of ordering a withdrawal he sent an officer and two men to make a fast sweep through **24 Battalion's** objective. The patrol returned just before 4.30 with a report that it had not found any sign of friendly troops to the west. Peart thereupon ordered the battalion to retire. Although it was daylight before the last troops cleared the depression, the enemy did not interfere except with some smallarms fire. The Germans were then engaged in overrunning 24 and 25 Battalions and brigade headquarters.

On the way out Peart met Hall, who gave him General Inglis'

message. As there were still no signs of British armoured support or of the six-pounder anti-tank guns, Peart carried on with the

¹ **Capt H. J. Hall; Christchurch; born Timaru, 8 Sep 1912; architect; wounded and p.w.4 Sep 1942.**

² **Maj A. R. McKinlay; Lawrence; born Lawrence, 21 Mar 1914; assistant company manager.**

³ **Capt A. M. Rutherford, MC and bar; Lower Hutt; born Dunedin, 27 Mar 1915; medical practitioner; wounded 22 Mar 1943.**

withdrawal. He directed B Company, which was still relatively intact, to take up a position by **Point 69** on the left of **21 Battalion's** outpost and to co-ordinate its action with that battalion against any counter-attack that might develop. The remainder of the 26th were taken back to the battalion's original area. Peart then went on to the brigade's rear headquarters whence he reported his actions to General Inglis.

In his dispositions for **24 Battalion's** advance, Lieutenant-Colonel Greville took precautions against interference by the enemy on his left whose strength was not known. He put D Company on the right, followed by part of battalion headquarters. B Company led on the left, with C Company following with the special duty of guarding the left flank. Greville took a small tactical headquarters forward with D Company. All companies were ordered to check the direction of advance independently.

The leading companies crossed the start line at 8.30 and almost immediately ran into bursts of machine-gun fire, probably from *Huelsen Group*. Some of the fire appeared to follow the advance but most of it was on fixed lines revealed by tracer bullets. This fire was negotiated with few casualties, but shortly afterwards a minefield with a number of enemy posts on a slight rise was encountered. The minefield was crossed

quickly and the opposition subdued. The enemy in these posts cannot be definitely identified. They may have been the left-flank posts of **2 Battalion, 382 Regiment, in Huelsen Group.**

It seems clear, however, that within a few more minutes the battalion was fully engaged with the remains of **3 Battalion, 115 Regiment**, which, behind a minefield on the lip of **Mreir**, was covering **5 Panzer Regiment's** laager. The battalion was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Warrelmann, who had been commissioned in 1934 after thirteen years' service in the ranks. Most of his service in **Africa** had been with a machine-gun battalion and he had been given his present appointment in April 1942. Warrelmann held the German Cross in Gold and two Iron Crosses. He was reported on as a very keen, vigorous, strong-willed character who had difficulty in controlling a hasty temper. He was considered a good tactician and an excellent commander in action.

Warrelmann's group could not stop **24 Battalion** but it exacted a heavy price for its positions. On the right, D Company spread out in trying to clear up the area and became scattered. Machine guns firing on fixed lines caught many of the men, and the company commander, Major Beyer, and several of his officers were wounded. The survivors were rallied by the company sergeant-major, **WO II McLauchlan**,¹ and were taken forward by the intelligence officer, Second-Lieutenant **Wilcox**,² who had caught up. Wilcox carried on to the objective against light and scattered opposition. In a quick reconnaissance he discovered an isolated platoon from **25 Battalion** on his left and his own battalion's transport group some distance behind. Through the No. 18 wireless set with the carrier platoon he established contact with Greville, who directed him to bring D Company on to battalion headquarters, whose position would be indicated by flare signals. Wilcox completed this mission about 2.30 a.m.

B Company on the left was more intent on pushing through to the objective than on mopping up. Led by its commander, Captain **Conolly**,³ the company charged the enemy posts with great dash and was soon through the defended area. Conolly was wounded, and although he tried

to carry on he had to hand over the company to Lieutenant **Brash**,⁴ who pushed on with about twenty-seven men. On the objective, Brash had defences dug on the reverse side of a slight rise and put two men on the crest as observers. They reported that enemy tanks and troops were not very far off down the forward slope. Patrols located other enemy to the west and battalion headquarters to the rear, to which Brash then led his small force.

One of B Company's platoons had broken away from the main group in the fighting, probably towards the numerous enemy posts on the left flank. When it tried to resume the advance it found itself almost surrounded. It broke clear and eventually worked its way back to Rear Brigade Headquarters.

C Company became more tangled with the enemy than the others. Its movements are obscure but it seems to have been drawn to the left instead of following B Company. On this route it had to fight its way forward along the line of the enemy. The commander, Captain **Beesley**,⁵ was killed and the company suffered severely. The survivors broke into small groups, some of which succeeded in rejoining the battalion on the objective. Others made their way back during the night.

In spite of some confusion concerning the battalion and brigade axes, the sappers of **8 Field Company** did a good job in clearing passages through the minefields, with the result that Greville had his transport on the objective by about 2.30. His force now comprised

¹ **WO II R. McLauchlan**; born NZ 18 Aug 1915; Regular soldier; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; died while p.w. (**Benghazi**) 9 Oct 1942.

² **Capt N. B. Wilcox**; **Auckland**; born **Waihi**, 3 Jan 1914; insurance inspector; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ **Lt-Col J. Conolly**, DSO, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Waihi**, 15 Aug 1908; school teacher; CO 24 Bn 16 Dec 1942–5 Feb 1944,

20 Mar-22 Apr 1944; wounded 21 Jul 1942.

⁴ **Capt D. G. Brash; New Plymouth; born NZ 2 Nov 1916; clerk; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.**

⁵ **Capt J. Beesley; born England, 7 Mar 1909; hairdresser; killed in action 21 Jul 1942.**

about eighty riflemen, ten Bren carriers, four 3-inch mortars, seven two-pounder and four six-pounder anti-tank guns, and two Vickers guns. Greville disposed the force as best he could in the dark and gave orders to dig in before dawn. He sent his adjutant, Captain **Turtill**,¹ in a carrier to make contact with **26 Battalion** in whose area tracer machine-gun fire could be seen. Turtill unfortunately ran into an enemy post and was taken prisoner.

About 3.30 the battalion was joined by Brigadier Clifton with the brigade headquarters' vehicle column. The support weapons brought by the brigadier were handed over to Greville, but as it was impossible to site the anti-tank guns in the dark most of them were left either on portée on the ground to await dawn. At first light, about five o'clock, **25 Battalion** reached the area, and enemy fire, which had been spasmodic for some time, increased considerably.

The 25th Battalion on the brigade's left rear was shelled and machine-gunned in its assembly area and on the start line but got away in good order and in good time. Lieutenant-Colonel **George**² put A Company on the right and B on the left, with C Company in reserve behind B. The leading companies encountered the machine guns which had engaged **24 Battalion** in the early stages of that battalion's advance. These were quickly dealt with by bullet and bayonet but, as so often happened in night fighting, some cohesion was lost. Parts of A Company in the course of the fight moved to the right and found themselves with **24 Battalion**, with whom they continued the advance. This spreading of the front left B Company without contact on its right flank and caused

it to lose one of its platoons, which carried on into **Mreir** past the battalion's objective on the pipeline.

By one o'clock most of A and B Companies and battalion headquarters were on the objective, from which they cleared confused groups of Germans and Italians. Lieutenant-Colonel George laid out preliminary dispositions and then sent runners to bring in the battalion transport and to find C Company. The vehicle column had some trouble with minefields and soft going, and on one occasion it was disclosed to the enemy by flares dropped by the **Royal Air Force**, a truck being set on fire. The initiative of Corporal **Broad**,³ an ex-sapper serving with the battalion, in clearing a track through the mines permitted the column to continue its advance until it met a battalion patrol when it was on the point of bypassing the objective and moving into enemy territory.

¹ **Capt K. S. Turtill; Auckland**; born England, 20 Feb 1914; schoolmaster; wounded and p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

² **Lt-Col C. D. A. George, m.i.d.; Wellington**; born NZ 9 Mar 1906; draper; CO 25 Bn Dec 1941–Jul 1942; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

³ **Cpl J. E. Broad**; Wadestown; born NZ 14 Sep 1912; purser; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

Colonel George now had about eighty riflemen of A and B Companies with some stragglers, seven two-pounders, one six-pounder (the other three attached to the battalion had become stuck in soft sand during the advance), two mortar detachments in carriers, most of the battalion's carriers and two Vickers guns in carriers. In compliance with orders received from Brigadier Clifton just before the transport arrived, the battalion closed on **24 Battalion** and brigade headquarters in **Mreir** at dawn as the enemy was about to mount his counter-attack.

The missing C Company had a night of adventure in the enemy's rear. After passing through the first minefield, the company came under

very heavy machine-gun fire from its left, the volume of tracer bullets being great enough to light the desert and force the riflemen to hug the ground. As soon as he had taken stock of the situation the company commander, Captain Wroth, ¹ shouted to the men to run forward. With a sharp sprint most of 14 and 15 Platoons and company headquarters cleared the beaten zone. Casualties were extraordinarily light but the whole of 13 Platoon was missing. Some of the men said they had seen the platoon swing to the left to engage the enemy.

Rather than wait for the missing platoon which he thought would catch up, Wroth pressed on after the battalion with which he was now out of touch. Signs of recent and hasty evacuation of enemy trenches suggested that the leading companies could not be far ahead. When he failed to find the battalion, Wroth assumed from the flat and stony nature of the ground that Colonel George had moved further forward in search of a better defensive area. About 1000 yards ahead of the track, Lieutenant **Matthews** ² sent a section to investigate a position seen on the left. As the section closed in, it was greeted with cries of *Kamerad* and then with fire, whereupon Matthews led the remainder of the platoon in a bayonet charge which, for the loss of two men, accounted for about eight enemy killed and wounded and the hurried withdrawal of about twenty more with a light tracked vehicle. Matthews put an abandoned anti-tank gun out of commission with blows from a rifle butt.

Attracted by sounds of activity to the north, Wroth continued the advance until his company was nearly two miles beyond the point at which it had crossed the pipeline. Here he found himself in desert illuminated by the **Royal Air Force** and close to considerable activity. While Wroth and his officers were considering this situation they heard tanks starting up. Then they saw an enemy

¹ Maj C.S. Wroth, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born **Christchurch**, 6 Mar 1915; Regular soldier; BM 6 Bde Oct–Nov 1944; Camp Commandant, Burnham MC, 1947–48.

² **Capt R. H. Matthews, m.i.d.; Hatuma, Waipukurau; born Gisborne, 22 Dec 1913; shipping clerk; wounded 22 Mar 1943.**

staff car circle the company and tanks following in its tracks.

Without further ado, Wroth withdrew the company at the best possible speed.

The withdrawal was made amidst a display of fireworks from enemy flares which seemed to rise on all sides. Near the pipeline the way back was blocked by a convoy of trucks and tanks. As the ends of the column were out of sight, Wroth led a breakthrough with the company converging at the double on a truck at which a grenade was hurled. A sticky bomb was also thrown at a tank. The suddenness of the onslaught so disconcerted the Germans that four of them surrendered and the company got clear without being fired on. Wroth then took his men to the east on to the brigade axis with the intention of rejoining his battalion at first light, but when he learned of the debacle in **Mreir** he marched the company back to its original position.

A misunderstanding concerning axes of advance and difficulties with minefields hampered the advance of **6 Brigade** Headquarters. Brigadier Clifton ordered the brigade axis to be about 600 yards to the east of that of **24 Battalion**, but the battalion's intelligence officer had the impression that brigade headquarters was to follow his unit and the brigade sappers went with him. The misunderstanding caused the brigade reconnaissance party to lose its two vehicles on an uncleared minefield and compelled the brigade headquarters and transport to follow **24 Battalion**.

While waiting for **24 Battalion's** vehicles to pass through the gap in the first minefield, Clifton investigated firing to the west and found a party from **18 Battalion** withdrawing into the minefield under threat from about five enemy tanks. These were probably from **Ariete Division**. As the party had used what little equipment it had had for countering tanks, the brigadier left three six-pounder anti-tank guns to help the

18th in keeping the gap open.

Clifton had with him three liaison officers from 2 and 22 Armoured Brigade headquarters and 6 Royal Tank Regiment, the unit specially detailed to protect the brigade against counter-attack. He had been perturbed when he found that these officers had been detailed to him without being fully briefed on the operation. However, the manner in which they handled their vehicles, a Crusader and a Honey tank and an armoured car, strengthened his belief that the British armour would have no trouble in moving in the dark to his support if required. The presence of the liaison officers' tanks was possibly a reason why the brigade column was not challenged by the enemy as it made its way forward in single file through rocky outcrops and abandoned defences. The column's worst misfortune was the loss of one of the defence platoon's trucks, which was blown up by a mine on a track previously negotiated by two jeeps and the two tanks.

Throughout his advance Clifton was in constant touch by wireless with the battalion transport columns, but these were not in contact with their rifle companies. Shortly after one o'clock he reported through Rear Brigade Headquarters that he had reached the pipeline. A little over an hour later he was in wireless contact with Greville, who fired a green over green light signal to give the brigade column a bearing on which to continue its advance. The rendezvous on 24 Battalion was reached about 3.30.

When Clifton learned that 24 Battalion was out of touch with the 26th, he called up 25 Battalion with the intention that at dawn it should move towards the 26th's area. He then reported to Division that he had reached 24 Battalion's objective and asked Colonel Gentry to ensure that tank support came up quickly. At the same time he asked a tank liaison officer to call his headquarters. Clifton climbed on to the tank and heard this officer report the situation with a request for tank support at first light.

By now firing in the depression had decreased to sporadic bursts of

tracer from the enemy machine guns. The New Zealanders were digging in as best they could, but in most places a rock shelf a few inches below the surface sand prevented the excavation of effective trenches. The majority of the crews of the support weapons were awaiting light before siting and digging in their weapons. As was usual at that hour, the weaker wireless sets failed but brigade headquarters had communication with **Divisional Headquarters** through its No. 9 set. The line cable to a forward signals office had not come up and Captain **Laugesen**¹ and five of his men from L Section of Divisional Signals went back to find it. They did not return and were later reported missing.

When Lieutenant-Colonel George arrived with **25 Battalion** just on five o'clock, the number of officers and men in the group, including headquarters, the crews of the support weapons and drivers, was about 600. In detail, there were approximately 160 riflemen and 22 carriers, 10 3-inch mortars, 10 six-pounders, 14 two-pounders, 10 Vickers guns. All these men, weapons, and vehicles were congested in the relatively small area taken up originally by **24 Battalion**'s depleted companies.

In spite of a few breaks in communications due to the normal hazards of operations, a constant flow of reports from main and secondary sources came into **Divisional Headquarters** during the

¹ **Capt N. W. Laugesen; Christchurch**; born NZ 4 Dec 1903; real-estate agent; killed in action 22 Jul 1942.

night. These gave General Inglis and his staff a remarkably clear picture of the progress of the battle up to the enemy counter-attack at dawn. Brought together as a log of events, the reports, with notes of action taken upon them, fill no fewer than six closely typed foolscap sheets.

General Inglis had prompt advice that the three battalions were advancing steadily under light shelling and that the engineers under Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson were clearing the main gap through the

minefields for the passage of **23 Armoured Brigade**. At twenty minutes to eleven, he had an encouraging report from an interception of a German wireless message recording that their right flank had been broken into and that their artillery and anti-tank guns were retiring. Just on midnight a message was received from **Brigadier Kippenberger** that **26 Battalion** had reached its objective but had been attacked by tanks.

Kippenberger, with Lieutenant-Colonel **Harding**¹ who had taken command of **21 Battalion** after Allen's death, was watching **6 Brigade's** advance from the battalion's outpost. He had noticed that the rate of advance had not been as fast as had been expected and that the infantry would be well short of their objectives by the time the artillery programme finished. He had thereupon arranged for the artillery to repeat some of its later fire tasks.

Besides giving the information that **26 Battalion** was on its objective and had been attacked by tanks, **Kippenberger** told Division that although some enemy tanks had been knocked out, a considerable number of them remained in **Mreir**. He closed his report with the message: 'Our tanks are urgently required before daylight.' On this, Colonel Gentry tried to telephone **1 Armoured Division** but, finding the line had been broken, transferred the call to **13 Corps'** tactical headquarters. He also closed his report with the statement: 'It is absolutely essential that our tanks are on the edge of **Mreir** depression by first light to deal with enemy tanks milling round in the depression.' This conversation is recorded as having taken place at thirteen minutes past midnight.

At 1.25 a.m. General Inglis himself spoke to **13 Corps**. He confirmed the presence of enemy tanks in **Mreir**, and added that while **26 Battalion** was on the objective, 'they are worried as to the situation in the morning.' Shortly afterwards, three delayed reports were received from Clifton concerning the progress of his brigade. Against the last of these, at five minutes past two, the Divisional diary notes: 'After our experience on 14–15 July we

¹ **Brig R. W. Harding**, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, **North Auckland**; born **Dargaville**, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; Auck Regt 1916–19; CO 21 Bn 10 May–12 Jun 1942, 18 Jul 1942–30 Apr 1943, 14 May–4 Jun 1943; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 4 Jun–23 Aug 1943; twice wounded.

wanted no repetition of what happened at Ruweisat and were doing all we could to ensure the armoured co-operation that had been laid on.'

To this end, Gentry at 2.15 telephoned the brigade major of **2 Armoured Brigade**, giving him an appreciation of the situation and again closing with the urgent representation: 'It is essential that our tanks are at the depression at first light.' This conversation left an impression that the brigade might not move without explicit orders from its divisional headquarters. To make sure that there would not be any delay on that account, Gentry immediately rang **1 Armoured Division**, to whom he recalled the experiences at Ruweisat and then asked that orders should be given to the brigade to be up with the infantry at first light.

Half an hour later, at 2.50, Inglis telephoned Gott to make certain that the armour would not be ineffective through any lack of orders passed through the correct channels from Corps Headquarters to the brigade. As a further reassurance, Inglis also spoke to **1 Armoured Division**. He was told that the armour, without fail, would be at **Mreir** at first light.

About half an hour before first light, say 4.30, is a convenient moment for looking at the situation as it was seen by Divisional Headquarters. Advanced Brigade Headquarters and 24 and 26 Battalions were on their objectives, and a message was on its way to Clifton approving his action in calling **25 Battalion** forward to the depression. All three battalions had suffered casualties but there was nothing to suggest these were heavy. Some transport had been lost, but again the price had not been severe. True, Hall's report at three o'clock concerning **26 Battalion** had not been reassuring. However, after he had left his

unit, the 24th had arrived on its objective, and with the six-pounder anti-tank guns Clifton had been directed to send over, Peart should not be badly placed. Division had not been told that 24 and 26 Battalions were still not in contact with each other, nor had it been given any indication that Peart was contemplating withdrawing.

Apart from the normal anxieties of a commander in a battle, Inglis' only real cause for worry lay in the proximity of the German tanks to **6 Brigade**. Everything now depended on the British tanks being up in time. However, there was no suggestion that the armour was being or was likely to be difficult. On the contrary **13 Corps, 1 Armoured Division, and 2 Armoured Brigade** had been made fully aware of the situation, communications with them were good, and there was every reason to believe that the tanks would move according to plan. Elsewhere on the Division's front, **18 Battalion** was having a little trouble but was secure, and the engineers, although under mortar and machine-gun fire, were clearing the main gap in the minefield. Not much was known about **5 Indian Division's** sector except that the first attack had been held up and that another one was to be made at dawn.

Lieutenant-General Nehring at *Afrika Korps Headquarters* and his German staff officers and commanders were extraordinarily calm as well as energetic during the night. Their resolution and action were in marked contrast to the despondency, sometimes approaching despair, reflected in their diaries, reports, and orders of the night of 15–16 July. Depleted strengths and the effects on morale of the exertions of the previous weeks caused concern, but there was a confident note in a special report on **15 Panzer Division** submitted on 21 July by Colonel Crasemann, who had just taken over the command. In Crasemann's opinion the division needed only a short period of rest, the allocation of a few energetic commanders and some important items of equipment, to regain its old form. Crasemann then added: 'The feeling that the German soldier is superior to the opponents he has so far met has not been lost, even after meeting the best of the English troops, the New Zealanders and Australians.'

Although the logs of *Afrika Korps* and *15 and 21 Panzer Divisions* do not record as many messages and reports as were received by New Zealand Division alone, they were sufficient in number, promptness, and accuracy to give Nehring a fairly clear idea of what was happening. This was due probably to the fact that his front-line commanders were Germans who kept their heads although many of their positions were overrun. The successive encounters of 26, 24 and 25 Battalions with *Lindemann, Huelsen and Warrelmann Groups*, the intervention of *Ariete's* tanks against **18 Battalion**, the actions of 5 and 8 *Panzer Regiments*, and the progress of the attack against **Point 63** may all be traced both as to time and place in the enemy reports.

At 1.30 in the morning, Nehring ordered counter-attacks to be suspended until dawn as the situation over the whole corps' front had a number of obscurities. He knew gaps had been torn in the front but not their extent. Nor did he know how seriously his infantry units had suffered. At that hour, *15 Division's* tanks were engaging **6 Brigade** in and south of **Mreir** and *21 Division's* armour was making ready to move down to the depression to assist. The reserve infantry battalion of *21 Division* was moving forward to help at **Point 63**, cover artillery units which had been forced back, and provide a connection with *15 Division* which had been broken by the pressure on *Warrelmann Group*. Nehring himself had ordered *Baade Group* to move up the pipeline track from **Kaponga**, having earlier refused to place the group at the disposal of *15 Division* on the grounds that the division still had a reserve of two companies uncommitted.

The German records refer to these operations as counter-attacks. Whether they were counter-attacks or merely stiffening resistance cannot be said. The Germans did not like night operations and, although they often resisted strongly at night, as a rule they left counter-attacks until dawn. In fact, in **13 Corps'** plans, the first phase of the battle was based on the belief that the enemy would follow his usual practice of not attempting a counter-stroke until it was light enough to see. By that time, according to the plans, the British tanks would be up with the

infantry.

It seems likely that while the German tank regiments were willing and were preparing to hit **6 Brigade** in the dark, the isolation of **26 Battalion** was not due to any counter-attack. Rather, it may be attributed to the absence of direct pressure on the enemy forces in the gap between the battalion and the rest of the brigade.

Nehring recognised that the penetration into **Mreir** was the most dangerous threat and he ordered his two panzer divisions to wipe it out with a counter-attack starting at 5.15 a.m. At 2.15 he sent the following orders:

21st Panzer Division will restore the situation on 15th Panzer Division's sector [i.e., the penetration into **Mreir]. It will advance at 0515 hours and attack the flank of the enemy penetration, moving in a general southerly direction. For this action, the 15th Panzer Division troops in the northern sector will be under command of 21st Division.**

15th Panzer Division with Baade Group under command will attack with the same object as 21st Division. It will advance in a general north-easterly direction astride the water pipeline track and establish contact with 21st Division. Its right flank will be echeloned back. 20th Corps has been asked to send Ariete's tanks forward in support of the attack on the right rear.

Nehring's intervention and the preparations of the panzer divisions for their counter-attack were responsible for the marked decrease in activity in **Mreir which was reported to New Zealand Division at this period.**

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 31 – SUCCESSION OF DISASTERS

CHAPTER 31

Succession of Disasters

THE time is just on five o'clock. The first signs of dawn are in the sky but it is still dark in the Mreir Depression. At the rear of **6 Brigade's** advanced headquarters, the riflemen of **25 Battalion** move out to take up a position on **24 Battalion's** right preparatory to cleaning up the gap to the 26th. Officers of the 24th Battalion and in command of the anti-tank and machine guns are getting their men ready to move into the best defensive positions as soon as it is light enough to choose them. There is little noise. Just the shuffle of feet in the sand and over rocks, an occasional flare and a burst of tracer fire from an enemy machine gun.

An ominous quiet, maybe, but only if one knew what was impending. A German counter-attack was expected at first light. But first light was not the first tint of dawn in the distant sky. First light was light enough to see, to make an appreciation of where precisely the attackers had installed themselves and what they had with them, and then to make quick preparations to meet the counter attack in terms of the corps and divisional orders.

So it might be half an hour or a little longer after the first tinting of the sky before the enemy showed up. Peart, isolated in the presence of German tanks and without anti-tank support, knew he had cause to be apprehensive. But to the remainder of **6 Brigade**, the situation was more or less normal after night attack. It was sticky, perhaps, yet not unduly so.

Around the lip of the depression and in positions on its floor German officers and non-commissioned officers of tank, anti-tank, artillery, machine-gun, mortar and infantry units were intent on the time. Their watches showed four o'clock, an hour behind British Army time, a quarter of an hour to zero. They knew approximately where the British forces lay in the depression and they had their guns laid roughly on the

area. Five minutes, then ten minutes past the hour. Now they watched the minutes. At the quarter, signal and illuminating flares burst in the air and down into the depression poured machine-gun and anti-tank tracer, solid and high-explosive shells and mortar bombs, into the congested mass of men and vehicles, anti-tank guns, machine guns and carriers.

The fire came from all directions except on **6 Brigade's** axis. Some men thought it was deliberate, aimed fire; that the Germans carefully picked out the liaison officers' tanks, the six-pounders and the two-pounders, and then the mortars and machine guns. That could not have been so. The target area was still in the dark and, even when burning trucks lighted the scene, it was next to impossible to choose particular targets within the mass. It was sufficient from the German point of view to fire into the area. Each bullet and shell was almost certain to hit something or, at the least, make innocuous any attempt to thwart the blow.

Riflemen went to earth and tried to use their rifles and Bren guns against the ring of fire. The spraying tracer compelled most of them to hug the ground. Those who could distinguish anything at all saw only the tops of tanks through the dust and in the half light. Vickers gunners, some on the ground and some still on trucks, tried to subdue the fire but without result. One after the other and some-times together, the guns were destroyed or their crews killed or wounded.

So also with the anti-tank guns. The crews got most of the guns into action but not for long. Heavy automatics on the German tanks pierced the gun shields, solid shot knocked out the guns or the portees, and the spraying machine-gun fire from in front and on the flanks took toll of the crews. The liaison officers' tanks were destroyed and ammunition trucks blown up. Brigadier Clifton tried to get round the battalions to organise resistance but could accomplish little. Lieutenant-Colonel Greville was killed before he could do anything, supposing there was anything he could do.

The diary of **21 Panzer Division** suggests that the Germans were surprised by the compactness and nature of the target. Whether this was so or not, they made the best of it. They saturated the area for about twenty minutes and then became more deliberate. About six o'clock, when it was full daylight, there was a momentary lull. Survivors sought to take advantage of the lull to break for the rear. On the appearance of groups of men running to the rear and to the east, the Germans reopened a heavy burst of fire from all directions. Then, with a flourish of Very signals, the tanks came over the northern rim of the depression, down the slope and into **6 Brigade's** positions. They were followed by a few self-propelled guns and small parties of German infantry.

The German tanks and infantry rounded up the survivors on the position and also most of the men who had tried to escape. These had little chance under the enemy fire in the open desert and in broad daylight. The story of escapes, including that of Brigadier Clifton, belongs to a later stage in the narrative.

Divisional Headquarters did not receive any direct advice of the attack on **6 Brigade**. At eight minutes past six that Signals' control office recorded that signals from the the brigade's advanced headquarters were heard at good strength but that communication could not be established. Twenty minutes later Lieutenant-Colonel Peart reported by telephone and was told by General Inglis that **24 Battalion** was believed to be on its objective with brigade headquarters, and that therefore he should collect all available forces within his battalion and lead them back into the depression to support the 24th.

Then ominous reports and rumours started to come in. At 6.47 a.m., **2 Armoured Brigade** reported that fifteen enemy tanks could be seen in the depression, the map reference being almost the point where **26 Battalion's** headquarters had been set up on its objective. The brigade said it was about to attack the enemy armour. Next, at 6.50, the Divisional Artillery headquarters passed on a report, presumably from one of its batteries, that either 24 or **26 Battalion** was being attacked by

tanks on its objective.

Survivors from **6 Brigade** appeared with lurid stories of the brigade having been overrun and destroyed. Experience had taught the Division to treat such reports with reserve. In this particular case, the early arrivals had not seen the end of the counter-attack. By the time they got in, the noises of battle in the direction of the objective had died down and there were no signs of the brigade in retreat. The usual morning haze and dust limited visibility. Communications with the brigade were broken. Some efforts were made from the forward defences to reach the brigade but they were beaten back by fire. The conclusion reached from these factors was that the brigade's situation was likely to resemble that of **4 Brigade** at **Point 63** on the morning of 15 July.

In the meantime, Inglis made inquiries concerning the action of the British armour. When he learned that it had not moved he telephoned **1 Armoured Division** at 6.50, spoke to an officer whom he understood to be General Gatehouse,¹ and

informed him he had not supplied promised support and inquired why and what he proposed to do. He replied that we had not requested any support. I informed him of our conversations with his staff during the night and that I had records of them. He then said we had not requested support through correct channels which, he alleged, were his LOs. He said he was ready to attack then.²

Instead of being at **Mreir** at first light or at least making an effort to get there, **2 Armoured Brigade** was still stationary within **Kippenberger's 5 Brigade** defences at 6.30, an hour and a half later

¹ Gatehouse denies that it was he who spoke to Inglis.

² General Inglis' diary, 22 July 1942.

and long after **6 Brigade** had been overrun. At 6.35 the **9th Lancers** passed to its brigade headquarters a report that nine to fifteen enemy tanks were attacking the New Zealanders in **21 Battalion's** outpost area. The Lancers were then ordered forward to help the defence. According to their reports on the action, they encountered a minefield and were held up. A squadron of the 6th Royal Tanks was also sent forward. It missed the mines and advanced towards the eastern end of **Mreir**, where it lost three tanks from anti-tank fire.

The 26th Battallion saw something of the latter action. From Rear Brigade Headquarters, Peart sent his adjutant to collect support weapons and then went on to B Company in its position alongside **21 Battalion**. The company commander, Major **Walden**, ¹ told Peart that he had given a tank commander details of the gap in the minefield through which the battalion's vehicles had withdrawn and that some of the tanks had advanced part of the way towards the depression. Peart gave Walden orders to take his company forward as far as he could and then went on to make contact with the tank commander and artillery officers. They suggested that there was no suitable task for the infantry at that stage. Peart therefore stopped the company until he made his own appreciation. The time was about eight o'clock.

Peart subsequently reported that the tank and artillery duels were very fierce. He saw several British tanks on fire and also numerous fires in enemy-held territory. Some of these appeared to be three-ton trucks in the area of **25 Battalion's** objective. Peart thought the British tank advance was far too slow and that his infantry could help. When his adjutant arrived with four six-pounders, four two-pounders and four carriers, Peart ordered his riflemen to advance in well-dispersed sections ahead of the tanks.

The infantry advance was contested by only a few enemy posts which had been annoying **21 Battalion**, and by midday the lip of the depression was occupied. Enemy infantry, vehicles, and two tanks were seen in the depression. The former were dispersed with rifle and Bren-

gun fire. One tank was set on fire after it had been engaged by British tanks and mortars and the other was thought to have been hit as it withdrew. Reconnaissance by riflemen and observation from the lip indicated that the battalion's objective was clear of the enemy, and preparations were in hand to occupy it when, at 12.45, Peart was ordered to withdraw and go under the command of **5 Brigade**. As the **Maori Battalion** in the meantime had taken over the original defensive area, Peart took the 26th into brigade reserve.

Several of the British tanks followed Peart in his advance to

¹ **Maj E. F. Walden, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 16 Feb 1911; brewer; p.w. 4 Sep 1942.**

Mreir but their action was not vigorous. Walden said later that he told the tank officers that other German tanks were within range, and that they had informed him they were waiting until the German armour came over the lip of the depression and thus make better targets. It was only when the Germans failed to oblige that the British tanks moved forward until they could lay their guns into **Mreir**.



EL MREIR: 23 ARMOURD BRIGADE'S ADVANCE AND FINAL NEW ZEALAND DISPOSITIONS, 22 JULY 1942

El Mreir: 23 armoured brigade's advance and final New Zealand dispositions, 22 July 1942

While this small infantry-tank action was being fought and the

remainder of **2 Armoured Brigade** was troubled by mines in **5 Brigade's** lines, **23 Armoured Brigade** was fighting for its life.

During the night the brigade, reduced to two regiments (40 Royal Tanks on the right and the 46th on the left), was held in **5 Indian Division's** sector ready to advance along the 278 grid line between **Point 63** and **Mreir** to its first objective, **Point 59**. New Zealand and Indian sappers were to clear a gap 2000 yards wide through the minefields up to the enemy defended localities. This gap could not be made.

In the evening six officers and sixty other ranks from **7 Field Company** and **5 Field Park** under Lieutenant-Colonel Hanson joined the engineers of **9 Indian Infantry Brigade** on the scene of operations. Daylight reconnaissance by Captain **Page**¹ had revealed that the first 3000 yards in the New Zealanders' part of the lane was clear. Page suspected that mines had been laid beyond this but enemy fire had prevented him from making a check. In this area, roughly south of **Point 62** on Ruweisat, the clearing party found not only mines but an enemy determined to stop interference with them.

Some of the sappers managed to get into the minefield and to lift a few mines, but their activity provoked fire of all types from ahead and both flanks and also machine-gun fire from posts in their right rear on Ruweisat. It was obvious to Page that organised lifting on a wide front was impossible, and with his casualties he drew back out of range and reported to Hanson, who recalled the party to the starting point. Hanson decided to wait until the Indian infantry cleared out the opposition and then to resume the lifting. Contact with the Indian sappers had been lost during the withdrawal and little information could be had concerning the progress of the attack along the ridge. The sustained enemy opposition, however, suggested that the battle was not going according to plan. Hanson then ordered his officers to reconnoitre an approach to the minefield from a more southerly or south-easterly direction. This search brought the officers through **21 Battalion's** outpost, beyond which they were again held up. The Indian sappers could not clear more than about 1000 yards of their lane because of the

failure of the assault against **Point 63**.

At 3.15 in the morning Gott's headquarters reviewed the situation, with particular reference to the problem of whether **23 Armoured Brigade** should make its attack. At this hour it was known that the minefield on the brigade's projected axis of advance had not been cleared and it was doubtful whether a gap could be made within the time available. The position of the Indian Division about **Point 63** and in **Deir el Shein** was uncertain. If these objectives could be taken and held, the gap could be made and the armoured brigade's right flank would be secured against flanking fire from

¹ **Maj H. C. Page**, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born NZ 26 Jan 1917; civil engineer; OC 7 Fd Coy Mar—Jul 1943.

Point 63. The news from **5 Indian Division**, however, was not good, certainly not good enough to ensure the success of the armoured advance.

On the other hand, reports from New Zealand Division indicated that **6 Brigade** had reached its objective in the depression. The condition of the brigade was uncertain and it was likely to be in trouble with the enemy tanks at first light. But the special arrangements made with **2 Armoured Brigade** were designed to take care of precisely that situation. In this connection, it may be recalled that only half an hour earlier Inglis had spoken to Gott to make sure there would be no default on the part of the armour. At 3.15 Gott had no more reason than the New Zealanders to think that **2 Armoured Brigade** would not carry out his specific orders.

Study of the general situation appears to have led **13 Corps** Headquarters to the belief that the attack of **5 Indian Division** along Ruweisat and the advance of **6 Brigade** from the south against **Mreir** had compressed the main enemy forces into the area bounded by the northern lip of **Mreir** and **Deir el Shein**. While this concentration

militated against the prospects of **23 Armoured Brigade** on its projected axis—the 278 grid line between **Point 63** and **Mreir**—it was likely to have opened a route to the enemy's rear south of **Mreir** in the area traversed by **6 Brigade** in its advance and covered by the New Zealand artillery.

This turn of events, although unexpected, might even improve **23 Armoured Brigade's** prospects. At the projected hour of the armoured assault, the enemy's strongpoints about **Point 63** with their artillery and anti-tank defences would either be taken or fully engaged by **5 Indian Division**. The German tanks in the neighbourhood, if not previously wiped out by **2 Armoured Brigade**, would be held off by that brigade and the New Zealanders' anti-tank guns in **Mreir**. Thus **23 Brigade's** right flank should be safe until it erupted into the enemy's headquarters and administrative area. Similarly, **22 Armoured Brigade** and the New Zealand **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, operating further south, should guard **23 Brigade's** left flank.

Gott took up this project with Gatehouse at 6.25. He suggested that **23 Brigade** should move on the 276 grid, 2000 yards south of the original axis of advance, and that, if necessary, the start should be postponed from 8 a.m. until 8.30. The 276 grid ran a little to the north of **21 Battalion's** outpost and skirted the southern lip of **Mreir**. Gatehouse considered the attack should be cancelled, but Gott said there were good reasons to believe the Germans were apprehensive of an armoured thrust and ordered it to be made on the revised axis.

After discussions with his staff and commands and further talks, with corps headquarters, Gatehouse issued amended orders to **23 Brigade** at 7.50. These instructed the brigade to take the 276 grid as its axis, to move with special reconnaissance for mines and, if these were met, 'to treat them as an intermediary objective.' The time of the issue of these orders is important. According to the corps' operation order, the start time was to be fixed by corps headquarters and was to be not before 8 a.m. Events indicate that the brigade was standing by ready to move at that hour. In effect, it was in the slips, keyed up and ready to go. Because of a break in wireless communication, the two regiments

received the order to advance without the amended details.

The two regiments, with approximately eighty-seven Valentines between them and each with one squadron in the van, crossed the start line about ten minutes past eight, and a little later New Zealand observers saw them 'thundering past' along the 278 grid, covered to some extent by a smoke screen put down on the ridge by the brigade's own artillery. On the right, C Squadron of the 40th Regiment came under heavy artillery and anti-tank fire at the same time as it struck the minefield about the pipeline track. Here it lost seven tanks. By 8.40 the remainder of the regiment was engaged just north of **Mreir**, where ten more tanks were lost and the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Dunbar, mortally wounded. The attack was pressed and the objective, **Point 59**, was reached at about ten minutes past ten, but with only four tanks in C Squadron, five in B and six in A. This little group was severely engaged by fire from both flanks and also by German tanks from **Mreir**. By 10.30 only eight tanks were left and of these only five were fit to fight.

The 46th Regiment on the left met a similar fate. Its leading squadron and regimental headquarters lost four tanks on the pipe-line minefield and from fire from the eastern corner of **Mreir**. B Squadron then moved up on the right and lost four tanks on the mines. C Squadron swung to the south in an effort to find a way through but lost five more tanks to mines and anti-tank fire. The remainder of the squadron pressed on but, with the exception of two tanks, was not heard of again. By ten minutes past nine, A Squadron with only twelve tanks reached its objective. Here it met such intense tank and anti-tank fire that it was forced on to the remnants of 40 Regiment on **Point 59**. B Squadron had ceased to exist.

By eleven o'clock the two regiments had only twelve battle worthy tanks. Their plight appears to have been reported by patrol of the 10th Hussars from **2 Armoured Brigade** which was trying to make contact with New Zealanders in **Mreir**. By midday support from 2 Brigade had

been arranged and the survivors of 23 Brigade were withdrawn. They mustered four tanks of 40 Regiment and three of the 46th. These were formed into a composite squadron and put under the command of **3/5 Royal Tank Regiment**. In four hours the brigade had lost approximately 30 officers, 173 other ranks, and 80 tanks. A little more than half of the tanks were recovered later. The enemy's losses were claimed as seven tanks.

The 23rd Brigade's attack gave *Afrika korps* and *Panzerarmee Headquarters* a severe fright, more so than any other phase of the battle. Between seven and eight o'clock in the morning, Nehring thought the difficulties of the night had been overcome. Most of the lost positions had been recovered, the front was intact, and an imposing list of prisoners and equipment was being counted. The only doubtful spot seemed to be south of **Mreir** in the sector held by **18 Battalion**. The Germans probably saw **22 Armoured Brigade** and the **Divisional Cavalry Regiment** as well as a mass of transport in the neighbourhood. This concentration and the aggressive attitude of **18 Battalion** caused Rommel to believe that a thrust to his rear might be made from this quarter. Rommel ordered Stuka attacks on the area, and *Baade Group* was directed to secure the minefield and stop any lifting.

Such satisfaction as Nehring might have had with the situation was shortlived. Both panzer divisions reported **23 Armoured Brigade's**, advance almost as soon as it started. Reissmann's strongpoint on **Point 63** signalled that British infantry supported by fifteen tanks were advancing, and *21 Division* called *5 Panzer Regiment* back to the north of **Mreir**. The *8th Panzer Regiment* of *15 Division* followed, except for a few tanks which remained in action against **2 Armoured Brigade** to the east and south of **Mreir**.

The German tanks arrived too late to prevent Reissmann's group from being overrun and the situation then became very confused as they tried to deal with the numerous sections into which 23 Brigade broke up. Communication between *Afrika Korps* and *21 Division* was lost and artillery units started to withdraw. *Panzerarmee Headquarters* ordered

90 Light Division's reserve and **Briehl Group** to be ready to assist **Afrika Korps**, while Nehring, sensitive to the concentration in **18 Battalion's** sector, called for the Stuka attack. At 9.40, **21 Panzer Division** urged **5 Regiment** of attack to the east and rescue Reissmann's troops. The regiment replied that it was itself in a precarious position as British tanks had broken through to its rear and it was also engaged with other tanks in a south-westerly direction.

For the next hour the squadrons and regiments on both sides were too busily engaged to keep their headquarters posted on the course of the action. **Afrika Korps**. sent a liaison officer to find out how **21 Division** was getting on. He reported shortly after ten o'clock that British tanks were on the Stone track [**Point 59**, **23 Armoured Brigade's** objective] but that they were falling back. Not long afterwards, according to **21 Division's** diary, 'Major von Heudeck sends the following message to **Afrika Korps**: "We shall do the job alright." This message calmed down the corps and army both of whom had looked on the situation as hopeless.'

By this time, round about eleven o'clock, the situation had turned markedly in favour of the Germans. Derelict British tanks could be seen in large numbers, **Point 63** had been retaken, and **21 Division** was moving against **Point 62** on Ruweisat. Rommel then suggested that the division should stop short of the height and make its tanks ready to counter-attack against the thrust he expected from **18 Battalion's** area. Nehring made this an order to **21 Division** at midday, and about the same time the Italian tanks were instructed to concentrate to the west of the threatened sector.

As further reports were received of British tank losses and recovered positions, Rommel decided close on four o'clock to deal with the threat from **18 Battalion's** sector. His chief of staff advised Nehring that an attack would be made at 6.45 p.m. by two battalions of **90 Light Division** and the tanks of **Ariete** and **Littorio Divisions** advancing north-east from **Kaponga**. Nehring had no sooner received this news than **15**

Division reported a British tank attack against Warrelmann's group which had been reinstated in its position immediately south of **Mreir**.

This was an effort by **2 Armoured Brigade** to renew the attack through a gap 20 yards wide and about 300 to 400 yards deep in the minefield where the pipeline track dropped into the eastern corner of **Mreir**. The brigade, with 9 Lancers in the lead followed by 6 Royal Tanks, advanced to the gap at five o'clock. As the tanks fell into single file to pass through the narrow gap they were engaged by anti-tank, 88- and 105-millimetre guns. Two squadrons broke through, but in little more than half an hour they were in such a precarious position that they were ordered to withdraw. Under covering fire and a smoke screen 9 Lancers' Grants reversed singly through the gap and the brigade pulled back in two stages into night laager. The operation cost eight Grant tanks destroyed and seven Grants and three Crusaders put out of action.

Also about this time, the enemy noted that the concentration of British vehicles in **18 Battalion's** sector was moving to the north. On this the projected attack by *90 Light Division* and the Italian tanks was cancelled. *Afrika Korps* warned its divisions that the British might attack along Ruweisat during the night. They were instructed to recover all of their old forward defensive localities and to prevent any interference with the minefields. The two panzer regiments, which had become very intermingled, were ordered to sort themselves after dark, after which *8 Regiment* with *Baade Group* was to form an operational reserve near Bullet el Tor.

Apart from artillery action which was maintained throughout the day, New Zealand Division had little to do with these operations. Principal efforts were devoted to trying to find out what had happened to **6 Brigade** and whether any part of the brigade might be still holding out in **Mreir**. As late as just on five o'clock **6 Field Regiment** reported what appeared to be elements of 24 and 25 Battalions close to their objectives, and **Divisional Headquarters** asked **13 Corps** to direct **2 Armoured Brigade** to look for them in its attack. However, reports from survivors who came into the lines indicated that the brigade had

suffered dire misfortune.

At a quarter to six when **2 Armoured Brigade's** advance failed, **18 Battalion** was drawn back from its advanced position into defensive localities in the areas previously held by 24 and 25 Battalions. By nightfall the Division was holding a line of which only the southern end was in advance of its original defences. A casualty return sent to **13 Corps** estimated **6 Brigade's** losses as over 1000 men, 12 two-pounder and 13 six-pounder guns, 29 carriers and 7 Vickers guns. Against these the Division had 64 German and 12 Italian prisoners.

During the night individuals and small parties from **6 Brigade** who by various devices and subterfuges had avoided capture rejoined the Division. Among these was Brigadier Clifton.

As the German tanks were rolling over the brigade Clifton, with Captain **Pemberton**¹ of **8 Field Company** and two men, got away in a bantam which, however, was soon put out of action by enemy fire. The party dived for cover and saw another car and a carrier caught by the same enemy post. German tanks then came up and passed on. They were followed, Brigadier Clifton has recorded, 'by a few lorried infantry, very excited, very worried, to gather the prisoners; there were several unpleasant incidents due to misunderstanding—in one case just deliberate murder.'

Clifton and Pemberton removed their badges of rank and helped the wounded. The German infantry did not interfere and the two officers gradually worked their way back to **Mreir**. On their way

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; CRE 2 NZ Div Jul–Aug 1944; twice wounded.

they saw the German tanks return through the area to go into action against **23 Armoured Brigade**. For the remainder of the day the

two officers acted as assistants to Private **McQuarrie**, ¹ a medical orderly of **25 Battalion**. McQuarrie stopped the German tank commander as he drove back through the battle area, and asked for medical assistance for the numerous wounded who had been left by their captors as too badly injured to walk to the rear.

To his everlasting credit [Brigadier Clifton further records], the panzer general said the battle was still on and nothing was possible immediately but that McQuarrie had his authority to demand assistance from any medical unit into the area.

Clifton, Pemberton, and McQuarrie collected medical supplies, water and stores from abandoned vehicles, dressed the wounded, gave morphia, and made constant brews of tea. The two officers brought in another dozen wounded from the area and buried many of dead. By the late afternoon several fit and lightly wounded joined the group. German infantry, who busied themselves with salvage, did not interfere and as evening approached escape plans were made. Towards dusk, about 8.30, a truckload of Germans came up to take over the position for the night. On their appearance Clifton, Pemberton, and Lieutenants Rutherford and Holt ² went into cover. McQuarrie drew the German officer's attention to his wounded and extracted a promise that medical help would be given. The Germans then put some lightly wounded men in a truck and drove off.

When the coast was clear, Clifton and Pemberton moved down the axis of advance and, after several adventures, escaped into the **Maori Battalion**'s sector. Rutherford and Holt were wounded and chose the shorter route direct to the east. Holt was wounded in the leg and thus could not make haste. The two officers also had to avoid German posts and at dawn were still in no-man's-land and under fire from both sides. Eventually they reached safety with **5 Indian Division**. McQuarrie stayed with his wounded until about midnight when, in response to his persistent demands, the Germans evacuated the casualties. While this was in progress McQuarrie slipped away and reached safety. The Military

Medal he was awarded a had been well earned.

¹ Pte I. M. McQuarrie, MM; Wellington; born NZ 31 Mar 1919; radio assembler; p.w. 26 Mar 1943.

² Lt D. L. Holt, MC; Bay View, Napier; born NZ 14 Apr 1918; farmer; wounded 22 Jul 1942.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 32 – PRICE OF BAD PLANNING

CHAPTER 32

Price of Bad Planning

THE Battle of **Mreir** flickered out at dusk on 22 July, although there was a little activity on **30 Corps'** front the next day and another attack on Miteiriya was considered for the night 23–24 July. This project, however, was abandoned.

It is true, as General Auchinleck reported to **London** early on the 24th, that the attack 'severely shook the enemy and caused him heavy losses.' But the price to Eighth Army had been woefully high and out of proportion to the damage inflicted on *Panzerarmee*. New Zealand Division alone had nearly twice the casualties of *15* and *21 Panzer* and *Brescia Divisions*. Thirteenth Corps had lost the use of two infantry brigades, the 6th New Zealand and 161st Indian, both composed mainly of men with desert training and experience. For a time the New Zealand and 5 Indian Divisions were reduced to practically one-brigade divisions. In addition, two-thirds of the newly-arrived **23 Armoured Brigade** had been wiped out and there were also the losses suffered by **2 Armoured Brigade** and **30 Corps**.

In detail, the battle cost the New Zealand Division 69 officers and 835 other ranks, of whom 6 officers and 96 other ranks were killed, 2 and 42 died of wounds, 21 and 247 were wounded, 5 and 62 were wounded and taken prisoner, 34 and 381 were taken prisoner, and 1 and 7 were missing. The 24th Battalion, with a casualty list of 20 officers and 265 other ranks, suffered most. Then came **25 Battalion** with 16 and 196, and the 26th with 8 and 124. The operations of **18 Battalion** on the flank cost 5 officers and 62 other ranks, of whom 1 officer and 19 other ranks were killed or died of wounds.

The enemy casualty returns, although incomplete for the whole of the front, give details for the main sector of the battle. The *15th* and *21st Panzer Divisions* which bore the brunt of the fighting lost 45 killed, 122 wounded, and 222 missing. With *Brescia Division's* losses of

1 killed and 50 missing, the total for the sector was only 440. The enemy's tank losses cannot be computed. The *15th Division's* daily return on 21 July shows 19 tanks and the same number on 23 July, while *21 Division* reported having 23 tanks on 21 July and 22 the next evening. These figures merely indicate that new and repaired tanks were reaching the panzer divisions in just sufficient numbers to replace losses. British records show that **23 Armoured Brigade** lost 80 tanks, **2 Armoured Brigade** about 18, and 50 Royal Tank Regiment, which fought with **30 Corps**, 23, a total of 121 of which, however, more than half were recovered.

Thus there was ample justification for Rommel's congratulatory message to his troops: 'I wish to express to officers and men my high appreciation of their stout fight during the victorious defensive battle of 22 July. I know that every new attempt of the enemy to attack will get such a thrashing.' The infantry units of the two German panzer divisions, much inferior in numbers and equipment to the two infantry brigades which attacked them, were pushed back on one flank but held the other firmly. Then the two panzer regiments, *5th* and *8th*, with only forty tanks, made their usual counter-attacks on the assaulting infantry and broke them. Later, over 200 British tanks closed on *Afrika Korps'* front and about half of them penetrated the defences. But by evening *Afrika Korps* had reformed practically on its original defensive line and had halved the British tank strength.

Nevertheless, Rommel was worried. He advised General Bastico, of the Italian Supreme Command in **North Africa**, that the situation had been extremely critical for the past ten days and, in spite of the success at **Mreir**, it would remain critical until the necessary reinforcements were with the army. Such reinforcements as had been received had been offset by losses. Rommel thought Eighth Army would continue its offensive, and if with its superior forces it succeeded in breaking through the thinly-held front, he would be faced with the decision either,

(to fight to the last round in the parts of the **Alamein** line we

a) still hold, but to allow the enemy after his breakthrough to push forward farther west as we will have no forces available to stop him. That will necessarily mean the final capitulation of the Army and thus the loss of **North Africa**.

(to abandon the **Alamein** line, concentrate the mobile forces

b) farther back to meet the enemy after his breakthrough, attack him, withdraw gradually to a line farther back and nearer the supply base, and thus save **North Africa**.

Rommel considered the second course the only possible one and he requested Bastico to give it his approval. Bastico agreed that the situation was serious, but not that it was critical. He affirmed that it was **Mussolini's** plan and policy, and also that of the Italian Supreme Command, that the present line should be held at all costs. He referred Rommel to reinforcements coming forward and assured him that the Italian Supreme Command would do everything in its power to hasten their arrival. In the meantime, **Mussolini** wished Rommel to avoid all actions which would lead to unnecessary losses and exhaustion of the army. Bastico himself was quite sure that 'thanks to Rommel's excellent leadership the crisis would be overcome.'

This correspondence substantiates General Auchinleck's belief that he had shaken *Panzerarmee* very severely and that the enemy could be smashed. Auchinleck, however, does not appear to have appreciated the real causes of the failure of his successive blows. In his report to **London** he candidly admitted that the attack had definitely failed in its object, but explained: 'Lack of reserves contributed to failure to maintain momentum of attack and this limiting factor persists.'¹ He maintained this view in his despatch.²

Faulty command and staff work was a greater factor in the defeats than Eighth Army's lack of material strength. The weaknesses and misconceptions in the general plan for **Mreir** have already been pointed out. Good staff work during the battle might have overcome them. General Gott and his staff saw at least better prospects for **23 Armoured Brigade** along the 276 grid and issued orders accordingly. The staffs of **13 Corps**, **1 Armoured Division**, and possibly also of **23 Armoured**

Brigade, failed to ensure that the amended orders reached the tank regiments.

The failure of **2 Armoured Brigade** to move to the support of **6 New Zealand Brigade** in **Mreir** at first light was not all due to lack of material strength or to want of training in infantry-armour co-operation. After the battle New Zealand officers did not hesitate to tell the tank officers what the Division thought of their inaction. Rejoinders gave the impression that the tank commanders were inclined to be ashamed. They said they would have been more than willing to help the infantry if they had known exactly what was expected of them and if they had been allowed to operate on their own initiative instead of waiting for orders.

Brigadier Clifton was perturbed when he found how sketchy was the briefing given to the liaison officers sent to him by the armoured brigades. The claims of the tank regiment officers that they would have helped 'if they had known exactly what was expected of them' suggests that they, too, either had not been briefed or had been given too vague a picture. This in spite of General Gatehouse's under-takings at the corps conference on the 20th when Gott and Inglis had stressed and stressed again the imperative necessity of armoured support for the infantry at first light. Not only had Brigadier Fisher, of **22 Armoured Brigade**, given similar undertakings on Gatehouse's behalf at the New Zealand Divisional conference the next day, but during the night of the battle the Division had been almost constantly in touch with Corps Headquarters, **1 Armoured**

¹ Report to CIGS, 24 July.

² Despatch, p. 366.

Division and **2 Armoured Brigade**, and had been assured that the promised support would be given. The failure to redeem the promises was

not due to the tank crews or the squadron commanders.

It may be argued that even had **2 Armoured Brigade** moved at first light it would have been too late to save Clifton's brigade. But the arrangement was that the armour should be at **Mreir** at first light. There was ample time between the corps conference and zero hour to arrange a clear passage for the armour through the New Zealand defences and the gap to be cut through the enemy minefields on **26 Battalion**'s axis. The staffs of the armoured formations took no steps to this end. Even after Major Walden, of **26 Battalion**, had pointed out a gap, the tanks ran on to mines.

This veteran ¹ brigade's hesitancy in tackling minefields and its suspicions of areas over which New Zealand transport had passed freely may be contrasted with the aggressive manner in which the raw **23 Armoured Brigade** tackled the enemy mine barriers. These, as has been noted, were to be regarded as 'intermediary objectives'.

The diary of the **9th Lancers**, which the British Historical Section says was always written in a noticeably robust fashion, has the following entry on 23 July: 'It is apparent that the length of time which the regiment has now been in the desert (seven months), combined with the constant battles and lack of sleep, is having its effect; most of us are at the extreme limit and it is getting hard even to think clearly. Yesterday three men—all normal stout-hearted men—went temporarily out of their minds and others were showing the same signs of mental and physical strain.'

The point occurs at once that the German tank regiments had been under similar, if not greater stress, and that they lacked little in endurance and energy at **Mreir**. But however that may be, no notice was taken in the planning from Eighth Army Headquarters downwards that troops who were to play a vital part in the operation might not be physically and mentally fit for the tasks given to them.

There is no doubt that General Inglis and the New Zealand Division

were badly let down by **1 Armoured Division**. Inglis mentioned this in a letter to **General Freyberg** on 27 July 1942, and added: 'The result is that I have flatly refused to do another operation of the same kind while I command. I have said that the

¹ In a letter dated 13 November 1953 to the British Historical Section, Major-General Briggs said: 'After Knightsbridge 2nd Armd Brigade which then consisted of Queen's Bays, **9th Lancers**, 10th Hussars and 1st Battalion, Rifle Brigade, with 11th Royal Horse Artillery under command, was sadly depleted. About 7th July a composite brigade was formed, with the signals of another brigade and the following regiments: (a) 3/5th Royal Tanks (a squadron each of 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, 5th Royal Tank Regiment and Royal Gloucestershire Hussars), (b) **9th Lancers** (a squadron each of **9th Lancers**, Queen's Bays and 3rd County of London Yeomanry), (c) 1/6th Royal Tanks (a squadron each of 1st Royal Tank Regiment, 6th Royal Tank Regiment and 10th Hussars). This brigade was under my command but had never fought nor trained together. Its signal detachments were new to me.'

sine qua non is my own armour under my own command.' Inglis then went on to examine the time and other factors of consolidation on the objective after a night attack.

I have tried to ram the following considerations home in connection with these long night attacks by infantry [he wrote].

- (1) Following a night attack by a brigade or more, at least one hour after first light is required to reconnoitre and plan a co-ordinated antitank defence. It takes another hour to site the individual weapons, and in good ground, a further hour to dig them in.
- (2) Until all this has been completed infantry is not in a position to defend itself against armoured counter-attack. There is also the field artillery to be tied up.
- (3) During this period, therefore, our own armour must be right on the spot to deal with the enemy armour.
- (4) If the advance is long and our own field artillery has to advance on to ground not occupied by us prior to the attack, it cannot

site its batteries or fix its pivot guns until after daylight next morning. This emphasises the need for close support of our own armour during the period of consolidation.

(5) I have given a minimum period of three hours for consolidation. I think the normal allowance should be five hours.

It is of interest that although Inglis appeared to make little headway with his representations at the time, these principles of armour under command and the time allowances for consolidation became standard practices in Eighth Army after the change in command.

In the meantime, Auchinleck was not dismayed by his further failure at **Mreir**. He intimated to **London** on 24 July: 'My intention remains the same—to go on hitting the enemy whenever and wherever possible with the object of breaking him here.'¹ To this end he organised a similar operation for 27 July in **30 Corps'** sector, where British and Australian infantry suffered severely for precisely the same reasons that caused the losses at **Ruweisat** and **Mreir**.

This record of the Battle of **Mreir** opened with a reference to illusions at Eighth Army Headquarters. It may well be closed with another example contained in the official account of the battle circulated throughout the theatre and sent to **London** in the Middle East Forces weekly intelligence summary:²

The week began and ended with British attacks on the enemy in the **Alamein** area. Though these attacks did not yield considerable territorial gains, they seriously worried the enemy and caused him many casualties. ... Our first attack started on the night 21–22 July. In the north Tel el Eisa was recaptured and a footing gained on the Mteiriya [sic] Ridge. In the centre, westward from the **Ruweisat Ridge**, the first objective was successfully reached and gaps were created in the enemy minefields; but exploitation by our armoured forces proved difficult and resulted in losses. Point 63, at the eastern [sic] end of **Ruweisat Ridge**, was stubbornly contested and finally left

¹ Report to CIGS, 24 July.

² Issue No. 95.

in “no-man's land”. The fighting on 22 July was exceptionally severe. Ten enemy tanks were seen burning and others were hit. The enemy infantry was severely handled and the bulk of 104 Lorried Infantry Regiment was either captured or killed.

In the south our troops gained a footing on the very difficult **Taqa Plateau** but later had to relinquish it. Where deep exploitation had proved impossible, it was generally found necessary at the end of the action to return to our original positions, since most of the area overrun by us was stony ground where digging was impossible without power tools and where our troops, unable quickly to provide themselves with cover, were subject to heavy fire. The operation yielded about 500 prisoners, most of them German, although the German infantry fought with outstanding tenacity.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

CHAPTER 33 – REORGANISATION

CHAPTER 33

Reorganisation

NEW Zealand Division was sourly discontented in the aftermath of Mreir. Few men and even fewer officers retained faith in the higher commands of the Army. The majority believed that whatever Eighth Army attempted, Rommel did better. They knew there was an element of luck in battle. They acknowledged that fortune could turn against even the most skilful commanders, that at times they might have a run of bad luck. Such commanders did not forfeit the confidence of their troops. This characteristic of British troops in adversity, the spirit of fair play, was shared by the New Zealanders. But now experience and observation had convinced the Division that luck was not the issue. The Army was the victim of bad management.

Unfortunately, this critical attitude was not directed solely at the higher commands. The good name of the Division suffered in criticism of the fighting qualities of the other divisions. Disparaging comment and sarcastic gossip spread to the point where official action had to be taken. Thus Brigadier Clifton in a memorandum to be promulgated to all ranks in his brigade said:

Our belief in the fighting efficiency of 2 NZ Div is to be encouraged. But we must not carry it to the degree of imagining that we are fighting this campaign on our own, slightly hampered by second rate troops on either flank. The proud record of the Indian divisions, who have fought gallantly and continuously before and since our entry, should indeed set us on our mettle. They have suffered battle casualties heavier than ours, but they are professional soldiers not “in the news” and we do not hear about them over the BBC. Remember we are all fighting with one purpose—to win this war. If we cut out criticism and pull together we shall win more quickly. Do your best to help. ¹

Later Brigadier Kippenberger circularised 5 Brigade more pungently

and specifically:

Instead of being satisfied with the credit given to them by all other soldiers in Egypt, many of our men are trying to insist on it by blaming or disparaging everyone else. Letters from the men of the Division show that many men are blaming impartially the South Africans, Indians, British, and the arm'd formations, and by implication are boasting that we are the only good troops in Egypt. Many of the men in Base, who have taken no part in the fighting or very little, have disgraced themselves and the Division

¹ Confidential circular to all officers, 31 July.

by unseemly boasting and insulting conduct in **Cairo**. Leave it to others to praise us. Everybody in **Egypt** is willing to give us full credit and we need not boast.

It must be remembered that we have seen very little of the fighting of other units. We did not take part in the great battles in **Libya** from 26 May onwards and many of the troops whom we are freely insulting have been continuously in the field since then. We were disappointed in the action of the Armour in failing to support us, disappointed and bitter. We do not know what difficulties prevented them, but we do know that many of the men whom we have freely charged with cowardice have had their tanks destroyed under them half-a-dozen times and that almost every armoured unit, owing to losses is an amalgamation of several units. We freely blame the South Africans for losing **Tobruk** but we have not shown yet that we ourselves can face and defeat a Stuka bombardment and concentrated tank assault of the violence that they had to meet.

I appeal to all men in the Bde to remember that we know only too little of what other units have done and suffered, that we are fighting the Germans and Italians and not the South Africans,

British or Indians and that careless, ignorant, and thoughtless talk of the description that has been common does tremendous harm to our cause and to the good name of the New Zealand Division. ¹

Such conduct was not characteristic of New Zealand soldiers. They could do their share of ‘bitching and belly-aching’, to quote Field Marshal Montgomery in a later context. They were ready to bait or ‘take a rise’ out of the men of other divisions. But as a rule they did so with a grin or a friendly twinkle in the eye that took the sting out of comments. They were willing to take as good as they gave. There is no doubt they considered that they had been badly let down at Ruweisat and **Mreir. Yet it is questionable whether their talk and comments would have been so bitter, so harsh, so biting, so boastful, if the conditions under which they existed after **Mreir** had not been so exhausting. Much of the gossip, so harmful that it had to be stopped, was but a relief to the pent-up feelings of outraged nature.**

The Egyptian summer was reaching its peak. Few clouds tempered the sun's burning rays. The flat, featureless sand reflected the heat. There was no natural shade in any form. In the forward defences and for some distance to the rear, improvised shade had to be set below ground level to escape enemy observation. Whether it was hotter in a shaded hole or in the direct rays of the sun was debatable. Water was scarce. At times the ration was down to a water-bottle a day for all purposes—half a mugful for a wash and shave and the rest for drinking. The Army Service Corps did its utmost to relieve the shortage and when the front became stabilised brought up small supplies of beer, usually American canned.

Constant tank and truck traffic had ground the surface sand to a

¹ Circular to all ranks of **5 Brigade**, 17 August.

fine dust which the slightest wind picked up and deposited in a film over bodies, weapons, and food. It penetrated every corner and crevice.

All food and drink contained some dust. All weapons, especially the automatics, had to be cleaned several times a day. Then there were the mid-summer sandstorms which seemed so vicious as to be beyond belief. The storms often lasted several hours and reduced visibility to a few yards so that men and trucks got lost even in the vicinity of known landmarks.

Flies were perhaps the worst plague of all. But for them the heat and dust might have been endured with greater equanimity. The plague, and the men's reactions to it, is well described in *Journey Towards Christmas*:¹

The foul and dismaying thing about the **Alamein** flies was their oneness. None was separate from its fellows any more than the wave is separate from the ocean, the tentacle from the octopus. As one fly, one dark and horrible force guided by one mind, ubiquitous and immensely powerful, they addressed themselves to the one task, which was to destroy us body and soul. It was useless to kill them, for they despised death and made no attempt to avoid it. They existed only in the common will, and to weaken that we should have had to destroy countless millions of them. None the less we killed them unceasingly. We killed them singly and in detachments with fly swats, and the dead lay so thick in our lorries that we had to sweep them out several times a day. We set ingenious traps for them, and they filled the traps, the living feasting ghoulishly on the dead. We slew them in mounds with our bare hands until the crunch of minute frames and the squish of microscopic viscera, felt rather than heard, became a nightmare. But what was the use? Their ranks closed at once and they went on with the all-important task of driving us out of our minds.

Although they had a common brain and a common purpose not all were identical in appearance. About one in a thousand was larger than his fellows and of a lovely bottle-green colour. These, so the story went, and doubtless it was true, were corpse-fed. One could only suppose that the Intelligence in charge of the operation had

introduced them for the moral effect, which was considerable.

Flies are attracted by any light surface, and our towels and the sunbleached canopies of our lorries were speckled as with black confetti. Flies crave moisture, and you knew from watching your friends—and the knowledge was disproportionately humiliating and disgusting—that you too were walking around with half a hundred miniature old-men-of-the-sea clinging dourly to the back of your damp shirt. And when you shut your eyes—this is the plain truth—flies tried to open them, mad for the delectable fluid.

We couldn't always be killing them, but we had to keep on brushing them away, otherwise even breathing would have been difficult. Our arms ached from the exercise, but still they fastened on our food and accompanied it into our mouths and down our throats, scorning death when there was an advantage to be gained. They drowned themselves in our tea and in our soup. They attended us with awful relish on our most intimate occasions.

¹ *Journey Towards Christmas* (Official History of 1 Ammunition Company), Peter Lewellyn ([NZ War History Branch](#)), pp. 247–9.

They waited until our hands were full—they liked us best when we were lying beneath a lorry busy with spanner or grease gun—and then they rushed us, feet and suckers working furiously, inflicting a hundred pricks and stings. ...

On 29 July while the plague was at its peak—a peak that was to be maintained effortlessly for more than two months—we were visited by a swarm of mosquitoes. For some hours we waded through a warm, whirring mist, every particle of which was able to raise a blister. This would surely have driven us mad before long, but the wind changed and the mosquitoes went away, leaving the field to the flies.

To the flies and the desert sores.

The satanic cunning ('But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh') was evident in these noisome ulcers. The least scratch was enough to cause them and they took rather less than a fortnight to expand round a suppurating centre to the bigness of a slice of lemon. They were irksome and humiliating rather than painful ('My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken and become loathsome') and they took weeks, months sometimes, to heal, and when they did they left scars that remained for over a year. Nearly everyone you saw had an arm or a leg bandaged and the knuckles of both hands ringed with filthy scraps of sticking-plaster.

Bad as were the conditions over the whole of the Divisional area, Llewellyn and the men in the transport companies had a slight advantage over the troops in the front line. The transport men could move about in the daytime. They could do something, however little, to ameliorate their lot. The forward defensive localities were under constant enemy observation which precluded all but stealthy individual movement. Only a few men in exceptional positions could improve their slit trenches in the daytime. The remainder could only sleep, smoke, clean weapons, write letters, gossip—anything at all to pass the long, hot days until dusk brought relief from the heat and the flies. It was an atmosphere to breed discontent. Like the cannibalistic flies, discontent fed on itself. The brain-cleansing influence of work was not available in the daytime. Even after a night of hard labour, tiredness was not always sufficient opiate to give relief from the oppressions of heat, dust and flies.

These conditions were not peculiar to the New Zealand sector. They prevailed over the whole front. They were suffered by friend and foe alike. Thus they do not excuse the New Zealanders' attitude to the other divisions. Yet they were a cause. They were as fuel to the fires of bitterness already well fed by certain knowledge that the Division had

been twice let down within a week, by a sense of frustration, by lack of confidence in the higher command, by thoughts of whether any further effort would be worth while.

After Mreir the New Zealand Division settled down in a sector which it was later to develop as the **New Zealand Box**, and which was to become an important factor in defeating Rommel's last effort to reach **Cairo** and the Delta.

In the afternoon of 23 July General Inglis conferred with his brigade commanders on the state of the Division and the reorganisation of the brigades. The strength of all the rifle battalions was low. Few reinforcements were available. The base camp at **Maadi** had been combed for surplus men but many of those sent forward were not suitable for infantry work. The 19th and 20th Battalions were at **Maadi** reorganising and building up their numbers after Ruweisat. It was decided to send **24 Battalion**, which had lost practically the whole of its rifle companies, to join them. The remnants of the battalion moved to **Amiriya** on the 24th and to **Maadi** on the 25th. Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam took Greville's place in command.

In **25 Battalion** the surviving riflemen of A, B and C Companies were placed in C Company, and D Company which had been left out of battle was ordered forward from **Maadi**. Under Major **Burton**,¹ formerly second-in-command, the battalion with a strength of 362 all ranks took over its former defences in **6 Brigade's** sector on 25 July. The 26th Battalion, with a total strength of 435, was returned to the command of **6 Brigade** in its old sector on the 23rd. The 18th Battalion, which had moved into **24 Battalion's** sector on its withdrawal from the flank position in the evening of the 22nd, was left under **6 Brigade's** command. It had a strength of 15 officers and 392 men.

In **5 Brigade** the main change was the relief by **26 Battalion** of the 28th, which was moved during the night 23–24 July to the brigade's right flank facing north towards Ruweisat. The brigade had 29 officers and 586 other ranks in 28 Battalion, 17 and 426 in the 21st and 19 and

572 in the 23rd, a total of 65 and 1584, roughly 400 more than **6 Brigade**.

On the completion of these dispositions on the 25th, **28 Battalion** guarded the Division's northern flank and **21 Battalion** the northwestern corner overlooking **Mreir**. The 23rd carried the line southwards and covered **6 Field Regiment's** batteries. Then came **26 Battalion** facing generally west, the 18th facing west and south-west, and the 25th on the south-western corner facing west and south. The 5th Field Regiment was deployed on the southern flank behind **25 Battalion** and **4 Field Regiment** supported the centre. The **Divisional Cavalry Regiment**, with **28 Battery 5 Field Regiment** under command, covered the open flank south of **6 Brigade** until 28 July, when it was withdrawn into reserve. Part of a rifle company of **22 Armoured Brigade** which had been deployed between 18 and

¹ **Lt-Col H. G. Burton**, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Christchurch**, 1 Dec 1899; plumber; NZ Mounted Rifles 1918–19; actg CO 25 Bn 23 Nov – 6 Dec 1941; CO 25 Bn 24 Jul–11 Sep 1942; CO 1 and 2 Trg Units, 1944.

26 Battalions was also moved to the southern flank. The tanks of the brigade supported the Division.

Concurrent with the reorganisation, the men were set to the task of cleaning the Division's sector in the interests of elementary hygiene. The dead were buried, all Italian slit trenches were filled in, and rubbish was buried or burned. Fighting patrols were sent out at night to check the enemy positions, harass his outposts and obtain control of no-man's-land. Works plans were also made to strengthen and improve the defences. With the fall of darkness, the sector came to life. Ration parties came up and the engineers appeared with their compressors and loads of mines and wire. Throughout the night there was the roar and rattle of compressors, bursts of fire from the patrols, the fixed-line tracer fire of the enemy machine guns, harassing fire from the

Divisional artillery and the noises of transport. As dawn neared, the patrols came in, the engineers packed up, and the transport moved to the rear. At dawn the infantry stood to in their slits, the desert would be practically clear of movement, and often there would be an uncanny quiet.

On 25 July General Auchinleck issued a special order of the day addressed 'To all ranks Eighth Army from C-in-C.' The order said:

You have done well. You have turned a retreat into a firm stand and stopped the enemy on the threshold of Egypt. ... You have wrenched the initiative from him by sheer guts and hard fighting and put HIM on the defensive in these last weeks.

He has lost heavily and is short of men, ammunition, petrol and other things. He is trying desperately to bring these over to [Africa](#) but the Navy and the Air Force are after his ships.

You have borne much but I ask you for more. We must not slacken. If we can stick it we will break him.

STICK TO IT

**C. J. AUCHINLECK,
General.**

This order was issued at the same time as Auchinleck's plans for what was to prove his last throw at Rommel. Both order and plans appear to recognise that Eighth Army was near, if it had not already reached, the end of its tether. The intention in the new plan was more modest than its predecessors. After stating that it was essential to strike the enemy hard and quickly before he had time to build up his strength, the intention was stated as 'To disrupt and disorganise the enemy's army with a view to its eventual destruction.'¹ The operation was designated **MANHOOD.**

Auchinleck instructed [30 Corps](#) to break through *Panzerarmee's*

front from Miteiriya to about **Deir el Dhib** and widen the breach to the north-west as rapidly as possible. The corps was then to destroy the enemy as far west as the Rahman track, 'but will avoid

¹ Eighth Army Operation Order No. 105, 25 July.

committing armoured formations in isolated action against superior enemy armoured forces.' Thirteenth Corps was ordered to give **30 Corps** maximum fire support and by various devices deceive Rommel into believing that the attack was again coming in the centre.

The pursuit paragraphs of the order had the tone of 'just in case', as if there were now little hope that Rommel might withdraw but that it would be as well to be prepared. Both corps were told that if the enemy yielded the field they were to pursue towards **Daba** and **Fuka**, with **4 Light Armoured Brigade** directed on **Fuka** and **1 Armoured Division** on **Daba**. The pursuit instructions in the operation order for **Mreir** would also apply. They were not amended or modified in the light of the losses suffered by the New Zealand, 5 Indian, and the armoured divisions at **Mreir**.

Generals Gott and Inglis discussed the operation in the afternoon of the 25th. On this occasion Gott listened attentively while Inglis expounded his views on the vulnerability of infantry in the first few hours of daylight after a long night advance, and the necessity for prompt and effective armoured protection at this period. Although New Zealand Division had only a subsidiary role in the new operation, Inglis firmly impressed on Gott that he would not allow the Division to be used in another battle like Ruweisat and **Mreir** unless he had greater control over the deployment of the armour. There is no record of whether Gott endorsed these views or conveyed them to Army Headquarters. In the event, MANHOOD failed because once again the armour did not support the infantry on their objectives.

In happier circumstances, New Zealand Division would probably have

enjoyed its task of deceiving Rommel, of 'pulling his leg'. During the night 25–26 July patrols from 23 and 21 Battalions, under Lieutenants **Bailey**¹ and R. A. Shaw respectively, reconnoitred the enemy defences south of **Mreir** and 'accidentally dropped' an envelope, a newspaper cutting, and a hat badge ostensibly belonging to men of the British 69th Infantry Brigade. It was hoped that when the enemy found these clues, as he must, he would believe that the brigade had been shifted from the southern to the central sector whereas it was on its way north to attack towards **Deir el Dhib**.

The Division's main role was to delude the enemy that the attack of 21–22 July on **Mreir** was being repeated. To this end reconnaissance parties were to lay out start lines in circumstances where they would be seen, and after dark both brigades were to send out patrols to blow gaps in the minefields and to hunt tanks. Between 12.30 and 1 a.m. in the night 26–27 July, coinciding with **30 Corps'** zero hour, the field artillery, mortars, and machine guns were to fire a

¹ **Lt A. F. Bailey**, MC; **Christchurch**; born NZ 22 Jun 1913; window dresser; wounded 23 Oct 1942.

fixed programme, after which fighting patrols were to be pushed out. The Divisional Cavalry was to move up to the western end of **Deir el Angar** and shell **Kaponga Box**. Under **13 Corps'** arrangements a phantom radio network and a special sonic unit were established in the neighbourhood of **Alam Nayil** to suggest the location of an armoured brigade. The sonic unit transmitted through loudspeakers a record of the noises of tanks and transport in movement.

It may be said here that these deceptions had some effect on the enemy, the chief victim being *90 Light Division*. This division recorded in its diary that two columns of British vehicles and some thrusts by isolated reconnaissance cars had been seen on the Taqa plateau in the afternoon and evening. At dusk strong artillery fire had fallen on **Kaponga**, and 20 to 25 vehicles, including tanks, had pressed forward to

within about a mile of the defences under a smoke screen. By dark the tanks had dispersed in a semi-circle around the box to the north-east. An observation post had reported that 'strong motor noises' could be heard coming from behind the tanks. This activity led the division to the conclusion: 'It must be expected that the enemy, after his abortive attempt to break through in the north on 22 July will now attempt a similar operation against the [**Kaponga**] work or possibly against the units of **Trieste** operating in the south.'

The diary adds that the division and **Trieste** and **Littorio** units stood to but that, except for some bombs on **Kaponga** and in **Trieste's** sector, the area remained quiet and the tanks withdrew. At 9.30 p.m., when reports were received of artillery 'drum fire' in the north, the division noted: 'The enemy does not seem to intend an attack on **Kaponga** but further north, with uninterrupted bombing attacks on the entire southern sector to pin it down.'

Afrika Korps had reports of the operations against **Kaponga** but its diary has no mention of the other deceptive measures taken by New Zealand Division. **Briehl Group**, **33 Recce Unit**, and later a battle group from **15 Panzer Division** were sent north to deal with **30 Corps'** attack. Whether **Afrika Korps** considered these forces sufficient to meet the attack, or whether it was apprehensive of a further thrust in the centre and therefore refrained from thinning it out, cannot be said.

Apart from the fact that the main operation by **30 Corps** marked the end of Auchinleck's local offensives, the New Zealand Division had only a more or less academic interest in that part of the battle. The planning was conspicuous for its lack of information concerning the enemy's dispositions, notably the location of his artillery and minefields, and also in the arrangements for co-ordinating the activities of the several formations taking part. This was especially the case in clearing, marking, and reporting the gaps in the minefields for the passage of the infantry's supporting arms and the armour. Commanders complained that they had been given insufficient time to plan in detail, even though at the instance of **69 Brigade** the attack was postponed from the night of

25–26 July for twenty-four hours.

The 24th Australian Brigade was given the task of establishing its 2/28 Battalion on [Miteiriya Ridge](#), after which 2/43 Battalion, supported by 50 Royal Tank Regiment, was to exploit north-west. The objective was won at 2.50 a.m., but as the minefield had been imperfectly gapped the supporting weapons and ammunition could not be sent forward. From three o'clock onwards the battalion was under heavy fire mainly from machine guns. At 9.45 the Germans counter-attacked with tanks and overran the battalion. At ten o'clock 50 Royal Tank Regiment was ordered forward to support the 2/28th and [1 Armoured Division](#) was advised of the situation. The Armoured Division intimated that it could not give any help as its 2nd Brigade was held up by mines. The 50th Tanks, however, got through, but when it found there were no infantry left to support, the regiment withdrew on 2/43 Battalion which was digging itself in some two miles in rear. The regiment claimed two enemy tanks against the loss of thirteen of its own, principally to anti-tank fire. The Australians lost some 400 men, and by afternoon the brigade was occupying the position from which it had started.

The 69th Brigade attacked with a [Durham Light Infantry](#) composite battalion on the right and the 5th East Yorks on the left. Both units encountered machine-gun and anti-tank fire from the start. They lost cohesion in imperfectly marked mine gaps but the rifle companies pressed on and appear to have reached their objectives about 8 a.m. From four to eight o'clock they were out of touch with their brigade headquarters owing to the loss of the [Durham's](#) wireless truck and cable lorry and the fact that the Yorks' battalion headquarters had lost contact with its companies. The Durham's support group was held up in the minefield by anti-tank fire and that of the Yorks by mines. At ten o'clock the isolated rifle companies of both battalions were overrun by tanks, only a few men escaping. The brigade's losses were estimated at 600, a large figure in view of the fact that all the battalions had been much under strength at the start of the battle.

The advance of **2 Armoured Brigade** in its exploiting role was twice postponed while the attached engineers reconnoitred the minefields and gaps. It was not until 10.45 a.m. that **6 Royal Tank Regiment** was ordered to attack, but with the modified task of assisting **69 Brigade** and thereafter moving against enemy tanks reported near Miteiriya. The regiment became entangled in the minefield under anti-tank fire and could not make headway. Shortly before two o'clock Major-General Fisher, now temporarily commanding the Armoured Division, learned that **69 Brigade** had lost its forward battalions. He asked **30 Corps** for fresh instructions as he considered there was no longer any objective for the armour.

By about three o'clock it was apparent to **30 Corps** that MANHOOD had failed in every aspect, and with Auchinleck's concurrence all formations were ordered to withdraw to their original positions.

Reporting to **London** early next morning, Auchinleck said that the failure probably marked the end of the second phase of the **Alamein** battle. It seemed now that the enemy had been able to consolidate his positions and to lay extensive minefields covering most of his front. Eighth Army was without reserves of infantry. These could not be produced except by reinforcements or extensive readjustments of formations now in the line which, apart from basic difficulties due to the mixed composition of the force 'which forbids detachments of subordinate Divisions units and formations from parent formations', was not easy owing to the length of the front and the need for maintaining a firm hold on vital localities.

Auchinleck added that all possible means to produce fresh offensive power were being explored and every effort would be made to regain the initiative, but a pause in activity and a consequent stalemate might be unavoidable. The enemy had not now an open flank, so that infantry would be needed to open the way for mobile troops to act against his rear. Auchinleck also mentioned that he would send a considered appreciation of the situation to **London** as soon as possible.

By this time, however, events were beginning to move out of Auchinleck's control. All through the retreat and in the stand at **Alamein**, Mr Churchill had given Auchinleck full support and every encouragement. But it seems to have become increasingly obvious to the Prime Minister that all was not well with the command in the **Middle East**. His doubts were fed continually by the reports he received from many quarters. Eventually, on 28 July, Churchill suggested to the King and Cabinet that he should visit the command and settle the decisive questions on the spot. Accordingly, he left England by air on 2 August for **Cairo**, having previously arranged for Smuts and Wavell to meet him there.

After several conferences and a visit to Eighth Army and the **Royal Air Force**, Churchill made what was practically a clean sweep of the command in so far as the Army was concerned. Auchinleck was to be replaced by General Alexander ¹ and Gott was to be moved

¹ Afterwards Field Marshal the Earl Alexander of **Tunis**, KG, GCB, GCMG, CSI, DSO, MC.

up to command Eighth Army. Both of Auchinleck's chief staff officers, Corbett and Dorman-Smith, were to go, as was also Ramsden from the command of **30 Corps**. ¹

Gott's appointment to the Army command may seem astonishing in the light of his record. It should be noted, however, that the measure of his responsibility in the successive failures on the **Gazala- Bir Hacheim** line, in the retreat and in the July fighting, was not known at the time. At least it was not fully appreciated. The enviable confidence with which he ignored facts as well as difficulties impressed his superiors, his staff and subordinates, and seems to have communicated itself to the Prime Minister. Churchill supports Gott's selection on the grounds that the feelings of Eighth Army could not be overlooked. He thought the men and commanders of every grade might consider it a reproach if two new generals were brought out from England to supersede all who had fought

in the desert.

In the event Gott was not to have the command. On 7 August, the day after he had received news of his appointment, he was killed when the aircraft in which he was taking off from a forward airfield for **Cairo was shot down. Thereupon Lieutenant-General Montgomery ² was sent for.**

Alexander reported to Churchill in **Cairo on 10 August and Montgomery arrived in **Cairo** next day. With the concurrence of General Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the Prime Minister gave Alexander the following directive:**

- 1. Your prime and main duty will be to take or destroy at the earliest opportunity the German-Italian Army commanded by Field-Marshal Rommel, together with all its supplies and establishments in **Egypt** and **Libya**.**
- 2. You will discharge or cause to be discharged such other duties as pertain to your Command, without prejudice to the task described in Paragraph 1, which must be considered paramount in His Majesty's interests.**

Alexander and Montgomery gave Eighth Army the leadership it deserved. How they executed the Prime Minister's directive, and the part played by the New Zealand Division, make the theme of the succeeding volume.

¹ Details of the conferences that preceded the changes and the reasons are given in Churchill's *The Second World War*, Vol. IV, pp. 408–24.

² Afterwards Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of **Alamein, KG, GCB, DSO.**

BATTLE FOREGYPT

APPENDIX I

Appendix I

THE principal appointments and units of the Division when it moved to the Western Desert in June 1942 were:

Divisional Headquarters

- GOC Lt-Gen Sir
Bernard
Freyberg
- GSO Col W. G. Regular soldier. Duntroon. AA & QMG in Greece.
1 Gentry GSO 1 Crete and Libya 1941.
- AA Lt-Col A. B. Civil servant. Territorial. DAA & QMG in Greece and
& Ross (from 1 Libya 1941.
QMG Jun 1942)
- CSO Lt-Col G. L. Telegraph engineer. Served in Western Desert Force
Agar Signals. 2 i/c Divisional Signals, Greece.
Commander Royal Signals, Libya 1941.

Divisional Cavalry Regiment

- CO Lt-Col A. J. Farmer. Territorial. 2 i/c in Greece. CO Libya
Nicoll 1941.

Divisional Artillery

- CRA Brig C. E. Regular. Woolwich. CO 6 Field Regiment
Weir Greece and Libya 1941.
- 4 Field Lt-Col R. C. Regular. Sandhurst. Regiment in Greece and
Regiment (25, Queree Libya 1941 and in Crete as infantry.
26 and 46 (from 10 Eight 25-pdrs per battery, as had all field
Btys) June 1942) regiments.
- 5 Fd Regt (27, Lt- Col K. Schoolmaster. Territorial. Regt in Greece
28 and 47 W. R. and Libya and in Crete as infantry, where
Btys) Glasgow it had very heavy casualties.
- 6 Fd Regt (29, Lt-Col C. L. Power Board engineer. Territorial. Regt in
30 and 48 Walter Greece and Libya 1941. Had extremely
Btys) heavy casualties at Sidi Rezegh and
Belhamed.
- 14 Light Anti- Lt-Col D. A. Warehouseman. Territorial. Regt had been in
Aircraft Regt Carty action at Alexandria, Canal Zone, and in

(41, 42 and
43 Btys)

Libya 1941. 12 Bofors in each battery.

7 Anti-Tank Regt (31, 32, 33 and 34 Btys)
Lt-Col J. M. Draughtsman. Territorial.

Regt frequently engaged in Greece and Libya 1941 with severe losses and considerable success. 12 6-pdrs in each battery.

Divisional Engineers

CRE Lt-Col F. M. H. Hanson

Civil engineer. Duntroon graduate. CO 7 Field Company in Greece. CRE Crete. CRE Libya 1941.

5 Field Park Company 6, 7, and 8 Field Coys

All companies in Greece and Libya 1941. 5 Fd Pk Coy and 7 Fd Coy in Crete.

4 Inf Bde Brig L. M. Inglis

Solicitor. Territorial. Comd 4 Bde Crete and Libya 1941.

**18 Bn Lt-Col J. R. Gray (to 29 June 1942)
Lt-Col R. J. Lynch (from 29 June)**

Barrister and Solicitor. Territorial.

Civil servant. Territorial. Coy comd Greece and Crete. Bn in several small actions in Greece. Very heavily engaged at Galatas in Crete and had high losses. Successful actions at Gambut and Belhamed in Libya 1941.

19 Bn Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell

Builder. Territorial. CO in Libya 1941. Bn engaged with success at Servia in Greece, Galatas in Crete, and Belhamed in Libya 1941.

20 Bn Lt-Col J. T. Burrows

Schoolmaster. Territorial. 2 i/c in Greece. CO in Crete. Bn in minor actions in Greece. Lost heavily at Maleme and Galatas in Crete. Several actions in Libya 1941 and practically destroyed at Belhamed. Rebuilt from reinforcement.

5 Inf Bde Brig H. K. Kippenberger

Solicitor. Territorial. CO 20 Bn Greece and Libya 1941. Commanded 10 Bde

in Crete.

- 21 Bn** Lt-Col S. F. Allen Regular. Sandhurst. CR Signals, Greece. Bn had very heavy losses at **Platamon** and **Peneios Gorge** in Greece. Fought successfully in **Crete**. Almost destroyed at **Sidi Rezegh** in **Libya** 1941 and largely rebuilt from reinforcements.
- 22 Bn** Lt-Col J. T. Russell Farmer. Ex-Regular. Sandhurst. OC squadron of Div Cav in **Greece** and **Libya** 1941 and Regt in **Crete**. Bn sharply engaged in **Olympus Pass** in **Greece** and lost heavily at **Maleme** in **Crete**. Several successful actions in **Libya** 1941.
- 23 Bn** Lt-Col D. F. Leckie School teacher. Territorial.
(to 29 June)
Lt-Col C. N. Watson School teacher. Territorial. Bn sharply engaged in **Olympus Pass** in **Greece**, **Maleme** and **Galatas** and minor actions in **Crete**, and several actions in **Libya** 1941.
(from 29 June)
- 6 Inf Bde** Brig G. H. Clifton Regular. Duntroon. CRE **Greece** and CRE **30 Corps**, **Libya** 1941.
- 24 Bn** Lt-Col A. W. Greville Regular. Sandhurst. 2 i/c 22 Bn **Libya** 1941.
Bn engaged at **Elasson** in **Greece**. Practically destroyed at **Sidi Rezegh** in **Libya** 1941 and largely rebuilt.
- 25 Bn** Lt-Col C. D. A. Draper. Territorial. Coy Comd **Greece** and **Libya** 1941.
George
Bn engaged at **Molos** in **Greece**. Practically destroyed at **Sidi Rezegh** in **Libya** 1941 and largely rebuilt.
- 26 Bn** Lt-Col J. N. Peart (to Schoolmaster. Territorial. DAAG in **Greece**. DAA & QMG in **Crete**. Bn lightly engaged in **Greece**, very heavily in **Libya** 1941 and largely rebuilt.
20 June 1942) Lt-Col C. N. Watson (20–29 June) Lt-Col J. N. Peart (from 29 June)
- 27 MG** Lt-Col F. J. Gwilliam Assistant town clerk. Territorial. CO in **Greece** and **Libya** 1941.
Bn
Elements of Bn engaged in

practically every action fought by the Division in **Greece, Crete and Libya 1941.**

28 (Maori) Bn Lt-Col E. te W. Love. Interpreter. Territorial. Bn fought in **Greece at Olympus Pass, in Crete at Maleme and 42nd Street, and with 5 Bde in Libya 1941.**

Army Service Corps

CRASC Div Amn Coy Div Petrol Coy Div Supply Coy 4 Res MT Coy 6 Res MT Coy Col S. H. Crump Regular. Same appointment **Greece and Libya 1941.** All but 6 Res MT Coy (formed Oct 1941) had served in **Greece and Libya 1941.** Div Petrol Coy, Div Supply Column and 4 Res MT Coy had fought as infantry in **Crete** with heavy losses.

Medical Units

ADMS NZ Div 4 Fd Amb 5 Fd Amb 6 Fd Amb Mobile Surgical Unit Lt-Col P. A. Ardagh Surgeon. Territorial. The three Field Ambulances had served in **Greece, Crete and Libya 1941,** the Mobile Surgical Unit in **Libya 1941.** (from 10 May 1942)

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

APPENDIX II – 22 BATTALION IN CAPTIVITY

Appendix II

22 BATTALION IN CAPTIVITY

THE movements of **22 Battalion** after it had been captured by the German **8th Panzer Regiment** at Ruweisat on 15 July are as follows:

From the headquarters' area, the prisoners were marched hurriedly to the **Alamein** track and thence north to the vicinity of **Deir el Dhib**, where they were given a short rest and water which was badly tainted with petrol. On the way several men, although convinced that they would be shot if they fell out, collapsed through exhaustion. The enemy, however, picked them up and carried them forward in transport. At one stage, the Italian driver of a truck carrying wounded jumped out and took cover when a flight of British aircraft bombed a transport column a short distance away. The truck was running free until a New Zealander ran forward and brought it under control. His conduct earned the commendation of the German officer in command.

From **Deir el Dhib** the prisoners were taken, fifty in a truck, to an enclosure between **Daba** and **Fuka**. Here Captain R. R. T. Young, of **22 Battalion**, escaped to make his way on foot to the British lines. Until this time the prisoners had been under the command of the Germans, but on the morning of 16 July, as one of them wrote in a letter home,

...the Germans said the war in the desert was **Italy's** war and the Italians would look after us. We all smiled when the Germans said this and the Germans smiled too. The German-Italian marriage was a strange one. ...

The men were then taken by transport via camps at **Matruh**, **Tobruk**, and **Derna** to **Benghazi**, where the majority were held for some weeks in cramped and unhygienic conditions before being shipped to **Italy**.

At Derna, **Mussolini** inspected the New Zealand prisoners. According to **Ciano**, **Mussolini** had found groups of fierce-looking New Zealand prisoners 'who were so far from reassuring that he always kept his gun close at hand.'¹ The prisoners, however, have said that **Mussolini**, looking insignificant and dispirited, was given a sub-machine gun to hold while being photographed facing the prisoners, and that he quickly handed the gun back when the photographing was finished.

Letters, conversations, and reports of the men of **22 Battalion** reveal that surprise and bewilderment were the immediate reactions of most of those taken prisoner. They had entered the battle confident of success. Although some may have faced the possibility that, as individuals, they might become casualties, none had imagined that any battalion, let alone their own, could have been so simply and so easily isolated, subdued, and rounded up by the enemy. The end of the battle with the infantry helpless under the tanks was so unexpected to most of them that they did not have time even to think of escaping.

After the initial surprise, followed by humiliation and in some cases self-consciousness at finding themselves standing with hands up, disarmed, and no longer members of a disciplined, trained and ordered group, the majority of the men developed an anger which they directed vaguely at their officers, at the Army generally, and then more particularly at the British armour for its failure to provide the promised support.

¹ *Ciano's Diary, 1939-43* (Heinemann), p. 489.

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

Contents

Appendix III p. 387

Glossary p. 389

Bibliography p. 391

Index p. 393

[backmatter]

BATTLE FOREGYPT

APPENDIX III

Appendix III

THE following casualties were sustained by 2 NZ Division during the period June to August 1942 inclusive:

	Killed & Died of Wounds	Wounded		Prisoners (incl Wounded & PW)		TOTALS		
	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs	Offrs	ORs
INFANTRY								
4 Brigade	13	161	23	409	34	520	70	1090
5 Brigade	17	202	39	488	16	410	72	1100
6 Brigade	16	115	14	223	33	484	63	822
TOTAL	46	478	76	1120	83	1414	205	3012
Artillery	13	141	26	456	13	67	52	664
MG Battalion	2	27	1	85	4	80	7	192
Engineers	1	39	7	69	3	23	11	131
Signals	3	20	2	35	2	38	7	93
NZASC	–	38	4	70	–	14	4	122
Divisional Cavalry	2	4	1	15	–	8	3	27
Miscellaneous	1	7	5	43	2	25	8	75
TOTAL	68	754	122	1893	107	1669	297	4316

(*Note: One hundred and twenty of the prisoners, mainly men from 6 Brigade taken at El Mreir, lost their lives when the *Nino Bixio*, carrying them from North Africa to **Europe**, was torpedoed and sunk on 17 August 1942.)*

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

GLOSSARY

Glossary

AA and QMG	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General
Abar, Abyar	Wells (plural of Bir)
ADS	Advanced Dressing Station
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
Alam	Cairn; rock
ASC	Army Service Corps
A-tk	Anti-tank
Bab	Pass; gate
Bde	Brigade
Bir	Well; cistern
BM	Brigade Major
BTE	British Troops in Egypt
Bullet	Pool
Burg	Fort; tower; hill resembling tower
Buweib	Pass (dim. of Bab)
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CO	Commanding Officer
Comd	Commander; commanding
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery
CRE	Commander Royal Engineers
Deir	Depression
Duweir	Group of hills
FDL	Forward Defended Locality
Gabr	Tomb
Gebel	Hill; mountain
GOC	General Officer Commanding
HQ	Headquarters
Inf	Infantry
IO	Intelligence Officer
Kafr	Village

Maaten	Shallow wells
MDS	Main Dressing Station
Mersa	Port; anchorage
Minqar, Munqar	Cliff; bluff
MT	Mechanical Transport
Naqb	Pass; cutting
p.w.	Prisoner of war
Qabr, pl. Qubur	Grave
Qaret	Low hill
RA	Royal Artillery
RAP	Regimental Aid Post
Raqabet	Dry watercourse
Ras	Headland; cape
RHA	Royal Horse Artillery
RMO	Regimental Medical Officer
RMT	Reserve Mechanical Transport
RTR	Royal Tank Regiment
Sanyet	Deep well
SDR	Special Despatch Rider
Sidi	Saint
Tell	Mound (usually artificial)
Wadi	Watercourse (dry)
Wishka	Palm

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

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BATTLE FOR EGYPT

INDEX

Index

, 16, 123

Abbott, Maj R. B., 121, 295

Abu Dweis, Naqb, 70, 71, 73, 74, 136, 137, 139, 142, 150, 165, 185, 221, 322, 324, 326, 334

'Acrobat Minimus', 11

Acroma, 21, 136, 300

Adams, Maj R. W., 123

***Afrika Korps*, 1, 2, 11, 66, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 85, 86, 92, 93, 94, 96, 102, 125, 126, 127, 128, 130, 132, 134, 140, 141, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 167, 169, 172, 175, 176, 178, 182, 183, 184, 187, 195, 196, 199, 200, 201, 202, 205, 207, 209, 215, 219, 224, 230, 255, 259, 260, 261, 262, 266, 273, 282, 283, 284, 285, 288, 289, 308, 309, 314, 317, 324, 338, 350, 360, 361, 362, 365, 377**

Agheila, 2, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 24, 40, 151

Aitken, S-Sgt H. J. A., 242

Alam Baoshaza, 167

Alam el Dihmaniya, 182, 203, 206, 215, 222, 250, 308, 309, 313, 315, 333

Alam Halfa, 227, 304, 313, 319

Alam Nayil, 162, 166, 167, 169, 172, 175, 183, 190, 197, 202, 206,

213, 215, 230, 234, 242, 249, 284, 297, 311, 315, 330, 377

Alamein, 44, 49, 53, 61, 63, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 93, 100, 103, 115, 117, 119, 120, 122, 123, 128, 129, 130, 133, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 142, 144, 145, 146, 147, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 165, 169, 172, 173, 175, 177, 178, 183, 185, 186, 191, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 201, 204, 209, 210, 211, 213, 215, 219, 220, 221, 230, 232, 237, 240, 272, 283, 300, 301, 314, 319, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 334, 335, 379

Alanbrooke, Fd Mshl Lord, 380

Aleppo, 23, 33, 42, 51

Alexander, Fd Mshl Earl, 379, 380

Alexandria, 44, 49, 52, 83, 137, 336

Amiriya, 51, 57, 123, 138, 227, 310, 311, 374

Allen, Brig S.F., 65, 121, 122, 123, 180, 228, 251, 270, 271, 272, 299, 348

Ana, 25, 26

Anatolia, 23, 24, 26, 35

Anderson, Lt-Col J. N., 88

Andrew, Brig L. W., 8

Andrew, Maj M. A., 316

Ardagh, Brig P. A., 99

2 Armoured Brigade, 213, 218, 222, 249, 257, 258, 283, 287, 301, 305, 308, 309, 323, 333, 334, 337, 339, 346, 349, 354, 356, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 364, 365, 366, 367

4 Armoured Brigade, 60, 130, 157

22 Armoured Brigade, 60, 98, 130, 157, 158, 167, 178, 179, 218, 249, 279, 282, 284, 287, 301, 308, 309, 314, 323, 331, 333, 337, 339, 346, 358, 360, 366, 374

23 Armoured Brigade, 322, 324, 325, 334, 339, 348, 356, 357, 358, 359, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367

1 Armoured Division, 60, 61, 62, 68, 70, 74, 75, 78, 80, 85, 90, 91, 93, 97, 99, 100, 101, 118, 122, 129, 140, 141, 150, 152, 157, 162, 163, 165, 167, 169, 175, 178, 187, 190, 192, 194, 195, 206, 210, 211, 213, 214, 218, 221, 222, 223, 224, 230, 258, 259, 296, 297, 303, 306, 315, 319, 325, 326, 327, 328, 333, 335, 337, 339, 341, 348, 349, 354, 366, 367, 376, 378

7 Armoured Division, 60, 70, 78, 122, 140, 150, 151, 179, 184, 189, 196, 202, 211, 297, 311, 315, 320, 321, 325, 326, 327, 335

8th Army, 1, 4, 11, 12, 15, 18, 20, 21, 22, 41, 43, 44, 45, 47, 52, 53, 56, 57, 59, 62, 63, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 75, 77, 78, 81, 89, 90, 91, 99, 100, 120, 125, 128, 129, 130, 133, 134, 136, 137, 138, 142, 144, 146, 147, 148, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 157, 159, 164, 165, 177, 178, 184, 186, 187, 192, 193, 194, 196, 197, 204, 210, 211, 212, 214, 215, 220, 221, 222, 223, 225, 251, 300, 307, 311, 312, 319, 320, 321, 322, 324, 325, 336, 337, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 370, 375, 379, 380

9th Army, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 32

10th Army, 24, 25, 26, 27

Auchinleck, Fd Mshl, Sir Claude J. E., 1, 5, 6, 11, 15, 18, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30, 39, 41, 44, 50, 53, 62, 69, 71, 72, 73, 74, 100, 101, 129, 130, 136, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 146, 148, 158, 159, 160, 162, 163, 165, 166, 167, 175, 177, 178, 186, 187, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 220, 221, 223, 299, 319, 320, 321, 322,

324, 325, 336, 364, 366, 368, 375, 377, 379, 380

20 Australian Brigade, 213

24 Australian Brigade, 195, 213

6 Australian Division, 22

7 Australian Division, 22

9 Australian Division, 28, 51, 61, 147, 177, 187, 195, 335

, 22, 23, 28, 33, 51

‘Bacon’, 213, 214, 215, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221

Baggush, 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 14, 48, 60, 69, 123, 300, 323

Bailey, Lt A. F., 376

Baker, Lt-Col F., 217

Bardia, 4, 7, 11, 13, 40

Barrel Track, 213, 283, 322

Barrington, Brig B., 119

Barrowclough, Maj-Gen Rt Hon Sir Harold, 8

Bassett, Maj B. I., 185

3/10th Baluch Regiment, 249, 283, 285

‘Battleaxe’, 4, 5, 137

Batty, Capt J. E., 243, 294

‘Bedstead’, 99, 100

Beesley, Capt J., 343

Begg, Capt T. F., 234

Bekaa Valley, 28, 33, 42

Belhamed, 9, 42, 136, 243, 300

Benghazi, 18, 79

Beyer, Maj A. E., 316, 342

**Bir Abu Batta, 65, 66, 67, 88, 93, 103, 104, 105, 109, 110, 111, 120,
121, 124, 125, 126**

Bir Abu Shayit, 80

Bir el Gibb, 85, 87

Bir el Makh Khad, 153, 213

Bir el Sarahna, 64, 65, 82

**Bir Hacheim, 15, 18, 21, 40, 44, 45, 47, 50, 136, 142, 147, 151,
335, 380**

Bir Khalda, 65, 66, 97, 100, 101, 104

Bir Shineina, 80, 85, 86, 88, 89, 93, 94, 102

Blackett, Sgt F. G., 256

'Blood Orange', 11

Brash, Capt D. G., 343

Brett, Maj C. L., 242, 243, 244, 245, 294

29 Brigade, 60, 82, 83

69 Brigade, 59, 92, 378

151 Brigade, 82, 84, 86, 87, 92

Briggs, Brig R., 258, 259

Brink, Lt-Gen G. E., 5

Broad, Cpl J. E., 344

Bryant, Maj A. L., 117, 119

Burnett-Stuart, Gen Sir John, 137

Burridge, Capt W. H., 243

**Burrows, Brig J. T., 9, 99, 104, 105, 107, 108, 110, 111, 162, 185,
188, 218, 227, 241, 246, 250, 270, 276, 278, 287, 288, 293,
295, 296, 299, 304, 306, 311**

Burton, Lt-Col H. G., 374

Bush, Capt R. G., 242, 246

Butcher, Capt E. B., 235, 270, 271, 272

Butland, Capt W. C., 270

**, 16, 17, 32, 34, 44, 50, 53, 79, 119, 137, 145, 146, 164, 196, 197,
311, 336, 374, 379**

Caucasus, The, 23, 24, 27, 34, 35

‘Cauldron’, The, 45, 47, 59, 300, 324

Charing Cross, 53, 54, 55, 60, 62, 80, 81, 82, 327

Chesterman, Maj E. R., 185

Churchill, Sir Winston, 11, 12, 19, 20, 38, 133, 379, 380

Clark, Pte, 235

Clifton, Brig G. H., 9, 23, 57, 127, 138, 139, 143, 180, 313, 330,

**331, 332, 341, 344, 345, 346, 347, 349, 353, 362, 363, 366,
367, 370**

Conolly, Lt-Col J., 343

Cooper, Capt G. S., 271

Corbett, Lt-Gen T. W., 144, 380

Cornwall, Lt-Gen Marshall, 137

**10 Corps, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 91, 92, 93, 120,
128, 129**

**13 Corps, 60, 61, 62, 64, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 90, 91, 93, 94, 98, 99,
118, 119, 120, 128, 129, 133, 134, 135, 143, 150, 151, 158,
160, 162, 167, 175, 179, 184, 186, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194,
197, 205, 208, 210, 214, 217, 218, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225,
226, 233, 259, 260, 297, 299, 303, 306, 309, 311, 320, 321,
322, 323, 324, 327, 331, 333, 337, 339, 348, 349, 351, 358,
362, 364, 376, 377**

**30 Corps, 61, 70, 71, 160, 162, 177, 182, 184, 186, 187, 189, 192,
193, 195, 204, 209, 210, 213, 214, 215, 217, 221, 222, 223,
225, 273, 299, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 326, 337, 339, 364,
365, 375, 376, 377, 379, 380**

Crete, 2, 3, 5, 40, 107, 214

Crisp, Maj A. J., 123

Crump, Brig S. H., 119

Cunningham, Admiral of the Fleet Viscount, 14

Cunningham, Lt-Gen Sir Alan, 4, 40, 41

Cyprus, 24, 34

Cyrenaica, 1, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 18, 20, 24, 40, 41, 43, 44, 47, 49, 59, 60, 79, 300, 313, 323

, 140, 177, 179, 182, 190, 192, 205, 322, 327, 334, 376

Damascus, 25, 28

Dasler, Maj R., 278, 289

Davies, L-Bdr W. F., 253

de Costa, 2 Lt R. G., 243, 244

Dee, Capt K. G., 121, 122

Deep Well, 207, 261, 262, 283, 284

Deir Alinda, 175, 186, 192, 199, 207, 209

Deir el Abyad, 14, 150, 151, 152, 156, 159, 187, 213, 214, 215, 260, 320, 322, 327

Deir el Angar, 197, 202, 207, 284, 301, 377

Deir el Dhib, 213, 375, 376

Deir el Harra, 99, 100, 103, 135, 182

Deir el Hima, 190, 211, 222, 249, 258, 259

Deir el Muhafid, 199, 210, 249, 257, 259

Deir el Munassib, 136, 137, 140, 141, 150, 152, 158, 163, 165, 169, 172, 173, 190, 191, 198, 199, 201, 209, 210, 232, 237, 240, 259, 283

Deir el Qatani, 189

Deir el Qattara, 71

**Deir el Shein, 136, 138, 139, 140, 141, 150, 152, 155, 156, 157,
158, 159, 160, 167, 177, 183, 187, 214, 215, 225, 251, 262,
274, 279, 281, 282, 313, 318, 322, 323, 327, 337, 338, 357, 358**

Deir el Tarfa, 210

Deir Umm Aisha, 249, 311

Deir Umm Khawabir, 202, 316

Derwentdale, 15

Desert Command, 2, 5

Dittmer, Brig G., 7, 8

Dizful, 25, 26

Djedeide, 23, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 41, 51

Djerablous, 34

Dorman-Smith, Lt-Gen E. E., 144, 380

Duckworth, S-Sgt A. J., 88

Duff, Brig C. S. J., 8

Dugleby, Maj L. W., 121

Dunbar, Lt-Col H. C. F. V., 359

Durham Light Infantry, 84

Duweir el Tarfa, 173

EGYPT, 11, 22, 47, 48, 59, 69, 79, 323

El Adem, 21, 22, 47, 136

El Kharita, 182, 193

El Mreir, 136, 159, 162, 172, 173, 175, 180, 182, 183, 186, 187, 191, 192, 196, 197, 199, 200, 203, 214, 225, 259, 263, 283, 284, 308, 318, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 330, 331, 332, 336, 337, 338, 339, 341, 342, 344, 345, 346, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 359, 360, 361, 362, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 370, 371, 373, 376

El Taqa, 196, 208, 215

El Wishka, 322

Elliott, 2 Lt K., 256, 257, 274, 275, 276, 305

Erskine, Maj-Gen G. W. E. J., 69, 73, 74, 90, 134

Essex Regiment, 86, 106, 110

Euphrates, R., 30, 34

‘Exalted’, 177

FAIRBROTHER, Col M. C., 124, 239, 251, 252, 256, 257, 277

Falconer, Brig A. S., 16

Farouk, King, 16, 17

Fayid, 14, 15, 18

Feltham, Maj R. J., 269

74 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, 84

121 Field Regiment, 86

Fisher, Brig A. F., 331, 332, 366, 379

Forqloss, 42, 43

Foster, Lt F. E., 88

Fraser, Sgt D. R., 292

Fraser, Rt Hon P., 3, 18, 20

Frazer, Maj K. J., 276, 277

Free French Brigade, 25, 61

Free French Troupes Speciales, 28

**Freyberg, Lt-Gen Lord, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15,
18, 19, 20, 34, 35, 36, 38, 39, 41, 42, 50, 53, 55, 56, 64, 65, 74,
90, 91, 92, 97, 98, 99, 103, 104, 118, 119, 145, 146, 211, 367**

**Fuka, 60, 83, 93, 100, 101, 120, 122, 123, 129, 135, 136, 137, 179,
190, 198, 322, 327, 376**

, 20

Garawla, 62, 64, 78, 80, 83, 92, 128, 323

Garmonsway, 2 Lt R. F., 274, 275

**Gatehouse, Maj-Gen A. H., 328, 329, 331, 333, 334, 339, 354, 358,
359, 366**

**Gazala, 4, 10, 15, 18, 21, 40, 44, 45, 47, 59, 136, 142, 147, 151,
325, 335, 380**

Gaziantep, 26

Gebel Kalakh, 196, 202, 215, 285

Gentry, Maj-Gen W. G., 50, 74, 90, 117, 347, 348, 349

George, Lt-Col C. D. A., 344, 345, 347

Ghazal, 184

Glengyle, 15

Gifford, Lt G. P. R., 314

Glasgow, Col K. W. R., 115, 116, 117, 119, 158

Gleeson, Lt-Col E. C., 81

Gordon-Finlayson, Gen Sir R., 137

Gott, Lt-Gen W. H. E., 20, 41, 53, 59, 74, 90, 91, 92, 98, 99, 100, 120, 134, 144, 145, 182, 184, 187, 190, 210, 212, 213, 214, 215, 217, 218, 222, 223, 302, 303, 316, 317, 323, 325, 326, 328, 329, 339, 349, 357, 358, 366, 376, 379, 380

'Graduate', 11

Grant, Lt-Col D. G., 189

Gray, Brig J. R., 16, 58, 112, 113, 166, 169, 185

Greece, 2, 3, 5, 25, 40

Greek Brigade, 25

Greville, Lt-Col A. W., 317, 342, 343, 344, 347, 353, 374

Griffiths, Maj J. L., 99

7th Guards Brigade Group, 40

22nd (Guards) Motorised Brigade, 11

Guides Cavalry, 60

de Guingand, Maj-Gen Sir F., 142

Gwilliam, Lt-Col F. J., 186, 227, 374

, 26, 51

Halfaya, 11, 18

Hall, Capt H. J., 341, 349

Hanson, Lt-Col F. M. H., 43, 63, 123, 331, 348, 357

Hanton, Maj S., 237, 238, 240, 254, 255, 299

Harding, Brig R. W., 348

Hargest, Brig J., 7, 302

Hartnell, Lt-Col S. F., 111, 245, 290, 296, 299

Hawkesby, Maj G. H., 272

Helwan, 119, 146

Highland Light Infantry, 83

Himeimat, 178, 180, 209, 210, 211, 213, 215, 262, 283

'Hindu', 158

**Holmes, Lt-Gen W. G., 53, 56, 59, 60, 61, 63, 69, 74, 91, 92, 128,
129**

Holt, Lt D. L., 363

Homs, 31, 33, 42

Horrocks, Capt R. E., 274

Hutchens, Lt-Col R. L., 191

3 INDIAN (MOTOR) BRIGADE, 60, 78

5 Indian Brigade, 86, 195, 249, 278, 293, 297, 305, 311, 313, 314

9 Indian Brigade, 47, 139, 165, 314, 334, 357

10 Indian Brigade, 47

18 Indian Brigade, 63, 138, 139, 140, 141, 152, 157, 159, 193, 251

29 Indian Brigade, 21, 47, 81, 82, 86, 129

161 Indian Brigade, 338, 364

4 Indian Division, 35

5 Indian Division, 54, 60, 61, 62, 63, 67, 68, 70, 71, 74, 75, 82, 86, 141, 150, 165, 179, 184, 187, 190, 195, 196, 199, 202, 222, 223, 224, 226, 234, 273, 289, 295, 297, 299, 308, 314, 318, 319, 320, 323, 325, 326, 327, 331, 334, 335, 350, 357, 358, 363, 364, 375

10 Indian Division, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 70, 71, 73, 74, 78, 86, 128, 150, 163

Inglis, Maj-Gen L. M., 54, 58, 99, 101, 103, 104, 107, 111, 112, 115, 117, 118, 119, 143, 144, 145, 146, 158, 166, 172, 182, 184, 187, 188, 190, 192, 210, 211, 212, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 222, 223, 225, 226, 250, 257, 259, 296, 297, 298, 299, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 310, 311, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 341, 342, 348, 349, 354, 358, 366, 367, 368, 374, 376

'Iodine', 99, 100

Iraq, 24, 25, 26, 35, 59, 63

Ironside, Capt C. G., 234, 271, 273

Ismailia, 49

JOHANSEN, Maj C. C., 296

Jones, Sgt R. G., 275

Judd, Maj L. E., 272

, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 23

Kanayis, 80

Kaponga Box, (see also Qaret el Abd), 117, 122, 123, 138, 139, 140, 141, 143, 150, 152, 158, 159, 163, 165, 166, 172, 173, 175, 179, 184, 186, 190, 191, 192, 196, 198, 199, 200, 202, 205, 207, 208, 215, 220, 224, 232, 234, 259, 272, 284, 285, 293, 301, 309, 317, 318, 323, 327, 338, 350, 361, 377

Kasr-el-Nil, 16

Kennedy, 2 Lt W. J., 294

Kesselring, Fd Mshl A., 48, 171, 176

Khalda, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 80, 85, 88, 92, 93, 95, 96, 99, 100, 116, 119, 120, 122, 123, 128, 129

Kippenberger, Maj-Gen Sir Howard, 8, 9, 15, 20, 54, 58, 115, 144, 145, 173, 175, 180, 190, 218, 227, 228, 234, 238, 239, 240, 251, 257, 258, 259, 278, 297, 301, 305, 306, 331, 332, 348, 354, 370

, 28, 30, 32

Lambourn, Lt-Col A. E., 87

Killearn, Lord, 17

9th Lancers, 258, 367

Latakia, 51

'Latton', 162

Laugesen, Capt N. W., 347

Leather, Maj, 81

Lebanon, 22, 28, 31

Libya, 50

4 Light Armoured Brigade, 195, 196, 322, 325, 326, 327, 339, 376

Little Zab R., 25, 26

Lord, 2 Lt S. V., 235

'Lounge', 100

Love, Lt-Col E. TeW., 217

'Luke', 187

**Lumsden, Lt-Gen H., 97, 99, 101, 104, 120, 122, 157, 214, 218, 258,
259, 301, 303, 328**

Luxford, Pte R. L., 269

**Lynch, Lt-Col R. J., 236, 242, 244, 257, 279, 294, 295, 296, 299,
315**

MCCONCHIE, 2 Lt P. A., 95

McElroy, Lt-Col H. M., 121, 122, 201, 251, 272, 305

McKinlay, Maj A. R., 341

McLauchlan, WO II R., 343

McLernon, Capt C. R., 289

McPhail, Lt-Col E. A., 258, 259, 278, 301

McQuarrie, Pte I. M., 363

Maadi, 7, 8, 10, 13, 16, 18, 32, 55, 58, 166, 180, 198, 219, 311

Maaten el Garawla, 70

Mahatt Abu Batta, 104, 105, 109

1 Mahrattas, 82

Maloney, Lt H. T., 185

Malta, 47, 48, 49

Manson, Maj I. O., 185, 246, 247, 290

Mantle, Sgt P. I., 96

Marmora, Sea of, 35

Marshall, Capt J. R. B., 236, 244, 276

Martin, Dvr O., 18

Mason, Capt C. T., 260, 278

Matthews, Capt R. H., 345

Matruh, 23, 48, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 91, 101, 110, 120, 123, 128, 129, 130, 132, 134, 136, 149, 150, 151, 196, 232, 324

Maxwell, Capt P. V. H., 246, 247

64 Medium Regiment, RA, 43, 70, 187

Middle East Command, 5

Middle East Defence Committee, 53

Middle East Headquarters, 5, 10, 13, 14, 15, 36, 39, 41, 50, 52, 53, 198

Miles, Brig R., 7, 8, 42

Minqar Qaim, 58, 59, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 71, 76, 80, 82, 83, 85, 87, 89, 92, 93, 97, 98, 99, 101, 103, 105, 108, 110, 115,

117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123, 125, 126, 130, 132, 133, 147,
219, 284, 290, 325

Minqar Sidi Hamza, 54

Miteiriya Ridge, 136, 213, 312, 320, 323, 339, 364, 375, 378

Montgomery, Fd Mshl Viscount, 371, 380

Moodie, Maj J. F., 94, 95

Morgan, Sgt F. G., 269

Morshead, Maj-Gen Sir L., 187

**7 Motor Brigade, 60, 75, 81, 117, 129, 130, 153, 167, 179, 183, 184,
190, 191, 197, 198, 199, 201, 207, 261, 339**

Mosul, 23

Mulloly, Sgt K. M., 96

Mungar Wahla, 180, 182, 188, 190, 192, 193, 198, 199, 233, 322

Mussolini, 48, 49, 196, 197, 365

NAGHAMISH Box, 55, 64

Nahas Pasha, 17

**Nehring, Lt-Gen W., 80, 93, 160, 163, 200, 209, 261, 262, 263, 266,
280, 281, 282, 283, 284, 285, 292, 293, 298, 307, 308, 310,
313, 350, 351, 360, 361**

**2 NZ Division, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 18, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 30,
33, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 50, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58,
61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 74, 76, 77, 80, 83, 84, 85,
86, 87, 88, 90, 91, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 103,
104, 107, 108, 111, 115, 118, 119, 120, 121, 123, 124, 125,
128, 129, 130, 133, 134, 135, 140, 141, 143, 144, 145, 146,**

150, 152, 155, 157, 158, 162, 163, 165, 166, 167, 179, 182,
184, 185, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 194, 195, 197, 198, 199,
202, 203, 205, 208, 210, 211, 213, 214, 215, 217, 218, 219,
221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 228, 229, 230, 232, 233, 234,
241, 249, 250, 251, 254, 259, 260, 261, 276, 277, 281, 284,
299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 307, 308, 309, 310,
311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 316, 318, 319, 320, 323, 325, 326,
327, 330, 333, 335, 341, 348, 349, 350, 351, 354, 358, 362,
364, 366, 367, 370, 373, 374, 375, 376, 377

Army Service Corps, 67, 119

Divisional Supply Company, 58

4 Reserve MT Company, 18

6 Reserve MT Company, 88

Reserve MT Companies, 1, 123

Artillery—

7 Anti-Tank Regiment, 9, 55, 330

**31 Anti-Tank Battery, 58, 67, 162, 227, 241, 242, 265, 266, 267,
282, 294**

32 Anti-Tank Battery, 65, 97, 158, 162, 227, 332

**33 Anti-Tank Battery, 58, 97, 162, 165, 172, 227, 228, 234, 239,
254**

34 Anti-Tank Battery, 227

48 Anti-Tank Battery, 277

**4 Field Regiment, 43, 58, 87, 94, 95, 108, 162, 179, 185, 188, 206,
227, 228, 242, 244, 248, 250, 278, 285, 304, 306, 309, 310,
311, 313, 374**

5 Field Regiment, 66, 96, 105, 112, 115, 117, 158, 172, 179, 187, 206, 227, 250, 285, 314, 330, 374

6 Field Regiment, 8, 9, 43, 58, 85, 87, 95, 97, 112, 158, 165, 172, 173, 180, 187, 208, 227, 228, 251, 257, 277, 279, 304, 305, 306, 313, 315, 362, 374

14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, 57, 330

25 Field Battery, 63

27 Field Battery, 65, 66, 121, 122, 123

28 Field Battery, 162, 374

30 Field Battery, 87, 88, 97, 251

46 Field Battery, 67

41 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, 58, 227, 242

42 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, 227

43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery, 58, 165, 172, 227, 228, 308

36 Survey Battery, 52

Divisional Cavalry Regiment, 1, 4, 18, 43, 50, 52, 83, 101, 103, 121, 123, 175, 180, 182, 202, 207, 227, 250, 277, 279, 282, 311, 315, 330, 331, 358, 360, 374, 377

Divisional Headquarters, 57, 62, 66, 70, 87, 112, 115, 140, 141, 175, 184, 186, 199, 208, 210, 239, 248, 249, 257, 265, 270, 276, 279, 280, 287, 347, 354

Divisional Postal Unit, 57

Divisional Provost Company, 173, 210

Divisional Reserve Group, 57, 58, 62, 66, 95, 96, 105, 112, 175, 184,

186, 202, 210, 227, 250, 262, 279, 282, 285, 310, 311, 314

Divisional Signals, 229, 248, 331, 347, 354

Engineers, 43

6 Field Company, 62, 67, 227, 242, 265, 293, 298

7 Field Company, 62, 65, 67, 88, 173, 227, 238, 254, 318, 331, 357

8 Field Company, 139, 173, 316, 332, 343, 362

5 Field Park Company, 57, 67, 171, 331, 357

Field Censorship Section, 3, 38

Infantry—

4 Brigade, 9, 16, 18, 23, 43, 54, 55, 57, 58, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 93, 94, 95, 96, 99, 103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 113, 116, 118, 119, 120, 126, 127, 140, 141, 166, 167, 175, 179, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 193, 198, 199, 202, 203, 210, 216, 219, 222, 225, 227, 228, 233, 239, 241, 245, 248, 249, 250, 251, 255, 264, 265, 266, 268, 270, 276, 278, 280, 282, 283, 287, 289, 293, 296, 297, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 306, 307, 310, 311, 332

5 Brigade, 1, 4, 7, 9, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 22, 30, 42, 43, 57, 58, 62, 64, 65, 66, 67, 87, 88, 93, 96, 101, 103, 104, 105, 111, 112, 115, 116, 118, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 140, 141, 162, 166, 172, 175, 180, 182, 186, 187, 189, 191, 192, 193, 198, 199, 201, 202, 203, 207, 208, 209, 210, 216, 222, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 236, 237, 238, 239, 241, 248, 249, 250, 251, 255, 258, 259, 270, 276, 278, 279, 280, 287, 296, 297, 298, 299, 301, 302, 304, 308, 310, 311, 313, 314, 315, 318, 330, 331, 338, 354, 356, 374

6 Brigade, 8, 9, 16, 18, 23, 30, 42, 51, 54, 57, 140, 141, 143, 158,

166, 180, 184, 186, 201, 219, 298, 313, 314, 315, 328, 329,
330, 331, 332, 334, 337, 338, 339, 346, 348, 349, 350, 351,
352, 353, 354, 355, 358, 362, 364, 366, 374

9 Brigade, 60

10 Brigade, 60

**18 Battalion, 9, 58, 87, 96, 98, 112, 113, 219, 227, 228, 236, 237,
241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 255, 257, 265, 270, 279, 288,
293, 294, 298, 299, 310, 311, 314, 315, 330, 331, 338, 346,
349, 360, 361, 362, 364, 374**

**19 Battalion, 9, 50, 58, 66, 87, 94, 102, 105, 106, 109, 169, 171,
179, 186, 188, 189, 216, 227, 228, 236, 242, 243, 244, 245,
246, 248, 279, 286, 289, 290, 292, 293, 298, 299, 310, 315, 374**

**20 Battalion, 9, 55, 58, 62, 66, 67, 94, 95, 99, 105, 106, 109, 185,
188, 191, 216, 227, 233, 241, 244, 245, 247, 262, 264, 266,
268, 269, 283, 189, 290, 292, 293, 298, 299, 310, 374**

**21 Battalion, 9, 65, 101, 104, 119, 120, 121, 124, 162, 173, 175,
180, 201, 203, 208, 216, 227, 228, 234, 235, 236, 238, 239,
241, 242, 244, 245, 246, 251, 256, 260, 262, 270, 274, 276,
293, 295, 298, 299, 305, 311, 315, 342, 348, 355, 357, 358, 376**

**22 Battalion, 66, 67, 105, 117, 162, 173, 175, 180, 189, 203, 216,
227, 228, 237, 238, 239, 251, 252, 254, 255, 256, 257, 266,
270, 274, 275, 276, 280, 298, 299, 303, 304, 305, 306, 310, 313**

**23 Battalion, 66, 121, 162, 173, 175, 180, 189, 216, 227, 228, 234,
235, 236, 238, 239, 241, 251, 254, 256, 257, 260, 270, 271,
272, 273, 274, 276, 278, 297, 298, 299, 305, 311, 314, 315,
330, 376**

**24 Battalion, 9, 16, 180, 313, 315, 316, 317, 330, 332, 338, 339,
340, 341, 342, 344, 345, 346, 347, 349, 350, 352, 354, 362,
364, 374**

25 Battalion, 9, 16, 180, 191, 199, 314, 315, 317, 318, 330, 338, 339, 341, 344, 347, 349, 350, 352, 355, 362, 363, 374

26 Battalion, 9, 180, 227, 250, 297, 298, 304, 310, 314, 315, 330, 332, 338, 339, 340, 342, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 354, 355, 364, 367, 374, 375

27 (Machine Gun) Battalion, 227

1 Machine Gun Company, 58

2 Machine Gun Company, 162, 227, 241, 266

3 Machine Gun Company, 332

4 Machine Gun Company, 173, 227, 239, 252, 276

28 (Maori) Battalion, 8, 14, 43, 51, 58, 66, 67, 86, 95, 98, 105, 107, 165, 184, 185, 188, 216, 217, 227, 313, 314, 315, 355, 363

Medical Corps, 33

4 Field Ambulance, 55, 57, 111, 227

5 Field Ambulance, 55, 57, 173, 191, 227

4 Field Hygiene Section, 57

2 General Hospital, 119

Rear Divisional Headquarters, 67, 96, 119, 315

Nicholson, Lt-Col S. W., 267

Norrie, Lt-Gen Sir C. W. M., 53, 56, 136, 138, 139, 142, 143, 158, 195, 251

Norris, Capt P. T., 234, 236, 276, 278

North Africa, 2, 34, 40, 44, 79, 82, 133, 241

50 (Northumbrian) Division, 59, 60, 61, 63, 68, 70, 71, 78, 92, 141, 175, 178, 194, 325, 326, 335

OLLIVIER, Capt C. M., 234, 239, 253

PAGE, Maj H. C., 357

Palestine, 22, 28

Panzerarmee Afrika, 47, 48, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 91, 92, 93, 127, 128, 130, 149, 151, 152, 154, 155, 156, 160, 161, 162, 164, 172, 175, 177, 182, 183, 184, 189, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 200, 201, 204, 205, 207, 219, 259, 261, 262, 274, 281, 282, 302, 311, 312, 313, 319, 320, 324, 325, 334, 335, 336, 338, 339, 360, 364, 366, 375

Parks, WO I C. H., 291

Paterson, Capt T. M., 296

Paulger, Gnr A. D., 253

Peake, Brig R., 97, 118

Pearson, Maj R. S., 185

Peart, Lt-Col J. N., 250, 339, 340, 341, 342, 349, 352, 354, 355

Pemberton, Lt-Col R. C., 362, 363

Perks, Capt W. E., 189

Persia, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, 50

Philip, S-Sgt R. J., 271

Pienaar, Maj-Gen D. H., 138, 145

'Pike', 101

Pleasants, Brig C. L., 113, 315

Point 59, 326, 357, 359

Point 62, 308, 314, 315, 318, 320, 357, 361

Point 63, 187, 213, 214, 215, 221, 222, 224, 225, 226, 236, 247, 258, 259, 261, 263, 266, 267, 268, 280, 282, 283, 285, 289, 292, 296, 301, 304, 305, 314, 323, 326, 327, 337, 338, 350, 357, 358, 360, 361

Point 64 (*see also* Point 63), 221, 222, 224, 273, 277, 278, 297, 300, 309, 311

Point 65, 240, 251, 257

Point 66, 240

Point 69, 331, 342

Point 102, 211

Point 175, 8

Polish Brigade, 25

Port Said, 49

Port Tewfik, 15

Pountney, Lt-Col J. A., 277, 278

Princess Marguerite, 15

Provost Corps, 32

Q_{ABR} ABU R_{AIYAT}, 96

Qaret el Abd (see also Kaponga), 137, 138, 150, 162

Qaret el Himeimat, 137, 141, 142, 158, 165, 169, 230

Qaret el Yidma, 184, 185, 190, 191, 192, 197

Qarima, 85

Qasaba, 71

Qattara Depression, 48, 49, 123, 136, 137, 152, 193, 199

4/6 RAJPUTANA RIFLES, 249, 278

Ramsden, Maj-Gen W. H., 195, 213, 223, 380

Raqabet el Retem, 185

Raqabet el Sikka, 86

Ras Baalbek, 25, 32

Ras el Ali, 11, 14, 15

Ras el Qattara, 70, 73, 74

Ras el Sudr, 15

Reid, Lt-Col H. M., 241, 247, 269, 270, 294, 295

Richards, Lt-Col E. E., 340

Rintelen, Gen von, 48, 49, 193, 197

Ritchie, Lt-Gen N. M., 44, 52, 53, 56

'Revelations', 187

Robinson, Dvr C. C., 111

Robinson, Sgt W. J., 247

Romans, Lt-Col R. E., 278, 297

Rome, 48, 79, 259

Rommel, Fd Mshl E., 1, 11, 12, 14, 18, 24, 40, 41, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 53, 59, 61, 66, 76, 77, 79, 80, 85, 89, 92, 93, 96, 120, 125, 126, 127, 128, 132, 140, 149, 150, 151, 152, 154, 156, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 167, 171, 172, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 182, 184, 187, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 200, 201, 202, 204, 205, 208, 214, 215, 218, 220, 223, 227, 230, 231, 255, 260, 285, 299, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 319, 320, 321, 322, 324, 326, 327, 334, 335, 336, 337, 360, 361, 364, 370, 374, 375, 376

Ross, Lt-Col A. B., 88, 119

Royal Air Force, 2, 3, 35, 65, 78, 79, 135, 177, 180, 203, 311, 315, 323, 335, 338, 339, 344, 345, 379

Royal Armoured Corps, 13

Royal Australian Air Force, 43

Royal Navy, 142

3/5 Royal Tank Regiment, 258, 360

6 Royal Tank Regiment, 213, 258, 346, 378

44 Royal Tank Regiment, 21, 213

Russell, Lt-Col J. T., 21, 117, 118, 119, 125, 175, 237

Russia, 34, 35, 78

Rutherford, Capt A. M., 341, 363

Ruweisat Ridge, 111, 136, 138, 141, 145, 150, 151, 152, 156, 157, 159, 162, 163, 167, 169, 175, 178, 183, 184, 190, 192, 194,

195, 196, 197, 202, 210, 213, 215, 218, 220, 221, 223, 224,
229, 230, 231, 232, 241, 251, 257, 258, 259, 262, 281, 283,
293, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 307, 308, 311, 312,
313, 314, 315, 318, 319, 320, 321, 325, 328, 331, 332, 333,
334, 336, 349, 357, 358, 361, 362, 368, 371, 374, 376

Saint Essylt, 15

Sanyet el Miteireiya, 204, 213, 221, 322

Sanyet el Murra, 153

Satterthwaite, Col S. M., 8

Savage, Rt Hon M. J., 4, 13

Sawyers, Lt-Col C. H., 277

‘Seedling’, 205

Shaw, Capt R. A., 256, 274, 275, 276, 376

Sidey, Maj T. K. S., 124

Sidi Abd el Rahman, 184, 204, 205, 327, 375

Sidi Barrani, 5, 48, 54, 55, 77, 78

Sidi Hamza, 60, 61, 63, 71, 83

Sidi Haneish, 67

Sidi Muftah, 45, 59

Sidi Rezegh, 4, 9, 21, 40, 41, 108

Siwa, 55, 60, 66, 67, 75, 78, 80, 81, 82, 83, 85, 86, 93

Smith, Maj D. J. M., 86, 106, 110

Smith, Lt-Gen Sir A. F., 10

Smugglers' Cove, 51, 55

Smuts, Fd Mshl J. C., 145, 379

Snadden, Maj J. P., 162

Sollum, 18

1 South African Brigade, 183, 194

2 South African Brigade, 157, 175, 183, 194

3 South African Brigade, 183

1 South African Division, 61, 78, 141, 193, 195, 314, 335

2 South African Division, 4, 18

'Sprawl', 35

Stevenson, Sgt J. L., 296

Stewart, Col G. J. O., 117

'Stuka Wadi', 251, 252, 257, 277, 298, 311

Suez Canal, 25, 44, 49, 79, 311

Suez Canal Zone, 17

Sullivan, Capt J. G., 185, 233, 247

Sutherland, Lt-Col J. H., 121, 122, 123

Sutton, Capt H. B. J., 243

Swallow, Capt C. K., 269

**Syria, 5, 6, 10, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 37, 43, 50,
52, 58, 61, 65, 83, 177, 232**

TAQA PLATEAU, 123, 315, 323, 377

Taurus Mountains, 23, 26

Tell el Aqqaqir, 140, 159

Tell el Eisa, 153, 194, 204, 210, 213, 220, 262, 282, 312, 319, 320, 321, 322, 339

Tell el Makh Khad, 308, 312, 320, 322, 339

Theron, Maj-Gen A. F., 145

Thompson, Capt S. B., 255

Thomson, Capt D. S., 111, 290

Tobruk, 18, 21, 44, 47, 52, 53, 79, 101, 136, 183, 196, 324

Trigh Capuzzo, 21, 45

Trigh el Abd, 45

Tripoli, 11, 25, 26, 28, 49

Tripolitania, 11, 13

Trounson, Lt R. D., 203

Tunisia, 154

Turkey, 5, 6, 23, 26, 34, 35, 36

Turtill, Capt K. S., 344

UPHAM, Capt C. H., 110, 246, 247, 268, 290

WADI MATRATIN, 113

Wadi Natrun, 186

Wadi el Huraiqa, 128

Wadi el Tawawiya, 59, 60

Wadi el Zarqa, 129

Wafdist Party, 17

Walden, Maj E. F., 355, 356, 367

Wallace, Capt L. N., 236, 244, 272, 276

Walsh, Brig J. J., 69, 73

Walter, Lt-Col C. L., 165, 173

Washbourn, Capt G. W., 247

Watkins, Gnr A. W., 96

Watson, Lt-Col C. N., 173, 234, 238, 254, 276, 299

Wavell, Fd Mshl Lord, 40, 41, 137, 379

Wavell Barracks, 22

Webb, Lt-Col R G., 316

Weichold, Vice-Admiral, 48, 78, 79

Weir, Maj-Gen C. E., 8, 42, 43, 65, 119, 162, 163, 331

1 Welch Regiment, 18

West-Watson, Capt K. C., 270, 272

Western Desert, 23, 35, 50

Whiteley, Brig J. F. M., 71, 73, 91, 133, 134

Wilcox, Capt N. B., 343

Wilder, Maj-Gen A. S., 4, 8, 15, 302

Williams, Lt-Col J. R., 340

Wilson, Fd Mshl Lord, 23, 25

Wood, Capt A. C., 217

Wood, Maj D. L., 292

Wroth, Maj C. S., 345, 346

YOUNG, Capt R. M., 340

BATTLE FOR EGYPT

[BACKMATTER]

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