

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

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## *Encoding*

**Prepared for the New Zealand Electronic Text Centre as part of the Official War History project.**

**All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the trailing part of a word has been joined to the preceding line. Every effort has been made to preserve the Māori macron using unicode.**

**Some keywords in the header are a local Electronic Text Centre scheme to aid in establishing analytical groupings.**

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**Added name tags around various names of people, places, and organisations.**

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**Added TEI header**

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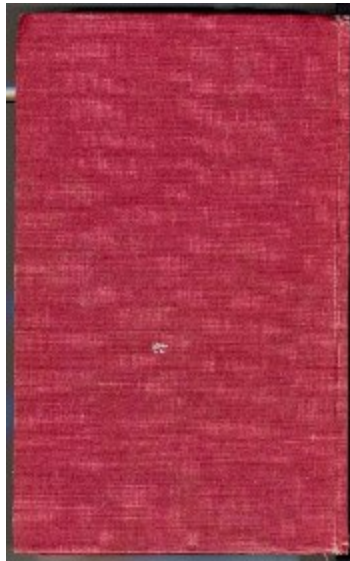
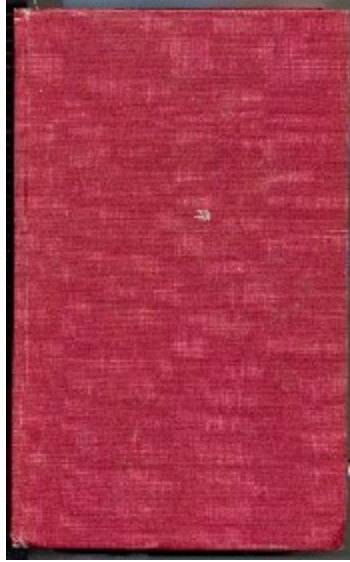
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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

[COVERS]



# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## OFFICIAL HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR 1939-45

### *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45*

**The authors of the volumes in this series of histories prepared under the supervision of the **War History Branch** of the Department of Internal Affairs have been given full access to official documents. They and the Editor-in-Chief are responsible for the statements made and the views expressed by them.**

**By Authority:**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## [FRONTISPIECE]



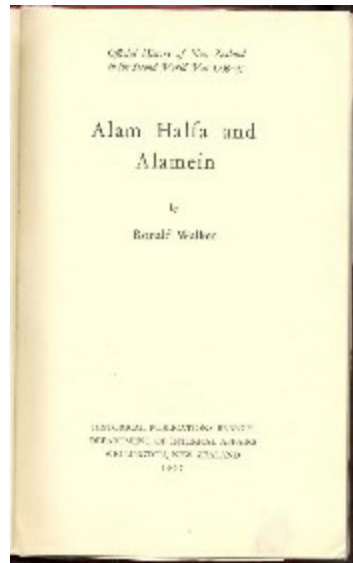
General Freyberg discusses plans for the Alamein battle with his brigadiers on 23 October 1942

**General Freyberg discusses plans for the Alamein battle with his brigadiers on 23 October 1942**

***From left:* Brigadiers C. E. Weir (CRA), W. G. Gentry (6 Brigade) partly obscured, Lieutenant-Colonel F. M. H. Hanson (CRE), Brigadiers H. K. Kippenberger (5 Brigade), J. C. Currie (9 Armoured Brigade) and General Freyberg**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

[TITLE PAGE]



***Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45***  
**Alam Halfa and Alamein**

**Ronald Walker**

**HISTORICAL PUBLICATIONS BRANCH**  
**DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## PREFACE

### *Preface*

**THIS** volume was intended to be an account of the part played by the New Zealand Division in the two battles from which the title is drawn. Work on it was commenced by **Lieutenant-Colonel J. L. Scoullar** as the sequel to his *Battle for Egypt*, published in 1955, but his untimely death in 1956 caused the task to be handed on to me. Owing to a disparity of style and approach I took the liberty of completely rewriting his draft which covered the opening of the **Alam Halfa** battle, but would record my indebtedness for the work he had already done.

I found, on beginning my task, that a picture of the New Zealand share in the battles could only be drawn in its true perspective against a clear background of the events occurring to all the forces concerned, both Allied and Axis. This I have attempted to do, so that, although the Division remains in the foreground, I have mentioned the names of only those New Zealanders whose actions affected operations or illustrate the conditions under which the battle was fought. For a detailed record of the gallant actions of officers and men, I would refer the reader to the numerous unit histories published by the **War History Branch**.

My acknowledgments are due to **Mr W. D. Dawson** and **Mr R. L. Kay** for the research they have undertaken on the New Zealand share in this campaign, and to Brigadier H. B. Latham, Brigadier C. J. C. Molony and Lieutenant-Colonel M. E. S. Laws of the Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office whose narratives and willing assistance in supplying material have been invaluable.

I would take this opportunity of paying a tribute to the first Editor-in-Chief of the New Zealand War Histories, the late **Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger**, whose wisdom, guidance and capacity to inspire loyalty made the project possible, and to his successor, **Brigadier M. C.**

**Fairbrother**, who did so much to ensure that the planned series of volumes was completed by a staff slowly diminishing under the pull of more lucrative employment. My gratitude goes to all those members of the staff who have helped me, particularly to the present editor, **Mr W. A. Glue**, for his continuing support and co-operation, and to Miss Elsie Janes for typing my manuscript. I am also grateful to Professor N. C. Phillips, formerly Professor of History and now Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canterbury, for his helpful comments.

The maps were drawn by the Cartographic Branch of the Lands and Survey Department and the index was prepared by Mrs M. Fogarty of the Historical Publications Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs.

Finally, though the story told is as close to the facts as detailed research can shape it, the views and opinions expressed are my own.

WELLINGTON

**August 1966**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHRONOLOGY

### Chronology

1942

- 3 August Churchill arrives in **Cairo**
- 9 " Alexander arrives in **Middle East**
- 10 " 'Pedestal' convoy to **Malta** passes Gibraltar
- 12 " Montgomery arrives in **Middle East**
- 12-15 " **Moscow** conference (Churchill, Harriman, Stalin)
- 19 " Allied raid on Dieppe
- 23 " Axis attack on **Stalingrad**
- 30 " **Panzer Army** advances on **Alam Halfa**
- 1 September Operation **BULIMBA**
- 3 " Operation **BERESFORD**
- 13 " Raids on **Tobruk, Barce**, etc., begin
- 23 " Rommel relieved by Stumme
- 24 " Axis penetration of **Stalingrad** defences
- 30 " Operation by 44 Division in **Munassib Depression**
- 23 October **LIGHTFOOT** opens at **Alamein**
- 25 " Australians start crumbling operations to north  
Rommel returns to **Africa**
- 26 " 10 Corps aims at **Kidney Ridge**
- Night " New Zealand and South African divisions advance to
- 26/27 " final objective 7 Motor Brigade action at 'Snipe'
- 27 " **21 Panzer Division** moves to the northern sector
- Night October Advance by 133 Brigade New Zealand Division relieved
- 27/28 " by South African Division
- Night November **SUPERCHARGE** opens
- 1/2
- 2 " Action by 9 Armoured Brigade Royals break out  
Rommel informs **Hitler** of proposal to withdraw
- Night " Advance by 7 Motor Brigade to west repulsed
- 2/3
- 3 " **Panzer Army** thins out Operation by 5/7 Gordons  
repulsed

- Night 3/4 ” **Advances to south-west by Indians and Highlanders**
- 4 ” ***Panzer Army* withdraws but Eighth Army held by rearguards**
- Night 4/5 ” **Eighth Army drives west in pursuit**
- 6-7 ” **Eighth Army's advance slowed by heavy rain**
- 8 ” **TORCH landings in North Africa**
- 11 ” **New Zealanders ascend *Halfaya Pass***
- 19 ” **Russian counter-offensive at *Stalingrad* begins**

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



# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

# CHAPTER 1 – THE OPPOSING ARMIES

## CHAPTER 1

### *The Opposing Armies*

*i*

**THE** heat of the summer sun beating down on the Egyptian desert, the fine dust that rose with any wind or movement, and the legions of flies made August in the **Alamein** line almost unendurable. The men of the British Eighth Army and the German-Italian *Panzer Army of Africa*, facing one another across an ill-defined no-man's land, were settling in to a period of static warfare as the several inconclusive actions of July petered out.

On 30 July 1942 the brigade major of 6 New Zealand Brigade had written in his diary:

**Tour FDLs and examine minefields. Troops a bit lethargic but cheerful enough. Slit trenches shallow but men show no concern. Say that rock is hard and compressors few.... Dearth of information criticised.... Weather very hot. Visibility bad. Little activity.... 2000 hrs mild shelling of Bde HQ area, followed by quiet night. <sup>1</sup>**

The men of 6 Brigade were fortunate in that they faced the enemy across a no-man's land measured in miles. In 5 Brigade's sector and further north, where the fronts converged until they were in easy range of mortars and small arms, lethargy was less evident. Here, movement in daylight was hazardous but, with the fall of darkness, the desert became alive as men rose from cramped slit trenches to arm themselves with picks and shovels. Some worked on their own 'slitties', deepening them to the four to five feet laid down in orders; others worked with the sappers who brought up their compressors and truckloads of barbed wire, pickets and mines; while, behind the front, still others worked on gun positions, headquarters, supply dumps, medical aid posts—all the various tasks of digging that occupied the soldiers' time more than the actual fighting.

On the low ridges, **Tell el Eisa**, Miteiriya, Ruweisat and **Alam Nayil**, the men digging and driving pickets for the barbed wire cursed at the intractable rocky ground. Digging was easier in the hollows where the sand lay deep, ground to dust by the passage of innumerable vehicles and the explosions of shell and bomb, a dust as fine as sifted powder which followed even the lifting boot.

All through the night, in the no-man's land between the two lines of toiling men, patrols crept quietly about their missions of observing and interrupting the other side's work. At intervals a sudden staccato outburst of rifle and automatic fire and the crump of mortar bombs would break the silence as real or imagined foes were seen by the men protecting the working parties. Possibly another corpse would be added to those already lying unburied and untended between the lines.

From the dark sky overhead came the rhythmic pulse of bombers searching for gunflash or other telltale sign on which to drop their bombs. Then the gunners, unhurriedly loading and firing the field or medium guns to harass an unseen enemy, would pause in their task, as the aircraft passed close overhead, to listen for the first faint whisper of a bomb.

It was during the hours of darkness that reinforcements and reliefs moved into the front line, passing the lightly wounded and the sick, sufferers from the prevalent desert sores, 'Gyppo tummy', jaundice, or malaria, who were making their way back to the medical aid posts. Trucks criss-crossed the desert, each with its plume of dust to thicken the gloom into which the drivers peered for signs of minefield or slit trench, as the army services went about their business of replenishing rations, water and ammunition.

Before the first hint of dawn appeared, all this nocturnal activity



slackened off. Patrols, working parties, and their guards moved quietly back to their own lines, the infantrymen slipping into their narrow slit trenches, often to wake their more fortunate comrades who, not detailed for nightly tasks, had managed to get a few hours' sleep in the cool of darkness.

As the sun rose behind the Eighth Army, the men of both sides 'stood to', ready for a dawn assault. One observant diarist noted that the flies stayed abed for twenty minutes after the official 'first light'; after this short respite, they appeared in their myriads to add their unpleasant attentions to the heat and the dust and the discomforts of the day until the sun set behind the *Panzer Army*.

Throughout the day the British artillery fired on known, observed, or suspected targets such as gun and infantry positions, groups of trucks or tanks, and the tracks by which the enemy's positions were supplied. Especially on a calm, clear morning with the sun rising behind them and visibility in their favour, the field gunners and the men manning the Vickers machine guns were very active. The Eighth Army, with its base installations so close to the front, was never really short of ammunition at this period. The German-Italian army was already beginning to feel the strain of its long haul from the rear, and its artillery consequently confined itself to occasional salvos on observed movement and a routine of dropping a few shells on headquarters areas or cookhouses, the shelling of the latter often coinciding with normal mealtime hours.

Except for the unequal artillery duel, and the occasional local vendetta with mortars and machine guns between opposing frontline posts, the hot days dragged on uneventfully for most of the men in the *Alamein* line. Incident was provided by British bombers passing overhead, sometimes to unload their cargoes on the Axis front in plumes of dust and smoke, sometimes to disappear into the blue of the desert sky on their way to more distant targets. At intervals groups of British fighters patrolled overhead as if daring the *Luftwaffe* to come and do battle, but many a day passed when only the occasional Axis fighter or

reconnaissance plane was seen. The British fighters usually gathered in strength as the summer sun sank over the western horizon, the time when Stuka and Messerschmitt preferred to come roaring out of the sun for a hit-and-run raid.

Water was one of the biggest problems for both sides. Eighth Army had the pipeline from **Alexandria**, with branches leading off at several points. Supplies were drawn off by water trucks which took their loads to distributing points behind the line, where two-gallon cans were filled to be taken further forward. In this way a small but regular ration, of at least one water-bottle a day, reached each man in the front line. The water, though flat and chemically treated, was quite palatable. The Germans and Italians had to draw the bulk of their water from old wells and cisterns along the coast, many of which had been damaged or polluted during the earlier fighting. Much of the water was brackish and, with the addition of chemical treatment and oil pollution, was the subject of complaint, not only by the Axis troops but by their prisoners, who were unwilling to believe that the water offered by their captors was the standard issue in the *Panzer Army*. The Germans also complained that the distribution at the water points under Italian control was badly organised, wasting both time and water. <sup>1</sup>

The *Panzer Army* also suffered from a steadily deteriorating transport system as the captured British trucks which had made up for its own losses became unusable from lack of spare parts. Replacements from **Europe** were too few to keep up with the growing needs of the army so that the available vehicles were of necessity overloaded and over-driven to the stage where drivers complained of the lack of time permitted them to service their trucks.

The Italians were nominally in charge of the supply system and there is a suspicion that they overestimated their own needs at the expense of the Germans; one German left a record of his humiliation at having to beg food and water from his Italian companions-in-arms. In the Italian army, the requirements of other ranks took a very second

place to those of the officers, while their standards of hygiene made their defence positions much more unpleasant than they need have been, besides providing breeding grounds for the flies that the men of the Eighth Army, a few hundred yards away, were trying with considerable trouble and ingenuity to eliminate.

In one particular respect the troops of Eighth Army were more fortunate than their opponents. Both sides were too thin on the ground, with too few reserves, to be able to release their front-line troops for more than short spells of leave. The Germans and Italians set up rest camps on the coast within a day's journey of the front where their men could enjoy swimming in the **Mediterranean**, home-made entertainment and sport, while being fed by army cooks. Luxuries were rationed because of shipping difficulties and there was no chance of contact with civilian life. The only change lay in relaxation from the strain of the front line. But the men of Eighth Army had the fleshpots of cosmopolitan **Egypt** at their back door. The thriving cities of **Cairo** and **Alexandria** could still offer most of the luxuries and amenities of civilian life, hardly yet affected by rationing. The services clubs, the welfare organisations, and the base camps competed to keep the men away from the less desirable facets of Egyptian civilisation. Many of the troops had civilian friends whom they could visit; all could, if they wished, have contact with civilian life, sordid or sublime. The 'four-day'

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<sup>1</sup> German water supplies were officially divided into three categories, each carried in marked containers to prevent contamination:

- ( Medically tested fresh water for drinking.  
a)
- ( Untested fresh water for washing and cooking.  
b)
- ( Salty or brackish water for washing (with an issue of salt-water soap).  
c)

The medical authorities suspected a connection between sea bathing and dysentery and forbade bathing other than a short immersion every second day.—German Military Documents

leave scheme commenced by the New Zealand Division early in August was typical of arrangements throughout Eighth Army. A percentage of the men of each front-line unit was withdrawn for six days, the first and last being taken up in travel to and from the desert, the remaining four being spent as each man wished. He could stay at his own expense—and there had been little drain on paybooks over the last few weeks—at a club or hotel ‘in bounds’ in **Alexandria** or **Cairo**, or he could take free board and lodging at a special leave area in the **Maadi** base camp. Here a battery of cooks, rostered for duty throughout the day, prepared large meals on order from an almost unlimited supply of choice rations; a beer bar treated the ordered hours of opening and closing with little ceremony, new and clean clothing could be drawn from a surprisingly acquiescent quartermaster; the canteens, cinemas, and other amenities of the camp were at hand, transport available into **Cairo**, and conducted tours provided to places of interest. It is doubtful if any ‘grim dig’ in the throes of leave in the ‘Pole Nord’ or the ‘Pam Pam’ cabaret wasted a breath of sympathy for his opposite number who might be spending an ordered day in the spartan simplicity of a **Panzer Army** rest camp.

Even had the men of Eighth Army been generally aware of their advantages over the Axis troops, this would not have been enough to lift the weight of frustration and uncertainty that had increased since the July fighting died down. When Rommel had moved forward to the attack at **Gazala** on 26 May, Eighth Army had entered the battle with extreme confidence from general to private. After the first few days of varying fortune, the army had met disaster after disaster that outstripped even the longest-term plans prepared beforehand, while hastily concocted plans failed to catch up with events. Perhaps the greatest blow to morale had been the fall of **Tobruk**, the story of whose defence in the previous campaign had become a legend. Although the **Middle East** command had agreed that the fortress should not be again defended as an isolated outpost, the disintegration of Eighth Army had been so rapid that

**Tobruk** was isolated and its defenders overwhelmed before any firm decision had been taken to withdraw the garrison. It could be said with justice that for a time Eighth Army had ceased to be an army, so that plans of army action made by the commander, General Ritchie, and later by General Auchinleck, had little value. Even corps' control was uncertain, as the stories of **Matruh** and **Minqar Qaim** make evident. It was hardly an army, but rather individual units and formations acting with little concert, that finally, at **El Alamein**, stopped an enemy exhausted by victory.

Though co-ordination between his two corps and between the formations within those corps was far from complete, General Auchinleck had managed during July to regain a measure of control over his command. This he did more by his determination to hit the enemy 'whenever and wherever possible' <sup>1</sup> than by any policy designed to weld his army into a whole. As he mounted attack after attack in July, none gaining worthwhile ground but all adding to the list of casualties, especially in prisoners, the lack of co-ordination became more and more obvious. Both the Australian and New Zealand divisions, which had not endured the long retreat but had come into the fighting fresh and sanguine, began to suffer in morale, while the cynicism of the mass of the army towards its leadership became very pronounced, bringing with it a rise of inter-service criticism.

In the space of seventeen days up to 27 July, when Operation **MANHOOD** <sup>2</sup> broke down, General Auchinleck had ordered an almost continuous series of attacks, using Australian, British, Indian and New Zealand formations. They brought Eighth Army about 12,500 casualties, about a third of whom came from the New Zealand Division, for a nearly equivalent casualty total in the German-Italian army.

If, as Auchinleck implied in his despatch, the July operations were designed to withhold the initiative from the enemy, they were successful. But, with this simple aim, they could have been just as great a success with much less loss. Designed as they were with a much wider

aim, they demanded a degree of co-ordination which the formations within the Eighth Army were unable to offer. Though minor criticisms of the handling of brigades and divisions at this period might be made, they would have little value, as the conduct of the operations was strictly conditioned by the plans issued by Army Headquarters and accepted by the two corps.

Several commentators on this period <sup>3</sup> have contended that Auchinleck was handicapped by the Commonwealth composition of his forces and it is beyond question that, as Commander-in-Chief in the **Middle East**, he had to cope with his share of such problems as the Australian Government's pressure to recall its troops to the **Pacific** and New Zealand's difficulties of manpower and reinforcement. But for the second part of his dual role, the command of Eighth Army, these problems should not have intruded. Some of the Commonwealth commanders were men of strong personality, often outspoken in criticism, and justifiably so

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<sup>1</sup> Report to CIGS, 24 July.

<sup>2</sup> Scoullar, *Battle for Egypt*, p. 375.

<sup>3</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, p. 209, *inter alia*.

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as things turned out, but in the particular events of July they had little or no influence on the initial planning. In the actual field operations, they committed their troops unconditionally and fulfilled their share faithfully, often practically to the letter of the plans. Analysis of the events leads to the conclusion that the principal factor responsible for the mounting casualty lists of July lay in Auchinleck's failure, in his role as army commander, to understand early enough the limitations of the armour, a purely British command, and the lack of training in co-operation throughout his army.

The July battles roused considerable criticism within the army, criticism not confined to the three Dominion divisions involved. For the New Zealanders' part this culminated in the statement by Major-General **Inglis**,<sup>1</sup> then commanding the Division, to Lieutenant-General Gott, commander of 13 Corps, that he would have to refuse the use of his division in another operation if the plans followed those of Ruweisat and El Mreir.<sup>2</sup> The sum of such criticism was probably as much a factor as the state of the army in persuading Auchinleck to go over to the defensive at the end of July.

On the enemy side, Rommel was more than once doubtful if his line would hold. In most cases his Italian infantry absorbed the brunt of the attack, allowing time for detachments of the German *Africa Corps*, trained in the co-operation of all arms, to be thrown in at the danger points. From the information available it seems clear that Eighth Army was unaware of the extent of the strain put upon the *Panzer Army*, nor did it realise how desperate were the methods by which Rommel had maintained his line.

*ii*

Once the troops on both sides learnt of their commanders' decisions to remain on the defensive for a period, they settled down to making the best use of the ground they were occupying until the two front lines began to take on a definite design, each with its epidermis of wire and mines covering the forward section and platoon weapon pits, and each company sector with an inner skin mined and wired for all-round defence. From the section posts a maze of tracks like fine veins ran through the defences back to

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj-Gen L. M. Inglis**, CB, CBE, DSO and bar, MC, VD, ED, m.i.d., MC (Gk); **Hamilton**; born **Mosgiel**, 16 May 1894; barrister and solicitor; NZ Rifle Bde and MG Bn, 1915–19; CO 27 (MG) Bn Dec 1939–Aug 1940; comd 4 Inf Bde, 1941–42, and 4 Armd Bde, 1942–44; GOC **2 NZ Div** 27 Jun–16 Aug 1942, 6 Jun–31 Jul 1943; Chief Judge of the Control Commission Supreme Court in British



**Zone of Occupation, Germany, 1947–50; Stipendiary Magistrate; died Hamilton, 17 Mar 1966.**

<sup>2</sup> Report by Inglis to Freyberg on GOC 2 NZEF/24, p. 34. See *Battle for Egypt*, p. 376.

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**company, battalion, and brigade headquarters and on to join the main arteries of the supply routes.**

**On the British side of the defences, the white sand dunes along the coast to the west of the El Alamein railway station and the newly won sector stretching out towards Tell el Eisa were held by 9 Australian Division, which had two brigades forward and one in reserve further back along the coast. The El Alamein box and the flat desert immediately to its south were occupied by 1 South African Division with all its three brigades well up. Ruweisat Ridge was occupied by 5 Indian Division on a front so narrow that there was room to deploy only one battalion forward, with a second well to its right rear on the flat ground north of the ridge.**

**Life on this rocky ridge was uncomfortable, wearing and dangerous. Being overlooked by the Germans and Italians, the troops lived an underground existence. No one in the forward positions could move with safety during daylight, and the men sat cramped in their trenches. Dusk and nightfall afforded a relief, and the men took exercise and stretched their limbs. By night, reconnaissance and fighting patrols had to be found to report on the enemy dispositions and activities and to deter enemy mine-laying parties. <sup>1</sup>**

**The Australian, South African and Indian divisions made up 30 Corps under the command of Lieutenant-General W. H. Ramsden.**

**On the south of the ridge in the stretch of desert over which it had advanced and retreated in July, the New Zealand Division, under the command of Major-General Inglis, had already begun to construct what**



became known as the **New Zealand Box**. With its western front covering the five miles from Ruweisat to the **Alam Nayil** feature, the 'box' constituted the southern end of the fixed defences of the **Alamein** line. To the south of the New Zealanders, armoured cars and mobile gun-columns of 7 Armoured Division patrolled the broken desert as far as the edge of the impassable **Qattara Depression**. These two divisions formed 13 Corps, which was commanded by Lieutenant-General W. H. E. ('Strafer') Gott.

All the infantry divisions were to some extent under strength through losses by sickness and battle during July, though none was quite so low in numbers as the New Zealand Division. With all three battalions of 4 Brigade <sup>2</sup> as well as 22 Battalion back in the **Maadi** base camp reorganising after their losses in the Ruweisat operation, the Division held its long front with two brigades only and no infantry reserve. At the end of July the three units of 5 Brigade, 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Battalions, together mustered some 1600 men, and 18, 25 and 26 Battalions in 6 Brigade slightly fewer. Small parties of reinforcements were, however, arriving

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<sup>1</sup> Maj M. I. Qureshi, *The First Punjabis*, p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> 4 Brigade in August 1942 was composed of 19, 20 and 24 Battalions.

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daily, drawn from men recovered from wounds and sickness with a few thinned out from base jobs.

The British armour was reorganising along lines proposed by Auchinleck, with 22 Armoured Brigade in process of becoming the heavy armoured formation manning all the available Grant tanks and completing its strength with Crusaders. The Valentines were concentrated in 23 Armoured Brigade, and 4 Light Armoured Brigade was being equipped with Stuarts and the remaining Crusaders. The exact total of 'runners' available at the end of July is not known but,

excluding the light Stuarts or 'Honeys', the Eighth Army could have mustered and manned considerably more than the *Panzer Army*, which had about 150 German and 50 Italian tanks in running order at this time. During the reorganisation, the bulk of the British armour was held close behind the centre of the line, handily placed to move to the assistance of either corps. General Auchinleck, since taking over direct command of Eighth Army from General Ritchie on 25 June, still combined the duties of Army Commander and Commander-in-Chief, *Middle East*. On 31 July he gave his two corps commanders an instruction which commenced:

In view of our present strength in relation to the enemy's, I have reluctantly decided that Eighth Army must adopt a defensive attitude until we have so built up our strength as to enable us to resume the offensive.

The date by which we will be able to resume large-scale offensive operations will depend on such factors as the speed of our own and the enemy's reinforcement. We must, however, meanwhile, be prepared to take advantage of any mistake made by the enemy and to inflict on him the maximum inconvenience and loss, by local offensive operations, active patrolling, and 'deception' schemes. It is of supreme importance that the enemy shall NOT be allowed to develop his plans for offensive or defensive action unhindered.

In the same document, Auchinleck estimated that Rommel might before long regain air superiority and, reinforced by an airborne regiment, might then take the offensive by a sweep round the south end of the line. He warned that the Eighth Army's southern flank should not be mined so indiscriminately as to hinder a counter-attack in strength against the enemy's flank by the British armour, 'to be husbanded until the opportunity for a major offensive arises'. Following this instruction, the Army Commander issued an amended version of the previous plans for defence in forward and main zones. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **8 Army** Operation Instruction No. 108 of 31 Jul 1942; **8 Army** Operation Order No. 109 of 31 Jul 1942. See **Chapter 2**.

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Though the **Middle East** command had been promised at least two new infantry divisions, 300 of the new Sherman tanks, and some American anti-tank artillery, as well as air reinforcements, little of all this would be ready for battle before the end of August. <sup>1</sup> Auchinleck accordingly did not expect to be able to mount another offensive until the full-moon period in the middle of September. He anticipated correctly that Rommel would not stay passively on the defensive for so long, but the sources of information on which he might forecast the *Panzer Army's* intentions were at this period extremely meagre. While the Axis intelligence organisation had many opportunities for checking on British shipping making the long journey between the **United Kingdom** and **Suez**, and the Delta's teeming millions harboured a host of informers able to pass on news of the landing of men and equipment, the British had few means of keeping a close tally of Axis troop movement by sea and air over the narrow **Mediterranean**.

The Eighth Army therefore had to rely to a great extent on information to be gained in the front line. Visual observation and wireless interception, though valuable, were far from capable of drawing a clear picture of the complicated interlacing of German and Italian units. It was necessary for this picture to be drawn in detail before any significant alterations, possibly presaging an offensive, could be understood. To this end the Army Commander ordered a policy of vigorous and constant patrolling by all front-line troops, both to reconnoitre the extent of the new defences being laid out and to learn the identity of the Axis troops holding each sector.

The Germans and Italians then had to cope with a constant stream of British patrols who watched, listened to, and often attacked, their working parties. Every night more details of the Axis defences, newly dug trenches, stretches of wire and minefields were collected and plotted

on Eighth Army's maps. But prisoners for identification of the Axis units in the line were rarely secured as the policy of day and night harassing kept the enemy constantly alert.

Facing Eighth Army across a no-man's land which became daily more clearly defined as the fixed defences grew, the *Panzer Army of Africa* under Field Marshal Erwin Rommel had a nominal strength of four corps, one German and three Italian. As the Italians' martial ardour and reliability in defence varied unpredictably, Rommel allocated sectors of the front to the three Italian corps with responsibility for administration, but by

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. IV, p. 386 *et al.*

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interspersing his German infantry almost to the extent that a German platoon was dug in beside each Italian company, he and his German commanders were able to maintain close control over the whole front without making it too obvious that the Italian corps commanders held little tactical responsibility.

The dispositions of the German and Italian infantry were being altered daily at the beginning of August as Rommel fitted the available infantry into the front in order to release the three *Africa Corps* formations, *15 and 21 Panzer Divisions* and *90 Light Division*, to rest and reorganise as his mobile reserve. Elements of the German *164 Light Division* had been arriving for some time and they were put into the coastal sector to relieve infantry of *90 Light Division*. These troops shared with *21 Italian Corps* the sector which ran from the sea south to *Deir el Dhib*.

The next sector, from *Deir el Dhib* to the *Qattara (Kaponga) Box*, was held by *10 Italian Corps*, bolstered by infantry detachments from all three *Africa Corps* divisions. South of the *Qattara Box*, *Trieste Division* of *20 Italian Corps* shared the front with the remaining infantry of *90 Light Division*. The main body of the armour was held in

the central sector.

Reinforcements received during August included the rest of *164 Division*,<sup>1</sup> the *Ramcke Parachute Brigade* and the Italian *Folgore Parachute Division*, the German parachutists being placed in the central sector and the Italian in the southern.

The *Panzer Army* had been so close to the limit of its endurance after the Eighth Army's MANHOOD operation of 27 July that it was unable even to think in terms of 'offensive defence'. To allow its reserves of men and material to be built up, it was forced to take as passive a role as its opponents would permit. A steady trickle, though still only a trickle, of German infantry reinforcements was coming over by air, but the Allies' sea and air offensive against the supply routes was preventing vehicles, heavy weapons, ammunition, petrol, and food being shipped over in large quantities. On 2 August the quartermaster of the *Panzer Army* reported that his stocks in hand were sufficient for only two days of heavy fighting, and that this reserve would not increase until more supplies were shipped over to him than the mere replacement of daily usage.

Rommel, however, was only a field commander. For all his requirements he had to travel the ill-defined and complicated path of German-Italian relations, in which politics and personalities loomed larger than strategy. Hitler alone could have solved his problems but, ever since the drive on Suez had stalled, what little

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<sup>1</sup> This division was intended to be re-formed as a *Light Africa Division*, but owing to the piecemeal arrival, especially of its equipment, this procedure was delayed.

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interest Hitler and the German High Command had felt in the African venture had waned. They were naturally more concerned with the immensely larger and more important campaign in Russia and considered with some justice that, having lent Rommel and his

armoured corps to the Italians in exchange for an Italian contribution of dubious value to the Russian front, it was now up to the Italians to deal with what, after all, was their own particular sector of the Axis battlefield.

The Italian supply organisation, on which Rommel had therefore to rely for almost all his needs except for the few German troops brought in by air, was corrupt at its source and inefficient throughout. Unable to provide their own fighter cover and, in the clash of interests, unable to persuade the Germans to do the job for them, the Italians had tried to avoid the ports of **Tobruk**, **Bardia** and **Matruh**, which were within easy reach of the British air bases in the **Middle East**. Instead, they preferred to run their shipping whenever possible to **Benghazi** or **Tripoli** where it was less subject to air attack, accepting the fact that the long road haul to **El Alamein** wore out the already inadequate transport available and used up vast quantities of the petrol landed. Nor did they take happily to Rommel's suggestion of operating a fleet of coastal barges servicing **Matruh** to save the road haul. By the middle of August, pressure from Rommel had the effect of diverting shipping carrying German supplies to **Tobruk** and improving the coastal service to **Matruh**.

Perhaps not all the fault can be laid on the Italians for, from the German records, it is hard to avoid the impression that the two men who might have helped Rommel, Kesselring and the liaison officer in **Rome**, von Rintelen, failed to give him wholehearted support. Kesselring, a field marshal senior to Rommel, held the German appointment of Commander-in-Chief South and commander of the **Luftwaffe** in the **Mediterranean**, a curious combination of appointments which gave him a sort of watching brief over both the Italian and German land forces and absolute control over the air forces within the limits of strategy and politics imposed by **Hitler** and Goering. With such standing and influence as should have enabled him to put pressure on Germans and Italians, Kesselring seems to have paid lip service to Rommel's aims while taking little positive action to assist. Von Rintelen, in a politico-military position as German liaison officer with the Italian supreme

command, was more concerned with the political side of his appointment.

The stalemate on the **Alamein** line and the slow reaction to it from above brought home to Rommel the relative unimportance of his command. His requests for reinforcements had been partially fulfilled by the arrival by air of most of *164 Division* and the promise of a brigade of paratroops, but the airlift, by a fleet of some 500 planes, was leaving much essential equipment still on the north shores of the **Mediterranean** at the mercy of Italian shipping. The Italians for their part were promising much but fulfilling their promises with exasperating slowness. As promises failed to materialise or delivery was delayed on one pretext or another, Rommel began to see that he would have to fight a hard and frustrating campaign against apathy and disinterest in his rear as well as a battle against the enemy in front.

No charge of ignorance or disregard of logistics can be sustained against Rommel in this period. As he faced the decline in importance of his own command, he was fully aware that the African front was the only theatre of operations in the west in which the British were actively engaged. He had had word through German intelligence sources that the **Middle East** was being reinforced as quickly as the long voyage round the Cape of Good Hope would permit. Other information, backed by prisoners' statements and the finding of American equipment on the battlefield, led him to think that direct American assistance to the theatre was imminent. Once it had been made clear to him that the strength of his own army would be limited, he had no alternative but to plan to attack as soon as he could, even if this meant starting operations with the minimum of reserves and supplies. To let the British take the initiative would be inviting defeat as their reserves would outlast his. To retreat would only postpone the ordeal. <sup>1</sup>

With characteristic energy, Rommel set to work to build up a striking force from the means to hand. He knew that Allied convoys were expected to reach **Suez** in September, and this set the full-moon period in the last week of August as his deadline. For detail of Eighth



Army's dispositions he was content to rely on observation, the identity of the occasional prisoner captured while on patrol, and his wireless intercept service. The British custom of holding the front in closely defined divisional sectors made his task easier and the *Panzer Army* was soon able to draw a reasonably correct picture of the Eighth Army front.<sup>2</sup> Further detail was unnecessary for only a very obvious increment in the Eighth Army's strength would have caused Rommel to change his plans.

So the Axis infantry, under orders to maintain a passive defence and keep the expenditure of warlike stores down, endured the British harassing, only retaliating when directly attacked. The

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<sup>1</sup> See also [Chapter 4](#).

<sup>2</sup> For an example, see map facing [p. 101](#).

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German troops were too few and too busy to be wasted on unnecessary patrolling. The Italians were not at their best at night. On the open southern front where the Germans might have patrolled to advantage, Rommel ordered that any reconnoitring should be restricted until a few days before his offensive opened, so as not to draw attention to the route he expected to take.

*iii*

The point where the pipeline, built by the British to serve the [Qattara Box](#), crossed [Ruweisat Ridge](#) was one of the focal points of the July battles. The Eighth Army had managed to push its front just across the pipeline but the Axis had clung tenaciously to the extreme western end of the ridge. For the observation offered over the surrounding desert, both armies held determinedly to as much of the narrow ridge as they could, and by the end of July the opposing trenches were hardly more than a stone's throw apart.



From the ridge the pipeline, or what was left of it, ran southwest out of the British positions to enter the **El Mreir Depression**. Apart from a thin ring of defence posts around the eastern lip of the depression, Rommel had been content to let his front follow the pipeline in its south-westerly course to the **Qattara Box**. In Eighth Army, 13 Corps for reasons of tactics and economy in troops had not closed up on the Axis front but had dug in on a north-south line from the ridge to the slight eminence of **Alam Nayil**. In the **New Zealand Box**, its western front commencing just south of Ruweisat near the point where the pipeline ran into no-man's land, 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade under **Brigadier Kippenberger**<sup>1</sup> held the northern sector with a front of nearly two miles. On the right 21 Battalion faced the El Mreir defences under observation of the enemy on the western end of Ruweisat, so that movement by day was only a degree less hazardous than in the Indians' positions on the ridge itself. In a less exposed sector on 21 Battalion's left, 23 Battalion looked over the widening no-man's land caused by the divergence of the opposing lines from El Mreir southwards. The brigade's third unit, 28 (Maori) Battalion, was in close reserve behind the front and on 2 August exchanged sectors with 21 Battalion.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj-Gen Sir Howard Kippenberger**, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); born Ladbroke, 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; GOC **2 NZ Div**, 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 9 Feb–2 Mar 1944; comd **2 NZEF** Prisoner-of-War Reception Group ( **UK**) Oct 1944–Sep 1945; twice wounded: Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1946–57; died **Wellington**, 5 May 1957.

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South of 23 Battalion, 6 New Zealand Infantry Brigade under Brigadier **Clifton**<sup>1</sup> held a front of some three miles with its three battalions in line, 26 Battalion on the right, 18 Battalion in the centre, both facing west, and 25 Battalion on the left across the **Alam Nayil** feature facing both west and south. Between this last battalion's

positions and the Axis posts covering the **Qattara Box**, no-man's land was more than five miles wide.

This expanse of open ground, while it made conditions in 6 Brigade's sector less uncomfortable than in the northern sector, also brought the need for constant reconnaissance in case the Axis troops should try to edge their line forward. Brigadier Clifton, assisted by the relative security of his sector, took Auckinleck's policy of 'offensive defence' to heart and quickly arranged a full programme of nightly patrolling and daylight harassing. With the incentive of a direction from Inglis that identifications of the enemy on his front were urgently needed, he instructed his three battalion commanders to step up their patrol activities on the last night of July.

An unrecorded number of patrols, but no less than three or four from each battalion, set out this night. Most of them failed to encounter the enemy but brought back useful scraps of information on areas of mines, wire and unoccupied trenches. A few got close to enemy working parties but, coming under fire from covering troops, had to withdraw. Only one was successful in bringing back an identification.

Working north-west across 5 Brigade's front, a 26 Battalion patrol of about a dozen men from 14 Platoon, C Company, led by Lieutenant **Fraser**,<sup>2</sup> crept up on a group of Germans digging defences along the pipeline. With bayonets fixed and tommy guns blazing, the patrol then rushed the enemy, killing or wounding a number and taking two prisoners. The survivors and probably a covering post then opened fire, forcing the patrol to withdraw in haste. In the confusion one of the prisoners tried to escape and was shot, but, with three wounded men helped by their companions, the patrol regained the company lines with its surviving prisoner, a man from *115 Infantry Regiment of 15 Panzer Division*. According to the German records, a New Zealand raiding party of over fifty men was driven off this night with difficulty.

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<sup>1</sup> Brig G. H. Clifton, DSO and 2 bars MC, m.i.d.; **Porangahau**;

born Greenmeadows, 18 Sep 1898; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1919–21 (MC, Waziristan); CRE 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; Commander, Northern Military District, 1952–53.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj A. J. Fraser**; born NZ 8 Mar 1905; schoolteacher; killed in action 17 Mar 1944.

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Encouraged by 26 Battalion's success, a strong patrol from 25 Battalion was sent out the following night to attack a post near the **Qattara Box**. The patrol was joined by 'August' column, one of 7 Motor Brigade's mobile parties of guns and armoured cars, which was to give covering fire and protect the vehicles. The infantry, in a silent approach, got right up to the enemy wire and lobbed over hand grenades preparatory to rushing the defences. The grenades, faultily fused, failed to explode but brought the enemy to the alert. Extremely strong defensive fire, spreading across the enemy front, caused this patrol and several others working further to the north to withdraw hurriedly.

This immediate and co-ordinated reaction to the British patrolling was the result of instructions given by the *Panzer Army* to tighten up its defensive measures by the use of stronger covering patrols, together with armoured cars and light tanks, for the working parties. By 2 August New Zealand patrols were reporting that they were unable to get within striking distance of the enemy working parties because of the heavy machine-gun and mortar fire let loose at any suspicious sound or movement.

The Axis troops had also begun to thicken up their minefields with anti-personnel 'S' mines, a device about the size of a Mills grenade set to spring out of a container buried in the ground and then explode in shrapnel at chest height. These 'S' mines were activated by three thin wire prongs which rose a few inches above ground and were extremely difficult to distinguish even in daylight from short vegetation or battlefield litter. They could also be worked by trip-wires attached to

**'push-pull' igniters so that the slightest movement of the wires set off the ejecting mechanism. Some hundreds of these mines were laid in the Ruweisat and El Mreir sector at this time. The Axis troops also tried the use of searchlights mounted on trucks, the beams being swung across the front at ground level at irregular intervals, and the trucks constantly changing position to avoid being fired on.**

**The continuous pressure of Eighth Army's patrolling, added to the constant day and night harassing fire, thus had the result within a few days of causing the Axis troops to improve their defences and maintain such a state of alertness that small hit-and-run patrols were more likely to suffer casualties than gather prisoners. When this became clear, Eighth Army's thoughts turned towards planned raids in place of opportunist patrols. With the greater freedom from enemy interference enjoyed in his sector, Clifton was one of the first to turn this planning into action by sending out raiding parties whose routes were covered by standing patrols equipped with wireless linked to the artillery. The idea was that the raiders should creep close to an enemy position, pass a signal back for the guns to bombard it, and then assault while the defenders were still in confusion. Several abortive attempts were made before a clear-cut and definite method evolved. On the night of 5-6 August, one patrol encountered a tank but its wireless failed, and another, with apparently good wireless communication, failed to find the enemy. The following night 25 Battalion sent a patrol to the south of the **Qattara Box** and 18 Battalion one to the north. The former was given the task of making its approach to the objective coincide with the end of a shoot by the medium guns, while the latter took with it four Vickers guns and two 3-inch mortars which were expected to give the necessary covering fire. A last-minute change in the timing for the gunfire upset the 25 Battalion patrol's plan, and immediate enemy retaliation to the fire of the mortars and Vickers guns prevented the 18 Battalion patrol from closing with its objective. The Axis troops, in fact, gave a demonstration of how seriously they took their defensive measures by blazing away spasmodically throughout the rest of the night with field guns, automatics and mortars, so that several small**

patrols reconnoitring in no-man's land deemed it wiser to return within the New Zealand lines.

A new gadget was received at this time which, it was thought, would provide a means of dealing with the armoured vehicles used by the Axis to cover the working parties in the front line. This was a parachute flare to be fired from the standard infantry 2-inch mortar. Experiments by armoured car crews of the Divisional Cavalry using derelict vehicles in no-man's land showed that the flare could illuminate a tank at night at a distance of 400 yards for sufficient time for several shots to be fired from an anti-tank gun. Danger lay in the wind drifting the flare back over the gun. After watching these experiments, Clifton fostered a plan for adding an anti-tank gun and a 2-inch mortar to a raiding party. However, the large element of luck necessary for the success of this scheme remained elusively absent and never, as far as is known, did any men of the brigade manage to site a gun, unobserved, within 400 yards of an enemy tank—with the wind in the right quarter.

Daylight activity in the first week of August was confined mainly to exchanges by the artillery, the weight of fire coming from Eighth Army. In the New Zealand sector, 5 Brigade's area was too exposed to allow much activity beyond standard firing by the 25-pounders, but 6 Brigade's distance from the enemy permitted Clifton considerable scope for experiment in 'offensive defence'. Observers in the brigade area reported that, with the lightening dawn sky behind them, they were able to see numbers of Axis troops appearing above ground to shake out blankets and perform their morning chores. On coming under fire, the men had gone to ground and tanks or armoured cars had appeared as if to cover the infantry against a possible dawn assault. The brigadier therefore elaborated his orders for dawn harassing fire with a plan designed to catch the armoured vehicles. Anti-tank guns were to be taken well into no-man's land overnight, the dawn shoot was to occur as usual, and the anti-tank guns were then to catch the armoured vehicles as they appeared.

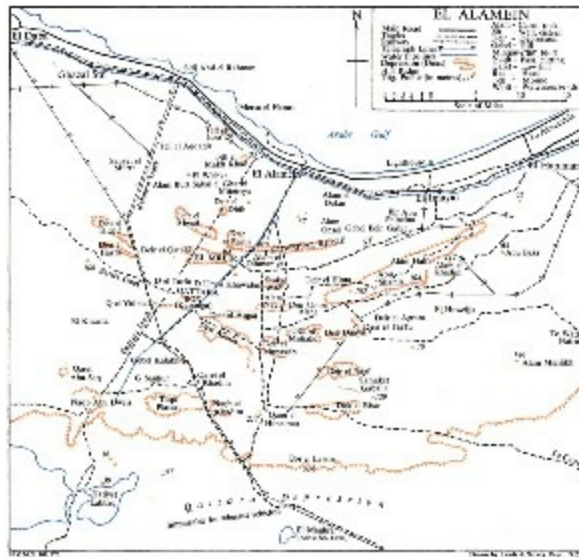
This plan was given its first major trial on the morning of 2 August.

**Two six-pounders of 31 Anti-Tank Battery and Vickers guns from the machine-gun companies were driven out overnight and carefully sited behind a screen of infantry and Bren-gun carriers. As soon as the dawn light gave sufficient visibility, the Vickers gunners opened up on Axis troops they could observe in the **Qattara Box** defences and the Khawabir Depression. This fire was the signal for 5 Field Regiment and 64 Medium Regiment to lay a five-minute bombardment on the same areas. The Vickers men felt sure that they had caught some of the enemy in the open but the enemy lines disappeared in a cloud of dust as soon as the artillery shells landed. The enemy then retaliated with such heavy defensive fire that the anti-tank and machine gunners and the infantry suffered several minor casualties and had considerable difficulty in regaining their lines.**

**Though this experiment was repeated later with variations, the anti-tank gunners never managed to get their sights on a tank within range. Clifton maintained his routine of visiting the artillery and machine-gunners' observation posts at first light to spur them to action, and the Axis troops must have found the regular dawn harassing very unpleasant, but from the complete lack of reference in the German unit records, it seems unlikely that the shooting caused much damage. It was probably accepted in the same way as the British troops accepted the occasional Axis strafing, as one more unpleasant desert condition to be endured.**

**As the New Zealand troops went about the job of 'rotating' the enemy, in the current slang, the Australians, South Africans and Indians were also experimenting with similar methods of offensive defence. No sector of the Axis front was secure from probing patrols at night, while during the day observers in Eighth Army watched continuously for targets on which the artillery, mortars, or machine guns could be laid. With no real shortage of ammunition, the British guns used ten or more shells to reply to each one fired by the Axis. Only in small-arms ammunition and Very lights did the enemy practise no economy for, all along the front, the hours of darkness were punctuated with soaring**

flares and the sudden chattering of machine guns.



# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN



## CHAPTER 2 – THE ALAM EL HALFA DEFENCES

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Alam el Halfa Defences*

**ALAM EL HALFA** ridge lay some 12 miles behind the New Zealand Division's line and ran generally west-south-west about ten miles from, and roughly parallel to, the coast. The terrain was common to that of most of the **Western Desert**, soft sand of varying depth in the depressions and folds changing to stony patches as the ground rose, with bare friable rock on the crests of the ridges where digging was arduous. Scattered throughout were patches of sparse stunted shrubs.

The highest point, Alam el Halfa itself, was some 132 metres (433 feet) above sea level. For some miles each side of this point the ridge maintained a height of over 100 metres. Immediately south of the ridge lay a wide shallow depression, the **Deir el Agram**, at its lowest only 50 metres over sea level. South from the depression the country rose steadily to the broken ground bordering the **Qattara Depression**, where it reached heights of over 150 metres.

Halfway between the Alam el Halfa ridge and the coast another parallel ridge, the **Gebel Bein Gabir**, was in effect an eastward continuation of **Ruweisat Ridge** (and often in Eighth Army documents called rather confusingly by that name). From the crest of the Gebel, which rose to a height of 90 to 100 metres, the ground to the north dropped rapidly across a narrow coastal plain to the sea.

The New Zealand Division's interest in Alam el Halfa began as early as the first week in July when **5 Indian Division**, directed to prepare a defensive position there, called for engineer assistance. Sappers of 8 New Zealand Field Company were sent to help on 12 July. By this date Major-General Inglis had been told that the area might become his responsibility and that he should accordingly supervise the layout of the defences. The scheme, however, does not appear to have gone beyond the stage of discussion and proposal before the New Zealand Division became too closely involved in operations to take more than an

academic interest in the ridge. On the eve of the Ruweisat attack, 14 July, the **Maori Battalion** was sent to reserve with orders to work on the defences, but had hardly settled down before it was recalled to the front. Most of the New Zealand sappers there were also called back about the same time and work on the defences seems to have languished until troops of 50 (British) Division, who had been working on the **Nile** defence line, were brought forward. The New Zealand responsibility remained, though treated as of secondary importance while offensive operations and plans continued.

An operation instruction <sup>1</sup> was issued by Eighth Army on 28 July to 'indicate future policy should Eighth Army be forced to act on the defensive or to withdraw'. This crystallised earlier proposals for a main zone of defence to which the troops from the present forward positions could fall back under pressure. The main zone had the Alam el Halfa ridge as its southern boundary and the coast as its northern. The eastern and western limits were, with some reason, not so clearly defined. This instruction also dealt with the possibility of a strong enemy force breaking completely round the south of the whole **El Alamein** defences, upon which event the Eighth Army was to fall back on the positions in course of preparation along the western edge of the **Nile Delta** between **Cairo** and **Alexandria**. The New Zealand Division's terminus was the **Wadi Natrun**, a valley of some historical interest on the **Cairo- Alexandria** road.

To complement this Eighth Army instruction, **Middle East** headquarters prepared plans for the base troops and installations in **Egypt** to conform with the field army's movement by withdrawing by two routes, one south along the **Nile** and the other across the **Suez Canal** into **Palestine**. Extensive inundations of the Delta were also expected to hinder the enemy's progress and gain time for the base troops to win clear.

The last complete instruction signed by General Auchinleck for the Eighth Army, issued on 31 July, <sup>2</sup> has already been mentioned. It directed that the army, adopting a defensive attitude, was to strengthen

its defences, rest, reorganise, and train. It was accompanied by a detailed order, <sup>3</sup> in effect a summary of previous plans, for withdrawal dependent on the 'scale of attack and

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<sup>1</sup> **8 Army Operation Instruction No. 107.**

<sup>2</sup> **8 Army Operation Instruction No. 108.**

<sup>3</sup> **8 Army Operation Instruction No. 109.**

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warning received', from the forward positions to a 'main zone'. In this main zone, nine defended localities were noted as in preparation, with three new ones not yet started, to cover the western face of the zone. The basic garrison for each of these twelve localities was to be two infantry battalions with artillery and anti-tank support. Mobile battle groups were to operate in the gaps between the localities. This order gave the artillery for each locality as a field battery, that is, eight 25-pounders; in his later report <sup>1</sup> Auchinleck increased this to a regiment of twenty-four guns. It seems evident that the allocation of a battery only was at first intended probably to spread the available artillery to the many tasks expected of it. The planned localities were scattered over a large stretch of the desert and, at a regiment in each, would have absorbed most of the artillery, and almost all of the infantry, available. This would have left the armour, still far from recovered from the long retreat and the July battles, with little artillery support to form the mobile columns guarding the wide gaps between the twelve boxes.

No large bodies of reinforcements were expected in the **Middle East** in the immediate future so that, implicit in the planning was the inevitability of withdrawal from the forward areas while the troops there were still organised and sufficiently intact to take over the main zone positions. In his book *Operation Victory*, <sup>2</sup> General de Guingand attributes these plans to General E. E. Dorman-Smith, deputy Chief of the General Staff in the **Middle East**, who had been brought into Eighth

Army Headquarters by Auchinleck in an advisory capacity. De Guingand states that he himself was unhappy about the planning, but as a newly appointed BGS to the army he could do little to influence it.

Whether the implications in the plan were clearly seen or not is uncertain, but Gott of 13 Corps took the liberty, when passing on the army instruction, of altering the terms 'forward' and 'main' to 'main' and 'rear' respectively for the two zones, and of otherwise changing the emphasis to a strong defence on the present front, with armoured counter-attack to drive back any enemy penetration of the New Zealand area, and a withdrawal to Alam el Halfa as merely a possible later contingency.

On 27 July Inglis was being asked by his two brigadiers if they could increase their local mining to cover all-round defence, but had to withhold permission until he could get 13 Corps to tell him the general policy. Two days later he drew from Gott the information that the policy was 'defensive' and that he could mine

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<sup>1</sup> Despatch in *London Gazette*, 13 Jan 1948.

<sup>2</sup> De Guingand, *Operation Victory*, p. 123.

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the western and southern faces of the **New Zealand Box**. He was also told the general army plan, or at least 13 Corps' version of it and, having reconnoitred the Alam el Halfa area, made a strong protest over the design of the defended localities. Quoting earlier experience to show that too great a reliance on mobile battle groups was likely to be misplaced and that small isolated boxes invited piecemeal destruction, he was emphatic that the positions indicated on the Alam el Halfa ridge as his responsibility were too small, and too far apart to be able to support each other, while the gaps were too wide for effective control by battle groups. Nor, in his opinion, could the **Gebel Bein Gabir** positions offer his area any support.

Confirmed in his belief that, under the state of training then existing in Eighth Army, an infantry division had to remain intact as a division and rely on its own strength in men and guns rather than on promised support by other formations, he was averse to breaking up the New Zealand Division into the small battle groups that the Alam el Halfa plan required. He therefore proposed to Gott that the position, which would have to withstand the initial impact of an enemy drive round the south, should be designed as a divisional defence area with the artillery under central control. For this he would need another brigade.

Gott agreed in principle and asked for a plan. Intensive reconnaissance of the ridge was begun by infantry, gunner and engineer parties. Meanwhile 21 Indian Infantry Brigade was called from reserve to work on Alam el Halfa and put under the New Zealand Division's command on 2 August. By 7 August the Division was able to issue a plan acceptable to 13 Corps with some minor amendments. This divided the ten-mile stretch of the ridge, from **Abu Shamla** tomb on the west to **Alam el Khadim** on the east, into three brigade areas, of which the centre was to be held by the Indian brigade, while the west and east were to be occupied on withdrawal by 5 and 6 New Zealand Brigades respectively. The Indians, with some outside assistance mainly from the engineers, were given the task of digging, wiring, mining, and stocking all three localities. Although by this time numerous troops of the army had had a hand in digging up this area, much of what had been done did not fit the new plan so that the Indians had a formidable task ahead.

The discussions and arguments that culminated in the acceptance of Inglis' plans for Alam el Halfa also brought to an end his command of the Division. He had been far from well for some time, and now the combined effects of jaundice, dysentery and an infection of the eye, added to the strain of operations, brought on a bout of insomnia. With the welcome news that **General Freyberg**<sup>1</sup> was recovering sufficiently from the wound sustained on 27 June at **Minqar Qaim** to return to the desert, Inglis prepared to tidy up the details of his command ready to hand over.

On 4 August he was called to the tactical headquarters of the Army, where the staff and senior officers were holding discussions on organisation and planning. Among those present was General Sir Ronald Adam, the Adjutant-General of the British Army, lately arrived from the **United Kingdom**. On returning to his division in the evening, Inglis confided to his diary that he was 'rather dismayed' by the outlook of certain of the officers. Attitudes, however, had already begun to show a radical change the next day when he was recalled to the headquarters to meet the Prime Minister, Mr Churchill, and General Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Questioned on New Zealand problems, particularly that of reinforcement, Inglis was able to give details of the Division's losses and reinforcement requirements but, with an incomplete knowledge of the negotiations between **Britain**, the **Middle East** and New Zealand, he was not in a position to advise on the **New Zealand Government's** intentions. The concern for keeping the New Zealand Division up to strength and in the **Middle East** was emphasised by Auchinleck who, after the meeting, asked Inglis if he thought a 'consultative trip' to New Zealand by **General Freyberg** might be of value.

A test of the combined plans for the armour and infantry of 13 Corps was held at Corps Headquarters on 7 August, attended by Inglis and senior officers of the Division. The principal item in this staff exercise dealt with the withdrawal of the infantry, after an enemy penetration of the forward positions, to the main zone defences of Alam el Halfa under cover of a limited counter-attack by 22 Armoured Brigade. Details of this exercise show that the implication in 13 Corps' plans, of a main zone to be strongly defended and a rear zone for a withdrawal in an emergency, had been subordinated to the original army plan of a forward zone likely to be overrun and a main zone into which the infantry would retreat and reorganise for the principal action of the defence. Inglis was not too happy with the result of the exercise as it showed weaknesses both in the time taken for the armoured counter-attack and in the difficulties of reorganisation in the main zone.

<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Gen Lord Freyberg**, VC, GCMG, KCB, KBE, DSO and 3 bars, m.i.d., Order of Valour and MC (Greek); born **Richmond, Surrey**, 21 Mar 1889; CO Hood Bn 1915–17; comd 173 Bde, 58 Div, and 88 Bde, 29 Div, 1917–19; GOC **2 NZEF** Nov 1939–Nov 1945; twice wounded; Governor-General of New Zealand, Jun 1946–Aug 1952; died Windsor, England, 4 Jul 1963.

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Having received news that **Freyberg** was likely to be passed fit by his doctors within a few days and would then resume command, Inglis obtained leave whilst at Corps Headquarters to hand over the Division to **Brigadier Kippenberger** so that he could return at once to **Maadi**. Before leaving the headquarters he heard Auchinleck announce that he was relinquishing direct command of the Eighth Army to General Gott. Back at his divisional headquarters, he handed over to **Kippenberger** and, early the following morning, 8 August, set off for the base camp at **Maadi**.



# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 3 – THE DAYS OF DECISION

## CHAPTER 3

### *The Days of Decision*

*i*

**IF any point in time could justifiably be taken as the turning point of the war in the west, the phrase should be applied to the first half of the month of August 1942. In that short period decisions were made, plans formulated and action taken, all of which led inexorably to the destruction of the Axis hold on North Africa and to the assault on the European fortress.**

**By the end of July the joint **United States**–British planners had reached a workable compromise in the long-argued discussions on strategy. The operation first called **GYMNAST**, then **TORCH**, for a landing in French North Africa had been given priority over all proposed landings on the mainland of **Europe**. With this decision fixed, Churchill arranged to visit **Russia**, with a break in his journey at **Cairo**, as ‘The doubts I had about the High Command in the **Middle East** were fed continually by the reports which I received from many quarters. It became urgently necessary for me to go there and settle the decisive questions on the spot’. <sup>1</sup> On 4 August the British Prime Minister landed in **Cairo**, where he was joined by a committee of talent which included Field Marshal Smuts, the Rt. Hon. R. G. Casey, Minister of State in the **Middle East**, Generals Brooke and Wavell, Admiral Harwood and Air Marshal Tedder. He brought a supply of bowler hats, and the committee's task among other things was to advise on their allocation.**

**Auchinleck's replacement was apparently accepted as a foregone conclusion, for there is no record of a single voice being raised on his behalf. Churchill, however, appeared unwilling to promulgate a flat dismissal of a commander who, whatever limitations he might have shown, had at least the right to claim that he had stopped the enemy at the gates of **Egypt** within a few days of taking over**

command of the field army. Accordingly the Prime Minister came up with a Churchillian compromise by which Auchinleck could retain his title but lose the operational part of his command. To do this Churchill proposed that the present area be divided in two, with the non-operational theatre of **Persia** and **Iraq** to be called the **Middle East**, and the operational area of **Egypt**, **Palestine**, and **Syria** to be called the Near East. There is little doubt that attempts to explain Eighth Army's failures put the germ of this idea into Churchill's fertile brain, for so long as the original **Middle East** had possible fronts in **Persia** and **Turkey** and an active enemy in **Libya**, the strain of deploying its insufficient forces for all contingencies must have been very great. Doubts of this new division of responsibilities were immediately expressed by the British War Cabinet and caused the Prime Minister to incubate the scheme while he and his committee dealt with the problems of the lesser generals. Several of them, from commands and staff, were selected for relief but, for the command of Eighth Army itself, the committee felt that too clean a sweep might lose the army's confidence and lower its morale still further. After many discussions and interviews, Churchill accepted the proposal to elevate General Gott, of 13 Corps, to the command of the army. Though Gott admitted to Churchill that he was tired, <sup>1</sup> his reputation as a calm leader in adversity was still high in British circles and any doubts of the efficiency of his handling of 13 Corps seem to have been confined to members of the Commonwealth contingents.

Gott's appointment was confirmed and left to Auchinleck to announce at the end of the staff exercise at 13 Corps Headquarters on 7 August. With the promise of a few days' leave before assuming his new role, the general left the exercise to board a plane on the nearby airstrip. As the aircraft, a **Bombay** transport, took off, it was shot up by a marauding enemy fighter and Gott was among those killed. His death was kept from the public for some three days, during which time

Auchinleck, informed of Churchill's compromise, wisely refused the command of the **Persia- Iraq** theatre. The subdivision proposals were thereupon shelved, to reappear later under the guise of the ' **Persia and Iraq Command**'. <sup>2</sup>

Although Churchill commented that, by the death of Gott, 'All my plans were dislocated', <sup>3</sup> the way had in fact been cleared for those drastic changes which the Prime Minister and his advisers knew were necessary but whose impact they had been trying to soften. The original selections tentatively made beforehand by

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<sup>1</sup> Churchill, Vol. IV, p. 414.

<sup>2</sup> Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III, Appx 6.

<sup>3</sup> Churchill, Vol. IV, p. 418.

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Churchill on the advice of the Imperial General Staff—General Sir Harold Alexander <sup>1</sup> for the **Middle East** command and Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery for Eighth Army—could now be appointed without further argument, and Churchill and his advisers could turn their minds to the forthcoming encounter with Stalin. <sup>2</sup>

General Alexander reached **Cairo** from England on 9 August to receive instructions that he would assume the appointment of Commander-in-Chief of the complete and original **Middle East** theatre from 15 August, with a directive from Churchill to 'take or destroy' Rommel's German-Italian army. The terms of this directive were passed on to General Montgomery, who arrived in **Egypt** on 12 August and, according to his memoirs, assumed the command of the army on his own initiative on the 13th, two days before he was officially supposed to do so. <sup>3</sup>

With a clear and incisive mind of his own, and no **Middle East**

loyalties to cloud his judgment, Montgomery quickly grasped what others in less influential positions had known for some time—and what many of the troops themselves had dimly perceived—that offensive operations were doomed to failure until the diverse elements that made up the Eighth Army learnt to fight as a single body with a common aim on definite, unequivocal orders. To achieve this end, he replaced those staff officers whom he thought unable or unwilling to alter their ways, but otherwise he made no great outward changes. He accepted the temporary policy of offensive defence and the general plan of defence, but simplified all orders by removing the ‘alternatives’ in which Auchinleck had become so entangled. He accepted also the Army's appreciation of Rommel's intentions, an appreciation well illustrated in an intelligence summary issued by the New Zealand Division as early as 2 August:

It is clear that the present, static, phase of hostilities will last only until one side or the other feels itself strong enough to launch a decisive attack. The problem is thus largely one of reinforcements. For a number of reasons, of which the chief is probably the heavy German commitments in **Russia**, the Germans in **Africa** do not seem to be receiving men and materials on the scale which the magnitude of the stakes might have led one to expect. On the other hand, they will probably resume the offensive at the first opportunity. They may very well apply again the tactic employed at **Gazala**, trying to contain the

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<sup>1</sup> ‘He was the youngest major-general in the Army when he was promoted on 16th October 1937. He replaced the previous youngest general officer of that rank, **Sir Bernard Freyberg** V.C., who had retired because of a period of ill-health from which he afterwards recovered, and who was to be one of Alexander's most distinguished subordinates in the **Mediterranean** campaigns.’—Hillson, *Alexander of Tunis*, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> Churchill's visit also brought about the return of

Naval Headquarters from **Ismailia**, whence it had retreated in the early July 'flap', to **Alexandria**.

<sup>3</sup> Montgomery, *Memoirs*.

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greater part of our line with their less mobile elements while the armour and the more mobile infantry formations seek to break through and swing around to attack our main positions from the rear. The execution of such a manoeuvre would require less preliminary regrouping than was the case on the **Gazala** line, where the distances involved were much greater than they are here. In fact, the preliminary moves could be carried out overnight, and we cannot count on receiving from aerial reconnaissance much warning of an impending enemy attack.

*ii*

As all these far-reaching decisions took shape, the mass of the Eighth Army went about its daily and nightly duties of digging, wiring, mining and patrolling, only vaguely aware that changes were in the offing. Churchill's visits to the forward areas were naturally kept as quiet as possible and, though a few New Zealanders saw him in person, most of the men were unaware of his presence in the area until days later. The changes were in fact heralded for the Division by the arrival on 10 August of **General Freyberg** who, having been brought up to date on the desert situation by Inglis, spent most of the next morning listening to his GSO I, Colonel Gentry. <sup>1</sup> Admitting that 'much fog of war' existed over the whole front, Gentry stated that the morale of the German troops was thought to be high but that of the Italians unlikely to stand up to any strain. Though little information could be acquired of Rommel's supply position, it was expected that 'Rommel's temper' would force an offensive soon, probably about the middle of August. This anticipation was borne out by information of the reinforcements lately received by the **Panzer Army**, which included a division 'from **Crete** and other parts' (i.e., *164 Division*), 5000 parachutists used as lorried

infantry, and 'an enormous number of recruits' for *90 Light Division*. On Eighth Army's defence preparations, Gentry pointed out the dangers of an enemy thrust along **Ruweisat Ridge**, where he considered **5 Indian Division** was not strong enough. A breakthrough here would endanger the New Zealand Division's northern flank and, though present plans were for a counter-attack by the available British armour, there was a strong possibility of a confusion of command as the tanks would have to be called on by 13 Corps to assist the New Zealanders, or by 30 Corps for the Indians, the boundary between the two corps running just south of the ridge. Of the two most probable lines

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<sup>1</sup> Maj-Gen Sir William Gentry, KBE, CB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Bronze Star (US); **Lower Hutt**; born **London**, 20 Feb 1899; Regular soldier; served North-West Frontier 1920–22; GSO II NZ Div 1939–40; AA & QMG 1940–41; GSO I May 1941, Oct 1941–Sep 1942; comd 6 Bde Sep 1942–Apr 1943; Deputy Chief of General Staff (in NZ) 1943–44; comd 9 Bde ( **Italy**) 1945; DCGS 1946–47; Adjutant-General, 1949–52; Chief of General Staff, 1952–55.

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of attack, along Ruweisat or round the southern flank, Gentry himself thought that Rommel would choose the latter. Commenting on Eighth Army's organisation, Gentry remarked that the army needed an armoured formation, trained and equipped with all arms similar to the panzer division, but that such a formation would not appear until a new approach was made to the employment of armour. Unless the cavalry attitude of the British armour was discarded, there was little hope of close co-operation between tanks and infantry.

With Inglis' forceful reports on the July fighting fresh in his mind, **Freyberg** found that the conclusions drawn by his GSO I were close to his own thoughts and he left a forecast in his diary that the next battle would be a clash between tanks, with the infantry 'in reserve ready to intervene'.

From these talks the GOC went to visit his two brigade commanders,



**Kippenberger** and Clifton, but before he had time for more than a quick look at their areas he was called back to **Divisional Headquarters** by a message instructing him to take over the temporary command of 13 Corps from Major-General Renton of 7 Armoured Division, who had been holding the post since the decision to elevate General Gott to army commander. With some background knowledge of the imminent changes in the army appointments gained in **Cairo** before he left, **Freyberg** was moved to comment that his temporary command was 'rather a waste of time', though it is probable that the wider view obtainable from Corps Headquarters helped his understanding of the general situation. **Brigadier Kippenberger** once again took over the Division.

The following day **Freyberg** took a group of staff officers from the corps to inspect the Alam el Halfa defences. It is interesting to note that he found 21 Indian Infantry Brigade's area, which was the most advanced of the planned boxes, to be already equipped with sixteen field guns and the same number of six-pounder antitank guns, together with dumps holding three days' supply of water and 450 rounds for each gun.<sup>1</sup> From Alam el Halfa he went on to visit 7 Motor Brigade, and then watched 22 Armoured Brigade practise deployment near **Point 102** as part of a plan to cover the south-eastern flank against attack.

On 13 August the new army commander paid a visit to the headquarters of 13 Corps and then, with **Freyberg**, motored on to the New Zealand Division. Writing later of this period, **Freyberg** remarked that he was prepared to give Montgomery his confidence

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<sup>1</sup> In his book *El Alamein to the River Sangro* (p. 3) General Montgomery stated that he found Alam el Halfa 'virtually undefended'.

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because of comments he had heard which, though intended to be critical, made the new commander appear a man of forceful, if unorthodox, character. During their meeting **Freyberg** was at some pains to ensure that the powers of his charter were understood and to make

clear that he was prepared to use those powers, especially against any proposals for breaking up his division into battle groups, columns, or other detachments. According to his recollections, he stressed his anxiety in the past with commanders who 'had a mania for breaking up military organisations', and added that he had seen numerous senior officers 'sacked because they put their trust in the "Jock" columns, the brigade group battle, and the Crusader tank.' <sup>1</sup> Much to **Freyberg's** relief, Montgomery maintained his own dislike of the employment of troops in 'penny packets' and of tying them up in isolated boxes. In fact, so closely did the two generals agree in principle that **Freyberg** never had open recourse to his charter during the rest of the campaign in **Africa**.

On 14 August **Freyberg** held a corps conference at the headquarters of the New Zealand Division, where he gave out the official news of the changes in the army command and staff and of the imminent arrival of Lieutenant-General Horrocks to take over 13 Corps. He then told of General Montgomery's agreement with the forecast that Rommel would attempt an offensive before the end of August, probably by an outflanking move round the Eighth Army's southern flank. The new commander, however, had drastically pruned the plans of defence; no longer were there to be forward, main, or rear zones to cause confusion as to which was to be held and which could be evacuated. The Army was now to hold fast in its present forward positions, which were to be developed as a continuous line of self-contained infantry positions, dug, wired, and mined for all-round defence and stocked with all the necessary supplies. All transport not vitally needed was to be sent to the rear and the troops were to be conditioned to fighting the battle where they stood without thought of retreat to alternative positions.

The new policy considerably simplified the New Zealand Division's tasks. Responsibility for the Alam el Halfa positions was to be handed over to 44 (Home Counties) Division, ordered forward urgently at Montgomery's request from its task of preparing defences in the **Nile Delta**. This division was to occupy Alam el Halfa with two brigades and lend the third to the New Zealand Division to cover the southern side of

the box. With 22 Battalion brought up from **Maadi** to hold the eastern face, the New

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to **War History Branch**, 5 Nov 1947.

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**Zealand Box** would then have all-round protection. If the enemy should attack before the new troops were settled in, reliance would have to be placed on 7 Armoured Division to guard the box's open flanks.

Montgomery gave a rousing talk the following day to a gathering of officers at Eighth Army Headquarters, which at his instigation had been removed from its uncomfortable situation in the bare desert <sup>1</sup> to more congenial surroundings by the sea at **Burg el Arab**. This speech, probably containing phrases used in earlier talks and repeated in substance by lower commands later, has been recorded in varying forms. The gist of it was that the longer Rommel delayed his anticipated offensive, the more certain the Army Commander was of having his forces so disposed as to repel the attack. He stressed his intention of not retreating from the present forward position, of keeping his formations intact and not committing them piecemeal. He so radiated confidence that **Freyberg**, on returning to 13 Corps from the talk, noted in his diary that he agreed with everything the Army Commander had said.

On 16 August General Horrocks arrived to take over 13 Corps, 'full of optimism and ready to consider changes in the plans'. <sup>2</sup> He had already been told by Montgomery that the corps' dispositions were unsound and that he was to revise them immediately 'so that you can defeat the enemy's attack without getting mauled in the process. This is important, because if you have heavy losses you will interfere with the offensive I propose to launch as soon as I can form and train a mobile reserve. Then I shall hit Rommel for six right out of **Egypt**.' <sup>3</sup>

*iii*

In the week after General Gott's death, before the changes in

command had become fully effective, daily life in the New Zealanders' forward positions varied only in detail. On several mornings a heavy mist covered the desert, limiting visibility to a few hundred yards and lifting only when the sun was well above the horizon. As the mist dispersed, the sun beat down from a brassy, cloudless sky. Then, around midday, the wind often arose to bring a dust-storm that might last for some hours, the fine sand penetrating into every crevice of weapons, trucks and tanks and caking the sweat-stained faces of the troops. One of the worst of these storms occurred on the day **Freyberg** returned to the desert, 10

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<sup>1</sup> Placed there in reaction to criticism similar to General Gordon's remark, 'If you wanted to find Her Majesty's forces you would have to go to Sheppard's Hotel at **Cairo**.'— *General Gordon's Khartoum Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> Diary of GOC **2 NZEF**.

<sup>3</sup> Horrocks, article in *Picture Post*, 1 Apr 1950.

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August, when visibility at two o'clock in the afternoon was less than 500 yards. In the heat and the dust, as the diarist of the **Maori Battalion** wrote, 'both sides seemed listless and affected by the flies and the sun'.

The nights were spent on defence works and patrols. Movement noticed in and to the rear of the enemy's front line brought an exhortation from Eighth Army to all formations that prisoners were needed for identification as it was suspected that considerable changes were taking place among the Axis front-line troops. Though the New Zealand battalions responded with numerous patrols every night in the week of 7–14 August, they failed to bring back a single prisoner, though their efforts cost several men wounded, two officers and one man killed and two men lost as prisoners to the enemy. Patrols from 7 Armoured Division operating further south suffered even greater casualties for the

same lack of success.

On the night of 12–13 August there occurred what was probably the last illustration of the old methods of the army before the new influences began to be felt. In an operation hastily and locally arranged, with a lack of effective liaison between neighbouring troops and even between the two corps, **5 Indian Division** planned an attack in about company strength on the Axis posts across the western end of **Ruweisat Ridge**. The operation appears to have been intended both to take ground in order to straighten out a ragged stretch of the front as well as to fulfil the army's request for prisoners. Although the area of attack was right alongside 5 Brigade's northern boundary, the New Zealand Division received no details until late, so late in fact that it had already prepared its programme of patrols and harassing fire for the night. This programme had then to be cancelled, particularly as some of the artillery fire would have fallen on the Indians' area of operations, and new plans, including tasks for supporting fire for the attack, had to be hastily concocted and liaison established.

The raid commenced just before midnight but the assaulting troops found the enemy posts on their objective had been vacated. While waiting for reconnaissance to decide if they had in fact reached the correct objective, the troops came under heavy fire from front and flanks. It took the raiders two hours to extricate themselves and they returned with five men wounded and thirteen missing. Of those missing, the Italians manning this sector of the front claimed five as prisoners.

While the Indians' raid was on, at least six New Zealand patrols were out on the front to the south of the ridge but, though they blew up a derelict tank used by the enemy as an observation post and found evidence of new defence works, they had no direct encounter with any enemy working parties. The Axis troops in fact were by this time in such a state of alertness from the constant patrolling and harassing fire that they would open heavy fire on the slightest suspicion of sound or movement.

At first light on the 13th, enemy troops seen in the area of the Indians' raid were subjected to heavy concentrations by the Indian and New Zealand 25-pounders. Enemy gunners then retaliated by shelling both 21 Battalion's lines and the headquarters of 6 Brigade. In the afternoon they fired one of the heaviest concentrations seen for some time into the unoccupied hollow of **Deir el Angar**, off to the south-west of 25 Battalion's sector. No casualties or damage of any consequence were caused in the Division's area by this exceptional expenditure of ammunition, a display designed apparently more as a deterrent and to indicate that the Axis defences were alert than for any practical result. It made a sufficient break in the monotony to be commented on in several official and private diaries but, after it was over, the New Zealand front quickly settled back to its normal routine of daytime lethargy.

With Horrocks' arrival, **Freyberg** returned to his division, permitting **Brigadier Kippenberger** to resume command of 5 Brigade. On the same day the advance party of 132 Brigade of 44 Division reached the box and commenced developing the defences of the southern face.

The coincidence of **Freyberg's** return at the same time as Montgomery's accession to the army command did much to restore the New Zealanders' morale. Though Inglis held the men's admiration for his many good qualities, he had not yet drawn the affection and trust which the almost legendary **Freyberg** possessed. He had been far from fortunate in the short period of his command when, with health deteriorating to the point where lesser men would have given up, he had had to stand the strain of the July disasters. His return to command his own 4 Brigade in **Maadi** Camp and **Freyberg's** reappearance in the desert brought the feeling that the family life of the Division, disturbed for a time, was now back to normal.

**Freyberg** himself was undoubtedly the 'head of the family' of New Zealanders in the **Middle East**. On the basis of the perversity that calls all red-headed men 'Bluey', the six-foot general, the very bulk of whose presence was reassuring, was known to all his men as 'Tiny', with that

affectionate lack of formality common to the dominions' civilian-soldiers. The sincerity of his consideration for the welfare of his men, reaching out to the provision of such amenities as pie and ice-cream factories, brought him a measure of trust and affection that has been accorded to few other force commanders. His popularity, moreover, remained through adversity and success.

Once back in the saddle, and accoutred with the spur of Montgomery's directives, **Freyberg** had no trouble in stirring a lethargic Division to purposeful activity. Addressing his senior officers on 16 August, he first stressed his own agreement with the new commander's approach to the problems of the desert war and then went on to explain the new policies in detail. The old desert complex of alternate advance and retreat was to be superseded by an entirely new outlook. The Eighth Army was to stand firm on its present positions against all attack while preparations were in hand for an offensive, for which no date or exact details could yet be given, but which was being planned on a scale designed to annihilate the enemy army and break the Axis hold on North Africa. On the present state of the British armour, **Freyberg** made the comment that, of the 300 tanks held by Eighth Army, the cruisers and Valentines were merely mobile two-pounder guns and only the 72 Grants were left to match the 200 heavy German tanks that Rommel was now estimated to possess. After this disheartening comparison he released the news of the 300 Shermans expected to reach the **Middle East** in the near future—tanks similar to the Grants but with the guns in the right place, better gun sights and generally better performance.

If, therefore, Rommel should attack within the next week or so, the situation would be difficult and much would depend on the outcome of the armoured battle. Until the mining of the **New Zealand Box** was completed and the attached brigade of 44 Division firmly in place, the Division could not rely on its flanks and rear being protected by the British armour for, in his view of the manoeuvres already carried out, it would take 22 Armoured Brigade about two and a half hours to open its counter-attack in the Division's sector and the Division could be overrun



before then. 'We know what happens from experience.'

For every week the enemy's attack was delayed, the Division's defences and the army's reserves would be so much the stronger, to the point when the British armour, free of any commitments to the infantry, could block a thrust round the flank and rear. As both the Australians and South Africans were holding strong defences, little danger was expected on their fronts, but the rocky **Ruweisat Ridge** sector, held by the Indians, was a difficult position to defend and constituted a danger to the New Zealanders' northern flank. Because of this, three battalions of Valentines were to be stationed in support of this sector.

**Freyberg** then informed his audience that the Division was shortly going out of the line to train with armour under command 'for the first time in our life'. The plan for Montgomery's offensive entailed the gapping of the enemy's line by a frontal attack, followed by the passage through the gap of an armoured division and the New Zealand Division, fully motorised and with an armoured brigade under command.

The General ended his talk by repeating the new terminology laid down by the Army Commander to replace certain expressions which had acquired undertones of meaning antagonistic to good morale. 'Consolidating', for example, had come to mean 'sitting down and doing very little', so was to be replaced by 'reorganising', with the meaning of gathering strength for further action. A 'box', in the Army Commander's opinion, was something with a lid on it to hold the occupants down; in future it would be known as a 'defended area', a secure base from which to operate. The term 'battle group' was to be entirely forgotten now that divisions were to fight as divisions, and any force approximating the old battle group was now to be called a 'mobile reserve' intended for offensive purposes. <sup>1</sup>

Habit dies hard and, though 'box' and 'battle group' were banned from official use, the terms remained in common usage for some time to come.



The impact of the new Army Commander was quickly felt throughout all ranks of the Eighth Army. His clear orders and simple definitions were such as could be passed down the chain of command to reach the men in the ranks without the usual mutilation in the process. The simply stated policy of a determined defence to cover the period needed to prepare the offensive brought morale up at once, for it permitted numerous minor decisions, previously withheld in case of a change of plan, to be made on the small matters which affected the ordinary soldier. Each man's slit trench, for example, ceased to be a temporary expedient, to be filled in and abandoned for another every few hours or days; it became a permanent fortification to be designed and improved with care, at least until Rommel's attack had been beaten off. To the New Zealanders particularly, who had been so constantly on the move since they left **Syria** in June, the idea of some relative permanence was welcome. Instead of taking up the attitude of 'she'll do', they could now put their ingenuity into siting infantry and gun positions with some thought; the engineers could plan their work and store up the wire and mines needed without the feeling that

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<sup>1</sup> 'Notes' on GOC 2 NZEF/24.

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tomorrow's change of plan would make the work wasted. All activity within the **New Zealand Box** thus took on a new meaning and a new tempo. No longer was Inglis' complaint valid, that he received little information and his corps commander seemed little better off, for Horrocks, following Montgomery's lead, instituted conferences in which both a world and a local picture of the progress of the war was drawn and future developments discussed. Whenever possible, the substance of these conferences was passed on to the troops in the line, an innovation which helped the men to identify themselves with the army in which they served.

**General Freyberg**, on his return from convalescence to active duty in the field, not only had to deal with the preparations for a battle expected soon to be joined but he brought with him a domestic problem that needed to be resolved urgently if the Division was to take its part in Montgomery's plans. The last body of reinforcements from New Zealand had reached the **Middle East** before the Libyan campaign at the end of the previous year. Since then the Division had been living on its fat. Back home in New Zealand the entry of **Japan** into the war and her initial successes had brought about a sudden acceleration in the Government's plans for putting the economy on a full wartime footing, and this in turn emphasised how carefully the Dominion's limited manpower would have to be deployed if the demands were to be met for civilian production, home defence, and overseas operations both in the **Pacific** and the **Middle East**. Though the fear of direct invasion had begun to recede as the **United States** gathered her forces in the early months of 1942, this fear remained sufficiently strong in some quarters for the Government to hesitate in coming to a firm decision whether to retain, and maintain, the expeditionary force in **Egypt**, or to follow **Australia's** intention of concentrating activities in the **Pacific**. Influenced by a personal plea from Churchill based on reasons of shipping difficulties and Allied morale, and also by the Australian decision to leave one division temporarily in the **Middle East**, the Prime Minister was able to assure **Freyberg**, in cables sent in March and April when the Division was out of action and the need for reinforcement consequently not urgent, that the Division would stay where it was, though it might have to suffer a reduction in size. No time limit, however, was put on this assurance.

The June and July operations and the hard desert conditions had since brought severe losses in both battle casualties and sickness and, though only two brigades were left in the field, it had been necessary to comb the base camp in **Maadi** for any fit men, to disband several small units, and call in detachments lent to the British for special duties. Even then, few units of the Division were up to strength and by August the bottom of the reinforcement bucket had become visible.

Faced with the situation that the Division would either have to be withdrawn from active operations or be reinforced, the **New Zealand Government** was more or less forced to a decision. On 5 August, in cables to both Churchill and **Freyberg**, the Government announced that a draft of over 5000 men would be allocated to the **Middle East**, 2500 to be despatched at once and the remainder later.

But between March and August much had happened in the **Middle East** and more was likely to happen in the immediate future. **Freyberg** had now to point out that by the time the first draft could arrive his division would be requiring at least 4700 men. Back in New Zealand there was a complete tank brigade, originally destined for the **Middle East** but held for home defence when **Japan** entered the war. Though in a draft appreciation on the Syrian situation written about the end of May, the General had commented that his chance of getting the armoured brigade had receded to 'nothing more than a pious hope', <sup>1</sup> he had continued to ask for it and he now suggested that, as well as a draft of general reinforcements, this complete brigade could be sent over without delay, possibly unencumbered with its equipment, which he thought might be procured in the **Middle East**.

Army Headquarters in **Wellington**, faced with the task of allocating the limited manpower available to all the various demands made on it, declared **Freyberg's** request excessive and countered with a proposal to send the complete tank brigade, equipped with most of its Valentine tanks and technical vehicles, provided the General would agree to breaking up one of his infantry brigades to form a reinforcement pool. This proposal had considerable merit for it would have meant that the **Middle East** division would be provided with a ready-made armoured formation, complete with technicians and tradesmen, in much less time than was likely to be taken in converting, training and equipping one of the infantry brigades. The men of the tank brigade, moreover, were mostly young, single, and anticipating going overseas.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/23.

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Yet, against the logical arguments submitted from **Wellington**, **Freyberg** had other points to consider. The troops in the **Middle East** had already developed such an *esprit de corps* that there might have arisen strong resentment within the Division if one veteran formation—6 Brigade was tentatively chosen for the block—should be eliminated in favour of a formed body of newcomers with fixed ranks and appointments. Furthermore, **Freyberg** himself was opposed to the basic tactical theory on which army tank brigades were formed, for, with their ‘infantry’ tanks, they were fundamentally designed as protective troops with the emphasis on defence. What the General wanted under his command was an offensively minded armoured brigade manning something better than Valentine tanks with their two-pounder guns.

While these proposals and counter-proposals were being cabled back and forth, Montgomery had taken over the Eighth Army and announced his scheme of establishing a mobile armoured reserve similar to the German panzer formations. His first choice for the infantry component of this reserve had fallen on the British 44 Division but, on learning that the New Zealand Division might soon acquire its own armour, he changed his plans, indicating to **Freyberg** that as soon as the situation permitted his division would be released from the front line for reorganisation and training with a British armoured brigade until the New Zealand armour was ready to take the field. The urgency of Montgomery's plans, together with what he knew of New Zealand's manpower problems, persuaded **Freyberg** to accept the offer of the complete tank brigade and, on 23 August, he cabled his willingness to do so and to disband 6 Brigade to provide a general reinforcement pool.

With such a measure of agreement following the protracted negotiations, **Freyberg** could confidently have expected the next cable from New Zealand to offer some indication that the tank brigade was preparing to embark. The offer to release it had been made on an appreciation by General Puttick <sup>1</sup> that the threat of direct invasion of the country had become faint now that **United States** forces on

**Guadalcanal** and the **Australians** in **New Guinea** had commenced offensive operations likely to cause the **Japanese** to consolidate their gains rather than extend the area of their conquests. <sup>2</sup> Not all the members of the **War Cabinet**, however, were willing to accept this appreciation in its entirety, for the month of

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Gen Sir Edward Puttick, KCB, DSO and bar, m.i.d., MC (Gk), Legion of Merit (US); **Wellington**; born **Timaru**, 26 Jun 1890; Regular soldier; NZ Rifle Bde 1914–19 (CO 3 Bn); comd 4 Bde Jan 1940–Aug 1941; **2 NZ Div ( Crete)** 29 Apr–27 May 1941; CGS and GOC NZ Military Forces, Aug 1941–Dec 1945.

<sup>2</sup> CGS file, ‘Recommendations to Minister of Defence and **War Cabinet**’.

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August had seen the Savo Island battle in which four Allied warships, including the Australian cruiser **Canberra**, had been lost, while there were signs that the **Japanese** efforts to retake **Guadalcanal** were on the point of being intensified. Moreover, in an attempt to join New Zealand more closely into the **Pacific** war for political reasons, the Government had, rather rashly, agreed to supply a force to take part in the American operational theatre any time after 25 August. Though neither the role nor the size of the force likely to be required had been settled, its possible commitment at divisional strength had to be considered. The only formed bodies of trained men ready to take the field at short notice were the two under-strength infantry brigades lately returned from **Fiji** on relief by **United States** forces, and the tank brigade. The armour, however, was the nucleus of home defence. The War Cabinet therefore voted against the despatch of the complete tank brigade ‘until the situation in the **Solomons** had clarified’, <sup>1</sup> but agreed to release one tank battalion and sufficient general reinforcements to satisfy **Freyberg**'s immediate needs.

Although this decision cut across their previous plans, both Puttick and **Freyberg** accepted it immediately so that arrangements could be

commenced with the **United Kingdom** for shipping and escorts. It was eventually agreed that the draft should be 5500 strong, including the men of 3 Tank Battalion.

The cable giving the **War Cabinet's** decision reached **Freyberg** on 31 August when his attention was concentrated on the **Alam Halfa** fighting. In the stress of immediate events he left no recorded comments on it, but there is no doubt he greeted the news with considerable relief, as at last he had something definite to work on. The decision in fact saved him from having to break up 6 Brigade and permitted him to start planning to convert 4 Brigade from infantry to armour. As he proposed to use the trained men and technicians of the tank battalion as instructors and as a nucleus for turning the three infantry units, 18, 19 and 20 Battalions, into armoured regiments, he suggested to New Zealand that, rather than break up the formed 3 Battalion, a similar total of trained men be drawn from the whole tank brigade so as to leave a cadre on which the three battalions could be quickly rebuilt. This suggestion was not accepted by Army Headquarters in **Wellington** on the grounds that all preparations, including the release of men on final leave, had already begun in 3 Battalion. Though this was all settled in the first week of September, shipping difficulties caused the draft, called the **8th Reinforcements**, to be held in New

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<sup>1</sup> CGS file, 'Recommendations to Minister of Defence and **War Cabinet**'.

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Zealand until 12 December. The Valentine tanks were left behind, as on 2 October the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs was able to inform the **New Zealand Government** that the necessary equipment for an armoured brigade, including Crusader Mark III, Grant and Sherman tanks, would be available in the **Middle East** by January 1943. In fact, when the trained tank men of 3 Battalion reached the **Middle East** early in the New Year, they found the ex-infantrymen of 4 Brigade well on the way towards their conversion to armour. Meanwhile the rest of the 2nd

Division continued to live on what was left of its fat. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For further details of the reinforcement and manpower problem see *Documents*, Vols II and III; Gillespie, *The Pacific*; Wood, *The New Zealand People at War: Political and External Affairs*; Stevens, *Problems of 2 NZEF*; CGS files, 'Recommendations to Minister of Defence and War Cabinet' and 'NZLO London, Cables'; and GOC 2 NZEF/23, 24, 26, 38, 39.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN



## CHAPTER 4 – AXIS AND ALLIED PLANS

## CHAPTER 4

### *Axis and Allied Plans*

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AS the British leaders were diagnosing the ailments of the **Middle East** command, the opening days of August brought decisions for the Axis which indicated, though very faintly at first, that the *Panzer Army* might soon be forced to dance to the Allied tune.

In the top levels of command in the *Panzer Army* there was no need for any sweeping changes. Rommel had the confidence of **Hitler** and the **German General Staff**, and if they contributed little help, they offered little interference. He himself had confidence in his German subordinates and appears to have accepted his Italian commanders, over whose appointment he had little influence, for what they were worth. Morale in the *Panzer Army*, though it had recovered from its low level of July, still ranged over a wide scale. The mass of Italian infantry was far from happy with the conditions of heat, discomfort, and danger in the front-line trenches, but the armoured troops and the newly arrived *Folgore* parachutists were in much better heart. Of the German troops, the new reinforcements were generally keen to show their mettle—though Rommel himself complained that too many of them were not up to the standards of physique and training of his original men. The old hands of the *Africa Corps* were showing signs of strain after their long spell in the desert, for few of them had managed to get leave to **Europe** in the preceding two years. But, whatever their state, the majority of the army was still willing to follow Rommel wherever he led.

Even before the fresh wind of change had begun to blow in the Eighth Army, Rommel was completing the plans for his next offensive. Churchill's visits seem to have passed unknown at the time to the *Panzer Army* but on 7 August, the very day that success and tragedy came to General Gott, Rommel called his senior commanders together to be briefed on his intentions. By setting the full-moon period at the end

of the month as his deadline, he gave a sense of urgency to the Axis preparations.

Rommel chose to continue the land offensive into **Egypt** deliberately. He was well aware that his drive to **Alamein** had been made at the expense of leaving the island fortress of **Malta** to threaten his lines of supply, and that several of the Axis leaders, particularly the Italians, believed that the island should now be eliminated before land operations continued. Whether the Italians' strategy was based on sound logistics or wishful thinking conditioned by a desire to add **Malta** to the Roman Empire, they could point to the island whenever Rommel complained of his supplies and say, in effect, 'we told you so'.

But Rommel's reasoning was sound. He was an army commander only and, though debates on strategy might be swayed by his forceful arguing, the final decisions were not his. Admittedly he had earlier in the campaign forced a decision against the seaborne operation, in which he was likely to play a subordinate part, by continuing the land offensive in which he was the *de facto* commander, but this had only been possible because of indecision in the command structure above him. Now, in August, to add to the forcefulness of his character, he had logic on his side. The sum of his information was that the British were preparing to pour men and materials into the **Middle East** in quantities greater than he was likely to receive. He was cynically aware that, though the subjugation of **Malta** would ease the supply lines, the consequential increase reaching him would at first be relatively small, and certainly not enough to enable him to catch up with the head start the British would gain during the pause in land operations while the island was being dealt with. It was already clear to him that **Hitler** would not willingly divert aircraft and troops from other theatres, so that operations against **Malta** would be mainly Italian, with his *Panzer Army* taking a share or at least forgoing reinforcements and supplies it might otherwise receive for the land advance.

The situation in **Russia** must also have come into Rommel's thinking. At this time both Axis and Allied leaders saw the possibility of

a German advance into the Caucasus. On 8 August German forces occupied Maikop in the oilfields <sup>1</sup> and on the 25th the swastika flag was planted on the highest peak in the Caucasus, while advanced guards had reached the Volga near **Stalingrad**.

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<sup>1</sup> 'This was the high water mark of the German advance in the East'.— **Lt-Gen S. Westphal** in *The Fatal Decisions*, p. 78.

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The further Rommel progressed round the shores of the **Mediterranean**, the sooner the secondary African theatre would be linked with **Hitler's** main strategical objective, the Russian and **Middle East** oilfields. And, with every mile gained past the **Suez Canal**, **Malta's** nuisance value diminished.

In short, any operations against **Malta** should have been undertaken for Rommel's benefit, but not at his expense. This was partially recognised for, throughout June and July, the island had been so pounded by the Axis air forces that its defensive aircraft and supplies were almost exhausted and its potential as a base against Axis shipping was diminishing daily. The last Allied convoy to the island had sailed in mid-June, but Axis sea and air action had allowed only two merchantmen to get through to **Valetta**.

Through Axis intelligence and other sources Rommel must have had more than an inkling of **Malta's** condition, but what he did not know was that Churchill, before leaving the **United Kingdom** for the **Middle East**, had persuaded the Admiralty to risk another attempt to run the blockade of the island. To Churchill, **Malta** stood as a keystone of Allied strategy in the **Mediterranean**. Its occupation by the Axis would have jeopardised all the schemes for which he had been battling in Allied councils, for landings in French North Africa and assaults on the 'soft under-belly of **Europe**'. For this, more than for its value against the Axis sea routes, was it necessary to revitalise the island's garrison.

So, while Rommel left the problem of **Malta** to the *Luftwaffe* and the

Italians and turned his mind to his land offensive, the promised convoy, code-named **PEDESTAL**, passed Gibraltar on 10 August. On the same day a dummy convoy sailed westwards from **Port Said**, to disperse under cover of darkness, its merchantmen returning but the escorting warships continuing towards the Aegean where, on the 13th, they bombarded the island of Rhodes. The main convoy was quickly picked up and shadowed by Axis aircraft which reported troopships among the merchantmen, news which brought the Axis forces in North Africa to the alert in case a landing was to be attempted in conjunction with a sortie by the Eighth Army. Troops were withdrawn from the front to guard vulnerable points on the coast and Rommel gave **21 Panzer Division** the task of repelling any landings in the forward zone. By the evening of the 13th the convoy's destination was obvious and the state of alert called off.

Although four warships of **PEDESTAL** were sunk and several damaged, and only five of the original fourteen merchant ships reached **Valetta** harbour, the operation was on balance a success. With Axis aircraft diverted from their customary raids on the island to deal with the ships, the opportunity had been taken to fly in two groups of Spitfires from the aircraft carrier *Furious*. This reinforcement of the air defences, together with the stores landed by the five surviving ships, revived **Malta's** fighting power so that, during the following three months, it played a decisive part in the defeats of the **Panzer Army** at Alam el Halfa and **El Alamein**. **PEDESTAL** was the last major convoy to run the gauntlet to the island.

Apart from the courage and determination of the men of the Royal and Merchant Navies, the failure of the Axis to destroy or repulse the whole convoy was due in great measure to **Hitler's** concern in keeping the Nazi jackboot hidden as yet from the Fascist jackal. Had the sea and air forces of the two Axis powers been under complete German control, the operation against the convoy would certainly have been much more thorough. As it was, there was a fateful lack of co-ordination between all the services to the extent that, though ships of the Italian Navy put to sea, they were either recalled or diverted to shadow the warships of the

dummy convoy in the eastern **Mediterranean**. This was done at Kesselring's instigation on the grounds that there were insufficient fighters to cover both a naval force as well as the bombing force operating from **Sicily** over the convoy.

Rommel soon felt the effects of **Malta's** revival. While the convoy battle was on, few Axis ships braved the passage to North Africa. After it was over, the Axis air forces sat back to lick their wounds and, against the island's reinforced air defences, never again managed to reach the air superiority they had previously enjoyed. The breathing space gave the Allied aircraft and submarines based on **Malta** the chance to take the initiative just at the time Rommel was in greatest need of those heavy stores which could be brought over only by ship. <sup>1</sup>

Troops of the *Ramcke Parachute Brigade*, being flown to **Africa** from **Greece**, were accumulating in the rear areas awaiting the transport by sea of their heavy weapons and equipment. These men were needed urgently in the field to relieve the infantry of *15 Panzer Division* who were still holding front-line positions in the El Mreir sector. To get them there was only possible by calling

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<sup>1</sup> See Churchill, Vol. IV, p. 454; Roskill, *The War at Sea*, Chs II, XIII; Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers*; Thompson, *New Zealanders with the RAF*, Vol. III; Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III; and *Panzer Army* and *Africa Corps* diaries and reports.

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on the already overworked supply services of the *Panzer Army*. Crammed into spare spaces in supply columns and in trucks borrowed from other units, the parachutists were ferried to the front with their light equipment and none of their own vehicles or artillery. Once at the front, their daily supply and their normal transport needs presented a continuing problem which could only be met by improvisation. They were even short of field kitchens.

Since the beginning of July, when the *Panzer Army* had reached its

lowest ebb, its strength had grown, reinforcements offsetting losses, by some 10,000 Germans and a like number of Italians by the middle of August. Each new arrival was adding to the burden of a supply organisation that, in its whole length from **Europe** to the front, had never been sufficient in itself to cope with the German-Italian army's needs and had only been saved from collapse earlier by the quantities of British stores and transport captured in the advance into **Egypt**. By mid-August the organisation was creaking badly. <sup>1</sup>

The relief of the assault formations from the front line was complete about 16 August when most of *Ramcke Brigade* and units of the Italian *Bologna Division* took over from the remaining infantry of *15 Panzer Division*. The assault formations, *15 and 21 Panzer Divisions*, *90 Light Division*, and the Italian *20 Armoured Corps*, were then spread out behind the front, with counter-attack roles in an emergency but occupied mainly with general reorganisation, servicing vehicles, and collecting the reserve stocks of ammunition, stores, and petrol needed for the coming offensive. Under the circumstances, this was a slow process in which German organisation was continually falling foul of Italian inefficiency. The need for economy in daily expenditure was carried to the stage where the New Zealand Division could report that, between 17 and 26 August, hostile shelling was 'practically non-existent'.

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<sup>1</sup> Axis shipping losses of merchantmen of over 500 tons sunk in the **Mediterranean** by Allied attack were:

June	6 ships of a total of 20,016 tons	
July	7	15,588
August	12	65,276
September	12	36,934

Over the same period 17 vessels of less than 500 tons were sunk. In October, Italian losses alone were 29 ships of 56,169 tons. Considerably more than half of the sunken tonnage was Italian. —Playfair, Vol. III, and Roskill, Vol. II.

One unfortunate result of the increased Allied action against

Axis shipping was torpedoed, on 17 August, of the transport *Nino Bixio* which was carrying British prisoners of war from North Africa to **Europe**. Among those lost were at least 120 New Zealanders, mostly men captured on 22 July in the El Mreir action.

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Once General Montgomery had simplified Eighth Army's battle policy, reserves and reinforcements previously allocated to rear lines of defence became available for the main battle and planning could proceed to greater purpose. The two corps of the army faced differing tasks. In the north, 30 Corps was not expected to have to fight a battle of manoeuvre and, apart from the placing of reserves to deal with a penetration of the front, its main task was to make its defences as impregnable as possible.

The southern part of the line under 13 Corps had, however, to anticipate an assault of greater variety. The New Zealanders' defended area—which in spite of repeated admonitions from above continued to be known as 'The Box'—had to be prepared to withstand attacks from west, south, and east, and possibly from the north as well. The two brigades of 44 Division on Alam el Halfa had a similar task, while the rest of the corps dealt with the enemy's manoeuvring. The essence of the new corps plan was for the **New Zealand Box** and Alam el Halfa to be as strongly manned as the available infantry allowed, with the gap between the two infantry areas covered by all the tanks that could be mustered. From this relatively central position the main armoured force would be well placed to support any part of the front that should be threatened.

On the open ground to the south of the box, the light tanks and mobile columns of 7 Armoured Division were to harass and delay the enemy's advance across a series of minefields that were already being laid with all speed on a design intended to block the easy routes and increase the natural hazards of this part of the desert. <sup>1</sup> The 'first' or westernmost of these minefields led off from the south-west corner of



the New Zealand perimeter minefield in a general southerly direction, with a pronounced bulge to the west, as far as **Himeimat**. The 'second' field began at the **Alam Nayil** feature, about a mile and a half from the first field, and ran at first to the south-east, but soon swung back to the south until it merged before reaching **Himeimat** with the first field. What was known to the New Zealanders—and so-called in this account—as the 'fourth minefield' started just to the west of the south-east corner of the box and ran down to **Deir el Muhafid**. The 'third' field, originally designed as a 'dummy' with no live mines, ran roughly parallel to, and some one to two miles west of, the fourth field. The spaces between the first and second, and second and fourth fields, apart from the deceptive wire and other signs of the dummy

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<sup>1</sup> See map facing p. 119.

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field, were clear as far as the depressions **Alinda**, **Munassib** and **Muhafid**, but from here southwards the main lines of mines were joined by a maze of lateral fields and projections until they merged into one definite field by **Himeimat**.

Extensions were planned to take this field as far as the edge of the **Qattara Depression**, and two other fields had been started away to the south-east of the box, but only isolated portions of these extensions had been laid by the end of August. (Several British records ignore the dummy field and refer to the fourth field as the third, and the incomplete fields on the south-east as the fourth.)

By the third week in August the three main fields from the box to the depressions had been finished for all practical purposes, each some 200 to 1000 yards wide according to the terrain and of a varying pattern of a core of ten or so rows of closely spaced mines inside two belts more widely spaced. From the depressions to **Himeimat** the mines were continuous except for narrow patrol gaps and, though the fields grew thinner the further south they went, they made a difficult obstacle for vehicles by reason of their maze-like pattern. The ground to the south of

the box and the depressions were held by 7 Motor Brigade, and from **Himeimat** to the **Qattara Depression** by 4 Light Armoured Brigade.

A week after **Freyberg's** talk to his officers, when Rommel's offensive had still not materialised, the new commander of 13 Corps, General Horrocks, issued a personal memorandum which shows how under Montgomery's purposeful leadership the army had begun to get a firm grip of events. This memorandum predicted the full moon on the 25th or 26th as the omen for the opening of the attack, and the southern flank 'between the left of the New Zealand Division and the left [ sic] of 7 Armoured Division' as the route of the *Panzer Army's* advance. It summarised intelligence reports to offer the opinion that Rommel was not as confident of the outcome as he had been in the past but was prepared to 'take a very hazardous chance' before the mounting British reserves swung the odds too heavily against him. Further influence of the new leadership showed in a paragraph: 'The importance of this battle and the way we propose to fight it should be explained to all ranks .... This is vital. We have a good plan with every chance of success and provided the men realise this they will fight with confidence and intelligence ....' The pernicious practice of internal criticism, such as the infantry had become accustomed to expend on the armour, was to cease, while staff officers were forbidden 'to bellyache', an expression used by Montgomery to describe a habit developed in Eighth Army whereby, for example, a divisional staff officer would ring the corps staff to question or complain about orders, and possibly arrange for them to be watered down without bringing his action immediately to the knowledge of his commander. Horrocks' memorandum also laid emphasis on the importance of the immediate passing on of military information to enable a full picture of operations to be available at all headquarters. In the fluid battle expected on the southern flank, effective air operations and the deployment of the armour depended on the fullest possible information of the enemy's movements.

When **General Freyberg** passed on this memorandum to his senior officers at a conference on the following day, 24 August, he told his

listeners that, though Rommel's coming offensive would appear similar to his right hook at **Gazala** in May, the Eighth Army was now in a more advantageous position, particularly as the system of brigade groups in isolated boxes had been scrapped and replaced by divisional areas from which a great volume of artillery fire, under central control, could be brought to bear on any threatened sector.

From 16 August, when 44 Division relieved the New Zealand Division of the responsibility of the Alam el Halfa positions, the defences of 13 Corps improved daily. The Alam el Halfa feature itself was occupied by 133 Brigade and **Alam el Khadim**, some five miles to the east, by 131 Brigade, both formations developing the defences on the lines commenced by the New Zealand Division. The two areas were linked by a thick minefield.

The three battalions of 132 Brigade were in their positions within the **New Zealand Box** by noon of the 18th, with **2 Buffs** on the west alongside 25 Battalion on **Alam Nayil**, **4 Royal West Kents** in the centre, both facing south, and **5 Royal West Kents** on the east by **Deir Umm Aisha** facing both south and south-east. The brigade had its own artillery, 58 Field Regiment, RA, but was short of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns. Several six-pounders of 34 and, later, 32 Batteries of 7 New Zealand Anti-Tank Regiment and three Bofors guns of 43 Light Anti-Aircraft Battery were therefore placed under its command. Prior to the arrival of the English troops, this front had been covered by a force of Divisional Cavalry in armoured cars and Stuart tanks, supported by a detachment of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion. The machine-gunners returned to their battalion but the Cavalry continued to patrol outside the perimeter in contact with the columns of 7 Armoured Division.

Following Montgomery's order for the removal of inessential vehicles from the front, all the trucks not needed for the daily servicing of the box were sent away, eventually to settle in an area known as 'Swordfish', some 45 miles to the rear near **Alam Shaltut** on the west of the main **Cairo- Alexandria** road. At the same time thirteen Valentine and two Matilda tanks went into laager near **Divisional Headquarters** to provide

the armoured reserve requested by **General Freyberg**. These tanks, forming A Squadron of 46 Battalion, The Royal Tank Regiment, were joined by two troops of the Divisional Cavalry and two platoons of **27 MG Battalion**, the whole force coming under command of the squadron commander, Major Boyd-Moss.

The headquarters of 132 Brigade took over the dug-in position which had been occupied by **Divisional Headquarters** since July, the latter then being transferred to another set of dugouts newly prepared in the north-eastern corner of the box, hard by the gap where the main track in and out of the box ran through the enclosing minefields. With the arrival on 20 August of 22 Battalion from **Maadi** to occupy the eastern flank, between the main gap and the left of **5 Royal West Kents**, under 132 Brigade's command, all sides of the box were now defended. On the same day Lieutenant-Colonel **Hanson**,<sup>1</sup> the CRE, reported that his engineers, assisted by parties of infantry and working throughout the day and night, had completed the main defensive minefields. The sappers' work, however, did not stop here for, as more mines and wire became available, existing fields were improved and thickened and new fields laid. To protect the northern side of the box against a breakthrough along **Ruweisat Ridge**, a secondary field was completed between 20 and 22 August by sappers of 8 Field Company working in continuous shifts with the help of infantrymen of 23 Battalion. A tactical field was laid to give all-round protection to 25 Battalion's sector on **Alam Nayil**, and then the engineers concentrated on the southern and eastern sides where the perimeter minefield was weakest. The final plan of the box showed a complicated pattern of interlocking minefields surrounding company positions on the western flank and a wide perimeter belt with few internal fields on the southern and eastern sides.

The sense of purpose that now had permeated through Eighth Army was heightened at this time by the reappearance of Mr Churchill who, on his way back from **Russia**, called in on the army to see how the changes he had inaugurated had worked out. Representatives from New Zealand units, including most of those

<sup>1</sup> **Brig F. M. H. Hanson**, CMG, DSO and bar, OBE, MM, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Levin**, 1896; resident engineer, Main Highways Board; Wellington Regt in First World War; **OC 7 Fd Coy**, NZE, Jan 1940–Sep 1941; **CRE 2 NZ Div** May 1941, Oct 1941–Apr 1944, Nov 1944–Jan 1946; Chief Engineer, **2 NZEF**, 1943–46; three times wounded; Commissioner of Works, 1955–61.

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who had lately received decorations for gallantry, gathered at the headquarters of 13 Corps on 20 August to hear the Prime Minister say:

I am very glad to have this opportunity of visiting the Desert Army and I certainly would not dream of going away without seeing the New Zealanders commanded by my old friend of many years' standing, **General Freyberg**.

In England not long before I left I heard someone say the New Zealanders were 'a ball of fire'. It was said by someone quite impartial who had a great opportunity of assessing your worth. You have played a magnificent part, a notable and even decisive part, in stemming a great retreat which might have been most detrimental to the whole cause of the British Empire and the **United Nations**.

I know that on the other side of the world in your homes in New Zealand all eyes are fixed on you. But even more eyes in England watch you fighting here with equal solicitude. I wish you good luck in the great days that lie ahead—perhaps not so far ahead—of you.

We share the pride that your Dominion feels in the great services you are rendering and in the contributions you have made in this war as in the last, to the pages of British Imperial history. You will be cherished by future generations who, through your exertions and sacrifices, will go forward to a better and a fairer and a brighter world. <sup>1</sup>

**At the time Churchill was speaking to his desert audience, Rommel and his officers were gathering not many miles away to the west to hold a staff exercise on their proposed offensive. No date was yet settled for the attack, though it was known that it would have to start before the end of August or wait for the September full moon. Plans, however, were made to concentrate the mobile formations over a series of nights in such a way that movement would be as inconspicuous as possible.**

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**<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/25, p. 80. This speech was published as a ‘Special Order of the Day’ and circulated within the Division.**

**Churchill's heavy lunch of oysters and Montgomery's spartan sandwiches, as recorded in Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. IV, pp. 464–5, were eaten at HQ 13 Corps, not as Freyberg's guests.**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 5 – PATROLS AND RAIDS



## CHAPTER 5

### *Patrols and Raids*

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**THROUGH** the time of **Freyberg's** return to the Division and **Montgomery's** accession to the army command, the pattern of night patrolling was being tested and developed by the New Zealand troops. Up to the 14th, the lion's share of this work was undertaken by 6 Brigade, but by that date 5 Brigade had dug, wired, and mined its defences well enough to have men free at night for more than the limited reconnaissance and standing patrols whose main task had been to protect working parties from sudden aggression. Under the insistent requests for prisoners, C Company of 23 Battalion sent out a fighting patrol on the night of 14–15 August to attack a post on the edge of El Mreir. Well led by Lieutenant **Garbett**,<sup>1</sup> the patrol charged a group of slit trenches and withdrew successfully with an Italian soldier of 39 *Regiment of Bologna Division*.

At daybreak next morning observers in 28 Battalion's front-line posts saw an estimated 200 men moving in the area of the position attacked and, thinking a reprisal was being prepared, called on 6 Field Regiment for defensive fire. The field guns opened up within a few minutes of the call being sent, demonstrating how quickly and effectively defensive fire could now be provided. After the dust had subsided, there was no sign of the enemy troops who, it was later thought, were merely a reinforcement or relief party that had been caught by daylight before they had settled in to their allotted trenches.

The wide expanse of unoccupied desert facing 6 Brigade's sector, besides allowing patrols from both sides to wander almost at will, also offered considerable scope for experiment by enterprising members of the brigade. Patrolling was one way, and almost the

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt J. J. Garbett**; Eltham; born **Waihi**, 25 Jun 1905;

solicitor; wounded 15 Jul 1942.

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only way in the line, of training the replacements sent up from the **Maadi** base camp to fill the gaps in the brigade's ranks caused by casualties, injuries and sickness. Though a number of these men were original members returning from hospital (often not fully recovered, so pressing was the shortage of trained men), many were clerks, orderlies, or drivers, who had forgotten any infantry training they might have received when they first joined the army. Such men, Brigadier Clifton claimed, only had to join a few night patrols to show their worth. For this reason, as well as the orthodox one of keeping a check on the eastward expansion of the enemy's defences, 6 Brigade was encouraged by its brigadier to flood the desert each night with patrols of all types.

The width between the opposing lines in this sector is illustrated by the fact that 25 Battalion was able to maintain, day and night, a standing patrol at **Point 104**, a small rise off the western end of **Deir el Angar**, some four miles south-west of the battalion's positions and about the same distance south-east of the **Qattara Box**.<sup>1</sup> The nearest enemy defences on the west were originally about three miles distant. During each day a section of three Bren carriers kept hull-down positions behind the point, where their safety from sudden attack was to some extent assured by the presence of armoured cars of 7 Armoured Division which patrolled as far north as this point.

After dark it was customary for a relief section of carriers to drive out escorting a truckload or more of infantry, who used partly prepared defences around the point as a listening post or as a base for further patrolling. Three-inch mortars on carriers, Vickers guns in trucks or carriers, and anti-tank guns towed by jeeps were also driven out at night to lay harassing fire on the enemy working parties which were pushing their defence works closer to the point on the north and west. Although similar listening posts were set out elsewhere on the brigade front, none was manned so strongly or consistently as **Point 104**.

The success of 5 Brigade's first attempt to bring back a prisoner by garnering one relatively unimportant Italian did not satisfy the demands of the army's intelligence staff, who were keen to confirm the persistent rumours and scraps of information that German paratroops had been brought into the front line. It was left to 6 Brigade to confirm the rumours, for on the night of 16–17 August a small patrol from C Company, 26 Battalion, returned triumphantly with a man from the *Ramcke Parachute Brigade*. The patrol, under Lieutenant **Galloway**,<sup>2</sup> had in fact swung to the

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<sup>1</sup> See map facing p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> Lt **D. M. Galloway**; born **Thames**, 7 Oct 1917; grocer; died of wounds while p.w. 23 Sep 1942.

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north off its intended course and approached close to the edge of the target area which the artillery were 'plastering' in support of a 23 Battalion patrol. A small party of Germans, discreetly moving away from the shelling, crossed Galloway's path and he immediately gave his men the order to attack. A brisk fight at close quarters ended when the two parties lost touch in the darkness, but the patrol managed to isolate one German who then surrendered.

The artillery fire which brought this paratroop prisoner by accident rather than design was being laid down for a raid by a 23 Battalion patrol on a troop of enemy guns believed to be situated on the south side of El Mreir. With extra support from 3-inch mortars in 28 Battalion's lines, a platoon had set out, its advance carefully timed to reach the objective as the supporting fire ceased. All went according to plan except that no guns were found, only empty pits with ammunition boxes scattered around.

The success of Galloway's patrol encouraged Brigadier Clifton to try out a method which, it was hoped, might recapitulate the same

conditions by design. This involved the firing of a 'backwards barrage' whereby the 25-pounders commenced by laying a barrage on the rear of an enemy position and then gradually reduced the range, thus encouraging any of the enemy who did not appreciate the shelling to walk forward from their trenches into the arms of a patrol waiting hidden close to the finishing line of the barrage. In the first, and it is believed only, trial of this scheme, the patrol, comprising two platoons of A Company, 26 Battalion, was able to get within sight of the objective where a number of troops were busily digging defences, but, when the 'backwards barrage' had only just commenced, the enemy hastily downed tools and ran back through the shelling. Through lack of communications the patrol was unable to tell the artillery to lift its range or cease fire.

While 6 Brigade was experimenting, 5 Brigade continued with more orthodox methods. With artillery fire on previously selected targets, two strong fighting patrols were sent out with instructions to make for the area where the shells were bursting and attack as the fire ceased. Both patrols, however, encountered heavy defensive fire from positions outside the target area and were repulsed with the loss of two men killed, and an officer and another two men wounded.

With a certain ennui from the lack of activity during the long hot days, men of the **Maori Battalion** tried to break the monotony by putting in operation a damaged Italian 75-millimetre gun found abandoned on their front with a supply of ammunition handy. With broken wheels, the gun was precariously propped up on old ammunition boxes and was sighted for direction through the open breech and for elevation by trial and error. Before the scratch crew had really mastered the elements of such gunnery, enemy retaliation became so unpleasant to everyone in the vicinity that the men's commander ordered the gun to be dismantled. The men had some small recompense when, shortly after dark, a lone Italian walked into their lines to give himself up.

The Maoris' enterprise might have been allowed to continue had not the same day been chosen for a counter-attack exercise for dealing with

an enemy penetration along **Ruweisat Ridge** on 5 Brigade's northern flank. The Valentines of A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, came up from reserve, to be joined by a company from each of 21 and 23 Battalions, and with carriers, mortars, Vickers guns and six-pounders in support, advanced against a selected sector on the boundary with **5 Indian Division**. The exercise proved valuable for checking weaknesses in the planning and execution, and was made more realistic when the unorthodox gunnery in 28 Battalion's lines broke the normal sun-drenched lethargy of the front and caused the enemy to take a closer interest in the activity in the brigade sector.

The failure of the 'backwards barrage' did not exhaust Clifton's ingenuity and he now proposed to 18 Battalion that it experiment with a patrol equipped with its own support in the shape of 3-inch mortars mounted on carriers. A fighting patrol from the battalion was followed by two carrier-borne mortars, moving in bounds, until the leading men reported enemy ahead. The patrol then closed up quietly on the enemy, the mortars were brought within range and, at a given signal, opened fire. Owing to an overestimation of the range, the mortar bombs, about sixty fired at a rapid rate, all fell behind the target. The enemy quickly manned his defences and swept his front with machine-gun fire, so the patrol leader discreetly withdrew his men before their presence was discovered.

Greater success was anticipated by 18 Battalion on the night of 20–21 August for a raid which had been planned with a great amount of care. Previous reconnaissance had discovered that an enemy post in course of preparation was relatively isolated and could be outflanked. The post was pinpointed with some accuracy and ranged by the artillery in daylight. At dusk a patrol from B Company set out and, unobserved in the bright moonlight, reached the chosen outflanking position. Here the men waited for the artillery concentration, which was timed for moonset to give them the cover of darkness during their assault and withdrawal. From their cover the men watched the enemy at work until the moon began to set, when the working party packed up its gear and marched

off. As the moon went over the horizon, the shellfire began—to fall on the empty desert.

A similar plan was tried the same night by 25 Battalion further to the south. This time the patrol successfully infiltrated round the flank of its objective, only to find itself sandwiched between the working party it intended to attack and a covering patrol. In a brisk engagement, the officer leading the patrol, Second-Lieutenant Budd,<sup>1</sup> was killed and one man went missing before the patrol extricated itself just in time to avoid the timed shellfire.

While these raids by 18 and 25 Battalions were taking place, 26 Battalion was busy with a scheme for daylight harassing. During the night signallers extended the telephone cable for a mile or so ahead of the lines to a point overlooking the Khawabir Depression and established an exchange in touch with battalion headquarters, 5 Field Regiment, and the Vickers guns of 27 (Machine Gun) Battalion. At the same time a six-pounder anti-tank gun was towed out by a jeep and two 3-inch mortars taken up in carriers. With an artillery observation officer at the telephone and a covering force of a platoon of infantry, the harassing party waited for dawn. As soon as it was light enough for movement in the enemy's lines to be seen, fire was commenced but, by some misunderstanding of the plan or of the observation officer's instructions, the field artillery opened its shooting with the smoke shells intended to cover the withdrawal. The enemy's line was quickly shrouded in smoke so that no results of the fire could be observed and, under heavy but fortunately ill-directed enemy retaliation, the force had to retire in some haste. No casualties were sustained, but on the way back the jeep towing the anti-tank gun ran over a mine in a newly laid but as yet unmarked extension of the perimeter minefield, one man being killed and another wounded.

A curious incident occurred on the following night, 21–22 August, when a patrol from 18 Battalion, reconnoitring from north to south across the front, returned with the uncommon news that it had seen a large enemy patrol moving in the opposite direction. The light from

parachute flares being dropped by **Royal Air Force** bombers over El Mreir had made a surprise attack hazardous and the patrol leader had prudently kept his men down on the ground until the enemy had passed. A patrol from 25 Battalion, traversing the same ground from south to north, also reported the presence of an enemy party but claimed that it had been coming from the north. The 25 Battalion patrol, also deterred by the aircraft flares

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt B. H. Budd; born NZ 17 Feb 1914; stock agent; killed in action 21 Aug 1942.

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and the strength of the enemy, took avoiding action. The next night 25 Battalion set an ambush in the hope that the enemy might use the same route again but nothing was seen. It was not until the two patrol reports were later examined at Brigade Headquarters that the obvious conclusion could be drawn.

The extensive use of parachute flares, whose light discommoded the men on patrol and added another hazard to their activities, inaugurated an offensive by the **Desert Air Force** planned to disrupt and harass the preparations for Rommel's expected attack. Starting on the evening of 21 August, the weight of the bombing was stepped up each night thereafter, the targets being mainly concentrations of vehicles behind the southern half of the line, especially in the **El Mreir Depression** and the **Qattara Box**. Although, according to the German records, this bombing did not interfere greatly with the preparations, it had a considerable effect on morale and gave evidence that the British were anticipating an attack. The German-Italian air force, husbanding its resources and especially its petrol, seldom appeared in any strength day or night. It confined its activities to reconnaissance flights, fighter patrols to chase away **RAF** reconnaissance, erratic and mostly ineffective night bombing, and some hit-and-run raids in daylight by fighters or fighter-bombers. During the second half of August, hardly a single Stuka was seen within range of the New Zealand Bofors batteries.



The Division suffered only five casualties by air action during this period.

On 22 August a practice was held of a plan in which A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, carrying Vickers guns on its Valentines and accompanied by six-pounder guns and two troops of the Divisional Cavalry, made a mock counter-attack against an assumed enemy breakthrough in 6 Brigade's sector. This exercise was watched by **General Freyberg** and other senior officers, who recommended certain modifications on which the practice was repeated.

It was on 23 August that General Montgomery made his first detailed inspection of the **New Zealand Box**. Of this visit, the commander of 22 Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel **Russell**,<sup>1</sup> wrote home:

We had the new Army Commander around my area yesterday and he was most impressive—looked as if he knew his own mind and meant to see things were carried out on the dot. Small, quiet-spoken and tightlipped with an eye that saw more than the obvious so I shall be surprised if he does not produce the bacon. This W.D. has certainly produced a number of bowler hats for British Generals and by the process of elimination we must get the goods soon ....

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col J. T. Russell**, DSO, m.i.d.; born Hastings, 11 Nov 1904; farmer; 2 i/c Div Cav 1941; CO 22 Bn Feb-Sep 1942; wounded May 1941; killed in action 6 Sep 1942.

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As well as visiting all the brigade areas, Montgomery toured the front lines of both 25 and 18 Battalions, but an extension of the tour further north along the front, into the area under close enemy observation, was discouraged by **General Freyberg**. The Army Commander left the Division with the impression that he was expecting an attack at any time and was confident that it would be beaten off. He also left the feeling that he was not too happy over the results of the army's patrolling, at least in so



far as the collection of prisoners for identification was concerned. No changes of consequence behind the enemy's lines had been noted by air reconnaissance, yet this negative evidence could hardly be reconciled with the mass of other information which pointed to an impending offensive. The Army Commander therefore deemed it essential that every effort should be made to see if any alterations were taking place in the Axis front line, especially in the comparative numbers of Germans and Italians manning the front.

The New Zealand troops, however, had begun to find their night patrolling for prisoners a frustrating experience in which luck played a large and elusive part. Enemy working parties could be located with comparative ease by the noise of picks and shovels ringing on the rocky ground in the still night air. In fact, the Axis troops seemed to dislike working in silence and were inclined to talk loudly, shout and sing, especially the Italians who obviously found company in noise. But the patrols could seldom get within assaulting distance without alerting a sentry and running the gauntlet of a deluge of machine-gun fire from covering troops who were often supported by tanks or armoured cars. Even an idea that had seemed so promising, a raid with wireless-controlled artillery support, had by now been shown to make too many difficult demands, its principal requirements being a more reliable wireless set and better navigation, neither of which could be obtained at short notice. However, one last effort was tried on these lines on the night of 24–25 August. Having found by earlier reconnaissance an unprotected route round to the rear of a position on which the enemy was working, Lieutenant [Baird](#)<sup>1</sup> led out a patrol from A Company, 26 Battalion, with a signaller carrying a No. 18 set. Creeping unobserved round the back of the working party, the patrol prepared to charge straight through the position and pick up whatever it could in the way of prisoners, documents, or identifications from the dead, as soon as the supporting shellfire ceased. The 18 set then decided to demonstrate its characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> [Lt J. R. Baird](#); born NZ 14 Mar 1916; painter and

paperhanger; died of wounds 25 Aug 1942.

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unreliability, and as the signaller sat patiently trying to raise the artillery control, another party of the enemy came up on the rear of the patrol. After a short but spirited engagement, the patrol broke clear, with no prisoners but with four of its own men wounded, including the leader who later died of his wounds.

*ii*

Montgomery's visit to the New Zealand Division and his discussions with **Freyberg** and his staff brought an immediate reconsideration of the methods of patrolling. Most of the commanders in Eighth Army were agreed in expecting the battle to open at any moment with a repetition by Rommel of the pattern of his **Gazala** advance in May with a hook round the southern flank. They also anticipated that, as at **Gazala**, Rommel would attempt to open a direct channel between his fixed defences and the spearhead of the hook. The obvious route for such a channel lay along **Ruweisat Ridge**. A small amount of evidence, such as the capture of the German parachutist by 26 Battalion, indicated that German troops might be taking over the sector on the west of Ruweisat and around the **El Mreir Depression**, and Montgomery suggested to his corps commanders that a major raid on this area might both prove if the Germans were concentrating there and disorganise their preparations.

The Indians on the ridge itself were badly placed to conduct such a raid, for their sector was confined and difficult to operate in and might at any moment have to bear the brunt of the Axis attack. The 5th New Zealand Brigade sector immediately to the south offered fewer difficulties and **Freyberg** put the suggestion to **Brigadier Kippenberger**. The brigadier, who was concerned over the lack of success of his patrols but had been unable to devise any improvement with the means at hand within his brigade, saw the suggestion as the opportunity to carry the small artillery-supported patrol the logical step forward. He immediately asked **Freyberg** what artillery would be available, and was told that he

could have the direct support of all the field and medium guns under New Zealand command as well as **5 Indian Division's** field artillery, a total of nearly 150 guns.

The sum of information brought back by the brigade's nightly patrols indicated that the enemy's defences projected in a small salient around the eastern lip of El Mreir, with a line of wire, in some stretches as thick as three coils of dannert, covering groups of weapon pits on the top of the escarpment. Down in the depression there were other groups of pits not so strongly wired. Minefields covered the front but they were sown, according to the patrol reports, mainly with anti-tank mines. South of this salient, the enemy line swung back to the west quite sharply before turning south-west along the pipeline towards the **Qattara Box**. This layout decided **Kippenberger** to try out a method with which he had experimented early in July, of a sweep along the enemy's front instead of a head-on assault. His earlier attempt, mainly through lack of detailed information of the enemy's positions, had been only partially successful but now most factors seemed favourable.

It was almost inevitable that he should choose 28 Battalion to carry out the raid. Having sat in their defences overlooking the area for so many days and patrolled over it at night, the men of the battalion knew the ground well. Moreover, they did not take happily to their forced inaction and were only too ready to let off steam.

On the previous night, 23–24 August, a mixed patrol from 23 and 28 Battalions had reconnoitred a site for an advanced observation post to the south of El Mreir and had helped signallers lay a telephone line to the post. On the evening of 24 August a platoon from A Company, 23 Battalion, manned this post in telephone communication with the brigade network while the commander of the **Maori Battalion**, Lieutenant-Colonel **Baker**,<sup>1</sup> led a party of four of his officers and his RSM north from the post to choose the ground for the raid in line with the brigadier's general plan. Then, with the co-operation of the brigade and artillery staffs, a detailed plan was prepared for an infantry assault under relatively massive artillery support for the night of 25–26 August.

In general terms, the plan was for two companies of 28 Battalion to march out along the south of the enemy salient, form up facing north and follow the artillery fire through the tip of the projection before turning east back home. A patrol from 23 Battalion was to occupy the observation post and thus provide a screen on the west of the start line. The final artillery arrangements provided for 104 guns to fire 6000 shells on the path and flanks of the line of assault, while other guns laid harassing fire elsewhere on the divisional front as diversions.

At 9 p.m. on 25 August, 23 Battalion's covering party, consisting of 7 and 12 Platoons under the command of Lieutenant I. M. **Wilson**,<sup>2</sup> set off through the Maori lines and passed out through C Company's patrol gap in the wire and mines. It was a calm moonlit night with occasional cloud and almost ominously

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col F. Baker**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; born **Kohukohu, Hokianga**, 19 Jun 1908; civil servant; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Jul–Nov 1942; twice wounded; Director of Rehabilitation, 1943–54; Public Service Commissioner, 1954–58; died **Wellington**, 1 Jun 1958.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj I. M. Wilson**; born NZ 8 May 1912; civil servant; three times wounded.

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quiet, the only noise coming from the customary erratic bursts of automatic fire on fixed lines with which the enemy proclaimed his wakefulness. An hour before midnight Wilson's men were disposed around the observation post, covering the west and south of the start line. The Maori Battalion's intelligence section followed the covering party to lay out a line of white tape to mark the start line, some 300 yards to the south of the enemy wire and 500 yards west of the patrol gap.

Meanwhile A and B Companies of 28 Battalion began to assemble in C Company's area. Here they were joined by Lieutenant Hamilton<sup>1</sup> of 7

Field Company with twelve of his sappers carrying Bangalore torpedoes and made-up charges for demolishing captured weapons. The brigadier, who established a tactical headquarters at the Maori headquarters while the raid was on, then addressed the men, telling them of the importance attached to the operation, what it was hoped to gain, and the need for prisoners rather than scalps. After Lieutenant-Colonel Baker, the Maori chaplain, and the Roman Catholic padre had all spoken, it was time to move. Led by guides, the two companies set off through the patrol gap and lined up on the start line, facing north, A Company (Captain **Porter**<sup>2</sup>) on the right with one platoon forward and two in reserve, B Company (Captain **Pene**<sup>3</sup>) with two platoons forward and one to the rear. The engineers in four groups, each with a Bangalore torpedo, were spaced across the front and the battalion commander with a small tactical headquarters took his station in the centre.

The quiet of the night was broken sharp on 4 a.m. as the supporting guns opened fire. The men walked steadily forward until halted by their officers as they reached the edge of the shellfire, where one or two shells, falling wide of the target, caused the first casualties. Soon the burst of smoke shells indicated that the guns were lifting to their second target area further north and the troops prepared to advance. As the smoke, added to the dust raised by the shelling, had by now completely obscured the coils of dannert wire marking the enemy's defences, the Maori officers called on their men to make for the flash of the exploding Bangalores. The sappers went steadily ahead into the murk, to lay their torpedoes so well that gaps up to twenty feet wide were blown in the wire. As each explosion lit up the night, the nearest of the assaulting troops charged through the resulting gap with yells and

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<sup>1</sup> Col P. H. G. Hamilton, OBE, m.i.d.; Waiouru Military Camp; born **Auckland**, 26 Apr 1918; mining student; OC **8 Fd Coy** May–Jun 1944; Chief Engineer, NZ Army, 1960–64; Camp Commandant, **Waiouru**, 1964–.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj W. Porter**, MC and bar; Kaeo; born Taumarere, 23 Aug

1915; taxi driver; twice wounded.

<sup>3</sup> **Capt M. R. Pene; Rotorua; born Whakatane, 1 Feb 1912; foreman, Maori Affairs Dept.**

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war-cries, to encounter a number of shallow sangars which were quickly overrun. The few occupants who offered resistance were shot or bayoneted, encouraging the majority either to hold up their hands or to run back into the artillery fire falling behind them.

The men of A Company, working their way along the lip of the escarpment, found a thin line of sangars just inside the dannert wire manned by Italians with rifles and light automatics. Resistance practically collapsed at the sight of the Maori bayonets, so that the company caught up with the supporting artillery fire and had to wait until the guns lifted to their next task. Within half an hour of leaving the start line, Captain Porter found himself on the company's objective and set to work to gather up his men and their prisoners. A distinctive flare he had arranged for his own defence headquarters in the box to fire at intervals gave him a guide for direction and, crossing the dannert wire at a place where it was only one coil thick, he led the men to the east. The supporting artillery fire had now ceased and enemy mortars from further west came to life, laying defensive fire on no-man's land and causing some casualties among the men of A Company and their prisoners.

On the left flank, B Company advanced down to the floor of the depression where the artillery fire had raised a pall of dust. Fire from a strongpoint on the left, quickly overcome, drew the company off its true northerly course, and it was not until Captain Pene noticed that he was on the left of a small knoll on which artillery fire was falling, when he should have been on its right, that he realised how far his company had been drawn off course. Unwilling to slow the impetus of the advance, especially as there were machine-gun posts ahead, he continued to lead his men forward until they met the pipeline, overcoming several groups

of sangars on the way. By following the pipeline to the north-east, he regained his correct objective, where he was joined by Lieutenant-Colonel Baker. The two officers then decided to return down the correct line of advance to pick up any wounded and stragglers. Back on the start line, B Company withdrew through the enemy's defensive mortar fire, followed by 23 Battalion's covering party. By 5 a.m., an hour after the opening of the artillery support, all the troops taking part in the raid were back in the box.

Casualties in 28 Battalion, caused as much by the men overrunning the supporting fire or by shells falling short, were reported as two killed, fourteen wounded and six, including an officer, missing; of these six it was later ascertained that the officer and four men had died and one wounded man was taken prisoner. The engineers, who after blowing the wire demolished one or two heavy machine guns, had two men wounded and one missing, later known to have died of his wounds.

In return for their losses the Maoris estimated that they had left behind them about sixty enemy dead and they brought back forty-one prisoners, of whom about half a dozen were wounded.

The fit prisoners were hurried back to **Divisional Headquarters**, where a special interrogation team had been assembled to get immediate assessment of any information forthcoming. All the prisoners turned out to be from *10 and 12 Companies of 39 Infantry Regiment of the Italian Bologna Division*. Most of them were described as 'poor physical types' and, shaken by the heavy shellfire and the Maori bayonets, were willing to tell all they knew rather than stand on their rights under the Geneva Convention. But the information they offered of surrounding dispositions or Rommel's plans was disappointingly scant. The absence of any officers among such a large batch of prisoners was surprising and none of the men who took part in the raid could clearly recollect seeing any Italian officers during the action, though some thought they had seen officers running to the rear. The prisoners took the absence of officers as a matter of course. <sup>1</sup>



In spite of its seemingly meagre intelligence results, the raid had at least proved that an important sector of the Axis front was held wholly by Italian troops who, moreover, had not yet made any preparations for a share in an offensive. One certain result, judged by the number of prisoners and the estimated total of killed and wounded, was the elimination of two full companies of Italian infantry.

The raid, one of the first major engagements undertaken under the new army command, was considered a model on which future operations of this sort should be based. Messages of congratulation to all concerned in the planning and execution of the operation were received the following morning. Captain Porter was awarded a bar to his Military Cross for his leadership and Sergeant **August**<sup>2</sup> of his company received the Military Medal.

The raid had in fact been more successful than anticipated. The following morning observers in the box reported that ambulances were moving in the depression, but no attempt appeared to have been made to bring up reserves to man the overrun defences.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Many officers, again, considered it unnecessary to put in an appearance during battle and thus set the men an example.’—Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers*, p. 262. The story mentioned by Rommel (*Ibid.*, p. 282) that a senior Italian officer captured about this time gave away the plans cannot be confirmed in any New Zealand records.

<sup>2</sup> **WO II J. August**, MM; born NZ 2 Apr 1909; slaughterman; killed in action 2 Nov 1942.

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**Freyberg** accordingly directed **Kippenberger** to advance his line to the edge of the depression and prevent the enemy from reoccupying the point of the salient. However, as **Kippenberger** records, he had seen ‘the operation as a raid only and was not prepared, either mentally or with troops’, to take advantage of the opportunity.<sup>1</sup> He immediately called on



Lieutenant-Colonel Baker to send troops forward, but Baker could not promise swift enough action as his men had already dispersed to their front-line defences in case the enemy turned on a counter-attack. He suggested it was a job for the reserve battalion and **Kippenberger** turned to Lieutenant-Colonel **Harding**<sup>2</sup> of 21 Battalion.

The opportunity for the operation was decreasing with every hour of daylight so it was decided to send one platoon only, to be reinforced if it succeeded. No. 12 Platoon of B Company was chosen, led by Lieutenant **Eady**<sup>3</sup> and accompanied by an observation officer from 6 Field Regiment, Major **Lambourn**.<sup>4</sup> As the platoon marched through 28 Battalion's lines, it was joined by a guide supplied by 28 Battalion, Lieutenant **Waaka**,<sup>5</sup> who had taken part in the raid.

Burdened with weapons, picks, shovels, and the other impedimenta necessary to enable them to consolidate defences, the men of 12 Platoon passed through gaps in the Maori wire and, well dispersed, set off for the depression. Their way lay over a flat expanse of desert, overlooked by enemy positions on the higher ground to the north-west. As soon as they started, enemy machine guns came to life, to be joined later by mortars which laid a belt of defensive fire behind them. By the time the leaders had reached the enemy's wire, most of the platoon had been forced to ground in the scanty cover available. The three officers agreed that it would be impossible to dig defences in daylight under the enemy fire and that little purpose would be served by keeping the platoon in the open. Major Lambourn accordingly called by wireless for artillery fire on the enemy mortars and machine guns. As the 25-pounders opened up, assisted by fire from the Vickers guns in 28 Battalion's lines, the enemy fire slackened sufficiently to allow 12 Platoon to filter back without serious casualties.

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<sup>1</sup> *Infantry Brigadier*, pp. 203–4.

<sup>2</sup> **Brig R. W. Harding**, DSO, MM, ED; Kirikopuni, Nth Auckland; born **Dargaville**, 29 Feb 1896; farmer; Auck Regt 1916–19; CO 21

**Bn May 1942–Jun 1943; comd 5 Bde 30 Apr–14 May 1943, 4 Jun–23 Aug 1943; twice wounded.**

<sup>3</sup> **Capt A. T. Eady; Auckland; born NZ 26 Jan 1906; musician.**

<sup>4</sup> **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.**

<sup>5</sup> **Lt K. Waaka; Whakarewarewa; born NZ 27 Nov 1914; State Forestry worker.**

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**All this activity on 5 Brigade's front brought very little retaliation from the enemy. His artillery, seldom in evidence lately, shelled 28 Battalion's area in the morning with some heavy concentrations which fell mainly on A Company without causing any casualties, but by midday the whole front had settled down to its normal torpor which lasted throughout the heat of the afternoon. Nor was the enemy apparently in a hurry to reoccupy his forward posts, for a patrol from 21 Battalion out after dark found the gaps blown in the wire by the Bangalorees unrepaired and the sangars on the lip of the depression unoccupied.**

**On the morning of 27 August, without warning, extremely heavy shellfire commenced to fall on the Maori positions, so heavy that the whole Division and most of Eighth Army were called to the alert in case the shelling was a prelude to the expected offensive. After an estimated 2000 shells had fallen within the period of an hour, the shellfire stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and the front resumed its normal state of relative peace. It was later thought that the shelling was intended to cover the movement of reliefs and reinforcements and the reorganisation of the El Mreir defences. Under the concentrated fire well-dug slit trenches proved their worth; apart from some minor injuries caused by flying splinters, only one major casualty was recorded in 28 Battalion—one man killed when a shell fell directly into his trench.**

Whatever the reason behind this shelling, patrols on the following night found the gaps in the enemy's wire still open and no troops in the forward posts. Accordingly, for the night of the 28th–29th, it was arranged that 21 Battalion should send out three fighting patrols in the hope that they might catch the enemy off guard and bring back some prisoners to identify any new units in the line. A powerful artillery support programme was arranged, with the four field regiments in the box and one from **5 Indian Division** firing in support of the patrols, while the Indians' other two regiments fired harassing tasks immediately to the north of the depression. In the event, the patrols were a night too late. Two found the gaps in the wire had been filled and, though they engaged enemy posts behind the wire, they were unable to break through and get to close enough grips to gather prisoners. The third patrol was stalking an enemy working party when the recall signal, a red flare fired from 28 Battalion's lines, brought all three parties back in haste to avoid getting caught in the artillery fire planned to cover their withdrawal. Losses were three men missing and four wounded. For half an hour after their withdrawal, the enemy laid heavy defensive fire across his front.

The night of the Maoris' raid saw unusual activity in the rear part of the box when, after unidentified aircraft had been heard overhead, several reports came in, principally from men in the headquarters area of 25 Battalion, that suspicious objects had been seen silhouetted against the moon. As this was before the era of flying saucers, and as the presence of German paratroops had lately been confirmed, a parachute alert was ordered in 13 Corps' sector. Headquarters staffs and the NZASC troops manning the replenishment points east of the box stood to and both 22 Battalion and 132 Brigade sent out search parties. The floating objects were quickly found to be nothing more than small pamphlets carrying a message unintelligible to the New Zealanders; written in Urdu, it was an Axis exhortation to Indian troops to change sides. At this period, in spite of the New Zealand Division's activities, which included the loss of several prisoners from patrols, the **Africa Corps** intelligence staff believed that the Division was further to the rear and that the box was occupied by Indian troops.

Although on this same night, 25–26 August, most of the artillery had tasks in support of 5 Brigade's action, 6 Brigade sent out several reconnaissance patrols while 25 Battalion's standing patrol at **Point 104** fought a minor battle. The previous night an enemy party had stumbled on the standing patrol and, after firing a few shots, had retired. This night a force, estimated to be as many as forty strong, took up positions within range and engaged the standing patrol for nearly two hours with machine-gun and mortar fire. After the firing had died down, with no major casualties to the patrol, the carriers followed up the enemy party as it withdrew and collected an Italian deserter.

The next night the standing patrol was reinforced and an ambush was laid west of the point in the hope of catching the enemy if he repeated his tactics. A clear sky with a bright moon and flares dropped by the **RAF** over the **Qattara Box** area made the night almost as light as day but no enemy was seen. On the night of the 27th–28th, the patrol was again reinforced, this time with five carriers, a section of 3-inch mortars, and a six-pounder anti-tank gun. A listening post set out some way west of the point reported back just after midnight to say that an enemy party was moving across the front. The carriers, setting out at once, missed the enemy but continued their search in the dark some way to the west, until they came up against a belt of wire behind which there were occupied enemy defences. On being fired on by the carriers, the enemy replied with heavy mortar fire, under which the carriers withdrew on to **Point 104**.

The following morning, the 28th, Brigadier Clifton's harassing of the enemy continued as all three battalions sent out Vickers guns, mortars and anti-tank guns into no-man's land before dawn to catch the enemy at his early morning chores. This morning, however, enemy retaliation was quicker and stronger than previously and a considerable number of smoke shells had to be fired by 5 Field Regiment before all the weapons were brought back into the lines. As on most mornings, armoured cars of 7 Armoured Division were operating across the southern part of the front, coming as far north as the line of **Alam Nayil – Qattara Box**. Their

presence this particular morning, added to 6 Brigade's harassing fire, for some inexplicable reason caused the Germans of *Ramcke Brigade* to fear an attack. The brigade reported to *Africa Corps* that up to thirty armoured cars were advancing from **Point 104** and asked for fire from the *Corps* artillery, the parachute brigade having no field or medium artillery of its own.

With 5 Brigade's raiding parties occupying so much of the supporting artillery on the night of 28–29 August, 6 Brigade confined itself to reconnaissance patrols, who noted that the enemy troops were keeping close in their defences, with very few of the customary chattering working parties above ground. They also observed an unusual number of enemy patrols on the front. The next night, while patrols from 26 and 18 Battalions reconnoitred the ground for future operations, 25 Battalion's standing patrol on **Point 104** laid diversionary fire from carriers and 3-inch mortars on the **Qattara Box** area, receiving unusually heavy machine-gun fire in retaliation. Once again, poor communications prevented the patrol from calling for artillery support for, although a vehicle-borne No. 11 set, a more powerful type than the No. 18, had been borrowed from the artillery, even this was unable to overcome the peculiar atmospheric conditions of the desert night.

*iii*

The standard of patrolling in the New Zealand Division during the August lull was not of a very high quality if it is judged by the results in terms of the efforts involved. The main reason for the nightly patrolling was the gathering of information; minefields, wire, and enemy trenches were plotted by rough and ready surveying by means of compass and pacing; the identity of the enemy troops in each small sector was sought through the capture of prisoners, the discovery of discarded equipment, uniforms, or papers, and by recognition of the language, German or Italian, spoken by working parties. The smallest scrap of information had its value in the picture drawn by the intelligence staffs.

There was, however, a secondary purpose, fulfilled to some extent by

the very number of patrols sent out each night. It was essential to dominate no-man's land and to deter the enemy if possible from extending his defences towards the east by constant interference with his working parties. This was all part of Eighth Army's harassing policy, a policy which, as far as the New Zealand Division was concerned, had its value in maintaining morale among the infantry, for whom it was the only aggressive activity offering.

This was the first time in the war that the New Zealand Division had experienced anything approaching static trench warfare and, although the men had developed an aptitude above the average for activity at night, they had not been given the training that could have put a sharp edge on their patrolling. The customary procedure was for a patrol to be taken by truck to some known point in the desert where a landmark such as a burnt-out tank, or even a less conspicuous object, had been surveyed in with reasonable accuracy. Then, on a compass bearing and counting paces, the patrol would set off for an objective which had been observed by day or reported by a previous patrol, in either case probably with a considerable degree of inaccuracy. If the patrol was for reconnaissance only, the results of its night's wanderings depended mainly on the leader's ability to march on an exact bearing and record the pacing, and especially to bring back a connected record of the route followed, without gaps caused by alarms and excursions when bearings and counted paces were likely to be forgotten. Early patrol reports at this period were so bad that special forms were devised to get patrol leaders to remember and record the essential points of time and distance. Surviving reports, even on these forms, seldom allow the course of a patrol to be traced with any certainty. Similar reports during the Italian campaign are models of accuracy in comparison and show how much had to be learnt.

For fighting patrols, sent out to make contact with the enemy and gather identifications from the dead or from equipment, or by capturing a prisoner, the need for such accurate recording was not so great, but good navigation, to bring a patrol to the point previously observed where

a weakness in the enemy's defences could be exploited, was often the main factor in success or failure.

One drawback, and one over which the men themselves had little control, was inherent in all patrolling. The desert here was relatively flat, surfaced with patches of hard stones alternating with soft sand and with only occasional patches of low scrub. Close approach to an alert enemy therefore was extremely difficult and silent movement was practically essential. Yet most of the men were equipped with iron-shod boots, and with weapons and other gear never designed for silent movement. Many of the officers, by the end of August, had equipped themselves with soft-soled desert boots, and some of the battalions had acquired a small store of similar footwear which was issued to the most deserving patrols. Sandshoes, issued by the army for sports, were tried out but were found uncomfortable on the sharp, rocky patches and generally unsuitable, with little wearing capacity. The wearing of socks over army boots, though a good expedient, had many and obvious drawbacks.

It was partly because of the noise, unavoidable when a patrol was wearing standard army equipment, that the system of covering fire from artillery, mortars or machine guns was first tried out; though such fire often kept the enemy alert, it drove his pickets to ground and lessened the chance of their attention being drawn to suspicious sounds.

Covering fire, however, had to be closely co-ordinated with a patrol's movements and for this purpose much experimentation was carried out with the two standard types of radio transmitter-receivers used by the Division. The No. 18 set, compactly designed to be carried by one man and issued to infantry battalions for internal communications, proved to have too many inherent weaknesses to overcome the climatic and atmospheric conditions peculiar to the desert, especially over the distances involved on 6 Brigade's front. Even the vehicle-borne, and more powerful, No. 11 set could not be relied on. To overcome the problem of distance, trials were made of relay sets between patrols and their bases, but even this method failed to provide certain

communication. Moreover, at the rare times when communication was clearly established, the accuracy of the supporting fire depended wholly on the accuracy of the patrol's navigation and, with all the chances involved in night navigation over the almost featureless desert, it is not surprising that the supporting fire seldom fell exactly where the patrol wanted it—and Clifton could write in his diary, 'Our patrolling did damn-all as usual'.

The fundamental faults of training and equipment could not be remedied on the spot so that it was only natural that commanders, continually pressed to produce prisoners, should consider ways of eliminating the hazards of poor navigation and uncertain communications. The only means at hand lay in organisation and planning and it was thus that the small fighting patrol, setting off with a minimum of orders to try its luck, gave way first to the various experiments in supporting fire and finally to the planned raid in company, or greater, strength on a timed schedule of movement and artillery fire. Once this lesson had been learnt, the New Zealand Division staged two minor operations which brought in many more prisoners than all the small patrols together had managed to collect. The first of these operations, by the Maoris against El Mreir, has already been described. Its success encouraged Clifton to set his men a similar task. <sup>1</sup>

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At a conference held at Headquarters 6 Brigade on the 27th and attended by **General Freyberg** and the CRA, Brigadier C. E. Weir, <sup>2</sup> Clifton outlined a suggestion for a raid by two companies of 18 Battalion, with diversionary operations by the other two battalions on the north and south of the area of attack. However, on a close study of the enemy's line as plotted by the nightly reconnaissance patrols, with additional information gained from air photographs, it was found that on 6 Brigade's front there were no salients similar to El Mreir for which the method used by 5 Brigade, of an attack across the enemy's front, could be employed. This was confirmed by special reconnaissance patrols



sent out on the two following nights, so the plan was altered to a raid by one company directly at the enemy posts in the long shallow depression, **Deir Umm Khawabir**, to the north-east of the **Qattara Box**. A heavy artillery programme was prepared to give concentrations on the area to be raided, with neutralising fire on nearby positions from which the enemy might interfere with the assault, while both 26 and 25 Battalions prepared diversionary action on their fronts.

The operation began early on the evening of 30 August when 25 Battalion sent out two platoons of infantry, two anti-tank guns, six carriers, three 3-inch mortars in carriers, and a platoon of Vickers guns, all under the command of Captain Weston <sup>3</sup> of B Company, to the standing patrol position at **Point 104**. With infantry and carriers providing protection, the weapons were sited

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison of patrolling techniques, see **Aitken**, *Gallipoli to the Somme*.

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

<sup>3</sup> Capt C Weston, m.i.d.; **New Plymouth**; born NZ 6 Mar 1914; farmer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

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on convenient spots close to the point and laid initially on the high ground, including the spur known locally as ‘**Maori Ridge**’, off the south-east of the **Qattara Box**.

Similarly, 26 Battalion sent out a patrol to cover two 3-inch mortars and two platoons of Vickers guns to a selected point about 1000 yards west of the FDLs. These weapons were laid on the rising ground along

the northern edge of the **Deir Umm Khawabir**, while a small fighting patrol under Second-Lieutenant **Hansen** <sup>1</sup> advanced towards the same area in the hope of gathering a prisoner in the confusion immediately the firing ceased.

Meanwhile, A Company of 18 Battalion, under the command of Captain **Pike**, <sup>2</sup> left its defences and, in light battle equipment, filed out through a patrol gap to march some two miles to a previously reconnoitred breach in the wire surrounding the main enemy minefield in **Deir Umm Khawabir**. Here they waited for the supporting artillery fire.

The movement of all three battalion parties was timed so that they would be ready for action by 9.30 p.m. At this moment one battery of 5 Field Regiment started firing on the **Maori Ridge** area, to be joined by the weapons around **Point 104**. A quarter of an hour later the mortars and Vickers of 26 Battalion's patrol opened up on their target, and at the same time the whole of 5 Field Regiment, one battery of 6 Field Regiment, and a troop of 64 Medium Regiment—about 40 guns in all—commenced firing on the path of 18 Battalion's raid. At 10 p.m. this shellfire lifted for 300 yards, the lift being signalled to the waiting assault party by two rounds of smoke from each 25-pounder. Captain **Pike** then led his men into the smoke and, with bayonets, tommy guns and grenades, A Company attacked the line of sangars behind the wire. The occupants, mainly Italians, were still hugging the bottoms of their sangars to shelter from the shellfire and were not given time to recover and man their weapons. Many were killed, but those showing clearly that they were prepared to become prisoners were rounded up and led to the rear. As the immediate defences were being dealt with, firing broke out from a supporting post in the rear. Sergeant **Goodmanson**, <sup>3</sup> who knew the layout of the defences from earlier patrolling, gathered a group of men and led an attack on the supporting position, overrunning a machine-gun post and then engaging and destroying an anti-tank gun and its crew. With twelve prisoners in hand, he rejoined the main group and the

<sup>1</sup> **Lt A. C. Hansen, MC; Nelson, born NZ 13 Nov 1917; clerk; wounded 25 Apr 1943.**

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col P. R. Pike, MC; Auckland; born Auckland, 1 Oct 1913; clerk; CO 24 Bn Apr–Jun 1944; twice wounded.**

<sup>3</sup> **WO I W. R. Goodmanson, MM, EM; Lyttelton; born Lyttelton, 23 Dec 1915; farm labourer.**

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company set off for home. The whole engagement had lasted less than an hour and resulted in an estimated forty of the enemy killed or badly wounded, thirty-two Italian prisoners, of *Brescia* and *Folgore* divisions, and one German of *Ramcke Brigade*, to balance only three men at all seriously wounded in A Company.

While the main raid was in progress, two batteries of 5 Field Regiment switched their fire to 26 Battalion's objective and at 10.20 p.m., when all supporting fire ceased, Second-Lieutenant Hansen led his patrol through the enemy wire, only to encounter an enemy tank under whose fire he wisely withdrew.

The expenditure of ammunition for this one operation amounted to a total of 400 rounds from the medium guns, 4000 25-pounder shells, 410 3-inch mortar bombs, and 36,000 rounds from the Vickers guns.

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 6 – ROMMEL'S OFFENSIVE OPENS

## CHAPTER 6

### *Rommel's Offensive Opens*

*i*

**THE** troops taking part in 6 Brigade's raid and the two diversions were back in their lines before midnight, leaving various small listening posts and the standing patrol on **Point 104** out in no-man's land. The night, however, did not regain the customary level of relative tranquillity.

As early as 29 August General Montgomery had decided that the Army's front was sufficiently manned and secure to deal with the type of attack he expected Rommel to attempt. The Alam el Halfa position was mined and dug and the mobile reserve had been built up to three brigades of tanks. Already he had begun the collection of reinforcements, supplies, and equipment in the rear areas in preparation for his own offensive, and now, concurring in the general opinion that the time for action by Rommel had passed, he directed that the formation of the special reserve he needed should commence. For this the New Zealand Division had to be withdrawn from its front-line position. Plans had already been prepared for a cautious exchange, spread over several nights, of the two New Zealand brigades by the two brigades of 44 Division on Alam el Halfa. When this relief was complete, 44 Division would resume command of its third brigade, 132 Brigade, already in the box. Although this division was less experienced and possessed fewer guns than the New Zealand Division, it was expected to hold without trouble the extensive and well designed ground defences that the New Zealanders had prepared. The two New Zealand brigades were to remain on Alam el Halfa, handily placed for any emergency, until the moon had waned and major action by the enemy was unlikely. After that reserve troops were to be brought up from the Delta to free the Division for its special training.

Just before he received Montgomery's decision for the exchange to commence, **Freyberg** had agreed to a suggestion from **Kippenberger** that

**22 Battalion should take its share in the front line by relieving 28 Battalion, whose men needed a respite from the trying conditions of their exposed sector. The men of 22 Battalion were in process of packing up on the morning of 30 August when the Corps Commander rang Freyberg to say that he and the Army Commander were agreed that the danger of an immediate attack was passing, if it had not already passed, and the relief of the Division could accordingly commence at once, to be completed by 4 September. The prelude to the withdrawal of the two New Zealand brigades entailed a complete exchange of sectors within the box between 5 and 132 Brigades so that the latter, now with some experience of front-line conditions, could be firmly settled into the lively sector facing El Mreir before the other two less experienced British brigades moved up to occupy the quieter fronts on the south-west and south. From this simple internal rearrangement for 44 Division's benefit a legend arose, so fast did events move in the next twenty-four hours, that 5 Brigade was deliberately shifted to the southern sector in anticipation of Rommel's offensive.**

**The relief by 22 Battalion was therefore cancelled and Brigadier C. B. Robertson of 132 Brigade was instructed to start thinning out his positions immediately so that his three battalions would be ready to move into 5 Brigade's sector as soon as dusk fell. The method of relief meant that the southern front would be left unoccupied for some hours, but this was felt to be less important than the need to keep the El Mreir defences continually manned. The headquarters of the two brigades changed places in the afternoon, the system of communications built and manned by the New Zealand Divisional Signals enabling them to keep in touch with their battalions throughout. Before evening many of the English troops were on the march and, as soon as dusk gave cover from enemy observation, all available trucks of the few still kept in the box were pressed into service to shuttle back and forth between the two sectors.**

**As this exchange was in progress, 18 Battalion's raid took place and the staff at Divisional Headquarters was assessing the information**

gained from the raid and its prisoners. Interrogation brought little of immediate value, though the natural volubility of the Italians had been so affected by the strain of battle and capture that it was difficult to stop the flow of words. The solitary German had rather arrogantly given his captors the impression that he was confident of early release at Rommel's hands, but by the time he reached the interrogating team at headquarters he had become more security conscious. The team, unaware of his previous arrogance, accepted his newly assumed ignorance. All in all, the identity and the questioning of the prisoners from both 28 and 18 Battalions' raids gave no hint of any significant changes in the enemy's dispositions or of an impending offensive.

But even before the prisoners had all been questioned, **Divisional Headquarters** received a warning that some unusual enemy activity was afoot. Shortly before midnight an urgent call came through the artillery wireless link with **5 Indian Division** for the New Zealand guns to help with defensive fire across the western end of **Ruweisat Ridge**. The battalion of **2 West Yorks** holding that front had reported that it was under heavy fire and its forward posts were falling back in face of an infantry advance. This action on the ridge only a few hundred yards north of 5 Brigade's sector started up while 132 Brigade was still in process of taking over. Most of the men of **2 Buffs** and **5 Royal West Kents** had already been guided into 21 and 22 Battalions' defences, the New Zealand occupiers of each post marching back to the rear as soon as their reliefs appeared. Relief of the exposed 28 Battalion area was purposely left to the last so that the other two battalions would have their defences and communications already organised. But, in its occupation of the quiet southern sector, 132 Brigade had not yet learnt to dispense with inessentials such as camp beds and mess tents and its inexperience aggravated the confusion inherent in such a large and complicated relief in the darkness. The planned timing became more and more upset as the exchange continued, to the extent that the companies of **4 Royal West Kents**, on entering the brigade sector, found themselves entangled in the ebb and flow of the earlier reliefs and eventually reached 28 Battalion's area rather late and in some



**disorganisation. Guides from the [Maori Battalion](#) were helping to sort out the incoming troops and lead them to the forward posts when the enemy attack opened against the West Yorks on Ruweisat. Some heavy concentrations of shells and numerous 'overs' that landed in the sector gave many of the newcomers their first direct experience of battle. The desert-wise Maoris escaped lightly but the men of the West Kents, many of them still in close formation awaiting allocation to their individual trenches, suffered numerous casualties. Several of the Maori officers and NCOs kept their men in the defences until the incoming troops had overcome any disorganisation caused by the shellfire, so that it was well after the appointed time before 28 Battalion was clear of the sector and following the rest of 5 Brigade to the southern front.**

**The enemy shellfire also caught the artillery reliefs. Careful liaison had been made on the CRA's direction to ensure that the exchange of gun positions between 58 Field Regiment, RA, and 6 New Zealand Field Regiment should take place in such a way that the maximum possible number of guns would be able to fire in support of the front at any moment. One of the New Zealand batteries, the 29th, had been set a task in 6 Brigade's raid and its relief was to wait until this task had been completed. With the other two batteries, the 30th and the 48th, the exchange of guns with 58 Field Regiment had begun on time and was proceeding smoothly when shells began to drop around 30 Battery's gun pits. Some of the relieving guns had just been wheeled into the pits, others were still on tow, while several New Zealand guns and quads were being lined up in convoy ready for the journey out. The first shells caught many of the gunners above ground, causing several casualties, principally among the drivers standing by their vehicles. New Zealand casualties were two killed and four seriously wounded, but this total might have been higher had not two of the gunners, C. P. [Carew](#)<sup>1</sup> and W. A. [Derrett](#),<sup>2</sup> the latter himself wounded, braved the shellfire to clear both guns and wounded from the danger area. The English gunners suffered more severely and several guns and vehicles of both regiments were damaged.**

Having got away before the enemy fire started, both 21 and 23 Battalions had reached their new positions on the southern front by midnight, 21 Battalion taking over the sector due east of 25 Battalion and 23 Battalion manning the south-eastern corner of the box. On the eastern side, 22 Battalion, having unpacked its gear and reoccupied its trenches after the cancellation of the relief order of the morning, now came under 5 Brigade's command. As this southern front had been left unguarded for some time, listening posts were immediately established outside the perimeter wire while the troops 'shook down' and settled in their new trenches. A strong force of carriers was sent out by 21 Battalion to cover the front, particularly of the central sector left unoccupied by the delay to 28 Battalion's relief. It was not until shortly before dawn that the Maoris eventually arrived in this sector.

About the same time as the fire began on **Ruweisat Ridge**, 25 Battalion's standing patrol on **Point 104**, left to its customary watching brief after its activities on 18 Battalion's behalf had ceased, was brought to the alert by sounds of movement close by.

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt C. P. Carew**, MM; **Masterton**; born **Christchurch**, 20 Nov 1918; french polisher.

<sup>2</sup> **Sgt W. A. Derrett**, MM; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 18 Oct 1914; clerk; wounded 30 Aug 1942.

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The carriers with the patrol drove forward to investigate and encountered a large force of infantry marching across the desert in open formation. After a brief exchange of fire, the enemy dispersed or went to ground, leaving five of their number, all Italians, to be captured by the carriers, which then returned to the point. Little significance was given to this encounter at the time, while news of it could not be immediately sent back to battalion headquarters as the patrol's wireless was demonstrating its customary unreliability. It has never been established whether the Italian infantry were attempting one of the diversionary

raids ordered by Rommel or were part of the main advance.

Half an hour after midnight **Divisional Headquarters** intercepted a message sent by 7 Armoured Division to 13 Corps, with information of a large column of enemy vehicles observed close to the westernmost of the minefields running south from **Alam Nayil**. Shortly after this the patrol on **Point 104** heard the sound of vehicles approaching from the west but, with its wireless still working badly, was unable to pass the information back immediately. Further messages from 7 Armoured Division, passed on to 5 and 6 Brigades from **Divisional Headquarters**, brought a sense of tension, and at 1.19 a.m. the prearranged code came from 13 Corps to give warning that Rommel's offensive had at last begun.

All other signals traffic throughout the Division was suspended to allow the alarm code, TWELVEBORE, to be sent to all units in the box. On this signal, trenches, weapons, and command posts were fully manned, while the engineers supervised the closing of the patrol gaps in the outer defences with mines and wire.

As the troops took station within the box, the men on **Point 104**, still unaware that the general alarm had been sounded, could hear the noise of vehicles increase until it seemed that one column was passing some way to the north and another closer to the south. Movement, dimly observed in the moonlight about 1000 yards off to the south-west, was engaged with nine rounds from the 3-inch mortars and bursts from the Vickers guns. Sound and movement then ceased. Unwilling to give its exact position away to a stronger force, the standing patrol waited quietly to let the enemy make the next move.

About the same time a small patrol was sitting in **Deir el Angar**, half way between **Point 104** and 25 Battalion's lines, guarding a wireless set whose operator was trying, unsuccessfully, to relay messages to and from the standing patrol. The corporal in charge, on climbing the low escarpment out of the depression to investigate the sound of voices, was confronted by a force of infantry advancing in open order. His attempt to stop them by rifle fire brought immediate retaliation, in which he was

wounded and taken prisoner. The rest of the patrol, below the escarpment, managed to escape on foot but left their truck and wireless set behind. On approaching their own lines, these men were fired on by over-alert sentries and it was some time before they could establish their identity, so that news that the enemy was in Angar in strength did not reach battalion headquarters until much later.

The Division, however, had already heard from 7 Armoured Division's patrols that the enemy was lifting the mines in **Deir Alinda**, some five miles south-west of **Alam Nayil**. The southern sky was lit by flares dropped from **RAF** aircraft which, from directions relayed from the armoured car patrols, had begun to search out and bomb the enemy columns.

After about an hour had passed quietly, the patrol on **Point 104** was preparing to send out a reconnaissance party when anti-tank, mortar and small-arms fire swept the area in such volume that the commander, Captain Weston, decided his small force was outnumbered and gave the order to retire. With the Bren-carriers screening the rear, the patrol made its way back to 25 Battalion's lines, reaching the perimeter wire about 4 a.m. Some of the carriers, turning off to warn the relay party in **Deir el Angar**, had a sharp engagement with the enemy established there and did not reach the wire until dawn was almost breaking.

On receipt of **TWELVEBORE**, 21 Battalion tried to call up its carrier patrol on the wireless but could not establish contact. As the minefield gaps were being closed everywhere and the defences were alert and ready to fire on any unheralded arrivals, the officer in command of the carrier platoon set out to find the patrol. His carrier, however, ran over a mine, he was mortally wounded, and his crew had difficulty in returning. The patrol in fact stayed out until nearly daylight, observing from the eastern end of **Deir el Angar** a large force of the enemy busily digging defences in the depression, and eventually returned through 25 Battalion's sector with valuable information on the enemy's locations.

The opening of Rommel's bid to regain the initiative from the British

on the evening of Sunday, 30 August, thus coincided with a night of more than usual activity for the New Zealand Division. While the *Panzer Army* was crossing its start line, one New Zealand brigade was embarking on a major raid involving all three of its battalions, with up to 200 of their fighting men out in no-man's land engaged on the main operation and its diversions. The other two brigades, of about 2000 men each at this time, were in process of exchanging sectors.

**General Freyberg**, after spending the Saturday afternoon at Army Headquarters in discussion of the relief arrangements, returned to his headquarters to note in his diary that the Army staff 'seem to have taken it for granted that Boche is not going to attack this moon—I don't know whether that is right'. <sup>1</sup>

The Sunday, a very hot and windless day, was occupied with detailed discussion with his own staff on the relief plans, rearrangements necessary if reinforcements were not quickly forthcoming from New Zealand, and such points as seaside camps for bathing and canteens in the training area. In expectation of leaving 13 Corps' command, **Freyberg** dined the commander, Horrocks, at the headquarters mess and then drove to 6 Brigade's sector to keep an eye on 18 Battalion's raid. Though the volume of the supporting fire for this raid seemed to set the pattern for a very noisy night along the whole front, no one as yet took the unusual amount of fire returned by the enemy as having any particular significance.

A certain amount of apprehension was naturally felt when the first news of the heavy shellfire on, and south of, Ruweisat reached **Divisional Headquarters**, and A Squadron, 46 RTR, with other available elements of the mobile reserve, was warned to be ready for action. With nothing further to indicate an attack on the New Zealand perimeter and only scanty information from **5 Indian Division**, no further action was taken, and it was not until after TWELVEBORE had been signalled and the general pattern of Rommel's plan began to emerge that the activity on Ruweisat could be seen in perspective. Gentry's comments to **Freyberg** on the latter's return to the Division early in August were shown to have

been well founded, for a limited raid by a small force of Germans proved how easily the ridge sector might have let the *Panzer Army* into the middle of Eighth Army's static defences.

Rommel, unaware of the strict doctrine of caution and immobility imposed by Montgomery, had felt it necessary for the initial movement of his right hook to be covered by a series of diversions on the main front, designed to pin down troops who might otherwise be transferred to help block his striking force. He had therefore ordered all sectors of his front to prepare hit-and-run diversionary raids, the first waves to go forward just before midnight, and the second and third at approximately two-hourly intervals. In the event only one raid, that against the Indians on Ruweisat, was repeated according to the information available.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/44

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In the northern part of the front, German troops of *164 Division* set off on their first raid before midnight but, on reaching the Australian defences, were met by such devastating fire that they were driven back in disorder with numerous casualties and the loss of several prisoners to the Australians.

Similar raids planned against the front further south were upset by aggressive action by the South Africans, who themselves had chosen this night for a raid to gather prisoners on the same pattern as 18 Battalion's operation. This overran a sector held by Italians of *Trento Division* and brought in some fifty-six prisoners at a cost of nineteen casualties. Diversionary patrols to the north and south of the main raid encountered enemy patrols which withdrew when attacked.

In the central sector, Germans of the *Ramcke Parachute Brigade* and Italians of *Bologna Division* set out about 11 p.m. to create a diversion across *Deir el Shein* and the western end of *Ruweisat Ridge*. As the main offensive had started, *Panzer Army* had relaxed its restrictions on the expenditure of ammunition and *Ramcke Brigade* took advantage



of this by arranging artillery support on a lavish scale. Not much is known of the Italians' part in the action but it would appear that, after advancing through **Deir el Shein**, they ran into defensive fire and scattered. A prisoner collected in this area admitted that he was from a flame-thrower unit, the *Guastatori*, attached to *Bologna Division*, but softened any repugnance which might at this period of the war have attached to his calling by adding that none of the flame-throwing equipment had yet reached the front.

The German parachutists, on their first aggressive action in **Africa**, advanced under their supporting shellfire against the western tip of Ruweisat, where **2 West Yorks** of 9 Indian Infantry Brigade held the narrow and difficult sector with four understrength companies. Listening posts ahead of the main defences fell back to give warning that infantry were advancing behind the shellfire. Within a few minutes of the despatch by the battalion commander of the SOS signal for prearranged artillery defensive fire, both South African and New Zealand guns joined **5 Indian Division's** artillery in laying down a curtain of shells across the front of the West Yorks' positions.

The guns were stopped as soon as it was seen that no enemy had penetrated the shellfire, and when the dust had settled, the desert appeared empty. After a period of relative quiet, a platoon from **2 West Yorks** was sent forward to investigate and reoccupy the listening posts, but the men had hardly left their trenches when they were met by heavy fire, mainly from automatics. Before they could regain their lines, the sector came under another bout of shelling and mortaring, behind which enemy troops again advanced to overrun the West Yorks' D Company. A period of confusion followed as fire was brought to bear to isolate D Company's area while a counter-attack force of infantry and Valentine tanks was collected. Before this force was ready, however, it was found that the enemy raiders had retired. One platoon of D Company was discovered still in position, having withstood the enemy attack and the defensive fire, but about twenty-five men from the battalion and twenty-four anti-tank and machine gunners were missing, most of them taken

prisoner. Other casualties in the battalion were unexpectedly light, two men killed and nine wounded. All evidence, including the identity of several corpses, indicated that this raid was a purely German affair, carried out by the *Ramcke Brigade* parachutists without Italian assistance.

That diversions were planned against the New Zealand front is certain, but what happened to them does not emerge from either British or enemy records. It was fortunate for the Division that the parachutists concentrated on their raid along Ruweisat and did not attack further to the south, where they might have caught 5 and 132 Brigades in the middle of the relief. It is more than probable that 18 Battalion's raid and the diversionary fire supporting it upset any plans made by the Italians on this part of the front, while the movement seen and fired on by the standing patrol on **Point 104** before the main attack was possibly intended as diversionary activity by the Italians in the **Qattara Box** area.

*ii*

In spite of private opinion that the Axis operations had been postponed until the next full moon, vigilance in Eighth Army had not been relaxed to any extent. The warning that brought all formations to the alert was in fact received with some relief, for the tension of anticipation felt before the defences had been completed had given way to a mild state of anti-climax as the troops saw another month of the heat and discomfort of the static war stretching ahead of them. Action was now welcome, especially as there had been time for Montgomery's energy and crisp decision to permeate his army thoroughly. Morale was high, though not at that imprudent level of self-confidence prevailing before the Libyan and **Gazala** campaigns.

The last intelligence summary issued by GHQ Middle East before the battle opened, and based on information received up to the evening of 27 August, listed the signs of the imminence of an offensive and the form it might take. The air-dropping of pamphlets addressed to Indian and Dominion troops, carried out immediately prior to earlier operations, had



lately occurred. Information extracted from prisoners and deserters, though generally indefinite, carried hints of preparations for an advance starting in the south and driving to the north-east. Air reconnaissance had not as yet been able to note any major changes or movement behind the enemy front line but it had brought news of the safe arrival of a tanker at **Tobruk**, from which piece of information GHQ assumed that the *Panzer Army's* known fuel shortage had been eased if not overcome.

The summary drew the obvious parallel between the **Gazala** offensive in May and the expected attack, suggesting that Rommel would take similar deceptive measures for the concentration of his mobile assault force and arrange a similar programme of demonstrations or diversions on the main, static front to draw attention from the south. It anticipated that the three German divisions of *Africa Corps* would lead the mobile force, leaving *164 Division* and the *Ramcke Brigade* to bolster the Italian infantry on the static front. Nothing in the nature of airborne operations was expected of the paratroops, German or Italian, known to be in the front, at least not immediately, as 'it is difficult to see what effective part the dropping of a small unit of parachutists could play in the first phase of a desert battle'.

The estimate of enemy strength in this summary gave the Germans a striking force of 25,000 men with 230 tanks and a holding force of 18,000 men. The Italian striking force, 'if that title can be granted to those who follow after', was thought to be about 17,000 with 200 tanks, most of them mechanically unsound, and a holding force of 22,000 men. The total strength of the *Panzer Army* was thus thought to be 82,000 men and 430 tanks.

This summary is evidence that British intelligence had managed to draw a remarkably close picture of Axis intentions and strengths. The enemy records show a front-line strength at this time of approximately 41,000 Germans and 33,000 Italians, of whom about half the Germans and less than half the Italians belonged to the formations of the mobile force. Of the Axis total of 514 tanks, 233 were German under *Africa*

**Corps'** direct command, and 281 Italian. A number of the Italian tanks were retained to support the infantry defences and did not take part in the advance.

Against these enemy totals, the Eighth Army could now muster in the front areas about 693 tanks, of which 517 were in the armoured and motorised brigades and the remainder with the divisional reconnaissance regiments (such as the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry who had 28 Stuarts) and in immediate reserve. <sup>1</sup> The British artillery had little advantage of guns over the Axis, but a considerable superiority in supplies of ammunition. Theoretically each British infantry battalion had its anti-tank platoon with eight two-pounder guns, and each division its supporting regiment of 64 six-pounders, but not all the anti-tank units were up to establishment. The field regiments mustered over 300 25-pounders all told, and there were several batteries of medium guns at the front. The Axis was well equipped with anti-tank guns up to 50 millimetres and had probably more, as well as a greater variety of, field and medium guns, including a number of captured 25-pounders. The striking force, including *90 Light Division* and *10 Italian Corps*, disposed of over 300 guns of 75 millimetres and above, of which more than fifty were the dreaded 88s.

In men, including those manning the front and easily available in reserve, the Eighth Army had a two-to-one superiority, together with a handy base from which, in an emergency, further reserves of men and over 200 tanks could be mustered and equipped. In comparison, Rommel had few reserves on African soil, either of men, tanks, ammunition, transport, or petrol; even his food and water supplies were not over plentiful. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Comparisons of the qualities of British and Axis tanks are extremely difficult to make as there are so many factors involved. In most points of armour and armament, the Grant was a reasonable match for the German Mark III Special, Mark IV and IV Special, and the Crusader and Valentine for the lower Marks, while the Stuart could stand comparison with the Italian tanks.

On this basis, a table of comparison of numbers and quality on 30 August 1942 would read:

164 Grants	v 109 Mk III Sp, IV and IV Sp
360 Valentines and Crusaders	v 124 Mk II, III
169 Stuarts	v 281 Italian
693	514

The exact numbers of ‘runners’ recorded in both Eighth Army and the *Panzer Army* vary, but the variations are too small to have had any effect on operations. It will be noted that both sides more than doubled their tank strengths during August.

<sup>2</sup> For the rather complicated pattern of comparative air strengths, see Playfair, Vol. III. See also pp. 176– 80.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 7 – THE BATTLE DEVELOPS

## CHAPTER 7

### *The Battle Develops*

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**THE *Panzer Army of Africa* was not accustomed to attacking in darkness and Rommel did not in fact plan the *Alam Halfa* encirclement as a night operation. His intention was to concentrate his forces as soon as the evening shadows made them less vulnerable to air observation and attack, to lead them through what both he and his staff considered were minor obstacles of the minefields and patrols that spread south of the main front, and have his spearhead formed up by dawn facing north against the Eighth Army's rear defences. From the concentration areas to the dawn positions meant a journey of up to 40 miles over broken country, and for this sufficient local visibility was necessary to keep the columns of vehicles in contact and control.**

**As each night passed after the moon reached the full, the period of darkness between sunset and moonrise was increasing while the hours of moonlight and the brightness of the moon both decreased. By 30 August the moon was appearing about three hours after sunset, so that the *Panzer Army*, setting off after daylight had completely faded, had to start its trek in darkness in which both contact and control were difficult. There was then a limited period of moonlight in which any confusion could be sorted out and the columns could reach their destinations before daylight revealed their positions and intentions. The planners on Rommel's staff held that the night of 30–31 August was the last on which the operation stood a chance of success.**

**To postpone the operation until the September full moon was, in Rommel's opinion, to give the battle away to the Eighth Army, for by this time he knew he could not rely on any large addition of German troops to offset the arrival of men and equipment known to be flowing in to the British base in *Egypt*. It was, in fact, now or never.**

**At a meeting on 27 August, Rommel discussed his *Panzer Army's***

needs and chances with Kesselring and Cavallero. The Italian marshal was obviously infected with Rommel's enthusiasm, if Ciano's diary can be accepted as evidence, but Kesselring's opinion is difficult to unravel from comments after the event. Both of them, however, gave sufficiently earnest promises that the one real shortage, of petrol, would be overcome within forty-eight hours. On the basis of these promises, Rommel set the date of the offensive tentatively for the 29th.

It seems strange that Rommel had not grasped that the Italian commander, in spite of his lip service, was incapable of galvanising the Italian supply organisation into action, and that Kesselring could not or would not use his influence with the **German High Command** to obtain the support requested. Why he accepted their promises can only be attributed to a combination of his own enthusiasm and his feeling that the offensive must be 'now or never'. Although he has been accused of ignorance of logistics, it would be fairer to charge him with a lack of appreciation of the human element in the problem.

Kesselring's attitude to Rommel and his plans is enigmatic. Through his position and rank he should have been able to exert considerable influence on the planning and supply for the African campaign. Yet in the records and reminiscences of this period, he emerges in a negative light. He does not appear to have encouraged Rommel, at least very positively, or to have acted as a restraining influence of any strength. Though his role of Commander-in-Chief South placed him theoretically above Rommel, the latter's personal repute and favour with **Hitler** may have made his position difficult. He was clearly the superior in his own sphere, the command of the *Luftwaffe*, though his control over the Italian air force was limited by the Italians' intransigence.

The explanation of Kesselring's equivocal attitude may be that, while Rommel was **Hitler's** man, Kesselring was the representative of the High Command with the task of reporting and, to some extent, controlling the campaign. With success still in the air he might not care to be too critical of Rommel, especially as his comments could reach

**Hitler's** ears, but he plainly had a wider vision than Rommel of the relative position of the African campaign in the broader strategy. From the little that emerges of his shadowy figure at this period, he might be accused of playing safe so that, should Rommel succeed, he would share the glory but, if Rommel failed, he could avoid the blame.

Much of the story of the two men is told in the letters Rommel wrote home to his wife. When he was able to take his mind off the battle at the end of July to consider why his German requirements were not being met, Rommel initially chose to put the blame on Italian self-interest rather than inefficiency and thought the solution lay with the liaison official in **Rome**, von Rintelen, who 'lets himself be done in the eye, for the Italian supplies are working excellently'.<sup>1</sup> After a visit by Kesselring to **Panzer Army** headquarters on 9 August, when the problems of the coming offensive and its supply were discussed, he received such encouragement that he wrote, 'We reached agreement over what is to happen. Now it's a question of making full use of the few weeks to get ready. The situation is changing daily to my advantage.'<sup>2</sup>

Arising from this same meeting, Rommel sent a proposal to the **German High Command** that Kesselring should be given special powers to control **Mediterranean** shipping, on the grounds that

Kesselring had a personal interest in helping us at **Alamein**; he had considerable strength of will, a first-class talent for diplomacy and organisation, and a considerable knowledge of technical matters.

Kesselring had the **Luftwaffe** and Goering behind him and could thus command sufficient support at the highest level to enable him to tackle questions of high policy in relation to **Italy**.<sup>3</sup>

Although, according to Rommel, his suggestion was not acted on early enough or in the form he wanted, Kesselring did in fact make a show of exerting his influence, but only to the effect that, just before the meeting on 27 August, Rommel wrote home:



Kesselring is coming today for a long talk over the most acute of our problems. He, too, often has a tough job in **Rome**. He gets plenty of promises, but few are kept. His over-optimism concerning these blighters has brought him bitter disappointments. <sup>4</sup>

From his diplomatic connections, Kesselring must have been aware that the African campaign stood on a low priority and that it would never be treated with the importance Rommel demanded, unless **Hitler** and the High Command shifted the emphasis of their war strategy. Instead of bringing Rommel to earth with an out-spoken opinion along these lines, he put up a smoke screen of 'bitter disappointments' and, to cap it all, promised at this last meeting to fly over 500 tons of petrol a day 'in an emergency', presumably meaning by this the failure of promised petrol tankers

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<sup>1</sup> Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers*, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 268–9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

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to arrive. According to Rommel, Kesselring was 'unfortunately' unable to keep this promise, <sup>1</sup> but there is evidence that he tried, for Nehring records how the *Luftwaffe* lifted some 400 cubic metres of fuel but delivered less than 100 at the front, the balance being consumed on the journey. <sup>2</sup> This points to an ignorance of logistics on Kesselring's part rather than on Rommel's. The *Panzer Army* staff officers were doubtful of Kesselring's intentions, <sup>3</sup> and altogether it is hard to avoid a suspicion that he was far from wholeheartedly behind Rommel's aspirations and let him start the Alam el Halfa offensive under a misapprehension that sufficient petrol would be on hand.

Rommel had the impatience of the enthusiast so that, in the realms of supply over which he had no direct control, he was willing to accept promises at their face value. His own army, by restricting its activities and hoarding supplies, was rested, reorganised, and sufficiently equipped with almost everything except petrol for a short, but possibly decisive, action. Much was made for British propaganda purposes of Rommel's stated intention to reach the **Nile**, set against his story after the battle that the operation was just a 'reconnaissance in force'. But Rommel's true attitude appears in a letter he wrote his wife a few hours before he sent his striking force on its way:

Many of my worries have been by no means satisfactorily settled and we have some very grave shortages. But I've taken the risk, for it will be a long time before we get such favourable conditions of moonlight, relative strengths, etc., again.... If our blow succeeds, it might go some way towards deciding the whole course of the war. If it fails, at least I hope to give the enemy a pretty thorough beating.... <sup>4</sup>

The original plans made out by the **Panzer Army** staff provided for the concentration of the various formations of the striking force in their assembly areas behind the start line over a period of five nights. With the petrol situation uncertain, the initial movement was postponed day by day until Rommel gave his decision after the meeting on 27 August. The bulk of the armour set off for the assembly areas that evening but the journey was delayed by the **Desert Air Force**. Under orders to maintain wireless silence and not to fire at aircraft, the tanks of **Africa Corps** dispersed and halted while flares and bombs were falling and, though little

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<sup>1</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> Nehring, *Der Feldzug in Afrika*, Union of South Africa War Histories translation, p. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Young, *Rommel*, p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 275.

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damage was suffered, the whole schedule was upset. *Africa Corps* headquarters suspected that the movement had been observed, but it seems more likely that the British aircrews failed to realise what a target they had missed.

The following night, 28th-29th, the assembly was continued, but it soon became obvious that the original five-night plan could not successfully be condensed into two nights. It was with considerable relief, therefore, that the army learnt from Rommel on the morning of 29 August that the offensive would not start until the evening of the 30th.

Rommel's decision, though possibly influenced by the delays encountered, was primarily based on news he received shortly after the meeting, that three ships carrying petrol had been sunk or damaged. The vehicles of his mobile formations had been 'topped up' by the expedient of draining the forward dumps of practically every gallon, and it was only after he had been assured again by Kesselring and Cavallero that more tankers were on the way and that the *Luftwaffe* would assist in the transport from the rear to the forward dumps, that Rommel gave his final decision. Even then, the offensive might have been postponed again had not news reached the *Panzer Army* headquarters on the 30th that a tanker had arrived safely in *Tobruk* and that the air lift had commenced.

Throughout the 30th, the *Luftwaffe* flew constant patrols over the southern part of the front to drive off British reconnaissance planes while the German and Italian formations sorted themselves out after their hurried assembly. With a last-minute distribution of petrol which had just been brought up, the two German panzer divisions recorded that they had enough fuel to take their tanks about 100 miles and their other

vehicles about 150.

The start line from which the German-Italian offensive was to drive to the east ran practically due south from the **Qattara Box**. On the far right flank, that is, on the **Taqa Plateau** just north of the edge of the **Qattara Depression**, the *Reconnaissance Group* formed up. This force comprised 3, 33, and 580 *Reconnaissance Units of Africa Corps* and a composite reconnaissance group from the Italian *20 Corps*, the whole under the command of the headquarters of *15 Rifle Brigade of 90 Light Division*. It appears to have had about fifty armoured cars, some light tanks, and a considerable number of other vehicles including tracked troop-carriers and mobile guns, and was about 2000 men strong.

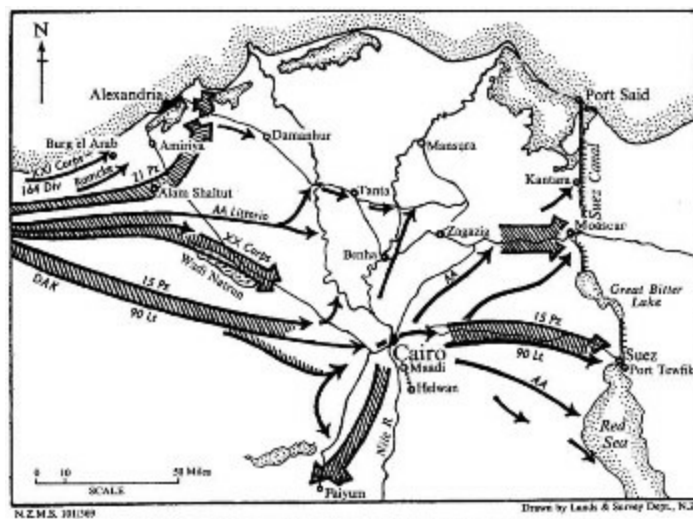
Along with the *Reconnaissance Group* there was a battalion of Italian parachutists from *Folgore Division* which had the limited task of occupying **Qaret el Himeimat**, an isolated hill of some 216 metres above sea level that gave a commanding view over a large expanse of surrounding desert.

In the area around **Gebel Sanhur** immediately to the north of Taqa the main body of *Africa Corps* lined up with *15 Panzer Division* on the right and *21 Panzer Division* on the left. These two divisions commanded most of the German tanks, and each division with its motorised infantry regiment about 2500 strong, tank crews, engineers, artillery, anti-tank and other units, mustered slightly over 6000 all ranks.

Still further north, slightly to the left rear of *Africa Corps*, the Italian *20 Armoured Corps* congregated on the **El Kharita** plain. The corps reached the start line with fewer than 250 of the lightly armoured and mechanically unreliable tanks of *Ariete* and *Littorio Armoured Divisions*. Its infantry component was the *Trieste Motorised Division*. As much of the *Corps'* artillery and about six infantry battalions for which there was no transport remained behind, the effective strength of the Italian mobile force is difficult to assess, but it was probably about half *20 Corps'* paper strength of some 16,000 men.

The *90th Light Division*, with a strength of just under 4000, formed up immediately south of the **Qattara Box** with, on its left, a mixed force made up of two German battalions from *Ramcke Brigade*, two Italian battalions from both *Folgore* and *Brescia* divisions and a group of the artillery and men from the infantry battalions of *20 Corps* without transport, the whole under the nominal command of *10 Italian Corps*.

The design of the advance was simple. Moving out of their assembly areas at dusk, the armoured and motorised formations were to form up and cross their start lines at ten o'clock of the evening on a course slightly south of east. After passing the **New Zealand Box**, they were to swing first due east and then north-east. On the rim of this wheel, the *Reconnaissance Group* was allowed five and a half hours by the plan to complete a journey of about 40 miles to reach its dawn objective. At the hub, the Italian *Ariete Division*, with only 20 miles to go, was allowed five hours. By 5 a.m. the whole striking force was expected to be lined up facing north along a front of some 15 miles, with the left flank resting on the depression known as **Deir el Tarfa**. From this front the advance was to drive due north, the *Reconnaissance Group* with another long journey to cut the coastal road and railway between **El Hammam** and **El Imayid** and protect the eastern flank, while *Africa Corps*, *15 Panzer Division* still on the right and *21 Panzer Division* on the left, crossed the Alam el Halfa and **Gebel Bein Gabir** ridges, and *20 Corps*, with *Littorio* right and *Ariete* left, moved on to the western end of Alam el Halfa. In order to guard the lines of communication, *90 Light Division* was to move inside the wheel to the **Deir el Muhafid** area and link up with the left of *20 Corps*, and the mixed force under *10 Italian Corps* was to fill the gap between *90 Light* and the **Qattara Box**. The final result would have had the Eighth Army bottled up against the sea with strong forces on all three landward sides.



SKETCH TAKEN FROM A MAP ON WHICH ROMMEL MARKED HIS INTENDED MOVEMENTS TOWARDS CAIRO AND THE SUEZ CANAL SHOULD HE BREAK THROUGH AT ALAMEIN

SKETCH TAKEN FROM A MAP ON WHICH ROMMEL MARKED HIS INTENDED MOVEMENTS TOWARDS CAIRO AND THE SUEZ CANAL SHOULD HE BREAK THROUGH AT ALAMEIN

Had the initial plan succeeded and brought the British forces to a sufficient state of confusion as at **Gazala**, a second phase was to be attempted. Leaving any small centres of resistance that remained to be dealt with by the non-mobile troops, *90 Light* and *15 Panzer* divisions were to drive south-east direct for **Cairo**, the light division then making a dash for **Suez**. The Italian *20 Corps* was to cut the **Cairo- Alexandria** road, *21 Panzer Division* was to encircle **Alexandria** and despatch a column to **Port Said**, and the remainder of the *Panzer Army* was to invest **Alexandria** from the west.

It was an ambitious plan but Rommel was probably justified in attempting it. The disparity in strength was not so widely dissimilar from that prevailing at **Gazala**, and Rommel hoped to iron out any inequalities by the efficient handling of his armour against the slow reaction of the British commanders. It was, in fact, upon the work of the two German panzer divisions that the whole plan depended. It is interesting to note that the original plan held no provision for a channel to be cut through the main British defences, for example, along the **Ruweisat Ridge**.

Much has been made of the fact that, in comparison with the situation at **Gazala**, the British positions were more compact and closely defended and that the channel for the striking force was more confined,



and comprised much heavily mined, broken, and difficult ground. These two factors naturally had a bearing on the outcome of the battle, but it should be remembered that, without undue loss or much delay, Rommel's striking force reached an area where the typical manoeuvring of the panzer units was possible. Why such manoeuvres were curtailed will appear as the story unfolds.

*ii*

The general dispositions of Eighth Army had not been changed when the *Panzer Army* advance commenced. The fixed defences from the coast to **Alam Nayil** were held by 9 Australian, 1 South African, 5 Indian and 2 New Zealand Divisions, in that order. The minefields running south from **Alam Nayil** to the **Qattara Depression** were patrolled by the columns of 7 Armoured Division, with 7 Motor Brigade responsible for the northern half and 4 Light Armoured Brigade the southern half of the sector. The motor brigade commanded five main groups, the 10 Royal Hussars Group with 41 Crusader tanks, the King's Dragoon Guards in three squadrons with a total of 57 armoured cars, and three mobile columns, 2 and 7 Rifle Brigade and 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps groups, each of approximately a battalion of motorised infantry supported by a battery of field guns, a troop each of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, and a platoon of machine guns. The light armoured brigade was divided into six main groups, of which 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps and 3 Royal Horse Artillery were mobile infantry and gun columns. The other four consisted of **11 Hussars** and **12 Royal Lancers**, each manning 54 armoured cars, **4 Hussars** equipped with 50 Stuart tanks, and **3 County of London Yeomanry** (3 Sharpshooters) with 27 Crusaders.

On paper 7 Armoured Division appeared much stronger than it was. With a front of over 15 miles, it had insufficient infantry and guns to man a continuous line, so that its various groups occupied temporary bases inside the minefields through which patrols were sent out into no-man's land to watch and harass the enemy. The division's orders were to impose the maximum possible delay on any enemy advance without

getting so involved that any of its columns should become surrounded or overwhelmed. In short, its role was to harass and run. In the rear of its sector there were two dummy tank brigades and a partly completed dummy infantry position, manned by a few troops whose task was to demonstrate against any light columns in the hope of turning them to the north against the forces disposed on and around Alam el Halfa.

The true rearward defences of Eighth Army consisted of the two brigade boxes of 44 Division on Alam ei Halfa ridge, 133 Brigade on the west and 131 Brigade on the east. <sup>1</sup> These positions were now well dug in, encircled with minefields, and supported by a field regiment in each brigade box and numerous anti-tank guns. The division could also call on the two field regiments of 22 Armoured Brigade, which lay immediately to the south-west of 133 Brigade. This brigade provided the core of the army's armoured striking force, with its 92 Grants, 34 Crusaders and 40 Stuarts divided into four regiments, each with two heavy squadrons of Grants and one squadron of the lighter tanks, manned mainly by experienced crews.

The open desert south of 131 Brigade was guarded by **8 Armoured Brigade** which possessed 72 Grants and 12 Crusaders. Its three regiments were still undergoing training and the brigade had not been in action before as a formation. Both 22 and 8 Armoured Brigades were under the command of **10 Armoured Division**, whose headquarters lay between the two boxes on **Alam Nayil**.

There was still another tank formation in the army, the Valentine-equipped 23 Armoured Brigade, which had been rebuilt

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<sup>1</sup> See map on p. 97.

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after its gallant but disastrous attempts to crack the enemy line in July. This brigade had its laager area to the rear of the junction of the New Zealand and Indian divisions, its main role that of counter-attack in support of the infantry. It possessed about 149 Valentine tanks, three



squadrons of which were detached, one each to the Australian, Indian and New Zealand divisions, so that about 100 tanks remained under brigade command. Although this seems a formidable total, the brigade's striking power was considerably less than that of either 8 or 22 Armoured Brigades.

For reserves, there were in the **Middle East** a number of tank brigades in process of being equipped and trained, from which about one complete brigade might have been assembled quickly to reinforce Eighth Army. The reserves of infantry available would probably have been the equivalent in numbers of at least two divisions. Amongst those training or refitting were 50 Division, of two weak brigades, 4 New Zealand Brigade at **Maadi**, a large part of 51 (Highland) Division which had begun to arrive at **Suez** in the middle of August, as well as units of Free French, Greek and Indian troops. Many of these were garrisoning the Delta defence zones and the rear landing grounds but could have been called forward in an emergency.

*iii*

The reaction to the start of the Axis offensive by Eighth Army on the ground has already been described. In the air, the Allied Air Force had been prepared for some time to lay on heavy assaults, with plans closely co-ordinated with those of the ground troops through Montgomery's insistence on close liaison between the army and air headquarters.

Small signs during the preceding days, such as reports from all reconnaissance aircraft that enemy vehicles tended to move from north to south, the enemy's own air patrols against reconnaissance and general lack of aggressive air activity over the front, all went towards convincing the **Desert Air Force** command that its assistance might soon be needed. For several nights towards the end of the month Axis aircraft had stepped up their bombing of the forward landing grounds, especially in the vicinity of **Alexandria**, and on the evening of 30 August enemy bombers came over in force to bomb the principal landing

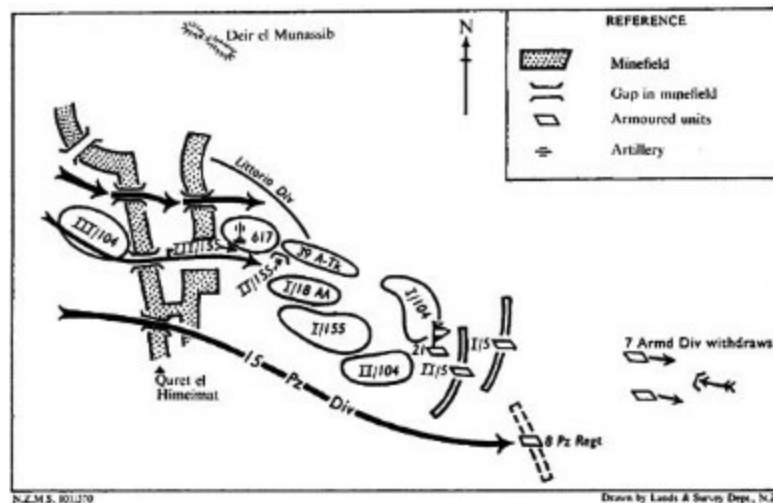
grounds at **Amiriya**, **Wadi Natrun** and **Burg el Arab**. None of these raids caused any grave damage to the sandy airstrips or the well dispersed aircraft, or affected to any degree the activities of the **Desert Air Force**.

In the early part of the night of 30 August, **RAF** bombers on routine harassing had noted and bombed concentrations of vehicles on the **El Kharita** plain, where the Italian *20 Corps* was assembling. By the time these particular bombers had returned to their bases and reported their activities, Air Headquarters had heard from the army that the Axis attack was on its way and all available night bombers were got ready to take to the air. By 3 a.m. searching aircraft had picked up three main enemy columns and kept them under observation by successions of flares to guide the bomber squadrons. From then until dawn, according to observers in the **New Zealand Box**, there was hardly a minute in which flares and bombs ceased to fall on the desert to the south.

The German records make it plain that much of the delay in the planned night march was caused by air action for, although material damage was probably not great for the weight of bombs dropped, the morale effect on men trying to break a way in unknown desert through minefields on a hostile front was considerable. Many vehicles and even tanks received minor damage, while one bomb landed close to the headquarters group of *Africa Corps*, wounding the corps commander, General Nehring, and causing several casualties among the staff.

Ground action on the southern front commenced as early as 10 p.m., when heavy shelling began to fall on various points along the outer or 'first' minefield. This shelling itself was unusual, and, when the small patrols which normally stayed overnight on the west of the minefields began to fall back to the main laagers of the various 7 Armoured Division columns with reports of large and aggressive enemy patrols, it was obvious that something was afoot. A good half hour before 13 Corps called its troops to the alert, 7 Armoured Division ordered its columns to instant readiness. Following their orders not to get too closely involved and cut off, the columns opened fire on any of the

enemy who approached the minefield, until retaliation became too heavy, when they disengaged and withdrew. The Germans found this fire particularly accurate and were considerably delayed by it in their attempts to lift the mines. No sooner had the ground forces disengaged than the Air Force appeared in strength overhead. The German method of dealing with minefields was simple but effective. Each advance guard, led by engineers with infantry and tanks in close support, drove forward until a minefield was either recognised or suspected, or until one of the vehicles was blown up. The engineers then debussed and, providing their own immediate protection, started to search the ground and clear a lane through the field. The rest of the advance guard deployed and increased the covering fire until the engineers signalled that the lane was cut, when the whole force charged through, the tanks leading. When there were infantry defences behind the minefield, the engineers would often ride the tanks to deal with any subsidiary fields. Although this method was likely to cost several vehicles, its value lay in the fact that the minefield would be breached before the defence could concentrate at the point of attack.



THE PANZER DIVISIONS BREAK THROUGH THE MINEFIELDS, 31 AUGUST 1942—A TRACE FROM A 21 PANZER DIVISION SKETCH MAP

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The widest part of the British minefields, between the **New Zealand Box** and the south of **Deir el Munassib** where there were three main fields and one partially dummy, was encountered by *90 Light Division*

and the left flank of the Italian armour. The two panzer divisions broke through at points between Munassib and **Himeimat** where the fields merged into two, forming a belt some 200 to 1000 yards deep of scattered mines backed by a closely spaced and continuous line seven mines wide, then a clear lane of some 100 to 200 yards and a final continuous belt of three lines of mines. The second field, not so formidable, lay up to a mile and a half to the east. The route taken by **15 Panzer Division** led it through two more isolated minefields, but **21 Panzer Division** passed round the northern extremities of these fields, which were not completed.

The *Panzer Army's* advance fell behind schedule right from the start. Difficult going in the early part of the journey in the moonless period split **Africa Corps**, **15 Panzer Division** diverging to the south and **21 Division** to the north. This caused **15 Division** to cut across the *Reconnaissance Group's* line of march, and at one time **33 Reconnaissance Unit** found itself on the panzer division's left flank instead of on the right. Appeals by wireless to the panzer division's headquarters to check direction were useless as the division's wireless broke down until well after dawn.

On **Africa Corps'** left, **21 Panzer Division's** infantry, in the lead, kept going on too northerly a course and met the minefields where they were thickest, while the tanks led by divisional headquarters swung back on the correct south-east line and hurried ahead to catch up with the sister division. The commander, Major-General Georg von Bismarck, a descendant of the Iron Chancellor, then returned to find the infantry, only to meet his death by British fire. The position of his grave and other evidence points to the cause of his death as mortar fire from **25 Battalion's** patrol on **Point 104**.

The Italian armour, trailing **Africa Corps'** left flank, also travelled too far north and, halted by the minefields and British fire, found itself being crowded from the rear by **90 Light Division**. By turning south along the minefields instead of cutting straight across, the Italians lost so many of their engineers that they had to call on **21 Panzer Division**

for assistance.

So great was the confusion, aggravated by the ground and air attack, that even Rommel himself was unaware of how his striking force was faring until dawn began to break and his liaison officers could bring him reports based on visual observation. He only knew that, at 5 a.m., when his troops should have been lined up south of Alam el Halfa ready to start the main assault on Eighth Army's rear, the formations were spread out over some miles of desert and well short of the first objective. The vanguards of the two German divisions were in fact by this time clear of the main minefields, but each gap was creating a bottleneck behind which columns were bunching, with supply vehicles strung out all the way back to the start line. A great deal of petrol had been used, many vehicles had either broken down or become bogged in soft sand, and others had been damaged by shellfire or bombing. The *21st Panzer Division* alone had received the attentions of eighteen flights of bombers during the night. The only part of the mobile striking force to reach its dawn objective was the group from *Folgore Division*, which followed the wake of the *Reconnaissance Group* to occupy **Qaret el Himeimat** without much trouble.

On the British side, 7 Armoured Division's columns maintained field, anti-tank, and small-arms fire for as long as they thought wise, claiming—over-enthusiastically—as many as twenty-four enemy tanks knocked out. As the panzer engineers cleared each gap and let the tanks through, the columns fell back, in several instances breaking contact and withdrawing at speed for fear of being encircled. The German records include only one account of British troops being caught this night, when some tanks of **10 Hussars** were destroyed and three men taken prisoner. Ground contact with the *Panzer Army* was uncertain at dawn, with conflicting messages coming from the various columns, but the **Royal Air Force** provided the army with reliable reports of the main enemy concentrations as an almost constant stream of reconnaissance aircraft and bombers flew over the southern front. A great degree of flexibility was shown this day when a heavy dust-storm arose in mid-morning,

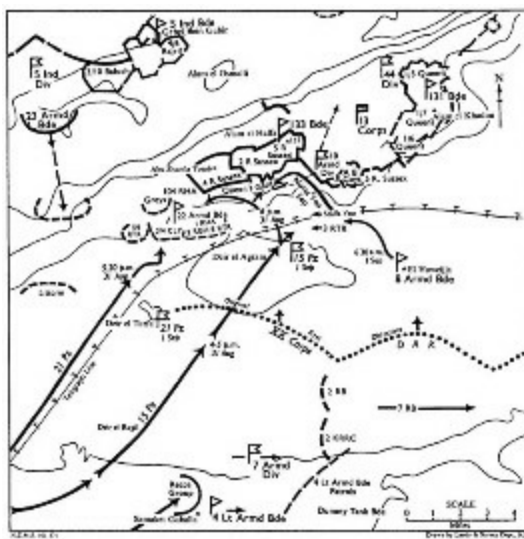
rendering many of the inland bomber airfields unusable; the air effort was then immediately switched to fighter and fighter-bomber sorties from the coastal landing grounds which were less affected by the dust.

By nine o'clock on the 31st, after regaining communication with most of the elements of his army, Rommel found that the *Reconnaissance Group* and *15 Panzer Division* were some way to the west of *Samaket Gaballa* in light contact with British columns, *21 Panzer Division* was still further west with its tail only just emerging from the minefields, while *Littorio Division*, the only Italian division to keep up with *Africa Corps*, was still threading its way through the last field on *21 Division's* left rear.

The strength of the German enthusiasm for this offensive may be gauged from entries in the diaries of both the *Panzer Army* and *Africa Corps*. Whoever made the entries clearly had a feeling that the success of the operation was doubtful and suggested various alternatives, down to a complete and immediate withdrawal to the start line. Rommel, however, was not easily deterred, especially as his army had advanced so far without any real opposition from the British. He accordingly gave orders that the advance was to be resumed direct for Alam el Halfa, with the old telephone line that ran north-east as the centre line of the march. The immediate objective was to be the feature itself, to be assaulted by the two panzer divisions, with the *Reconnaissance Group* covering the eastern and south-eastern flanks and the Italian armour the western.

German reconnaissance aircraft had already reported this morning that an extensive infantry position existed on the Alam el Halfa ridge, but they appear to have failed to notice the hull-down tanks of *22 Armoured Brigade*. No mass movement of tanks or transport vehicles had been observed in the British lines and this tied in with information Rommel had received from agents in *Egypt*, that the British planned to meet him with shellfire rather than an armoured counter-attack.





ALAM HALFA, 31 AUGUST-1 SEPTEMBER 1942

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The extent of the disorganisation caused by the night march became apparent as soon as Rommel gave his orders. All units had taken the opportunity of the morning halt to refuel and start running repairs to their vehicles, and this delayed the assembly for the correct order of march. Then, about 11.30 a.m. the dust-storm thickened so that visibility at times was only a few hundred yards. Rommel's orders, given at 9 a.m., had allowed four hours for the panzer divisions to get ready, an exceptional length of time for German troops, but by 2 p.m. only *15 Division* was on its way. On the left flank, *Littorio Division*, trying to make up for its previous tardiness, had pushed up into the area chosen by *21 Panzer Division* for its assembly, thus bringing another hour of confusion as in the murk of the dust-storm Germans and Italians were sorted out, a task made no easier by the constant bombing and machine-gunning from the air. The management of the assembly was also delayed by the need for several changes in command caused by the wounding of Nehring and the death of von Bismarck; with *15 Panzer Division's* commander taking over the *Corps*, both panzer divisions started the day with new commanders and a subsequent reallocation of the subordinate posts.

two of the light squadrons of 22 Armoured Brigade were sent out some three to four miles south of the brigade's position to observe and to act as a decoy to draw the enemy towards the prepared defences along Alam el Halfa. From ground and air observation and from wireless intercept, the Eighth Army had already begun to draw a fairly exact picture of the dispositions and composition of Rommel's forces, though for a time **21 Panzer Division** could not be satisfactorily accounted for and the New Zealanders particularly feared that it was waiting in El Mreir ready to break through along **Ruweisat Ridge**.

Though some of 7 Armoured Division's columns were in contact with the *Reconnaissance Group* and appeared to have directed some harassing fire on the panzer formations, there was little action during the day until the dust-storm began to subside in the late afternoon. By this time **15 Panzer Division** had progressed some miles along the eastern side of the telephone line and, as visibility increased, the light squadrons of 22 Armoured Brigade found themselves within range of the leading German armour and boldly took it on. The two-pounders of their Stuarts and Crusaders were no match for the enemy tanks and, after losing four tanks and a number of men, the light squadrons disengaged to drive rapidly back to the armoured brigade's protection.

Their role as a decoy was however not fulfilled, for **15 Panzer Division** did not follow but swung out to the east. About the same time **21 Panzer Division**, coming up on the west of the telephone line, appeared on the south of 22 Armoured Brigade, and it also began to turn east across the brigade's front. On this, the British commander ordered the tanks on his left flank to show themselves and open fire. The German tanks then turned straight at the armoured brigade's positions and joined in a tank versus tank battle that lasted until darkness fell. Twelve Grants, in spite of their hull-down positions against the Germans in the open, were knocked out, and the infantry protecting the tanks were caught in the cross-fire, losing several anti-tank guns and thirty-two men, of whom **21 Division** claimed twenty as prisoners. The precise German losses in this action cannot be assessed but they were



undoubtedly lighter.

As this engagement was in progress, *15 Panzer Division* had turned to a northerly course and its leading tanks were probing at the infantry defences on Alam el Halfa. The headquarters of *10 Armoured Division*, situated behind the minefield connecting company positions of 5 Royal Sussex of 133 Brigade, saw the enemy approaching and moved back some miles, but the German tanks turned back to the west along the front of the infantry defences and came in on 22 Armoured Brigade's left flank. The light squadrons guarding this flank fell back, exposing the brigade's gun lines and headquarters. With all the heavy tanks engaging *21 Panzer Division* on the south, the brigade called for help from 23 Armoured Brigade, which sent two squadrons of Valentines to assist. Before this assistance arrived, darkness had begun to fall and both *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* broke off the battle and withdrew. However, of the two dozen tanks of *15 Division* on the east of the armoured brigade, six did not fall back with the others, possibly because of empty petrol tanks or minor damage, but remained overnight across the rear of 1 Royal Horse Artillery's gun lines and less than a mile from the headquarters of 22 Armoured Brigade. Apparently these six were either unobserved or not recognised as enemy for they were not fired on until they were moving off in the dawn light next morning, when they lost two of the number in the process.

v

While the opposing armoured forces were joining battle well to their rear, the New Zealanders in their box remained relatively undisturbed except for the medium, field and anti-aircraft gunners. Save for a short period in the worst of the dust-storm, the noise of aircraft was almost continuous throughout the day as the Air Force attacked the enemy on the south and the *Luftwaffe* passed directly overhead on call from the panzer divisions to the east. The Bofors gunners of 14 New Zealand Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, spread among the gun lines and headquarters areas, had one of their busiest and most successful days on record, with

a final bag of three Stukas, and three Me109s shot down for certain and one 'probable'. Two of the German pilots, parachuting in or close to the lines, were taken prisoner.

The field and medium guns were also kept busy firing on targets passed to them by patrols and OPs in the south, who watched the enemy columns moving through the line of the three depressions, the deirs **Alinda**, **Munassib** and **Muhafid**. Several of the observers were forced to move in closer to the Division's defences by probing patrols of the enemy, and at one period in the late afternoon there was a scare that an enemy force was advancing from the south against **Alam Nayil**. This alarm, and an earlier SOS from **5 Indian Division** to fire on the west end of Ruweisat, brought all four field regiments and the medium guns into action with heavy concentrations on the threatened areas. There was in fact hardly a minute of the day when the New Zealand guns were silent, the artillery records showing that at least 12,000 shells—and probably considerably more—were fired between the time **TWELVEBORE** was signalled and the fall of darkness on 31 August.

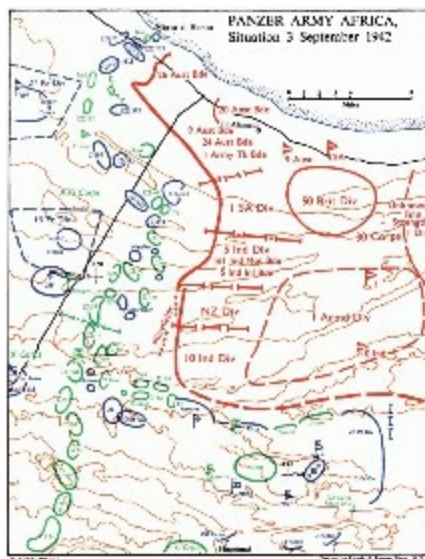
To the infantrymen in the box the day was comparatively restful. After their busy night, either in exchanging positions or taking part in the raids and patrols, followed by a long stand-to from the receipt of the alarm until well after dawn, the men were glad to snatch what rest they could in the heat, the dust, and the continual noise of gunfire and bombs.

Towards evening the Divisional Cavalry patrols and OPs, watching from the northern rim of **Deir el Muhafid** a long column of tanks passing to the south of the depression, had to fall back towards the south-east corner of the box as enemy infantry commenced to spread over the floor of the depression. The tanks were probably those of the Italian armoured corps, trying to catch up with **21 Panzer Division**, and the infantry were part of **90 Light Division**.

This movement gave **General Freyberg** considerable concern. During the day the columns of **7 Motor Brigade** had fallen back to the east

faster and farther than the plans anticipated and, although the Corps Commander had ordered them to return to give some cover to the south-east of the **New Zealand Box**, they had been prevented from doing so by the advance of **Africa Corps**. Their absence left the eastern front, occupied by 22 Battalion, and the south-eastern corner, where 23 Battalion had just settled in, uncovered except by the Cavalry patrols. This was the weakest part of the box, with no minefields extending beyond the perimeter belt.

On **Freyberg's** representations, Horrocks obtained permission from Eighth Army to bring 23 Armoured Brigade under **10 Armoured Division's** command and ordered it to move south to cover the east of the box. By mid-afternoon the leading squadrons of Valentines were in the four-mile gap between 22 Armoured Brigade and the **New Zealand Box**. Later, two squadrons were sent to reinforce 22 Armoured Brigade.



With this arrangement **Freyberg** had to be content, but it was natural that he should remain anxious as, with the known reluctance of British tanks to move at night, an advance during darkness by the enemy armour followed by the customary dawn assault, with the rising sun behind it, would have been extremely difficult to resist. He issued orders that patrols were to maintain close touch with the screen of Valentines during the night and that the Division was to prepare for a night or dawn attack on the south and eastern defences of the box.

August passed into September with a night of little incident. On the coast the Australians were busy with preparations for a daylight raid and neither invited nor received much attention from their opponents. The South Africans scored an unexpected success when a patrol of the **Capetown Highlanders** was ambushed by the enemy but fought its way clear with fourteen German prisoners in hand. On the rest of the western front, from Ruweisat to **Alam Nayil**, occasional gunfire and the movement of patrols were the only activity.

The New Zealand Division's southern front was more lively. A request had been made by the Corps Commander for 'substantial raids' to the south-west and south to harass the enemy's line of communication and to deter him from pressing overnight closer to the defences. This demand, however, reached the two New Zealand brigadiers rather late for the detailed planning they had come to see was the best insurance for success in such raiding, but on **Freyberg's** suggestion, they agreed to experiment with infantry parties working under close support from some of the Valentine tanks attached to the Division.

Shortly after dusk a strong infantry patrol set off from 18 Battalion's sector with three tanks of A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, to raid **Deir el Angar**. On approaching the depression the Valentines went ahead at such a speed that the infantry were left behind and, encountering an enemy position, the tanks proceeded to drive through and over the trenches, firing all weapons and lobbing hand grenades until any immediate opposition had been silenced. The rest of the enemy in the vicinity, however, came to the alert and laid down an intensive mortar barrage between the tanks and 18 Battalion's party under which the infantry were forced to ground. The Valentines, with ammunition almost exhausted, withdrew through the mortar fire to rejoin the infantry and the whole party then returned to the box. No prisoners were taken, but identification gathered from the dead showed the sector to be occupied by a battalion of the *Folgore Parachute Division*.

Similar raiding parties with Valentine tanks were sent out to the south by 21 and 23 Battalions but both failed to find the enemy. The 23 Battalion patrol incurred casualties to men and vehicles in a minefield which had either been laid by the enemy or, more probably, by one of 7 Armoured Division's columns and not recorded. <sup>1</sup>

Not very long after these patrols had returned to the box, a column of some fourteen vehicles, moving up between the routes taken by the 21 and 23 Battalion patrols, stopped within a few hundred yards of the defences held by D Company of 28 Battalion. The Maoris watched while the occupants, estimated at about 100 men, debussed to search for and lift mines. Once the troops were identified as hostile, the Maoris opened up with rifles and Bren guns, and sent up the light signal for the Vickers and 25-pounders to lay defensive fire on their sector. The enemy troops replied with automatics and anti-tank gun fire until the field guns got the range, when they withdrew, leaving behind the bodies of two men, three burnt-out trucks, and a light anti-tank gun. A patrol from D Company identified the dead as men from *90 Light Division* and brought in the gun to add it to the battalion's arsenal of assorted weapons. The fact that the enemy could approach so close to the Division's defences before being observed caused considerable concern and brought orders from **General Freyberg** for a thicker screen of listening posts to be set across the front.

Throughout this night single enemy bombers droned overhead, occasionally letting loose a stick of bombs without causing much damage, while away to the south-east of the box Air Force flares lit the sky for long periods at a time and the rumble of heavy bombing could be heard distinctly by the New Zealanders.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the 'third' minefield leading south from the **New Zealand Box** was supposed to be 'dummy', according to the New Zealand engineers, it was found to have numerous live mines in it. Who placed the live mines there was never clearly established.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 8 – WITHDRAWAL OF THE PANZER ARMY

## CHAPTER 8

### *Withdrawal of the Panzer Army*

i

SEPTEMBER opened with the *Panzer Army* lined up across the south of Alam el Halfa in a good position to commence the assault on Eighth Army's rear, as envisaged in Rommel's plan, but exactly twenty-four hours behind schedule. The element of surprise had thus been lost but no major regrouping had been made by the British, so that an opinion was growing among the *Panzer Army* staff that the Eighth Army was short of reserves and unlikely to attempt a large-scale counter-attack. In spite of the delay, the opportunity was in fact still waiting for the *Panzer Army* to give the British the 'pretty thorough beating' of Rommel's secondary hope. <sup>1</sup>

In detail, the two panzer divisions were well poised to give 22 Armoured Brigade some fairly rough handling, even to the extent of eliminating it as a fighting force, for 23 Armoured Brigade's Valentines could have offered only limited assistance, while 8 Armoured Brigade's Grants were cut off by *15 Panzer Division* and were so far away that they could have been dealt with separately later. The line of communication from the spearhead to the *Qattara Box* was being strengthened hourly and the stage was all set for the *Panzer Army* to open its assault.

But Rommel had already begun to lose his customary confidence. Petrol was not reaching the front in anywhere near the promised quantity, the constant air bombing was having a noticeable effect on morale, and this, coupled with the delay in reaching the first objective, had brought him to issue on the evening of the 31st an order for his army to go over temporarily to the defensive. This order was obeyed by *21 Panzer Division* after it had disengaged from 22 Armoured Brigade, and by the Italians, but it was not



closely followed by *15 Panzer Division*, whose commander believed he was on the point of occupying the Alam el Halfa feature and that only *21 Division's* failure to help was jeopardising his success. The extremely sanguine reports emanating from *15 Division* led Rommel to modify his order to allow action to continue if the feature ( **Point 132**) seemed attainable.

Dawn on 1 September brought news which added to Rommel's misgivings. First, the *Reconnaissance Group* sent in a report that it was scarcely battle-worthy. In the approach march its vehicles had suffered severely from ground and air action, mines, and mechanical trouble. In its laager overnight near **Samaket Gaballa**, it had been caught in the light of Air Force flares and pattern bombed. Now about a third of its vehicles was completely destroyed or in need of repair and it had a large number of casualties to be evacuated to the rear.

After this Rommel learnt that a strong force of tanks with infantry in support was attacking *164 Division* in the coastal sector, while *15 Division* reported a force of British tanks approaching from the east.

Meanwhile, *15 Division*, renewing its attempt to take **Point 132**, continued its complaints of lack of co-operation from *21 Panzer Division*, whose commander countered by questioning the accuracy of *15 Division's* reports. This led the Corps Commander himself to drive out on a reconnaissance in which he discovered that the two divisions were separated by a much wider expanse of unoccupied desert than their situation reports indicated. His arrival at *15 Division* caused further confusion for, according to messages sent out by him, he accepted the accuracy of the division's obviously inaccurate map-reading of its own position and the position of **Point 132**. He therefore ordered *21 Division* to send tanks at once to assist in the attack on the point, only to receive the curious reply that the latter division's tanks were needed 'for

special duties'. The only explanation of this reply is that the divisional commander feared to give over the radio his true situation, which was that his tanks were out of petrol and that he did not dare to manoeuvre his vehicles more than necessary until his supply columns, 'expected hourly', <sup>1</sup> put in an appearance. The division was in fact immobilised through lack of petrol until the middle of the afternoon, when a limited amount was brought to it.

By mid-morning *15 Panzer Division* was claiming, with the Corps Commander present to corroborate the claim, that it had beaten off a tank counter-attack and had occupied **Point 132**. What actually happened seems to be that the leading tanks of the division

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<sup>1</sup> Diary of *21 Pz Div*, 1 Sep 1942. GMDS 27641/5.

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reached a false crest to the south of the Alam el Halfa feature—but certainly did not penetrate the infantry defences around the feature—under fire from 44 Division's guns and the tanks and artillery of 22 Armoured Brigade. Some of the British tanks then left their hull-down positions, possibly to draw the Germans tanks away from the infantry positions, but soon lost five Grants to the German fire. The regiment's commander was then sharply reminded by his brigadier of the army orders not to move from the protection of hull-down positions to conform to the enemy's manoeuvring, and accordingly called his tanks back. The German tanks did not follow up this withdrawal, partly because they were also beginning to feel the pinch of petrol shortage and partly because **8 Armoured Brigade** was trying to outflank the division's gun line on the east.

*ii*

While the tanks were skirmishing on the south of Alam el Halfa, there occurred 'one of those little actions customarily described ... as a "bad show"', <sup>1</sup> the Australian diversion code-named BULIMBA. This operation had originally been planned over a week earlier as one in the

sequence of major raids for harassing and information ordered by Montgomery. The Australian contribution, however, had somehow developed on a greater scale and with a somewhat different conception from the raids already laid on by the South Africans and New Zealanders. According to its operation order, **BULIMBA** was intended as an 'immediate counter-stroke to enemy attack or as a diversion prior to enemy attack'. Set in motion some thirty-six hours after the enemy had attacked, its immediacy as a counter-stroke could be questioned. That it was intended as 'a diversion prior to enemy attack', that is to harass and deter a possible enemy assault in this sector to link up with the spearhead, seems unlikely. It appears to have been allowed to proceed purely in the hope of either diverting forces from the enemy's main advance or preventing the *Panzer Army* troops in defence from being used to reinforce the striking force. However, reports and despatches remain vague as to the operation's exact purpose.

It was on the afternoon of the 31st that 9 Australian Division received orders from 30 Corps to start the raid at 5.35 a.m. the following day. Extremely detailed plans had been in existence for some time—so detailed and widely distributed as to offend all the theories of security—and many of the necessary preparations had already been made. The method proposed for the raid was of a

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<sup>1</sup> **D. Goodhart**, ed., *History of 2/7 Australian Field Regiment*, p. 192.

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type that had not been tried before on the **Alamein** front, and could best be described as based on the principle of Auchinleck's July battles but with the limited objectives of a raid.

In short, an infantry force was to push forward a salient into the enemy's lines, clear it, and hold it as a firm base from which tanks would advance to 'exploit'—a military term which meant many things to many men. The exploitation was to cease about 3 p.m., when the tanks would retire through the firm base, to be followed after dark by the

**infantry. No material gain of ground was intended.**

**The infantry, four companies of Queenslanders of 2/15 Infantry Battalion, crossed the start line on time. As they approached the area chosen to be occupied as the firm base, heavy artillery concentrations kept the enemy in cover, but as soon as the shelling lifted to its next targets, the enemy came vigorously to life with automatics and mortars. Most of the Australians reached their objectives but they had struck an area held by German troops, who resisted tenaciously and mounted immediate local counter-attacks whenever they were driven from their positions. For some time communications broke down, battalion headquarters losing touch both with its companies and with the squadron of Valentines of 40 Royal Tank Regiment which was to come up in support and start the exploiting.**

**The tanks themselves experienced difficulty in negotiating the narrow gaps cut in haste by the engineers through the British and enemy minefields. Before they got through the enemy mines, the Valentines came under fire and, with several of their number ablaze and others immobilised by mines or gunfire, halted well short of the infantry.**

**The second-in-command of the Queensland battalion, Major Grace, taking charge when his commanding officer was wounded, decided that the uncertain communications and lack of close co-ordination between tanks and infantry made the task of securing a firm base practically impossible and the likelihood of the tanks going on to exploit remote. Using the one reliable means of communication, the wireless link between the artillery's forward observation officer and the guns, he called for covering fire from all available weapons and sent word by runners to the infantry for them to retire as soon as the fire commenced. Four hours after the operation started, the companies were on their way out.**

**It is difficult to assess whether this raid had any value or not. Rommel may have been influenced, if only to the extent of calling back**

some of his *Africa Corps* tanks to form a mobile counter-attack force in case a similar attack was repeated. It may, on the other hand, have proved to him that his infantry defences could stand unsupported by tanks, for no enemy tanks took part in the defence.

A tally of casualties showed that the Australians lost 15 men killed and 120 wounded, and nine tanks were knocked out. Against these losses, the enemy lost probably 150 killed, while the Australian infantry maintained their reputation by bringing out of the disorder and confusion nearly 140 prisoners, most of whom were Germans of *382 Infantry Regiment*.

While this early morning local battle was being fought far away near the coast, another isolated and inconclusive skirmish by British forces had begun off the south of Alam el Halfa. On orders to make contact with *22 Armoured Brigade*, the regiments of *8 Armoured Brigade* had set off to work their way westwards across the southern face of the ridge defences. The advance was cautious as the brigade commander had been told not to become too deeply involved or risk unnecessary casualties through lack of experience and the incomplete state of training in his brigade, a state that became obvious soon after the start, when one regiment ran out of petrol. It was not until about 8.30 a.m. that the leading tanks, then off to the south-east of the el Halfa ridge, came into contact with *15 Panzer Division*, whose eastern flank was covered with a gun line in which were several 7.62-millimetre self-propelled guns of Russian origin. Under fire from these guns, which the brigade thought were the dreaded 88s, the tanks halted while the brigadier made arrangements with *44 Division* for covering fire under which he intended to lead his brigade northwards and thence, in the shelter of the infantry minefields, on to the west. No sooner had this movement started than a heavy Stuka raid came in on the area between the two el Halfa boxes, where the headquarters of *13 Corps*, *10 Armoured Division* and *44 Division* were all situated. The resulting disruption of communications upset the co-ordination between guns and tanks and prevented the leading regiment finding a gap in the minefields through which it could

enter the infantry defences. Meanwhile *15 Panzer Division's* tanks moved up and forced the brigade to withdraw to the east. A later repetition of the same manoeuvre was no more successful so that, by the end of the day, *15 Panzer Division* was still sitting squarely between Eighth Army's two heavy armoured brigades. Thirteen Grants and three Crusaders of *8 Armoured Brigade* were lost by enemy fire but the casualties in men were relatively light—three killed and twenty-six wounded.

*iii*

For the New Zealanders in their box, this second day of the battle was hardly more eventful than the first. Artillery observers who had gone out before dawn to the high ground overlooking *Deir el Muhafid* found themselves faced by a number of Italian tanks and retired hurriedly under covering fire from the Stuart tanks of a Divisional Cavalry patrol. The Italians showed little inclination to do more than some long-range sniping at the Cavalry Stuarts and, when a patrol of Valentines from *23 Armoured Brigade* appeared, they withdrew out of range. This permitted the observers to return and watch, in the middle of the afternoon, a large force of both German and Italian tanks with infantry in trucks drive across the east of *Muhafid* and turn north-east towards *23 Armoured Brigade's* position. The Valentines and Stuarts opened up on this target, to be joined by all available field guns. Numerous hits were claimed on the vehicles but, though the enemy did not seem to be advancing with any great determination, by nightfall a few tanks and infantry were little more than a mile from the south-east corner of the *New Zealand Box*. The movement gave rise to a fear that the enemy might be preparing to mount an attack at dawn next morning, so *General Freyberg* cancelled plans for a repetition of the previous night's raids by tanks and infantry and instead ordered listening posts to be set out and maintained until dawn.

The enemy's movement was in fact not a concerted operation but a number of only loosely related activities. The tanks were mainly those of

*Littorio Division*, with no immediate aggressive task other than to protect *21 Panzer Division's* left flank and link the spearhead with the infantry covering the line of communication rearward. To *Littorio's* left, that is, somewhere south of 23 and 28 Battalions, troops of *90 Light Division* with a few tanks in support were attempting their original task of forming a line across the south of the British defences in preparation for a possible attack to the north in conjunction with the armoured spearhead.

Two prisoners of *90 Light Division* who were gathered in by a 23 Battalion patrol just after dark told a story of a hard day. Two parties, of about thirty-six men altogether, had set off that morning from the vicinity of *Deir el Munassib* with orders to advance to the north-east. Under heavy artillery fire the men had halted until they were joined by six tanks. The tanks then led off again but, after one had been knocked out, the rest retired, leaving the infantry under fire in the open. By evening all but three of the men were casualties. After dusk, these three set off, one openly stating his intention to desert and going off on his own. The other two, with apparently only a vague idea of direction, must have wandered in a northerly direction until they fell into the hands of the New Zealand patrol. Their story illustrated the typical probing method of advance used by the Germans, as well as the effectiveness of the British defensive fire, especially that of the 25-pounders.

The second day of the battle, which saw the Australian raid and some minor skirmishes on the Alam el Halfa front, ended with the bulk of the two armies in much the same positions as they had occupied at dawn. The three British armoured brigades had already lost some fifty tanks, more than half of them Grants, in the inconclusive skirmishing, apart from losses sustained by the columns of 7 Armoured Division. The *Panzer Army's* tank strength was down by about ninety German tanks and an unknown number of Italian, but many of these had suffered mechanical breakdown or minor damage from shelling and bombing and were repairable. The total German and Italian losses by actual encounter appear to have been no greater, and may have been less, than the British



losses by the same cause, while the loss of so many of the Grants made it plain that the British armour was still no match for the German panzer divisions.

*iv*

By the morning of 1 September the Eighth Army had garnered sufficient information to account for all the major formations of the *Panzer Army*. Patrols, air reconnaissance and other sources confirmed that there was no ominous gathering of forces along the static front, so that General Montgomery could confidently assume that the drive on Alam el Halfa was the only threat to be dealt with, at least in the immediate future.

During the day he was joined at the *Burg el Arab* headquarters by General Alexander, both generals later touring the defences. They were in agreement that the situation had developed in such a way that reserves could safely be moved up and considerable reorganisation made in the forward defences to provide a force to counter-attack and gain the initiative if the opportunity should arise.<sup>1</sup> Montgomery proposed two main lines of counter-attack: a drive south from the *New Zealand Box* to meet, in the vicinity of *Himeimat*, a northward thrust from the edge of the *Qattara Depression*, either to cut off the enemy's spearhead or force it to withdraw; and an attack out of the coastal sector with *Daba* as an objective for 'exploitation'. This latter operation was to be carried out by a force built up from reserves available after the reorganisation of the defences and placed under the command of

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<sup>1</sup> See map facing p. 119.

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Headquarters *10 Corps*, which had been operating as headquarters of *Delta Force* in charge of the *Nile* defences. As its area of operations would be through the Australian sector, *10 Corps* would possibly take command of *9 Australian Division*. Logically these two counter-attack operations should have been planned with a degree of simultaneity, the



southern one to draw the attention of the *Panzer Army* from Alam el Halfa to defending its own lines of communication, the northern attack to catch the defences without an adequate armoured reserve and make Rommel withdraw some of the armour from the spearhead. It is worth considering that the *Panzer Army* was able to hold its static defences securely and at the same time provide a strong striking force, but the Eighth Army, with a paper strength at least equal to that of the enemy, was hard put to it to find even sufficient forces sufficiently well trained for the southern operation alone. The 'exploitation to **Daba**', therefore, did not get beyond the initial planning stage.

Unaware that the stringency of supplies had already brought Rommel's offensive to a stop, Montgomery was concerned about the defences between Alam el Halfa and the sea. He therefore arranged to combine the strengthening of these defences with the gathering of his reserves. One brigade of the newly arrived 51 (Highland) Division was brought from its training and acclimatisation in the Delta defences to take the place of 151 Brigade in the **Amiriya** box, the latter formation moving up to reinforce Localities G and H, two prepared boxes which linked the north-east corner of the Alam el Halfa defences to the sea. The South African Division was ordered to take responsibility for Localities C and D on the **Gebel Bein Gabir** in order to release the troops of 5 Indian Infantry Brigade to reinforce the **New Zealand Box**. By the end of this rearrangement the New Zealand Division would be in command of four infantry brigades, two to man the western face of the box and two for the proposed pincer movement to **Himeimat**. Though this 'general post' of brigades entailed numerous and complicated exchanges of field and medium artillery and other supporting arms, Montgomery wanted it complete early on 2 September so that, if necessary, operations could commence that evening. In the event it took longer than expected, some of the delay being caused by the commander of the South Africans, Major-General D. H. Pienaar, who objected to the detachment of one of his brigades both on principle and on the practical grounds that his sector was too large to be held by two brigades alone. His objections were overruled by Montgomery, who

directed that **5 Indian Division** should extend its front to take over part of the South African sector.

Towards the evening of 1 September **Freyberg** received a message from 13 Corps with a decision on the methods already discussed earlier for the attack to the south. The first stage proposed a limited advance of some two to three miles to gain the northern sides of the **Munassib** and **Muhafid** depressions. This was to be followed, according to the degree of success of the first stage and of the enemy reaction, by a further advance through the depressions and beyond. Apart from a proviso in the corps' order that the Indian brigade should 'eventually' be sited in the north of the **New Zealand Box**, where by a simple extension of the boundary it could be taken back under command by **5 Indian Division**, **Freyberg** understood he could use any of the four brigades under his command for the coming operation, the first stage of which was to begin on the night of 2 September, that is in twenty-four hours' time.

But while Montgomery was planning slowly and cautiously, the opportunity to strike really hard at the **Panzer Army** was passing. About the time that the corps' order reached **Freyberg**, Rommel had discounted the sanguine expectations of **15 Panzer Division** and had made his final decision to withdraw. Only the arrival of almost unlimited quantities of petrol in the front line could have persuaded him to change his mind. The long advance and heavy going of the first night had so drained his reserves that supply could not keep level with the demand, even though his army had spent two days of relative inaction. Kesselring's air lift had proved a broken reed while British air and sea action had taken such toll of shipping and land transport that only extreme efforts could get enough petrol up to the **Panzer Army** to permit it to withdraw, let alone manoeuvre in an attack.

At this point, when the **Panzer Army** has been taken to the limit of its advance, it is worth considering the much publicised story of the 'going map' which was supposed to have deceived Rommel into choosing the worst possible route that led him into a trap of soft sand. A New Zealand officer who was concerned in the actual preparation and

printing of the map has given his story, and various other versions have appeared in print telling how the idea was conceived, and how the fake map was printed in great secrecy, marked and stained to give the appearance of use, and finally left in an abandoned vehicle for the enemy to find. Evidence that the map was found and used by Rommel's staff in their planning was given by General von Thoma on direct questioning after his capture later in the year, but this officer did not arrive in **Africa** until after the Alam el Halfa battle was well over. Whether the map was used or not, the effect on operations of the false information contained in it must have been negligible. The faked going details commenced east of the point that the *Panzer Army* reached on the morning of 31 August. On Rommel's original planning, the advance should then have continued in an easterly direction for some distance before turning north. As it was, the failure to keep to the time schedule caused Rommel to order an advance from this point in a north-easterly direction and, although *Africa Corps* met some bad going, Rommel's choice of this route was plainly influenced by the circumstances and not by any map. Had the advance gone according to plan, some of the *Panzer Army* might have been drawn in to areas of bad going, but it should not be forgotten that, in the *Panzer Army's* tactics, the planning of routes across the desert had been simplified to the point where subordinate commanders were given objectives and expected to reach them. Difficulties of terrain were treated as forms of opposition, in the same way as minefields or points of resistance, to be discovered by quick reconnaissance and either overcome or avoided. The first night's crossing of the southern minefields illustrates these tactics, for it is plain that the *Panzer Army* made the most cursory of reconnaissances and then proceeded to feel its way across. More than anything else, the importance laid on the false going map indicates that not only those responsible for the ruse but those who later extolled its improbable success still had only a hazy idea of German tactical methods.

v

On the night of 1–2 September, with the enemy's situation well

reconnoitred during daylight, the Air Force stepped up its bombing programme. For the first time in the desert war, a 4000 lb bomb <sup>1</sup> was dropped on the enemy columns, and among the thuds and rumbles of gunfire and bombing, the detonation of this one bomb was clearly heard by the New Zealanders in their box some miles to the north. The support and supply vehicles of the Axis troops, no longer strung out along the line of march as on the previous night but laagered in closer concentration around unit headquarters, felt the weight of the air assault severely. Their records, previously complaining of the moral effect rather than of material damage, now listed men, guns, and vehicles as casualties. Apart from this bombing, a comparatively small amount of Axis air activity, and the customary artillery harassing fire, this night passed with no minor

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<sup>1</sup> Bombs of this weight had been used earlier on enemy harbours in [Africa](#) but not against ground troops.

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incidents recorded. Both sides sent out reconnaissance patrols to see if their opponents were sneaking up in the darkness but merely found the desert emptier than in daylight.

New Zealand patrols brought back news of considerable activity in the two depressions, Angar and Munassib, where the Axis troops were obviously digging positions of some strength. Between the depressions and the box there were numerous groups of trenches, fully or partially dug but unoccupied. Several of the slit trenches were found to contain booby traps, which were disarmed by engineers with the patrols. No one knew whether the Axis troops intended to occupy these positions when they were completed, or whether they had abandoned them as too close to New Zealand observation.

With [Africa Corps](#) patrol reports offering no hint of British night activity between Alam el Halfa and the [New Zealand Box](#), followed by a quiet dawn, Rommel was convinced that he did not have to fear a counter-attack for some time, his opinion being that the British were too

short of reserves to risk moving from their defences. Montgomery at about the same time gave out his opinion that the Axis forces, probably through shortages of supply, were adopting a defensive attitude, at least for the time being. Both commanders therefore felt free to go ahead with their own plans without undue interference, Montgomery with the provision of his counter-attack forces, Rommel with a withdrawal before the 'slow reaction of the British command' could hinder him. <sup>1</sup>

Rommel prefaced his withdrawal orders with the explanation that British air supremacy and the sinking of several tankers made a continuation of the offensive impossible. Accordingly the *Panzer Army* was to retire in bounds to positions behind the British minefields that ran north from *Himeimat*, the new line to be linked to the old through *Deir el Angar* and the *Qattara Box*. Before the general withdrawal commenced, both panzer divisions were to supply detachments of tanks and infantry as mobile reserves to reinforce any part of the front against which the British might attack. Rommel was particularly sensitive to the *Qattara Box* area, where his new line hinged to the static front.

For the first stage of the withdrawal proper, the troops covering the line of communication on the north were to stand firm, *21 Panzer Division* was to move to the south of *Littorio* with its rearguard facing east, while *15 Panzer Division* fell back to *21 Division's* right flank. The *Reconnaissance Group* was to conform and cover the southern approaches. Then, as the two panzer

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<sup>1</sup> Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 274.

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formations fell back in bounds under cover of their rearguards, the three formations on the north, *Littorio*, *Trieste* and *90 Light* divisions, were to leapfrog back until the new line was reached. Once the defences of the new line had been suitably prepared, they were to be manned by Italians with the German formations in reserve.

Observers in Eighth Army, though unaware that a major withdrawal

was commencing, were quick to note that outlying columns and patrols were being pulled in on the morning of 2 September. On renewing its advance at dawn **8 Armoured Brigade** passed across the south of the Alam el Halfa box unmolested, to join **22 Armoured Brigade** about 9.30 a.m. Columns of **7 Armoured Division** discovered that positions in which **15 Panzer Division's** troops had laagered overnight had been vacated but, when they tried to follow up, were met by the gun line of the rearguard. Well to the south a column of **4 Hussars** nipped off an isolated party of the *Reconnaissance Group*, shooting up several trucks and taking some prisoners.

By the middle of the morning the field guns of **10 Armoured** and **44 Divisions** were falling silent as few targets remained within range. The armoured division then took some of its batteries from their dug-in positions and set them up further to the south. By midday a thick dust-storm was raging, hindering observation both from the ground and the air. Several New Zealand artillery observation officers took advantage of the dust to settle themselves in better vantage points overlooking the line of the depressions on the south of the box and, when the dust began to settle about two o'clock, reported a wealth of targets as numerous enemy columns, also taking advantage of the low visibility, were moving to their positions for the withdrawal. On orders from Eighth Army for maximum harassing fire, all British guns within range maintained constant fire until dusk, several batteries expending over 1000 rounds each during the afternoon and evening.

A curious incident occurred this day in the sector north of the **New Zealand Box**. English troops of the **Essex Regiment** on **Ruweisat Ridge** were approached by a German officer and NCO carrying a white flag. The officer, identified later as a member of the *Ramcke Brigade*, demanded immediate surrender on the grounds that Rommel had surrounded the Eighth Army. The two optimists were escorted back to **5 Indian Division's** headquarters and eventually on to the headquarters of **30 Corps**. After interrogation, it is understood, they were finally returned to their own lines. Some days later Rommel issued an order forbidding keen



but misguided officers from acting as *parlementaires* without official approval.

Early on 2 September **General Freyberg** learnt with some relief that the operation planned for the coming night was to be postponed for twenty-four hours. The movement of 5 Indian Infantry Brigade had been delayed and its troops only began to arrive in the box in the late afternoon. The first battalion to appear took over the sector held by 26 Battalion, which then moved back to an uncomfortable bivouac in the rear of the sector. During the evening and night the remainder of the Indian brigade relieved 132 Brigade, whose troops moved back to bivouac among the gun lines in the northern part of the box. As these reliefs settled in, the two New Zealand brigades sent out patrols to the southwest and south to reconnoitre the ground and enemy defences in the area over which the proposed operation would occur.

One patrol, under Second-Lieutenant **Mowat**<sup>1</sup> of 25 Battalion, had a brisk engagement on the edge of **Deir el Angar** and had to be assisted in disengaging by covering fire from field guns and mortars. No other patrol encountered the enemy, but the total of the information brought back was that the main enemy line had been prepared along the northern edges of the depressions **Angar**, **Alinda**, **Munassib**, and **Muhafid**. North of this the section and platoon positions discovered the previous night were still unoccupied though some showed signs of further work. More booby traps were found and disarmed. These partially prepared positions reached to within a mile of the southern minefield of the **New Zealand Box**.

While these patrols were out, the British guns, on Montgomery's instructions, harassed the enemy constantly throughout the hours of darkness, while seventy-two sorties were flown by the Air Force between dusk and dawn. Two 4000 lb bombs were dropped this night, both causing large fires to show that they had found targets of some kind. According to the German records, 300 aircraft dropped 2400 bombs and caused such damage to transport that some units were nearly immobilised.

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt R. S. Mowat; Wellington; born Shannon, 8 Feb 1911;  
newsroom foreman.**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

# CHAPTER 9 – OPERATION BERESFORD

## CHAPTER 9

### Operation BERESFORD

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**THE** third day of September ushered in the third year of the war in the west. In the rear areas and in some of the Eighth Army headquarters the day was observed by prayer services. For the troops in the front line there was little opportunity to join in the observances for, though there was relatively little ground activity, no one was yet sure of the *Panzer Army's* intentions and all positions were fully manned. In the air 200 bombers and 574 fighter sorties were flown by the **Desert Air Force**, with altogether some 1036 bombs dropped on the *Panzer Army*.

Patrols from all three of the brigades of **10 Armoured Division** and the columns of **7 Armoured Division** probed forward cautiously as soon as it was light, only to encounter fire from a thick screen of anti-tank guns covering the north and east of the **Muhafid Depression**, and running thence for some distance to the south. Ground and air observers reported that, behind this screen, several large groups of vehicles were either stationery or appeared to be moving slowly westwards. Once the enemy's intentions, or rather lack of definite intention, had been established by the early morning patrols, Montgomery issued the following orders.

- 1. There was to be no forward movement from the main battle positions except by patrols.**
- 2. The armoured car ring was to close round the enemy and picquet him.**
- 3. Strong patrols were to operate against any enemy MT.**
- 4. 13 Corps was to proceed vigorously, methodically and carefully, with the plan for closing the gap from the N.Z. Box to **Himeimat**.**

Under these orders, the British heavy armour was content to keep the enemy under observation and fire. The light armour and armoured car columns were more vigorous but, with no plan or direction to follow up success, they did not seek for weak spots in the anti-tank gun screen

but merely probed forward until they drew fire. In several skirmishes both sides suffered casualties to men and vehicles, but in the majority of the encounters the troops of the *Panzer Army* stood firm until the British columns retired.

Later in the day 7 Armoured Division was offered the opportunity of more aggressive action as its share in the closing of the gap between *Himeimat* and the *New Zealand Box*. To tie in with the New Zealand advance southwards, intended for the coming evening, Montgomery instructed 13 Corps to send strong columns to operate from *Samaket Gaballa* against the *Panzer Army's* southern flank. Air reconnaissance was already indicating that the enemy might be withdrawing, though General Horrocks himself felt that it was yet too early to assume that such a withdrawal was a 'definitely established fact'.

When Horrocks passed the orders on to 7 Armoured Division with the detail that both 7 Motor Brigade and 4 Light Armoured Brigade were to take part, the value of the scheme for a two-pronged attack meeting at *Himeimat*—and the impractical thinking still prevalent in Eighth Army—became clear. The commander of 7 Armoured Division immediately pointed out that, to engage the enemy between Gaballa and *Himeimat*, his columns would have to traverse some of the worst of the desert going, so difficult indeed that wheeled vehicles could only follow certain limited tracks with no room for manoeuvre. A compromise was eventually reached, that 7 Motor Brigade should press from the east in the better going north of Gaballa while light tanks and carriers of 4 Light Armoured Brigade attempted to reach *Himeimat*. The discussions made it clear that little could be expected from the southern prong of the pincers. Of the 27 Crusaders and 50 Stuarts with which the light armoured brigade had commenced the battle, only about one in three was still in running order.

Such a light force, operating in difficult country and with no infantry or gun support, was not likely to make much impression on the *Panzer Army's* flank. In fact, in one of the first engagements, a column of Stuart tanks was attacked and driven off by tanks of *Ariete Division*

which had been directed to help cover this southern front.

During Eighth Army's methodical and careful, but not very vigorous, preparations for closing the gap, the *Panzer Army* took full advantage of its opponents' caution to stage a leisurely and ordered withdrawal. In the early dawn of the 3rd, *15 Panzer Division* and the *Reconnaissance Group*, pivoting on *21 Panzer Division*, swung steadily back until their front ran in a north-south line facing east. Behind an anti-tank gun line the three groups then continued to retire to the west. By midday *Africa Corps* felt safe in ordering *Littorio Division*, then left on the extreme eastern end of the line of troops covering the northern flank, to thin out and eventually withdraw into reserve. The Italian motorised division, *Trieste*, holding the front west of *Littorio*, was then to conform with the withdrawal of the eastern flank by stepping back into the *Muhafid* – *Munassib* depressions and relieving *90 Light Division*.

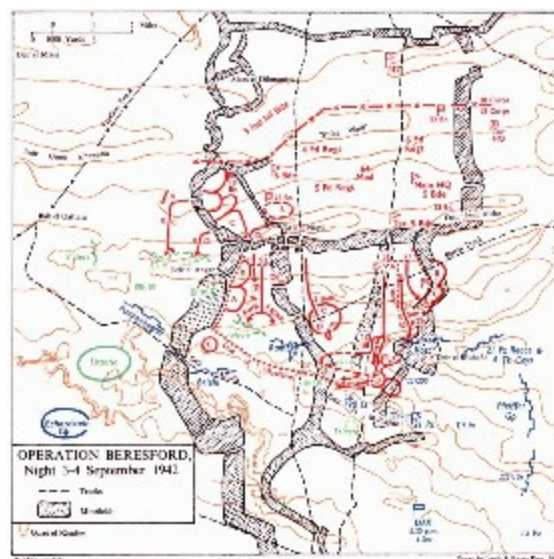
As had happened before, the Italians failed to act with German efficiency. In spite of attempts by *21 Panzer Division* to co-ordinate the Italians' withdrawal with its own, *Littorio* reacted with unexpected alacrity to its orders, prompted possibly by the fact that, in holding the north-eastern corner of the *Panzer Army's* front, it was coming in for more than its share of British fire. The Italian tanks, in fact, withdrew so smartly that they triggered the next phase of the retreat, *Trieste's* relief of *90 Light Division*, well ahead of schedule, so that, when *21 Panzer Division's* patrols tried to find contact with the troops on their north, they found only empty desert.

By the evening of the 3rd, when Eighth Army was getting ready for its counter-attack, the *Panzer Army's* retirement had progressed even further than its plans demanded. The *Reconnaissance Group* was falling back on *Folgore Division's* positions around *Himeimat*, while *21* and *15 Panzer Divisions'* rearguards were on a north-south line running from the south-east corner of *Muhafid*. This depression itself was thinly occupied by patrols drawn from *21 Division's* reconnaissance and anti-tank companies, who were out of touch with any troops on their west. In

the western end of the depression there were some guns of the army artillery, including some 88-millimetre, and scattered troops of *90 Light Division*, all awaiting relief by *Trieste Division*. In the neck of desert between **Muhafid** and Munassib and in Munassib itself, *Trieste* had surprised *90 Light Division* by its early arrival and the relief was under way, one battalion group of the Germans having already moved out before dusk.

Between the north-west of Munassib and **Deir el Angar**, the newly prepared defences were still held by detachments of German and Italian parachutists of *Ramcke Brigade* and *Folgore Division*. Two battalions of *Brescia Division* held Angar, with other units of this division linking the defences with the **Qattara Box**.

Two armoured regiments of *21 Panzer Division*, with up to sixty tanks in going order, were laagering immediately to the south of **Muhafid**, with another sixty tanks of *15 Panzer Division* only a few miles further south. The battalion groups of *90 Light Division* were forming up in Munassib on relief and travelling back to laager about two miles further west.



The main route used followed the track through **Deir Alinda** and, with supply vehicles for the panzer divisions and *Trieste*, the transport of *90 Light* and the tanks of *Littorio* all converging on this route as soon as dusk offered cover from air attack, the minefield gaps along the way caused numerous traffic jams throughout the night.

**Opinion in the Eighth Army on the evening of 3 September, according to the records of the time, ranged from the hypercautious, in which the enemy's withdrawing was seen as a gathering of his forces prior to a further advance, to the extremely sanguine view that Rommel had had enough and was getting out while the going was good. Either to hinder the preparations for a renewal of his offensive or to hasten his going, a hearty blow struck at this time seemed indicated. Although the commander of 7 Armoured Division had made clear his inability to take effective action from the south, Montgomery decided to proceed with the attack from the north, through the **New Zealand Box**.**

**The development of the plans for this northern prong of the pincers is of interest. As soon as the probability of an enemy advance round the south of the box had been accepted, planning included numerous suggestions for cutting off the Axis spearhead or disorganising the lines of communication. For any such operation the **New Zealand Box** presented the most suitable base. The *Panzer Army's* advance was less than twenty-four hours old before Horrocks had warned **Freyberg** that some limited operation might be expected of him to gain control or observation over the line of depressions that lay some three to four miles south of the box.**

**With no specific task or objective given him, **Freyberg** discussed the possibilities with his brigadiers. At that time there was a quite justifiable fear that the box might be attacked from the west, south, or south-east, so that neither of the New Zealand brigadiers was willing to carry out operations which might disorganise the carefully prepared defences. The most that came of the discussion was an offer from **Kippenberger** for the use of 22 Battalion as a mobile column, provided the British armour would guarantee the eastern face of the box.**

**Montgomery, however, saw the proposed operation as something more than limited action by a mobile column and had already developed**

his scheme for a pincers movement from north and south. **Freyberg**, on presenting his mobile column proposal to Horrocks, was accordingly told to consider instead a major advance by one of the two New Zealand brigades to tie in with operations by 7 Armoured Division.

This matter was discussed on 1 September, when the *Panzer Army* was so placed that it could have turned all its strength against the **New Zealand Box** with the rest of 13 Corps as spectators, and **Freyberg** objected strongly to the new proposal. He pointed out that, if one of the two New Zealand brigades moved into the open, it would mean abandoning the whole conception of the box as the southern bastion of the line, with its well-planned infantry defences, minefields, and artillery layout. Moreover, he had grave doubts of the effectiveness of any action by 7 Armoured Division's columns, especially after their behaviour the previous day when they had abandoned the ground immediately to the south of the box well before the enemy approached.

Horrocks replied to the objections with a vague offer of armoured assistance to protect the eastern flank and a concrete offer of another infantry brigade placed under **Freyberg's** command so that the three brigade sectors could still be maintained while one brigade advanced to the south. Though later developments show that there was some misunderstanding over the use of the extra brigade, the general principle was agreed, **Freyberg** leaving on record his opinion that the area between 5 Brigade and the depressions could be regained with little difficulty as the enemy had still not occupied it by more than light patrols, but that any further advances into and beyond the depressions would meet strong resistance.

Agreement set going the 'general post' of brigades between the Delta and the front as already recorded. **Freyberg** was told that an Indian brigade would join him late on 2 September and that the advance would commence that night with, as its objectives, the ground between either the first or second minefields on the west, the fourth field on the east and the 265 grid line as the southern limit initially. If the second minefield was chosen as the western boundary, the area gained would



have to be extended to the first field as soon as possible to provide a wide base for another advance to occupy the depressions.

As the planning proceeded on its various levels, enemy tanks and infantry had been closing in on the south-eastern corner of the New Zealand position, thus cutting off access to the first objective except through the already crowded and congested box. This brought to light the misunderstanding mentioned earlier, for **Freyberg** had envisaged feeding the Indian brigade into the objective round the outside of the box, thus leaving his own defences undisturbed, while Horrocks thought he had made it clear that one of the New Zealand brigades was to carry out the advance. Though **Kippenberger** agreed that his brigade, from its position and knowledge of the ground ahead, was the logical choice, neither he nor **Freyberg** liked the thought of the disorganisation that would ensue, and the risk if the enemy should attack, when the Indian brigade was brought through the crowded box for a hurried relief to free 5 Brigade for the advance.

**Freyberg** then set his staff to prepare a plan for passing the Indians through 5 Brigade, the latter to prepare routes, open gaps in the minefields, and generally act as guide. But as soon as Horrocks passed the outline of this plan to Army Headquarters, he was told it would not do. The army's intention was for the Indian brigade to be used to extend **5 Indian Division's** front southwards to release one New Zealand brigade. This agreement had been embodied, though not very plainly, in the original proposal passed on from the army by 13 Corps and should have been followed by both Horrocks and **Freyberg** from the start. However, early on the 2nd, the Division learnt from Corps that the operation was to be postponed for twenty-four hours, thus permitting less urgency in the preparation of the plans. The reason for the postponement is not clear but it seems to have been caused mainly by delays in the various movements designed to release 5 Indian Brigade to the New Zealand command.

**Freyberg** immediately called a conference at his headquarters to

redesign the plans and, while this conference was in session, he received a message from Corps which made it quite clear that Horrocks wished the attack to be carried out by New Zealand troops; that is, that the Indian brigade should relieve 132 Brigade, and the latter should then relieve one of the New Zealand brigades. **Freyberg**, however, was still against such a double set of reliefs under the prevailing circumstances and, backed by his brigadiers, was also against an advance by a single brigade. As he himself pointed out at the time, there had not yet been an armoured battle other than a skirmish or two and the full weight of the *Panzer Army's* armour could easily be loosed at the narrow salient that one brigade might gain between 5 Brigade's front and the depressions, and at a time when the double relief was placing the whole defence plan of the box at a disadvantage, especially in the artillery layout and communications. But for a two-brigade advance, Horrocks' proposals could only be fulfilled by having 132 Brigade relieve 6 New Zealand Brigade, thus endangering the whole western front of the box in the event of an enemy attack from that quarter, an event which in most minds was still a possibility.

With these points in mind, the morning's conference evolved a plan which, with some minor modifications, was eventually approved by Corps and Army. It started with the relief by 5 Indian Infantry Brigade not only of 132 Brigade but of 6 Brigade's northern sector held by 26 Battalion. This battalion was then to extend 6 Brigade's front to the south of **Alam Nayil**, at the same time providing cover for the flank of the main operation, in which 132 Brigade passed through 6 Brigade and occupied the ground to the edge of **Deir Alinda**, while 5 New Zealand Brigade advanced to a line which had its right flank on Munassib and passed through **Muhafid** to follow the fourth minefield back to the corner of the box. In this form **Freyberg** felt certain the operation could be carried out 'with good results', provided no warning either by too obvious firing or patrolling was given the enemy. The dangers inherent in the movements involved were still valid and he felt it essential to keep at least part of 6 Brigade in its defences while all other troops in the box were on the move. The Indian brigade, which had considerably

fewer machine guns and anti-tank guns than the Corps Commander had led him to understand, was to take over a sector in which all its three battalions would be in the front line, while 5 Brigade after the conclusion of the advance would be fully extended in garrisoning the eastern flank and the southern extension. Accordingly, **Freyberg** asked for the co-operation and possible assistance of the British armour.

Horrocks, on receiving details of this plan, telephoned **Divisional Headquarters** to object to the use of 132 Brigade, on the grounds that Montgomery intended to bring forward the headquarters of 50 Division to take over the **New Zealand Box** with 132 and 151 Brigades under command as soon as the New Zealanders were ready to advance beyond the depressions in the second stage of the operation. The GSO I, Colonel Gentry, who answered the telephone in **Freyberg's** absence, pointed out that, if 151 Brigade relieved 6 Brigade to allow the latter to take part in the second stage, some troops would still have to hold the ground won by 132 Brigade in the first stage, and this could best be done by having 132 Brigade face west as soon as 6 Brigade passed through to continue the advance to the south. He also drew attention to recent comments that Dominion troops were receiving a disproportionate amount of publicity and suggested that valuable propaganda lay in the use of such English troops as the Kentish battalions of 132 Brigade. Finally, he pointed out the dangers from counter-attack invited by both stages of the operation and reiterated **Freyberg's** request for a definite plan of co-operation by the British tanks on the eastern flank. Unable to offer any such plan because of Montgomery's ruling that the armour should remain in its prepared positions save in extreme urgency, Horrocks then agreed to the New Zealand proposals.

This conversation took place in the late afternoon of 2 September and before nightfall Horrocks had learnt from Eighth Army that the headquarters of 50 Division would not be available, and that **Freyberg** would have to retain command not only of the **New Zealand Box** but also of all ground won in both stages of the advance. This permitted more freedom in the use of the available brigades and Horrocks sent the

Division a signal agreeing to the plans for the first stage and, possibly influenced by Gentry's talk of propaganda, suggesting the use of 151 Brigade for the second stage. Detailed planning then went ahead for the first stage but, for the second, **Freyberg** still felt that any plans were likely to be premature, at least while the German armour was still intact.

All the discussions and arrangements leading up to what was first called Operation **WELLINGTON** and later **BERESFORD** indicate that it was intended as a probe to test the enemy's reactions. No plans were prepared in advance for the powerful force of the British armour to assist, either before or during the action, by containing the German panzer divisions or by warding off counterattacks. Nor were the armoured formations briefed to action should the infantry advance open the way to greater success. The New Zealand infantry, thrusting forward into the lifeline of an as yet undefeated enemy, was given two squadrons of Valentine tanks.

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On the morning of the 3rd, the Corps Commander held a conference at the New Zealand headquarters attended by the commander of **5 Indian Division**, Major-General H. R. Briggs, together with **Freyberg**, his CRA, Brigadier C. E. Weir, and Colonel Gentry. Some small details of the plan for the first stage were altered but the main topic of discussion was the extension of the Indian sector to follow the success of the first stage.

A divisional conference was held immediately afterwards when the plans emerged in their final form. On the right, 26 Battalion was to extend 6 Brigade's western front for about two miles south from **Alam Nayil** along the first minefield. With its right flank thus covered by 26 Battalion, 132 Brigade was to advance with two battalions between the first and second fields and a third immediately east of the second field, with the edge of **Deir Alinda** and the western end of Munassib as the brigade objective.

**Fifth Brigade was to send one battalion down the line of the third, or so-called 'dummy', minefield to occupy the neck of desert between Munassib and Muhafid, while another extended the eastern flank of the box down to Muhafid. The other two battalions of 5 Brigade were to be ready to reinforce or support the advance. The squadron of tanks already under New Zealand command, A Squadron of 46 Royal Tank Regiment, was to support 132 Brigade, and another squadron from 23 Armoured Brigade, B Squadron of 50 Royal Tank Regiment, was sent in late that afternoon to work with 5 Brigade. Each squadron mustered about fifteen Valentines.**

**To avoid letting the enemy be forewarned of the advance, no artillery barrage or concentration was to precede the infantry though the guns prepared tasks to cover the newly gained front.**

**The English brigade's guns were still sited in the north of the box with tasks mainly to cover the western front, so 4 New Zealand Field Regiment was placed in support of 132 Brigade while 6 Field Regiment continued to support 5 Brigade.**

**As the Air Force had been bombing the depressions regularly since the beginning of the offensive, it was not expected that air activity would give the enemy any warning of the infantry operation but would rather draw attention away from it, so the Corps Commander arranged for air action in the early part of the night to be concentrated on the objective and the ground further south.**

**All this, however, did not complete the plans. It was known from observation and patrols that the main part of the advance would cover ground that had not yet been occupied in any strength by the enemy, but 26 Battalion's new front would lie close to the east of Deir el Angar, where the enemy had been extremely busy digging defensive positions since the first night of the offensive. It was therefore thought necessary that some sort of diversionary activity against Angar would help 26 Battalion and plans were made for both 18 and 25 Battalions to raid the depression from the north.**

To most of the New Zealand troops, seeing things in simple patterns and buoyed by the new spirit of decision in the army, Operation BERESFORD was the opening move of the awaited and logical counter-attack that had to be made against the *Panzer Army*. To Montgomery at the head of affairs the operation was a minor or limited manoeuvre to test Rommel's reactions. Between these two extremes there was an area of confusion of thought which led to some extent to a confusion of aim.

**Freyberg** himself has left it on record that he was not keen on 'probing further south', that is, beyond the first objective into and beyond the depressions. The Corps Commander, on the other hand, having settled the conflicting proposals for the use of the various brigades and accepted **Freyberg's** plan for the first stage, put considerable enthusiasm into planning further advances. Then there arose the problem that so bedevilled Inglis at Ruweisat and El Mreir—the use of the British armour. Montgomery, following his plan of caution, was not willing to commit the heavy armour, but **Freyberg** was unwilling to accept Horrocks' plans unless they included the commitment of the tanks.

While the *Africa Corps* tanks remained in force to the east of the southern minefields, any major advance to the south of the **New Zealand Box** would have jeopardised the policy of maintaining fixed defences, unless the whole operation could have been carried out by reserve forces not only of infantry but of armour as well. **Freyberg** realised this, as his arguments on the planning make evident. Horrocks either did not appreciate the dangers or was willing to take the risk, for both the record of his comments and his planning indicate that he was looking forward to a major operation in which his corps would decisively rout the *Panzer Army*. In the varying attitudes, the first stage of Operation BERESFORD lost some of its relative importance and was accepted as a simple advance, likely to be only lightly opposed if at all, from which a major attack might, or might not, be launched. This explains much in the planning, including the employment of an untried brigade.



Fifth Brigade's plans were drawn with care by **Kippenberger** on his experiences in the July battles. Although he had four battalions under command, he decided to use only two of them in the initial advance, giving 28 Battalion the task of occupying the ground between the Munassib and **Muhafid** depressions, while 21 Battalion extended the eastern flank of the box to link up with the Maoris. He intended to use his other two battalions according to how the situation developed. One company of 22 Battalion was to help the engineers in clearing and laying mines and a company from 23 Battalion was to guard the start line. Only a narrow gap was to be cut in the wide defensive minefield through which all the assaulting troops and their transport were to pass. Immediately behind this gap a large dugout was prepared as a tactical headquarters with communications joined into the divisional network.

At dusk on the 3rd, sappers of 6 Field Company, assisted by men of B Company, 22 Battalion, were to start cutting the 12-foot lane in the wire and minefield on 28 Battalion's front. Then A Company of 23 Battalion was to move through and cover the start line on the south of the gap against surprise by enemy patrols. Next, 21 Battalion was to pass through and line the eastern side of the objective, where little or no opposition was expected, and the Maoris were to follow and proceed due south to the edge of the two depressions. Meanwhile 22 Battalion was to leave its defences and bivouac close to the new tactical headquarters as immediate reserve, and all the various vehicles—the tanks of B Squadron, 50 Royal Tank Regiment, anti-tank guns, mortar and Bren carriers, engineers' trucks with mines, and similar transport needed for the operation—were to form up in groups ready to be despatched through the gap like trains in a marshalling yard. In fact, most eventualities that could be foreseen from past experience were covered by 5 Brigade's plans.

Brigadier Robertson of 132 Brigade had been visited by **Freyberg** during the day and, on the latter's advice, discussed his plans with **Kippenberger**, who pointed out how experience had shown the value of a stationary headquarters with good communications, and with reserves

and support vehicles within easy call. The English brigadier must have considered that the conditions under which his brigade had to operate did not allow for this method. His men had quite a long march from their bivouac area through 6 Brigade's sector to the start line, and another march on to the objective. As everyone, including **Freyberg**, gave him to understand that he need expect little opposition until his troops reached the line of the depressions, he planned to keep his headquarters moving close behind his battalions until he reached a convenient and central point in the sector to be occupied. The long march also gave him grounds for rejecting **Kippenberger's** advice that picks and shovels be carried by the infantrymen and not brought up in bulk on trucks. He was, however, talked out of a proposal to have the supporting Valentines of A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, lead the advance.

The final plan was for the brigade to travel in all available transport through 25 Battalion to a start line parallel to and about half a mile outside the defensive minefield on the south of **Alam Nayil**. Here the brigade was to move forward in battalion groups for about a mile to a 'debussing point' where the groups were to deploy for the remaining advance to the final objective, a distance of about a mile on the right and a mile and a half on the left. The orders gave **5 Royal West Kents** the right flank, with a front of 500 yards, and **4 Royal West Kents**, reinforced by B Company of **2 Buffs**, the left with a slightly wider front. The other three companies of **2 Buffs** were to advance down the eastern side of the 'second minefield', conforming to the movements of the main part of the brigade. The Buffs were to have one troop of the Valentines in support, the remainder of the tanks following **4 Royal West Kents**. It seems probable that the brigadier intended to halt his headquarters at or near the debussing point, where it would have been practically in the centre of the new sector he expected to occupy.

The share that 6 Brigade took in the operation was larger than would appear in the orders. It had the task of preparing sufficient routes through its sector for the passage of 132 Brigade and 26 Battalion. This



included clearing and taping gaps in the inner minefields surrounding 25 Battalion's area, marking the routes with coloured lamps, clearing three gaps in the perimeter minefield, two between the first and second minefields and one east of the second, and surveying and marking the start lines. There were also the two diversions to be provided by 18 and 25 Battalions, as well as the major task entrusted to 26 Battalion of following the English brigade to form a front facing west along the inner side of the first minefield.

Many of the preparations had to be started in daylight in areas over which the enemy held observation of some degree. The start lines were laid out during the day and work started on the gaps in the inner minefields. The sappers in charge of the clearance had earlier stated that they would find it difficult to open the gaps in the outer minefields between the fall of darkness and 132 Brigade's scheduled time of arrival, so some preparatory work was started on these gaps before the sun had set.

*iv*

Operation **BERESFORD**, on the extreme south-western corner of Eighth Army's front, took place on an arc over ten miles in length along the northern edges of the four depressions, Angar, **Alinda**, Munassib and **Muhafid**. As so often happened at this period, though the planning was generally sound, few of the arrangements developed according to plan.

The night was probably the noisiest experienced by the New Zealanders in the box. Dusk had hardly fallen before the glowing orange flares of the Air Force's **Albacores** commenced to blossom over the depressions, followed by the thump of bombs. As if in retaliation, but in fact under arrangement between Rommel and Kesselring to help cover the night's bound of the *Panzer Army's* withdrawal, Axis aircraft flew over the Eighth Army in greater strength than previously. Although this effort spread past **Ruweisat Ridge** to the north and over the British armour to the east, the **New Zealand Box** came in for the major share of the bombing and most of the noise. From the ground it appeared as if

the *Luftwaffe* was sending over a succession of lone bombers, each of which circled until its stock of bombs, mostly dropped singly rather than in sticks, was exhausted, when it would give way to its successor. Some of the bombers were equipped with 'Banshee wailers' which screamed as they dived, and most of them interspersed their bombing with haphazard bursts of tracer.

Damage sustained in the box was negligible. Though some of the newcomers among the Division were affected by the Banshee screams, the haphazard bombing and the tracer fire, seasoned troops were hardly disturbed. The greatest nuisance value came from the canisters of butterfly bombs dropped in some profusion, those that fell on tracks or defence positions presenting a hazard until found and exploded. Fortunately many of these were duds and others exploded prematurely on impact. Of the Banshee bombers the *Maori Battalion's* diary noted: '... Then they sent a plane which was fitted with a siren—it careered madly across our positions screaming in an eerie fashion, intended perhaps to panic our troops; it sounded bad but one gets used to it....'

Of the *Luftwaffe's* effort the *Panzer Army's* diary records:

The *Luftwaffe* attacked the enemy concentrations at and east of *Alam Nayil* with good effect. It also made a night attack on *10 Indian Division* which seemed to have considerable effect. It was believed to have smashed a large troop concentration intended for an attack southwards against *Brescia Division*....

But *Africa Corps* was less enthusiastic about Kesselring's assistance with an entry, 'From observation, the attacks did not seem comparable with the enemy's night bomber raids'.

Possibly because of observation of unusual activity in the *New Zealand Box*, the enemy commenced to search the south-west perimeter of 6 Brigade's sector at 6.20 p.m. with fire from field guns and mortars. This fell at first mainly on 25 Battalion's C Company area, where it did not greatly hamper the preparations.

At 8.30 p.m. the **Desert Air Force** commenced ninety minutes of continuous bombing over the Munassib area. At this time the men of 21 and 28 Battalions were leaving their defences to assemble before passing through the 5 Brigade gap, and the leading troops of 132 Brigade were entering 25 Battalion's sector. Shortly afterwards the first of the almost continuous stream of enemy aircraft which came over during the night dropped some bombs near Divisional Headquarters. By 9.30 p.m. 26 Battalion was also on the move and the Vickers gunners with 6 Brigade had started a programme of harassing fire on the **Deir el Angar** area to keep the enemy's heads down. The field guns were also laid on the same area ready to fire should the enemy show signs of interfering with the forming up of the assaulting troops.

The infinite variations that the human element can play on the most carefully laid plans appeared early. **Kippenberger**, intending to visit his two assaulting battalions as they assembled in their sectors, was prevented from so doing when he and his staff had trouble in the darkness in locating the newly prepared tactical headquarters from which the battle was to be conducted. Meanwhile, 21 Battalion's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel R. W. Harding, led his men at the appointed time to the minefield gap only to find that the sappers of 6 Field Company had not quite completed clearing the mines. The infantry then went through, some by a patrol gap further to the east, and the battalion transport followed as soon as the main gap was cleared, but on assembling his men on the start line, Harding found himself a company short. This company, B Company, had been the last in the order of march and, failing to keep close to the troops ahead, had arrived late at the gap to see the men of 28 Battalion filing through. Rather than cause confusion, the company commander held his men back until the Maoris were clear before hurrying after the rest of his unit. In 28 Battalion's lines, when the companies assembled for last-minute instructions, two platoons of one company from the defences close to the gap were missing. Hurried arrangements to make up the missing numbers from spare men of Headquarters Company had to be as hastily undone when the two platoons were found on the start line, having made their way

there direct to save a double journey.

However, by the appointed time, 10.30 p.m., 21 Battalion had set off, leaving guides to wait for B Company, while 28 Battalion had shaken itself out and was on its way to the south. As the final details of 132 Brigade's plans had not been received, no method of contact had been arranged between the Maoris' right flank and the Buffs on 132 Brigade's left.

Similar troubles beset 132 Brigade but did not straighten themselves out so simply. As the troops reached 25 Battalion's sector, each group was supposed to select its respective lighted route to one of the three main gaps. Inexperience in night travel under such conditions, the customary congestion at the gaps through the inner fields, as well as the sporadic fire and bombing brought considerable delay and confusion. The Buffs' column was least affected and reached the gap east of the second minefield on time, to pass through and wait for word that the rest of the brigade was ready. The two West Kent battalions became considerably disorganised, with trucks on the wrong routes and often, in losing the way, becoming stuck in the soft sand or in the minefields. Several casualties to men and vehicles from the enemy fire or mines stretched the delays so that, at 10.30 p.m., when the battalion columns should have been lined up on the start line, there was a confused mass of men and trucks on both sides of the gaps, with officers and NCOs, both English and New Zealand, working hard to get order out of the chaos. The leading troops of 26 Battalion, coming up behind, found the centre gap, through which their vehicles were supposed to pass, completely blocked, and the commander then gave orders for the transport to try to follow the infantry through the right-hand gap.

Some order was being gained and the assaulting battalions of 132 Brigade were beginning to form up on the start line when the field and Vickers guns opened up in support of 18 and 25 Battalions' diversionary raids, causing the enemy to retaliate with increased fire on the perimeter minefield. Fortunately the start line was out of the main area of fire. The brigade hastily completed its deployment and, almost an

hour behind the scheduled time, set off away from the enemy fire into the open desert to the south. The Valentine tanks, with which all contact had been lost for some time, eventually found their way through the centre gap and followed on behind the brigade. Two squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry, whose task was to follow the brigade with a possible exploitation role into **Deir Alinda**, were held up so long that the regiment's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel **Nicoll**<sup>1</sup> decided to send only one troop forward with instructions to report back to him.

The increase in enemy fire caught many men and vehicles of the rear elements of 132 Brigade still on both sides of the minefield. The confusion was not helped by several drivers who left their vehicles or tried to drive back into the box. The infantry of 26 Battalion, marching in file close to the tape on one side of the western gap so as not to interfere with the passage of vehicles, got through with only minor casualties until a salvo of mortar bombs landed among the battalion headquarters group bringing up the rear. The commander, Lieutenant-Colonel **Peart**,<sup>2</sup> was mortally wounded, three men were killed and several wounded. The adjutant, Lieutenant **Barnett**,<sup>3</sup> then took charge and, with the assistance of Second-Lieutenant **Buchanan**,<sup>4</sup> who stayed in the gap under fire to direct the traffic, managed to get the battalion transport column in order and on its way to the start line.

Meanwhile the companies had reached the start line to find the area still occupied by confused groups of the tail of 132 Brigade. As these groups moved on, the battalion followed, keeping to the right of 132 Brigade's route, and only a half hour behind its planned starting time. The transport column, led by the adjutant, brought up the rear, to halt about a mile south of the gap where a temporary headquarters was established.

The two diversionary raids had been timed to meet the enemy at 11.30 p.m., that is, one hour after 132 Brigade should have passed over its start line and half an hour after 26 Battalion's start. Any postponement, with all its alterations in timing for the supporting fire,

would have been difficult and, in the event, with the uncertainty over the possible length of the delay of the main advance, virtually impossible. The raids, therefore, were set going on the original plan, and though the enemy's retaliation did not help the confusion in which 132 Brigade had already fallen, the intention behind the diversionary action was probably achieved. The defences prepared in the **Deir el Angar** area by the *Panzer*

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<sup>1</sup> *Lt-Col A. J. Nicoll, ED, m.i.d.; Ashburton; born Ashburton, 2 Feb 1900; farmer; CO Div Cav Jul 1941–Oct 1942.*

<sup>2</sup> *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.*

<sup>3</sup> *Lt-Col A. W. Barnett, MC; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 13 Oct 1913; draper; CO 25 Bn Apr–Oct 1945; comd (temp) 6 Bde 19 Oct–1 Dec 1945; wounded 2 Nov 1942.*

<sup>4</sup> *Capt N. Buchanan, MC; born Scotland, 6 Dec 1916; pastrycook; died of wounds 17 Dec 1944.*

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*Army* since the commencement of the offensive had been gradually extended to a point within a mile of the south-west corner of the **New Zealand Box**. Enemy action from this point, either by fire or raids, could have seriously interfered with the forming-up of 132 Brigade and 26 Battalion on their start lines. To divert the enemy's attention, therefore, it was planned that B Company of 25 Battalion from reserve should pass out through a patrol gap in C Company's sector and advance on Angar on a north-south course, while a strong force from B and C Companies of 18 Battalion from their defences to the north should move down a parallel course about 1000 yards further west. Timings were arranged so that both parties should reach the northern edge of Angar at 11.30 p.m. at the end of a ten-minute concentration by field and Vickers guns. The

supporting fire was then to lift into the depression to allow the raiding parties to assault the posts on the northern lip.

The 18 Battalion force started on time but B Company, 25 Battalion, was held up at the patrol gap for some minutes to allow the enemy's searching fire along the perimeter to move on. Owing to this delay, this company, under the command of Captain Weston, was still some 300 yards to the north of the depression when the supporting fire lifted. Further advance was met by such a volume of fire from all types of weapons that Captain Weston, deeming the necessary element of surprise lost, ordered an immediate withdrawal. Through a curtain of mortar bombs falling across their line of retreat, the men reached the box with four wounded and twenty-eight missing. Several of the missing turned up later but about twelve, including several wounded, were taken prisoner.

The 18 Battalion force reached the edge of the depression just as the supporting fire lifted to find itself between two defensive positions. Charging the posts nearest to them, the men broke into small groups and for some time a mêlée of hand-to-hand fighting developed. When the three officers of C Company became casualties the company sergeant-major, WO II [Fletcher](#),<sup>1</sup> set off to regain control and in the process led attacks against several positions. Within half an hour all opposition in the vicinity had been overcome, and through the company's wireless, which had unexpectedly remained throughout in working order, the force received the battalion commander's order to withdraw. Sergeant-Major Fletcher again distinguished himself in organising the withdrawal, in which he was helped by some heroic work by medical orderlies and stretcher-bearers, to the end that all the

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<sup>1</sup> [WO II A. Fletcher](#), DCM; born [Taihape](#), 14 Nov 1911; service-station proprietor; died [Puhipuhi](#), 5 Sep 1959.

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wounded and a number of prisoners were successfully brought through the fire that the enemy still maintained along the minefield.



The raid cost about forty casualties, of whom eight were killed, including two officers, against an estimated loss to the enemy of 250 killed or wounded and 52 of 'Benito's worthies' belonging to *Brescia Division* brought back as prisoners. From A Company's action on the opening night of Rommel's offensive and this engagement, it was plain that 18 Battalion had mastered the art of night raiding. Together the two actions, according to acceptable estimates, brought the enemy a loss of nearly 400 men, of whom over eighty were prisoners, against a loss to the battalion of fewer than fifty.

As the two diversionary raids were taking place, the initial stages of the main advance continued unchecked. Away on the left flank, C Company of 21 Battalion had already, by 11.30 p.m., reached the area of its objective without finding any enemy and the other companies of the battalion were close behind.

The Maoris, unaware that 2 Buffs on their right had started late, marched steadily southwards towards the bomb flashes and soaring tracer where the *Desert Air Force* was operating over the depressions, the only sign that enemy were nearer coming from occasional bursts of machine-gun tracer away on the right flank. The order of march of 28 Battalion was uncommon. The men of C Company were in the van, spread out over a front of about 1000 yards with orders to break through any isolated outposts encountered, but to go to ground when the main defence line was met. The other two companies, D on the right and A on the left, with battalion headquarters in the middle, followed in closer order with the role of assaulting as soon as the enemy disclosed his positions on the appearance of the C Company screen.

A few minutes before midnight C Company encountered the first opposition, a group of three machine-gun posts whose fire was quickly subdued, the men of the company then passing on. It so happened that battalion headquarters followed through this area and, coming under rifle fire, made a search which brought in several of the enemy missed by the screen ahead. From this point on the speed of advance slowed as the battalion found itself crossing a stretch of desert dotted with newly



constructed but unoccupied weapon pits and sangars, all of which had to be examined. This search caused C Company to lose any of the cohesion that it might still have maintained, so that it was no longer the evenly spaced advance guard of the commander's plan. As the men probed forward, they ran into some occupied posts and, as soon as these opened fire, the whole enemy front came to life. Lieutenant-Colonel Baker, well forward in the centre of his men, then blew the prearranged blasts on his whistle to indicate that C Company was to go to ground while D and A Companies passed through to the assault. But in the crackle of rifle and machine-gun fire and the crump of mortar bombs it is doubtful if more than a few men heard these signals. In any event the men needed no urging, for D and A Companies surged forward in a charge that took them right among the enemy.

By this time C Company had ceased to exist as a formed body. Some of the men may have obeyed orders to go to ground and engage the enemy by fire, but few could have resisted joining in as the other two companies charged by. The company commander himself, Captain **Keiha**,<sup>1</sup> had been trying to establish contact with his men on the left flank when the firing commenced, and found himself faced by a number of posts containing anti-tank guns and automatics around the western end of the **Muhafid Depression**. Personally joining in with the men around him in attacks on these posts until all immediate opposition had been silenced, the company commander called a halt for reorganisation, only to discover that the troops he was leading comprised his company sergeant-major, his batman, two stretcher-bearers, two of his own riflemen and two stragglers from A Company.

About this time there occurred one of those unfortunate actions that are probably the basis for the complaints noted in German reports that the New Zealanders did not 'fight fair'. Keiha's small group had been almost overwhelmed by enemy troops who wanted to surrender, and had had some trouble discriminating between those leaving their trenches with the intention of offering themselves as prisoners and those merely moving to better cover to continue the fight. In the heat of the battle a

party of prisoners collected by one man was fired on by the others, several being killed or wounded. Eventually the surviving prisoners were sent back in charge of two of the riflemen, but the escort lost direction and ended up in the enemy lines.

In a quick search around, in which he gathered up another ten men, mostly of his own company and some wounded, Keiha discovered that he was close to the lip of the depression, on the floor of which vehicles were on the move. Thinking they might be from 21 Battalion, he led his small party down the slope towards the nearest trucks only to be met by fire from automatics.

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col K. A. Keiha, MC; Lower Hutt; born Gisborne, 24 Jan 1900; law clerk and interpreter; CO 28 Bn Apr-Sep 1943.

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An immediate bayonet charge disposed of this opposition and, though some of the trucks managed to drive off, several were caught and immobilised. While this action was taking place, Keiha's party was joined by a lieutenant and six men from A Company. <sup>1</sup> These new arrivals had no idea where the rest of the battalion was, so Keiha decided the best thing he could do would be to turn back to the north to find either 21 Battalion's right flank or his own battalion's support column. After picking up several stragglers, mostly wounded, the party heard the noise of tracked vehicles, identified after a cautious reconnaissance as the 28 Battalion's carriers which had been following some way behind the infantry with the role of exploiting into the depressions. Two of the carriers were loaded with the wounded and, with Keiha accompanying them, returned to brigade tactical headquarters. As no definite information had as yet come from Baker, Kippenberger sent Keiha back to gather up all the stragglers he could find and set up a defensive position in touch with 21 Battalion's right flank. This he did, with a force consisting eventually of over thirty men, in the area of Point 100. About dawn he was able to make contact with his own battalion headquarters.

On the initial impact with the main enemy line, D Company's commander, Captain **Awatere**,<sup>2</sup> having earlier lost contact with the screen of C Company's men ahead, presumed they had gone to ground as planned and immediately gave his men the order to assault. The two leading platoons separated against posts ahead, No. 16 Platoon on the left losing touch with the rest of the company for some hours. The remainder of the company battled its way through the enemy's defences and set to work to roll up the line, thus working farther and farther to the west until the company must have been fighting on the objective originally allocated to **2 Buffs**. It was a fight in which sections and platoons worked in co-ordination with outflanking movements and frontal attacks, and the Maoris' natural aptitude for such battle was allowed full play.

Eventually, with several men killed and most of the survivors wounded in greater or lesser degree, the impetus of the advance slackened. The enemy then rallied and brought up mortars which, from behind a ridge, laid down a heavy barrage. Awatere, realising that his men's enthusiasm had carried the company too

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col A. Awatere**, DSO, MC; **Rotorua**; born Tuparoa, 25 Apr 1910; civil servant; CO 28 Bn Jul–Aug 1944, Nov 1944–Jun 1945; twice wounded.

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far to the right, pulled them back and, setting up a temporary headquarters, had the wounded gathered in while runners were sent to find Lieutenant-Colonel Baker. The walking wounded set off to the north, to encounter a carrier patrol from **2 Buffs**. After some erratic navigation which took them almost back into the enemy's lines, the carriers delivered the wounded safely at Brigade Headquarters.

With about thirty-two fit men left, Awatere followed after his runner, eventually finding Baker in process of setting up his headquarters close

to the point where the track from the north entered the **Munassib Depression**. Enemy posts on this track had earlier been dealt with by 16 Platoon which, on its separation from the rest of D Company, had followed the track down into the depression, overcoming on the way two machine-gun posts and an 88-millimetre gun manned by Germans. Turning west along the floor of the depression in the hope of rejoining the rest of the company, the platoon caught up with a number of enemy trucks whose drivers, alarmed by the firing on the escarpment above them, were on the point of driving off. Bayonet charges by the platoon accounted for those of the drivers who stayed to fight and nearly twenty trucks were put out of commission. After some further skirmishing, the platoon made contact with A Company, which was holding a small knoll on the floor of the depression.

This company, under Captain W ('Ben') Porter, had been within sound of Baker's whistle when the first opposition was met. It had immediately charged through the middle of an Italian defence position, collecting fifteen prisoners on the way, and had then been called to a halt by Porter as he estimated he was on his objective, the neck of ground between **Muhafid** and Munassib. However, Baker appeared in the rear and, disagreeing with this estimate, ordered the company to continue and join up with D Company. As it advanced, it came under fire from two armoured cars which were assailed by the men who, jumping on the outside of the vehicles, fired through the slits in the armour and managed to put both cars out of action. Heavy firing to the right indicated where D Company was engaged, so Porter led his men west along the slope of the escarpment. Three 88-millimetre guns with covering machine-gun posts were encountered and dealt with, one of the gun positions being attacked single-handed by Sergeant **Davis**.<sup>1</sup> In the hope of salvaging these guns, the Maoris did not

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Lt **R. Davis**, DCM; born **Opotiki**, 12 Mar 1912; surfaceman, NZR; died 28 Oct 1947.

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stop to demolish them; but of the four captured, three by A Company and one by D Company, only one was salvaged, one was used later by the Maoris and then destroyed, and the other two were recovered, damaged but repairable, by the Germans.

Following up the retreating enemy, the men of A Company swarmed down over the floor of the depression, attacking all who tried to oppose them and destroying numerous trucks with grenades or Bren fire. During the course of its advance so far, the company had had remarkably few casualties, but numerous men had lost contact with the headquarters in the darkness. Among these was Second-Lieutenant [Marsden](#)<sup>1</sup> and some of his platoon, who eventually joined forces with Keiha on the left flank. Others straggled back to join D Company or battalion headquarters and a few wandered into the enemy's lines, but Porter eventually rallied about two platoons and established a position on a small knoll that rose from the floor of the depression some distance out from the northern escarpment. Here, using improvised flares, the men found constant activity in firing on troops and vehicles that passed unsuspectingly close to the knoll. About 2 a.m. the company was reinforced by the lost platoon of D Company.

Porter had already sent runners to follow the escarpment back to battalion headquarters and report his position. About half an hour after the D Company platoon arrived, the runners reappeared guiding the rest of D Company, which had been sent by Baker to link up and form a defensive position ready for daylight. Both Porter and Awatere, however, agreed that the knoll was well to the west of the battalion's proper objective, so they decided to move back at once to the east so that their men could dig in before the day broke. On the way they gathered in several stragglers and added a few more wandering Italians to their bag of prisoners. After a conference with Baker, they set out their company positions across the track at the point where it ran down into the [Munassib Depression](#). In soft sand on a forward slope that overlooked the depression, the men set to with a will to dig in before daylight should expose them to enemy fire.

As the Maoris were playing havoc with the enemy in Munassib, 21 Battalion had marched on to its objective along the inner side of the fourth minefield with very little incident. Defence positions had quickly been laid out, the men commenced to dig in, and

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj G. T. Marsden**; Pukehou; born NZ 28 Aug 1918; schoolteacher; three times wounded.

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support weapons had been called up. Only one platoon of the battalion saw action. Set on the extreme right under orders to maintain contact with 28 Battalion, 18 Platoon of D Company, under Second-Lieutenant **P. Robertson**,<sup>1</sup> encountered some isolated enemy posts. Joined by a group of Maoris, the platoon fought through this opposition until it reached the edge of the **Muhafid Depression**. Halting there to take stock of his situation, Robertson was disconcerted to find that the men of 28 Battalion with him had completely lost contact with their own battalion. Casting back east along the top of the escarpment, he had to overcome further opposition before joining up with his own D Company, to whom he delivered his bag of some fifteen mixed German and Italian prisoners. As his men were digging positions on the east of **Point 100**, he was joined by Keiha, with the remains of C Company of 28 Battalion, who extended the line to the west of the point.

v

The carrier force moving up behind 28 Battalion and met by Keiha had been despatched by **Kippenberger** at 1.25 a.m. on a request over the wireless from Baker, one of the half-dozen occasions during the night when the wireless between the battalion and brigade worked properly. The force consisted of all 28 Battalion's carriers and two sections from 21 Battalion, a total of some eighteen vehicles, under the command of Second-Lieutenant **Hayward**.<sup>2</sup> The carriers' first task was to deal with a 20-millimetre gun, somehow missed in the advance and now firing on an ambulance which the Maoris' medical officer, Captain **Cumming**,<sup>3</sup> was

taking forward in order to set up an aid post close behind the objective. With the gun and its five-man crew silenced, Hayward led his carriers forward until they were stopped by a minefield from which machine guns opened fire on them. Five posts altogether were dealt with, but in the necessary manoeuvring Hayward found his force too unweildy for easy control in the darkness and accordingly sent the six carriers of 21 Battalion back.

A route having meanwhile been found that avoided the mines, the remaining carriers drove on until they were halted by Keiha and his men. Two of the vehicles were then left to take the wounded back while Hayward led the rest down into Munassib.

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt P. Robertson, MC; Auckland; born Torquay, England, 1 May 1918; company manager.**

<sup>2</sup> **Capt E. V. Hayward; Rotorua; born Rotorua, 11 Sep 1916; labourer.**

<sup>3</sup> **Capt D. G. Cumming; Auckland; born Masterton, 3 Feb 1915; medical practitioner.**

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In the depression some nine enemy trucks were shot up but no sign of the battalion could be found. Hayward eventually decided to retrace his route with the idea of getting in touch with 21 Battalion's right flank and starting his search again. On the way back he met the column of Valentines of B Squadron, 50 Royal Tank Regiment, leading the support weapons and transport of his battalion.

This column had been sent off about an hour behind the carriers after **Kippenberger** had received a wireless request from 28 Battalion for its minelaying detachment of sappers, from which request he deduced that the battalion must be on its objective. Shortly after this two officers from the battalion had arrived at tactical brigade headquarters with the news that the troops had reached Munassib but were out of



**touch with any units on their flanks.**

**The column, which kept good contact with Brigade Headquarters through the powerful wireless sets in the tanks, was led by Captain [Bennett](#),<sup>1</sup> 28 Battalion's liaison officer at brigade, who travelled in a jeep beside the tank of the squadron commander, Major J. Hughes. Behind them came the dozen Valentines of the squadron, followed by two sections of 22 Battalion's Bren carriers and a long tail of vehicles, including anti-tank *portées*, trucks with the battalion's mortars, reserve ammunition and rations, as well as the mine trucks of the 6 Field Company detachment, who were to mine the new front, and the sappers' escort, B Company of 22 Battalion.**

**Captain Bennett at first followed the shaded lights already set out by the provosts along the brigade axis, which ran due south from the minefield gap. For a reason never explained, the lights which should have continued for about two miles were not visible much beyond half that distance, but Bennett continued to lead by compass after the last light had been passed. At one time aircraft dropped flares over the column, causing many of the soft-skinned vehicles to scatter. No bombs were dropped on the column itself but it took some time to get the vehicles reassembled in order.**

**Just before 4 a.m. both Bennett and Hughes became worried because they had not yet found any signs of 28 Battalion, so they halted the column and called up Brigade Headquarters on the wireless. Their call coincided with one of the rare moments when 28 Battalion's wireless worked successfully and Baker himself came on the air. In a conversation, relayed between the two wireless links and much of it in Maori, Baker offered to fire two white**

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<sup>1</sup> [Lt-Col C. M. Bennett](#), DSO; [Wellington](#); born [Rotorua](#), 27 Jul 1913; radio announcer; CO 28 (Maori) Bn Nov 1942–Apr 1943; wounded 20 Apr 1943; High Commissioner for NZ in [Malaya](#), 1959–63.

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Very lights, the only colour he had, on which Bennett could take a bearing. With all eyes turned to the south where the enemy's customary pyrotechnic display of flares of all colours was in full spate, two white flares soared up off to the south-west. Though they were well away from the direction expected, this could be explained if the tank column had deviated to its left while the Maoris, according to the information received from Brigade Headquarters, had been drawn to their right. When no similar pair of white flares appeared elsewhere, Bennett prepared to lead the column forward on the new bearing. Just then, Hayward's carriers appeared and were formed up with 22 Battalion's carriers between the tanks and the soft-skinned vehicles.

A short distance had been travelled when one of the leading tanks ran over a mine. Hardly had the others halted when heavy fire from anti-tank and machine guns swept over the column. The trucks in the rear immediately dispersed into the sheltering darkness, but the carriers, and Bennett in his jeep, sheltered behind the line of tanks.

The role of the Valentines, in the brigade plan, had been to support the infantry at first light and to do any exploiting that might be feasible, but Major Hughes must have felt that his main task was to reach the infantry. Whatever his thoughts, he engaged the enemy until several of his tanks had been put out of action either by mines or by enemy fire. He then led the remainder off to the south as if to outflank the enemy position, but in doing so took them into that part of the fourth minefield that lay in and around the [Muhafid Depression](#), where some more of the Valentines fell victim to mines.

Meanwhile, Hayward and Bennett, with no communication with the tanks and uncertain what action Hughes contemplated, directed the carrier force to follow the tanks and help if possible while they turned back to round up the transport convoy. With the vehicles re-formed in some sort of order, Bennett was preparing to lead them on a roundabout route to avoid the enemy position when some of the carriers returned to report that there were mines and more enemy on this route. He therefore

turned the column about and dispersed it some distance to the rear.

Of the tanks' first engagement, Captain Bennett later recorded:

I cannot speak too highly of the courage of Major Hughes and the men of his tanks.... It was night time and there was very little they could see.... Yet I saw Major Hughes' tank gather up speed and charge straight into the unseen enemy positions with every tank doing likewise. The last I saw of them they were charging with all guns blazing.

This was in fact the last seen of most of the squadron. What exactly happened, as well as the location of the engagement, has been difficult to determine, but it is known from the German records that the squadron came up against *7 Troop of 25 AA Battalion*, manning two 88-millimetre and several 20-millimetre anti-tank guns. This troop had somehow been missed in the advance, though the Maoris had overrun all the 88-millimetre guns of its companion troop, No. 8. The diary of *135 AA Regiment* states:

7 and 8 Troops were involved in heavy fighting after enemy troops broke into our lines. During the action all the 88mm guns of 8 Troop were knocked out and their crews fell into enemy hands temporarily. 7 Troop came into action with all its guns and cleared the enemy off the battlefield before daybreak. At 0700 hours the enemy launched more infantry and tank attacks which were beaten off. Before 1000 hours eight enemy tanks were knocked out.... Casualties (nearly all in 7 and 8 Troops) 28 killed, 26 wounded, 11 missing.... <sup>1</sup>

Just before daybreak some of the Valentines were seen still in action down in the **Muhafid Depression**. Four of them finally limped back and these, together with two damaged early in the action and repaired, constituted 5 Brigade's armoured defence for the following day. Twenty-two men of the squadron were killed, wounded, or missing, Major Hughes himself being among those killed. The gallantry displayed by the men

handling these lightly armed Valentines—the two-pounders they carried were already considered obsolescent—and their willingness to ‘mix it’ with the enemy did much to restore the infantry's faith in the British armour. Their courage, however, should not obscure the fact that their action served little purpose tactically. It pointed the complete lack of co-operation between the armour and other arms and the futility of tank operations without infantry support, for the small pocket of enemy barring the route to 28 Battalion could almost certainly have been overcome by concerted action; Bennett could have quickly called up some infantry—the company of 22 Battalion was only a little way back in the column—and they, with the carriers and tanks working in co-operation, could have dealt with a much stronger defence. As it was, once the tank commanders closed their turrets, Bennett and Hayward could do little to assist.

While the carriers formed a screen, Bennett re-formed what he could find of the transport column and, on orders from Brigade Headquarters, withdrew the column about a mile and dispersed it. Meanwhile the sapper party and B Company of 22 Battalion had broken out of the column with the intention of moving west and

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<sup>1</sup> GMDS 79009/79002.

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then south to avoid the enemy pocket. However, on meeting some members of 28 Battalion who indicated that the battalion was isolated in Munassib, the infantry commander, Captain **MacDuff**,<sup>1</sup> managed to get a message passed on to Brigade Headquarters through his battalion wireless link, to be told to send the sappers back but to take his company forward to 21 Battalion's right flank and extend the line west from **Point 100**. As dawn was showing in the east, the company dug in beside Keiha's group where some of the support weapons from the transport column had been deployed, including four two-pounders of 28 Battalion's anti-tank platoon and three six-pounders of 32 Anti-Tank Battery. The Bren carriers extended the line to the west, one carrier

patrol reconnoitring far enough west to discover the position of **2 Buffs**.

At the same time as B Company was ordered forward, **Kippenberger** also sent 22 Battalion's composite company, C/D Company, which had been waiting by tactical headquarters, off to continue the line along the **Point 100** ridge.

*vi*

At the time the Maoris met the enemy line, the main force of 132 Brigade, having run the gauntlet of the fire round the minefield gaps, was advancing unopposed southwards over the open desert. Anticipating that the enemy would not be met in any strength, at least until they reached the northern edge of **Deir Alinda**, the two Royal West Kent battalions were moving in compact groups with company trucks carrying picks, shovels, mines, and other impedimenta, well up with the infantry. Close behind the two battalions came the brigade headquarters column of thirty to forty vehicles.

The Maoris' battle, some two or three miles off to the south-east, was hidden by the contours of the ground and its noise was overlaid by the Air Force bombing and enemy anti-aircraft fire along **Alinda** and **Munassib**. The going was good over a hard and stony patch of desert and, about half an hour after midnight, in a spirit of extreme confidence, the West Kents had just topped a slight crest and started down the slope beyond when heavy fire from all types of weapons crashed into their close-packed columns. Within moments several trucks were burning, one carrying ammunition or mines exploding in a brilliant blaze which lit up the lines of men and vehicles. Details of 132 Brigade's actions similar to those

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<sup>1</sup> **Col J. L. MacDuff**, MC, m.i.d.; born **Wellington**, 11 Dec 1905; barrister and solicitor; CO 27 (MG) Bn Sep 1943–Feb 1944; 25 Bn Mar–Jun 1944; Adv Base, **2 NZEF**, Jun–Jul 1944; Chief Justice, **Fiji**; died **Suva**, 11 Jul 1963.

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recorded of 28 Battalion are necessarily lacking, but there is evidence that some of the officers and NCOs attempted to rally the men around them to assault the enemy ahead. For many of the men, however, this was their first experience of battle at close quarters. On the bare, flat desert, brightly lit by the burning trucks, and without tools for digging in, they felt as exposed as in full daylight to the enemy gunners. Even those small groups held under some control began to disintegrate as drivers and infantrymen sought the protection of the darkness to the rear. Soon the brigade ceased to exist as a fighting force.

The headquarters column, brought to a sudden halt just behind the crest, found itself at first sheltered from the direct fire of machine-gun and anti-tank tracer. Possibly for the same reason, the brigade commander was not fully aware of what was happening over the crest for his first reports to **Divisional Headquarters** were couched in such terms as 'having a party', which did not indicate the seriousness of the situation. He soon found that, though the brigade wireless was undamaged, he could not raise either of the battalion headquarters on the air, and he accordingly set off in a Bren carrier to see the situation for himself. It is believed that he found the commander of **4 Royal West Kents** and told him to hold his position or withdraw at his own discretion. On his way across the front to look for **5 Royal West Kents** he was badly wounded and later evacuated.

A picture of the action emerges from an account given by Major **Bevan**<sup>1</sup> of 4 New Zealand Field Regiment, detailed to act as liaison officer between the brigade and the field artillery. He estimated that the infantry were only a 'few hundred yards' ahead of the brigade column with which he travelled when the enemy fire commenced.

We were under intense m.g. and s.a. fire and the tracer was coming through them and over our heads.... We stayed on the ridge all night being mortared and shelled all the time. Every time another truck went up in flames, we moved just far enough to get

out of the worst of the light. This was fairly frequently and there were not many trucks left by morning. The situation in front was very obscure. Brigade had no communication with any of its three battalions, no phone, no wireless, no runners, until after dawn. The Brigade wireless trucks were not hit and they must have been in touch with N.Z. Div. all the time. I was in touch with my battery and regiment throughout.

After the brigadier was wounded, the brigade major, believed to have been Major R. J. Murphy of the Buffs, took command, and of him Bevan wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Maj T. H. Bevan, DSO, m.i.d.; **Onehunga**; born **London**, 27 May 1909; builder; wounded 17 Dec 1942.

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It was bad luck for him that his first action should have been such a mess. He was willing to take any advice except that he would not move off that ridge. I wanted him to move back a few hundred yards on to the back slope where his vehicles—and mine—would be safer from observation and gun fire, but he would only say ‘I won't retreat’. A few infantry straggled back during the night with wild tales that the battalions were wiped out and it seemed pretty certain they were in a bad way, or at least pinned down in the open, and I suggested artillery concentrations on the enemy positions as marked on the map and actually fired at least two Div. concentrations. I hope they helped....

During the night parachute flares were dropped.... and we expected bombs but none came.... The flares showed us up to the enemy gunners however. About half an hour before first light I at last convinced the brigade major that unless he moved off the ridge he would lose all his vehicles at dawn and that he was useless without his wireless trucks. He agreed to move ... and asked me to lead.... I got them lined up and led them to a position about 400 yards from the minefield gap and dispersed as it got light. I had

wirelessly for ambulances and they were there to pick up our wounded.... There we were with a brigade headquarters and no brigade....

Part of the brigade major's reluctance to move his headquarters may have stemmed from a belief that some of his brigade, though out of touch, was still in action. The enemy's defensive fire abated considerably after the first outburst but never quite ceased for some hours, while at times some real or imagined alarm would set the whole Axis front to sudden outbursts of fixed-line machine-gun fire and mortaring. The enemy records do not indicate that the defences here were broken into or that casualties were suffered to any extent, but they claim 200 prisoners for this night, of whom about 150 must have been men of 132 Brigade. Such a number cannot be accounted for merely by stragglers who, inexperienced in desert movement at night, wandered into the enemy lines, and it seems probable therefore that more than one group of the brigade broke through the enemy outposts to be surrounded further back.

About 3.30 a.m. **Divisional Headquarters** received a message emanating from either Bevan or the brigade major with the news that **2 Buffs**, beyond the second minefield, were believed to be on their objective but that the other two battalions were disorganised, their positions confused and insecure. A quarter of an hour later, the brigade's intelligence officer, who had led the brigade's advance 'in a jeep with a red lamp fixed to a pole and shining backwards', <sup>1</sup> appeared at **26 Battalion's** headquarters and from there rang Division to give what he knew of the story, and to report that he had 100 to 150 men of **4 Royal West Kents** who had no ammunition, few weapons, no transport, and were in a bad way generally.

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<sup>1</sup> Chaplin, *The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment*.

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**General Freyberg** was obviously unwilling to accept at their face value the scanty reports he received of 132 Brigade's disintegration. At



4.15 a.m. he issued an order for the brigade to reorganise on the line he understood it to be holding, the line in fact that it had reached when it came under fire, and for 26 Battalion to extend its southern flank to meet the brigade's right. It is certain that this message did not reach the brigade headquarters before it was taken back near the minefield gap, and by that time the general situation was less obscure so that a more realistic defence line could be planned.

The column of 2 Buffs, less its B Company, had conformed to the start of the rest of the brigade but, isolated by the second minefield and with only erratic wireless communication, knew little of events on other fronts. When the heavy enemy fire broke out on the main front, the battalion commander halted his men while he tried unsuccessfully to find what was happening on his flanks. On resuming the advance, the column came under some fixed-line defensive fire from the right flank and, when still about 1000 yards short of the objective, some scattered fire from ahead. With a battle apparently raging to his right rear, the commander called another halt. Patrols into the minefield on the right met only enemy fire, while a carrier patrol into the open desert on the left helped a group of wounded Maoris to the rear but returned with little useful information. Increasing light disclosed the leading troops on a forward slope from which, coming under enemy fire, they withdrew on to the main body of the battalion. Just after dawn, Captain **McPhail**,<sup>1</sup> the intelligence officer of 5 Brigade, arrived with an order that the battalion should come under **Kippenberger's** command.

The subsidiary operation by 26 Battalion to protect 132 Brigade's western flank went off smoothly at first. Two of the companies, A and B Companies detailed to establish the northern and central sectors of the battalion front along the first minefield, reached their positions without meeting opposition and quickly started to prepare defences. Enemy posts to the west, where 18 and 25 Battalions' raids had just finished, were jittery and sweeping the

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-Col E. A. McPhail, DSO, MC and bar, m.i.d.; **Wyndham**;



born **Wanganui**, 31 Dec 1906; bank official; CO 23 Bn May–Jun 1944, Aug–Oct 1944; 21 Bn Oct 1944–May 1945; wounded 9 Apr 1943.

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ground with bursts of fire, but this did not greatly interfere with the two 26 Battalion companies. Contact was soon established with the headquarters that Lieutenant Barnett was setting up a short way to the east of the junction of the two sectors. However, contact with the third company, C Company, which was to hold the southern sector and provide a link with 132 Brigade's front, could not be made.

As 26 Battalion was settling in, stragglers from 132 Brigade commenced to drift into the area in ever increasing numbers, causing considerable concern to the depleted staff at battalion headquarters, who had already spent much time earlier helping to sort out the brigade's transport confusion. Patrols scouting to the south, both to find C Company and obtain first-hand information of 132 Brigade, returned to say that no organised bodies of men could be found between the battalion and enemy defences to the south, though the commander of **4 Royal West Kents** was met by one patrol as he was trying to round up some of his battalion. After the brigade's intelligence officer arrived at 26 Battalion's headquarters and had given his story to **Divisional Headquarters**, a message came from **General Freyberg** to tell 26 Battalion to take command of any 132 Brigade stragglers in the battalion sector. With the arrival of Major **Walden**<sup>1</sup> of B Company, who left his company under his second-in-command, to assume command of the battalion, Lieutenant Barnett found time to help some of the English officers and NCOs gather together a party of about fifty men who had retained their equipment and whose morale still seemed sound. This group was sent off to the south to link up with C Company but apparently ran into enemy positions and scattered.

News had come in that the supporting weapons, including some New Zealand anti-tank guns, which were to follow 132 Brigade's column, had run into mines or been otherwise delayed. Major Walden then decided

that he would have to provide the protection for his own southern front, so called up all the anti-tank guns, 3-inch mortars and Bren carriers that could be spared, to form a screen across the south of A Company's sector as far as possible towards the second minefield. The carriers, patrolling to the east, found the headquarters of 132 Brigade, so that direct contact was at last established between the brigade and 26 Battalion. Some of the Valentines of A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, were also found, as well as other parties of troops of various arms, all of whom were brought into the defensive screen.

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj E. F. Walden**, ED; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 16 Feb 1911; brewer; p.w. 4 Sep 1942.

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The ground over which 132 Brigade had advanced remained under shell, mortar, and machine-gun fire of varying intensity, with aircraft circling overhead to drop flares and a few bombs, until about 4 a.m., when the enemy's activity began to die down. By dawn of 4 September the whole front was relatively quiet.

Just prior to dawn, Brigadier Clifton set off from the box to visit 26 Battalion and from there was directed on to 132 Brigade headquarters. Returning to give 26 Battalion instructions for providing extra cover for the southern front, he took Major Walden in his jeep to reconnoitre the front, and particularly to find C Company. Seeing some khaki-clad troops above ground off to the south, Clifton told his driver to make for them, only to discover the troops were Italian parachutists of *Folgore Division*. The two officers, the driver, and the wireless operator were all taken prisoner and with them the enemy collected a number of documents and marked maps. The latter's value was lessened by the action of the driver who, when he realised capture was imminent, did his best to obliterate the chinagraph markings on the talc overlay of the brigadier's situation map. The operator, attempting a last-minute call, had his set smashed by a rifle butt. The only witness to this capture on the New Zealand side was an artillery observation officer, who saw the

jeep surrounded by troops but did not realise who the occupants were. Clifton was renowned for his mobility so that it was some time before the staff at 6 Brigade Headquarters became concerned over his absence.

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Apart from the story of C Company, 26 Battalion, to be told later, the actions during the hours of darkness of all the main parts of Operation

BERESFORD

have now been described. At dawn, most of the stragglers of the 18 and 25 Battalions' raiding parties who had not been taken prisoner were back, the wounded seen to, prisoners sent back to **Divisional Headquarters**, and the two battalions were firmly settled in their box defences. B Company of 26 Battalion carried the new defence line south from **Alam Nayil** along the eastern edge of the first minefield, with A Company stretching further south, each company holding a front of some one thousand yards. The men were dug in, with anti-tank guns and mortars in support and observation officers from both field and medium artillery in good vantage points. From the rear of A Company's sector eastwards to the second minefield, a thin screen of carriers kept observation over the front while, behind them, a

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<sup>1</sup> See also Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 281, and Clifton, *The Happy Hunted*.

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few anti-tank guns and mortars were being dug in and efforts made to get tools, weapons, and ammunition to hastily reorganised groups of 132 Brigade's men who were being disposed to protect the support weapons. Of the three troops of Valentines of A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, more than half had fallen victim during the night to mines, enemy fire, or other causes. The survivors took up positions behind the carrier screen.

Some way further south and immediately east of the second minefield, with two of their attached Valentines in running order and

with few casualties to either men or vehicles, **2 Buffs** were halted, under some enemy fire, in what might be called attenuated march order. Uncertain whether he would be expected to stay or withdraw, the commander had not yet set his men to dig in. Captain McPhail, arriving just as dawn was breaking with orders for the battalion to come under 5 Brigade's command, advised the commander to pull his leading troops back from the forward slope where they were under direct enemy observation and fire, to lay out defences on and behind the crest of the ridge, and to disperse his transport further back. McPhail recorded his impression that the battalion appeared to be 'very green', its inexperience not helped by lack of communication, and consequently instructions, from its brigade headquarters.

Shortly after McPhail joined **2 Buffs**, a patrol of 22 Battalion's carriers appeared and these, together with carriers from both 23 and 28 Battalions, began to patrol the gap more than a thousand yards wide along the ridge to the point where B Company of 22 Battalion was taking up a defensive line. As earlier recorded, this gap was narrowed when C/D Company of the battalion moved on to the right flank of B Company shortly after daylight.

From B Company's positions, a fairly solid and well-supported front ran through **Point 100**, where Keiha's collection of C Company, 28 Battalion, had dug in, northwards along the fourth minefield back to the box. This eastern front was held by D Company, 21 Battalion, on the right, C Company in the centre and B Company on the north.

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 10 – ENEMY COUNTER-ATTACKS

## CHAPTER 10

### Enemy Counter-Attacks

i

**NEARLY** two miles to the south of 22 Battalion's line on the **Point 100** ridge, the Maoris of D and A Companies watched the shadows lightening in the **Munassib Depression**, still in good heart from the undoubted success of their night attack, but slightly apprehensive of what daylight might bring. They had dug themselves weapon pits on a forward slope in soft sand, pits which could not be dug deeply as the sand easily caved in. The two company commanders, Awatere and Porter, were concerned over the failure of either the tanks, carriers, or other support to join them for their only weapons were rifles, Brens, tommy guns, and 2-inch mortars. Sergeant Davis had managed to re-site the 88-millimetre gun he had captured in the night and was prepared to operate it against enemy tanks. Numerous vehicles could be seen on the floor of the depression as the light increased, but it was difficult to sort out those which were 'runners' in enemy hands from those derelict or immobilised by the Maoris' night activities or by Air Force bombing.

After he had fired the flares to direct the tanks, Lieutenant-Colonel Baker sent off a patrol to meet them and then returned to the battalion defences. Soon, however, he realised that dawn was not far off and the tanks had not yet put in an appearance, so decided to search for them himself. In his jeep he set off in a northerly direction and, in the fast increasing light, caught sight of two Valentines off to his right. As he turned towards them, the jeep ran over a mine, fortunately without injuring either himself or his driver. Continuing on foot, he found that the tanks had also been immobilised by mines, in the third, or so-called 'dummy', field, and from the crews he learnt something of the tanks' action in the night. Baker next met Keiha, from whom he borrowed transport to take him back to Brigade Headquarters. Here he found that **Kippenberger** had already decided, consequent on 132 Brigade's failure to gain its planned objective, that the farthest forward he could hope to

hold was along the low ridge running from **Point 100** to the Buffs' positions. Directing his brigade major, **Major Fairbrother**,<sup>1</sup> to give the artillery the position of 28 Battalion as indicated by Baker on the map and arrange for a smoke screen to be laid in front of it, **Kippenberger** sent Baker off immediately to pull his two companies back under cover of the smoke through 22 Battalion's line and re-form them in the rear.

Meanwhile the two Maori companies had been far from inactive. A small patrol sent to find 132 Brigade returned to report that contact had been made with **2 Buffs**, who however were too far off for any effective liaison to be established. The riflemen had opened fire on any movement within range among the trucks in the depression, while Sergeant Davis got in some practice with his captured gun. The men at first were keen to make a sortie down into the depression, ostensibly to deal with numbers of enemy who were hiding among the vehicles, but as the light improved enemy fire soon kept them close to their shallow and insecure pits. A sudden break in the fire heralded the approach of a solitary soldier, laboriously making his way over the sand of the depression and waving a piece of white cloth. Earlier, during the night's fighting, one party of the Maoris had been approached by a German officer who had arrogantly demanded surrender: a flare from a Very pistol had hurried him back to his own lines with his clothing singed. This time, the *parlementaire* with the white flag turned out to be a very weary private of the Buffs. He showed no inclination to return to captivity with any of the suggested answers to the demand he brought for capitulation.

After this incident, enemy fire increased and then a flight of **Desert Air Force** bombers scattered their load across the Maoris' positions, fortunately without causing any severe casualties. After the dust of the bombing settled, the men could see light tanks or armoured cars forming up on the far side of the depression, with one of their number probing forward as if to reconnoitre the going. Captain Porter, sure that the customary German counter-attack was imminent, sent a runner to battalion headquarters asking if a smoke screen could be arranged under which the infantry might withdraw when the tanks approached. Before



the runner returned, smoke

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig M. C. Fairbrother**, CBE, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Carterton, 21 Sep 1907; accountant; BM 5 Bde Jun 1942–Apr 1943; comd in turn 21, 23, and 28 (Maori) Bns, Apr–Dec 1943; CO 26 Bn Oct 1944–Sep 1945; comd Adv Base, **2 NZEF**, Sep 1945–Feb 1946; Editor-in-Chief, NZ War Histories, 1957–.

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shells commenced to fall in and ahead of the two companies' defences. The artillery had in fact laid on the screen so quickly that the shells were whistling overhead as Baker regained his headquarters. He got a message through to D Company, who began to withdraw at once, but the runner to A Company was unable to find Porter in the smoke. However, as the shelling coincided so exactly with his own request, Porter did not stop to worry how the smoke arrived so quickly but immediately started to gather up his men and lead them back. Passing through the line being formed by 22 Battalion, and picking up Keiha and his men, the battalion took up reserve positions in the box for the rest of the day.

The battalion's casualties for this action were listed as 5 killed, 18 missing, and 54 wounded and safe. Of those missing, a few later reappeared but about half the number were made prisoner. Against this total of 77, the battalion claimed that it sent back over 100 prisoners and left 500 killed or severely wounded enemy on the field. The claim for prisoners was soundly based, for of the 108 that passed through Brigade Headquarters, all were sent in by 28 Battalion except for a few passed back by 21 Battalion, and in the capture of some of those Keiha's men had a share. The second claim was accepted at the time as a reasonable estimate. It was possibly too high, but the enemy records offer insufficient detail to dispute it. Of the German troops involved, only 25 *AA Battalion's* casualties have been found, a total of 70 for the two troops in action against the Maoris and the tanks. Other German prisoners were all from *90 Light Division* and represented infantry, artillery, engineers and signals. *Trieste Division*, the biggest sufferer,

reported to *Africa Corps* a list of 8 killed, 55 wounded and 40 missing, an absurd set of figures, for 89 prisoners from the division were checked through the headquarters of the New Zealand Division. It is certain that the Maoris overran many machine guns and other light weapons, either destroying them or bringing them back as booty, as well as capturing four 88-millimetre anti-tank/anti-aircraft dual purpose guns, of which two were recovered by the Germans. Estimates of the number of vehicles shot up ran between thirty and forty.

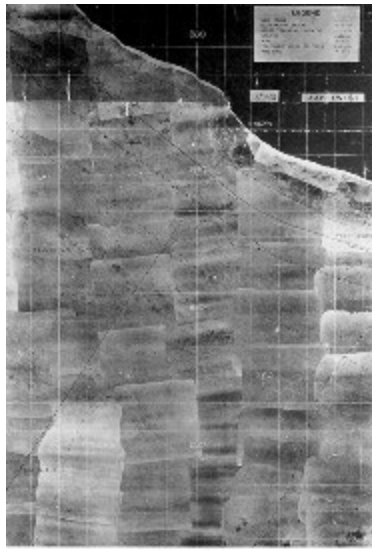
As the Maoris fell back, C/D Company of 22 Battalion was already digging in beside B Company, while A Company and battalion headquarters were on their way through the minefield gap to a reserve position behind the other two companies. *Kippenberger*, with *Freyberg's* agreement, was going ahead with his plan to hold 21 Battalion's positions and the ridge through *Point 100*, with 23 Battalion to cover the gap between 22 Battalion and the Buffs. The ridge itself, in reality no more than a break in levels where the flat ground south of the box tilted slightly down towards the depressions, was very exposed to enemy fire and, except for a small area around *Point 100*, did not give the desired observation over the depressions which the operation had been intended to secure. However, it gave the enemy a wide, bare slope with little natural cover over which to mount an attack and *Kippenberger* felt that, with about twenty two-pounder and six-pounder anti-tank guns already fully or partially dug in, the fire from the six surviving tanks, as well as a large volume of artillery fire on call, the position could be held against the expected counter-attack.

The day of 4 September began with a series of Stuka raids in which the engineers' and anti-tank gunners' lines in 5 Brigade's sector were the main target. One raid arrived just as the cooks were serving breakfast, delaying the meal but causing little damage. Then a strong flight of Stukas dive-bombed the trenches vacated by 28 Battalion on the northern slope of Munassib. This was taken as the prelude to ground attack, and *Kippenberger* directed the leading troops of 23 Battalion to dig in quickly in the area they had reached, between 22 Battalion and

**the Buffs but slightly to the rear.**

**As the morning wore on, intercepted messages between enemy units as well as observers' reports of tanks forming up in Munassib kept the southern front alert. Another flight of Stukas screamed over 23 Battalion, scattering bombs among the men digging in. All movement in the foremost positions, especially around **Point 100**, came under bursts of fire from guns and mortars. The counterattack, however, was slow in arriving, though intercepted enemy messages urging the local commanders to 'counter-attack without fail' made its eventual arrival certain. Every minute allowed the men of 22 and 23 Battalions to improve their defences and get more support weapons dug in. All signs, including observation of enemy preparations and intercepted messages, pointed to an attack on the sector held by 22 Battalion.**

**Further west, **2 Buffs'** area was under fire but the enemy to the south showed little signs of movement. Similarly, to the west of the second minefield, where strenuous efforts were being made to get the survivors of 132 Brigade organised into a continuous defensive line, there was nothing to indicate an imminent attack. Enemy fire here was occasionally heavy though much of it fell on the burnt-out trucks left behind by 132 Brigade, south of the new line. Sappers of 209 Field Company of the **Royal Engineers**, laying a minefield to cover the new positions, suffered heavily under fire from 88-millimetre guns using 'bounce' fuses and Major Bevan tried, unsuccessfully, to locate the guns responsible.**



Aerial mosaic, Alamein

**Aerial mosaic, Alamein**



Wheel tracks, Alamein

**Wheel tracks, Alamein**

Approaching dust-storm



**Approaching dust-storm**



Washday

**Washday**

Fly-proofed



**Fly-proofed**



Bofors gun and crew

**Bofors gun and crew**

## ***On the Defensive***

Digging a trench



**Digging a trench**



Sandbagged headquarters dugout

**Sandbagged headquarters dugout**



**A disabled enemy tank serves as an OP**



A 5 Field Regiment gun crew

**A 5 Field Regiment gun crew**

The gunners go underground during a Stuka raid



**The gunners go underground during a Stuka raid**





Stuka pilot shot down at Alamein

### Stuka pilot shot down at Alamein

Camouflaged gunpit



Camouflaged gunpit

To Officers and Men of Eighth Army

**SPECIAL MESSAGE**

1. The enemy is now attempting to break through our positions in order to reach CAIRO, SUEZ, and ALEXANDRIA, and to drive us from EGYPT.

2. The Eighth Army bars the way. It carries a great responsibility, and the whole future of the war will depend on how we carry out our task.

3. We will fight the enemy where we now stand; there will be NO WITHDRAWAL and NO SURRENDER.

Every officer and man must continue to do his duty as long as he has breath in his body.

If each one of us does his duty, we cannot fail; the opportunity will then occur to take the offensive ourselves and to destroy once and for all the enemy forces now in EGYPT.

4. Into battle then, with stout hearts and with the determination to do our duty.

And may God give us the victory.

*Was Wiley*  
**B. L. Montgomery,**  
Lieutenant-General.

Special message by  
General Montgomery,  
20 August 1942

### Special message by General Montgomery, 20 August 1942



General Alexander, Mr Churchill and General Montgomery



**General Alexander, Mr Churchill and General Montgomery**



Mr Churchill and General Freyberg

**Mr Churchill and General Freyberg**

German prisoners captured by the Maori Battalion  
in the Munassib Depression, 4 September 1942

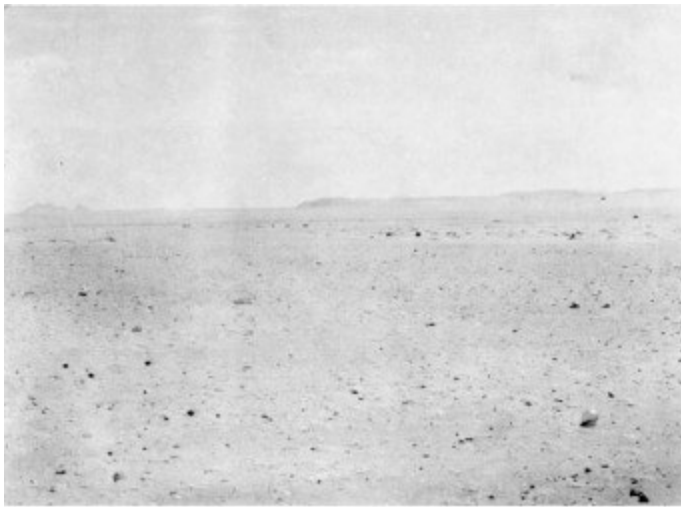


**German prisoners captured by the Maori Battalion in the Munassib Depression, 4 September 1942**



*Aerial mosaic showing the depressions south of Bab el Qattara*

**Aerial mosaic showing the depressions south of Bab el Qattara**



Munassib Depression. Qaret el Himeimat is the raised feature on the far left

**Munassib Depression. Qaret el Himeimat is the raised feature on the far left**

Wounded awaiting treatment in 6 ADS, near Alam Halfa



**Wounded awaiting treatment in 6 ADS, near Alam Halfa**



General Freyberg and Brigadier Kippenberger, August 1942

**General Freyberg and Brigadier Kippenberger, August 1942**

**Men of New Zealand!**

Have you ever asked yourselves who you are at heart?  
 For when attack and for what nation have you left your native  
 country to come and fight in the Great War?

Have you ever asked yourselves how brave English people have  
 been in New Zealand ready to sacrifice themselves in the Great War  
 have you known and your people?

The English in New Zealand have one sole object, to take advantage  
 of the moral wealth of your country and to make themselves rich at  
 your expense.

British propaganda is a great master in making wonderful news  
 which makes a fine impression on the people who do not know the truth.  
 If you know the truth, you would rather be left by those who do not  
 care you and desire you and make profit out of you.

Just now we have a final attack for the British.

In the Mediterranean, the Italian Fleet, together with the combined  
 Italian and German Air Force, were doing a crushing attack on the  
 British Navy.

In Africa, the British Army, with its accessories has lost the biggest  
 battle of this war. More than 40,000 prisoners, 1,200 aircraft and 100  
 German tanks, approximately 700 airplanes, a large quantity of war  
 material, money, transport and food stuffs is that is the heavy expense by  
 the Italian and German troops, troops which have broken down every  
 resistance in Romania and which are advancing victoriously in Egypt.

On the Russian Front, the D-Block troops have been defeated  
 everywhere.

Nevertheless, the general bankers in the world, has been helped and  
 strengthened.

The highways to South Africa and Australia are closed.  
 In Asia, England has definitely lost all power and all prestige.

**Men of New Zealand!**

This is the truth which has been so shamefully hidden from you.  
 We are telling you in your own interests. There is no feeling of  
 hatred or enmity in what we say.

Perhaps it is your advertisement agent which urges you to join with  
 the British - but remember you are fighting in no sacred cause - aiding  
 and abetting English greed which enjoys profiting and dominating  
 over other peoples' territory.

Stop and think!

Look upon the truth!

Then you will understand how futile it is and how much to your  
 own disadvantage to provide in sacrificing yourselves for England.



German propaganda leaflet and some of its New Zealand readers



German propaganda leaflet and some of its New Zealand readers



A New Zealand navigator in the Long Range Desert Group

A New Zealand navigator in the Long Range Desert Group

An LRDG patrol



**An LRDG patrol**



Kiwi Concert Party  
audience in the rest area  
near Burg el Arab

**Kiwi Concert Party audience in the rest area near Burg el Arab**

'Swordfish' Area



**'Swordfish' Area**





A Sherman tank of 9 Armoured Brigade, under New Zealand command

**A Sherman tank of 9 Armoured Brigade, under New Zealand command**

A Grant tank on manoeuvres



**A Grant tank on manoeuvres**

**The enemy facing 26 Battalion on the west remained fairly quiet, at least for the first part of the morning. Several patrols from the battalion set off to locate C Company, but all met determined fire from posts across the south of A Company's sector and were forced to return. The presence of these enemy posts, combined with the fact that no messages or runners came from C Company, made it appear probable that the company had been surrounded and captured. This assumption was strengthened when Clifton and Walden failed to return. When **General Freyberg** visited the sector and the brigadier had still not returned, the General called in Lieutenant-Colonel C. L. **Pleasants**,<sup>1</sup> of 18 Battalion, to take command of 6 Brigade and arranged for the senior battalion**

commander to take over 132 Brigade. Lieutenant Barnett resumed responsibility at Headquarters 26 Battalion until relieved by Major **Richards**<sup>2</sup> of A Company later in the day.

About 10 a.m. enemy fire on all the fronts increased in severity. Observers reported considerable infantry movement to the west of 26 Battalion and activity by both tanks and infantry in Munassib. The front-line infantry of 26 Battalion called for a sortie by tanks to shoot up the infantry, but as the Valentines of A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, provided the key defence for 132 Brigade, this request was refused and the battalion had to be content with concentrations from 5 Field Regiment. Under this artillery fire the enemy infantry dispersed and went to ground. It seems possible that no attack was intended at this time, but that the enemy was merely reorganising the positions attacked during the night by 18 and 25 Battalions.

On 5 Brigade's front, however, enemy activity continued to increase. Several tanks could be seen creeping out of Munassib from one hull-down position to another, with infantry dispersed around them. The line of advance led towards C/D Company's positions on 22 Battalion's right flank. Stukas appeared overhead but, except for some scattered bombs, left the front line unharmed when their attention was caught by the stream of vehicles using the minefield gap by Brigade Headquarters. Just before this

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<sup>1</sup> **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; Commander, Northern Military District, 1953–57; Central District, 1957–60; Senior NZ Army Liaison Officer, **London**, 1964–66.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col E. E. Richards**. DSO, OBE, ED, m.i.d.; born Kumara, 6 Dec 1915; civil servant; CO 26 Bn Dec 1943–Apr 1944; died **Christchurch**, 21 Mar 1962.

bombing, in which several vehicles were damaged and two men wounded, **Kippenberger** had driven through the gap to join 22 Battalion's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel J. T. Russell.

From a vantage point, the two officers watched the tanks advance to within 3000 yards of the defences. **Kippenberger** then returned to his headquarters, but no sooner had he arrived than Russell rang through, at 11.45 a.m., to say that the leading enemy infantry had advanced rapidly to within 500 yards of C/D Company's foremost posts, with the tanks not far behind. The whole of the southern front was now under heavy shell, mortar, and machine-gun fire.

As the enemy attack drew closer, 22 Battalion's 3-inch mortar detachment began to search the folds in the ground where the enemy infantry sheltered. Vickers gunners of 10 MG Platoon, which had earlier taken up a position near **Point 100** with good observation of the ground to the south, came into action to thicken up the fire of 22 Battalion's Brens and rifles, and some sections of D Company, 21 Battalion, with a view over the south, also joined in. Observation officers sent back targets for 6 Field Regiment, but the enemy was well dispersed and the artillery fire did not at first seem very effective.

When the turret of a tank appeared over a low ridge ahead, men of 22 Battalion holding a post slightly ahead of the main line began to leave their shallow trenches and run back, but prompt action by the battalion commander quickly had the men back in position.

By midday the whole of 5 Brigade's southern front was alive with bursting shells and mortar bombs. The rising dust was pierced with a pattern of tracer from anti-tank and machine guns and only a strong breeze from the north saved the defence from being completely blinded at times in the haze of smoke and dust. The fire of the defenders held the enemy infantry off, but glimpses could be had of several tanks working close enough to charge and overrun the outlying posts.



Russell then called on Brigade Headquarters for more artillery support. **Kippenberger**, on his return from the battalion, had already asked the CRA to lay defensive fire across the path of the advance. He now repeated the request, with Russell's plea for urgency. The CRA's headquarters had nearly completed the necessary computations and orders, and replied that the desired support was 'coming up'. At 12.45 p.m. it arrived. The CRA had chosen a strip of ground just west of **Muhafid** over which the main body of the counter-attack force appeared to be passing. On this area, given the code-name of ARTHUR, he let loose a five-minute concentration from the forty-eight guns of two field regiments and several medium guns.

The full effect of this fire was not felt immediately. The spearhead of the attack had already closed with 15 Platoon of C/D Company on the left flank, where there was a slight gap between the two companies' defences. The enemy troops, however, were unable to break in against the small-arms fire and, whenever they went to ground, the 3-inch mortar crews searched them out, working under the direction of Corporal **McClurg**<sup>1</sup> who, from an exposed rise, continued to direct the fire until the mortar ammunition ran out. By this time the six surviving Valentines of B Squadron, **50 Royal Tanks**, had moved close in behind B Company to add their two-pounders and machine guns to the volume of defensive fire.

As the infantry assault faltered, a number of tanks came forward. The six-pounders manned by 32 Anti-Tank Battery opened on them at long range, forcing most of them to take cover, but four, later identified as Italian M13s, kept going until almost into the defences. Here they came into view of 28 Battalion's anti-tank platoon commanded by Captain **Logan**.<sup>2</sup> Within minutes, the two-pounders had stopped all four tanks at ranges between 150 and 250 yards, forcing the crews to bale out. Subsequent shots set three of the tanks on fire.

The summary disposal of these tanks, and a repetition of the shoot ARTHUR to which 6 Field Regiment added its guns, appeared to break the

back of the enemy's attack. Shortly after 1 p.m. both tanks and infantry could be seen in withdrawal and the volume of enemy fire died away. Fire was maintained by the defenders for some time but targets were difficult to observe as the wind had risen to drive clouds of dust across the battlefield, so that visibility distance at times was less than a hundred yards. When the wind fell temporarily about half an hour later, observers reported much activity down by Munassib, possibly as the counter-attacking troops were being reorganised and wounded evacuated. After a shoot by 6 Field Regiment, all movement in the enemy lines ceased for some time.

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt L. T. McClurg**, DCM; born Chatham Is., 19 Mar 1918; labourer; wounded 4 Sep 1942.

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

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About the time that the attack on 22 Battalion was at its peak, shell and mortar fire on 26 Battalion's sector increased. Signal cables were continually being cut and, with wireless working only erratically, communications were badly disrupted until Corporal **Gordon**,<sup>1</sup> of the Divisional Signals, who had already spent much of the night laying and repairing cables through the minefield gap under fire, then took over the task of keeping open the telephone lines to 26 Battalion's headquarters.

Enemy infantry again appeared in numbers to the west of A and B Companies' lines, small parties of them, as if reconnoitring the way for an assault, approaching close enough to be fired on by the infantry. After some rounds had been fired on them by 5 Field Regiment and the Vickers guns, the enemy troops went to ground and, in the early afternoon heat when the rising wind began to lift clouds of dust, the western front quietened down to spasmodic exchanges of fire.

Several attempts had been made by individuals and small patrols during the morning to scout for signs of C Company and Clifton's jeep,

but the enemy seemed to have complete coverage of the desert round the south-west of A Company's sector. Hope had practically been given up when, shortly after noon, Lieutenant A. J. Fraser, one of C Company's platoon commanders, arrived with one of his men to give the news that the company was surrounded but still holding out some way to the south-west. Three of the Bren carriers that could be spared from 132 Brigade's front were then sent out with Fraser as guide to bring the company in under a smoke screen to be fired by 5 Field Regiment. By this time the dust-storm was so thick that navigation was almost impossible, so the carriers waited until the dust subsided, about 2 p.m., before starting off. Twenty minutes later the field guns, as well as the mediums of 64 Medium Regiment, RA, laid smoke and HE across the west of the area in which Fraser had indicated the company lay. Well short of the smoke, however, the carriers ran into fire, one being disabled. On the return of the other two carriers to the battalion area, a patrol on foot set off to find a way round the enemy positions but met fire at every turn.

As the dust-storm died down and the carriers set off, the western front had begun to come to life again. Both A and B Companies were in action against small parties of enemy infantry which were working their way forward, while behind them a large force of men was assembling. A divisional artillery shoot had been prepared earlier, but not fired, when the enemy assembled in the same area

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<sup>1</sup> **Sgt N. Gordon, MM; Gisborne; born Canada, 16 Aug 1905; electrical lineman; wounded May 1941.**

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in the morning. This was now fired by the three New Zealand field regiments, 58 and 4 Field Regiments, RA, and 64 Medium Regiment, RA, a total of well over 100 guns laying several shells each on a strip some 2000 yards wide by 1000 yards deep. When the dust raised by this concentration dispersed, the enemy had clearly had enough. The western front settled down for the remainder of the day to occasional

exchanges of small-arms and shell fire.

At the same time as the counter-attack appeared to be starting opposite 26 Battalion, the enemy in Munassib showed increasing movement. Again the 13 Corps intercept service reported having overheard several orders for an attack and, just as the big artillery concentration was being fired for 26 Battalion, observers in 5 Brigade's lines reported that up to twenty-four tanks were advancing in the strip between Munassib and **Muhafid**. Waiting until the enemy had completed his assembly and the advance was on its way, **Kippenberger** asked the CRA to repeat the task ARTHUR. At 3.25 p.m. the target was pounded by more than 100 guns for five minutes. As the smoke and dust cleared, enemy vehicles could be seen retreating into the cover of the depressions, leaving behind several vehicles blazing, on which 6 Field Regiment continued to fire to discourage salvage and rescue.

Meanwhile, well dispersed infantry, followed by some unidentified vehicles which were to the north of the target area, continued to advance until they were within range of 22 Battalion's weapons. Under fire from the infantry, the Vickers and the Valentines, these troops turned to the east but, coming under more fire from 21 Battalion's right-flank defences, retreated over the escarpment into the **Muhafid Depression**. By 4.30 p.m. the men of 22 Battalion could get out of their trenches, stretch their cramped limbs and compare notes on the fighting, for the desert to the south, except for the few trucks still burning, was bare of the enemy and all firing had practically ceased. This calm continued until dusk was falling, when the enemy came to life with a burst of shell and mortar fire on 5 Brigade's front.

A few surviving records of ammunition expenditure offer some idea of the volume of fire that the enemy had to endure this day. The two batteries of 64 Medium Regiment, RA, in the box together fired over 2000 rounds and the three New Zealand field regiments used well over 1000 rounds each. The two other regiments under the CRA's control must have used about the same. Much of this total of 7000 rounds fell in limited time on the confined areas of the enemy's assembly opposite 22

**and 26 Battalions.**

**In the defence of 22 Battalion, the Vickers gunners of 10 MG Platoon on *Point 100* fired 8000 rounds, mostly at rapid rate. There were about twenty-five Bren guns in action manned by 22 Battalion and the right-flank troops of 21 Battalion, and their expenditure, added to that of the riflemen and the machine guns of the Valentines, must have equalled, if not surpassed, the total fired by the Vickers gunners.**

**There are no Axis records which give even a hint of the casualties sustained in these counter-attacks. Only the advanced troops, probing for a weak spot, reached the defences and came under the small-arms fire. The main body of the counter-attack force, preparing to follow and exploit any weakness disclosed, was caught by the shellfire as it formed up but, though it was obviously too disorganised to continue with its task, it may not have suffered a great number of casualties.**

**Losses in 5 Brigade, almost completely confined to the two companies of 22 Battalion and the various small groups supporting them, amounted to four men killed or died of wounds and about twenty wounded.**

**It may seem strange that the Axis forces attempted to attack only on the two narrow fronts and did not disturb 21 Battalion or, particularly, the long and poorly organised front held by the remnants of 132 Brigade. The reason for this, however, was that the Axis operations were nothing more than local counter-attacks to regain supposedly lost ground. Rommel had learnt from both German and Italian sources that parts of the defences had been overrun. In conformity with standard German tactical doctrine he issued orders that the defence line must be restored. But most of the defences on the northern flank had been taken up hurriedly and to some extent temporarily, so that no one except the local commander on the ground knew exactly where the line ran. In Munassib, where troops of *Trieste* had only just taken over from 90 *Light Division* in darkness under shellfire and bombing and had then been thrown into confusion by 28 Battalion's attack, the Italian officers**

could have had little idea where their front was supposed to be. Reports of the extent of the British penetration sent to *Panzer Army* and *Africa Corps* were vague and contradictory, so that when Rommel's order percolated down, the officer on the spot responsible for mounting the counter-attack had a problem in deciding how far the advance should go. There was a story, repeated by *Freyberg* in one report but never verified by men in the front line, that some of the leading Axis infantry approached 22 Battalion with their hands up, only to be fired on by their own tanks. It seems possible therefore that the Italians, who constituted the bulk of the attacking force, decided they had done their job when they reached their old front line, but were driven further by Germans who were under the impression that British troops had to be met and driven back for the line to be restored.

A similar confusion seems to have existed on 26 Battalion's front. Here the Axis front had in fact been penetrated at one point and news of this, added to reports of defences overrun and prisoners lost by 18 and 25 Battalions' raids, also triggered off high-level demands for a counter-attack to restore the position. The practical Italians, having found they could regain their deserted posts in *Deir el Angar* without fighting, were deterred from unnecessarily pressing their advance by the heavy fire of the New Zealand artillery.

*ii*

Once the Maoris had withdrawn from Munassib, all the Axis counter-attacks to 'restore the situation' were in fact unnecessary, except at the one small point where C Company of 26 Battalion was sitting some way inside the line.

The enemy posts which prevented patrols from reaching the company were a continuation of the line against which 132 Brigade had broken. The men of the company, marching down behind, and to the west of, that brigade, had seen the burning trucks and the firing on their left before they themselves met the enemy. Coming under fire, the company charged, to overrun the flank of a position held by *Folgore*

parachutists and break through into clear ground beyond. The commander, Captain **Hall**,<sup>1</sup> had been given what he later described as 'vague' instructions, the gist of which was that his company had to reach a position from which he could dominate a gap in the first minefield at the western end of **Deir Alinda**. His task was then to control the gap, either to let an exploiting force of the Divisional Cavalry through or prevent the enemy using it. The map showed that the company would have to march some 4500 yards to its selected position.

The brush with the *Folgore* defence upset the calculation of distance, done simply by counting paces, but Hall continued to lead his men on until he reasoned he was on his objective. The exact position taken up is difficult to determine but appears to have been further than planned, though it complied with the orders in

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt H. J. Hall; Christchurch; born Timaru, 8 Sep 1912; architect; wounded and p.w. 4 Sep 1942.**

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that it overlooked the minefield gap. Hall confidently expected to find A Company moving in on his northern flank and was not at first unduly worried over its absence.

After the confusion and delay in reaching the start line, Hall was told not to wait for the rest of the battalion but to push ahead. In doing so his company had been caught in the confusion of 132 Brigade's tail and had somehow lost its medical orderlies and signallers. The company arrived on the objective about sixty strong but with no means of communication other than by runners. The commander laid out defences and the men dug in before dawn broke. Daylight brought scattered small-arms fire, mainly from the west, but not enough to hinder patrols being sent out to find 132 Brigade and A Company. None of the patrols got very far, however, before meeting much heavier fire. It was soon clear that the position was nearly surrounded, with Italian posts on the northeast and east, more Italians to the south, and Germans on the west. As the morning wore on and details of the enemy



positions could be observed, several men tried to find routes between the posts, but only Lieutenant A. J. Fraser and one man were successful in breaking through the ring.

Captain Hall had been given to understand that he was to hold his objective for twenty-four hours, by the end of which period the second phase of the operation would have been decided on. He guessed that he had advanced slightly further than expected but, unaware of the complete failure of 132 Brigade's attack, he was confident that, at any moment, friendly troops and supporting weapons would appear over the slight crest that hid him from the north. The enemy at first showed no great interest in the company except to subject any movement above ground to bursts of small-arms fire. Small parties of infantry who approached, either to attack or merely to investigate, were seen off and in the middle of the afternoon the company opened fire on a staff car that came up the **Alinda** track to the minefield gap. Three of the occupants of the car were killed and three taken prisoner, the latter being added to the three prisoners the company had earlier collected.

By the late afternoon C Company had accounted for about thirty of the enemy at a cost of only six casualties. By this time Hall had decided that in the circumstances the orders for a stay of twenty-four hours could be ignored, and had warned his platoons to be ready to withdraw as soon as darkness offered some concealment.

At 6 p.m. shells commenced to fall across the position, killing three men and wounding several, including Hall himself. At the same time enemy infantry closed in from the west. Salvoes of mortar bombs and bursts of automatic fire preceded repeated attempts by the enemy to break into the defences, but for nearly two hours the company held firm. Nine of the original sixty had been killed, most of the others had suffered major or minor wounds, while Hall himself had been wounded a second time. As first the Brens and then the rifles fell silent from lack of ammunition, Hall gave permission for surrender. Although the enemy infantry, who were pressing closely at the time, moved in at once, many



of the men managed to evade surrender in the fast-growing dusk, but thirty, most of them wounded, including Hall, were taken prisoner. Those who got clear made their way back to the box with one of the six prisoners, the driver of the staff car, a German from *200 Infantry Regiment of 90 Light Division*.

From survivors' accounts and the enemy records the story emerges that the initial, and rather half-hearted, attempts to seal off C Company's penetration were made by Italians. After the staff car was shot up, the job was given to the *Ramcke* parachutists on the company's west, a group about 100 strong. After capture the prisoners watched the occupants of the car being buried with considerable ceremony as if one of the dead was of high rank. They also saw in the vicinity the grave of Major-General Bismarck. <sup>1</sup>

*iii*

The return of the survivors of C Company coincided with a general withdrawal from all the ground gained by Operation BERESFORD. After touring the whole front during the morning, **General Freyberg** had returned to find the commanders of both 13 and 30 Corps at his headquarters. A discussion was proceeding on whether the second stage, that is, an advance into the depressions, was feasible after the failure to gain the full line of the first objective, when news of the counter-attack on 22 Battalion began to come in. All three commanders were in agreement that, with this obviously vigorous reaction by the enemy to the threat to his line of communication and because of the losses sustained, particularly in 132 Brigade, it would be unwise even to leave troops in the exposed and insecure positions they now held, let alone to attempt any further advance.

General Horrocks, however, was unwilling to forgo the ground won by 5 Brigade, especially **Point 100** with its observation over both **Muhafid** and **Munassib** depressions and, though he gave **Freyberg** permission to make plans for pulling 26 Battalion and 132

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Brigade back from between the first and second minefields, he reserved any decision of withdrawing **2 Buffs** and **5 Brigade** from between the second and fourth fields.

In the middle of the afternoon he let **Freyberg** know that the Army Commander was willing to let the western positions be evacuated, with **132 Brigade** going to reserve and **26 Battalion** back to its old sector, now held by  $\frac{1}{4}$  **Essex**. As for **5 Brigade's** sector, **151 Brigade** was already on its way to the box, either to relieve the troops in the front line or to pass through and continue the advance into the depressions. Just before this, the enemy attack on **22 Battalion** had been resumed, convincing **Freyberg** that the enemy would continue to react to the threat posed by British occupation of **Point 100**, at least until the *Panzer Army* had withdrawn far enough to the west to make the point valueless for observation. In fact, any keenness **Freyberg** may have earlier felt for attacking the *Panzer Army* had evaporated once he fully realised that the Army Commander was standing firm on his refusal to allow the British heavy armour to take part, even as a covering force on the left. He felt sure that any further threatening moves would bring German tanks into the picture. In this, his appreciation was close to the mark as **Rommel** had already ordered a strong tank detachment to stand by ready to counter-attack any further advance against his northern front.

So convinced was **Freyberg** that his appreciations were correct that he had already passed on the withdrawal orders to **132** and **6 Brigades**, and had also told **Kippenberger** to tidy up his salient as soon as the fighting on **22 Battalion's** front permitted, so that the front-line troops could be pulled out without undue delay after dark. When liaison officers from **151 Brigade** reported in to **Divisional Headquarters**, with advance parties hard on their heels, **Freyberg** directed that they be sent to the old **5 Brigade** sectors within the box perimeter.

At 7.20 p.m., after touring the front and discussing the situation

with **Kippenberger**, he used all his powers of persuasion to argue Horrocks out of further action in the salient. He explained that the desired observation over the depressions could only be obtained from the small area around **Point 100** and, because of its value, this bare and exposed vantage point invited heavy fire and counterattack which new troops, put into the front line overnight, would find it hard to withstand without heavy losses.

The Corps Commander then passed on **Freyberg's** appreciations to Montgomery who agreed, with some reluctance, to complete withdrawal into the box. With this official sanction, the withdrawals and reliefs then went ahead on the lines **Freyberg** had planned. The three southern sectors within the perimeter were taken over by 151 Brigade, with 6 DLI<sup>1</sup> on the west, 9 DLI in the centre and 8 DLI on the east. With some New Zealand Vickers and anti-tank gunners temporarily under command to make up for some of its own shortages, this brigade assumed command of its sector from eight o'clock that evening. Troops of 5 Brigade within the box were moved into the eastern front, for which the brigade took responsibility.

With plenty of warning for details to be seen to, the withdrawal from the salient went smoothly. As soon as dusk fell the surviving tanks of A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, and the anti-tank guns in 132 Brigade's front formed a line covering the minefield gaps on the south of **Alam Nayil**, through which the troops and transport of the English brigade marched back to a bivouac area in the box. This covering screen and the two companies of 26 Battalion then followed, the battalion bedding down for the night in **Stuka Wadi**. As soon as the last vehicle was through, sappers of 8 Field Company relaid the mines in the gaps, and it was while this work was nearly complete that the party of thirteen survivors of C Company, 26 Battalion, with one German prisoner arrived out of the darkness. Patrols from 18 and 25 Battalions covered the front for some time longer, returning to report that enemy activity was unusually light.

The troops in 5 Brigade's salient also started on their return journey

as dusk fell, with 21 Battalion moving first to pass through the box and bivouac by the main gap in the north-east corner of the minefield. The men of 22 Battalion thinned out in the front line behind rearguards who watched for enemy patrols, the two forward companies then falling back through the reserve company. Once back in the box, the battalion settled into its old sector on the eastern face.

Care taken to ensure that nothing of value and no troops were left behind, as well as precautions against surprise raids by the enemy, delayed the planned timing of the withdrawal of the first two battalions so that 23 Battalion, arriving at the gap by tactical headquarters, had to wait until 22 Battalion could report that all its men were through. By 2 a.m. 23 Battalion was through, to bed down near Brigade Headquarters, and the sappers of 6 Field Company had started to re-lay the mines in the gap. Lieutenant **Ross**,<sup>2</sup> a liaison officer sent from Brigade Headquarters to check the passage of the gap, then returned to report that **2 Buffs**, who

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<sup>1</sup> **Durham Light Infantry.**

<sup>2</sup> **Maj A. Ross**, MC and bar, ED, m.i.d., Aristion Andrias (Gk); Dunedin; born Herbert, North Otago, 19 Jul 1911; university lecturer; four times wounded.

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were expected to pass through between the two New Zealand battalions, had not appeared. It was at first thought that the Buffs had misunderstood the instructions and might be trying to return through 6 Brigade's area, but when inquiries to this brigade drew a blank, **Major Fairbrother** himself drove out to the gap with a wireless operator. While waiting for the sappers to reopen a narrow lane, he called the Buffs on his wireless and fortunately established communication without delay, to learn that the battalion had become 'bushed' in the darkness. By radioed instructions he led them towards the gap, but it was dangerously close to first light before the tail of the Kentish column was safely inside

**the box.**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 11 – SUMMARY OF THE BATTLE

## CHAPTER 11

### Summary of the Battle

i

**THE closing of the gaps in the perimeter minefield in the early hours of 5 September marked the ending of Operation BERESFORD. In the reconnaissance patrols immediately preceding the action, in the diversionary raids, and in the operation itself, some 80 New Zealanders were killed or died of wounds, 300 were wounded and 60 taken prisoner. Though 28 Battalion among the infantry suffered most, with nearly 100 casualties, mostly wounded, 5 Brigade as a whole came off more lightly than 6 Brigade. The losses in 132 Brigade were more serious. The two Royal West Kent battalions lost about 250 men each, the Buffs approximately 100, and the attached troops, including the Valentine crews, lost close on another 100, to bring the total of English casualties to nearly 700, of whom over 200 were listed as missing or prisoner.**

**Freyberg is on record as having apologised to his corps commander for the losses in 132 Brigade. He plainly felt his responsibility, partly for not having been firmer with Brigadier Robertson over the planning, partly for having minimised the likelihood of strong opposition in the first phase of the advance, but more particularly for having encouraged the use of the brigade in place of one of his more experienced New Zealand formations. For the last point, he knew, none better, of the parlous state of the reinforcement pool, that his men were due for, and expecting, relief and that too hard a knock might eliminate the Division from its anticipated role in Montgomery's *corps d'élite*. Over the planning, both he and Kippenberger had offered their wisdom and advice, but many of the New Zealanders detailed to help 'indoctrinate' the Kentish brigade found that, though personal relations became extremely cordial, there was a resistance to suggestions that the brigade was inexperienced in anything except the terrain, a natural resistance perhaps as the two Kentish regiments from which the brigade was drawn had distinguished records and many of the senior officers wore**



decorations gained in battle.

The brigade had been shown the position, estimated from reconnaissance and observation, of the enemy's line, and in fact it met this line fairly close to the point where it should have been expected. The defences were not continuous but consisted of groups of weapon pits and sangars, well spaced out both frontally and in depth according to the evidence of 26 Battalion's C Company. There is nothing to suggest that the enemy was specially prepared for an attack on this narrow sector any more than on any other sector this night, or that the fire met by 132 Brigade was anything more than the enemy's standard defensive fire. **General Freyberg's** responsibility in the brigade's debacle rests therefore on his failure to appreciate the degree of its inexperience. Earlier, in its occupation of the southern front of the box and in its move to the north-western sector, the brigade had shown an extreme rigidity in control and a consequent lack of initiative among its junior commanders and men, faults which could not be removed by a few days of holding unthreatened defences or by well intentioned attempts at indoctrination. These faults showed up when the brigade was passing through 25 Battalion's sector and the minefield gaps; individuals and groups, isolated in the darkness and confusion from their normal chain of command, 'flapped', to use the army vernacular. On the start line the rigid control was re-imposed but brought with it the necessity for an advance in close order instead of the wide dispersion which is only possible with troops trained to take the initiative and act independently. The effect of the enemy's defensive fire on the close-packed brigade was to break up the chain of command again.

The defences met by 132 Brigade were manned by *Folgore Division* parachutists, who proved later to be some of the best of the Italian troops in the desert. They were stiffened by a sprinkling of German parachutists of *Ramcke Brigade*, and these two specialist groups, undisturbed in their defences since the first day of the battle, may have offered stronger resistance than that met by 28 Battalion, whose opponents were Italian infantry of *Trieste Division*, supported by

German anti-aircraft gunners and elements of the *Kost Group* (mainly *155 Infantry Regiment*) of *90 Light Division*, including a detachment of *900 Engineer Battalion*. The *Trieste* troops had moreover only just taken over in Munassib from *90 Light Division*, so that they were probably unfamiliar with the defences there. Word of the fighting was received about midnight at the headquarters of *21 Panzer Division*, then some three miles south of Munassib, and at the headquarters of *Africa Corps* some three to four miles further south. The *Corps* immediately ordered *21 Panzer Division* to ensure that it made contact with the *Kost Group* in Munassib, on which the division was swinging back. The divisional reconnaissance company managed to find some isolated anti-tank gunners in the depression but the attacks, first by the Maoris and then by the Valentine tanks, seem to have disorganised this stretch of the defence until after dawn. No reports appear to have been sent by *Trieste Division*, possibly because the headquarters of the two units concerned, *65* and *66 Infantry Regiments*, were in the area overrun by the Maoris. Even the next day the Italians had only a vague idea of what had happened as their casualty report of 103 killed, wounded and missing makes evident.

Information sent direct to *Panzer Army Headquarters* from the *Folgore-Ramcke* front on the engagement with *132 Brigade* brought urgent orders for the detachment of *15 Panzer Division's* tanks, then in bivouac west of *Alinda*, to stand by ready to support *Ramcke Brigade*. In recording this part of the action the following day, the *Panzer Army* had acquired the information that the attack was made by about thirty tanks and a battalion of infantry, of whom 200 were taken prisoner, including the commander of *6 New Zealand Brigade*.<sup>1</sup> The only really detailed account of the enemy side of the fighting lies in the diary of *135 Anti-Aircraft Regiment* whose story has already been mentioned.

From 7 a.m. on the 4th to 10 a.m., *Panzer Army Headquarters*, obviously acting on delayed reports from the anti-tank gunners, was urging *21 Panzer Division* to join in the battle in *Muhafid*. Observers sent by the division could see no sign of a battle but were in time to see

the Maoris withdrawing out of Munassib, but the *Panzer Army* was not satisfied with their reports. Such confusion still existed in the defences around the two depressions that no clear picture of the situation could be gained. When, later in the morning, a company of *15 Panzer Division's* infantry rearguard was cut off by one of *7 Armoured Division's* mobile columns on the eastern flank well to the south of *Muhafid*, the *Panzer Army* took this as a continuation of the night's attack and increased its exhortations to both *21 Panzer* and *90 Light Divisions* to take appropriate action. The panzer division, more concerned with husbanding its tanks and petrol to complete the withdrawal, took little notice except to ensure that the

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<sup>1</sup> GMDS 34373/1.

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gap between its left flank and *90 Light Division* was covered by anti-tank and reconnaissance patrols. It was left to *90 Light*, or more probably the headquarters of its *Kost Group* only, to mount the required counter-attack, using those German troops who had not already withdrawn on the general plan and scratch groups of Italian infantry and tanks. Owing to the loss of many of *90 Light Division's* records later in the desert, little is known of the counter-attack other than that, according to *21 Panzer Division*, it gained very little ground, and from the New Zealand records, that four Italian tanks were lost. It was quite obviously the standard counter-attack that German tactical doctrine laid down 'to restore the situation' rather than a desperate bid to remove a threat to the forces in withdrawal. The situation, that is, the occupation of the original defences, could have been restored without fighting, but after *Trieste's* discomfiture at the hands of the Maoris, no one seems to have grasped this in the general confusion, so that the counter-attack went well beyond the original defence line and only stopped when it broke against *22 Battalion*.

Apart from a certain amount of flurry in *Panzer Army Headquarters* when piecemeal reports of the night's fighting were arriving, Operation

**BERESFORD** hardly affected Rommel's plans of withdrawal. On visiting **21 Panzer Division** on the morning of 4 September, he stated his feeling that a threat of attack from the north still existed, directing the division to remain where it was, that is immediately to the south of **Muhafid**, in a counter-attack role. When he learnt a short time later that Italian armour covering **Himeimat** failed to receive his instructions to remain in position until **21 Division** was free to relieve it, and was already on the next leg, he let the whole withdrawal continue as originally planned. By the evening of the 4th, any slight dislocation caused by **BERESFORD** had already been ironed out.

The rather meagre German reports made later on this action contain several points of interest. Rommel could not understand Eighth Army's inertia and took the lack of aggressive action to mean that the British were conforming to his criticism of slow and cumbrous reaction. By the 3rd, he felt that the British command had had time to show some reaction, and concluded from reports by air and ground observation that slightly increased activity in the **New Zealand Box** area might presage an attack from the north. Kesselring, anxious to regain some of the lost popularity of his air force, offered to lay on a heavy blitz on the box. This air activity, admitted by German ground troops to have been only a weak copy of what the **Royal Air Force** had done to them, was thought to have smashed a large concentration of troops of **10 Indian Division** intended for an attack on **Brescia Division**, that is, on the **Deir el Angar** and **Qattara Box** sector. <sup>1</sup> The idea that **10 Indian Division** was somewhere in the southern and eastern parts of the **New Zealand Box** persisted in German appreciations well after Operation **BERESFORD** was over.

From prisoners the Germans acquired the notion that two brigades of **44 Division** and **6 New Zealand Brigade** had attacked the **Folgore – Ramcke** front, and on **90 Light Division's** front they had captured 'some members of the **28 Maori Battalion**. They were reinforcements just arrived up with the battalion from the **Sixth Reinforcements'** <sup>2</sup>—rather late arrivals as the **Sixths** reached **Egypt** more than a year previously. From captured documents, the units of **132 Brigade** were identified in

some detail and placed 'probably in the New Zealand Division's area', but Italian interrogation managed to get an erroneous picture of the rest of 44 Division's dispositions by placing 131 Brigade 'in the front line beside 132 Infantry Brigade' and 133 Brigade still in the Delta area. <sup>3</sup>

Of the changes in the British command, interrogation of New Zealand prisoners confirmed the news that General Gott had been killed in an aircraft shot down by a German fighter, and also elicited the strange information that Auchinleck had been appointed Commander-in-Chief, **India**, and that Wavell had been moved to a higher command: a remarkable example of prescience as these two appointments were not made until June 1943. <sup>4</sup>

Later in the month the intelligence summary of *15 Panzer Division* carried the appreciation that, among the newly equipped and reinforced British forces in the **Middle East**, 'only the New Zealand Division can still be regarded as weak. Its morale can hardly have been improved by the abortive attack on 3–4 September when it lost 200 prisoners including a brigadier.' <sup>5</sup> The Division's old foe, *90 Light Division*, wrote of the Maoris' attack, 'following an enemy penetration into 900 Engineer Battalion's positions, members of the battalion declared that the New Zealanders had violated international law, fought with knives, and fired on wounded, or men who had surrendered. Similar statements had

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<sup>1</sup> *Pz Army* war diary on GMDS 34373/1, 14, 15.

<sup>2</sup> *15 Pz Div* intelligence report on GMDS 24442/7.

<sup>3</sup> *Pz Gp Africa* intelligence reports on GMDS 34373/8–9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *15 Pz Div* intelligence report on GMDS 24442/7.

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been made on so many occasions that an attempt was made to get information from prisoners of war that would justify further measures being taken. However, nothing definite could be found out....'<sup>1</sup>

*ii*

For the New Zealand troops, the few days following **BERESFORD** brought a test of morale. Rumours of relief had been rife towards the end of August, for much of the story of the Division's future role had filtered down to the man in the line. Internal rearrangements, especially the exchange of sectors between 5 and 132 Brigades, seemed to show that relief was not far off when Rommel struck. When **BERESFORD** was over and 151 Brigade was seen to settle down in 5 Brigade's old defences, hopes revived.

Three of 5 Brigade's battalions remained in reserve in temporary bivouac in the open desert with nothing much to do except tidy up after the battle and watch the dogfights in the air above. The fourth unit, 22 Battalion, settled back into its old area facing east, with little expectation of being called on to man the defences. While here the battalion was unfortunate in losing its popular commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Russell, who was killed in a mine explosion as he went to help the casualties among the crew of a carrier which had been blown up in a minefield.

The battalions of 6 Brigade, however, returned to their August routine of daylight inaction and nightly patrols. With the relief of  $\frac{1}{4}$  **Essex Regiment** in the north-west sector of the box by 26 Battalion on the 5th, the brigade's front line was exactly as it had been for the last six weeks. For 18 and 25 Battalions there had not even been the break in the monotony brought by a change of sectors. The only variety came with the nightly patrols, but these occupied only a relatively small number of men. As much as

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<sup>1</sup> 90 Lt Div intelligence report on GMDS 28876/8. Troops of



**900 Engineer Battalion** were in the western end of **Muhafid**. German troops were noted for continuing to fire their weapons until their opponents, charging with bayonets, were only a few paces off, before offering to surrender. The Italians, more practical if less warlike, usually signified their willingness to capitulate well in advance. The German method permitted the men to claim that they had fought to the last, but it was objected to by many New Zealand infantrymen on the grounds that the defence, manning automatics in the protection of weapon pits, had already sufficient advantage over the attacker charging with a bayonet in the open and should hardly expect also the added advantage of safe capitulation in the penultimate moment. This distinction in timing between penultimate and last is not clearly covered in international law or convention and led to many of the German complaints of New Zealand behaviour, as at **Minqar Qaim**. There is also a wealth of evidence, inconclusive in detail but convincing in mass, that many Germans were not averse to using a token surrender as a trick. In this particular action there is one known incident, described earlier ( **p. 134**), in which enemy troops, offering surrender, were shot down. The fighting with knives is plainly a piece of embroidery for the knife was a weapon unfamiliar even to the Maoris; knives of a type suitable for close-quarter fighting were unlikely to be held by anyone except the company cooks.

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possible was done by quartermasters to ease the conditions with extra issues of water, changes of clothing, and variations in diet, but all this was little enough compensation for the long days spent in cramped inactivity under a brassy sun or in choking dust-storms.

The heat remained excessive in the early days of September, while the fighting had left many corpses, dismembered and unburied, to swell the plague of flies. In spite of all efforts towards hygiene within the lines, of fly traps and veils of mosquito netting, no man in daytime could avoid his attendant swarm of flies, insistent for moisture from mouth, eyes, or sweat-damped clothes.

The enemy gunners, now relieved of the need to conserve ammunition as strictly as before the battle, followed Rommel's orders to keep the Eighth Army under constant harassment to deter any

interference with the *Panzer Army* as it settled back into defence. They laid regular and methodical strafes on key areas, from mortar and anti-tank gun positions, platoon and company headquarters, in the forward defences back to battalion and brigade headquarters and the gun lines. The cookhouses in the company areas of both 18 and 25 Battalions were subjected with Teutonic punctuality to salvos of shells at normal meal hours. The ration parties, coming in to collect their dixies of tea and stew, soon learnt to disperse and go to ground until the customary number of shells had fallen, so that few casualties occurred. The enemy shelling reached its peak on 6 and 7 September, on which two days it was almost continuous. From then on it gradually declined. The accuracy with which this shellfire fell on many previously undisturbed targets was attributed by many of the men to marked maps carried by prisoners taken by the enemy, but it may of course be possible that more targets were engaged merely because more shells were fired.

The Axis air forces, as if to make up for the lack of ardour complained of by the ground troops, also put out a burst of activity at this time. Several Stuka raids were directed at the *New Zealand Box*, one on the 5th bringing some fifteen casualties and considerable vehicle damage among undispersed troops and trucks in the headquarters area of 151 Brigade, and another two days later causing some damage but only minor casualties among the headquarters of 6 Brigade and 25 Battalion. On the 9th, D Company of 25 Battalion lost two men killed and five wounded from bombing. Several times in between these raids, flights of dive-bombers came over but were forced to jettison their bombs and run for home as British fighters appeared, the Kittyhawks usually engaging the covering Messerschmitts while the slower Hurricanes tried to pick off the Stukas. These German dive-bombers had by now lost most of the terror they held for British troops earlier in the war; in fact, the men were inclined to admire the Stuka pilots' bravery in running the gauntlet of the *Desert Air Force's* fighter patrols. Of one flight that tried to raid the area east of the box, almost all were shot down either by the fighters or, as they tried to seek safety by flying close to the ground, by the Bofors gunners.



Patrolling by 6 Brigade's battalions followed the pattern learnt by experience before **BERESFORD**. No major raids were made to get prisoners, but each night seven to eight patrols of varying sizes were out reconnoitring new Axis defence diggings and harassing working parties. On the evening of the 5th, men listening to radios in the Division heard **Berlin** announce the capture of Clifton. With this definite news, **General Freyberg** decided to place his GSO I, Colonel W. G. Gentry, in command of 6 Brigade and called Lieutenant-Colonel **Queree**<sup>1</sup> to take Gentry's place.

In spite of the trials of these few September days, morale in the New Zealand Division was extremely good. The lack of worth-while results from Operation **BERESFORD** and the loss of comrades in the fighting were offset by the gradually emerging details of the complete failure of Rommel's offensive. Confidence in the higher command of the desert war reached a point unknown for many months. The trying conditions combined with the Axis shellfire to keep the medical staff busy. The occasional battle casualties were well outnumbered by the steady flow of men falling sick with malaria—a hangover from the stay in **Syria**—infective hepatitis or jaundice, dysentery and desert sores.

Official news that the Division was to be relieved and out of the line within four days was released by **Freyberg** on the 7th. The news was met with some scepticism in 6 Brigade, especially in 18 Battalion, whose men had possibly become so inured to the confined piece of desert they had occupied for close on seven weeks and the life they lived therein that they might have found it hard to imagine any other sort of life. Even after 21, 23 and 28 Battalions started back to the rear on the evening of the 8th, 18 Battalion's war diarist remained sceptical. The next day 5 Brigade officially handed over its sector, part to 151 Brigade and part to 1 Independent Greek Brigade, the latter occupying the areas on the south-east and east previously held by 23 and 22 Battalions. Brigade Headquarters and 22 Battalion then followed the remainder of the brigade. With the arrival of the Greeks, 151 Brigade extended

<sup>1</sup> **Brig R. C. Queree**, CBE, DSO, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born **Christchurch**, 28 Jun 1909; Regular soldier; Brigade Major, NZ Arty, Oct 1940-Jun 1941; GSO II **2 NZ Div** Jun-Aug 1941, Jan-Jun 1942; CO **4 Fd Regt** Jun-Aug 1942; GSO I **2 NZ Div** Sep 1942-Jun 1944; BGS NZ Corps 9 Feb-27 Mar 1944; CO **5 Fd Regt** Jun-Aug 1944; CRA **2 NZ Div** Aug 1944-Jun 1945; QMG, Army HQ, 1948-50; Adjutant-General, 1954-56; Vice-Chief of the General Staff, 1956-60; Senior Army Liaison Officer, **London**, 1960-64; Director of Civil Defence, 1965-.

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its sector into 25 Battalion's area, so that by the morning of the 10th that battalion could leave for the rear. By that evening **2 Buffs** had completed the relief of 26 Battalion, the exchange being drawn out because of a heavy dust-storm.

Finally **5 Royal West Kents**, completely lost for a time in the same dust-storm, appeared in the lines of 18 Battalion just on midnight. At 1 a.m. on 11 September, when this battalion reported that its relief was completed, 6 Brigade handed over command of its sector to 132 Brigade and the official relief of **2 New Zealand Division** by 44 Division, arranged for the evening of the 10th, could be ratified. For the New Zealanders this ended what has been well described as the hard summer of 1942. The last casualty for the Division occurred when the General's staff car, travelling back along the coast road, collided with a heavy truck. The General, who was only just recovering completely from his **Minqar Qaim** wound and its complications, sustained a cracked rib.

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From the time the New Zealand Division vacated the ground occupied in Operation BERESFORD on the evening of 4 September, the battle of Alam el Halfa can be said to have faded slowly to a finish. Hardly affected by any of Eighth Army's actions, Rommel's planned withdrawal and the deployment of the formations of *Panzer Army* continued until, by the morning of the 8th, all but a few patrols were behind the line along which Rommel had decided to set his new southern front. Italians

of **10 Corps** with a detachment of **Ramcke Brigade** extended the old front from the **Qattara Box** to Munassib, **Trieste Division** remained on the bend in the line on the east of Munassib, and from this point southwards to beyond **Himeimat Littorio** and **Ariete** divisions, with detachments of **Folgore** parachutists, were straightening out the old 'second' minefield and digging in behind it. The three battle groups of **90 Light Division** stayed in reserve in the area of the bend, while the three German reconnaissance units and a tank detachment from **21 Panzer Division** watched the southern leg as the Italians dug in. The main bodies of the two panzer divisions pulled back well to the west and sent battle groups to support the northern and central sectors of the main front. Thus the territorial gains of the Axis amounted to the occupation of the area from the **Qattara Box**, through Munassib and on to **Himeimat**, an area previously the playground of **7 Armoured Division's** light columns.

As the **Panzer Army** fell back to these positions, the British heavy armour was kept by Montgomery's instructions close to its chosen positions west and south of Alam el Halfa. All three armoured brigades, however, made up light columns of Crusaders, Valentines or Stuarts with scout cars and field guns, which kept in contact with the enemy's rearguards by day and pulled back to laager and replenish at dusk. Several of these columns had minor engagements, particularly at dawn as they felt forward to test how far the enemy had retreated during the night. Further to the south the mobile columns of **7 Armoured Division** found themselves too weak and the going too rough to 'hustle' the enemy as Montgomery had directed. As the **Panzer Army** fell back round the south of **Muhafid**, the contraction of the front brought much overlapping of the activities of these columns, of whom there were at least a dozen, many split into smaller patrols and all operating practically independently on a front little more than ten miles wide. The lack of co-operation, limiting their total effective striking power, permitted these columns to advance only at the pace of the German retreat.

By the evening of 4 September both air and ground observation had noted a decrease in the *Panzer Army's* movements. This was taken, by the more sanguine of Eighth Army's commanders such as **Freyberg**, to mean that Rommel considered he was out of danger and could occupy his defences at leisure. To the more cautious Montgomery it carried a threat that Rommel might have finished regrouping ready to turn at bay and renew the offensive. He caused orders to be sent to 4 Light Armoured Brigade to 'harass the enemy's southern flank with all available troops and, if forced to withdraw owing to enemy infiltration round our flanks or by an enemy attack in force, to impose the maximum delay....' He also persuaded the **Desert Air Force**, which was beginning to feel the strain of the heavy bombing programme, to lay on a two-hour raid on the concentration of vehicles observed at dusk in Munassib. This raid, on the evening of the 4th, was the last major air effort of the battle. Next morning the *Panzer Army* had begun to thin out and disperse its vehicles as the troops took up their final defensive positions, so that good bombing targets became progressively more difficult to find. And, as if ashamed of the *Luftwaffe's* poor showing in the battle, German fighters began to appear in increasing numbers, both to cover the Stuka raids intended to keep the Eighth Army from thoughts of counter-attacking while the *Panzer Army* settled down, and to drive off the British bombers and reconnaissance aircraft.

On 5 September the Valentines of 23 Armoured Brigade were allowed to make a cautious advance round the south-eastern corner of the **New Zealand Box**. By the late afternoon one regiment had joined the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry patrols who were observing the enemy from **Point 100**. The sight of enemy tanks in the distance to the south-west and fire from anti-tank guns kept the Valentines, acting on orders not to become engaged, hull down behind the point. Encouraged by the presence of the heavier tanks, some of the Divisional Cavalry's Stuarts worked their way forward into the eastern end of Munassib. Horrocks, on learning of this, asked **Freyberg** if he could move troops out again during the night to occupy the ground as far as Munassib, but **Freyberg** replied that such an operation was out of the question. His stand was that any

attack on the Munassib area, save as a fully prepared operation with strong mixed forces, would have little value. The area on which, in his opinion, minor threats of attack might cause the enemy uneasiness and bring him to hasten his retirement was the **Qattara Box – Deir el Angar** front and he offered to stage raids here. Also, feeling sure that Rommel's withdrawal was permanent, he suggested that, with two extra brigades now in the **New Zealand Box**, the relief of the Division might begin. Horrocks, presumably after discussions with the Army Commander, refused the proposal for a raid and also stated that the time was not yet opportune for moving the New Zealanders, but that the congestion in the box should be relieved by the despatch of 132 Brigade to its parent formation, 44 Division, on Alam el Halfa, for reorganisation.

That evening the following message from Montgomery was received by the formations of Eighth Army:

The battle ... has now lasted for six days, and the enemy has slowly but surely been driven from **8 Army** area. Tonight, 5th September, his rearguards are being driven west, through the minefield area north of **Himeimat**. All formations and units, both armoured and unarmoured, have contributed towards this striking victory, and have been magnificently supported by the R.A.F. I congratulate all ranks of **8 Army** on the devotion to duty and good fighting qualities which have resulted in such a heavy defeat of the enemy and which will have far-reaching results.

From this time on the Army Commander's orders were based on his assumption that Rommel would return to the defensive in the positions held before the battle. Horrocks was urged to regain the ground up to the original first minefield, using 7 Armoured Division and the light columns from **10 Armoured Division**, with the New Zealand Division pressing from the north to assist where possible. Air reconnaissance had reported that detachments of tanks had been seen moving across the rear of the enemy's front from south to north and, as 30 Corps lacked armoured support, Montgomery ordered 23 Armoured Brigade to move into the northern sector.

The departure of the Valentines left the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry in sole control of the **Point 100** ridge, on which any movement was still heavily shelled by the enemy. It was at this time that Lieutenant **Ormond**,<sup>1</sup> working his Stuart tank forward of the ridge and into the **Muhafid Depression**, came under fire from two light anti-tank guns set behind a minefield. Noticing wheel tracks through the field, Ormond reconnoitred on foot, to discover a cleared gap. He then returned to his tank and directed it through the mines. In a spirited charge against determined opposition, he disposed of both guns and their crews.

On 7 September Montgomery officially called the Alam el Halfa battle off. He decided that, in order to commence at once the major reorganisation of Eighth Army needed for his own offensive, he would be unable to spare enough troops to reinforce the columns of 7 Armoured Division so as to push Rommel back to his original line in the south. He accordingly ordered that the **Panzer Army** should be left in possession of the minefields from Munassib to **Himeimat** and that the 'third' and 'fourth' minefields in this area should be developed as 7 Armoured Division's new front. He also planned for the **New Zealand Box** to be extended to include some of the unoccupied ground to the south.<sup>2</sup>

In order to retain sufficient armour for support and counter-attack on both corps' fronts, Montgomery rostered his armoured formations so that each brigade in its turn could be relieved for training and re-equipping. Not many miles to the west, Rommel, only slowly losing his suspicions that the Eighth Army might eventually counter-attack, was planning a similar reorganisation but a step behind Montgomery. While the Eighth Army was preparing for offence, Rommel knew that, unless he could win the battle with the strategists in **Germany**, his next role would be defensive.

The Alam el Halfa story should not be closed without some note of the air effort, as it was here that, for the first time in the course of the war, the Allied air forces gained and maintained superiority over the



**Axis. Until this battle the significance of the air had been**

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj A. R. W. Ormond, MC and bar; Wallingford, Waipukurau; born Wallingford, 27 Jan 1916; farmer; wounded 17 Dec 1942.**

<sup>2</sup> **See p. 195.**

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**appreciated only by the few. With relatively small numbers of aircraft used by both sides, the power of the air forces to affect the ground battles in the open desert had not been great. Now, even if the Axis reinforced the *Luftwaffe* to equal or surpass the Allies, the whole pattern of the desert war would have to alter. Whichever side held control of the air, even if temporarily, would force its opponents to take to fixed defences. The war of manoeuvre, of the movement of masses of tanks and vehicles, so often likened to war at sea, would cease.**

**During August the *Royal Air Force* in the *Middle East* had been reinforced with some 181 bombers and 254 fighter aircraft, mainly Bostons, Wellingtons and Hurricanes Mark II. It had also received a token force of Mitchells (B25s) and some Kittyhawks (P40s) manned by the United States Army Air Force. There was as well in the theatre a force of Liberators (B24s), originally destined for *China* but held in the *Middle East* for the bombing of the *Ploesti* oil wells in *Rumania*. From June on, these Liberators had attacked several targets in *Europe* as well as the Italian fleet, and had assisted Royal Air Force Wellingtons against *Tobruk* and *Benghazi*. The medium and light bombers had been mainly directed at *Matruh* and the rear of the enemy's *Alamein* positions, especially the airfields and landing grounds around *Daba* and *Fuka*.**

**On the evening of 21 August the air effort was stepped up with the intention of disrupting Rommel's expected offensive. The positions on the *Alamein* line itself, forward installations and landing grounds, and the coastal road and railway were all among the targets. On the night of 23–24 August, 10 flare-carrying *Albacores* led 41 Wellingtons over the El**

Mreir sector, and on the following night but one, 52 aircraft, including 9 USAAF Mitchells, made the main Stuka base at **Daba** so unusable that it was taken some 60 miles back. Lesser raids on the intervening nights led up to the opening of the Axis offensive on the evening of 30 August, which coincided with another major effort, an attack by 44 aircraft, including USAAF Liberators, over **Tobruk**. The next night, and again on the night of 2–3 September, the heavies gave their attention to the Axis landing grounds, trying out two 4000 lb bombs. Throughout the Axis advance, the flare-carrying Albacores and the Wellingtons concentrated on the line of the depressions south of the **New Zealand Box**, also experimenting with 4000 lb bombs. During daylight the fighters, fighter-bombers, and light bombers maintained the offensive, with peak activity on 3 September when a shuttle service of Bostons, Baltimores and Mitchells ('The Boston Tea Party') flew from dawn till dusk over the retreating *Panzer Army*. The fighters on this day carried out some 200 patrols. From then on, targets were harder to find as the enemy dispersed his transport and commenced digging in, while heavy dust-storms became more frequent. On 5 September Montgomery and Coningham, the AOC Western Desert, agreed that the air offensive could now be called off.

The fighter cover provided during the battle was so constant that, while the Boston Tea Party flew almost unmolested over the Axis columns, few Axis bombers ventured over the Eighth Army's lines during daylight, except for occasional hit-and-run raids by heavily escorted Stuka formations. Against these dive-bombers the tactics evolved were for the USAAF Kittyhawks (the RAF P40s were fitted with bomb-racks and used as light or fighter-bombers) to engage the fast Me109s while the Spitfires and Hurricanes dealt with the Italian MC202s and the Stukas. In this way the slow and vulnerable Stukas, once so dreaded, were faced with such odds that their pilots would jettison their bombs, more than once on their own troops, and turn for home as soon as the Allied fighters were sighted. In the light of the number of aircraft employed and sorties flown, the total loss of Allied air forces was not unduly high.



The strategy of attrition employed over the previous weeks by air action against enemy ports in **Europe** and North Africa and, in conjunction with the **Royal Navy's** submarines, against shipping at sea paid greater dividends than were anticipated once the land battle was joined. With petrol down to a mere trickle, the **Panzer Army** found that not only was its cutting edge blunted but that all its movement had to be constricted. Wide dispersion of trucks and tanks cost petrol that could not be spared. Supply vehicles following the advance and the whole army in retreat were forced to use the short, direct routes through the depressions rather than risk greater consumption of petrol on more widely dispersed routes further to the south. So, as the Eighth Army sat stolidly on the defensive, the Allied bombers took the offensive against targets almost made to order. With the strong fighter cover that allowed the Boston Tea Parties to fly virtually unmolested by Axis fighters, and the flares from the Albatrosses that turned night into day, the **Desert Air Force** took full advantage of the *Panzer Army's* predicament. 'The continuous air attacks resulted in a noticeable decrease in the efficiency of commanders and troops (no sleep, continuous waiting for the next bombs to fall, scattering of units, etc.,)' is a typical example of the comments in the German reports, in which the **Africa Corps'** losses by air attack alone were estimated as over 100 men killed, 300 wounded, 170 vehicles (including one tank) totally destroyed, and 270 (including two tanks) damaged. <sup>1</sup>

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The battle of Alam el Halfa lasted in effect less than a week. The Eighth Army's commander, his own referee, claimed a victory, but in losses inflicted and sustained the British forces could justly claim only a bare win on points. The army started the battle on 31 August with a grand total of 935 tanks, of which 693 were in the forward areas ready for action. By 8 September at least 100 tanks had become unusable, principally from enemy action, but many of these were repairable, and the final total of loss seems to have been between 40 and 50. <sup>2</sup> Of the *Panzer Army's* initial muster of 233 German and 281 Italian tanks, the

two panzer divisions had 113 seriously damaged, of which 38 were abandoned in the withdrawal, while the Italians reported 11 of their tanks lost but left no record of those damaged.

In men, the British suffered at least 1800 casualties. This figure is made up of 1600 in actions of which records are available, with an estimated 200 to cover the casualties in the mobile columns and patrols and under bombing and shellfire.<sup>3</sup> Against this the *Panzer Army* left a record of 1859 Germans and 1051 Italians killed, wounded, or missing, a total of 2910. The Axis lost also about fifty guns of 47-millimetre calibre and upwards and some 400 transport vehicles, while the number of vehicles damaged must have run over the thousand mark.

In the air war from 31 August to 5 September, called by the *Royal Air Force* the battle of Deir el Ragil as so much of the bombing was centred on that depression, the figures again were only slightly in favour of the British. In the battle area itself seven

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<sup>1</sup> *Africa Corps* messages on GMDS 25869/9–11.

<sup>2</sup> The British official history (Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. III, pp. 390–1) gives 67 tanks ‘put out of action’, including 18 Grants knocked out and 13 damaged. As this figure includes those damaged and possibly salvaged to a greater or lesser degree, it cannot fairly be compared with the Axis loss of 38 German and 11 Italian tanks, all of which were ‘total’ losses. A figure of 40 to 50 is therefore a better comparison of total losses.

Although some of the 300 Sherman tanks diverted to the *Middle East* by arrangement between Churchill and Roosevelt were landed at *Suez* during the Alam el Halfa operation, none was used in the battle. Some US Army technicians, however, joined the crews of 22 Armoured Brigade to study the operation of tanks in combat. They were interviewed on 6 September by Wendell Willkie, who was on a semi-official goodwill tour at this period.

<sup>3</sup> British estimates 'for the week's fighting' were 984 British, 405 New Zealand, 257 Australian, 65 South African, 39 Indian, a total of 1750. See Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. IV, p. 492.

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**Royal Air Force** bombers were shot down, almost all by ground fire, and 13 damaged. The fighter force, of Hurricanes, Spitfires and Kittyhawks, lost more heavily with 43 fighters destroyed and 27 damaged. Against this the Air Force claimed 26 Axis bombers (of which 13 were Stukas) and 22 fighters known to be destroyed, with another 12 bombers and 57 fighters estimated to be destroyed or damaged. <sup>1</sup> This claim appears higher than the losses admitted by the Axis, but the German and Italian records are too inconclusive for an authoritative figure to be given.

The diary of *135 Anti-Aircraft Regiment*, a *Luftwaffe* formation attached to the *Panzer Army*, carried an entry on 2 September, after noting receipt of the orders for the first stage of the withdrawal, that

...The probable reasons for this decision were:—

- (a) The enemy's air superiority,
- (b) the petrol shortage.....,
- (c) the fact that the push through to the sea had not come off, the enemy had regrouped to better advantage, and our attacks were not reducing his strength at all. <sup>2</sup>

On 7 September, when the battle was over, the diarist saw fit to alter his opinion:

In connexion with the diary entries for 2 September it now appeared that the main reason for the withdrawal of our forces was not the enemy's air superiority or the petrol shortage. The main object of the operation had been to force the enemy to come out and come to grips in an open tank battle. The enemy had not accepted the challenge but fought a delaying action and gained enough time to regroup. If our assault divisions had pushed on

farther east, their right flank would have advanced past the cover afforded by the **Qattara** depression and the plateaus north of it, and would have become vulnerable. Enemy forces had concentrated south-east of **Deir el Risw**, and an enemy reconnaissance force had made a raid on the supply track. This gave rise to the conclusion that the enemy would have let the assault divisions push on east almost unopposed and would then have attacked the line of communication from north and south.

This supposition is supported by a remark of Field Marshal Rommel's to Field Marshal Kesselring on 1 September, 'The swine isn't attacking'.

The operation was now broken off. It had cost us heavily in men and equipment with very little to show for it, and the formations had given evidence of some exhaustion and lack of drive. The morale and material effect of the enemy air attacks were mainly responsible for this. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The figures for air losses are drawn from the *R. A. F. Middle East Review* of December 1942. The British official history gives the air losses from all causes as 68 British aircraft against 36 German and 5 Italian.

<sup>2</sup> GMDS 79009/79002.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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This opinion represented in essence the story that both sides were content to have commonly accepted. On the Axis side, embellished by the addition that Rommel had originally intended the operation as merely a 'reconnaissance in force', it saved Rommel's face and gave his troops an excuse for their 'Six-day Race'. <sup>1</sup> For the British, it justified Montgomery's policy of caution.

Rommel had not previously been on the receiving end of massive and continuous air attack, but he was quick to realise what the British had learnt by bitter experience, that battle tactics are limited against an opponent who has command of the air.<sup>2</sup> This lesson was driven home more firmly by the shortage of petrol for, had both the fighting and supply troops had greater freedom of movement, the effect of the air attacks would have been consequently less. An operation planned for a mobile force has little chance of success if that force no longer possesses mobility. Once the two panzer divisions showed their inability, through petrol shortages, to co-operate in their attacks on the Alam el Halfa box and 22 Armoured Brigade, Rommel knew he was no longer in a position to exploit success, even if success came his way. The British perimeter had not been breached, no supply dumps of any consequence overrun; nothing of value had been, or was likely to be, 'got from Tommy'. So long as the Eighth Army remained intact and showed no sign of aggressive action against the spearhead, there was the fear that it would turn its attention to the static front; then, not only would the necessary detachment of armour in support use up more petrol than could be spared on the long journey back from Alam el Halfa, but the defences might not be able to hold should the British unleash their unexpected air power to pave the way for a ground assault.

It was in fact lack of petrol and lack of fighter cover that blunted Rommel's last offensive in **Egypt**. It is to his credit that he withdrew his forces in such good order, preserving an apparently united and threatening front that deterred interference. Like so many of the Axis operations, Alam el Halfa was a gamble, but unlike earlier successes it was a gamble that did not come off.

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<sup>1</sup> So called after the *Sechstagerennen*, a famous cycle race. (*Rommel Papers*, p. 284.)

<sup>2</sup> In Normandy Rommel tried hard, but unsuccessfully, to pass this lesson on.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

**CHAPTER 12 – THE UNCOMBINED OPERATIONS**



## CHAPTER 12

### *The Uncombined Operations*

AS members of the Division were thankfully relinquishing their tenancy of the **New Zealand Box** to enjoy a week of rest and reorganisation by the sea, other New Zealanders were among the forces navigating the desert many miles behind the enemy's line to take part in a series of operations, little publicised and later heavily criticised. These operations had their genesis in July, when Auchinleck was willing to consider any means that offered to weaken the enemy's pressure on his army. The initial proposals, however, emanated from the **Royal Navy**, whose concern lay with **Malta's** predicament at that time and the maintenance of **Alexandria** as a naval base. With both army and navy interest, the Combined Operations organisation came into the planning, and this brought in those enthusiasts who ran the 'cloak-and-dagger outfits' of varying degrees of unorthodoxy the **Middle East** then nurtured. Suggestions soon snowballed into an elaborate scheme of land, sea, and air raids on the enemy's rear involving some thousands of troops. Churchill's visit in early August added impetus, for the scheme was of the type dear to the Prime Minister's heart, and by the time Alexander and Montgomery took up the reins of command, planning was well advanced. Possibly because it represented the only immediate and definite form of aggressive action to be inherited from the previous command, as well as being sponsored by a number of spirited individualists backed by Churchill's interest, the plan received no official disapproval from the new commanders, whatever their private thoughts. Such disinterest was possible as control of the operations was not given to the army but was put in the hands of the Middle East Commanders-in-Chief's Committee.

As the proposals involved the co-ordination of action by widely separated forces, planning took such time that decision was delayed by other events, but eventually the **Middle East Joint Planning Committee** recommended that the operations should take place as part of the Eighth Army's counter-attack against the enemy's offensive anticipated

at the end of August. The plans were re-examined on 29 August, before Rommel commenced his offensive, and the final decision for the operations to commence was taken by the Commanders-in-Chief's Committee on 4 September, while the battle was still on. It is not known whether the Committee, at that date, was fully aware that Montgomery did not intend to launch the Eighth Army into a counter-attack, but several of the men whose parties started out before the battle was concluded imagined that they were taking part in such a counter-attack.

The decision resulted from a meeting of Alexander, Harwood and Tedder and was arrived at on the grounds that any interruption of the *Panzer Army's* supply lines 'might prove fatal to the enemy'. Harwood was willing to risk the seaborne forces, but Tedder could not offer full air support while the land battle continued.

The final scheme provided for two major and three minor attacks to take place on the same night, but widely spaced in distance, against the *Panzer Army's* rear installations. Most of the preparations were complete by the time the final decision was reached and the first troops set off immediately, other groups following later according to the distances involved, to reach their objectives on the evening of 13 September. By 10 September, when all danger of a sudden return to the attack by Rommel had passed, the whole series of operations could have been called off but there seemed no valid reason for so doing. The land forces were closing on their objectives, the sea and air forces ready; success would have had a psychological effect and might possibly have caused the enemy to spread his forces in defence.

The operations were designed in five parts as follows:

- (a) A combined land and sea assault on **Tobruk** to overrun the defences and damage shipping and port facilities, especially the oil installations.
- (b) A land raid on the port of **Benghazi** for similar purposes.
- (c) A land raid on the **Benina** landing grounds.
- (d) A land raid on the landing ground and military installations at **Barce**.
- (e) The capture of the oasis of **Gialo** and its occupation to assist the

**withdrawal of the forces engaged on the other operations. (The length of occupation appears to have depended on enemy reaction.)**

**Three diversions were also planned for the same night: a dawn shoot of some 6000 rounds by 9 Australian and 44 British Divisions to simulate the opening of an attack on the **Alamein** line; a naval demonstration off **Daba** in which some 350 rounds of 5.2-inch ammunition were fired at land targets; and the movement of a column towards **Siwa** and the dropping of some forty self-destroying dummy parachutists close to the oasis, for the purpose of keeping the *Young Fascist Division* garrison of the oasis from interfering with other operations. These diversions were carried out as arranged and appear to have served their general purpose.**

**The operation against **Tobruk** was the most ambitious and the most costly. On 22 August a commando force some eighty strong left **Cairo** for **Kufra**, guided by a Yeomanry patrol of the **Long Range Desert Group**. On 5 September, still led by the Yeomanry patrol, the commandos set off to navigate the 600 miles to **Tobruk**, and on the evening of 13 September were waiting to the south of the town for the timed completion of a heavy and sustained bombing assault by the **Royal Air Force**. About midnight, when the bombing was due to cease, the commandos moved towards a bay on the east of the harbour, where they were to overcome any defences and permit the landing of seaborne troops, after which the whole force was to battle its way westwards along the coast and attack the town and harbour from the south. The seaborne troops, about 180 men of the **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** with engineer and other specialists, had left **Alexandria** early that morning in motor torpedo-boats and launches. Owing to failings in organisation and training, mostly in communications, initial success by the commandos was not followed up, only two of the assault craft managing to land their troops on shore.**

**While this battle occurred east of the harbour, another assault force comprising some 400 Royal Marines and specialist personnel carried in the destroyers *Sikh* and *Zulu* was attempting to land on a beach to the**

north of the harbour. About half the troops in the first flight of landing craft reached shore, but some way west of the intended landing point.

By this time the enemy defence was fully alert, with coastal guns, 88-millimetre anti-aircraft guns and automatics firing on the destroyers and landing craft. Out to sea the anti-aircraft cruiser *Coventry* and eight destroyers patrolled, prepared to assist in re-embarkation and against counter-attack.

The destroyer *Sikh*, moving inshore to give covering fire and pick up survivors, was hit and finally sunk by gunfire. The rest of the naval force, as the coming of daylight made its situation precarious, set off for *Alexandria* but soon came under enemy air attack which accounted for the cruiser *Coventry* and the destroyer *Zulu*. Of the light flotilla of MTBs and launches, six of the original eighteen failed to return.

In *Tobruk*, daylight gave the enemy the opportunity of concentrating against the several small groups still holding out. British records indicate that only four men, belonging to the commando force, managed to escape and eventually reach the Eighth Army's lines.

In this action the *Royal Navy* lost some 280 men, of whom 225, mostly from the crew of the *Sikh*, were later reported to be prisoners. The Royal Marines lost 300 men and the Army 166, of whom probably more than half were prisoners. Against this total of 746, the Axis defence recorded a casualty list of 62 killed and 119 wounded. According to the German area commander, General Deindl, the raid was not anticipated nor was the approach of the assault forces observed, but the intensity and duration of the Air Force bombing caused him about 11 p.m. to issue an 'alert' which had the effect of delaying reliefs and the customary settling down for the night.

The raid on *Benghazi* was no more successful. For this operation a detachment of the *Special Air Service Brigade* with other troops, to a total strength of 200 men, was guided by a Southern Rhodesian patrol of the *Long Range Desert Group* for the 600 miles from *Kufra* to *Benghazi*.

South of the town they were joined by another Southern Rhodesian patrol which had travelled out with the **Barce** raiding party, the intention being that the two LRDG patrols should raid the **Benina** landing ground while the other force made for **Benghazi** docks as the **Royal Air Force** completed a bombing raid.

Delayed by difficult country, the two patrols abandoned their task for the night and withdrew to an area in which their vehicles could be concealed against air attack in daylight, but the commando force pressed on, only to run into an Italian machine-gun post on the **Benghazi** perimeter. Driven back and, after daylight, harassed from the air, the commandos made their way in small groups back to **Kufra**, the last arriving on 24 September. Losses amounted to over half the original fleet of seventy-two jeeps and 3-ton trucks, ten men killed or missing, and several wounded. The two patrols worked their way east and assisted in the withdrawal of the **Barce** raiding party.

The operation against **Gialo** succeeded in keeping the Italian garrison of the oasis contained for a few days. The assault force, consisting of about 800 men, mainly native troops of the **Sudan Defence Force**, left **Kufra** on 11 September guided by a Yeomanry patrol of the **Long Range Desert Group**. Owing to administrative difficulties the force did not get within striking distance of the defences until the evening of the 15th. It made no headway against the 'Beau Geste' type forts in which the Italian defenders were ensconced, so invested the oasis until the 20th, when it was withdrawn on orders from **Cairo**. The **Sudan Defence Force** losses, mostly from air attack, were 16 killed and missing and 45 wounded. A New Zealand patrol of the **Long Range Desert Group** commanded by Lieutenant **Talbot**,<sup>1</sup> which joined the force to cover the western and north-western approaches, was caught by enemy aircraft on 19 September in a featureless area of the desert and forced to scatter, losing seven men wounded or injured and three missing.

The raid against **Barce** was the only operation of the whole series which brought any measure of success. This was carried out by two LRDG patrols, one of the Guards and the other of New Zealanders, the

latter commanded by Captain **Wilder**<sup>2</sup> and the whole force under Major J. R. Easonsmith's command. Major ('Popski') Peniakoff, who had previously acted as an agent in the **Barce** area, joined the force to assist in the final stages of the operation. Leaving the **Faiyum** area on 2 September, in company with the Southern Rhodesian patrol destined for the **Benina** raid, the force passed round the south of the battle then being waged on the **Alamein** line and navigated the notoriously difficult Egyptian and **Kalansho** sand seas, to reach the vicinity of **Barce** on 12 September after a journey of some 1155 miles. Here the Rhodesian patrol continued on to the west while the New Zealanders and Guards, some fifty strong, carried in twelve light trucks and five jeeps, drove towards **Barce** on the evening of 13 September. Surviving without loss two minor encounters with enemy guards on the way, the force entered the town by midnight, the Guards making for the military barracks, Major Easonsmith creating a diversion in the town, and the New Zealanders driving on to the landing ground. In a drill practised beforehand the New Zealand patrol drove round the airfield firing incendiary bullets at parked aircraft, laying demolition charges, and shooting up the quarters. Enemy reaction was initially uncoordinated and harmless but, when the raiders tried to withdraw, they found the narrow exits from the area blocked by light tanks and armoured cars. By aggressive action the patrol broke through, losing some men and vehicles

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt J. R. Talbot; Motueka**; born South Africa, 4 Jun 1910; storekeeper, Public Works Dept; p.w. 16 Jan 1943.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col N. P. Wilder, DSO; Waipukurau**; born NZ 29 Mar 1914; farmer; patrol commander LRDG; CO Div Cav Apr 1944–Jan 1945; wounded 14 Sep 1942.

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in so doing, and regained the rendezvous where it met Easonsmith and the Guards, whose activities against the barracks and parked transport had been successful and almost unopposed. An attack by



**Tripolitanian infantry and harassing by aircraft on the 14th reduced the party's vehicles to two, on which those more severely wounded were loaded while the remainder set off on foot. At a landing ground used by the desert patrols some 100 miles inland, the survivors were met by the Southern Rhodesian patrols from the **Benghazi** force and taken back to **Kufra**, the wounded being flown in by Royal Air Force Bombay aircraft.**

**Losses of the **Barce** raiders amounted to ten prisoners, two of whom, both New Zealanders, were wounded, and eight wounded and safe, including Major Peniakoff. All the wounded eventually recovered, while four of the seven New Zealanders taken prisoner escaped about a year later. According to Italian records, some twenty-three aircraft were destroyed or badly damaged in a raid by 'armoured cars', while an undisclosed but far from negligible number of casualties was inflicted on the troops in the town and considerable damage done to installations and transport. Four of the New Zealanders received awards for their part in this action.**

**The German records dismiss the actions at **Benghazi** and **Barce** with the comment that sabotage troops were wiped out by the Italian garrisons and several prisoners taken. This is perhaps fitting as the material losses sustained at **Barce**, mainly Italian aircraft of secondary value, hardly affected the *Panzer Army's* strength, while the raids themselves proved what Rommel already knew, that the British were able to operate small raiding parties over the wide expanse of desert in the *Panzer Army's* rear. The **Gialo** and **Tobruk** actions, however, gave more cause for concern, that at **Tobruk** being considered a defensive victory of some value. The *Panzer Army's* diary recorded that, after seven hours of air bombardment, troops landed at the port at 2.30 a.m. on the 14th. A mobile force of German troops was hurriedly called together from the units in the **Alamein** line and other emergency measures put in hand in case the attack on **Tobruk** was intended to coincide with a major operation by the Eighth Army. However, by 9 a.m. the commander of the **Tobruk** area could report that the assault had been repulsed and the situation was in hand. The Germans finally**

estimated their successes as a cruiser, four destroyers, and four escort vessels sunk, a light cruiser and a destroyer seriously damaged, and three or four destroyers hit by bombs, as well as a bag of 580 prisoners, a total not greatly in excess of that of the losses admitted by the British. No sooner had the state of emergency at **Tobruk** subsided than news reached the *Panzer Army* of the attack on **Gialo**. Failure of communications with the oasis at first gave the impression that the garrison had been overwhelmed. Rommel then sent off the German *3 Reconnaissance Unit* and the Italian *Nizza* reconnaissance group to join the troops of the *Young Fascist Division* in **Siwa**, some 250 miles east of **Gialo**, but before any further action was taken, news arrived that the **Gialo** garrison had driven off the attackers with the help of the air forces.

Rommel himself saw the series of raids, especially the **Tobruk** operation, as an experiment by the British to test the possibility of similar action on a greater scale as part of a major offensive. He gave instructions to the commanders of the rear areas to improve their defensive systems, while he arranged for the reserves for the **Alamein** defences to be so placed that they could be quickly deployed against any landings. Both Rommel and his successor, General Stumme, tried to get the Italians to use the quite considerable forces held in the rear areas for an operation against **Kufra** and thus remove the main British raiding base in the desert but, although they gave approval to the idea, the Italians never managed to mount the operation.

There was some talk in Middle Eastern circles that the raiding operations were so long in the planning, and accordingly discussed freely in **Cairo** bars, that the enemy was given warning, but it is clear that, apart from vague hints that raids by land or sea were possible, there was no leakage of sufficient detail of time or place for counter measures by the Axis to be prepared.

Of the series of operations, General Alexander stated in his despatches that 'From a material point of view the raids had been a failure and our losses had been heavy but it is possible that they had had



the psychological effects we had hoped for. They probably .... assisted in diverting Rommel's attention to the possibility of seaborne raids on his long open flank.' Montgomery, with commendable restraint, left no public comment on the operations, but his Chief of Staff, de Guingand,<sup>1</sup> says he viewed them with disfavour. The loss of over a thousand men, three warships, and other valuable material was no small matter at the time, and it is therefore strange that these raids have received little publicity, even if only as a basis for a dissertation on the evils of political pressure on military operations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Operation Victory*, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Roskill, *The War at Sea*, Vol. II; Kay, *Long Range Desert Group*, War History Branch Episodes and Studies series; Peniakoff ('Popski'), *Private Army*; Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers*; Churchill, *The Second World War*, Vol. IV, p. 801; Alexander's Despatch, *London Gazette*, 3 Feb 1948; War diary of the *Panzer Army*; Campaign narrative, British Historical Section of the Cabinet; de Guingand, *Operation Victory*.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

# CHAPTER 13 – PREPARATIONS FOR THE OFFENSIVE

## CHAPTER 13

### *Preparations for the Offensive*

*i*

**AS** these raids were taking place, the New Zealand Division was settling in its rest area along a stretch of the coast between **El Hammam** and **Burg el Arab**, some 25 to 30 miles to the east of **El Alamein**. All the guns and such vehicles as were unwanted for the daily servicing of the Division were collected in an area known as 'Swordfish', some 15 miles inland, under pickets who were relieved at short intervals to allow all men to share in the amenities of the rest area.

At the rest area the men were housed in bivouac tents, dug in against air attack, along a stretch of sand dunes between the main road and the coast. Although the extreme heat of the summer was already showing signs of abating, the midday sun encouraged sea-bathing. On parts of this coastline there was a dangerous undertow, and in spite of surf patrols two men were drowned. Unit and **YMCA** canteens were quickly set up in the rest area, fresh food and an increased water ration supplied, worn clothing and equipment replaced and everything done to revive health and spirits. The Kiwi Concert Party performed twice a day from a portable stage, while 5 and 6 Brigade bands, the Base band and the **Maadi** Camp pipe band toured the area, giving concerts not only to New Zealanders but to all the troops there. The gathering at any one entertainment was limited to 400 men under anti-aircraft protection, but although enemy aircraft were occasionally seen, no bombs fell on the rest area. Drafts of men sent off on the four-day leave scheme started in the **New Zealand Box** were increased and leave trucks took parties each day into **Alexandria** to enjoy the cinemas and other civilian luxuries there.

**General Freyberg** took this opportunity to drive down to the New Zealand base camp at **Maadi** to deal with a back-log of administrative affairs of **2 NZEF**, only to be immediately presented with the problem of

discipline among the men on leave in **Cairo** and **Alexandria**. Aware that the congregation of men freshly released from the rigours of the front line would lead to a certain amount of riotous behaviour, he tried to reduce the paper war that would inevitably follow by ringing the headquarters of British Troops in **Egypt** 'to anticipate attack from that quarter re behaviour of tps on leave—six attacked British for no (?) reason—six were gaoled for breaking windows—60 raided the Berka. Think my comments stopped letter and have agreed to send in more picquets'. <sup>1</sup> A record number of cases of bad behaviour was in fact reported in this week, most of the incidents attributable to high spirits and alcohol in combination, but often aggravated by the rapacious habits of the Cairene shopkeepers and café proprietors allied to maladroit action by base officers and military police. **Freyberg** himself, on an unannounced inspection of the beer bar of the **New Zealand Club** in **Cairo**, quickly abandoned any intention of speaking to the men as he realised that his presence alone created a difficult situation, and that any attempt at advice or admonition would be rashly inopportune.

Although the troops' behaviour improved after this, **Freyberg's** endeavours to get the worst of the disturbances buried quickly and decently were to some extent frustrated by a fellow New Zealander who, serving in the British Army on the **Cairo** administration, apparently felt personally implicated and would not let the matter drop. A few days later the General received a letter from his officer in charge of **2 NZEF** administration, Brigadier **Stevens**, <sup>2</sup> in the following terms:

I very much regret that [this officer] has apparently been communicating with you at great length about the disturbances in **Cairo** last week. I am seeing him about this as I am convinced that, regrettable though they were, they were no worse than might have been expected. In any case, every incident that happens is with him verging on a disaster and needs to be looked at from that angle. <sup>3</sup>

With the Division out of the line, **Freyberg** was able to make some arrangements for the receipt of the reinforcement draft which he was

then expecting to be despatched from New Zealand at any moment. He ordered 18 Battalion to return to its own 4 Brigade at **Maadi**, its place in 6 Brigade being taken by 24 Battalion, which had now reorganised after its losses in the El Mreir action in July. He also called on 4 Brigade to provide a draft of 600 men, drawn equally from its three battalions, to reinforce 5 and 6 Brigades. Meanwhile 4 Brigade was to press ahead with its

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<sup>1</sup> GOC **2 NZEF/45**, 16 Sep 1942.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj-Gen W. G. Stevens**, CB, CBE, m.i.d.; **Richmond, Nelson**; born **London**, 11 Dec 1893; Regular soldier; NZ Fd Arty 1915–19 (Maj); AA & QMG, NZ Div, 1940; Officer in Charge of Administration, **2 NZEF**, 1940-45; GOC **2 NZEF**, 22 Nov 1945-6 Jul 1946.

<sup>3</sup> GOC **2 NZEF/26**.

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conversion to armour, prepared to absorb the reinforcement tank battalion when it arrived. Though its reinforcement was delayed until the next year, this brigade was officially renamed on 1 October 4 New Zealand Armoured Brigade, of 18, 19 and 20 Armoured Regiments.

A vexatious problem with which **Freyberg** dealt at this time concerned a long debated proposal for the return of 'undesirables'. As in most armies, **2 NZEF** had within its ranks a group of men who for various reasons, principally criminal tendencies and inability to submit to military discipline, came into the category of 'undesirables' in that they not only bred unnecessary work for those administering military law but also created a bad influence and a core of irresponsibility in whatever unit they were placed. Some of these men had in fact spent most of their time in the **Middle East** in periods of absence without leave followed by periods of detention for the crime. Though the shipping of such men back to New Zealand might encourage others to misbehave

with the sole intent of being similarly sent home, senior officers in the Division had gradually come round to the opinion that the benefits gained by getting rid of the transgressors would override all other considerations. **Freyberg** now agreed to a formula put forward by his staff classifying the undesirables, of whom certain classes would be sent back to New Zealand as soon as passages were available.

Another point he dealt with about this time was the matter of waste and salvage. With the vast amount of material pouring in to the **Middle East**, the need for economy in small details no longer appeared to the ordinary soldier as greatly important. No one walked if a vehicle was handy, yet the vastly increased supply of trucks was already putting a strain on the stocks of tyres available, while water and petrol tins, urgently needed for building up the dumps for the offensive, were likely to be carelessly discarded when empty. The whole of the desert from the Eighth Army's front line to the rear was littered with broken, worn or discarded material, from brass cartridge cases and bivouac tents to partially destroyed trucks, much of which could profitably be used by the **Middle East** workshops. **Freyberg** made a directive from General Alexander the basis for a personal plea to his men and, as had happened before, they responded with a genuine effort to cut down waste and collect salvage for despatch to the rear.

At this time **Freyberg** recorded a message to be broadcast in New Zealand on Christmas Day. In it he spoke of 'three years of sunbaked earth, sandstorms and flies' and expressed the hope that this might be 'the last Christmas we are away from our homes'. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/26.

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On 18 September the Division's rest period ceased, the bivouac areas were cleaned up, and the troops became mobile once more. Picking up surplus transport, field guns and other impedimenta at the 'Swordfish'

area, the units assembled next day in the open desert to the west of **Wadi Natrun** and 40 miles inland from the coast. Here the British 9 Armoured Brigade, mounted mainly in the new Sherman tanks, came under the Division's direct command. **General Freyberg** by this time had been made aware of the general principles of the task which the Army Commander expected the Division to undertake in the forthcoming offensive, and he directed a reconnaissance of a portion of the desert which, in distances and topographical details, bore some resemblance to the sector in the line where the Division's task lay. The known enemy defences facing this sector, plotted from ground and air reconnaissance, were reproduced in the training area by token weapon pits, wire, and unfused mines. For the first four days, while the ground was being prepared and plans studied, the units carried out training in route-marching, firing, and movement at night. On 24 September the divisional exercise commenced with a move of about ten miles in a south-easterly direction to an assembly area, where headquarters were set up, communications established, and supporting troops allocated to the three brigades to put them on a battle footing. In the afternoon **Freyberg** held a conference of brigade and unit commanders to explain the general intention and method of the exercise, and before dusk men of the **Provost Corps** set out to mark with lights two routes to a deployment area some 14 miles further west. At 8.30 p.m. the Division, fully motorised and led by 5 Brigade on the right-hand route and 6 Brigade on the left, set off along the lines of lights. Most of the vehicles had reached the deployment area by midnight but numerous stragglers, many of them overladen or undesertworthy trucks caught in soft sand on the right-hand route, were still creeping in at dawn, and in an unusual and heavy fog had difficulty in finding their units, which were well dispersed against air attack.

In the afternoon of the 25th **Freyberg** held a staff conference, after which operation orders were written under battle conditions. The plan entailed a movement that night by one battalion of each brigade to a start line while the other two battalions followed up. Everyone was to be dug in before dawn, transport sent away or dispersed, and everything



done so that during daylight of the 26th the concentration and preparations would be unnoticeable from the air. The approach march went through as planned, lit by the September full moon, and the troops lay concealed throughout the day. At 10 p.m. on the 26th, the men of the leading battalions rose from their trenches and set off for the first objective, followed by sapper parties who cleared lanes in the dummy minefields and marked the gaps for the support weapons and tanks. The other four battalions then passed through the leading troops and occupied the final objective, a distance of 5800 yards from the start line. Behind the infantry came the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade, the whole force taking up positions against dawn counter-attack. Throughout the exercise everything possible was done to simulate the conditions and methods expected for the actual operation. Tracer from Bofors guns was fired to mark the boundary between the two infantry brigades, 25-pounder tracer marked both flanks of the divisional area, and the field regiments fired a token live barrage ahead of the advancing infantry. The tanks and other vehicles needed in the action were sent forward in groupings designed to prevent congestion and confusion, communications by radio and line were established from front to rear, while behind the battle area a complete replenishment system was set up. It was in fact the most realistic exercise the Division had attempted. In spite of the use of much live ammunition and other explosives, only two men were injured.

After dawn the tanks and anti-tank guns had a live shoot against targets set out ahead of the objective to represent enemy tanks in a counter-attack. When it was all over, **Freyberg** had officers and senior NCOs gather on the objective so that he could point out some of the immediately obvious failings revealed by the exercise. Too many of the men had shown signs of physical distress during the march across the desert, and **Freyberg** ordered that fitness and care of the feet should be seen to. He also mentioned that, as he moved around the men during the exercise, he had found several who had been insufficiently instructed in, and thus failed to understand, their particular tasks. During the period of concealment before the assault, both men and vehicles had moved

about in the open in unnecessarily large numbers, giving evidence that junior officers and NCOs did not appreciate the principle of the exercise and failed to keep control. Much of **Freyberg's** comment was based on the fault common to all large-scale manoeuvring, a fault that commanders were only now beginning to admit. Though there was no real indiscipline, the majority of the men, with an incomplete understanding of the purposes behind the marching and digging and living on hard rations, found manoeuvres of this nature rather tedious. They became unwilling to play the game according to the ill-understood rules and often welcomed, even to the extent of encouraging, periods of apparent chaos to alleviate their feelings. **Freyberg** was aware of all this and had welcomed Montgomery's ruling that the troops should be kept well informed, but in this exercise there were two factors which limited the amount of information that could be disclosed. One was the necessary secrecy that had to be kept in an exercise shortly to be put into practice against the enemy. The second, and in this instance possibly the principal factor, was the unconscious desire of many officers and NCOs to sustain the importance of their ranks by appearing to be among the few selected to enter the esoteric mysteries of the higher command. Allied to plain inability to pass on information correctly, this influence caused the information issued from above to lose coherence as it gained in detail until, by the time it reached the lowest ranks, the purposes of the exercise had been lost in such details as the need for daily shaving and whether greatcoats should be carried or not. Lack of knowledge engendered lack of co-operation, and this in turn made it doubly hard for those of the staff studying the exercise to pick the faults that might appear in actual battle.

After **Freyberg's** talk to the officers and NCOs, a more detailed examination of the exercise was held at **Divisional Headquarters** on 8 October. Points then raised included the need for greater control of all traffic movement, and here again was stressed the importance of detailed knowledge of plans by officers and NCOs so that they could take their share in directing traffic and sorting out tangles. Observers reporting on concealment advised that the ban on smoking at night

would have to be rigidly enforced and vehicle windscreens shielded to eliminate the reflection of moonlight. Other defects were noted in communications, especially those to the rear for replenishment of supplies.

But the greatest weakness demonstrated by the exercise had been in the employment of 9 Armoured Brigade. This was the first opportunity the attached brigade had had of integrating its communications and services with those of the infantry. Naturally, several differences in method and some misunderstandings appeared, but other faults lay deeper and **Freyberg** felt that considerably more collective training would have to be undertaken before the tanks and infantry could work as one.

The exercise had been watched by a number of senior officers from Eighth Army, including Major-General Lumsden of **10 Corps** and Lieutenant-General Leese, who had assumed command of 30 Corps from Major-General Ramsden on 12 September. At the completion of the main manoeuvres, the Division took up desert formation to return to the 'Swordfish' training area, leaving 9 Armoured Brigade and 4 Field Regiment to do some further exercises. On the night of the 28th, **Freyberg** held a dinner in **Alexandria** for a selected group of officers from the Division and the armoured brigade in order to break down reserves and promote a spirit of closer understanding. The last two days of September were devoted to rehearsals of ceremonial parades for inspection by the Army Commander, arranged according to a note in **Freyberg's** diary to show that 'we are not a ragtail [ sic] and bobtail Army'. <sup>1</sup> To prevent the concentration of troops from attracting attention from the air, the two infantry brigades held their parades in the morning of the 30th, while the Artillery, Divisional Cavalry and the Machine Gun Battalion held a combined parade in the afternoon, followed by that of 9 Armoured Brigade. General Montgomery took the opportunity to present a number of awards won in recent battles, including the Victoria Cross to Sergeant Keith Elliott <sup>2</sup> of 22 Battalion.

While the New Zealand Division was on its training exercises the **Alamein** front was relatively quiescent. On 18 September 9 Australian Division, after careful preparations, made a 'bloodless advance' for about a mile and a half on its landward flank and thus straightened an inward curve made by earlier advances towards **Tell el Eisa**. The area gained, previously unoccupied and dominated by artillery fire by day and a stalking ground for patrols at night, brought the advantage of a simpler start line and shorter approach for the forthcoming offensive. Enemy reaction was negligible, partly because of the well prepared plan and lack of any aggressive fire support and partly because the Axis troops, fully occupied with strengthening the line they held, saw no point in driving the Australians back and occupying the ground themselves.

Another attempt, this time in the southern sector, was far less successful. On taking over the **New Zealand Box**, 44 Division had extended the defences southwards into the area over which 5 New Zealand Brigade had advanced in Operation BERESFORD, and had dug defences on the north-eastern and eastern edges of the **Munassib Depression**. The commander of 13 Corps decided that, if dominating enemy positions on the western and south-western escarpments could be occupied, the floor of the depression would make a valuable deployment area for artillery. In a heavy morning mist on the 30th, troops of 44 Division advanced through the depression under massive artillery cover and supported by tanks of

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45, 22 Sep 1942.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Lt K. Elliott, VC; **Wellington**; born Apiti, 25 Apr 1916; farmer; twice wounded; Asst Missioner, Wellington City Mission.

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4 Light Armoured Brigade. The right-flank objective was gained against little direct opposition, but the troops on the left disintegrated

against a strongpoint held by Italians of *Folgore Division* backed by men of *Ramcke Brigade*, all paratroops and among the best infantry in the *Panzer Army*. Attempts by 44 Division to renew the assault and relieve the survivors were delayed by a Stuka attack and other disorganisation caused by inexperience, and on the morning of 1 October General Horrocks called a halt on the small gains made. On the enemy side, an immediate counter-attack fell into some confusion, first when Italian infantry and German tanks failed to 'marry up', and later when supporting Stukas were forced by British fighters to jettison their bombs on the Axis lines. Against the weight of artillery and air support the British were employing, the counter-attack was finally abandoned on the excuse that the small amount of ground lost was not worth regaining. The defence put up by the Italian parachutists brought considerable praise from the Germans, but at the same time the *Panzer Army* commander issued a strongly worded and ominous note on indiscriminate artillery fire: 'This resulted in a large amount of ammunition being fired into areas in which there was no enemy. With the present ammunition situation this borders on a crime.'<sup>1</sup> Axis casualties from this operation were relatively light but 13 Corps lost 121 men wounded and 229 killed or missing, of whom the Axis claimed approximately 200 as prisoners.

Since the halt on the *Alamein* line, Field Marshal Rommel's health had been gradually deteriorating. Even before the *Alam Halfa* battle it had been giving concern to his staff and medical adviser and, once the battle simmered down, he was persuaded to take a rest cure in *Germany*. With few illusions that his army under existing conditions would ever be able to take the offensive, and with a shrewd guess that the British would not be ready for active operations until at least the October moon, he decided to take the opportunity of putting the African situation clearly before his superiors. Before leaving he prepared elaborate plans for complete defence works across the whole of the *Alamein* front and for the deployment of troops in the line and in reserve, with major deadlines for completion of the plans by the middle of October. On 21 September he handed over command of the *Panzer Army of Africa* to his

relief, General Stumme, who continued the plans without major alteration.

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<sup>1</sup> Diary of the *Panzer Army*. GMDS 34373/1.

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The system of defence worked out by the *Panzer Army's* engineers under Rommel's orders was formidable. The outer edge of the defences in the north followed the wire and minefields laid down when the battle stopped at the **Alamein** line and, further south, the new defences constructed during and after the **Alam Halfa** battle, when the old line ending at the **Qattara Box** was extended south-eastwards to Munassib and then, following the British minefields, southwards to **Himeimat**. South of **Himeimat** a continuous minefield was planned to meet the escarpment of the **Qattara Depression** but was never completed.

This outer edge of the defences was to be wired and mined throughout to a thickness of 500 to 1000 metres according to the terrain and was to be furnished with weapon pits for infantry manning light weapons. Directly to the rear of this outer belt there was to be an empty zone one to two kilometres thick, backed by another mined strip some two kilometres deep. Each infantry battalion in defence was to be allotted a sector with a front of one and a half kilometres and running the full depth from the outer belt to the rear, that is, up to five kilometres. One company only, set out in section strongpoints, was to hold the battle outposts while the rest of the battalion, with its heavy mortars, anti-tank guns and similar support weapons, occupied the second, or main, belt. At night the outposts were to be reinforced from the rear and given watchdogs to guard against surprise attack.

Plans of the defences prepared by the German engineers early in October indicate that initially lateral or flanking fields were to be laid between the outpost and main belts to cut the front into sectors three kilometres wide, each sector accommodating two battalions. The design of each lateral field was that of a narrow isosceles triangle, its apex resting on the front line. It was intended that the base and centre

portion of each triangle should be left clear of obstacles to provide a route to the outposts for counter-attacking forces. Although the master plan was followed along much of the front, there were many local variations caused by the lie of the ground, shortages of engineers and equipment, and lack of enough infantry to man the whole front.

For their system of defence the Germans used the term 'mine gardens', likening the open areas to gardens surrounded by hedges or borders of mines. The underlying principle was that, in the event of a British breakthrough at any particular point, the attacking forces would be halted by the main defence line and, hemmed in by the lateral fields, would be dealt with by fire and counter-attack in the open areas. Against a collapse of a portion of the main line, further defences were planned in the rear, including thick east-west laterals to guard against turning movements.

The extent of the defences can be gauged by the number of mines laid, some 445,358 of all types according to an estimate made by the German engineers. Over half these were British mines, either lifted from existing fields and relaid or taken from dumps captured in earlier campaigns. The majority were anti-tank mines, but some thousands of German anti-personnel 'S' type mines were laid thickly in the forward defences. The Axis sappers also made much use of trip-wires set a few inches above ground and attached to 'push-pull' igniters, which would explode mines or other explosives by either increase or release of tension on the wire. Where the sappers had time to add finishing touches to their work, they placed captured British shells of large calibre and aircraft bombs in the minefields, set in such a way that they could be electrically detonated by men in the defence posts, or by trip-wires or the explosion of nearby mines.

Mainly through photographic reconnaissance from the air, Eighth Army headquarters soon recognised that the Axis engineers were working to a pattern so that, by early October, it was able to issue a description of the defence works from the coast to as far south as [Deir el](#)



**Shein**. At this time the laterals dividing the sectors in the north were not fully completed, so that the air photographs revealed the continuous lines of the forward and main minefield belts, with the open space in between cut into large sections by the main laterals. The Eighth Army intelligence staff correctly surmised from what was known of the layout of the Axis artillery and anti-tank guns the purpose of the open spaces or 'hollows'. In the extreme north, between the end of the line on the sea at **Mersa el Hamra** and **Sidi Abd el Rahman**, the garden pattern did not show out clearly. Here the defences of the sand dunes and the coastal road and railway had evolved under the Australian assaults in July in a rather shapeless form, in which however three main defence lines could be identified enclosing some irregularly grouped open spaces.

Immediately south of **Tell el Eisa** the pattern showed out clearly, with four hollows between two belts of mines in the relatively level stretch as far as **Deir el Dhib**. Around the El Shein and El Mreir depressions the pattern became confused among the old defences and the broken terrain, to reappear in outline along the pipeline as far as the **Qattara Box**, with the box itself showing as a formidable strongpoint. To the south of the box British interpretation was unable to identify the pattern and assumed that the defence here relied on strongpoints in the new line backed by the positions held through Kalakh, Khadim and Taqa before the **Alam Halfa** advance. This assumption was partially correct for, although the double line of mines was in fact laid as far as **Himeimat** with the existing British-laid fields adapted to fit in, the fields were very thin in places, while the troops available were insufficient to man more than the tactically valuable areas in strongpoints. It was, however, the *Panzer Army's* intention to man the whole front as strongly as in the north as and when troops became available, and even to continue the mine gardens south from **Himeimat**.





ENEMY DEFENCES IN 30 CORPS' SECTOR  
 ENEMY DEFENCES IN 30 CORPS' SECTOR

British reconnaissance had also quickly picked up traces of a massive minefield running west from the vicinity of **Deir el Dhib**. This work, known to the Axis as the **Qatani field**, was eventually extended to the **Rahman Track** and then southwards along the track, a total distance of over 20 miles, and was intended to insulate the northern sector from the southern. As the panzer formations of **Africa Corps** would be closely concerned with any manoeuvring and fighting in the rear, the **Qatani** work was made the **Corps'** responsibility, and such was their engineers' enthusiasm for enlarging and improving the minefield that they had to be restrained from cornering the **Panzer Army's** supply of mines.

The only other major defences to the rear were those along the coast, but any clear appreciation of them was difficult to obtain by aerial reconnaissance as the area along the road and railway from **Rahman** to **Matruh** was thickly occupied by the rear services of the Axis, whose camps, transport parks, dumps, and defence works were hard to distinguish among the multitudinous traces of occupation left behind from previous campaigns.

Although the **Middle East Joint Intelligence Committee** in September considered that the **Panzer Army** might be strong enough to launch an offensive in November, or even to try a spoiling attack earlier, enemy

records carry no definite information of proposed offensive operations. Neither war diaries nor reports by the Axis commanders mention even a vague target date for the resumption of the drive for the Canal. Rather, there is in some of the records a faint flavour of fatalism as if the turn of the tide had been perceived. Most of the senior German commanders, Rommel and Kesselring in particular, must have been aware that little was likely to be achieved in North Africa so long as the attention of the **German High Command** was concentrated on **Russia**.

Rommel left no clear record that he expected the Eighth Army's offensive to take any particular course. In *The Rommel Papers* his statements imply that he was anticipating a battle of material and attrition similar in fact to that laid on by Montgomery, and he made the comment, 'In this form of action the full value of the excellent Australian and New Zealand infantry would be realised and the British artillery would have its effect'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, p. 299.

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It is very doubtful, however, if Rommel saw the issues and results clearly before the battle. His intelligence staff had in fact practically discounted the value of the New Zealand Division after **Alam Halfa**, reporting it weak and low in morale, and not even troubling to set its disposition clearly within the Eighth Army.

The true expectations of both Rommel and the *Panzer Army* must be sought in the records of plans and actions prior to the battle. Here the plan of defence, the positioning of front-line troops and reserves, and several minor instructions, all indicate that the British offensive was expected to take the conventional pattern of a breakthrough and outflanking movement in the southern half of the line. In an intelligence summary issued by the *Panzer Army* on 10 October,<sup>1</sup> a summary which must have borne at least an echo of Rommel's thinking, British reconnaissance activity in the south was used as evidence that the main thrust was likely to come somewhere on the front to the south

of **Ruweisat Ridge**, with the possibility of an assault along the coastal road, either in conjunction with the outflanking movement, as an alternative, or as a diversion. That this was the generally held opinion is borne out by the method of work on the defences. The mining of the southern sector and of the Qatani field were given priority by Rommel before he left in September, but lost this priority to the northern sector early in October. The reason for this was that the distance from the coastal supply line, the shortage of transport and petrol and the shortage of infantry, precluded the southern front from ever being made impregnable. The defence there was intended to absorb and weaken the impetus of a British attack, after which the line would swing back, hinged on the El Mreir or El Dhib area, on to the massive Qatani minefield, while the armoured and mobile troops operated in the open desert to the west and covered the coastal supply line. A second line of defence in the area of the **Fuka** escarpment was considered but little preparation was made to develop it, and it can only be assumed that the *Panzer Army* did not envisage a retreat there unless it could do so sufficiently intact and with time to spare to dig itself in. That this was the general plan is supported by Rommel's reaction when, on returning to **Africa**, he found that Montgomery's tactics had combined with *Panzer Army's* petrol shortage to upset his preconception of the way the battle would be fought.

Following this policy, the *Panzer Army* concentrated its efforts from the end of the first week in October on making the northern half of the front, from the coast to El Mreir, as impregnable as

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<sup>1</sup> GMDS 34373/7.

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possible. The intelligence summary quoted above carries the note, 'There are several contradictory reports to hand regarding the date of the enemy offensive. The forward move of the attacking troops and artillery will take at least one or two days, and therefore our troops cannot be taken by surprise if they keep their eyes open and take every

opportunity to observe the enemy.'

The *Panzer Army's* estimate of the Eighth Army's intention was at least soundly based. The previous attacks in the **Alamein** line had been made either in the vicinity of **Ruweisat Ridge** or in the coastal sector and all had followed a similar pattern: an initial infantry advance whose success had been backed up so slowly and hesitantly that the defence had been given time to concentrate reserves at the point of penetration and 'seal off the breach'. Only in the coastal sector had the Eighth Army been able to hold a gain of ground. In the two definite offensive actions during the **Alam Halfa** battle, the attacks by the Australian and New Zealand divisions, the British methods, as seen from the enemy side of the hill, had remained unchanged in principle; in both, an infantry advance had been allowed to peter out before being followed up by armour, while elsewhere in this battle the general caution and apparently slow reaction gave little hint that the British tactics were likely to change radically. Thus the Axis theory was that, so long as the expected increase in the Eighth Army's strength was countered by a corresponding increase in the strength of the defences, the *Panzer Army* could rely on its speedy response to danger and the slow reaction of the British to exploit success. In all the comments in the Axis records known to have been made before 23 October, this theory, often seemingly with a touch of complacency, is evident.

The *Panzer Army* commanders and staff were anticipating an attack in the full-moon period in the second half of October, but were confident that the assembly and concentration of the British forces would be observed over a period of two to four days before the offensive opened. A senior staff officer, Colonel Liss of the **German War Ministry**, after visiting the front on the day of 23 October, gave it as the Ministry's opinion that there was no danger of a major attack in the near future. <sup>1</sup>

Had the Axis commanders been aware, as several later claimed, that the odds were heavily stacked against them, it is strange that they did not develop their intelligence services more fully in order to gain every item of information that might offer them some advantage in the

coming battle. Yet just as before **Alam Halfa** they failed to reconnoitre the southern minefields carefully, so at

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<sup>1</sup> War diary of *Africa Corps*.

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**Alamein** they remained preoccupied with their own work on the defences and their supply problems, and were seemingly content with such scraps of information as fortuitously came their way.

The direct approach to information on the forces facing them, by means of fighting patrols and similar operations, was not used to any extent, and even reconnaissance patrolling was sketchy compared to the Eighth Army's efforts. Some recognition of this brought an order early in October for more vigorous patrols with both German and Italian tanks in support, but such efforts were rare. 'The value of [armoured patrols] is very debatable, particularly in view of the high petrol consumption of about 600 litres per patrol.'<sup>1</sup>

Air observation, on which the Axis had earlier relied for most information of immediate value, was proving progressively more difficult and hazardous against the superiority of the Allied air forces. High-level, or stratospheric, reconnaissance was attempted by Ju86 aircraft equipped to fly above the British fighters' ceiling, but was only carried out about once a week, usually over the **Suez** roadstead. With stripped-down Spitfires flown by specially trained pilots, the **Royal Air Force** made these flights unprofitable and the last known occurred on 15 September.

Planned low-level reconnaissance, similar to that carried out by the Allied air forces, was impossible in face of superior fighter cover, so that the Axis planes could attempt no more than hasty and irregular sorties when the opposing fighter patrols were engaged elsewhere. Aerial observation under such conditions could not hope to do more than bring a general picture of shipping and major transport movement. It was quite unable to detect details, such as the difference between genuine

and dummy trucks and guns, which would have been of immediate value to the ground commanders. In contrast, the **Desert Air Force**, in **208 Squadron** alone, maintained twenty-four aircraft solely engaged in mapping a complete aerial mosaic of the Axis positions.

Another of the Axis sources of information, the wireless intercept services operated by both Germans and Italians, could hardly have failed to gather items which would have been of value when examined in the context of other intelligence. The enemy records mention agents' reports from civilian sources in **Egypt** as well as interrogation of deserters and prisoners taken on patrol, but neither these nor intercept seem, by themselves, to have been able to pierce the tight security imposed by Montgomery.

<sup>2</sup>See *R.A.F. Middle East Review*, Vol. I, pp. 85, 99.

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<sup>1</sup> Message from *Africa Corps* to *Panzer Army*, 11 Oct 1942, on GMDS 25869/9-11.

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As early as 1 October the intelligence officer of *15 Panzer Division* wrote an appreciation in which the sector of attack, the British tactics, and the use of camouflage and deception were foretold with some accuracy. His choice of the sector lay solely in the fact that his division's role covered that part of the line and was therefore accidental, but otherwise he was at fault in only two points: he expected the British to spend a day in preparations which could be observed and recognised, followed by an infantry advance in the late afternoon to allow a full night for mine clearance, and the armoured advance at first light next morning. He did not attempt to foretell the date, and later divisional records, probably made by the same officer, comment on the scanty information and poor observation reports available, especially the air reconnaissance which was 'as always of doubtful value and lacked clearness' and 'gave no preliminary indication when or where the offensive might come'. <sup>1</sup> On the other hand *21 Panzer Division*, not involved in the main assault and thus clear of any charges of

unpreparedness, claimed that the British preparations were seen and the offensive forecast to the day, though expected on the southern sector. Written after the event, this claim is interesting only for its touch of Teutonic self-righteousness. <sup>2</sup>

The only known warning the *Panzer Army* received of the opening date of the battle came in an Italian naval intelligence message of 22 October, which warned that major British naval operations were imminent and possibly would include an assault landing on the coast. <sup>3</sup>

On 10 October the *Panzer Army* issued a summary <sup>4</sup> of what was known of the Eighth Army's strengths and dispositions, an estimate not greatly amended later. Montgomery's name was known as army commander but the three British corps, 30, 13, and 10, were placed under Ramsden, Lumsden, and Holmes respectively. The general dispositions of 30 Corps were given with accuracy, with 51 (Highland) Division sharing the Australian sector under indoctrination preparatory to taking it over, and 5 instead of 4 Indian Division on the corps' left flank. In 13 Corps the summary placed 7 Armoured Division, 44 Infantry Division, 1 Greek Brigade and the New Zealand Division, with 1 and 10 Armoured Divisions in reserve to the rear. Some hint of a reorganisation of the British armour had seeped through but was believed to apply only to divisions, for 10 Corps was shown as an infantry formation made up of 50 British and 10 Indian Divisions, 133 Brigade (of 44

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<sup>1</sup> *15 Pz Div* intelligence reports on GMDS 26421/1 and 3.

<sup>2</sup> *21 Pz Div* appendices on GMDS 27641/8.

<sup>3</sup> *Panzer Army* war diary, GMDS 34373/1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



opinion that the Australian division was the best attacking force and that the New Zealand Division, under strength and 'in spite of its reverses on 4 September', might be used in an attack. Concern was expressed over **United States** intervention, for rumours pointed to the arrival of two American armoured units at **Suez**, yet prisoners' statements indicated that there were no formed **United States** units ready to take the field. The summary concluded that the Eighth Army was as strong, if not stronger, than it was at the beginning of the Axis May offensive, with 3½ armoured divisions and 9 infantry divisions in the forward area, and another armoured and two infantry divisions in the Delta, all at good strength and with a total of 800 to 900 tanks. It is doubtful if this estimate of British strength was intended as a warning, for the Axis commanders knew that their own present strength was considerably higher than their May totals and, though their supply line was longer, they expected to fight a defensive battle. Only in the air did the Axis acknowledge a real inferiority.

The failure to take steps to improve their intelligence system is perhaps understandable in the light of the internal troubles that beset the Axis commanders. In spite of Rommel's representations at the top level in **Germany**, the demands of the African theatre were still being met mainly by promises or by token shipments on account. In the last ten days of September an airlift expected to bring the German formations up to strength brought an average of 107 daily, a total of a little over a thousand men, far from enough even to replace those falling sick from the prevalent desert ills. When complaints from General Stumme caused the flow to be increased, each new arrival only emphasised the other logistic difficulties under which the *Panzer Army* suffered. Food in the German half of the army became progressively worse in the latter part of September and, though two ships were despatched to ease this shortage, they sat, one in **Tripoli** and the other in **Benghazi**, until well into October for lack of road transport to shift their cargoes and lack of escort vessels to allow them to be moved to a port nearer the front. Eventually the Italians who, in control of the supply lines, had amassed food stocks in the rear areas were persuaded



to hand over a quantity of bread which was flown up to the German troops at the front. It must have been galling to the Germans to have to go cap-in-hand to their junior partners, especially as the Italians were almost offensively magnanimous in helping to feed the hungry German soldiers.

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<sup>1</sup> 133 Bde became 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade in October 1942.

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In the first days of October the *Panzer Army* reported that its petrol situation was precarious and ammunition stocks inadequate. Presumably under pressure from Rommel, the *Panzer Army* was promised some of Hitler's 'new weapons' and eight multi-barrelled *nebelwerfers* actually reached Africa; but further shipments were held up on the grounds that they would only add to the ammunition problem. From his rest-cure in Germany, Rommel wrote advising that these eight be held in reserve for their surprise value in an emergency and, as far as is known, they were never fired on the Alamein front.

The state of inadequacy of the whole North African supply organisation made any real improvement impossible without a concerted effort and a calculated risk similar to that made by the Allies in relieving Malta. But while the crises in Malta were obvious, that in North Africa was hidden in a smoke screen of promises and wishful thinking. The Italians, and many Germans, made the excuse that their lack of shipping, aggravated by Allied sea and air operations, limited the amount that could be sent to the *Panzer Army*. Yet there were available in Europe sufficient supplies of all kinds, as well as ships, escorts and air cover, to make possible several 'Malta convoys' in which, in spite of possible losses, enough material would have reached Africa to settle the *Panzer Army's* problems for some months at least. As it was, the method of attempting a constant trickle of supply not only gave the Allies the opportunity to impede its constancy but made efficient planning impossible. As with the food cargoes mentioned earlier, ships that reached North Africa safely remained in port for long periods, all the

time in danger of air attack, through lack of facilities to transport their cargoes to the forward area. The coastal scow service, intended to relieve road transport of long bulk haulage, operated with disconcerting irregularity owing to lack of provision of sufficient vessels and sufficient crews. The railway on which bulk supplies could be brought close to the front similarly suffered a lack of rolling stock, as well as maintenance crews to repair damage caused by air bombing and washouts on the line after heavy rain. Air lifts with their natural limitations and expense proved merely a palliative: they carried troops without their heavy equipment or petrol at the expense of existing stocks, in both cases throwing more strain on the other supply methods. Motor transport thus was left with the bulk of the work, not only of its normal servicing of the wide front but of carrying bulk supplies from as far to the rear as the port of **Tripoli**. Of the available trucks held by the *Panzer Army*, one in every three was invariably under repair owing to shortages of mechanics, spare parts and tyres. Each weak link in the system created its corresponding problem in other fields. Only by a vigorously executed plan of moving supplies in bulk, and taking the risks involved, could the North African supply and transport problem have been solved. This the Axis was not yet ready to attempt.

By 19 October a slightly improved flow from **Europe** and strict economy in **Africa** had brought ammunition stocks to the point which the *Panzer Army* quartermaster could call adequate, that is, sufficient for a battle not unduly prolonged. Food at this date was sufficient for twenty-one days for the German troops, and probably more for the Italians, but water in the whole forward area was scarce and, what there was, unpalatable since several heavy rainstorms in the first weeks of October had spoilt many of the coastal wells and cisterns upon which the *Panzer Army* was forced to rely. This of course aggravated the general transport problems as water was needed daily in astronomical gallonage for drinking, cooking, and vehicle radiators; washing, as an increase in the incidence of lice infestation showed among Axis troops during this period, must have taken a back place. With the irregularity of the scow service and the railway, water had to be brought at times by

motor transport from as far back as **Tobruk**. The building up of other stocks in the front area could only be done at the expense of petrol stocks so that, just two days before the battle opened, the *Panzer Army* had only enough petrol to last for ten to eleven days of normal usage under static conditions of the front.

Thus General Stumme on 22 October commented that his troops were living from hand to mouth, denied the 'strategic mobility absolutely essential for the existence of the Panzer Army'. <sup>1</sup>

With this continuing source of worry the new Commander-in-Chief of the *Panzer Army* allowed himself to be deceived by the thoroughness of Montgomery's scheme of deception. Although previous experience indicated that the full moon would bring danger, the lack of any overt signs of British preparations seems to have been taken as an indication that the Eighth Army was not yet ready and would follow the pattern set a year previously by opening its campaign in November.

At conferences on the 8th and 14th, Stumme directed the two panzer divisions to prepare plans for counter-attacks, to be submitted to him by the 25th. The records of the two divisions show that planning and some exercises were carried out with no sense of urgency, *15 Panzer Division* preparing for relatively simple

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<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Army* war diary, GMDS 34373/1.

counter-attacks on the northern front and *21 Division* for a rather more elaborate operation in the nature of a counter-stroke in the south. The latter formation's diary remarks that its plan in actual battle 'will probably use up all our present stocks of ammunition and petrol'. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *21 Pz Div* war diary, GMDS 27641/8.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

# CHAPTER 14 – THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLANS

## CHAPTER 14

### *The Development of the Plans*

AS in the trench warfare of the First War, there was not a great deal of variation possible in the planning of an offensive at **Alamein**. Neither the British nor the Axis gave serious thought to a wide outflanking turn round the south of the defended line, though such a movement might have been possible with the facilities with which the Eighth Army was finally equipped. The assembly of troops and material, together with the complicated preparations necessary to ensure navigation of the difficult going, could not have been hidden and there were other tactical and logistical disadvantages in such a left hook. Yet, with the parlous state of the Axis petrol supplies, it might have been more successful than the British planners could imagine, for the *Panzer Army* would have been hard pressed to deploy its reserves to meet the threat and at the same time maintain its fixed defences against a possible frontal assault. But the strongest argument of all against outflanking movements lay in the likelihood of a planned withdrawal by the Axis army before it was encircled. Montgomery was determined to break the pattern of see-saw fights up and down the desert by forcing the *Panzer Army* to fight—and be beaten—where it stood.

Planning was thus resolved into a choice of the sectors of the defended line against which main or secondary assaults should be made. There is evidence that Montgomery, or his staff, early considered the course suggested in some of the German appreciations, of holding attacks in the north to cover a major breakthrough in the vicinity of **Ruweisat Ridge**, a plan similar in conception to the July operations in which the New Zealand Division took part. This later evolved into a more ambitious proposal for simultaneous attacks by the two British infantry corps on the enemy's flanks, to converge once the defences were pierced; or alternatively, should the southern attack fail, for 30 Corps in the north, with the main weight of the army behind it, to swing towards the sea. Little detail of the planning up to this stage has survived, but it was all of the traditional pattern in which the infantry were expected to cut

gaps through which the armour would charge to engage the Axis armour. The essence of these tactics lay in the concept that, although the British might lose tank for tank, the superior numbers in the Eighth Army would bring the armoured battle to a close with a credit balance, the surviving tanks then joining the infantry to polish off the now unprotected Axis infantry.

But hard facts, of the number of experienced troops and the amount of equipment available, brought second thoughts about a two-pronged assault, leading Montgomery to a decision to concentrate his forces in the north, with 30 Corps to make the infantry break-in and 10 Corps to follow through, while 13 Corps in the south played a minor, diversionary, role. In this form the plan took shape under the code-name LIGHTFOOT, a name it retained throughout later variations.

Considerable detail of this phase of the planning survived in the New Zealand records in spite of Montgomery's direction that the 'paper battle' was to be kept to a minimum. This came about mainly because Freyberg, his division allotted a dual role as assault infantry in the break-in under 30 Corps and as a mobile force in the break-out under 10 Corps, was unable to attend all the conferences called by the two corps headquarters. He was, moreover, still not completely fit, as the treatment he had received for the wound suffered at Minqar Qaim had left him with a troublesome rash. When, on 15 September, after an Army Commander's conference at which the salient points of LIGHTFOOT had been disclosed, he had driven to Maadi, his trip had been to some extent actuated by the need to get specialist advice and treatment. After an arduous round of visits and consultations, he was back within forty-eight hours at his headquarters near Burg el Arab to become immersed immediately in the sea of planning conferences. Early on the 18th he talked with the commanders of both 30 and 10 Corps, Leese and Lumsden, and then drove westward to see General Morshead of 9 Australian Division and examine from a forward observation post the ground over which the infantry were to advance. It took nearly 100 miles of dusty driving in the late afternoon to rejoin the Division, which

was then assembling in the training area west of **Wadi Natrun**, and no sooner had he arrived than he received a summons to attend a 30 Corps conference the following morning. In considerable discomfort after the many miles of travel in heat and dust, he was able to plead the excuse of having his own divisional exercise to plan, the **10 Corps** plans to study, and a backlog of paper work waiting at his headquarters. This occupied the 19th, while a war game exercise at the headquarters of **10 Corps** claimed his close attention until the late afternoon of the next day. On returning to his own headquarters he found the GSO II of 30 Corps awaiting him with the **LIGHTFOOT** plans developed at the conference he had missed. Until close on midnight, **Freyberg** and his staff worked over these proposals point by point and drafted a detailed set of comments which, with a covering letter, was sent to General Leese. The next few days were filled with his own divisional exercises, but **Freyberg** found time to continue discussions with his staff and brigadiers on certain of the **LIGHTFOOT** proposals in the light of previous desert experience and of the current manoeuvres.

**Freyberg's** main worry lay in the timings of the infantry break-in battle. He was confident that his division could gain its objective and that 9 Armoured Brigade, after completing its close training with the infantry, could be moved forward before daylight in time to resist armoured counter-attack by the enemy. But the other three infantry divisions were to attack without heavy armoured brigades under command but with only detachments of two-pounder Valentines of 23 Armoured Brigade in support. The failure of any one division to get on, or at least close, to its objective, dug in, and supported against counter-attack would endanger the whole initial operation. The Army plan insured against this by having the two armoured divisions of **10 Corps** advance through the infantry and deploy across the front, but **Freyberg** had grave doubts whether this would be accomplished. After talking with Lumsden, commanding **10 Corps**, and Gatehouse whose **10 Armoured Division** was scheduled to pass through the New Zealand sector of the assault, he came to the conclusion that, as at Ruweisat and El Mreir in July, the armoured formations were likely to act with caution rather



than resolution. Latent suspicion of the armoured commanders' intentions was in fact so strongly rooted among the infantry that finally Morshead, Pienaar and **Freyberg**, the three 'Commonwealth commanders', approached Leese to voice their disquiet. Leese, who had only taken over command of 30 Corps from Ramsden after the **Alam Halfa** battle and had had no first-hand experience of the desert war, was unwilling to believe that the armour would not follow Montgomery's orders to the letter and was inclined to discount the infantry's lack of confidence. However, early in October, his own Brigadier General Staff (Brigadier G. P. Walsh) returned from a **10 Corps** conference with similar doubts, upon which he brought the matter before the Army Commander. Montgomery then told the armoured commanders firmly that his orders allowed no latitude in interpretation. Though this edict was welcomed by the three 'Commonwealth commanders', some doubts still lingered in **Freyberg's** mind at least.

The New Zealand Division's manoeuvres with 9 Armoured Brigade in September were watched with interest by most of the senior commanders of the Eighth Army and the post-mortems were carefully studied, particularly of such details as the speed of communications between front and rear, the rate of advance of both infantry and tanks, the time taken by the engineers to clear the gaps in the minefields, and the timing of the operation as a whole from the moment dusk gave concealment from observation until the objective was occupied and consolidated against counter-attack. One innovation, arising from a suggestion made by Captain **White**<sup>1</sup> of **Freyberg's** personal staff and adopted after trial, was the use of a distinguishable pattern of tracer shells or bullets fired by machine guns, anti-aircraft or field guns along sector boundaries to assist the troops in keeping direction at night.

The results of the manoeuvres had a great bearing on 30 Corps' plans. Although several details were varied by the three other infantry divisions to allow for differences in organisation and experience, **Freyberg's** methods for an infantry advance at night were adopted as the basis for standard practice. The New Zealand Division, most of whose

officers and men had had experience in operations of a similar nature and were thus able to relate the exercises to battle conditions, was in the event the only formation to carry out full divisional manoeuvres. For purposes of indoctrination, brigades of the newly arrived 51 (Highland) Division relieved brigades of 9 Australian Division in rotation from 2 October onwards, so that neither of these two formations could muster its full three brigades out of the line at any time, while **1 South African Division**, having to maintain its front with two brigades, could only release one brigade at a time for rest and exercises. All three divisions allocated at least one battalion each to train with the Valentine tanks. <sup>2</sup>

As for the main body of the armour in **10 Corps**, there were several factors to hinder its training in co-ordinated action. To guard against a sudden spoiling attack by the *Panzer Army* should

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj J. C. White**, MBE, m.i.d.; **Wellington**; born Dunedin, 1 Nov 1911; barrister and solicitor; PA to GOC 1940–45; Solicitor-General, Feb 1966–; appointed QC Mar 1966.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt-Col S. F. Hartnell** of 19 NZ Battalion was brought from **Maadi Camp** to advise the Highland Division on desert movement and formation.

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word of the offensive leak out, an armoured reserve had to be kept ready to act at short notice. At the same time a scheme was still being implemented, on lines proposed by General Auchinleck some months earlier, of concentrating tanks by their types in the various formations. This entailed constant transfers of both tanks and their crews as the squadrons in the field were built up with new or reconditioned tanks—with every commander doing his best to acquire the new Shermans in place of Grants or Crusaders. A further impediment to collective training lay in the need to build up the lorried infantry, artillery and engineer units of the armoured formations, and for this it was often necessary to transfer men, and sometimes whole units, who had had no previous experience of working with armour. Though the armoured formations

trained hard, much of the training was of necessity elementary and piecemeal.

By the time the results of the New Zealand post-mortems were made known, Montgomery himself had begun to see more clearly the shape of the battle he intended to stage, influenced no doubt by comments of the 'Commonwealth commanders' and other old desert hands. Studying the question why, in previous battles, superiority in numbers of tanks and men had failed to ensure victory, he realised that in the conventional form of breakthrough battle he was planning, his main body of armour would pass for a time beyond his immediate and direct control. Although, shortly after his arrival in the **Middle East**, he had enthusiastically started to form the British equivalent of the German panzer corps, called variously a '*corps d'élite*' or a '*corps de chasse*', it was becoming obvious that weaknesses in training, and particularly the strong cavalry tradition of the British armour, could hardly be eliminated in a matter of weeks so that **10 Corps**, however hard it worked, could not hope to become that closely integrated body of all arms in which the power and achievement of the *Africa Corps* lay. The Army Commander in fact foresaw danger if his armour was permitted, in the local slang, to 'swan around' and fight independent battles on its own, but just such action was part of his present plan in which the armour was expected to sally forth from the infantry breach and do battle with the Axis tanks.

As already explained, after wide outflanking movements and a pincers assault by the two corps had been ruled out, the only method left was the direct, concentrated attack on a relatively narrow front, which was the method of the **LIGHTFOOT** plan. A seaborne landing behind the Axis lines might have been added, but it is doubtful if Montgomery ever seriously considered such an attempt after the abortive **Tobruk** raid of mid-September; in any case, most of the trained units and special equipment available in the **Middle East** for a sea-landing had been expended and insufficient remained to ensure success. Such an operation broke the rules both of concentration of effort and direct

control.

It would seem, therefore, that little variation was possible on LIGHTFOOT. Yet, on 6 October, Montgomery made it known that he had changed the plan. Admittedly it was mainly a change in the principle under which the battle was to be fought, but it was a significant alteration and one that added much to the army's faith in his leadership, especially among the infantry. In detail, the LIGHTFOOT opening was to proceed as arranged, with a frontal assault by the four infantry divisions of 30 Corps under massive artillery support, to coincide with diversionary action along the whole of the fortified front and a feint, seaborne attack in the vicinity of **Daba**. After the infantry had penetrated the main Axis defences and the engineers had cleared gaps in the minefields, the armour of **10 Corps** was to pass through. But, instead of a charge through the gaps 'to seek out and destroy the enemy armour' as previous operation orders had demanded, Montgomery now proposed that the tanks should form a bridgehead on ground of their own choosing and, with the support of their motorised infantry, anti-tank guns and artillery, go over in effect to the defensive, to cover further infantry operations against counter-attack. This would place the Axis armour and reserves at the disadvantage of having to counter-attack to relieve their front-line troops, which meanwhile would be under constant assault designed to 'crumble' them and remove the fixed defences as bases of armoured manoeuvre. The essential element was that the British armour would remain on the defensive until the Axis armour, wasted by fruitless counter-attacks and divorced from the fixed defences, would become too weak to conduct the war of manoeuvre in which the panzer divisions had shown themselves the superior. Only then might the British tanks be loosed to encircle and block the retreat of the survivors of the *Panzer Army*.

It was a bold conception and it shows that Montgomery perceived something of the essential differences between German tank tactics and the British. Seldom did German tanks advance against British tanks unless they were closely supported by anti-tank guns and, if possible,

other artillery. Upon engagement the leading German tanks fell back, drawing the British tanks, unencumbered by supporting arms, on to an anti-tank gun line. The actions of 23 Armoured Brigade at El Mreir and 8 Armoured Brigade to the south of Alam Halfa offered recent examples of the difference in method. Under the new proposals, the British tanks were to attempt a modified version of the German tactics by thrusting themselves out to invite retaliation and then sitting tight, covered by field and anti-tank artillery, in a position where they would be under control and not likely to start a private war of their own.

Montgomery's plan was in effect an example of the concentrated frontal assault as employed by commanders throughout the ages in face of strong fortifications which could not easily be outflanked, and against which ruse and strategem were limited to the point and time of the attack. For the Axis, it held little element of surprise, except uncertainty of time and place. Although the desert had seen numerous versions of the outflanking manoeuvre since General O'Connor's early victories over the Italians, and was to see several more under Montgomery's leadership, the frontal assault on a narrow sector had not been completely unknown or untried. The claim that the new plan was a reversal of the accepted military thinking of the day <sup>1</sup> rests upon the defensive role given to the tanks and the principle of eliminating the enemy's infantry before his armour, and it could at least be said that these two ideas were not standard practice. But whatever its degree of unorthodoxy, the new plan was basically sound, for it admitted some of the weaknesses in British training while offering simplicity of aim as well as firm control to bring unity of action.

Yet it almost came to grief over a blank spot in tactics which received far less attention in the planning than its importance warranted. This was the lack of practice in a common doctrine among the tanks, artillery and infantry for dealing with anti-tank guns, and particularly with those firing from the protection of minefields. Admittedly there was little time for such practice, even had the lack been generally recognised. Only 9 Armoured Brigade and the battalions

of the Valentine-equipped 23 Armoured Brigade had the opportunity to train with the infantry divisions and other arms; the bulk of the armour in **10 Corps**, as mentioned earlier, was never sufficiently organised to deal with anything more than the fundamentals of co-operative training.

Yet from the first day of the battle the German anti-tank guns rather than the Axis armour were clearly the main adversaries of the British tanks. Handling their guns, from the small 20-millimetre to the dreaded 88, with competence and determination and displaying an ability to disengage and re-form rapidly on a new line, the enemy anti-tank gunners in fact provided the key to the defence so long as the British armour was restricted by minefields.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Memoirs*, p. 119; *Alamein to Sangro*, p. 13.

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On the evidence available it is probably true that in this, as in previous desert battles, British tanks suffered more from anti-tank guns sited in minefields than from any other cause, including the fire of opposing tanks. Realisation of this was in fact implicit in the extreme caution often shown by armoured commanders when asked to use their tanks in support of infantry against mined defences, for it was not so much the mines but the anti-tank guns that were feared, and with no common doctrine to deal with the guns, the tanks naturally preferred their freedom in the open desert where sweeping cavalry manoeuvres could more dashingly be employed. The development of tactics against the anti-tank gun is an interesting study, but at **Alamein** the study had hardly begun.

Because of this and other acknowledged weaknesses in co-operation, the planners, Montgomery included as his writings indicate, were still drawn towards regarding their armour as an entity separate from the rest of the army, and ignoring the absence of such a strict separation in German tactics. The plans thus kept alive the traditional concept of the desert battle, with its distinct phases of armour versus armour followed by infantry versus infantry. The change of principle merely reversed the



order, and added a finale of infantry and surviving tanks versus infantry alone. The German anti-tank gun, under whatever arm of the service it was organised, <sup>1</sup> was a factor likely to upset any nice distinction between the phases.

The change in principle in **LIGHTFOOT** made little difference to the preparations already in hand. The sector chosen for 30 Corps' initial infantry breakthrough was not altered materially, so that the New Zealand Division's exercises, over ground and defences resembling those of the actual front, were still valid, while the deception scheme, well started before 6 October when Montgomery announced the change, was not greatly affected.

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<sup>1</sup> The Eighth Army's anti-tank organisation consisted in the main of six-pounders manned by anti-tank regiments of the artillery and parcelled out in detachments to brigades, battle groups and columns, and the two-pounder platoons of the infantry. The British field regiments had some training, and experience, in anti-tank work, but such a role was not expected of them save in grave emergency. The tenor of British anti-tank policy was defensive. The *Panzer Army* had a greater variety of weapons, the armoured divisions having their own anti-tank units trained to act closely with the tanks in both defence and attack, and the infantry formations having a similarly integrated organisation. The German field artillery was trained in anti-tank work and supplied with suitable ammunition, while the *Panzer Army* disposed of a force of *Luftwaffe* personnel who manned the 88-millimetre and smaller anti-aircraft guns which could be used in an anti-tank role. Both in defence against tanks and in attack against an anti-tank gun line, the Germans showed a much greater degree of co-ordination of all arms than the Eighth Army had yet managed to attain.

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The selection of the breakthrough sector was influenced by the fact that, though the enemy defences were believed to be less developed the further south the line ran, operations based on the main line of communication along the coastal road and railway would simplify many of the problems of supply, assembly and deception. Ever since the troops

and reserves promised by Churchill in early August had begun arriving in the **Middle East**, the base depots had been spilling over into the desert, so that by September the coastal strip held a high concentration of men, vehicles and dumps, among which the preparations immediately prior to the assault could the more easily be concealed, while the open desert to the south lent itself to deception measures designed to be observed from the air.

Aware that his offensive could only gain surprise in the exact day and point of the opening attack, Montgomery was determined from the start to use security and deception to the full. Once he had decided that 13 Corps would take only a minor role, he directed that all movement and assembly between the front and the **Cairo- Alexandria** road should be placed under strict control and organised to a master plan.

The first step of the deception plan was to assess the requirements of 30 Corps for the opening day of the offensive, and as quickly as possible to fill the coastal strip to the necessary density of occupation. This would then remain constant, providing aerial observation with no signs of the sudden increase in the movement and concentration of transport or the dumping of stores which would normally precede an offensive. The appearance of the required density was practically reached by the first week of October by means of the extensive use of dummies of all types—vehicles, guns, tanks and dumps. In daylight the normal transport to service the front-line troops proceeded openly, but at night the roads were given over to convoys that brought forward the genuine articles to replace the dummies. In the same way, the movement of bodies of troops was disguised; the New Zealand Division, for example, carried out its exercises inland with no attempt at concealment but, on returning to the coastal area under cover of darkness, it replaced a camp of dummy vehicles while similar vehicles were erected in the inland area it had just vacated, manned by a small detachment who, by lighting fires and driving trucks around, gave a semblance of occupation to the dummy camp. Various refinements of camouflage were developed, such as devices known by the code-name ‘sunshields’, an erection of canvas



over a framework, resembling a truck but capable of housing a tank or gun. Boxes of ammunition and other stores were either hidden underground or openly piled up in the shape of trucks, the Eighth Army's camouflage units becoming so expert that, even from a short way off on the ground, it was difficult to tell dummy from real. One detail that it was hoped would deceive the enemy over both the time and place of the offensive was the construction of a dummy pipeline leading from the coast inland towards the southern sector, and prolonged at such a set and steady pace that it appeared unlikely to be completed until well into November. At the same time a steady increase of camps, dumps and transport concentrations of both real and dummy vehicles was built up behind the southern sector.

Knowledge that the Axis had a technically efficient wireless intercept service was utilised in the design of a network of sets passing bogus routine messages from fixed positions, while the formations concentrating for the offensive maintained wireless silence.

With a constant stream of men moving to and from **Alexandria** and **Cairo** on army business or leave, to many of whom some details of the plans had to be released to allow them to carry out their particular jobs, the task of keeping the preparations secret from the civilian population of **Egypt** was impossible. Complete security, however, was attained of the two key details, the date and place of the opening attack. This was accomplished under a strict schedule of the release of information down the levels of command, and the curtailing of all movement out of the forward areas once a certain level had been reached. No recall of men on leave was made until the battle opened and other precautions were taken to disguise any increase in the tempo of preparations in the base area from enemy agents among the civilian population.

However, in spite of the great care and detail of the deception plan and security, there were times when this work appeared in jeopardy. On the morning of 12 October, six men of a 51 (Highland) Division patrol failed to return and fears were felt that, as a group, they might give the enemy information of value. The German records, however, show that

nothing more than rumours of an impending offensive were elicited from them under interrogation. Again, on the morning of 22 October, an officer and NCO of the same division went missing, but it would appear that interrogation of these two either did not take place or was delayed until after the opening of the battle. Gale force winds on 16 and 17 October, causing the disintegration of many of the timber and canvas dummy vehicles, brought fears that enemy air reconnaissance might penetrate the deception, but hard work by the camouflage units under extra fighter cover repaired the damage in short order.

The *Panzer Army* was aware of the existence of dummy vehicles behind the British lines but their intelligence service attributed their use purely to the misdirection of air attack; for some time both sides had been using dummy aircraft and vehicles set around little-used landing grounds to draw attention from the main airfields, and Axis deductions apparently did not go beyond this idea. Certainly the changes from dummy to real went unobserved by Axis air reconnaissance, which day after day reported no changes of importance in either the British positions or the density of occupation. Yet the actual number of dummy vehicles erected, though difficult to assess with close accuracy, must have been in the vicinity of 4000, or possibly even more.

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 15 – THE EVE OF THE OFFENSIVE

## CHAPTER 15

### *The Eve of the Offensive*

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**FOR** the New Zealand Division as well as for most of the troops in the Eighth Army, the first fortnight of October was set aside on the Army Commander's instructions for detailed and intensive training in the particular tasks which each unit was to undertake in the offensive. Three New Zealand units, 4 Field Regiment, 31 Anti-Tank Battery and 6 Field Company of the engineers, remained under command of 9 Armoured Brigade for exercises in co-operation with the tanks. The Divisional Cavalry, warned that its role would be reconnaissance and exploitation ahead of the armour, practised drills for getting its armoured cars and Stuarts quickly through minefields and for passing back information about enemy defences and strongpoints. Perhaps the busiest men in the Division were the engineers, who were expected to become proficient in the standard army drill for mine-clearance and then practise it on exercises with the brigades or units to which they were attached.

The infantry brigades carried out day and night exercises on the lines of the September manoeuvres, with innovations and alterations that earlier faults suggested. Each brigade in turn advanced behind an imaginary barrage in daylight so that faults of contact and cohesion, not easily observed at night, might be studied and the troops themselves could gain a better picture of what was expected of them. Two of the infantry battalions in co-operation with tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade, 28 Battalion with the **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry** and 25 Battalion with the **Warwickshire Yeomanry**, carried out exercises under machine-gun and artillery support designed to crash through an enemy gun line.

On 14 October the Division began a series of movements which eventually brought the troops to the starting line for the offensive. About the same time the two armoured divisions of **10 Corps**, which had

also been exercising in the inland desert, followed a similar procedure, every move of men, transport, and tanks carefully dovetailed into the deception plan so that no evidence of a mass movement westwards might be observed from the air.

By this time the Egyptian winter had set in, for although October opened fine and warm, as early as the third day the troops in the desert were shivering under grey skies and biting winds that brought showers and hailstorms. In one burst of hail the pellets rattled down almost as large as the undersized 'eggs-a-cook' of the Cairene street hawkers, so unpleasant a battering that a performance of the **Kiwi Concert Party** for the benefit of 9 Armoured Brigade had to be hastily abandoned. The broken weather lasted over a week, strong winds bringing either driving rain or dust-storms, after which a few days of calm, clear skies showed the desert winter at its exhilarating best. On the 16th, however, the calm gave way to stormy squalls which swept in from the sea for about twenty-four hours with hardly a break, blowing down tents, bivouacs, and dummy vehicles and flooding several of the coastal camp sites. This storm took another day to blow itself out, but from then until the end of the month the weather settled down with only an occasional dust or rain storm. Apart from the work of repairing damage caused by gale or flood, the exercises of the army were little hindered except during the worst of the dust-storms when navigation, even on known tracks, became exceedingly difficult. **Freyberg** himself had to curtail a visit round the front-line positions when the gale on the 16th was at its height and visibility often no more than fifty yards, while on the following day the commander of 9 Armoured Brigade, Brigadier Currie, was unable to pick out the route from his brigade area inland to **Divisional Headquarters** on the coast and failed to arrive until the next morning, thus missing a divisional conference.

From the 14th to the 19th, the two infantry brigades remained on the coast by **Burg el Arab**, sorting gear and equipment and making last-minute preparations. On the 19th they were joined by the Divisional Cavalry and 9 Armoured Brigade, who drove in from the inland desert to

take over a 'dummy' assembly area just south of the coastal road, their places in the desert being taken by the surplus transport of the Division, augmented with dummies. That same evening the three New Zealand field regiments, together with six attached troops of **10 Corps'** artillery, drove forward to a specially prepared artillery area nearer the front where the guns and towers were camouflaged under and among dummies that had been placed ready many days earlier. Also on that evening **23 Battalion**, under Lieutenant-Colonel **Romans**,<sup>1</sup> went forward in

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col R. E. Romans**, DSO, m.i.d; born Arrowtown, 10 Sep 1909; business manager; CO 23 Bn Jul 1942–Apr 1943, Aug–Dec 1943; twice wounded; died of wounds 91 Dec 1943.

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transport and took over the left sector of 51 Division's front-line trenches. By this action, each of the four divisions with a part in the initial attack held the portion of the front which was to be its start line.

After dusk on the following evening, the 20th, the guns moved again, this time into the prepared and camouflaged pits from which they were to fire in the battle, each pit having been carefully surveyed in, with its quota of ammunition in hidden dumps nearby. Before daylight the towers withdrew to be hidden again in the dummy area while the gunners settled down to a day of inaction, except for such minor tasks as would not draw enemy observation.

Darkness on the 21st saw the two New Zealand infantry brigades in movement, ferried by 4 and 6 Reserve Mechanical Transport Companies to an area some ten miles behind the front. Here the infantry were dispersed among ready-made slit trenches with strict instructions not to be seen above ground in daylight. Though the day was fine and mild, it seemed exceedingly long before dusk allowed the men to stretch cramped limbs above ground and join the queues at the cooks' trucks for a hot meal. Then trucks of 4 RMT Company appeared, to gather up the men of 5 Brigade and take them to a position immediately to the right rear of 23 Battalion's front-line trenches. As there was some doubt

whether the second transport company could get 6 Brigade up and its trucks back along the difficult and congested tracks near the front before daylight, the three battalions of this brigade were told they had to march. Setting off ahead of the 5 Brigade units so that the latter in their trucks overtook them, the men of 6 Brigade, stoically enduring uncomplimentary remarks and clouds of choking dust as each truck passed them, trudged the ten winding miles through wire and minefields in some five hours. Shortly before dawn began to lighten the eastern sky they thankfully dropped their loads of weapons, extra ammunition, grenades, picks, shovels, and other impedimenta into ready-dug trenches on the left of 5 Brigade. The same night the brigade and **Divisional Headquarters** groups drove up and occupied positions in which dug-out signals exchanges were already prepared alongside pits for the armoured command vehicles which the Division was using for the first time in battle. Much of the work on these headquarters had been done by 5 Field Park Company whose bulldozers, operating so close to the enemy, had drawn considerable shellfire. This night, however, there was no enemy interference as the two brigade headquarters settled in close behind their battalions, with **Divisional Headquarters** about a mile and a half further to the rear. Farther back still, 9 Armoured Brigade and the Divisional Cavalry took another disguised step forward to bring them to their final assembly area some ten miles behind the front.

Although the New Zealand Division was the only complete infantry formation to move from the rear to the front, all the other divisions already in the line had to bring up their reserves of men and extra artillery, whose movements and arrival were camouflaged in the same manner. The complicated movements of men, vehicles and guns took place on a series of roughly parallel tracks starting some eight to ten miles behind the front line. Certain parts of these tracks had been in use for normal supply purposes for some weeks but the remainder, particularly the stretches immediately behind the front, had been camouflaged from observation by allowing wire, minefields and other defences to appear to cut across them. At night all such obstacles were removed and traffic kept flowing by control posts manned by provosts



and linked by telephones, so that any accidents or breakdowns likely to disclose in daylight the use of the tracks could be quickly cleared away.

The Australians, using mainly the coastal road for normal supply, had developed a system of short tracks to the sector of their front on which the attack would start. These went under the names, from north to south, of Diamond, Boomerang, Two Bar <sup>1</sup> and Square. The sector held by 51 Division was served by Sun, Moon and Star tracks, the New Zealand front by a short branch leading south off Star, and by Bottle and Boat, and the South Africans by Hat. Each of these tracks was clearly marked along its length by its distinguishing sign in cut-out form set on a post, and by petrol tins holding hurricane lamps or electric torches that shone through holes pierced in the shape of the sign and facing the rear.

This carefully prepared traffic plan, upon which the speed and secrecy of the final assembly depended, was in general extremely successful. Although the western ends of all the tracks were well within enemy artillery range and the whole system as well as the concentration and assembly areas of the troops and transport was in easy bombing range, the enemy was unaware of the vast movements taking place in the three or four nights preceding the offensive. Lone night bombers continued to fly over, dropping random bombs but seldom causing any damage, while both by day and by night the enemy's artillery loosed occasional salvos which only rarely found a worthwhile target. Yet several units, in accounts published later, reported difficulty in preventing unauthorised transport movement and in keeping their men from appearing above ground in areas over which the enemy should have had good ground observation.

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as 'Double Bar'.

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The amount of detailed planning and execution that went into the preparations for the offensive cannot be adequately told in brief. Every branch of the services took its share, from the men in the base

installations who worked long hours in assembling, repairing and testing equipment to the provosts who policed the traffic lanes from base to the front line. Signals troops laid many miles of cable, much of it underground to avoid damage from traffic, and set up exchanges, duplicating and in some cases re-duplicating their lines so that vital information and orders could be passed without delay. The men of the Army Service Corps, British and Commonwealth, worked together in a comprehensive plan of delivering and dumping the many tons of stores, from rations to ammunition, needed to carry the army through the opening phases of the battle. Behind a flapping hessian screen in the coastal sandhills a team of engineers and mechanics, South Africans predominant, worked in secret to construct a fleet of twenty-four 'Scorpions' or flail tanks for beating a way through minefields. Artillerymen worked on tasks varying from the digging of gunpits close behind the front line and the dumping of vast quantities of ammunition, to the intricate calculations of fire tasks for each gun.

Perhaps the most diverse jobs fell to the engineers. A special Eighth Army school of mine-clearance was set up in an empty portion of the desert, run from 18 September onwards by a New Zealander, Major [Currie](#),<sup>1</sup> to evolve and teach a standard drill for minelifting, a drill whose value was fully proved in actual battle. Teams of sappers also demonstrated to the men of other arms the known types of enemy mines and booby traps, teaching them how to recognise them and disarm them. Other sappers went through courses of handling and operating electrical mine-detectors, fragile mechanisms that needed constant servicing but invaluable when in working order, of which some 500 were issued to the engineer units in the Eighth Army. Among other engineer stores called for in the battle plan were some 120 miles of white tape and 9000 electric lamps, both items for marking the cleared lanes through the minefields.

One large headache for the planning staffs lay in preventing traffic congestion on the tracks leading to the front. The Eighth Army at this time was probably the most mechanically minded army that the British

had ever fielded and, with its short lines of communication, was more than adequately provided with vehicles of all types. Unlike the *Panzer Army*, whose trouble was in bringing its

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col A. R. Currie**, DSO, OBE; **Wellington**; born **Napier**, 12 Nov 1910; military engineer; **OC 8 Fd Coy** Oct 1940–Jul 1942; **CO NZ Engr Trg Depot** Apr–Jul 1943; **OC 7 Fd Coy** Jul–Nov 1943; three times wounded; Director, Fortifications and Works, Army HQ, 1946–49; Chief Engineer, NZ Army, 1951–60.

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supplies and men forward, Eighth Army faced the danger of a congestion of transport, first in giving away the deception plan in the nights before the offensive, and then in delaying the speedy replenishment of material and the transport of reserves, reliefs, wounded and prisoners, once the battle had begun. A most detailed traffic plan was finally devised, the front-line units reduced to essential vehicles and all convoys run on prearranged times and routes. With fortunately little enemy interference by either long-range shelling or air attack, the plan generally worked out extremely smoothly for the great mass of vehicles.

The medical organisations of the British and Commonwealth forces, though retaining their individual entities, were also integrated in a master plan so that wounded would be evacuated and treated with a minimum of delay. For this, the lines of evacuation of each division were carefully planned from advanced dressing stations to field and base hospitals, with check posts linked by radio or telephone so that the wounded could be distributed according to the degree of injury and a heavy influx at any one point might be spread over several of the medical channels. Cab ranks of ambulance cars were set up well forward so that an empty car could be despatched at once to take the place of every loaded car coming back through the check posts. In this work the drivers of the **American Field Service** were prominent, greatly easing the strain on the medical corps' staff at the height of the battle.

The divisions holding the line had their medical channels in going

order for some time, though in the few days before the battle the facilities were increased and improved while the majority of patients then in hospital, both wounded and sick, were moved rapidly out of the desert to the base hospitals in **Egypt**. The New Zealand Division, however, had to set up a complete new medical link. No. 1 New Zealand Casualty Clearing Station had fortunately been established early in October at **Gharbaniyat**, near **Burg el Arab**, operating in conjunction with British and Australian stations and taking its share of the many sick and few wounded being sent back at that time. The next two links in the chain forward, the main and advanced dressing stations, had to be set up in the terms of the deception plan, for any indication that the medical arrangements were being increased would have put the enemy on the alert. The main stations were able to complete many of their preparations with time to spare, except for the erection of the large medical tents and **Red Cross** signs, but the two advanced stations, operated by the A companies of 5 and 6 Field Ambulances, were able to make no preparations until dusk on the evening the battle opened. Then they had to set up their tents and operating theatres in positions ahead of the guns that were firing the opening barrage, and they had to admit their first patients before they had fully completed their preparations. In the event, the medical arrangements worked smoothly except for a certain amount of delay in the forward areas when ambulances returning from the front found it difficult to travel against the stream of tanks, lorried infantry and supply transport moving up on the first day of the battle.

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Montgomery's desert offensive commenced in the air some days before the ground battle was joined. Since the end of the **Alam Halfa** action, close co-operation with the air forces, so successful in that battle, was brought a stage further by agreement between the army and air commanders on a plan designed to lead up to the new offensive. The fighter and light bomber forces were to be given a period of rest and reorganisation, while the heavy and medium bombers were to develop a

gradually increasing weight of attack on the Axis supply lines. From 6 September to 22 October, flights of twenty to thirty bombers flew over **Tobruk** on almost every night while other flights paid attention to **Benghazi**, **Bardia**, **Sollum**, **Matruh**, and even **Suda Bay** and **Navarino**, according to intelligence reports of shipping movements. In this phase, the **Royal Air Force** was greatly assisted by the **Middle East** detachments of the United States Army Air Forces, whose Liberator bombers proved invaluable. Meanwhile, as the light bomber, fighter-bomber, and fighter squadrons were reorganised, attacks were gradually stepped up on the landing grounds, railway, camps, and supply columns immediately to the rear of the *Panzer Army's* front. A particularly intense effort was made by day and night on 9 October when it was learnt that heavy rain had made several of the enemy's forward fighter landing grounds unserviceable. For the loss or damage of some nineteen aircraft, the **Desert Air Force** succeeded in this series of raids in crippling the enemy's air defence to the extent that it never fully recovered, so that from this day on until the end of the campaign in **Africa** the *Luftwaffe* was never a serious threat to the Eighth Army's operations.

On the night of the 18th, the air offensive in direct support of the land operations was officially commenced with the light bombers and fighters joining in, the main weight of assault being concentrated on the area between the **Alamein** line and **Tobruk**. Throughout the whole of the five succeeding nights and days, this assault was maintained, with hardly an hour in each twenty-four in which Allied aircraft were not over the Axis lines. At the same time the fighter screen over the Eighth Army was gradually thickened.

Although the Axis commanders noted the increase in air activity, the suspicions of most of them were lulled as each day passed with no corresponding land action, while the *Luftwaffe* was so fully occupied with defence and repairing the damage to its landing grounds and aircraft that it had little time or opportunity for offensive action or even for reconnaissance. In fact, according to reports made by the front-line units, during daylight on 23 October not one enemy aircraft was seen

**over the Eighth Army's lines.**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 16 – 30 CORPS' PLANS



## **CHAPTER 16**

### **30 Corps' Plans**

**BY the morning of the 23rd, all the major preparations for the battle were going according to the plans. The infantry to start the advance were lying doggo in trenches near the front, the guns were in their camouflaged pits, the tanks and transport vehicles waiting in their various echelons in the assembly areas in the order in which they would be called forward. Normal and unhurried wireless messages were being passed by the few stations that the deception plan permitted to stay on the air, though telephone lines hummed with last-minute queries and instructions. Medical teams, mechanics, engineers, signalmen and drivers checked their equipment to ensure that, when dusk fell, they could start their varied tasks without hitch or failure. And in every unit cooks were making preparations to issue, in dixies of tea and stew, what was likely to be a last hot meal, at least for some time and to some men.**

**In spite of the care with which the deception scheme had been planned and the stringent orders given to the troops to keep in cover with no unnecessary movement, the area over which the enemy had observation must undoubtedly have offered some signs of unusual activity. Yet no hint is carried in the enemy records that any suspicious movement was noted, and this is confirmed by the enemy's inaction. The Eighth Army's gunners were under orders to restrict their fire, retaliating only if Axis shellfire was above normal and obviously directed at some observed section of the preparations, restrictions intended both to lull suspicion as well as to keep the Axis gunners from moving to alternative positions which might not be within the area of counter-battery fire planned for the night's operations. The Axis gunners appear to have taken their cue from their opponents, for by all accounts their harassing fire was even less than customary and certainly caused little damage.**

**Along this almost somnolent front, the troops of the Eighth Army were disposed as described below. Against the coast and holding the line**

for some four miles south of **Mersa el Hamra** lay **24 Australian Brigade**, with **2/28 Battalion** between the sea and the railway line, **2/42 Battalion** further south, **2/32 Battalion** in immediate reserve, and **2/8 Field Regiment** in support. As on the rest of the front, the Australians had prepared camouflaged tracks, gun pits, trenches and headquarters beforehand so that, on the evening of 22 October, the two other field regiments of the division with six attached troops of **10 Corps** artillery were able to move up from the rear and quickly get themselves settled and hidden in the prepared pits and signal exchanges. Following the guns, the infantry of **26 and 20 Brigades** took over trenches in the southern half of the sector.

The Australian division's task was to drive due westwards from **Tell el Eisa** on a 3000-yard front for some 8000 yards. The southern flank of this penetration would be covered by a simultaneous advance by **51 (Highland) Division** but the northern flank would be unprotected. The Australian plan was for **26 Brigade** to advance on the right on a narrow frontage of under 1000 yards, with **2/24 Battalion** taking the first objective, about half way, and digging in to face north and **2/48 Battalion** passing through to the final objective to face both west and north. The third unit of this brigade, **2/23 Battalion**, remained in reserve. In the southern part of the sector, **20 Brigade** was to take the first objective with **2/17 and 2/15 Battalions**, on right and left respectively, where they would be well placed to support the defence against counter-attack from either west or north. Then **2/13 Battalion**, with **40 Battalion**, **The Royal Tank Regiment**, in **Valentines** and under command, was to gain the southern part of the division's final objective and dig in facing west. A special composite force was formed, strong in antitank and machine guns, to cover the vulnerable angle where the northern flank of the penetration projected from the original front line.

The Australian operation was to be supported by the whole of the divisional artillery, six attached troops from **10 Corps**, **7 Medium Regiment**, **RA**, and another troop of medium guns, about 100 guns all told. General Morshead, the Australian commander, had decided that the

design of his attack would not be best served by the creeping barrage as advocated by **Freyberg** for, although his men would be advancing on a narrow front on which a creeping barrage would be effective, there was the need to lay fire almost continuously throughout the operation on enemy positions along the long exposed northern flank. Moreover, the Australians had been in the line for a long time, their patrolling was always vigorous, and they held several points from which good observation over the enemy could be obtained, so that the majority of the enemy positions facing them had long since been noted and marked on the map with a considerable degree of accuracy. The method therefore chosen was for a portion of the artillery to keep all enemy posts on the northern flank subdued while the infantry advanced at the rate of 100 yards every three minutes, in relatively compact order, against each known strongpoint, on which a heavy artillery concentration would be timed to fall, marked by smoke shells at commencement and ending, just before the infantry's arrival.

To allow the infantry to keep up with the timed concentrations, three pauses were allowed, one for ten minutes at approximately halfway to the first objective (called the Red line), another for an hour on that objective, and one for thirty-five minutes halfway between there and the final objective.

Hard on 9 Australian Division's left, 51 (Highland) Division was to advance at the same rate to a final objective that ran in a south-easterly direction for some 5000 yards from the end of the Australian objective. The Highland Division's front had been narrowed to about 3000 yards by the relief of its left-hand sector by 23 New Zealand Battalion, and the distance from this line to the objective was between 6000 and 7000 yards. The divisional commander, Major-General Wimberley, chose to follow the Australian method of timed concentrations rather than a barrage, although he possessed as many guns as the Australian artillery and had no need to disperse his gunfire to a flank. The method he proposed looked relatively simple on paper but had within it the germs of confusion. The division's sector of assault was marked off into three

intermediate objectives and a final objective, called the Green, Red, Black and Blue lines respectively, roughly equidistant one from the other. All the known enemy positions were given code-names in good Scots and the intermediate objective lines were bent around these positions so that no one line was parallel to another or to the start line or final objective, a system unlikely to make for co-ordination in the advance.

On the right, 153 Brigade was given about a third of the total frontage from which it was to advance with all its three battalions. The method of advance was for 5 Battalion The Black Watch on the right, and 5/7 Battalion The **Gordon Highlanders** on the left, to take the first and second intermediate objectives (the Green and Red lines). Then 1 Battalion The **Gordon Highlanders**, passing through 5 Black Watch, <sup>1</sup> was to join 5/7 Gordons in taking the third, or Black, line. Finally, two platoons of 1 Gordons, mounted on Valentine tanks of A Squadron of 50 Battalion, The Royal Tank Regiment, were to assault and occupy the final objective or Blue line. It was thought that an enemy strongpoint, code-named 'Aberdeen', lay along the right-hand half of the final objective and another, but smaller, strongpoint, 'Ballater', lay just ahead of the Black line on the left-hand side. The available orders do not make it clear whether 'Ballater' was to be subdued by the passage of the tanks or by exploitation by 5/7 Gordons from the Black line. Had the orders been carried out to the letter, 153 Brigade's final objective, some 1800 yards long, would have been held at dawn by the survivors of two platoons of infantry and a squadron of Valentine tanks.

The left-hand two-thirds of the Highland Division's sector was to be occupied by 154 Brigade on a plan that, even on paper, appears to be somewhat elaborate, with six groups of men operating in four lanes of varying widths. On the extreme right, 1 Black Watch was to advance to the Black line (third objective) and in the right-centre lane 7/10 **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** was to follow suit. From that objective, two platoons of the latter battalion accompanied by C Squadron, **50 Royal Tanks**, in Valentines was to capture a large strongpoint, ' **Stirling**',

situated on the final objective.

The procedure for the left-hand side of the brigade sector, believed to be thinly held by the enemy as far as the Black line, involved an advance by two companies of 5 Battalion, The Cameron Highlanders (attached from 152 Brigade), to occupy the Green and Red lines. Then 7 Black Watch, moving up on the left of the sector, was to assault through the Black line to the final objective. However, the attack on a strongpoint, 'Nairn', just ahead of the final objective, was the special task of a composite force which was to advance on the right of 7 Black Watch. This force comprised a squadron of 51 Reconnaissance Regiment mounted in carriers and trucks, together with **50 Royal Tanks**, less A Squadron detached to 153 Brigade and less C Squadron which was to move with the composite force as far as the Red line and then cut across to the right to join 7/10 Argyll and Sutherlanders. After capturing 'Nairn' the composite force was to retire to divisional reserve, leaving 7 Black Watch to hold the whole of the left-hand half of the brigade's objective. The division retained its 152 Brigade (less 5 Camerons) in reserve.

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<sup>1</sup> In order to save constant repetition of the rather cumbersome full titles, units will customarily be referred to, after first mention in full, by the shortened forms in use by Eighth Army: e.g., 5/7 Battalion, The **Gordon Highlanders**, becomes 5/7 Gordons; 50 Battalion, The Royal Tank Regiment, becomes **50 Royal Tanks**, and so on.

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Artillery support for both of the Highland brigades was to be by concentrations, of predicted fire without previous registration, on the enemy strongpoints as shown on a map prepared by 30 Corps and Eighth Army intelligence staffs, the fire on each position being timed to lift just ahead of the arrival of the assaulting infantry, who were to advance at the rate of 100 yards every three minutes after making contact with the forward defended positions. Pauses of 15, 60 and 15 minutes were to be made on the Green, Red and Black lines respectively, each pause marked

**(‘pricked out’ was the phrase used in orders) by a short barrage fired on the line at the calculated time of the infantry's arrival and repeated at the time of departure. Tracer shell from Bofors guns in short bursts was also to mark the estimated times of arrival, and a burst of three similar tracer shells fired every ten minutes was to mark the divisional boundaries and the inter-brigade boundary.**

**The Highland Division had its own three Royal Engineer companies as well as a troop of sappers of 50 Royal Tanks attached for clearing gaps in the minefields but, as for the New Zealand sector, all clearance for 10 Corps' tanks, except of the initial gaps in the forward positions, was to be left to that corps. All the customary preparations for defence against counter-attack were ordered, with anti-tank and Vickers guns taken forward and artillery defensive fire on call to cover the final objective.**

**A great deal of work and care was put into 51 Division's initial preparations. As early as the evening of the 20th, the start line was surveyed and inconspicuously marked. After dark on the 22nd, eleven gaps in the British minefields were cut and camouflaged, and on the following evening the start line, the gaps, and all the routes leading back to the lying-up positions of the assaulting troops were marked by lamps facing eastwards and by white tape, some nine miles of this tape being used altogether. This work was accomplished by engineers and infantry parties of the reserve brigade without detection by the enemy, who had good observation over most of the ground, though some alarm was felt when, on the morning of the 22nd, it was found that an officer and NCO, out on a night patrol to cover the preparatory work, had not returned. <sup>1</sup> For some reason news of this was not sent to Eighth Army Headquarters until next day, when of course it caused some consternation.**

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 218.

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**Immediately to the south of the Highlanders, the New Zealand**



Division was given the task of assaulting and occupying a sector closely similar in shape and size. From a start line of some 2000 yards extending south-east from 51 Division's line, the Division was to advance nearly 7000 yards on its right but only 5000 yards on its left to gain an objective 5000 yards in length. This objective lay along a slight rise known as **Miteiriya Ridge**, of which the highest point was 100 feet above sea level, though no more than 30 feet at the most over the ground immediately to the east. The ridge extended into the Highland Division's objective for a short distance but soon merged into the surrounding desert, and even on the New Zealand objective it was far from being a clearly recognisable feature of the landscape, although in places it afforded observation both to east and west. Occupation of the ridge was intended to provide a firm base from which the Divisional Cavalry and 9 Armoured Brigade could 'exploit' to the south-west, both to search for a weak spot in the enemy's defences and to provide a flank guard to the main sortie by **10 Corps'** armour.

Of the battle to gain the ridge, **Freyberg** had already pointed in conferences to its resemblance to the conditions of the First World War and repeated this conviction in his report written later: 'The northern sector of the **Alamein** front ... was the nearest approach to the static defences of the last war yet seen in North Africa and it was the technique of 1918 which was used as the basis of the plan for our attack.'<sup>1</sup> Though **Freyberg** was wise, as events proved, to insist on this similarity, points of dissimilarity were numerous. There were no clearly defined lines of trenches to be given as objectives, there was far from enough artillery to provide a solid curtain of barrage fire or prolonged bombardments, and, particularly in the New Zealand Division, there were far fewer infantry than would have been used in the First War on a similar width and depth of penetration. Moreover, the distance to be covered was close to the limit that infantry could penetrate at night without losing cohesion, control and the impetus of the advance.

The Australian commander, Morshead, with three strong and experienced brigades, was probably wise in choosing the more modern

method of support by timed concentrations, both for the reasons already given and through confidence in the co-operation between his infantry and artillery. Wimberley, commanding the Highlanders, had a difficult decision for, though his division was well up to strength, it was inexperienced and had a wider sector to cover than the Australians. Probably because his men had been

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/25.

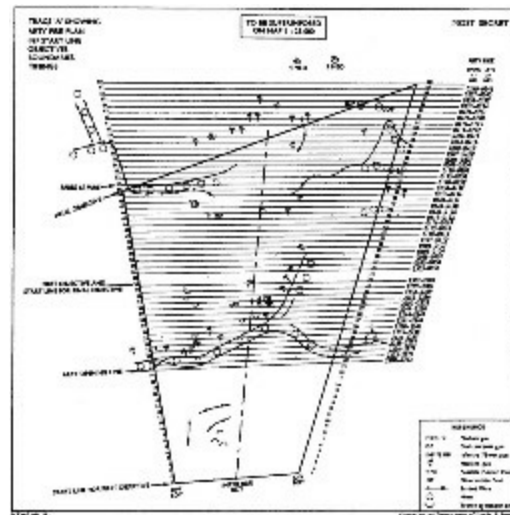
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given training of the modern type in which assaults on strongpoints figured largely, he also chose the system of concentrations.

Though unable to sell his ideas to the other commanders, **Freyberg** remained convinced that the only way his two under-strength infantry brigades could reach the objective was under some form of a creeping barrage. But against the enemy's system of defence by individual strongpoints separated by expanses of open ground, a simple creeping barrage would have been ineffective as only a relatively small number of shells would have fallen on any one strongpoint. **Freyberg** therefore accepted a compromise plan worked out in consultation with the commander of the New Zealand artillery, Brigadier Weir, for one quarter of the 104 available guns to fire a standard creeping barrage, while the remainder laid concentrations, timed to coincide with the barrage, on the known strongpoints. In this way the leading waves of infantry would be able to 'lean on the barrage', that is, follow it so closely that the required rate of advance of 100 yards every three minutes would be maintained evenly across the whole front, and at the same time would assault each strongpoint immediately after it had been subjected to a very heavy concentration of fire. Smoke shells were to be used freely to mark the extremities and the centre of each barrage lift, the commencement and ending of each concentration, the opening line of the barrage, the pause of an hour and 45 minutes on the first objective, and the point when the barrage crossed the left-hand edge of the final objective. As an aid to direction, Bofors tracer was to be fired down the



**divisional boundaries and along the centre line.**



PLAN OF THE ARTILLERY BARRAGE FOR THE NEW ZEALAND SECTOR ON  
23 OCTOBER 1942

PLAN OF THE ARTILLERY BARRAGE FOR THE NEW ZEALAND SECTOR ON 23 OCTOBER 1942

The sector was divided evenly, the right-hand half allocated to 5 Brigade and the left-hand to 6 Brigade, with start lines and objectives of equal lengths. Owing to the angle at which the final objective ran in relation to the start line, 5 Brigade had a slightly longer distance to go. From the start lines, marked with white tape by the sappers just ahead of the forward posts held by 23 Battalion, one battalion of each brigade was to advance at 9.35 p.m., covering 100 yards every two minutes. With the opening line of the creeping barrage 1800 yards ahead of the start line, the leading infantry would thus be some 500 yards short of the shellfire when it commenced at 10 p.m. Fire on the opening line was to be maintained for twenty-three minutes, during which time the two leading battalions were to approach the shellfire as closely as was safe, ready to resume the advance as soon as a line of smoke shells indicated that the barrage was beginning its lifts of 100 yards every three minutes. Fourteen such lifts, the last marked by smoke and finishing at 11.5 p.m., would bring the men on to the first objective, a line some 3500 yards long and about the same distance from the start line. Here the two leading battalions were to dig in to provide a base from which the other four battalions would carry the advance to the final objective.

At this point, the barrage trace supplied to the infantry held a small

**discrepancy which passed unnoticed at the time. The trace made it appear that fire would jump 200 yards beyond the first objective and continue there, on what was in effect the opening line of the second phase of the barrage, for an hour and 50 minutes, giving covering fire for consolidation by the men of the two leading battalions. Some of the officers in fact expected to use the line of this fire to indicate the forward edge of the objective and thus simplify the laying-out of the defences. The actual artillery programme, however, was for the barrage to cease for this period while concentrations were laid on known enemy positions between the first and second objectives, the fire creeping forward and back in a pattern designed to deter any movement of enemy troops. Also during this time the guns in rotation were given short periods for rest and servicing.**

**The four battalions following up were to deploy along a start line on the first objective ready for the barrage, which was to recommence at 12.50 a.m. with a five-minute stand on the opening line followed by lifts and concentrations similar to those before. There was to be a pause of fifteen minutes, indicated by smoke, in the progress of the barrage as the shellfire reached the final objective on the extreme left, though in this case the fire was to continue throughout the pause. At 2.22 a.m., that is 4 hours 22 minutes after the opening of the artillery programme, the barrage was to cease as the fire reached the junction of the Division's centre line and the objective, after which some heavy concentrations were to be fired on the untouched triangle of ground between the centre line and the extreme right flank. On the conclusion of the fire in support of the infantry advance, all guns were to be ready to lay down defensive fire on call to cover consolidation on the final objective.**

**Although the other divisions in the assault were expected to carry out the customary exploitation for a short distance beyond their objectives in order to clear the ground ahead of their new lines, both the New Zealand and South African divisions were given a larger exploitation role. According to 30 Corps' orders, the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry,**

following the night assault, was to reconnoitre at dawn to the south-west on the north side of the **Qattara Track** as far as **Deir el Abyad**, a distance of about four miles, and lead the way for a methodical advance 'with tanks, covered by field guns and supported by anti-tank guns and infantry'. The South Africans were to assist by pushing forward a strong reconnaissance on the south side of the **Qattara Track**. Contemporary comments make it clear that, after the first phase of the infantry 'break-in' and the positioning of **10 Corps'** armour, this was in fact intended to be Montgomery's next major move. The New Zealand Division, with its heavy armoured brigade and mobile infantry, was expected to break through the crust of the enemy's fixed defences and cut the **Panzer Army** in two. The **10 Corps** armour, poised on the right flank of the breakthrough, would then either follow through or occupy the corridor and force the enemy to commit his reserves. Future action by the Eighth Army would depend on the detail of enemy reaction; withdrawal of reserves from the north would ease the crumbling process of the fixed defences between the Australian salient and the sea while movement of reserves from the south would lead to increased pressure by 13 Corps. Whatever happened, the **Panzer Army** would be forced into committing its reserves at a time when its whole front line was under pressure, so that it would have to dance to Montgomery's tune.

Careful study of the Division's campaigns has shown that **General Freyberg**, in spite of a certain reputation to the contrary, was invariably very canny in committing his men to battle. He was still unconvinced that the ideas held by the British armoured commanders of co-operation with infantry had changed fundamentally and, though in discussion he was given to believe that the armour's role was clearly understood, he noted, immediately **10 Corps'** orders appeared in writing, that the armour was more concerned with the detail of getting into position at dawn than with its role of protecting the north-western flank of his division's proposed exploitation. Through the commander of 30 Corps he asked for – and received – confirmation that the armoured commanders were fully aware that, once they were through the infantry's final objective, their primary role was to protect and support his division's

exploitation. Even then **Freyberg** must have decided to let the exploitation role wait upon events, for his written divisional orders carry no more than that the Divisional Cavalry should move out beyond the infantry objective and, swinging in an anti-clockwise circle, cause panic by approaching enemy posts from the rear, acting boldly but avoiding engagement with armour or aimed anti-tank gun fire. In a conference on the morning before the battle **Freyberg** stated that he intended to 'test the market' with the Cavalry, other moves depending on information sent back. He himself did not think the area of exploitation would be unguarded, 'but it is just possible the enemy has misjudged it because of his contempt for our generals'.<sup>1</sup> Later comments and events show that **Freyberg** was not unduly surprised that no opportunity for immediate 'gate-crashing' was found, and he was moreover fully prepared to consider another infantry assault at night to breach the defences. Except for the definite reconnaissance and exploitation role of the Cavalry, no other written orders were issued within the Division to cover either the composition or action of the exploitation force that the 30 Corps' orders envisaged.

The reason why the sectors to be overrun by the Highland and New Zealand divisions widened from start lines to objectives in the shape of truncated wedges becomes clear when the final sector of

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<sup>1</sup> GOC **2 NZEF**/45, 23 Oct 1942.

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30 Corps' area of assault is examined. On this southern end, **1 South African Division** confronted the tip of a decided eastward bulge in the *Panzer Army's* line. The gradual spreading of the two other sectors thus allowed the South Africans to attack the bulge from the north-east, their right flank against the New Zealand sector and their left practically along the line of the enemy's forward positions. In this way, unlike the long exposed flank of the Australians on the north, the South Africans' left flank would be covered by the existing British line and needed no more than strengthening at the junction with 4 Indian Division's sector

further south. In simple terms, the South Africans' task was to iron out the point of the bulge in the enemy's line.

The South African division was an experienced and well-trained formation whose artillery held a reputation for versatility and ability to co-operate closely with the infantry. The division had been holding its sector of the front for many weeks and had the opportunity to observe and range the enemy defences facing it in some detail. All this, added to the circumstances of the advance in that the division's left flank would be moving along the line of the enemy's front rather than through it, appears to have influenced the commander, Major-General Pienaar, to choose timed concentrations for his artillery support. The South Africans had their own three regiments of field guns, plus three troops from **10 Corps** and a battery of mediums from 69 Medium Regiment, RA, a total of about ninety guns.

The position of the South African sector allowed a 2000-yard start line, and a short advance of about 4000 yards in a south-southwesterly direction to an objective that extended from the left flank of the New Zealand objective until it reached the existing front line, a distance of about four miles. The plan of assault gave the right-hand half to 2 South African Infantry Brigade, with the **Natal Mounted Rifles** taking the first objective and the **Cape Town Highlanders** on the right and  $\frac{1}{2}$  Frontier Force Battalion on the left passing through to the final objective. In the left sector, 3 South African Infantry Brigade gave 1 Battalion, The Rand Light Infantry, the task of taking the first objective, with the Royal Durban Light Infantry (right) and 1 Battalion, The Imperial Light Horse (left) to occupy the final line. On the left flank, 1 South African Infantry Brigade was to provide assistance by giving covering fire in enfilade from 60 Vickers guns and 12 3-inch mortars sited in secretly prepared positions in no-man's land, and also by providing forces to link the final objective with the existing positions further south.

A third force, called the Divisional Reserve Group and consisting principally of the fifty-one Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks**, the infantry of 2 Battalion, The Regiment Botha, and a number of support weapons, was

to advance along the boundary between 2 and 3 Brigades, ready to help in the capture of both the intermediate and final objectives, to assist in mopping up, to support the new front against counter-attack, or to exploit southwards. This exploitation, led by cars of 3 South African Armoured Car Regiment, was to proceed on a course parallel to that of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, on the south side of the **Qattara Track** as far as **Deir el Abyad**. Besides keeping the gap open from the objective to Abyad, this force, or elements of it, was presumably to join with the New Zealand exploitation force in attempting to find a way through the enemy's defences. Of this role **Freyberg** remarked that the 'Corps Commander has told Pienaar that if he can't break through he can maintain our flank.'<sup>1</sup>

There was one further division under the command of 30 Corps, 4 Indian Division which, since the **Alam Halfa** battle, had relieved **5 Indian Division** in the **Ruweisat Ridge** sector and was made up of 7 and 161 Indian Brigades in the front line and 5 Indian Brigade in reserve. Although it was intended to use this division in subsequent operations, its tasks for the first night of **Alamein** were diversionary, to draw fire away from the South Africans and to keep the enemy defence occupied. Over ground well known to the New Zealanders in the July actions, **7 Indian Brigade** was to lay on a company raid westwards along **Ruweisat Ridge** while 161 Brigade made a dummy attack on the eastern tip of El Mreir and a two-company raid across the pipeline just to the south of the depression. These three operations were timed in sequence so that each could be supported by the Indian division's three field regiments, which manned forty-eight 25-pounders. Two more regiments in 13 Corps further to the south, with thirty-two guns within range of El Mreir, were to assist. Just before the opening of the attack, 5 Indian Brigade was to move into the rear of the South African defence sector and come into 30 Corps reserve.

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 **NZEF**/45, 23 Oct 1942.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

# CHAPTER 17 – 13 CORPS' PLANS



## CHAPTER 17

### 13 Corps' Plans

**ALTHOUGH** there is no doubt that hopes were held of a measure of success in the efforts of 13 Corps, the composition of the forces within the corps, their varying degrees of training, the terrain and the quality of the defence through which any advance would have to be made, all militated against anything more than a successful diversionary operation. The corps had three divisions under its command, 7 Armoured, 50 and 44 Infantry Divisions. The armour comprised 22 Armoured Brigade and 4 Light Armoured Brigade, together mustering 71 Grants, 57 Crusaders and 86 Stuarts, and there were 190 armoured cars in the corps' command. Though both these armoured brigades had had long desert experience, this had all been on the old independent model, with little training in co-operation with infantry. Of the two infantry formations, 50 Division had suffered so heavily in earlier fighting that it had been threatened with disbandment but had lately managed to build up two of its original brigades, 69 and 151, though not to full strength, with reinforcements. For a third brigade it had 1 Greek Independent Brigade under command, an enthusiastic but neither a well trained nor well equipped body of men. The Home Counties formation, 44 Division, had lost 133 Brigade to **10 Corps** as a lorried infantry group, and its two remaining brigades, 131 and 132, were under strength from losses sustained in the two operations into the **Munassib Depression** at the beginning and end of September. The corps also had under its command 1 and 2 Fighting French Brigades as well as a French 'flying column', all of whose equipment and training were incomplete. There were fourteen field regiments in the corps but several were under strength, so that they could deploy about 280 field guns, in addition to which the French had a battery of four medium guns.

Though its formations were thus not yet ready for complex or sustained operations, 13 Corps was set quite an ambitious task against a heavily mined front defended by German and Italian parachute troops and well supported by artillery and anti-tank guns. The armoured reserve

of *21 Panzer and Ariete* divisions had at least 70 heavy tanks to match the 71 Grants of 7 Armoured Division, and well over 200 lighter German and Italian tanks and captured Stuarts. Unlike 30 Corps, 13 Corps had superiority only in men and that only at the point of assault, for on the corps' front, stretching for nearly 20 miles, the *Panzer Army* deployed three Italian divisions and the German *Ramcke Brigade* to face the two British infantry divisions.

The plan agreed on between Montgomery and Horrocks was for 13 Corps to advance on a line to the south of *Deir el Munassib*, penetrate the Axis defences on the original British second and first minefields that were lost after *Alam Halfa*, and place the armour in behind these defences so that they would be untenable or easily 'crumbled'. The corps would then clear the area as far as the old Axis line between the *Qattara Box* and *Gebel Kalakh* in readiness for a final break-out into the open desert beyond. It was on paper a minor edition of the 30 and 10 Corps' plan, but in execution it was limited by a reservation which practically precluded any chance of success. Although there was still a current of opinion in the Eighth Army that the southern defences of the Axis, with their preponderance of Italians and less well-knit strongpoint system, offered an easier nut to crack than the mine gardens of the north, Montgomery had chosen, for valid reasons, to make his main assault in the north. He was moreover committing all his armour on the opening day of the battle, leaving himself no armoured reserve, and though it is doubtful if he would have been prepared to switch forces from the north to reinforce success, however great, by 13 Corps, he was certainly prepared, even expecting, to strip 13 Corps of armour and infantry to reinforce the northern punch. So Horrocks, in spite of the elaborate plans he was encouraged to edit, loosed his corps to the assault under a strict injunction that the whole operation should be called off if 7 Armoured Division appeared likely to suffer heavy losses in tanks, an injunction which made Montgomery's policy – of setting out an armoured screen to hold off counter-attack while the Axis defences behind were 'crumbled' – well-nigh impossible of execution against even a mediocre defence. Diversionary action, to contain the Axis forces in

the south and especially *21 Panzer Division*, was in fact all that 13 Corps could expect to achieve.

The northern sector of 13 Corps' front, immediately on the left of 4 Indian Division, was held by 50 Division, with 1 Greek Independent Brigade in the south-west of the old New Zealand Box, 151 Brigade covering from *Alam Nayil* south-west along the old second minefield, and 69 Brigade holding the eastern end of the *Munassib Depression*. Next came 131 Brigade of 44 Division, reinforced with a battalion of 132 Brigade, and then *1 Fighting French Brigade* was thinly disposed along the line of the old fourth minefield. The main body of the armour of 7 Armoured Division was held in the rear of this southern portion, with tank and armoured car patrols operating in the front line as required. The corps reserve consisted of *2 Fighting French Brigade* and the other two battalions of 132 Brigade, which were in the rear of the northern part of the sector.

The corps plan in detail was for raids or simulated attacks as diversions by all three brigades of 50 Division, while the main attempt to breach the minefields was made to the south of the *Munassib Depression*, where one battalion of 131 Brigade was to advance to cover the northern flank as 7 Armoured Division made the breach. At the same time a mobile force from *1 Fighting French Brigade* was to pass to the south of *Himeimat*, occupy the *Naqb Rala* plateau, isolate the *Himeimat* garrison and link up with 7 Armoured Division some three to four miles further north. The main operation presented several problems. The infantry, 1/7 Battalion, The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey) of 131 Brigade, were to break into the main enemy defence line on the old British first minefield and cover the northern flank of the armour's advance. To do so, the troops had to move about three miles in transport and another three on foot to reach the enemy line at the same time as the armour, which had to travel about ten miles from the rear over four routes which, though lit and marked, included patches of very heavy going in soft sand. Each of the four columns of armour was to be led by detachments of 44 Reconnaissance Regiment (a carrier-borne unit of 44

**Division which had received special training in gapping defended minefields), supported by engineers, anti-tank guns, Scorpions, tanks of the [Royal Scots Greys](#) (of 4 Light Armoured Brigade) and a company of lorried infantry from either 1 Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, or 1 Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps. Each advance guard was followed by a column of tanks of 22 Armoured Brigade with field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery and by the armour's A Echelon vehicles carrying supplies to replenish the tanks. Each column, including its advance guard, consisted of over 200 vehicles. Behind these came four more columns of 4 Light Armoured Brigade.**

**Once through the mine-belts, the armour was to form a screen, 4 Light Armoured to the north and 22 Brigade to the south, to allow the infantry to consolidate the bridgehead. Later the two armoured formations were to move north-west towards [Deir Alinda](#) to screen an advance by 50 Division through Munassib to the line of the old 'first' minefield. The initial assault was to be supported by a fairly heavy artillery programme, commencing with a counter-battery shoot by about 130 guns and followed, as the assaulting groups met the enemy's forward line, by a form of creeping barrage, fired by four field regiments to cover an area some 2000 yards wide by 4500 yards deep and lifting in irregular leaps of 200 to 400 yards. This barrage was designed, and timed, to subdue the enemy covering the two mine-belts as gapping operations proceeded. The infantry advance of 1/7 Queen's, taking place off the north-east corner of the main barrage area, was to be covered by a creeping barrage fired by one regiment on a front of 550 yards to a depth of 800 yards. After the barrage was completed, the artillery was to maintain concentrations mainly on known posts along the northern flank of the armour's advance. The French operation against [Himeimat](#) had the support of two field regiments, firing mainly concentrations on call.**

**Owing to several factors, principally the broken nature of the ground and the wide dispersion of the positions on both sides, 13 Corps had not been able to secure the same detailed picture of the enemy's dispositions**

as was acquired in the northern area. Accordingly, as early as 17 October, a provocative shoot, by three medium batteries firing nearly 4000 rounds altogether, was commenced to encourage the enemy to disclose his gun positions by retaliation, while the field guns laid smoke and the infantry 'demonstrated' to suggest an assault in order to get the Axis forward posts to open fire. In spite of a chain of flash-spotting, sound-ranging, and observation posts, not a great deal was recorded for it would appear that the Axis troops, remembering Stumme's strictures on the wastage of precious ammunition, refused to be drawn. So it was that 13 Corps to some extent assaulted blind, in places against objectives not held by the enemy and at others against unexpected opposition.

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

# CHAPTER 18 – 10 CORPS' PLANS

## CHAPTER 18

### 10 Corps' Plans

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FOR his armoured corps to follow the infantry break-in of 30 Corps in the north, Montgomery had hoped to have three full armoured formations, 1, 8 and 10 Armoured Divisions. But shortages of equipment and trained men could not be made up in the time available so that, just prior to the opening of the operation, 8 Armoured Division had to be 'cannibalised' to build up the others. Thus 1 Armoured Division was composed of 2 Armoured Brigade, 7 Motor Brigade, and a composite force, mainly artillery, from 8 Division, and **10 Armoured Division** of 8 and 24 Armoured Brigades (the latter from 8 Division) and 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade (from 44 Division). The tank strength in **10 Corps** Headquarters and the two divisions on the eve of the battle amounted to a total of 457, made up of 216 Shermans, 62 Grants, and 179 Crusaders, with 168 armoured cars of various types.

The plan of operations gave **10 Corps** the task of sending its leading elements forward on the heels of the assaulting infantry of 30 Corps, making its own gaps in the enemy minefields, and placing its tanks beyond the infantry's final objective to cover the 'crumbling process' and draw the enemy's armoured reserve into counter-attack. On the right, 1 Armoured Division was to find its way through the northern side of 51 Division's sector, advancing almost due west, while **10 Armoured Division** took a route through the New Zealand sector, travelling in a south-westerly direction.

In discussion and study of the problem of traffic movement in the area of penetration, **Freyberg** pointed out that he had to get the whole of 9 Armoured Brigade forward before the **10 Corps** armour, and then keep it replenished in action, while 51 Division had a similar, though lesser, problem with its supporting Valentines; and this could hardly be done if the routes were congested with long columns of **10 Corps** armour and its



ancillary vehicles, while his engineers were too few in number to cut more than the routes needed by his own division. The final arrangement was that 30 Corps should be responsible for clearing and marking the six named tracks, Sun, Moon, Star, Boat, Bottle and Hat, as far as no-man's land, and from that point on each division, infantry and armour, would cut its own lanes. The armoured divisions therefore prepared minefield task forces, which included engineers in sufficient strength to breach the minefields expected to be met, together with tanks and lorried infantry to subdue any enemy posts bypassed by the infantry.

For the advance of 1 Armoured Division it was planned to extend Sun, Moon and Star tracks on a compass bearing slightly south of due west, the extension of Sun track running almost on the boundary between the Australian and Highland divisions' sectors. On each route the way was to be led by a reconnaissance party of the task force in touch with the infantry ahead, followed by a detachment formed into three groups, the first to deal with the first enemy minefield, the second the next and so on. Behind the gapping parties, one of the three regiments of 2 Armoured Brigade was to lead each of the three main columns, the Queen's Bays (2nd Dragoon Guards) on Sun track, 9 Queen's Royal Lancers on Moon, and 10 Royal Hussars on Star, each with its supporting tail of lorried infantry, engineers, artillery, and replenishment vehicles. The commander, with his Tactical and Main Headquarters of 2 Armoured Brigade, was to travel with the Lancers on the centre track, Moon. Following the tank columns, the armoured cars of 12 Royal Lancers were to have a squadron on each track and behind them were battery groups of 2 Regiment, RHA.

On the tail of the armoured brigade, 7 Motor Brigade was to have a battalion on each of the outer tracks, 7 Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, on Sun, and 2 KRRC <sup>1</sup> on Star, with brigade headquarters in the centre on Moon, followed by the remaining company of 2 Battalion, The Rifle Brigade (the others were with the minefield task groups), two troops of Churchill tanks and various anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery. The main columns were completed by battery groups of 4 Regiment, RHA,

and detachments of 78 Field Regiment, RA, the latter detailed to collect en route its six troops which had moved up earlier to fire in the opening

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps.

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artillery programme. The final group of 1 Armoured Division consisted of 'Hammerforce', drawn from elements of 8 Armoured Division with the task, if plans fell out as hoped, of reinforcing the front and passing its armoured cars through any breach made in the Axis defences. This force had an anti-tank regiment on Sun track, its headquarters and a mixed group of artillery and Royal Army Service Corps vehicles on Moon, and the fifty-five cars of 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment on Star track.

In each of the columns on the two outside tracks there were well over 200 vehicles, and on the centre route, Moon, considerably more. The armoured fighting vehicles of 1 Armoured Division consisted of 92 Sherman tanks, one Grant, and 76 Crusaders, a total of 169, with 118 armoured cars. <sup>1</sup>

The other armoured formation of **10 Corps, 10 Armoured Division**, planned an advance, generally similar but differing in detail, from the western ends of the three southern tracks, Boat, Bottle and Hat, within lanes that ran in a south-westerly direction through the New Zealand Division's sector of the assault. Possibly because of faith in the capability of the New Zealand infantry and its attached tanks to clear the ground, **10 Armoured Division's** minefield task force comprised mainly engineers, with tank or lorried infantry support. The detachment for each track was divided into a reconnaissance group to advance ten minutes behind the New Zealand infantry to locate the minefields, of which it was thought there were only two, and a working party following fifteen minutes later to cut the gaps, while provosts put out signs and tapes to guide the main columns and signalmen laid telephone cable and set up exchanges. A reserve party, with stores and medical detachment, was to move on Boat track ready to send assistance to the gapping

parties. There were in fact four gapping parties as, for a purpose still obscure, **10 Armoured Division** decided to cut an extra lane, Ink, between Bottle and Boat.

Behind the task forces, **8 Armoured Brigade** led the division, with the **Staffordshire Yeomanry** on Bottle, the **Nottinghamshire Yeomanry** and brigade headquarters on Boat, and **3 Royal Tanks** on Hat. The armoured cars of the **Royal Dragoons** came next on Hat, and **Divisional Headquarters** on Boat. Then **24 Armoured Brigade** followed, with **41, 47 and 45 Battalions**, The Royal Tank Regiment, on Bottle, Boat and Hat respectively, and finally **133 Lorried Infantry Brigade** with **5, 4 and 2 Battalions**, The Royal Sussex Regiment, respectively on the three tracks. The

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<sup>1</sup> **Humbers, Daimlers and Marmon-Herringtons.**

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total of **10 Armoured Division's** tanks was **273**, made up of **31 Shermans, 57 Grants and 45 Crusaders** in **8 Armoured Brigade**, and **93 Shermans, 2 Grants and 45 Crusaders** in **24 Armoured Brigade**. The armoured cars of the **Royal Dragoons** numbered **46**. It has been estimated that, when the rear vehicles were preparing to start up, the leading vehicles were more than ten miles ahead, each column consisting of up to **400 vehicles or more**.

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To avoid the slightest chance of observation by the enemy, the vast mass of tracked and wheeled vehicles of **10 Corps** had to form up in the assembly areas after dusk. Then, in complete wireless silence, each group had to be fed in its correct order on to its selected track on a detailed timetable that allowed little latitude if the tanks were to pass through the infantry's final objective before dawn, as was planned. With starting times from **7.30 to 9.30 p.m.** according to the distance to be travelled, the six columns advanced until their heads reached the **Springbok Road**, the track running south-west from **Alamein** station.

Here petrol tanks were topped up and last-minute adjustments made, and at 2 a.m. the whole of **10 Corps** set off. From **Springbok Road** to the infantry's objective, the armour had about ten miles to go.

In the orders given to the armour, it was appreciated that the infantry might not succeed in reaching its objective and that news of success or failure might be too scanty and incomplete for some hours to indicate whether the Axis defences had been sufficiently breached for the tanks to pass through and deploy. The armour was therefore warned that its columns might have to fight their own way forward at any point. To allow for any disorganisation caused by opposition or delay in getting through the minefields, the various armoured groups were instructed not to make their way direct to the final **10 Corps** objective, some four miles beyond the infantry objective, but to halt and rally on three defined bounds. The first of these, only a short way past the infantry line, was to be gained by dawn, but further advances were only to be made on orders to be sent out from Corps Headquarters after the course of the battle had been studied.

In detail, 1 Armoured Division was to deploy 2 Armoured Brigade on the first bound to cover the western end of the Australians' area of penetration and then, as it advanced westwards to the next bound, was to bring up 7 Motor Brigade to extend the Australian northern flank to link the infantry's gains with the armour's objective. Meanwhile **8 Armoured Brigade** of 10 Armoured Division, on debouching from the New Zealand sector, was to spread northwards immediately and link up with 2 Armoured Brigade on the first bound; it was to be followed by 24 Armoured Brigade, which would extend the line southward with 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade guarding its left rear. By these dispositions, with three armoured brigades stretched for about four miles in a nearly north-south line and, if all went well, with at least 400 tanks in fighting trim, Montgomery hoped to be able to exploit any situation that might develop. He expected the first enemy move to be a counter-attack by the armoured reserve under **15 Panzer Division** which, according to Allied intelligence, was stationed to the west of 2 Armoured Brigade, a move

with which both 2 and 8 Brigades could deal. Should the southern armoured reserve under *21 Panzer Division* be brought up rapidly, it would probably be intercepted by the New Zealand Division's exploitation force, consisting of 9 Armoured Brigade, on whose right flank 24 Armoured Brigade would be well set to give assistance. The Army Commander pinned considerable hope on the exploitation role given to the New Zealand and South African divisions, allied to pressure by 13 Corps, to drive a wedge between the northern and southern halves of the Axis fixed defences and thus prevent the free movement of reserves; but he was also prepared to take the alternative or complementary action of driving from the north flank of the Australian penetration towards the coast. His policy was deliberately fluid, stressing the importance of all formations being prepared to operate immediately on any changes in plans.

It should be noted that Montgomery retained no true armoured reserve. All the fully equipped armoured brigades, 2, 8 and 24 in 10 Corps, 23 and 9 in 30 Corps, and 22 and 4 Light in 13 Corps, were committed in the opening stages of the battle. He had, however, a fully functioning armoured command in Headquarters 8 Armoured Division, which was under orders to prepare plans to assimilate any newly formed units and others withdrawn from the battle and reorganise into a mobile force which could, if opportunity offered, make a dash as far as *Tobruk*. The infantry situation was more satisfactory as there were three brigades uncommitted, the veteran 5 Indian Infantry Brigade and the less experienced 132 Brigade and 2 Fighting French, while six others, 24 Australian, 7 and 161 Indian, and the three in 50 Division (1 Greek, 151, and 69), had holding tasks only and could thus be made available to reinforce the successes of the attacking formations.



# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 19 – COMPARATIVE STRENGTHS



## CHAPTER 19

### *Comparative Strengths*

**THE strength of the opposing armies on the day before the battle is difficult to compare owing to the differing methods of organisation, and thus of computing strengths, used in the available British and German records. The Allied figures are known in considerable detail, down to the number of tanks under repair in forward and rear workshops, and they cover the totals of men in all units and formations under the direct command of the Eighth Army without distinction between riflemen, gunners, cooks and clerks. The surviving German records, on the other hand, offer only the number of tanks fit for action in the panzer divisions and formation strengths in terms of men ready to take part in the battle under the *Panzer Army's* command as carrying or manning weapons. The Italian figures examined are incomplete, their detail difficult to reconcile with any totals given. The following comparisons are offered, however, to give some idea of the relative strengths of the two armies.**

**Against the Eighth Army's total on 23 October of 220,476 men under command (including 10,570 officers), the *Panzer Army* in the line could probably muster about 110,000, of whom slightly more than half were Italians.<sup>1</sup> The British had as great a superiority in tanks, for just over 1000 of the 1348 Allied tanks held in the **Middle East** were in fighting trim in the forward areas while the Axis could muster 600 'runners' at the most, of which only 129 were 'heavies' (German Mark III Special, Mark IV and Mark IV Special) to be pitted against the 430 British Grants and Shermans. The Eighth Army could also field more than 400 armoured cars against an Axis total of under 200.**

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<sup>1</sup> The *Panzer Army* war diary carries entries to indicate that in the week before 23 October there were 237,000 Axis troops on the ration strength in North Africa. Of these, 91,000 were German Army, Navy and Air Force personnel, and 146,000 were Italians, divided into 84,000 in the rear and 62,000 in the

forward areas. An equivalent ration state of British troops in the **Middle East** theatre has been estimated at over 500,000.

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For artillery the Eighth Army had approximately 900 medium and field guns, the majority 25-pounders, as well as 800 six-pounder and 550 two-pounder anti-tank guns, 48 3·7-inch and 700 Bofors anti-aircraft guns. With some 52 other weapons of assorted calibres, the British could man a grand total of 3050 guns. <sup>1</sup> The *Panzer Army*, with 26 heavy guns for which the British had no equivalent, disposed of some 500 heavy, field, and medium weapons and 1000 anti-tank or dual purpose anti-tank/anti-aircraft guns of from 37- to 88-millimetre calibre. Of the notorious 88s, there were between fifty and sixty in the **Alamein** defences, with less than half the total sited in an anti-tank role. The Axis also had a quantity of guns of all types that could have been rapidly brought forward from the rear and coastal defence areas. Apart from a definite superiority in the number of guns, the Eighth Army also had the advantage of being able to concentrate its artillery at its chosen points of attack, while the *Panzer Army* had to maintain artillery defence across the whole front. Further, the Axis supply of artillery ammunition, in spite of restrictions and careful hoarding, was certainly considerably less than that of the British and its replenishment from the rear more difficult. Lastly, the British forces had a supply of transport vehicles, mostly well-shod and in good going order, vastly greater than the battle-worn and overdriven Axis transport fleet.

The figures for the *Panzer Army* fighting strength may be on the conservative side but there is no doubt that the Eighth Army had generally a two-to-one superiority. The course of military history shows that such a ratio is not sufficient on its own to ensure victory to the attackers.

The *Panzer Army's* dispositions were fairly well known in general to the Eighth Army through normal intelligence sources, but the Axis method of stiffening the Italians with German units made an exact delineation of divisional sectors impossible. It was known that, facing 30

Corps from the coast to the South African front, there were the infantry battalions of 382 and 433 *Regiments of 164 Division* in the tactically important positions in the mine gardens, with Italians of 61 and 62 *Regiments of Trento Division* and some *Bersaglieri* units sandwiched in between. Behind them there was the armoured reserve consisting of 15 *Panzer Division* and *Littorio Armoured Division*, with 90 *Light Division* on the coast by **Ghazal** and *Trieste Division* further to the west. The *Bologna Division* faced 4 *Indian Division* on **Ruweisat Ridge** and *Brescia Division* covered the ground opposite 50 *Division* in the

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<sup>1</sup> In the assault on the Chemin des Dames in 1918, the German siege train numbered 3719 guns.—Barrie Pitt, 1918. *The Last Act*.

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old **New Zealand Box** area. Both these Italian formations were well stiffened with detachments of *Ramcke Parachute Brigade*. *Folgore* and *Pavia Divisions* held from Munassib to **Himeimat**, with 33 *Reconnaissance Unit* guarding the southern end of the line. The southern armoured reserve, of 21 *Panzer* and *Ariete Divisions*, lay to the rear, between the **Qattara Box** and **Gebel Kalakh**. The assault by 30 *Corps* would thus fall on 164 and *Trento Divisions*, while the attack by 13 *Corps* was directed at the junction of *Brescia* and *Folgore Divisions* at a point where the *Ramcke* parachutists had an extensive strongpoint.

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 20 – ADVANCE BY 30 CORPS

## CHAPTER 20

### *Advance by 30 Corps*

**THROUGH** Montgomery's firm stand, backed by Alexander, against various pressures to hasten the offensive, the Eighth Army's preparations were sufficiently complete in all major points on the day of 23 October for the orders for final assembly and forward movement to be issued with confidence. Most of the requirements for the type and length of battle foreseen were in the front line or ready to be brought forward, whilst the troops, including those for special tasks, were trained as well as time and opportunity had allowed, and their commanders had been briefed more fully than ever before.

Some details in the planning admittedly still gave cause for concern, as for example the reliability of the newly invented Scorpion flail tanks and the training of their crews, but where possible such weak points had been insured against: the use of the Scorpions was made subsidiary to the normal engineer methods of clearing minefields. Communications probably presented the biggest weakness, for the wireless sets then in use were notoriously unreliable, and the plans included the laying of telephone cable by special signal detachments, the use of signal rockets, and even carrier pigeons. But there was nothing that really warranted a delay for the month that would have coincided with the next full moon. A delay in fact would surely have staled the enthusiasm that had gradually built up within the ranks of the army.

In daylight of the 23rd, the army's cover plan provided that much of the normal supply traffic should be dispensed with in place of some of the preliminary movement of the assault forces, the altered pattern screened from observation by continuous fighter patrols provided by the **Desert Air Force**. This cleared the routes for the time when the sun began to sink below the western horizon and men, trucks, guns, and tanks moved out of concealment to assemble for the advance. From the front line in 30 Corps' sector to a point some miles in rear, the desert then saw such a concentrated flow of movement as it had probably

never seen before. The best part of four divisions of infantry and two of armour, amounting to an estimated 100,000 men and 15,000 to 20,000 vehicles, converged on to the ten prepared tracks, Diamond, Boomerang, Two Bar and Square in the Australian area, and Sun, Moon, Star, Bottle, Boat and Hat further to the south. <sup>1</sup>

That the organisation was substantially sound was soon proved. Apart from some minor upsets when last-minute changes were imposed in the schedules of movement and routes, the various columns on each route formed up in the right order and generally kept closely to their timings in spite of the fact that the fine dust churned up by the vehicles sometimes made the darkness of the night almost impenetrable. Eventually all those units whose task was to advance without further orders crossed their start lines successfully, though other units farther to the rear, who had to wait upon reports of the degree of success gained, spent a trying night in long halts and short bursts of movement as news from the front filtered back.

Right up at the front the movement, mainly by men on foot, was brisk and up to time, first by the engineers and their covering parties who opened the prepared gaps in the last British minefield, and then by the assaulting infantry who filed through the gaps to fan out on the taped start lines. Visibility here was at first very good, with the full moon rising and few clouds in the sky, and the night was mild with a slight breeze. The silence in no-man's land was broken only by the occasional bark of one of the British batteries detailed to make a show of firing the normal night's harassing tasks and by the rarer salvo in reply from the enemy. The noise of the vast mass of Eighth Army's vehicles grinding their way along the tracks behind the front seemed to get lost in the desert's flat vastness.

Contrary to popular report, the guns at **Alamein** did not all open with a concerted roar. The first shells fired in the offensive were high airbursts sent over about 8.30 p.m. by one of the medium batteries to test the meteorological conditions affecting accurate shooting. Then, apart from the odd harassing salvo, the next activity occurred at 9 p.m.

when **24 Australian Brigade** in the coastal sector opened its diversionary programme, using a variety of light weapons, including twelve of the new 4·2-inch mortars operated by 66 Mortar Company of the **Royal Engineers** and fired in action for the first time in **Africa**. At 9.40 p.m., five minutes after the leading troops of the four assaulting divisions advanced from their start lines, the main artillery programme commenced with fifteen minutes of counter-battery fire, the forty-eight medium guns under 30 Corps laying a series of methodical 'murders' on the more distant Axis gun positions while most of the 424 field guns in the corps dealt in a similar manner with positions within their more limited range. These 'murders' were arranged so that each known enemy troop, usually of four guns, received about a hundred 4·5 or 5·5-inch shells in a two-minute burst, or an equivalent weight of 25-pounder shells. The pattern of this counter-battery fire was designed not only towards the destruction of the enemy's weapons and their crews but also to cause the utmost disorganisation of the lines of communication, replenishment and reinforcement. It ceased at 9.55 and for five minutes there was an impression of silence on 30 Corps' front, but an impression only for numerous Axis posts were laying down defensive fire with automatics and mortars, particularly in the coastal sector, where the first diversionary raid by the Australians was under way. In 13 Corps' area in the southern half of the line a counter-battery programme was fired from 9.25 to 9.50 p.m.

It was not until 10 p.m., when the assaulting infantry of 30 Corps were within a few hundred yards of the foremost enemy posts and the raiding parties and the main assault groups of 13 Corps were crossing their start lines, that searchlights pointing skywards behind Eighth Army's lines swung to intersect each other and give the signal for all the 900 field and medium guns to join in concert in direct support to the advance by concentrations and barrages. At the same time the first flights by the **Royal Air Force** began in direct support of land operations, some ninety bombers, including flare-dropping Albatrosses, and numerous Hurricanes equipped for night strafing, attacking mainly the Axis heavy and medium gun positions, all of which were out of range of the 25-



**pounders and many even beyond the range of the British medium batteries.**

**The initial response of the Axis was slow and weak under the sudden impact of the heavy shelling and bombing. The German records show that, though casualties were not very heavy and many weapons survived the 'murders', communications with the front-line positions were badly disrupted, so that for some hours the Axis command was unable to ascertain exactly where and how deeply the defences had been overrun.**

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**<sup>1</sup> This estimate is based on the following details. Approximately two brigade groups out of three in each of the Australian, Highland, and South African divisions had to move up to the front, as well as the whole of the New Zealand and the two armoured divisions, together with a large body of ancillary troops. The New Zealand Division (including 9 Armoured Brigade) had some 2800 vehicles, including its tanks, and nearly 16,000 men, most of whom, including medical and other rear services, moved after dark this night. The proportion of men to vehicles in the New Zealand Division was thus nearly 6:1; the ratio throughout 30 Corps could not have been much different.**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 21 – THE BATTLE IS JOINED

## CHAPTER 21

### *The Battle is Joined*

**‘...in face of the overwhelming evidence of history no general is justified in launching his troops to a direct attack upon an enemy firmly in position.’—B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Decisive Wars of History*.**

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**THE first move in the **Alamein** offensive, apart from all the preparations, was made at sea. In full daylight on the morning of 23 October a scratch force of warships and merchantmen gathered from **Port Said** and **Alexandria** and started to sail westwards. Its movement was seen, it would appear, by Italian naval reconnaissance aircraft and reported, as was intended, through naval intelligence to the Axis army. After dusk the convoy turned back, leaving eight motor torpedo-boats to continue as far as **Ras el Kanayis** where, after the land action had commenced, they made a mock landing under a demonstration of tracer fire and flares.**

**Land operations commenced at 9 p.m. when **24 Australian Brigade** laid down diversionary fire from the sea coast to a point just south of the railway line. To leave the division's field guns free for the main assault, the brigade used its infantry weapons as well as a number of captured automatics and mortars and the new 4·2-inch mortars for which 1600 rounds were on hand. As the main 30 Corps assault went in at 10 p.m., two platoons of the brigade, one to the north of the railway line and the other to the south, were raiding known enemy posts. Both platoons suffered about 50 per cent casualties against strong opposition, though one managed to bring back five German prisoners. After the raiding parties returned, the diversion continued with a smoke screen laid by **Boston** aircraft while dummy figures, worked by concealed operators and briefly illuminated by searchlights, gave the impression that attacks on other parts of the brigade's sector were continuing. At 3**

a.m. the diversion ceased, and that it was very successful was clear at the time from the strong enemy reaction. This was confirmed in the German records which show that the defenders, mainly of *125 Infantry Regiment*, were so sure that they had repulsed a major assault that their morale remained high in later engagements. To add to the confusion, four Hudson aircraft dropped a number of self-destroying dummy parachutists and flares to illuminate them in the vicinity of **Fuka**.

These diversionary actions on the coast were intended not only to confuse the enemy as to the actual point of the main assault and hinder the deployment of reserves in the northern sector, but also to cause the Axis command to turn its thoughts to the south once it realised the diversions for what they were, for one of Montgomery's aims was to keep the *Africa Corps* from concentrating against 30 Corps.

The main Australian operation commenced at 10 p.m., when the guns switched from counter-battery fire to the supporting concentrations for the infantry's advance. On the right of the divisional sector 2/24 Australian Infantry Battalion, charging each enemy post immediately the shellfire lifted to the next, disposed of all opposition as far as the first objective, where a new start line was quickly laid out to allow the following unit, 2/48 Battalion, to form up and set off at the appointed time, 12.55 a.m. This battalion also advanced with great dash and, though meeting some fierce and determined opposition, passed through it all to reach the final objective about 2.45 a.m. The complete success of this advance by the two battalions of 26 Brigade along the right flank of the area of penetration, besides doing much to ensure the success of the whole corps operation, allowed the division's **Composite Force** to man posts and lay minefields to cover the junction of the sector of advance and the fixed defences of 24 Brigade to the north.

In its wider sector on the left, 20 Australian Infantry Brigade advanced with two battalions forward, 2/17 on the right and 2/15 on the left. Near the first objective heavy fire caught 2/17 Battalion and brought some eighty casualties, but by midnight both battalions were firm on the objective, to allow 2/13 Battalion to form up ready for the

final part of the advance. This battalion was to be assisted by the forty-two Valentines of **40 Royal Tanks**, but at 12.55 a.m., when the second part of the supporting artillery concentrations was due to begin, the tanks were meeting trouble in navigating the tracks and minefields well to the rear, their route running through a lateral minefield for 1600 yards. Through the delays and difficulties in communications occasioned in such circumstances, it was found impracticable to stop 2/48 Battalion's advance on the north, so the divisional commander ordered the artillery fire to proceed as arranged and for 2/13 Battalion to attempt the advance without the tanks. Only a few minutes late, this battalion set off, but the delay was sufficient for the full value of the 25-pounder concentrations to be lost. Against strong opposition from ahead and on its open left flank, 2/13 Battalion suffered heavy casualties and was finally brought to a halt. About 5 a.m. some of the Valentines appeared, and with their help the survivors of the battalion, reorganising rapidly, broke through some of the opposition ahead. With the increasing light the tanks came under fire from the left which forced them to move into cover, leaving the infantry to dig in where they were, some 1000 yards short of the final objective and to the north of the planned line of advance.

Thus at dawn 9 Australian Division had one battalion in good strength on the objective and another weakened battalion slightly to the left rear. Three battalions were on the first objective in good order, ready to operate to north or west and, as Axis retaliation was relatively slight in the first few hours of daylight, the remaining Valentines and support weapons were able to consolidate the sector in strength.

Communications were maintained throughout the action by both brigades though sometimes with difficulty. Casualties for this first night of the offensive are not known in any detail but were reported as not unduly heavy, while prisoners taken amounted to 137 Germans and 264 Italians.

**Much of the story of 51 (Highland) Division, in the sector immediately to the south of the Australians, has been lost in the fog of war. The initial stages, however, in which it had been possible to prepare and train the men in their exact tasks, went almost as smoothly as a parade-ground drill. Ten gaps were opened in the outer British minefield, each 24 feet wide or more, so that each assault group of the division had a route of its own, whether it was to move in the first wave or later. The start lines were quickly and correctly laid for the troops of the first wave, who formed up in good order and, with pipers leading some of the units, set off at 9.50 p.m., some fifteen minutes later than the New Zealanders on their left, though with approximately the same distance to cover to the first enemy posts. From this point on the advance developed into individual operations by the various assault groups for, with a general breakdown of communications throughout the sector, many of the groups were ignorant of the progress of their neighbours as they fought for the four objective lines, Green, Red, Black, and Blue (Red and Blue corresponding respectively with the first and final objectives of the Australian and New Zealand divisions).**

**In 153 Brigade's portion of the divisional sector, the northern side, 5 Black Watch on the right successfully used its A and B Companies to subdue two enemy strongpoints and then passed C and D Companies through to the Green line by midnight without much trouble. Then A Company carried the advance to the Red line to cover the forming up of 1 Gordons, detailed to take the final lines, Black and Blue. This battalion, advancing with two companies forward and two to the rear, ran into heavy fire thought to come from the enemy, though it now seems likely that some of it was from supporting artillery concentrations falling short. The battalion then fell back until the shelling eased, when the two leading companies, A and C, again set off, only to find themselves without benefit of artillery support. On coming under fire from two strongpoints, the men gallantly attacked with the bayonet but were beaten back in some confusion. Rallied by officers and NCOs to try an outflanking assault, the survivors swung wide of the nearer strongpoint and broke into the further one, close to the Black line. At**

dawn three junior officers and sixty men were holding on in a part of this position with the enemy still determinedly defending the remainder. Here they remained, under constant fire and completely out of communication, until well after daylight.

The rest of the battalion, B Company and a platoon of D, had remained close to the Red line to await the arrival of the fifteen Valentines of A Squadron, **50 Royal Tanks**, carrying the other two platoons of D Company which were detailed to make the final assault on an extensive enemy position thought to exist on the final objective, the Blue line. The tanks arrived late, about 2 a.m., when B Company was away trying to subdue some isolated enemy posts which were firing on the battalion from the left, or southern, flank. By the time tanks and infantry had married up, all the supporting artillery fire had ceased and enemy opposition was still strong, much of it coming from the two posts that A and C Companies had encountered. When two of the Valentines were lost on a minefield where fire prevented the sappers from working, the whole force turned back.

On the left of 153 Brigade's sector, 5/7 Gordons successfully overcame a number of small posts to reach the Red line shortly after midnight. Here A and B Companies dug in while C and D set off for the Black line. In attempting an outflanking move against a strongpoint, D Company was caught in a thickly sown minefield under fire and disintegrated. On reporting that it was out of touch with other troops and unable to advance on its own, C Company was told by the battalion commander to dig in where it was, some way short of Black. Thus by dawn the farthest 153 Brigade had penetrated was about 2000 yards short of the final objective, where the survivors of two companies of 1 Gordons were holding out unknown to brigade headquarters. The rest of the brigade had gained little more than the middle objective, the Red line, and were not well organised to meet an immediate counter-attack. With a general breakdown in communications through loss or failure of wireless sets and the difficulties of night navigation in such an operation, the brigade's actions could not be plotted with any accuracy,



so that there was considerable uncertainty over both unit locations and the positions of enemy strongpoints still unsubdued.

In the Highland Division's left sector, 154 Brigade had a much wider front to cover, for which it had been reinforced with **50 Royal Tanks** (less A Squadron), the divisional reconnaissance regiment and two companies of 5 Camerons from 152 Brigade. On the extreme right 1 Black Watch, with its pipers to the fore, marched steadily up to the Green line, keeping close to the artillery concentrations and meeting little direct opposition. From this line, B and C companies pressed on to overrun a large strongpoint just ahead of the Red line, but in doing so suffered severe casualties from artillery fire which may have been part of the supporting concentrations. As these two companies reorganised, D and A Companies passed through to make for the battalion's last objective, the Black line. On the left A Company ran into a thick mine-garden sown with anti-personnel mines and 500-pound bombs, where it came under heavy machine-gun fire. Though with numerous casualties, the company rallied and fought on almost as far as the Black line, the survivors taking over an enemy post which they shared with thirty prisoners. Here they remained for some hours out of communication with the rear or with other troops on their flanks. The other company, D on the right, was delayed while forming up but, in order to catch up with the supporting fire, hurried forward with such purpose that it quickly and completely overran a large strongpoint, taking forty prisoners. Although elements of the company continued the advance probably as far as the Black line, they were forced to fall back into the captured strongpoint by fire from unsubdued posts in 153 Brigade's sector.

In 154 Brigade's right-centre lane, 7/10 **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** set off in good time to take its portion of the Black line. Here it was to be joined by two platoons of its A Company carried on the tanks of C Squadron, **50 Royal Tanks** which, advancing in the next lane to the south, were expected to move across somewhere in the vicinity of the Black line to lead the assault on the Highlanders' part of the final objective, where an extensive enemy position lay on the junction of the

**battalion's sector and that of 1 Black Watch on the right.**

**Meeting little direct opposition but suffering a steady drain of casualties from anti-personnel mines, booby traps and mortar fire, the Argyll and Sutherlanders passed Green and reached Red in good time. Here the battalion came under some heavy shellfire in which a whole platoon was wiped out by one concentration. However, when the second phase of the artillery support opened at 12.55 a.m., the battalion was sufficiently reorganised to resume the advance. A successful assault on a strongpoint brought the men to a position just short of the Black line where the survivors, about 100 men altogether, dug in to await the Valentines. As wireless contact had failed, an officer went back to give information about the strongpoint on the final objective and arrange for artillery fire in readiness for a combined assault on the arrival of the tanks. The tanks, however, had met considerable trouble with navigation and mines and did not appear until about 5 a.m., some way to the left (south) and cut off by a minefield. In the rapidly increasing light the enemy in the positions ahead were able to bring aimed fire on the sappers who tried to cut a gap to let the tanks join the infantry, and when anti-tank guns joined in, the Valentine force withdrew to cover some way to the rear.**

**The left-centre lane of 154 Brigade was cut for a special support force consisting of the headquarters of **50 Royal Tanks**, with its B and C Squadrons and the Composite Squadron of 51 Reconnaissance Regiment. For some reason not entirely clear, the Scorpion tank allocated to this force was not available, while the accompanying sappers had no detectors in working order, so that the method of prodding the ground with bayonets had to be employed whenever mines were encountered. Progress was so slow that the commanding officer of **50 Royal Tanks** detached his C Squadron, with its accompanying two platoons of **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders**, early in the advance to find the Argylls' lane. It was apparently unable to do so and made its way independently forward, as has just been recounted.**

**The rest of the support force worked its way through several belts of**

mines, meeting little direct opposition but occasionally coming under fire, and by 3 a.m. the commander decided that he had reached the Black line. Here the Valentines of B Squadron, carrying assault troops of 51 Reconnaissance Regiment and with a troop of the regiment's carriers on each flank, set off to assault what was thought to be a large defensive position just ahead of the final objective. Little or no opposition came from the objective, which was either unoccupied or hastily evacuated by the enemy, but heavy fire broke out from the flanks. With three tanks and six carriers lost by fire or mines, the commanding officer ordered the Valentines to lay smoke, under which the force retired to the Black line and took up hull-down positions as day was breaking.

For the final lane on its far left, 154 Brigade had borrowed two companies of 5 Camerons (of 152 Brigade) for the task of occupying the Red line, from which its own 7 Black Watch was to carry the assault to the final objective. Setting off level and in time with the New Zealand troops on their left, <sup>1</sup> B and C Companies of 5 Camerons made a spirited advance under considerable fire, probably from bypassed posts along the boundary with the New Zealand Division, but reached the Red line on time and with forty prisoners in hand.

In following up the Camerons closely, 7 Black Watch also came under fire from the flanks but formed up on Red in good time for the second phase of the artillery support. Beyond Red, enemy resistance increased and, with the thick minefields encountered, caused a steady loss of men, including all six officers detailed to navigate the battalion along its axis. At the pause in the vicinity of the Black line to reorganise for the final phase of the artillery fire, the toll of casualties became apparent. The battalion commander therefore hastily re-formed his men into two groups, A and C Companies to dig in and hold Black, while B and D went for the final objective. This was gained by 4 a.m. by the survivors, who by then numbered less than two platoons, led by only three officers, all of whom were wounded. Contact was made with 21 New Zealand Battalion on the left but communication immediately to

the rear was cut by an unsubdued enemy post until shortly after first light, when a patrol from the group on the Black line, trying to make contact with the forward troops, rushed the post and overcame it, taking ten prisoners. Even then communications were far from easy, as the remnants of B and D Companies were on a forward slope, heavily mined and exposed to enemy fire. However, the position held by 7 Black Watch was the only portion of

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<sup>1</sup> 5 Camerons appear to have conformed with New Zealand timings.

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the final objective truly gained and held by 51 Division by dawn on the 24th.

Contact across the division's front and from front to rear was too patchy for a clear picture of the operation to be seen, as the infantry wireless links either worked only spasmodically or failed completely, while the Valentine tanks, though keeping radio contact, could do little more than report the situation in their own immediate areas. Few units knew their correct positions on the map so that the more sanguine reported they were further west than they had in fact progressed. Several bypassed enemy posts were still lively as the sun rose and were able to fire on movement west of the Red line, deterring the support weapons and vehicles, as well as the mine-clearing parties, from advancing beyond this line. The area to the rear thus became heavily congested, especially on the northern side of the division's sector, where the mass of vehicles of 1 Armoured Division banked up in columns and spread out in dispersal in any mine-clear patches available, adding to the Highland Division's difficulties of communication and movement and causing conflicting reports of progress to be circulated.

It later became apparent that the Highland Division was not within 1000 yards of the final objective except on the extreme left. In 153 Brigade's sector on the right, where congestion was the worst, an immediate enemy counter-attack would certainly have caused a great

deal of confusion though it could have been held by the armoured division's tanks; but on the rest of the front the infantry were extremely thin on the ground, in places not well organised, and generally so out of touch with their support weapons that defence against counter-attack would have had to rely solely on the previously planned fire tasks of the field guns.

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To complete the story of the right-flank operations, the events occurring to 1 Armoured Division need to be told. This formation was to cut its own three lanes, each separated from the next by about 500 yards, from the ends of Sun, Moon and Star tracks to the infantry's final objective. Then, breaking out beyond the infantry, the armour was to deploy across the front, ready to step forward in ordered bounds to its own objective some five miles further to the west. The tanks had received strict injunctions that they were to press forward relentlessly, but with full reconnaissance and on properly co-ordinated plans, against any opposition and were in no case to rush blindly against anti-tank gun screens.

Well on time the three regimental columns of 2 Armoured Brigade had formed up, fully equipped for the battle expected and with tanks topped up with petrol. With each column led by its detachment of the minefield task force, the advance through the infantry areas to the old front line began on time but was slower than anticipated because, in the darkness, the thick fine dust raised by the mass movement made the task of the tank and truck drivers extremely difficult. In spite of numerous minor mishaps, when vehicles collided or missed the route, as well as a half-hour delay caused by a misunderstanding over the use of Star track, the heads of all three columns passed through the last British minefield about midnight, that is, about the time when the Australians and Highlanders ahead were reaching the intermediate, or Red, line.

On the extension of Sun track behind the Australian advance, the

sappers of the minefield task force had cleared numerous scattered mines and gaps in three main belts as far as the leading infantry battalion, which however was still some way short of the final objective. The armoured column following, led by the Bays, <sup>1</sup> was for some reason unknown held up at the first enemy minefield until 4 a.m., although the sappers had cleared and marked a gap only half an hour after midnight. The column then made better time to reach the third field shortly after the sappers had finished marking the gap, but dangerously close to the approach of daylight. Two squadrons of Shermans then moved through the gap, only to be engaged hotly by anti-tank gun fire. With two tanks immobilised by mines, the Bays took up hull-down positions to the left rear of some Australian infantry (probably 2/15 Battalion) and sent a message back that they were on the infantry's objective, although in fact they were some 3000 yards short of it.

On the extension of Moon track which ran through 153 Highland Brigade's sector, the sappers had to call on their supporting troop of Crusader tanks to subdue opposition at the first enemy minefield and again at the next major mine-belt. Although a squadron of armoured cars came up to assist the task force, this second field was not gapped at daybreak. The column on this route, **9 Lancers** group, <sup>2</sup> therefore had to disperse as best it could among abandoned defences liberally sprinkled with scattered mines, just through the first minefield and a long way from the final objective.

The last column of 1 Armoured Division, **10 Hussars** group <sup>3</sup> on Star track, was delayed at the gap through the outer British minefield by a cause not clearly established, but possibly through confusion over routes and priorities with 50 Royal Tank Regiment's Valentines. The sappers of the column's task force eventually cut a gap in the first enemy field but, on advancing to the next

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<sup>1</sup> The Queen's Bays, 2nd Dragoon Guards.

<sup>2</sup> 9 Queen's Royal Lancers.

belt of mines, came under fire from one of the posts bypassed by 51 Division's infantry. Though the task force claimed that it had cut a narrow gap in this second field before dawn, the leading tanks did not arrive until day was breaking and, with enemy fire covering the exit, made no attempt to push through the gap but dispersed behind the minefield in very congested conditions.

At dawn on the 24th, therefore, 1 Armoured Division's three columns had not got beyond the infantry's intermediate objective, the Red line. This failure was partly attributed to the unsubdued points of enemy resistance left in 153 Brigade's line of advance, but it was basically due to the lack of co-operation between tanks and infantry still endemic in the British Army, for the strongpoints encountered were mostly small, isolated, and vulnerable to immediate combined assaults, as was later shown. The northern column of the Bays, though handily placed to do so, does not appear to have co-operated in the resumption of the assault by 2/13 Australian Battalion and **40 Royal Tanks** towards the final objective.

With its three columns no further than the Red line, the rest of 1 Armoured Division had perforce to halt and disperse as best it could, all units remaining to the east of the old front line except for some of the field guns which managed to deploy further west. Casualties in the division, both in men and vehicles, were very light and, in spite of the lack of initial success, the tanks were reasonably well organised and handily placed to deal with a counter-attack on a weak part of the front and to resume the assault later on. But the surprise effect hoped for by the Army Commander had been lost and the *Panzer Army* was already reorganising new anti-tank defences against the massive armoured breakthrough Montgomery had anticipated.



On the southern part of 30 Corps' front, **2 New Zealand Division** was to make the infantry 'break-in' through which **10 Armoured Division** was to pass and deploy, linking its tank screen with that of **1 Armoured Division** to the north, while **1 South African Division** kept pace on the New Zealanders' left, ready to assist in any exploitation that might be possible. For its advance the New Zealand Division had the use of its three field regiments and three troops from each of **78 and 98 Field Regiments, RA**, and a battery of **69 Medium Regiment, RA**, a total of seventy-four 25-pounders and eight 4.5-inch guns. The creeping barrage was fired by **4 NZ Field Regiment's** twenty-four guns, while a **Bofors** troop of **42 NZ Light Anti-Aircraft Battery** fired tracer at the rate of one round a gun a minute along the extremities of the divisional sector and down the centre line between the two brigade sectors.

The order of advance gave **5 NZ Brigade** the right-hand or northern sector, for which **7 NZ Field Company** the previous night had opened two gaps about 300 yards apart in the British wire and minefield about halfway between the ends of **Star and Bottle** tracks. After dusk on the **23rd** these gaps were lined with tape and lights facing to the rear. Then the men of **23 Battalion**, under **Lieutenant-Colonel R. E. Romans**, left their front-line trenches to file through the gaps and line up on a start line which had already been taped and lit. **C Company** took the right of the line, **B Company** the centre and **A Company** the left, with **D Company** and **Battalion Headquarters** behind **B Company**.<sup>1</sup> At **9.35 p.m.** the men set off from the start line in a clear moonlit night which, on this part of the line, seemed relatively quiet. The sounds of the Australian operation further north could be faintly distinguished, while nearer at hand occasional shellbursts or gunfire could be heard. Five minutes over the line the men felt the impact as the corps guns behind them started the counter-battery fire, and when this fire ceased fifteen minutes later, the men slowed to a halt, for, having marched on a compass bearing and at a carefully calculated rate of advance, they were now within 500 yards of the opening line of the barrage. As the barrage started at ten o'clock, the men edged forward so that when smoke shells twenty-three minutes later signified the first lift, they had only a short



way to go before entering the smoke. Although casualties were already occurring from enemy fire and possibly from short-firing guns in the barrage, the battalion line moved steadily forward in good order close behind the barrage lifts for several hundreds of yards without meeting opposition. Then A Company on the left came under machine-gun fire and, in a series of charges against a group of enemy posts defended with determination, the company lost its commander and two other officers as well as a number of men. Delayed and reduced in numbers by the time the position had been subdued, the company resumed its advance under the command of its surviving platoon commander, Second-Lieutenant **Cooper**,<sup>2</sup> but was unable to catch up with the rest of the battalion, and eventually joined 24 Battalion on the first objective.

The rest of 23 Battalion meanwhile had dealt with several minor posts and arrived on or close to the objective in good order. Contact with 5 Brigade headquarters could not be established as

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<sup>1</sup> 23 Battalion's company commanders were Captain P. L. Lynch (A), Captain G. M. Robertson (B), Captain W. Hoseit (C), Major D. B. Cameron (D).

<sup>2</sup> **Capt A. F. Cooper**, m.i.d.; Dunedin; born Dunedin, 20 Oct 1919; civil servant; wounded 26 Mar 1943.

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the jeep carrying the rear-link wireless had been held up early by a minefield, and A Company which should have provided contact with 24 Battalion on the left could not be found. Uncertain of the distance travelled owing to losses among the pace-counting men, Romans hoped to check his position by the standing barrage he expected to see falling just beyond his objective,<sup>1</sup> but all he could see were the 'creeping concentrations' being fired from the first to the final objective during the hour's pause in the barrage. He then called on his three companies to resume the advance, which they did with such a will that they carved a path through considerable opposition as far as **Miteiriya Ridge**, the final objective. Recognition of this feature, together with the

resumption of the barrage to the rear, made it obvious that the battalion had well overshoot its objective, so, rallying the survivors with some difficulty as the companies had become very scattered and there were still active enemy posts among them, Romans gave orders for a withdrawal. It would appear fortunate that the companies avoided any areas of the concentrations that were thickening up the barrage and suffered lightly as they passed through the thin line of shells of the creeping barrage, while very few of the men encountered the second wave of the attack following up the barrage. Back on its proper objective 23 Battalion established contact with its A Company and 24 Battalion on the left, but could not make contact with 5 Camerons who should have been level on its right. Casualties for the night's action came to 177 men.

Setting out through two gaps cut on the evening of the 21st by 7 Field Company at the end of Bottle track, 24 Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel **Gwilliam**,<sup>2</sup> moved up to the opening line of the barrage level with 23 Battalion. A Company, forward on the right, was in contact with 23 Battalion's A Company, while B Company was forward on the left and C Company in reserve.<sup>3</sup>

The two A Companies met considerable direct opposition but, guided by the Bofors tracer fired down the inter-brigade boundary, kept a true course to the first objective and then carried on to clear up a strongpoint some 200 yards beyond. B Company's right flank was involved with the same enemy defences while its left was harried by fire from the south. This caused B Company to edge over to the right, leaving C Company exposed and having to fight

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The battalions of 6 Brigade had only three companies each. 24 Battalion's company commanders were Captain E. W. Aked (A), Captain J. Conolly (B), Captain A. C. Yeoman (C).

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its own way forward on the left flank. Then, as C Company also worked to the right, the Battalion Headquarters group found itself traversing untouched ground and having to deal with opposition in its path. On the objective, Colonel Gwilliam set out a defence line with the survivors of 23 Battalion's A Company on his right flank but no other contact with this battalion, and no contact whatever with any troops on his left. This southern flank in fact was still wide open, with enemy in occupation of posts along the boundary with the South Africans.

The four companies of 28 Battalion, <sup>1</sup> with the task of mopping up, set off close behind the leading troops but dropped back as they searched the overrun defence positions for any of the enemy who might have survived. Apart from suffering a few casualties from shelling and from machine-gun fire sweeping in from the north, A and B Companies in 5 Brigade's sector reached the first objective in good order only to find no sign of 23 Battalion there. In 6 Brigade's sector, C Company moved behind the main body of 24 Battalion and met little trouble, but D Company on the left met opposition almost from the start. Joining with 24 Battalion's C Company in several attacks, D Company even seems to have entered the South African sector to deal with machine-gun and anti-tank gun posts, thus clearing up most of the opposition untouched by 24 Battalion along the left-hand side of the sector.

Although the first objective was gained within a few minutes of the planned time, five minutes past eleven, confirmation of their success from the battalion commanders did not reach the brigade headquarters until much later. However, a general but sometimes confusing picture of events was gained from information passed back by the various parties of engineers, signals, and support groups following up the infantry. The brigade major at 5 Brigade headquarters, **Major M. C. Fairbrother**, was told by a signman, Corporal **Barron**, <sup>2</sup> who was laying line behind 23

Battalion, and later by the battalion support group commander, Captain **Coop**,<sup>3</sup> that the battalion had disappeared beyond its objective, and, though the brigade staff questioned this story, the sum of information they received indicated that the way to the first objective was clear. Although news coming through 30 Corps concerning the events on the Division's flanks was even more sketchy, **Freyberg** saw no reason to postpone the second wave of the attack, for which the

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<sup>1</sup> 28 (Maori) Battalion's company commanders were Captain J. C. Henare (A), Major C. M. Bennett (B), Captain W. M. Awarau (C), Captain F. R. Logan (D).

<sup>2</sup> **Sgt C. O. Barron**, MM; **Timaru**; born Clinton, 8 Jan 1915; lineman.

<sup>3</sup> **Maj M. J. Coop**; England; born **Christchurch** 21 Jul 1911; shepherd; three times wounded.

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four remaining battalions were already on their way to their start lines on the first objective.

For this second phase, the artillery barrage was to resume at ten minutes to one just beyond the start lines, stand for five minutes and then move forward in 100-yard lifts every three minutes. In 5 Brigade's sector, 21 Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel R. W. Harding took the right-hand side with its A, B and C Companies in line from right to left and D Company in reserve,<sup>1</sup> and 22 Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel **Campbell**<sup>2</sup> was on the left with B, C and D Companies in line and A Company in reserve.<sup>3</sup> The 6 Brigade battalions, with the same width of front but a shorter distance to go, placed two companies forward and one in reserve. Members of the battalions' intelligence and provost sections set off ahead with lights and tapes, navigating by compass and pacing the distance. In the smoke and dust of the night and under intermittent shell and mortar fire, the various groups met difficulties in laying out the tapes and assembling in their correct order, especially as

very few of the men of 23 and 24 Battalions, who should have been preparing defence positions on the first objective, could be found. Enemy fire, sweeping in from the right flank, brought some casualties in 21 Battalion whose Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant **Abbott**,<sup>4</sup> was later awarded the Military Cross for his efforts in directing the laying of the line and assembling the companies while under fire.

Exactly at five minutes to one o'clock the first smoke shells marking the resumption of the barrage began to fall some way ahead of the taped start lines. By this time the four battalions were ready and in contact with each other and, in the five minutes during which the barrage stood on the opening line, the leading companies moved up until they reached the danger zone of the 25-pounder bursts. As the second fall of smoke shells signalled the first lift, the whole line of men rose from their lying or crouching positions on the sand and hurried forward into the haze of dust and smoke. Several enemy posts were caught with the defenders still hugging the safety of their slit trenches, and others were missed completely as the leading men bunched to attack points of resistance or to avoid booby-trapped minefields. With the fan-like spread of the sector leading the battalions on diverging bearings and with

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<sup>1</sup> 21 Battalion's company commanders were Captain W. C. Butland (A), Captain J. R. B. Marshall (B), Major N. B. Smith (C), and Captain B. M. Laird (D).

<sup>2</sup> **Brig T. C. Campbell**, CBE, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; **Christchurch**; born Colombo, 20 Dec 1911; farm appraiser; CO 22 Bn Sep 1942–Apr 1944; comd 4 Armd Bde Jan–Dec 1945; Commander, **Fiji Military Forces**, 1953–56; Commander, Northern Military District, 1958–63; Southern Military District, 1963–66.

<sup>3</sup> 22 Battalion's company commanders were Captain P. R. Hockley (A), Captain J. L. MacDuff (B), Captain H. V. Donald (C), Captain D. F. Anderson (D).

<sup>4</sup> **Maj R. B. Abbott, MC; Ngaruawahia; born Auckland, 16 Feb 1919; insurance clerk; wounded 6 Jul 1942.**

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casualties mounting, contact was soon lost between battalions and even between companies. Parts of the line, meeting opposition, fell behind the barrage, and the four battalions approached the final objective thinly spread and with large gaps in the line. Here also the barrage was noticeably thinner and visibility seemed to improve so that the enemy was more aware of his danger. In all four battalions the direction of advance was well kept by the aid of compasses and the tracer fired by the artillery and, except for the final stages on the right flank, the rate of advance was generally that of the barrage, some of the men even overrunning the fire when opposition appeared ahead.

On the extreme right 21 Battalion met opposition from ahead and the right flank. Edging over to this flank and probably encroaching on the Highland Division's sector, the battalion encountered men of 7 Black Watch, who remained in close contact as far as the objective. In the last stages of the advance over the broken ground which here constituted **Miteiriya Ridge**, a strongly defended German position had to be overcome before the battalion could cross the ridge to the final objective. A patrol led by Lieutenant P. Robertson, exploiting beyond the objective, overran a troop of field guns and brought back nearly a hundred prisoners, mainly Italians. In spite of fairly heavy casualties, which included two company commanders killed and one wounded, 21 Battalion had cleared its objective within twenty minutes of the ending of the supporting artillery fire.

On the left of 5 Brigade's sector, 22 Battalion met little opposition on the right flank, but D Company on the left was held up by a strongpoint of which returning stragglers of 23 Battalion had earlier given warning. A flank attack by C Company in the centre cleared the way but left this company with few survivors. At the pause in the barrage at 1.40 a.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell replaced the company

by A Company from reserve, but during the final stages of the advance the battalion became so extended that all four companies were in the front line. On the ridge, here forming a small plateau, there was an extensive position which B Company, under Captain MacDuff's leadership, rushed close on the heels of the barrage, thus clearing the way for the other companies to cross the ridge and exploit well down the forward slope. By 3.15 a.m. the objective was cleared, but fire from air-bursts and mortars continued to rake the position and by dawn the battalion's casualties amounted to 110 men, or one in three of those taking part in the assault. <sup>1</sup> The two companies of 28

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<sup>1</sup> The total strength of 22 Battalion was 35 officers and 628 men, but of these only about 310 actually followed the barrage, the remainder being headquarters, administrative and support group personnel.

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Battalion, A and B Companies, following to mop up in 5 Brigade's sector found little fighting to do, so thoroughly had the ground been covered, first by 23 Battalion and then by the other two battalions.

On the left of the divisional sector of advance, 26 and 25 Battalions followed a similar pattern of movement through the British minefield up to their start lines. With only three companies each, both battalions placed two forward and one in reserve, the four leading companies thus being thinly spread over the front. Owing to difficulties in maintaining contact, 26 Battalion on the right reached the start line on the first objective rather later than planned and had to deploy its companies in some haste in order to be ready for the barrage opening. Consequently there was little time to search for 24 Battalion, whose survivors seem to have been in a concentrated group on the left. In the event, although contact was made with 22 Battalion on the right, 26 Battalion, under Lieutenant-Colonel **Fountaine**, <sup>1</sup> set off without meeting any of 24 Battalion and with only uncertain contact with 25 Battalion on its left. With C Company forward on the right, A on the left and B in reserve, <sup>2</sup> the troops at first met so little opposition that they were able to keep



close up to the barrage, so close in fact that at one point C Company overran the shelling and lost several men. In attempting to keep in contact with the flanking battalions, the two forward companies spread so far apart that B Company moved up into the gap between them. On reaching the rise of the ridge, the battalion used the 15-minute pause in the barrage to reorganise into its correct formation and then continued over the broken ground of the ridge and well down the forward slope, where several enemy posts were attacked and subdued. Shortly after 3 a.m. the men of C and A Companies were digging themselves in along and forward of the ridge with B Company slightly to the rear. Good contact was established with 22 Battalion on the right, but continuing mortar and machine-gun fire from the left showed that 25 Battalion had not yet drawn level. Within the position there was an enemy headquarters area with an aid post in which a German doctor and several patients had been taken prisoner.

From its arrival the battalion was shelled and mortared until well into daylight, one early salvo falling on the Battalion Headquarters group and causing several casualties. This salvo also

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<sup>1</sup> **Col D. J. Fountaine**, DSO, MC, m.i.d.; Westport; born Westport, 4 Jul 1914; company secretary; CO **20 Bn** Jul–Aug 1942; **26 Bn** Sep 1942–Dec 1943, Jun–Oct 1944; comd NZ Adv Base Oct 1944–Sep 1945; wounded 26 Nov 1941.

<sup>2</sup> **26 Battalion's** company commanders were Lieutenant J. R. Williams (A), Captain L. G. Smith (B), Captain H. J. H. Horrell (C).

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damaged the No. 11 wireless set giving communication to the rear and destroyed the signals rockets and flares which were to be used for announcing success and calling for artillery defensive fire. Until the arrival some time later of signalmen laying telephone line, the battalion had to rely on runners for all communications outside its own area. By the morning of the 24th, **26 Battalion** had suffered nearly a hundred casualties, of whom twenty-four were known killed.



On the left of 6 Brigade's sector, 25 Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel **Bonifant**<sup>1</sup> moved up without encountering any of the 28 or 24 Battalion troops who had preceded it. Some difficulty was found in identifying the start line and contact could not be made with 26 Battalion until just as the barrage was due to resume. On the left flank no other troops could be found, though the noise of firing was heard and tracer and explosions seen some way off. Moving forward as the barrage opened until the leading men were under 100 yards from the smoke, the battalion, with C Company forward on the right, B on the left and D in reserve,<sup>2</sup> set off immediately the first lift was signalled by the fall of smoke shells. Meeting no serious opposition, C and B Companies had to slow their pace more than once to avoid overrunning the barrage. Machine-gun fire on fixed lines sweeping in from posts well out of its path on the left, and attempts to keep in touch with 26 Battalion on its right, caused the battalion to pull over to the right for a time; but when this error in navigation was corrected, a gap opened up between the two battalions. On reaching **Miteiriya Ridge** about 2 a.m. at a point where it narrowed to a single crest, beyond which lay an exposed forward slope covered with an extensive minefield, the leading companies halted and, having ascertained from the men deputed to count paces that the requisite distance and more had been covered, the companies proceeded to dig in. Patrols to right and left made it appear at first that the battalion was isolated until members of 26 Battalion's headquarters group were met some 600 yards to the right. On the appearance of men of C and D Companies of 28 Battalion, these were placed in the gap between the two battalions while D Company was sent up to cover the left flank. This company, however, immediately ran into opposition and in subduing several enemy posts lost seventeen men. Up to this the

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<sup>1</sup> **Brig I. L. Bonifant**, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; **Adelaide**; born **Ashburton**, 3 Mar 1912; stock agent; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942–Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943–Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3–27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan–May 1945; 6 Bde Jun–Oct 1945; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

<sup>2</sup> 25 Battalion's company commanders were Captain C. Weston (B), Captain C. S. Wroth (C), Captain G. A. W. Possin (D).

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battalion's casualties were fewer than twenty, caused by shell and mortar fire and booby traps. <sup>1</sup>

A summary of the records of events and times shows that the four New Zealand battalions maintained a relatively steady and level advance in spite of the tenuous contact between the leading companies, a feat due to the experience so many of the men had already had in night navigation over the desert, aided by the creeping barrage. The two Maori companies following 5 Brigade found little mopping up to do, and of those behind 6 Brigade, C Company reached the ridge with the loss of only two men. On the left flank, however, D Company missed 25 Battalion's passage over the start line and followed up later to find several unsubdued enemy posts along the left boundary. Altogether 28 Battalion's casualties for the night were 6 killed, 53 wounded and 3 missing. By the afternoon of the 24th, about 250 prisoners had reached the cage behind the start line; most of them had been taken in the night advance. They included Germans of *382 Regiment* and Italians of *62 Regiment of Trento Division*.

No sooner had the four battalions halted their men along the ridge than the commanders sought ways and means of communicating their success to their brigades. All had been supplied with special signal rockets, but none of those that survived the march, and were fired, were identified by watchers in the rear from the other fireworks of flares, tracer, shellbursts and explosions. Runners were also sent back and eventually wireless contact was established through various vehicles carrying sets that followed up the infantry, so that by 4 a.m. the staff at **Divisional Headquarters** was beginning to gain a picture of the night's results.

In this period of insecure communications, the infantry was most vulnerable to counter-attack. Until the supporting arms and particularly

the observation parties of the artillery could arrive, a determined enemy attack could in fact have thrown the whole front into confusion for, by the time the infantry had reached the final objective, the routes for vehicles had only just passed the first objective. Two lanes had been planned for each brigade sector, reconnaissance parties of the engineers setting off close behind the Maori mopping-up companies. In 5 Brigade's sector, both of the gapping parties worked under fire from the north flank which only ceased when the second wave of the infantry

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<sup>1</sup> In surviving notes given by C Company's commander to one of those detailed to count paces, the distance to be marched is shown as 2760 paces. This was in fact the distance, scaled on the map, from the first to the final objectives on the extreme left boundary of the brigade sector. By diverging off course and also by travelling nearer the centre of the brigade sector, 25 Battalion, in marching the required distance, halted at a point estimated to be between 500 and 800 yards short of the objective.

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passed through. In 6 Brigade's lane, one sapper section met a group of South Africans who had suffered severe casualties, possibly from one of the supporting artillery concentrations, and gave what help they could, and the other section was caught in a major explosion, losing four men killed and 12 wounded. <sup>1</sup>

By 2.30 a.m. all four routes to the first objective were open for vehicles, the lanes marked by signs and lights and policed by provosts. By this time the reserve engineer parties were already at the work of extending the lanes, with the infantry's support groups hard on their heels. Though Scorpions and detectors were used, both of these aids proved technically unreliable so that much of the clearing was done by the traditional method of prodding the ground with bayonets, a method which of necessity had to be slow and deliberate.

As each lane progressed, a dense column of vehicles gradually banked up on it—signal detachments laying cable, anti-tank guns on

*portée* or towed, 3-inch mortar carriers, Bren carriers, Vickers gun sections in trucks, RAP vehicles, and numerous trucks and jeeps carrying essential equipment and stores. First came the support columns for the two battalions on the first objective and, as these dispersed off the marked route, the columns for the other four battalions passed through. With these latter were Crusader troops of 9 Armoured Brigade for the infantry's support against counterattack, and behind them again came the Stuarts and Bren carriers of the Divisional Cavalry and the heavy squadrons of 9 Armoured Brigade. Traffic discipline on the whole was good, though at points the narrow minefield gaps became jammed and vehicles were lost when attempting to take short cuts over uncleared ground, led by impatient support group commanders who knew how vulnerable their battalions might be unless their weapons arrived before dawn.

The extreme right-hand lane, behind 21 Battalion, seems to have been the first to be cleared as far as the final objective, and on receiving the engineers' report the battalion commander sent back guides to find his support column. In the half light before dawn, this was discovered among the traffic on 5 Brigade's left-hand lane, waiting while the sappers were using a Scorpion to flail a way through a wide belt of scattered mines. Led to the right behind

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<sup>1</sup> There were numerous diamond-shaped booby-trapped areas combined with the minefields in the New Zealand sector, possibly as many as fifty originally. Some were set off by the shellfire but many were untouched, especially towards the final objective where the barrage fire was thin. A typical trap consisted of a camouflaged captured British 500lb aerial bomb connected through igniters to two anti-tank mines, and with radiating trip wires as well as a remote-control wire leading to an enemy post, the whole contraption set to explode by a change of tension on any of the wires. Two such booby traps were detonated, one causing casualties to the engineers, as recorded, and the other to 26 Battalion's support column. Several others were rendered harmless by the engineers by the hazardous process of inserting fine wire into each of the igniters.

**this field on to the northern lane, which was almost free of traffic, the support vehicles arrived at the battalion area just as it was subjected to heavy shelling. As dawn was close, the weapons were quickly unloaded and the vehicles sent back from the exposed ridge to better cover in the rear.**

**On the route behind 22 Battalion, the clearing of the scattered mines took so long that, of this battalion's support weapons, only two two-pounder anti-tank guns arrived in time to be dug in before daylight. However, on learning that tanks of the [Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry](#), of 9 Armoured Brigade, were also on this route, the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell, had his men search and mark a mine-free track through the battalion's positions. Not long after six o'clock, tanks of the leading squadron had been guided over the ridge and were well forward of the infantry, in engagement with enemy posts, and shortly afterwards the regiment's other heavy squadron followed, thus bringing to the [Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry](#) the honour of being the first, and only, regiment to break out beyond the infantry's final objective on this first morning of the [Alamein](#) battle.**

**In 6 Brigade's sector, an advance support column for 26 Battalion, including three Crusader tanks of the [Warwickshire Yeomanry](#), two-pounder anti-tank guns on *portée* and carrier-borne 3-inch mortars, had set off on the right-hand Route 'A', led by a small detachment of engineers manning two Scorpions. Both the flail tanks broke down early in the march and later several of the vehicles were damaged on mines. Three mortars and two of the anti-tank guns eventually reached the ridge intact and, about 4.30 a.m., were dug in, but one of the guns was almost immediately put out of action by a direct shell hit. Route 'A' was properly cleared and marked by 8 Field Company sappers following this advance party and on it the main battalion support column travelled, arriving in the lee of the ridge an hour or so later.**

**The southern lane, Route 'B', on which 25 Battalion's support column with its troop of Crusaders followed the engineers, was cleared**

fairly quickly as far as the ridge but then had to be diverted to the right to join the battalion's positions, where the first vehicles arrived about 5.30 a.m. Attempts by the engineers to cut a gap in the thick minefield on the forward slope of the ridge were hindered by heavy enemy fire and eventually stopped by Brigadier Gentry's orders as too hazardous in the fast increasing light.

The heavy squadrons of the **Warwickshire Yeomanry** and the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry also used this route but, unable to penetrate the minefield over the ridge, halted in hull-down positions along the brigade front.

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The task of **10 Armoured Division** was to clear its own four lanes from the ends of Bottle, Boat and Hat tracks, with an extra lane, called Ink, between Bottle and Boat. Once over the ridge it was to deploy its two brigades beyond the New Zealand objective and, making in a north-westerly direction, join the left of 1 Armoured Division. Instead of a strong minefield task force for each column, **10 Armoured Division** was content with an engineer party with only a small covering patrol for each lane. The four clearing groups commenced work close behind the New Zealand infantry, the sappers on Bottle route meeting so little interference from the enemy that they had cleared and marked their lane to the 5 Brigade objective a good hour before first light. The men on Ink route were delayed by fire at the first enemy minefield but then made such good time that they soon had a clear lane as far as 26 Battalion's positions. Beyond this point the sappers discovered another field which they managed to gap, after their covering party drove off a small enemy post, shortly before first light.

The extensions of Boat and Hat tracks, the former commencing at the junction of the New Zealand and South African sectors and the latter within the South African area, presented greater difficulties, as the lanes here cut along rather than through the pattern of the enemy minefields, while the South Africans had trouble in subduing the defences in the



area. The gapping of the first minefield on Boat track commenced under fire from a post close to the inter-divisional boundary, and it was not until one of the Maori mopping-up parties arrived to deal with the enemy that the gap could be completed. Further on the sappers were held up by heavy shelling, possibly a South African concentration, and then they encountered a very thick field sown with anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. The gapping of this took until nearly dawn but a clear route then led as far as 25 Battalion's positions. Daylight prevented the sappers from clearing mines over the ridge beyond the infantry positions as the enemy covered this forward slope with fire. On Hat track the covering party met opposition only 300 yards beyond the South African start line and again about 1000 yards out. In both cases the enemy was too strong for the light covering party, so that the sappers were unable to work until the South African infantry had cleared the ground. They then found themselves in an extremely complicated part of the German mine-garden stretching for some 700 yards. With this laboriously gapped and marked, the party met another field a short distance on, through which, however, the covering party on a reconnaissance discovered a ready-made gap. The light was increasing by this time to disclose the sappers to an enemy position which guarded the exit to the gap. Under fire the sappers marked the entrance and then withdrew. So before dawn on the 24th, **10 Armoured Division** had four minefree routes as far as **Miteiriya Ridge**. The two on the right led beyond the infantry's objective, and of the other two, Boat reached as far as 25 Battalion's front and Hat seems to have ended between that battalion's left and the South Africans' right flank.

The task of leading **10 Armoured Division** into the open was given to the three regimental groups of **8 Armoured Brigade**, the **Staffordshire Yeomanry** (Staffs Yeomanry) on Bottle, the **Nottinghamshire Yeomanry** (Notts Yeomanry) on Boat, and 3 Battalion, The Royal Tank Regiment (**3 Royal Tanks**) on Hat. <sup>1</sup> The combination of dust and darkness gave the tanks a difficult task, but their routes up were marked and policed, and free from direct enemy interference save for the stray shell or two. Yet their advance was considerably slower than anticipated. The Staffs

**Yeomanry arrived on 5 Brigade's objective after 9 Armoured Brigade's tanks, having already gone over the ridge, had retired to hull-down positions, that is, about first light.**

**On Boat track, the Notts Yeomanry were probably the first on the infantry objective, arriving before first light. This allowed them time to clear mines and pass two squadrons and some field guns over the ridge. In the increasing light enemy fire forced a withdrawal after sixteen tanks and some guns had been lost either by mines or anti-tank gun fire.**

**Through reports of unsubdued opposition ahead, the column led by 3 Royal Tanks on Hat track started late and was still negotiating the 700-yard lane through the first minefield when dawn broke. On orders from its brigade headquarters, the tanks of the column went on to take up positions to the rear of 25 Battalion, while the rest of the vehicles dispersed as best they could. Armoured cars of the Royal Dragoons, following the 8 Armoured Brigade columns, tried to put out patrols on the flanks as ordered but called them in on losing two cars by shellfire and one on mines.**

**Of the remainder of the armoured division, the three regimental columns of 24 Armoured Brigade, 41, 47 and 45 Battalions of the Royal Tank Regiment, had been held back by the slow movement ahead and were by dawn still waiting at the gaps in the**

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**<sup>1</sup> From lack of exact information, it can only be assumed that Ink route was kept as a reserve and/or return route.**

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**outer British minefield on the three tracks, where they were ordered to disperse. But adequate dispersal was for some time impossible owing to the extreme congestion of vehicles in this area, so that the Royal Tank columns had to remain in close night order until dispersal areas could be allocated. Fortunately the area received no attention from either enemy guns or aircraft until later in the day. Behind 24 Armoured Brigade the vehicles of 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade, strung out along**



the three tracks, also had to find room to disperse. Several of the field batteries managed to work past the press of vehicles and got far enough forward to deploy ready for action.

In the New Zealand sector, therefore, at dawn on the 24th the infantry was practically on its objective, with its support weapons well enough organised to deal with an immediate counter-attack. In the same sector, in various stages of organisation and grossly overcrowding it, were the best parts of three heavy armoured brigades, enough to repulse an attack by a full panzer division. Communication throughout the sector was generally good so that both infantry and armoured headquarters had a reasonably accurate picture of the disposal of the various units.

*vi*

To the south of the New Zealanders, the South African Division placed its 2 Infantry Brigade in the right-hand sector, in which the **Natal Mounted Rifles** were given the task of taking the intermediate objective (Red line), with the **Cape Town Highlanders**, right, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  Frontier Force Battalion, left, following through to the final objective. The advance was to be supported by artillery concentrations timed to fall on known enemy positions ahead of each infantry group.

The advance of the **Natal Mounted Rifles** appeared to go well, reaching the first objective in good time with some sixty-seven Italian prisoners in hand. The battalion, however, must have concentrated its efforts on defences immediately ahead and thus missed others to right and left. The enemy left on the north first fired on the sappers working on Hat track and then turned their attention to the **Cape Town Highlanders** as the latter moved up to their start line on Red. The right-flank company of the Highlanders suffered heavy casualties before overcoming this opposition, while the left-hand company also found its way barred by another defended area. Finally, the supporting fire programme was postponed for an hour while the reserve company was brought up to assist the survivors of the other two companies to clear

the way to the start line. Another postponement was then necessary to allow the battalion to reorganise. All this time enemy opposition along the border with the New Zealanders on the north continued to be lively, firing into the flank of 6 New Zealand Brigade, which followed its creeping barrage without pause and was now well ahead of the South Africans. Several New Zealand groups crossed the boundary into the South African sector to deal with the more persistent enemy posts.

The opposition began to dwindle as the tanks of **10 Armoured Division** progressed up Hat track and practically ceased when, shortly before 5 a.m., the **Cape Town Highlanders** began their delayed advance. Reaching **Miteiriya Ridge** with little trouble, the Highlanders, like 25 NZ Battalion, halted on the crest some 800 to 1000 yards short of the planned line of the final objective, and about the same distance south of the New Zealand position. On **2 South African Brigade's** left flank, the Frontier Force Battalion also encountered enemy defences which it had to subdue before its companies could form up on the start line on the intermediate objective, and accordingly had to have the artillery supporting concentrations rearranged. Once over the start line, the battalion was unfortunate in meeting one of the key defence areas, determinedly manned by German troops, and although it managed to overrun part of the position, taking thirty-six German prisoners, it lost 183 men (of whom forty-two were killed). At dawn the battalion was still engaged with the enemy and well short of the ridge.

The opposition offered by this German position also had considerable effect on the progress of 3 South African Brigade further south. In this brigade's sector the plan was for 1 Battalion, The Rand Light Infantry, to assault a large strongpoint which lay just ahead of the first objective and then send patrols to clear a start line for the second phase. In this, the Royal Durban Light Infantry was to advance on the right and 1 Battalion of the Imperial Light Horse on the left to the final objective. The Rand Light Infantry met the strongpoint as and where expected and, under heavy artillery concentrations and machine-gun fire, used Bangalore torpedoes to good effect to break into the defences. Against

fierce resistance by troops of *433 Regiment (164 Division)*, elements of the Rand Light Infantry fought through the strongpoint to reach the line of the first objective. The extension of the defence area to the north into 2 Brigade's sector was still unsubdued, so that the rest of the Rand Light Infantry had to form a front facing north to cover the troops moving up for the second phase. This action allowed the Royal Durban Light Infantry to reach the start line on the first objective, but further progress was delayed by heavy fire from the right flank coming from defences that the Frontier Force Battalion had not yet been able to overcome. By placing one company forward on the right to engage this resistance with fire and screen the route of advance, the battalion was able to pass the start line. Meanwhile, on the left of the brigade sector, the Imperial Light Horse ran into the southern end of the German defences on its way to the first objective but managed to work its way past and form up on its start line, where it waited for the Royal Durban Light Infantry. About 2 a.m. the two battalions set off together and, overpowering some opposition on the way, reached the ridge about 5 a.m., where they dug in on the correct objective.

Behind the main infantry advance the Divisional Reserve Group, of armoured cars, artillery, machine-gun and other units, moved up to provide depth to the defence against counter-attack. The fifty-one Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks** were attached to this group with the task of helping to gain and consolidate the objective. Cutting their own gaps, the tanks led the group up the boundary of 2 and 3 Brigades' sectors but soon became enmeshed in the maze of German defence works, from which they eventually got clear by moving to the south, on to 3 Brigade's axis, and then back to their right line of advance. About dawn two squadrons of the Valentines reached the rear of the Royal Durban Light Infantry and took up defence positions.

Owing to the configuration of the front the South African Division had to use troops of its third formation, 1 Infantry Brigade, to clear the area between 3 Brigade's advance and the old front-line positions. Besides arranging a massive medium machine-gun programme in support

of the main advance (sixty-six Vickers guns fired 640,000 rounds) and putting in an anti-tank gun screen at the point where the final objective met no-man's land, this brigade also was given the task of occupying the ground, part enemy and part no-man's land, on the left of 3 Brigade's advance. The anti-tank screen, in sites secretly prepared beforehand, was set out with no enemy interference, while the **Transvaal Scottish Battalion** cleared some scattered opposition to come up on the left of the Imperial Light Horse.

By dawn, therefore, **1 South African Division**, in spite of initial setbacks, was well established on the final objective except on the right hand against the New Zealand Division. Here some enemy resistance still remained to be cleared out and no firm contact could be immediately established with 25 Battalion, itself behind the line of the objective.

*vii*

To the south of the South Africans, 4 Indian Division was also under command of 30 Corps with the task of holding a firm base as the southern anchor for the assault. The division's artillery was given a part in the corps' counter-battery programme and defensive fire tasks, as well as supporting three minor diversionary operations designed to hold the enemy's attention and draw his fire. The first diversion was a raid by men of **7 Indian Brigade** along **Ruweisat Ridge to Point 62**, the scene of 4 New Zealand Brigade's misfortunes the previous July. Undertaken by a section of carriers with two platoons of **2 Gurkha Rifles**, the action was noisy but short for, in spite of strong supporting fire by three field regiments, the enemy encountered proved very stubborn. The raiders withdrew with the loss of eight men but claimed they had killed about fourteen of the enemy.

For the second diversion a trick was tried out, similar to that employed by the Australians on the coast, of placing out in no-man's land dummy figures which could be made to stand erect as required so that, illuminated by flares or even in bright moonlight, they gave the appearance of advancing infantry. The illusion was supported by vehicle

**noises, lights and covering fire. This deception was laid on by 7 Rajput Regiment at 1.30 a.m. opposite the eastern end of the El Mreir Depression and drew a heavy riposte of mortar and automatic fire.**

**The last diversion was a raid by a company of 1 Punjab Regiment to harass, and gain identifications of, the enemy in the line to the south of El Mreir. Starting out half an hour after midnight, the company seems to have run into the supporting fire provided by seven field batteries and withdrew without making any contact with the enemy.**

**All in all, the Indians' operations, though individually not scoring any obvious success, gained their object in keeping the enemy from moving troops from this sector for some time and causing him to waste a great deal of ammunition. The division had also prepared plans for an advance, but the progress of operations elsewhere caused this to be cancelled.**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 22 – 13 CORPS' OPERATIONS

## CHAPTER 22

### 13 Corps' Operations

i

**I**n the southern sector 13 Corps did little more than carry out a fairly costly diversion. The operations of this corps have been somewhat clouded by later emphasis that it was intended to accomplish no more than was in fact accomplished, that is, to hold *21 Panzer Division* away from the north. Yet the corps' task, as laid down in orders, was to 'destroy the enemy east of his main position'. It was erroneously thought that this 'main position' lay along the old line held before the *Alam Halfa* battle and that the ground to the east, given up by the Eighth Army in that battle, held some loosely-knit strongpoints defended mainly by Italians. Several factors, including the broken ground and consequent difficulties of observation and patrolling, had apparently obscured from 13 Corps the fact that the new line was based on the thick mine-garden pattern in the north though not so fully developed. Rommel, however, had insured against its possible weaknesses by manning it with some of the best of the Italian troops, bolstered by German parachutists. Had not this misconception of the type of defences to be overcome been generally held, it is doubtful if the plan of attack prepared by Horrocks, commanding the corps, would have been accepted by Montgomery. The plan in effect was for the corps' armour to break into the supposed crust of outposts and roll them up ahead of the *Panzer Army's* main position, while the infantry stepped up behind to provide a base from which the tanks could work, the diversionary quality of the operation lying in the threat to the main position by which it was hoped that the *Panzer Army* infantry and armoured reserve would be kept in the south.

It is of course possible that a certain amount of wishful thinking affected the method proposed, for Montgomery's method as used by 30 Corps, of an infantry 'break-in' followed by an armoured 'break-out', could hardly have been employed by 13 Corps, whose infantry in the



main was not in a fit state of organisation, training or experience, or in sufficient numbers, to make a successful break-in assault, the weakness in infantry being balanced, at least on paper, by the quality of the corps' armour, the veteran 7 Armoured Division, the 'Desert Rats'. With its long experience in the desert, especially in mobile operations, this division could be expected to employ its mixture of light and heavy armour and supporting arms to best advantage in the mobile battle envisaged in isolating and overpowering the enemy outposts.

That this was the type of engagement anticipated is made clearer by the injunction Montgomery gave to Horrocks, similar to that given to 10 Corps, against losing the armour in any 'death or glory' charge. For 13 Corps the injunction was even stricter. Having committed the bulk of his armour in 10 Corps at the start of the offensive, Montgomery needed 7 Armoured Division to be kept in existence both to supply a reserve and to keep his army's 'balance', the latter a point on which the Army Commander laid much stress.

The British estimated that the enemy facing 13 Corps consisted of three Italian infantry divisions, *Brescia*, *Folgore* and *Pavia*, all probably below full strength but stiffened by the German troops of *Ramcke Brigade*. The armoured reserve was thought to be divided into three battle groups of mixed German and Italian tanks from *21 Panzer* and *Ariete* divisions, all under German command and manning 132 German, 150 Italian, and some captured British tanks, to a total of nearly 300 all told. The artillery in positions to cover 13 Corps' front was placed at 300 field, medium and heavy guns, including thirty or more 88-millimetre guns. According to the German records, this estimate was fairly close to the mark in actual numbers, though possibly overstressing the weight of artillery fire likely to be encountered. These records also show that the bulk of the infantry was concentrated well forward, the method of defence being that any breaches should be sealed off and recovered by the armoured reserve. As for withdrawal on to a 'main position', it is doubtful if any form of retreat had been discussed with the Italians and only general indications given to *21 Panzer Division*, but it is clear that

the *Panzer Army* intended, if forced, to withdraw, not by a step back to the west, but by a swing back to the north on to the Qatani minefield. For this the paratroops of *Ramcke Brigade* had been deliberately placed to hold the hinge. On paper the advantage seemed to lie with the defence, but the *Panzer Army* in the south was spread over more than 15 miles of front, against which 13 Corps was attacking on a relatively narrow sector.



ABBREVIATIONS	
Arm	Armoured
A.S.	Anti-aircraft
Bde	Brigade
S.C.L.	S. County of London Yeomanry
Inf	Infantry
A. & C. B. Co.	Armoured & Cavalry
Lt. Col.	Light Infantry
Rgt.	Regiment
A. & C. B. Co.	Armoured & Cavalry
Div	Division
Brig	Brigade
Regt.	Regiment
Batt	Battalion
Co	Company
Squad	Squad
Platoon	Platoon
Section	Section
Platoon	Platoon
Section	Section
Platoon	Platoon
Section	Section
Platoon	Platoon
Section	Section
Platoon	Platoon
Section	Section

ii

The 13 Corps operations started in the north about 10 p.m. when 1 Greek Brigade in the vicinity of **Alam Nayil**, in the old 6 Brigade area of the **New Zealand Box**, laid on a raid in company strength against a post to the west. This resulted in a bag of eighteen men of *Brescia Division* for a loss of four casualties. Next in order were the operations of 151 Brigade, a simulated attack on **Deir el Angar** and a raid on a post to the south of this depression. These deceptions, besides diverting attention from the main attack, were intended to unsettle the enemy troops so that, when 4 Light Armoured Brigade reached its objective behind them, they would be cajoled into surrendering and would allow 151 Brigade to advance its line to the corps' objective. The deception against Angar commenced at 10 p.m., with what effect is not known, and the raid, by two officers and twenty-four men of 9 Battalion, The Durham Light Infantry, met strong opposition in which the two officers were killed. Altogether 151 Brigade lost nineteen men killed or missing this night.

Similarly 69 Brigade, from its positions in **Deir el Munassib**, laid on two diversions and a raid, the former at 10 p.m. and the latter at 2 a.m., but little has been recorded of the results. All these raids and diversions were given strong support by artillery, medium machine guns and mortars.

The main 13 Corps operation took place to the south of the **Munassib Depression**, where the British line swung back to the east of the old third minefield across the end of Deir el Ragil, leaving between it and the enemy front on the old first minefield through **Himeimat** an expanse of no-man's land in places three or more miles wide. Partly because of the difficulties of accurate navigation and surveying by mobile patrols in this area of rough going, details of the exact dispositions of the enemy had not been satisfactorily plotted and, though attempts were made on the days preceding the attack to induce the enemy to disclose his positions by opening fire, such attempts had met with little success, probably because the enemy troops were under orders to conserve their ammunition.

The method of attack called for the main assault to be made by 7 Armoured Division on a due westerly course and on a front of about 2000 yards under a form of creeping barrage. The right flank of this area of penetration was to be covered by an advance of infantry of 44 Division, using a combination of creeping barrage and concentrations against certain known enemy positions. The southern flank was to be protected by a wide encircling movement carried out by the Fighting French round **Himeimat** and the southern extremity of the minefields. Once the enemy's outpost line had been breached, that is, after three to four thousand yards, 7 Armoured Division was to swing north on the west of the old first minefield and 50 Division was to come forward to the minefield.

The width of no-man's land and the corps' dispositions necessitated an approach march of over four miles for some of the infantry and ten for most of the armour. Some preparation and concentration was

therefore done before dusk and may have been seen by the enemy, for **21 Panzer Division** hinted in a report made out later that the offensive was not altogether unexpected. There is, however, no evidence that the front-line troops were ordered to be any more on the alert than on previous nights.

Movement forward of 7 Armoured Division began after dusk along routes lit by over a thousand oil or electric lamps placed to face the rear. The advance was led by 44 Reconnaissance Regiment, formed into four minefield assault groups with engineer detachments and Scorpions. Each of these was followed by a mixed column of 22 Armoured Brigade of about two hundred vehicles, comprising tanks, field artillery, anti-tank guns and lorried infantry. These in turn were followed by 4 Light Armoured Brigade in four columns, each of about a hundred vehicles. Co-ordinating their timing with the armour's advance, units of 44 Division set off to occupy the ground on the right while Fighting French forces swung south round **Himeimat**.

After a counter-battery programme fired from 9.25 to 9.50 p.m. by thirty-four troops of 25-pounders (136 guns all told) on known or suspected enemy battery positions, there was a ten-minute pause before the main weight of the corps artillery began to fire the creeping barrage behind which the 44 Reconnaissance Regiment's parties were to assault and gap the minefields. But the armoured columns had first been halted because it was thought they were travelling so fast that they would reach the start line too early and would thus be exposed to enemy defensive fire; and then, on resuming the march, they had difficulty in finding the routes (it was later claimed that some of the guiding lights had gone out). Finally, enemy fire in retaliation to the counter-battery programme fell in the area, setting some vehicles alight. All this brought delays which allowed little time for any form of reorganisation on the start line, the leading troops getting away in fact some minutes after the barrage commenced.

In the lead, the task forces put into practice the method of mine-clearance developed by 44 Reconnaissance Regiment. In each group

carriers took the van until mines were encountered, when the group's Scorpion was brought up to flail its nine-foot path. A Stuart tank and two sections of carriers followed through the gap to form a bridgehead while sappers enlarged and marked the gap. In the event, the short time lag in crossing the start line was augmented by further delay caused by bad going, scattered mines, and the mechanical unreliability of the Scorpions. With the barrage well lost, the mine-gapping parties came under fire from machine guns and mortars which the tanks and carriers were unable to subdue. Units of lorried infantry were then sent up to clear and occupy the small bridgeheads so far gained beyond the first mine-belt; the barrage was stopped and a hasty reorganisation made, the survivors of the four groups of the Reconnaissance Regiment being reformed into two parties, each with one of the two Scorpions still in going order. At 5.10 a.m. the barrage resumed but the gapping parties were again unable to keep up with it. Enemy posts, recovering after the shellfire had passed over them, were able to prevent any breaching of the second main mine-belt.

Under this defensive fire, and with the sky rapidly lightening, 22 Armoured Brigade ordered its troops to withdraw into the bridgeheads between the minefields. Here, with the coming of daylight, conditions were extremely unpleasant, for the areas were very congested with men and vehicles, under enemy observation and, because the gaps had been cut closer together than intended, exposed to a strong concentration of the enemy's fire.

The night's losses in 22 Armoured Brigade were estimated at 250 men killed, missing, or wounded, up to thirty carriers and a few tanks destroyed. One damaged Scorpion was unfortunately left within reach of enemy patrols. On the credit side, the brigade claimed 400 prisoners, all Italians and mainly from *Folgore Parachute Division*. In the meantime, the columns of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, due to come up behind 22 Brigade's right and draw up on the right flank, were still well short of the start line when it became obvious that the operation was not progressing according to expectations. The light brigade was therefore

**directed to halt and disperse in defensive formation where it stood.**

**The infantry operation by 44 Division to cover the armour's right flank gained even less success. Advancing under a mixture of barrage and concentrations, 1/7 Battalion of the Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey) of 131 Brigade fell into some confusion under determined enemy resistance, though the Commanding Officer managed to rally and lead a small group of his men as far as the first objective. However, in moving south to make contact with the armour, the group ran into more hostile positions, the commander being killed and the rest dispersed. The battalion's casualties, of 76 killed or missing and 104 wounded, included the commanding officer, the second-in-command, the adjutant, and all company commanders. The other two battalions of 131 Brigade, 1/5 and 1/6 Queen's, whose task was to follow the armour and form a firm base around the gaps, were not called on, while 132 Brigade remained in its defensive positions along the old third minefield.**

**To the south of 7 Armoured Division's operations, the Fighting French sent out four columns, two to form a base in no-man's land, and the other two to work round the south of [Himeimat](#), turn north and roll up the *Panzer Army's* outposts as far as the armour's left flank. Initially this operation went well, the two bases being taken up and artillery disposed to cover the area, while the two mobile columns, against some resistance, reached a position to the west of [Himeimat](#). Here, however, stiff fighting was necessary before enemy troops could be driven off the high ground, and by this time, through casualties and the rough going, the attack began to lose its punch. The enemy garrison on and around [Himeimat](#) was apparently unconcerned that it was being encircled, so that with the failure of 7 Armoured Division's operation, the French were faced with determined opposition both on the north and east, and with artillery fire from the west.**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 23 – DAWN, 24 OCTOBER



## CHAPTER 23

*Dawn, 24 October*

**THE situation of the Eighth Army as day dawned on the 24th was that, in the main area of operations, the infantry of 30 Corps had gained most of the desired objectives, but the armour had not yet broken out as planned, while the subsidiary action by 13 Corps had done little more than keep the enemy on the southern sector engaged and apprehensive of further assaults.**

**The first estimates of casualties received at Army Headquarters indicated that the Australian and South African divisions had each lost about 350 men, of whom about forty were known killed, the rest wounded or missing. The New Zealand estimated total was slightly higher, 420 wounded or missing and 41 killed, while the Highland Division offered a rough total of 1000, but this probably included several of the isolated groups and stragglers out of touch with their units. The total loss in 30 Corps was therefore thought to be in the vicinity of 2000 men all told, a total not considered unduly high for the results gained on the first night. Yet the losses, coming as they did mainly from the effective riflemen of the infantry battalions, were felt heavily in the New Zealand Division with its seven under-strength battalions. The other three divisions, all of whom had at least nine battalions and better pools of reserves, were less affected. In 10 Corps, casualties were too light to have any effect on the armour's efficiency, and though some thirty to forty tanks were out of action through enemy fire, mines or mechanical troubles, most of these were easily recoverable and repairable.**

**Casualties in 13 Corps, excluding the French, were under 400, almost equally shared by the armour and infantry, and of the total 71 were known killed and 50 reported missing. Losses by the Fighting French were believed to be relatively heavy in the two battalions of the Foreign Legion most actively engaged, but little was known of the French action until late on the 24th, when a check showed about 130 casualties in men and some fifty vehicles and several guns lost. <sup>1</sup>**

It will be seen that the first night's achievements at **Alamein** fell short of Montgomery's intentions, if not of his expectations. The essence of the operation was the mass 'break-out' of the armour, formed up, organised and under unified control, on ground beyond the infantry's objective. It is doubtful whether, by the methods employed and in the conditions met, this could have been achieved in the hours of darkness available. Although the leaders of one or more of the six tank columns of **10 Corps** may have shown undue caution in threading their way through the newly won ground, others certainly progressed at a rate probably near the limit of speed possible; yet not one of the six reached the infantry objective in sufficient time to break out and re-form in the manner prescribed and, as the experience of the Notts Yeomanry showed, a piecemeal advance, once darkness began to lift on **Miteiriya Ridge**, was extremely hazardous. Success required that all six columns, or the best part of them, should be in position well before daylight, with lorried infantry and supporting arms close behind. <sup>2</sup>

The failure of the armour to break out as a body gave the **Panzer Army** the small amount of time it needed to recover from the initial shock of the assault. German plans of the defences indicate that 30 Corps' infantry had in most places penetrated the outer belt of the mine-garden design. <sup>3</sup> Beyond this, the defences consisted of a number of tactical minefields intended to channel any armour that broke through, as well as numerous mined areas protecting rear strongpoints, headquarters and gun areas. No continuous second line had as yet been completed, so that there were several gaps and spaces clear of mines in which the British armour could have manoeuvred. Every hour's respite allowed the **Panzer Army** to fill these gaps with mines and anti-tank guns to offer a formidable defence now that the element of surprise had gone.

On the **Panzer Army's** side of the line it was some hours after the Eighth Army's artillery fire began before General Stumme could be certain that the British attack was genuine and not merely a noisy diversion such as had been laid on for the **Tobruk** raid in September.

Unfortunately many of the German records covering the next week or more, including the daily diaries of the

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<sup>1</sup> Separation of casualties occurring on the opening night from those suffered up to midnight on the 24th has been found impossible. The totals given above provided the basis on which immediate future operations were planned.

<sup>2</sup> This operation gave evidence that the pleas of New Zealand, and other, infantry commanders for 'armour under command' were not without foundation, for 9 Armoured Brigade, acting as an integral part of the infantry division, was the only formation that reached the ridge in time to take part in a mass tank advance.

<sup>3</sup> See map on p. 199.

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*Panzer Army* and some of the main German formations, were lost in the course of the fighting, while most surviving reports, prepared later when the course of events had become clearer, cannot be guaranteed to mirror knowledge and reactions at the time. However, it is clear that the British offensive did not catch the *Panzer Army* unprepared, in spite of Colonel Liss's prediction on 23 October that a major attack was not imminent. <sup>1</sup> It is unlikely that this appreciation was known to others than General Stumme and his immediate staff, and even more unlikely that, even if the army had accepted the visitor's opinion, Stumme would have allowed normal precautions against sudden attack to be relaxed.

The only element of surprise lay, as Montgomery himself had expected, in the weight and direction of the assault, and it was in this that weaknesses in the command structure between Italians and Germans, acidly commented on earlier in German records, left the *Panzer Army* headquarters almost completely enveloped in the fog of war until well into the following day.

The last entry in the *Panzer Army's* daily diary noted that after dark

on the 23rd a heavy barrage commenced on the whole front, later slackening off in the south but increasing in the north.

Communications with the front-line positions and for some distance to the rear were badly disrupted by the shelling, and though some of the German battalions seem to have passed news back, no reliable information was received of the Italian front-line positions. Even when the duration and extent of the shelling convinced Stumme that a major offensive had commenced, he felt constrained to order that immediate counter-attacks, customarily laid on by local commanders, should be held up in place of a planned and co-ordinated operation when daylight allowed observation and some assessment of the true situation. Only sufficient information had come in during the night for *Panzer Army* headquarters to estimate that a broad penetration had been made in Mine-boxes J and L (which, with K to their south, covered the assault front of 30 Corps). According to the German situation sketches, it was at first believed that the major assault had been made by the New Zealand Division backed by a part of 7 Armoured Division, with the Highland Division operating between the coast and the main road. The Australian Division was placed at the rear and south of the main area of penetration. News of the fortunes of individual front-line units, pieced together as the day wore on, indicated that the whole of the Italian 62 *Regiment* and a large part of the German 382 *Regiment* had been overrun. In detail, information

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 202.

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recorded by *15 Panzer Division* shows that one battalion of Italians in the path of the Australians just 'disappeared', while a German battalion in this sector was 'wiped out by drunken negroes with tanks', in the words of an Italian message. The positions of another Italian battalion along the boundary of the Australian and Highland sectors were penetrated, no further mention of the battalion being recorded. The German *III Battalion* of 382 *Regiment*, in the Highlanders' path, initially lost touch with the rear but later regained contact, and some of

its companies were still in action during the next two days. On the boundary of the Highland and New Zealand sectors *II Battalion* of *62 Regiment* was early overrun, as was *III Battalion* of *61 Regiment* on the south of the New Zealanders' sector, but survivors of the German unit, *II Battalion, 382 Regiment*, in the centre must have rallied after withdrawing as they took part in a counter-attack later in the day before their battalion was officially written off. The South Africans were obviously responsible for annihilating one company of *III Battalion, 61 Regiment*, but the German troops of *433 Regiment* in their path appear to have fallen back in some sort of order, though one battalion was reported as overrun by tanks during the day of the 24th. When the commander of *164 Division*, Major-General Lungershausen, proposed to re-form the German and Italian infantry still remaining under his command on a new line, General Stumme ordered that the main defence line must be held, and regained where lost. The command of the northern front was then removed from *164 Division* and given to *15 Panzer Division*, whose reserve battle groups were in action before the end of the 24th, trying to plug the gaps in the infantry's line. <sup>1</sup>

A comment in the German campaign narrative, compiled later from diaries and reports, that 'After the overrunning of the Italian battalions, the interspersed German battalions stood like islands in the holocaust' <sup>2</sup> seems hardly fair, as all the battalions, both German and Italian, within *30 Corps'* objective were either overwhelmed or driven back except for the positions in the centre of the Highland Division's sector. Several Italian posts are known to have resisted stoutly, but at the point of giving way, where German troops could stage an orderly withdrawal, the Italians were likely to fall into disorganisation.

News from the southern sector also took time to filter through to the staff at *Army Headquarters*, who appear to have decided at first that the British effort there was diversionary. This opinion was modified shortly after dawn when it became known that some

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<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Army* situation sketches, *15 Pz Div* war diary (GMDS

<sup>2</sup> GMDS 34373/1-2.

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of *Folgore Division's* outposts had been overwhelmed and that up to 160 tanks could be seen between the inner and outer mine-belts. Accordingly no immediate consideration was given to moving the reserve force under *21 Panzer Division* to the north. In the few relevant records, there is no hint that the *Panzer Army* command at this stage doubted its eventual control of the battle, though General Stumme seems to have been more intent on gathering detailed information before taking action than Rommel himself might have been.

The *Panzer Army's* losses for this first night cannot be accurately assessed but, on a basis of five battalions overwhelmed by 30 Corps together with the casualties inflicted by 13 Corps and by the British shellfire, the total cannot be far short of that suffered by the Eighth Army. A check of prisoners, mostly captured during the night and early morning, showed 954 held by 30 Corps and about 500 by 13 Corps, a total of 1454, of whom approximately one third were Germans. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The German campaign narrative (GMDS 34373/1-2) gives the total German-Italian casualties compiled to the evening of 26 October as 3655. It is doubtful if this figure is accurate.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 24 – THE BREAK-OUT FAILS



## CHAPTER 24

### *The Break-out Fails*

**ALTHOUGH** the impetus of the infantry's night advance had not been followed up by the armour of **10 Corps**, this was not clearly understood at Army Headquarters until well after daylight on 24 October when the various and often conflicting reports of the course of the battle could be studied against actual visual observation of the ground. In the Australian and New Zealand sectors fairly good contact was maintained throughout with the foremost troops, who could thus be placed with some accuracy on the map, but the constitutional weakness in liaison between armour and infantry prevented the leading tank units from checking their estimated positions with the infantry around them. At the armoured headquarters, commanders and staff naturally preferred to take the often over-sanguine reports of progress sent in by their own men rather than the doubts of such progress held by the infantry headquarters. This failure of effective liaison was bad enough over all of **30 Corps'** front but showed at its worst in the Highland Division's area. Here, even by ten o'clock, the divisional com-commander was still not in touch with some of his troops, while attempts to place his known positions on the map were bedevilled by disagreement with **1 Armoured Division** over map reading. Offers by **Eighth Army** headquarters to send a survey party to settle this dispute seem to have touched the pride of both divisions, so that uncertainty remained until artillery observers in the course of their duties showed that the infantry's resecting was less inaccurate than that of the armour, which in fact was up to 1200 yards out. Until this was settled the artillery groups of armour and infantry were unable to co-ordinate any plans.

With the coming of full daylight aircraft of the **Royal Air Force** streamed over the line to continue their offensive as planned, with attacks on landing grounds to keep the Axis air force grounded and with heavy raids on the area in which it was believed **15 Panzer Division** would be concentrating for a counter-attack. On the ground the *Panzer Army's* artillery, recovering from the pounding it had received under the

British counter-battery fire, began to lay salvoes along **Miteiriya Ridge** and the ground to the east, firing mainly by observation of vehicle concentrations and movement. Eighth Army's flash-spotting organisation then came into action to record that several of the known enemy batteries still had guns able to fire and that some previously unknown batteries were in action. For a time the **Panzer Army** gunners were allowed to remain almost unmolested as many of the British guns were being brought forward and surveyed into new positions, while others had to be given a much-needed rest and overhaul; each of the medium guns, for example, had fired some 260 rounds in about six hours during the night and needed mechanical adjustments and their crews needed rest. It was not long, however, before sufficient batteries of both field and medium guns were ready to make use of the flash-spotters' observations to lay 'bombards' of predicted fire on each of the enemy batteries in turn. The resulting decrease in hostile fire brought the curious impression, held by **Freyberg** among others, that the **Panzer Army** guns had shot off their stocks of ammunition on hand as a prelude to withdrawal.

Along the newly established front sporadic firing broke out as daylight exposed tanks, vehicles and infantry to hostile observation. In places Axis troops were still occupying defences within throwing distance of the positions taken up by the attackers, but as first the infantry and later the tanks and artillery fired on them, a no-man's land of varying width gradually became defined.

In the Australian sector heavy exchanges of fire occurred as the troops on the north, mostly Germans, turned to cover their newly exposed southern flank. The Australians on this line held firm, though menaced by several minor counter-attacks, and even managed in places to improve their positions. On the left flank of the western objective Valentines of **40 Royal Tanks** moved up in front of the infantry to cover the depleted 2/13 Battalion. Along the boundary of the Australian and Highland sectors, the tanks of 1 Armoured Division, nowhere in close contact with the enemy, ignorant of what was going on around them,

and uncertain of their positions, made tentative efforts to advance further but soon halted when they met mines and some enemy fire. They then engaged vehicles and troops at long range to the west. This division later claimed that its advance had been hindered mainly because it had encountered scattered mines instead of the neatly-bounded belts it had been led to expect. Its leading columns had in fact almost reached the limits gained by the infantry around them, though rather late, and its failure to fulfil the plans lay mostly at the door of the elaborate minefield task forces which, though designed to drive gaps through minefields against opposition, had failed to do so except where the Highlanders had reduced most of the opposition beforehand. To this cause there was allied both poor navigation and complete lack of liaison with the infantry.



THE OPERATIONS OF 30 AND 10 CORPS, 24-26 OCTOBER

THE OPERATIONS OF 30 AND 10 CORPS, 24-26 OCTOBER

At 7.15 a.m., as two companies of 2/17 Australian Battalion were preparing to move into the gap between 2/48 and 2/13 Battalions, observers reported the signs of a counter-attack from the west. Under increasing enemy fire the Valentines ahead of 2/13 Battalion withdrew through the infantry, while tanks of the Bays to the left rear deployed for action and a call for defensive fire was sent to the artillery. At least five field regiments responded, causing the enemy to disperse hurriedly. As this excitement died down, part of a flight of aircraft, including a

**number of USAAF Mitchell bombers briefed to attack a suspected enemy headquarters further north-west, unloaded their bombs on 2/13 Battalion. With the Valentines moving up and then withdrawing through their lines, and tanks of 2 Armoured Brigade milling about on their flank, this battalion's positions were under constant enemy shellfire so that the men spent a very trying day.**

**To the south of the Australian sector, the Highlanders were gradually sorting themselves out. Daylight disclosed that at least three main enemy posts still held out between the right-flank troops and the final objective. The divisional commander accordingly decided to use 2 Battalion, The Seaforth Highlanders, from reserve in a daylight attack, with artillery support and the use of any available Valentines of 50 Royal Tanks. Action was initially delayed by instructions from 30 Corps to coordinate the plan with the efforts of 2 Armoured Brigade to get the latter's tanks forward, and further delayed by the discovery that the tank regiments were not where their reports indicated. Finally it was arranged for the Bays, the armoured brigade's right-flank regiment, to advance on the right, while the other two regiments, 9 Lancers and 10 Hussars, followed the Seaforths who were to attack two strongpoints to the west. At the same time Valentines of 50 Royal Tanks carrying men of 51 Reconnaissance Regiment were to swing wide to the left and take another post that lay to the left rear of the Seaforths' objective. Though the armoured regiments claimed they were given little time for preparation or reconnaissance, 2 Seaforths, short of one company that missed the start line, set off at the appointed time, 3 p.m. Closely following up concentrations fired by their own divisional artillery (the help of 1 Armoured Division's artillery being refused owing to the continuing disagreement over map reading), the Seaforths advanced with considerable dash to overrun both strongpoints but at the cost of eighty-five casualties. The Valentine force of seventeen tanks, with thirty men of the Reconnaissance Regiment, ran into fire from a post further to its left front and, with the loss of seven tanks mostly on mines, withdrew without gaining its objective, though its action was thought to have drawn fire away from the main attack.**

The Bays, having earlier indicated their position to the enemy by long-range firing, set off due west on the right but soon were stopped by mines and anti-tank gun fire, some reputedly from 88s. With the loss of six Shermans they fell back, but then received orders from their brigade to turn south and follow the Seaforths. Meanwhile **9 Lancers**, not sure of their position and delayed while two minefields were gapped, failed to make contact with the infantry and pulled over to the north, only to meet the Bays coming south. Both regiments then began to probe gingerly in a north-westerly direction. The third tank regiment, **10 Hussars**, tacked its way up to avoid minefields and appeared unexpectedly on the left of the Seaforths' objective. As daylight began to fail, 2 Armoured Brigade claimed that the Bays and Lancers were in the vicinity of the final objective with **10 Hussars** to their left rear. On orders from 1 Armoured Division that the regiments spread north to make contact with 2/48 Australian Battalion, the regimental commanders reported that their surviving tanks were too thin on the ground for further dispersion, so the armoured division called up 7 Motor Brigade to fill the gap. Overnight, 7 Battalion The Rifle Brigade came forward and dug in on the Australians' left rear, but 2 Battalion The King's Royal Rifle Corps, intended to extend the front further south, stopped behind the rifle battalion.

It would seem that the tanks were neither as far north or west as they claimed, for the Australians were preparing to repeat the final tasks of the artillery programme of the previous night to allow 2/13 and 2/15 Battalions to advance after dark to the objective. Had the Bays and Lancers been where claimed, and especially if they had spread north as ordered by 1 Armoured Division, they would have been well within the area of the artillery fire. In arranging their fire programme the Australians either must have been unaware of the movements of the armour or more likely knew by observation that the tanks were clear of their sector. In the event Australian patrols at dusk found the area vacated except by a few enemy stragglers, so that artillery support was not needed and both infantry and tanks were on the final objective overnight.

**The story of 2 Armoured Brigade illustrates the weaknesses from which Eighth Army still suffered, weaknesses in communications, liaison, and particularly in understanding of the role of the armour in the plans. Instead of assisting 51 Division to clear its area and organise a firm front, 2 Armoured Brigade in fact took the path of least resistance, which led it from, rather than towards, a common front with 10 Armoured Division.**

**On the rest of 51 Division's front, the confusion following the night advance was being slowly ironed out, but movement in the sector was still greatly hindered by observation and fire from the large enemy pocket remaining in the centre of 154 Brigade's objective. On the far left the two companies of 7 Black Watch well forward against the New Zealand sector found themselves caught up in the tank engagements being fought on their front.**

**The New Zealand front was perhaps the strongest and best ordered in 30 Corps for, although short of the objective on the left, it was manned as a continuous line by the four infantry battalions in contact with each other. Both 5 and 6 Field Regiments had observation posts set up on the ridge before dawn and in contact with the infantry. Communications to the rear were quickly established, although signal lines were constantly being cut by both shellfire and the mass of tanks milling about behind the front, while wireless was initially somewhat erratic. Through valiant efforts by the Division's signal linesmen, and by using alternative radio links, the observation officers were able to get their calls for fire answered by the guns within a few minutes. As no immediate counter-attack developed to call for defensive fire, the first calls were on targets of movement and gun positions disclosed by the fast-growing light.**

**Although the infantry had arrived in time to get dug in before dawn, the masses of vehicles following behind took some time to be sorted out as the various groups were led from the gapped routes to the battalion and company positions. In the unavoidable confusion, and often through impatience to carry out the tasks required, a number of the drivers ran**

off the cleared routes and immobilised their vehicles on minefields; others lost their way and waited for guidance. Altogether probably as many as half or more of the support weapons – anti-tank guns, mortars, machine guns – failed to arrive in time to be properly sited and dug in before daylight exposed them to enemy fire. However, the mass of tanks closely following the infantry advance more than made up for any shortage of support weapons. The **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry** were out ahead of 22 Battalion, where they were joined a short time later by the Crusader squadron of the Staffs Yeomanry of **8 Armoured Brigade**. Unfortunately, in manoeuvring through the battalion area, nine of these tanks had run off the marked route and were immobilised by mines; though some of the crews continued to man their guns, these nine sitting ducks soon became a target for enemy fire and several were set alight. The plight of these tanks may have deterred the rest of the Staffs Yeomanry, who remained behind the ridge.

Further to the south, the Crusader squadron of the Notts Yeomanry (of **8 Armoured Brigade**) came up on Boat track in the right of 26 Battalion's sector just as the sky was lightening. At this point **Miteiriya Ridge** commenced with a short but definite rise which made a false crest to those approaching from the east, and from this rise the ground rose imperceptibly to the true crest some distance farther on. The infantry had their foremost positions beyond the true crest on a forward slope overlooking the wide, shallow valley to the west. On surmounting the false crest the Notts Yeomanry Crusaders raced forward, but only three managed to cross the true crest, the remainder being immobilised on scattered mines. These three stayed in support of C Company of 26 Battalion, attracting more and more enemy fire until one was knocked out; the other two then withdrew under smoke, much to the infantry's relief. The enemy gunners then gave their attention to the mined tanks on the top of the ridge, several of which were set alight during the morning.

Meanwhile, as these first attempts to cross the ridge were being made, the remainder of the three brigades of armour banked up in the



**New Zealand sector, blocking the minefield gaps on the routes up and hindering free movement across the front. It is recorded that some of the tanks fired on the New Zealand infantry in reserve positions. Many of the men in positions behind the ridge went to the trouble of laying out old tins and lengths of barbed wire to simulate minefields in order to deter the milling tanks from overrunning their slit trenches.**

**Such was the press of vehicles that the Divisional Cavalry, attempting to cross from behind 6 Brigade's front to reach the gap reported in 22 Battalion's sector, could make little headway, and about 7.30 p.m., on Freyberg's orders, moved back to the rear. Even in the rear the congestion was such that the advance party of 4 Field Regiment, searching for an area to deploy the guns in the vicinity of the first objective, had to turn south into the South African sector. Here the party encountered a still unsubdued enemy post whose occupants continued to fire until the arrival of a Bofors anti-aircraft gun. One shot from this gun, however, brought the surrender of twenty of the enemy. Later in the morning the regiment lost about thirty men when heavy shellfire fell on one of the batteries as it was moving through the minefields in this area.**

**At 7 a.m. Freyberg considered that there was still an opportunity for the tanks to break out en masse as planned provided a supreme and immediate effort was made. From his command tank, a stripped-down Stuart in which he had set off before five o'clock to tour the divisional sector and see conditions at first hand, he first instructed Brigadier Currie of 9 Armoured Brigade to rally his regiments and reconnoitre a route to the gap in 22 Battalion's sector, and to join the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry tanks that were there. He then called up his GSO I, Colonel Queree, at Tactical Headquarters to take steps 'to get the battle moving again'. His exhortations were passed by Queree to 30 Corps, who passed them on to 10 Corps and so down to 10 Armoured Division, who replied, by the same channels, that the armour was held up by the congestion in the New Zealand sector. This reply far from satisfied Freyberg, who was sure that any delay caused by the congestion could be overcome with**



drive and determined leadership. He therefore told Currie to make for 22 Battalion's gap, ready to break over and beyond the ridge, while he whipped up **10 Armoured Division** to follow. He had by this time learnt from **Brigadier Kippenberger** of the uncongested northern route leading to 21 Battalion and arranged to have guides placed on this track to lead **10 Armoured Division** forward.

Currie himself was only concerned to be given a definite objective. He signalled that there were about forty enemy tanks in view and that he was prepared to lead his brigade over the ridge straight away, but wanted to know if the other armour would assist and if his artillery liaison could be improved. This latter trouble took some time to settle, though it was later found that observers from 4 Field Regiment were well forward and in fact directing fire but not in close contact with the tank regiments. What definite objective **Freyberg** gave Currie is not clear though it seems it was the original objective of the plan. However, he told him to push on as quickly as he could as **10 Armoured Division** was being urged to follow. He then rang Queree to get action from 30 and **10 Corps** to 'move mass of tanks here doing nothing'.

Queree had meanwhile managed to speak direct to his opposite number in **10 Armoured Division**, to whom he repeated the information already passed along the channel of the two corps headquarters, i.e., that the congestion was not caused by New Zealand transport but by the lack of decision and action by the columns of the armoured division. He emphasised that a clear route, with guides available, was open on the right of the sector and that 9 Armoured Brigade was preparing to break over the ridge into the open, with **8 Armoured Brigade** handily placed behind it and awaiting orders from its own division before following. This conversation between the two staff officers, however, did little more than ensure that the headquarters of the armoured division was made aware of **Freyberg's** appreciation of the situation and his proposals. All attempts to get in touch direct with the armoured corps' commander, Lumsden, or the divisional commander, Gatehouse, failed as both these officers were on the move, Lumsden apparently visiting 1 Armoured

Division's sector while Gatehouse, according to his own headquarters, was thought to be 'up forward' establishing a tactical headquarters. However, a message eventually reached Queree from **10 Corps**, relayed through **30 Corps**, that Lumsden had decided that **10 Armoured Division** was not in a position to support **9 Armoured Brigade's** sally and that no further armoured advance would be made meanwhile.

The time lag involved, of some three hours since **Freyberg** first advocated an immediate advance, naturally caused some concern to General Leese at Headquarters **30 Corps**, through which most of the messages were being relayed, and at 10.45 a.m. he appeared in person at the New Zealand headquarters. Here he learnt that an enemy counter-attack thought to be impending against **5 Brigade** had died away under fire from tanks and artillery, but that movement and concentration of troops and vehicles made it appear that another attack might be coming against **6 Brigade's** front. Leese's reaction to this was that **Miteiriya Ridge** should be made secure and that a plan for the two corps should be prepared for the afternoon. He then joined **Freyberg** in a tour of the sector as far as the ridge.

Meanwhile Queree received a long message from **10 Armoured Division**, which claimed that two regiments of **8 Armoured Brigade** were on **Miteiriya Ridge** but not in contact with **9 Armoured Brigade**, and that earlier information sent about **1 Armoured Division's** situation had been incorrect, this division in fact having been stopped by mines well short of the earlier-reported positions. The message continued that Gatehouse now proposed passing **24 Armoured Brigade** across the rear of **8 Armoured Brigade** to make contact with **1 Armoured Division** and cover the right flank of the New Zealand sector. He was against continuing the advance until the right flank was secure unless there was a definite objective as, from the amount of anti-tank fire, he anticipated heavy tank casualties once the armour left the security of the ridge. Having been told by his corps commander, Lumsden, to give the New Zealand Division as much assistance as possible, he proposed staying along the ridge to intervene against counter-attack while preparing for a new

operation to take place either that night or the next day after the enemy's anti-tank defence had been subdued by artillery fire.

The actual sequence of orders given to the armour and of the movement of the various groups of tanks during this morning is difficult to disentangle. According to the British official narrative, on an order given by Lumsden just before 7.30 a.m., 24 Armoured Brigade sent its **47 Royal Tanks** up on **8 Armoured Brigade's** left, where it reached the ridge and was in engagement with enemy tanks. There is no mention of this regiment's arrival in the New Zealand records but it may have passed unnoticed among the mass of tanks of 9 and 8 Armoured Brigades, most of which were concentrated in the sectors occupied by 22 and 26 Battalions. Then, the British narrative records, at 9.35 a.m. Lumsden called on 24 Brigade to advance north-west behind the New Zealand front and attack the enemy holding up 1 Armoured Division. There was a movement of tanks in this direction in the rear of the New Zealand sector, probably with **47 Royal Tanks** in the lead, but 24 Armoured Brigade does not seem to have moved far enough to cross into the Highland sector, possibly because of the modification of the order, on the lines given by Gatehouse to Queree, to guard the New Zealand right flank. Lumsden was apparently giving orders direct to Gatehouse's brigades because the latter could not be contacted and, as can be seen, neither **Freyberg** nor Leese knew fully what the armour was planning to do until shortly before midday when, on their tour of the sector, they encountered Gatehouse in person.

On returning to the New Zealand headquarters, Leese immediately called up the Army Commander, his side of the conversation being recorded as follows:

I have seen **Bernard [Freyberg]** and Gatehouse and I understand Herbert [Lumsden] has talked to you in the last hour. There is one Bn of 9 Bde over the ridge. On the left inf are in touch with SAs and an attack is developing. B. is confident that he could get on. The Wilts in front appear to have run on to some mines on his right – rest of Bde is behind ridge. He thinks he could go well

through provided one of Gatehouse's brigades goes with him. G. says Royals <sup>1</sup> A/Tk weapons and anything that puts its nose over the ridge gets shot up. G's main preoccupation at moment is to get 10 Armd Div into position to receive attack from someone else ... I think we damn well do. He keeps on saying he is trained for a static role. I think that is getting above him. I have told Bernard to hold a meeting with G. and Brigs. I am placing whole Corps arty at his disposal and am suggesting that under smoke they try and do something later in day. What did Herbert say, Sir? That is happening.... You want them to get into position so that they can manoeuvre on the far side of M. Ridge.... Right I shall do that. I shall find out earliest time Corps arty can be ready.... The northern one is not complete – attack goes in at 1200.... Bernard thinks he is moving off. They did a hell of a lot of shooting up this morning. He may be shooting off his ammunition. M. Ridge was full of hate but now there is hardly anything happening. <sup>2</sup>

As this conversation concluded, Lumsden appeared at the New Zealand headquarters. Both corps commanders then agreed that, if the Army Commander insisted on a further tank advance, the sooner it took place the better. On the arrival of a liaison officer from **Freyberg**, who had meanwhile gone forward to see Currie and **Kippenberger**, to offer the combined advice of the two brigadiers that the operation should take place after dark, a start was made on the details of the plan. A call from Montgomery at 2.15 p.m. was taken by Lumsden, who emphasised that the operation would certainly be costly in tanks but that he was willing to attempt it.

Plans were then prepared for the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry and 9 Armoured Brigade to advance after dark behind a creeping barrage while 8 and 24 Armoured Brigades, supported by timed concentrations, made for their original LIGHTFOOT objectives, the whole operation to be supported by the combined artillery of the two corps of some 300 guns.

As the commanders were attempting to co-ordinate their actions,

there were several alarms of impending counter-attacks on the New Zealand front. From daybreak until the middle of the morning, enemy fire built up in intensity with 88-millimetre and other guns searching along the crest of the ridge and behind it, while smaller calibre anti-tank guns from the nearer defences let fly at any tanks that showed their turrets above the crest.

The **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry** and the other tanks immobilised on mines drew a great deal of fire on to 5 Brigade's area, particularly on 22 Battalion, much to the infantry's discomfort, and there was a certain amount of relief when, shortly after midday, the four remaining runners of the Yeomanry were withdrawn into cover. The regiment's casualties to this time were 10 killed or missing and 32 wounded (including the Commanding Officer and seven other officers).

By midday the enemy's shelling had almost died away, although any vehicle moving into view on the ridge still drew immediate fire. On the counter-attack alarms, which waxed and waned about every two hours from seven in the morning until four o'clock in the afternoon, the British guns laid observed fire on any concentrations reported by their observers while preparing for the planned defensive tasks should the enemy forces approach the ridge. Every enemy movement, however, appeared to disperse under fire and none came close enough to be a real threat to the infantry. A count of prisoners taken on the New Zealand front gave a total to date of approximately 250, made up of infantrymen of 382 and 62 *Regiments* with a few men from artillery and other units. Nearly half of the total were Germans.

There is little doubt that troops of the **Panzer Army** facing the New Zealand front intended to counter-attack. Orders were given early for the positions lost overnight to be recovered and, according to the German records, advances were aimed during the day at the New Zealand right flank from two directions, one from the southwest by elements of the *Battle Group South* and the other from the north-west by mainly Italian forces. Little is known of the Italian effort, even the Eighth Army's observation reports failing to mention that it was seen or fired on. The

German force from the south-west consisted of two tank companies of 8 *Panzer Regiment* (of up to thirty tanks all told), with possibly some Italian tanks, accompanied by a mixed group of German and Italian infantry and artillery. Starting early in the morning this force progressed very slowly, and though it claimed it drove the British back and retook some of the defences, these latter could only have been positions from which the defenders had retired in the night under threat from exploiting patrols or the sight of tanks on the ridge. By mid-afternoon contact was claimed with some of the still unsubdued posts facing the Highland Division to the northwest of 5 Brigade, and this seems to have been the farthest point reached. The German records dealing with this force illustrate the state of chaos and uncertainty prevailing among the remaining defences facing the New Zealand front, and add point to **Freyberg's** appreciation that a further advance would sweep through the *Panzer Army's* defences in the way the original plan envisaged.

The *Panzer Army* directed its attack to this particular point to close a gap caused by 5 Brigade's overrunning of 2 *Battalion of 62 Infantry Regiment (Trento Division)* sandwiched between *II* and *III Battalions of 382 Regiment*. The outposts of *II Battalion, 382 Regiment*, had been driven back by 6 Brigade but had apparently re-formed in some order, while *III Battalion* facing the Highlanders was still holding on to much of its main defence area. Had the attack been directed further north, to recover the positions of *3 Battalion, 62 Regiment*, it might have met with more success, but because many of the positions on the Highland Division's sector were still holding out, *Panzer Army Headquarters* felt that the danger lay in the deeper penetration made by 5 Brigade.

The lack of drive by the counter-attack force possibly showed the effects both of Rommel's absence and the defensive attitude engendered by the *Panzer Army's* policy of static defence in fixed positions. There is no doubt, however, that the real cause of its failure to develop into a threat lay in the fact that, for once, the British army had ensured that the objective was covered by strong artillery support and by a force of

tanks well forward at first light to act as anti-tank defence. The counter-attack force was first harassed from the air as it formed up, then subjected to heavy concentrations from the field guns as it moved off and, on further advance, its vehicles came into range of the 75-millimetre guns of the Shermans and Grants. This was sufficient to break its impetus, for only a few infantry came within range of the small-arms of the men in the defences and the tanks' machine guns.

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<sup>1</sup> The **10 Armoured Division**'s armoured car regiment which had lost two cars to anti-tank guns while trying to reconnoitre to the south-west from the New Zealand front.

<sup>2</sup> GOC **2 NZEF/45**.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN



# CHAPTER 25 – TANKS ATTEMPT NIGHT ADVANCE

## CHAPTER 25

### *Tanks Attempt Night Advance*

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**DURING** the afternoon of the 24th the various commanders settled the details of the night's plan, which was in effect the armoured phase of the original but with extra support from all the available artillery of 10 and 30 Corps. Though both Lumsden and Gatehouse stressed the dangers and the possible heavy loss of tanks in an armoured advance without infantry to precede it, they appeared to agree that unless the advance was continued as soon as possible, the battle would become static and, in Lumsden's own words, would just 'fizzle out'. <sup>1</sup>

**Freyberg** was concerned to give the enemy no time to deploy a new gun screen and wanted to get the armour over the ridge so that he could assess the chances of continuing his division's role of exploiting to the south-west.

There are, however, clear indications from recorded statements made at the time that none of the commanders concerned, except perhaps the as yet inexperienced Leese, was very sanguine of the result of an unaccompanied armoured sortie. The experienced infantry leaders, assessing the armour's capabilities on the opening night's performance, would have preferred a repetition of that night's plan had the reserves of infantry and the time to prepare been available. Lumsden himself counselled caution, both in speaking to the Army Commander from the New Zealand headquarters and later in conversation with **Freyberg**:

Playing with armour is like playing with fire. You have got to take your time about it. It is like a duel. If you don't take your time you will get run through the guts. It is not for tanks to take on guns. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

The Army Commander, however, was insistent that the momentum of the advance must be maintained and there was no other way of maintaining it.

The start of the operation was timed for 10 p.m. under the support of 300 guns. The positions of the two **10 Armoured Division** brigades were reversed from the original plan so that 24 Brigade was to advance on the right and **8 Armoured Brigade** on the left, the former using the route through 21 Battalion and cutting its own gap through a minefield known to lie further out, and the latter using the way through 22 Battalion along which the tanks had broken out earlier in the day. The artillery support was to start with timed concentrations just beyond the infantry lines and precede the tanks to the objective, which was the original first bound, some 3000 yards to the west.

At the same time the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry and 9 Armoured Brigade, now reduced to two regiments as the Wiltshire Yeomanry had been withdrawn and its surviving tanks given to the other regiments, were to cross the ridge in the area held by 26 Battalion and, proceeding behind a creeping barrage fired by the New Zealand guns, were to form a front facing generally south to link the left of **10 Armoured Division**'s objective to the infantry positions.

It was also proposed that 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade should take over 5 Brigade's area so that it would be ready to advance and consolidate ground won by the tanks, while 5 Brigade would be free to follow 9 Armoured Brigade in the exploitation role. **Freyberg**, uncertain of the quality of support 51 Division could give his right flank and becoming more doubtful of the likelihood of the armour's completing the task it had accepted, held up the orders for this relief and, in ringing Leese shortly after dusk to explain his actions and his doubts, started an argument which has echoed down the years. He told Leese bluntly that **10 Armoured Division** was being commanded from too far back and that

it was not 'properly set up' for the night's operation. The basis of this complaint lay in the fact that, though Gatehouse maintained a tactical or forward headquarters, this was apparently mobile and very hard to find or reach by wireless, so that the only reliable channel of communication was through the headquarters of **10 Armoured Division**, well to the rear and manned by a staff often out of touch with the latest developments and unable to make valid decisions without relaying messages to their commander. There is evidence that Gatehouse visited both his brigades in the New Zealand sector during the late afternoon or evening, but in failing to keep in constant personal touch with **Freyberg** he showed a lack of appreciation that the operations of **9 Armoured Brigade** should have been closely co-ordinated with those of his own armour. The orders issued by **10 Corps**, **10 Armoured Division**, and the **New Zealand Division** show numerous points of variance, and though the records of what actually occurred are in places very confused, it soon became obvious that the operation was, in **Freyberg's** words, not 'properly set up'.

At dusk the rearward side of **Miteiriya Ridge**, already very crowded, became a scene of near confusion as the infantry, antitank gunners and others in the defences took advantage of the failing light to move above ground, improving their defences, bringing up stores and distributing rations, while groups of sappers and their covering infantry parties, together with the leading elements of the armoured columns, were assembling for the advance. Men and vehicles filled almost every available yard of space between the minefields and at times completely blocked movement through the minefield gaps behind the front.

At the same time the **Panzer Army**, estimating that, as no major tank advance had been made by the Eighth Army during the day, the British would attempt a renewal of the infantry advance in the dark, started to lay artillery harassing fire on and behind the ridge, while the Axis infantry, returning to forward posts vacated in daylight, began their customary bursts of machine-gun fire on fixed lines, with salvoes of mortar fire on the gaps west of the ridge.

This enemy activity delayed the sapper party of 6 New Zealand Field Company detailed to clear the ground beyond the gap between 25 and 26 Battalions' fronts for the passage of the Divisional Cavalry and 9 Armoured Brigade. Led by their company commander, Major **Woolcott**,<sup>1</sup> the sappers had not quite cleared the mines when the supporting fire opened on them. Although they suffered a number of casualties, including their commander who was fatally wounded, the men carried on under the leadership of Sergeant **Lawrence**<sup>2</sup> to get the gap taped and lit, and allowed the Cavalry through with only a short delay. The supporting fire also caught one of the forward companies of 26 Battalion. Though warned by the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Fountaine, who learnt only a short time beforehand that his men would be on the opening line of the barrage, the men of this company failed

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<sup>1</sup> **Maj H. C. S. Woolcott**; born **Auckland**, 29 May 1909; civil engineer; OC **6 Fd Coy** 1941–42; wounded 1 Dec 1941; died of wounds 24 Oct 1942.

<sup>2</sup> **Sgt J. K. Lawrence**, DCM; **Christchurch**; born England, 14 Aug 1917; draughtsman; wounded 18 Jan 1943.

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to retire in time and were so disorganised both by the barrage and when moving back through the congestion behind them that it was some hours before they could be reassembled as a company.

The two squadrons of light tanks and Bren carriers of the Cavalry, on passing through the final gap, soon met machine-gun and anti-tank gun fire and were further delayed by scattered mines so that they lost the barrage. On losing two tanks, C Squadron halted, but B Squadron pushed on for nearly two miles, clearing a route along which the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade followed. On being joined by the heavy tanks, the Cavalry asked permission to fall back, but **Freyberg** instructed them to stay out until dawn. This they did, retiring to the ridge at first light. The Cavalry's total losses for the night were 23 men, five light tanks, and

four Bren carriers, against which they overran several defence positions and were responsible for rounding up a number of prisoners.

Next in time over the ridge after the Cavalry were the **Staffordshire Yeomanry of 8 Armoured Brigade**, who appear to have gone through a gap in 26 Battalion's sector, though they were supposed to have used the route previously taken through 22 Battalion. Whichever gap they used, they pulled off to the south and were found some 500 yards out, waiting for the rest of their brigade, by the leading regiment of 9 Armoured Brigade.

The Staffs Yeomanry were followed by the Notts Yeomanry, the 'soft-skinned' part of whose column came up through the left of 25 Battalion's area and turned right, parallel to, and in the shelter of, the ridge, and halted while waiting for their tanks, which came up on a different route further to the right. Some time before midnight a random shell or mortar bomb hit and set alight one of the leading vehicles of this stationary and closely packed convoy which was carrying infantry, petrol, ammunition, and other stores. Lone enemy bombers which had been about since dusk then used this blaze as a target, dropping several sticks of bombs around it, while enemy gunners also laid some salvos on the area. In spite of attempts by men of 25 Battalion to drive some of the unharmed vehicles clear, few were saved, the majority being abandoned to the flames which eventually swept through the whole column. The constant enemy attention caused by the blaze forced a number of 25 Battalion men to leave their slit trenches, some of which were within a few yards of the burning vehicles. Casualties directly attributable to this event were at least fifty and probably more, mainly in the lorried infantry of the Notts Yeomanry. The losses in men, vehicles and stores completely disorganised the advance of the Notts Yeomanry and eventually of all **8 Armoured Brigade**. The commander of the regiment called a halt while he assessed and reported the damage, and this in turn caused **3 Royal Tanks**, following on behind, also to halt. On a request from both regimental commanders to be allowed to disperse where they stood, the brigade commander gave this permission and also

rang up Gatehouse with a proposal that the whole advance be postponed.

Meanwhile Brigadier Currie managed to lead 9 Armoured Brigade through the congestion and confusion and, personally reconnoitring on foot the route over the ridge, sent his leading regiment, **3 Hussars**, off on the advance. The second regiment, the **Warwickshire Yeomanry**, was delayed but managed to follow some time later. One group of tanks was helped to cross the ridge by New Zealand machine-gunners, who not only fired a special barrage of some 12,000 rounds but also replaced lights in the minefield gap and guided the tanks through.

Encouraged by the appearance of 9 Armoured Brigade on its left, the Staffs Yeomanry joined in the advance to the west, successfully using its infantry, a company of 1 Battalion, The Buffs, to overcome some anti-tank guns. The two regiments of 9 Armoured Brigade drew away to the south-west, following the trail blazed by the Cavalry. How far the Staffs Yeomanry advanced is a matter of conjecture, estimates ranging from 1000 to 3000 yards, but as day began to break, they were in a slight hollow, offering a little cover, about 1000 yards in front of 22 Battalion. The regiments of 9 Armoured Brigade went about 2000 yards, overrunning many enemy posts and collecting a body of prisoners. At dawn they found themselves in a shallow valley overlooked by strong enemy posts to west and south and accordingly pulled back a little, so that **3 Hussars** was on the right to the south of the Staffs Yeomanry, facing south-west, and the Warwick Yeomanry on the left, facing south.

*ii*

On the right flank **10 Armoured Division**'s operations went even more slowly. The engineers of 24 Armoured Brigade, through lack of liaison over the routes already cleared, came up in the rear of 5 Brigade's positions and spent some time in clearing a new gap through a minefield there. Once on the ridge they could not at first find their reconnaissance party, which had gone forward to lead the way but had had to retire hurriedly when it found itself under the artillery supporting fire. No sooner had the sappers got to grips with the first minefield over



the ridge than a false alarm of an enemy counter-attack caused the engineer officer to lead his men back. In doing so, he lost touch with the infantry covering party of 5 Royal Sussex and, more importantly, with his wireless truck. When eventually a gap was cut in a fairly thick field, it was not until about 4 a.m. that 24 Armoured Brigade learnt that the way was open. The two leading regiments, 41 and **47 Royal Tanks**, had meanwhile dispersed fairly widely when the wandering enemy aircraft had been attracted by the fires among the Notts Yeomanry's vehicles and took some time to assemble. The greater part of the night had therefore passed, and only the two armoured regiments under New Zealand command and one of **10 Armoured Division** had so far broken out. Five regiments still remained behind the ridge.

The first news of the progress of the advance, reaching **Freyberg** through an intercept about 11 p.m., indicated that everything was going according to plan. Soon after that, he received requests from several sources for anti-aircraft protection against the bombing of the armoured columns. He accordingly ordered 14 New Zealand Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment to move its Bofors up and also asked Army Headquarters for heavy AA guns, a request that was refused. Then Brigadier Currie complained that the observation officers of 4 Field Regiment were not with his tanks, though it later transpired that the officers in question were forward but had become separated from the armoured columns when passing through the confusion in the area of the bombing. Currie's next report was that his two regiments were going over the ridge and he would like information on **10 Armoured Division**'s progress. A later message stated that Staffs Yeomanry had been met over the ridge.

News of the activities of **10 Armoured Division** reaching the New Zealand headquarters was so scanty and conflicted so much with information coming from New Zealand observers that **Freyberg** called up Leese to state that, as far as he could tell, most of the armoured division was sitting doing nothing among the infantry behind the ridge. This conversation must have taken place after the commander of **8 Armoured Brigade** had given permission for the Notts Yeomanry and **3 Royal Tanks**



to disperse and had suggested to Gatehouse that the operation be called off, and it seems probable that **Freyberg** had learnt either directly or indirectly through intercepts what was going on. No records have survived of any discussions involving either Lumsden or Gatehouse, but shortly after 2.30 a.m. **8 Armoured Brigade** received an order from Gatehouse to send the two regiments out to join the Staffs Yeomanry, an order that could be justifiably connected with the reports of success coming from the Staffs Yeomanry and **9 Armoured Brigade**. As the two regiments had by this time settled down for the night, they took a good hour or more to assemble. Between 4 and 5 a.m. they streamed through **25 and 26 Battalions'** areas, **3 Royal Tanks** leading and Notts Yeomanry in the rear. By the time the tail of the tank columns had passed over the ridge the sky was perceptibly lightening.

But **Freyberg's** call to Leese had already set in motion a sequence of action that had important consequences. The 30 Corps commander, concerned over the way the battle appeared to be shaping, called up Eighth Army headquarters and gave his version to the Chief of Staff, de Guingand. The Chief of Staff felt that this was one of the exceptions to the strict rule that the Army Commander's sleep was not to be disturbed and, after arranging for both Lumsden and Leese to attend the headquarters at 3.30 a.m., he woke Montgomery and put him in the picture.

There are several records of this 'fateful' conference <sup>1</sup> held in the small hours of the morning. According to his memoirs, Montgomery based the decisions he made on a belief that **1 Armoured Division** was 'out in the open and was being furiously attacked by the enemy armour', <sup>2</sup> when in fact **2 Armoured Brigade**, joined overnight by the division's lorried infantry, **7 Motor Brigade**, was still to the left rear of the foremost Australian positions and passed a quiet night, broken only by some sporadic bombing and shelling and a short exchange of fire by a party of the Motor Brigade with what was thought to be an enemy post but could easily have been an Australian patrol. Had it not been for **Freyberg**, similar misinformation might easily have been passed to the

Army Commander on **10 Armoured Division's** efforts. The armour was perpetuating the tradition, established by General Gott (under whom both Lumsden and Gatehouse had served) of giving lip service to the plans but holding to a determination to run the armoured battle its own way.

As it was, the New Zealand reports of 9 Armoured Brigade's advance and the inaction of **10 Armoured Division** were too factual to be easily discounted so that Lumsden, at this conference, could only pass on Gatehouse's plea that the armour was trained for a static role and not for difficult night operations. To support his opinion that further advance by the armour was at the moment impractical, Lumsden, according to Montgomery's memoirs, <sup>3</sup> asked him to telephone Gatehouse. Gatehouse's story is that, on hearing of the decisions given at the conference, he went back from the

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<sup>1</sup> De Guingand, op. cit., pp. 176, 199.

<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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front area to his main headquarters and opened a telephone conversation with Montgomery by saying 'What the hell's going on here?' <sup>1</sup>

Whichever way the call was made, Montgomery used the fact that Gatehouse was some ten miles behind the front to castigate him for leading his division from the rear. The implication in this charge may not be fair as there is indirect evidence that at some time during the night Gatehouse was in the New Zealand sector, but there is no doubt he laid himself open to the charge by his rather casual method of command and communication and his failure to keep in direct and constant touch with the other commanders. That **Freyberg** believed the charge at the

time is made obvious by the comment written in his diary the next morning that 'commanding an armoured division from right back is not a success'.<sup>2</sup>

Montgomery's orders at the conference and by telephone to Gatehouse appear to have been merely that the original plan should be adhered to and are probably reflected in a written message received some three hours later at Headquarters **10 Corps** – that the armour was to advance west of the minefields, free to manoeuvre, and hold off the enemy's armour from the New Zealand operations to the south-west. At 10.30 a.m. more details were given in a message passed from Tactical to Main Headquarters of the Army. In this, 24 Brigade was to line up with 2 Brigade and act offensively, and 8 Brigade was to form a 'hinge' from which 9 Armoured Brigade and 5 New Zealand Infantry Brigade (relieved by 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade) were to exploit to the south.

Gatehouse's understanding of the decision, whether gained from Montgomery or Lumsden is not clear, appeared in an order he issued to **8 Armoured Brigade** shortly after 4 a.m. for the brigade either to move or maintain one regiment forward to assist 9 Armoured Brigade and to hold the other two behind the ridge, and also to have the minefield gaps widened. Receipt of this message by the commander of **8 Armoured Brigade** was delayed for some hours and, moreover, acting on earlier orders and urged on by **Freyberg**, he had already set his brigade in motion again. As recorded earlier, the two regiments behind the ridge were on their way forward to join the Staffs Yeomanry.

By the time the last tanks of **8 Armoured Brigade** were breaking out, that is, about 5 a.m., the minefield on 5 Brigade's front was

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<sup>1</sup> Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> GOC **2 NZEF**/45.

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reported clear, on which 41 and **47 Royal Tanks** passed slowly

through to deploy some 800 yards to the west, leaving **45 Royal Tanks** and the brigade's lorried infantry, 11 Battalion, KRRC, among the already congested infantry positions on and behind the ridge.

Thus, at dawn on 25 October, there were seven regiments of tanks out in front of the New Zealand positions. On the right were **41 Royal Tanks** which reported that other tanks, believed to be those of 2 Armoured Brigade, were in sight some two miles to the north. Next came **47 Royal Tanks**, in visual contact with the squadrons of 8 and 9 Brigades further south. Both the Royal Tank regiments reported that they were on 'Pierson', the first bound some 3000 yards beyond the original infantry objective, though both infantry and artillery observation indicated that they were probably less than 1000 yards out. The position they held was shielded from enemy observers to some extent by the configuration of the ground so that they were subjected to a surprisingly small amount of fire at first.

A thousand yards or less to the left of 24 Armoured Brigade, but without that close contact that would have allowed cooperation, the Staffs Yeomanry of **8 Armoured Brigade** had by dawn begun to move from the hollow occupied during the night, closely followed by the first tanks of **3 Royal Tanks** from over the ridge behind. Both regiments, joined by some of the tanks of **3 Hussars** on the right of 9 Armoured Brigade, started to advance westwards but soon encountered enemy fire and mines. The Staffs Yeomanry lost six tanks and the Hussars three, and by the time 8 Brigade's third regiment, the Notts Yeomanry, caught up, all squadrons were seeking cover from the enemy's fire. About 6.15 a.m. the regiments learnt of Gatehouse's last order, that one regiment should remain out and the other two stay behind the ridge, but through some misunderstanding all three obeyed the latter part of the order with such alacrity that by seven o'clock the whole of **8 Armoured Brigade** was in cover of the ridge, while several tanks of **3 Hussars** in error conformed with the withdrawal. Although the Notts Yeomanry had suffered fairly heavy casualties in men, mainly from the night bombing, neither the Staffs Yeomanry nor **3 Royal Tanks** had been badly hit, and the brigade

still had in running order nearly a hundred tanks of the 111 with which it had started the battle.

When the Staffs Yeomanry had started its advance, 9 Armoured Brigade's two regiments were spread in an arc facing south-west and south, with 3 Hussars on the right and the Warwick Yeomanry on the left. The morning light disclosed that the brigade was mostly on low ground overlooked from the west and south-west but, though the tanks came under increasing fire, there did not appear to be any organised defences immediately ahead. Brigadier Currie therefore decided to take his tanks further forward where the ground offered better cover, but before doing so he proposed to Freyberg by radio about 8 a.m. that, instead of risking his supply vehicles in the open, he should bring the brigade back behind the ridge to refuel and rearm. He also mentioned that his brigade was on its own since the tanks of 10 Armoured Division earlier on his right had retired about an hour before, taking some of his tanks with them, and he made another complaint of the lack of direct artillery support. The basis of this complaint must have been the lack of effective communications as 4 Field Regiment left records of several tanks fired at this time for the forward observation officers with the tanks.

Before receiving Currie's request, Freyberg had been trying to get some definite information on 10 Armoured Division's action and plans. From New Zealand observers he learnt that numerous tanks had withdrawn through 6 Brigade, but others were still out in front of 5 Brigade. According to comments he made later, the headquarters of 10 Armoured Division could neither confirm nor deny 8 Armoured Brigade's withdrawal. Thus uncertainty prompted him to keep the armour under his own control well forward, and he accordingly directed Currie to stay out to discourage counter-attacks, an object which, the German records indicate, the brigade's presence achieved.

Some of the difficulties Freyberg met when seeking information might have been the result of Montgomery's telephone talk to Gatehouse. After receiving the Army Commander's censure for

commanding from the rear, Gatehouse ordered his main headquarters to move up to a point within the old front line, and meanwhile about 6 a.m. led his tactical headquarters forward through the New Zealand sector. He appears to have made contact with **8 Armoured Brigade** after its three regiments had fallen back over the ridge, that is, probably after 7 a.m. From this brigade's headquarters he learnt that **24 Armoured Brigade** claimed it had two regiments well out to the west of the ridge, though their exact positions were still uncertain, and that **133 Lorried Infantry Brigade** was proposing to relieve **5 New Zealand Brigade**. It is unlikely that he was told that **5 Brigade** was objecting to being relieved, for contact between **8 Armoured Brigade** and the New Zealand units among which his tanks were sitting was such that Gatehouse could learn nothing of the fortunes of **9 Armoured Brigade**. Some of the companies of **22 Battalion**, on hearing from an unknown source that they were to be relieved by the lorried infantry, actually moved back from their positions this morning, leaving only one company in the forward defences.

What actual orders Gatehouse issued at this time is uncertain, but it could be assumed he instructed **8 Armoured Brigade** to place one regiment forward to implement the 'hinge' plan, but, probably through disorganisation consequent on its early morning sortie and withdrawal, the armour had taken no definite action before the plan was cancelled later in the morning. Gatehouse then appears to have devoted his energies to getting his divisional artillery up into any spare spaces in the New Zealand sector to cover the front against counter-attack.

*iii*

As **10 Armoured Division** was making its tentative advances in the early morning of the 25th, **2 Armoured Brigade** further north also joined in the operation. The two leading regiments, the Bays and **9 Lancers**, broke out beyond the infantry defences along the junction of the Australian and Highland divisions' sectors but soon came under fire from enemy positions on their south-west. After the loss of ten tanks, the

brigade commander sent his third regiment, **10 Hussars**, to make a wide flanking swing to the left and attack the main point of opposition. Before this movement got really going, observers reported that enemy forces were assembling to the west and north of the brigade's positions. All regiments were then directed to take up defensive positions. By midday a general counter-attack seemed imminent but, under bombing by the Air Force and artillery fire from the Australian, Highland and 1 Armoured divisions' guns, it developed slowly. Several enemy groups were reported coming from the west but only one seems to have approached the defences closely. About 2 p.m. this force, led by a group of Italian tanks, came into the range of 2 Armoured Brigade's tanks, but turned away to the north and then swung east again to come up against the front of 2/17 and 2/13 Australian Battalions. Under heavy defensive fire the rear elements of the enemy were separated from the tanks in the lead, but the tanks alone pressed their attack with considerable dash, some even reaching the infantry outposts. Australian anti-tank gunners, aided by the troops of 7 Motor Brigade on their left and the tanks further south, managed to halt the attack and drive it back. Claims of tanks knocked out, all Italian, reached as high as twenty. German sources record that the attack was carried out by a tank battalion of *Littorio Division* aided by five German tanks, the Italians turning tail when their commander became a casualty. *Littorio's* return of tanks made shortly after this engagement showed that it possessed only 60 of the 116 tanks with which it had started the battle.

After this attack had been repulsed there were several false alarms of fresh enemy assemblies and advances on various parts of this front, culminating in a report sent in about 4.30 p.m. that 24 Armoured Brigade was in danger from a force on its north-west. The commander of 2 Armoured Brigade then ordered **10 Hussars** to renew its earlier attempt to advance into the gap between the two brigades. Under supporting fire from **9 Lancers** on its northern flank and from 1 Armoured Division's field guns, the Hussars set off but soon halted and finally withdrew after five of their leading Sherman tanks had been knocked out. Casualties during the day on this part of the front, both from the enemy counter-



attack and from shellfire, amounted to 85 men in **20 Australian Brigade** and 49 in **7 Motor Brigade**. Though about twenty-four tanks of **2 Armoured Brigade** were put out of action, leaving the brigade with just under a hundred runners, casualties in men were relatively light.

While the troops of **1 Armoured Division** and the Australians facing to the west were engaging the enemy, the Australian Division was already preparing for the Army's new offensive and the **Highland Division** was planning a final effort to get its men overnight on to the original infantry objective.

Further to the south **24 Armoured Brigade** remained out ahead of **5 New Zealand Brigade**, surprisingly unmolested for most of the day. Some salvos of 88-millimetre shells at midday ceased after artillery concentrations had been fired on the suspected gun positions, and another bout of shelling occurred when enemy vehicles could be seen assembling some way off to the brigade's north-west in the late afternoon. The shelling ceased when **2 Armoured Brigade** took action as recorded and the enemy dispersed.

Though it was logical for this brigade to be left out beyond the ridge to form a common front with **1 Armoured Division's** tanks on its north and **9 Armoured Brigade** to the south, even though contact between the three groups was tenuous, the changes of plans made during the day entailed the brigade's withdrawal. It is not known, however, when the order for the withdrawal was issued but the two regiments beyond the ridge were ignorant of it until after 5.45 p.m., at which time Gatehouse personally made contact with the brigade commander. At this time the two regiments were in long-range engagement with enemy tanks so had to call for artillery fire and smoke to be laid down before they could safely disengage. It was not until dusk was falling that they eventually drove back over the ridge to rejoin the rest of the brigade in the rear of **5 New Zealand Brigade's** positions. Here **24 Armoured Brigade** formed up to start a night march, on Gatehouse's orders, across the **Highland Division's** sector to join **1 Armoured Division**.



While the two main armoured formations of Eighth Army were inconclusively skirmishing on the 25th, the New Zealand armour, on **Freyberg's** orders, stayed well forward on the south-west of the infantry's front. The two remaining regiments of 9 Armoured Brigade, **3 Hussars** and the **Warwickshire Yeomanry**, out of touch for any tactical purposes with 24 Armoured Brigade to their north, provided a screen against counter-attack which never materialised, for they saw few enemy tanks or vehicles and those only at a distance. Though the tanks of the two regiments kept mainly in hull-down positions to avoid enemy shellfire, which however was never very heavy, they managed to round up numerous prisoners who were sent back over the ridge. Behind the tanks the infantry occupied themselves with improving their positions and communications, suffering a few casualties from salvos of shells which the enemy directed mainly at the crest of the ridge. The two forward battalions of 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade, crowded in the rear of 5 Brigade's positions with many men not in slit trenches and transport undispersed, lost about sixty men and several trucks to enemy shelling before new orders reached them changing their role and permitting them to move further back.

In the late afternoon **Freyberg** told Currie to bring his regiments back, but the preparatory movement brought immediate enemy reaction. A heavy smoke screen was then laid down by the tanks themselves and 4 Field Regiment, under which the withdrawal behind the ridge was completed about 7.30 p.m. A muster of the brigade showed that it had only thirty-six tanks in effective running order. A total of 200 prisoners for the day was claimed by the brigade while 25 Battalion, immediately behind the armour, claimed another 100 stragglers who gave themselves up to patrols when they found themselves encircled by the tanks. As many of these men were passed over to 133 Brigade to escort to the rear, an exact total cannot be definitely established.

The enemy, however, had his riposte, for as the last of the British

tanks returned through 6 Brigade's positions, a solitary Grant followed up and swung in among the men of C Company of 26 Battalion, many of whom were out of their trenches enjoying the freedom of movement permitted by the dusk. Some of the company managed to avoid capture, but thirty-four were lined up under the guns of the German crew manning the captured Grant and marched off. The audacity of the enemy caused the story to be treated at first with disbelief at Battalion Headquarters and a belated attempt to recover the prisoners failed.

On the front to the south of the New Zealand sector, the South Africans used the previous night and the day of 25 October for organising their defences and clearing mines. They also sent out numerous patrols to discover the enemy's new defence line. Overnight diversionary actions by 4 Indian Division and a programme of harassing fire by 50 Division in 13 Corps' sector were carried out to keep the enemy guessing. From enemy reaction and from observation during the day, on all three divisions' fronts, there appeared to be no sign that the enemy was thinning out his defences for reinforcement elsewhere.

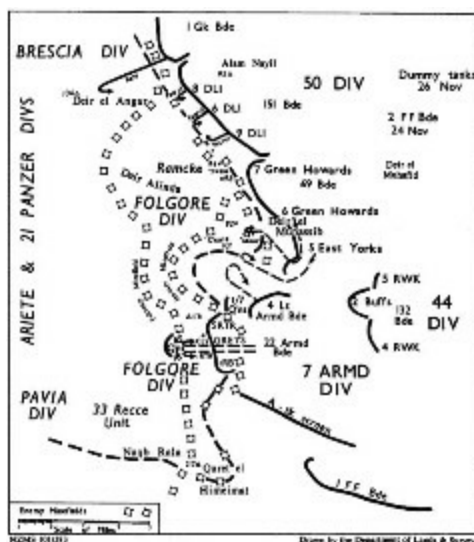
v

The main action in the south was a resumption of 13 Corps' original plan with some modifications, starting after dark on the 24th. Two battalions of 44 Division under the command of 7 Armoured Division were to break through the second mine barrier that had defeated the first night's advance and were to form a bridgehead from which 22 Armoured, followed by 4 Light Armoured Brigade, was to sally out. As the armour swung north across 50 Division's front, this division was to be ready to step forward and clear the ground encircled by the tanks.

Disorganisation in assembly delayed the start of the operation for an hour and a half but eventually the two units, 1/5 and 1/6 Battalions of the Queen's Royal Regiment of 131 Brigade, made their way through the second minefield, only to be pinned to the ground in a very restricted bridgehead. Heavy enemy fire turned back the vehicles bringing up support weapons and, with the complete failure of wireless, the leading

troops were unable to call for artillery fire to subdue the enemy guns. The engineers managed to cut two gaps, on news of which the leading armour advanced, but several tanks missed the gaps and ran on to mines while others were halted by anti-tank gun fire. About 4.15 a.m. the commander of 7 Armoured Division called off the armoured advance until observation in daylight would allow the use of artillery to subdue the enemy positions that dominated the bridgehead.

As his tanks claimed that the mine gaps were not properly cleared the armoured commander ordered the engineers out again, but poor communications delayed his order so that by the time a sapper party had been assembled, the growing light made a close examination of the ground impossible under the fire the enemy was able to bring to bear. So sure, however, was the Commander **Royal Engineers** that his men had done their job thoroughly, that he and his field squadron commander, in two tanks, drove out through one of the gaps and back. The journey was made under a hail of fire in which one tank was immobilised on its way back. This action proved that the real stumbling block to 22 Armoured Brigade's progress was a combination of the enemy fire and poor navigation, for daylight disclosed several immobilised tanks in the minefield well away from the narrow channel of the gap.



13 CORPS' OPERATIONS, 24-26 OCTOBER

On the Corps Commander's advice, the armoured commander then halted the whole operation, though this meant leaving the two infantry battalions out all day, isolated and poorly dug-in, in a small bridgehead completely dominated by the enemy's fire. Although observed artillery fire lessened the enemy's activity, any attempt at a daylight withdrawal would have been disastrous.

At this stage of the battle, when the capacity of the *Panzer Army* to react was as yet not fully tested, it was still necessary for General Horrocks to keep 13 Corps spread over a very wide front and to be prepared to provide reserves for the Army as a whole. Under such restrictions the use of only two battalions to open the bridgehead was perhaps unavoidable but not well-advised, for such a small force was unlikely to gain an area wide and deep enough to enable the tanks to use the mine gaps unmolested. Estimated losses for the operation up to the evening of the 25th amounted to 350 men, most of them from the two West Surrey battalions, and 26 tanks. Had the attack been intended to delay the switch of *21 Panzer Division* to the north, a purpose it probably achieved, the same result might have been gained more cheaply by a well planned demonstration, so it can be assumed that more was expected of the operation. The French forces on the south flank of 13 Corps, still recovering from their earlier disorganisation and heavy transport losses, took no major action over this period, thus leaving the dominating feature of *Himeimat* in enemy hands to affect the next day's planning.

*vi*

Although stalemate seemed to have been reached on the ground, the *Desert Air Force* continued to prove that the air war had already been won. In 660 sorties intended both to curtail the *Luftwaffe's* activities and to hinder counter-attack, over 300,000 pounds of bombs were dropped on landing grounds and targets close to the front. Although the *Luftwaffe* itself was more adventurous than on the previous day, its activity on the 25th was confined mostly to hit-and-run raids which did

little damage.

From the start of the offensive to the evening of the 25th, some 1456 prisoners, of whom about 600 were German, had been counted into the Eighth Army's cages. Including this figure, the *Panzer Army's* losses were probably not much different from those of the British, which totalled slightly below 3000 killed, wounded, missing and prisoner. Though British tank losses appeared heavy, many of the tanks had suffered minor damage or breakdowns and were recoverable. The total number of runners this evening in 2 and 24 Armoured Brigades, now to work together in 1 Armoured Division, was 189; **8 Armoured Brigade** was down to 65 all told while 9 Armoured Brigade was left with only 36 heavy tanks. The four Royal Tank battalions of Valentines in 23 Armoured Brigade still had over 150 tanks for infantry support.

Against this a German supply report indicates that *15 Panzer Division* had only 31 runners of the 119 with which it had begun the battle <sup>1</sup> and *Littorio* had about 60 of its original 116. In the southern sector 7 Armoured Division had about 70 Grants and the same number of Crusaders and Stuarts to oppose *21 Panzer* and *Ariete* divisions, neither of which had so far lost many of their original 143 German and 129 Italian tanks.

Although the British advances on the ground seemed inconclusive from the *Panzer Army's* side as the main minefields had been penetrated and not fully breached, and that only on a narrow front, the events of 25 October proved that the Axis had little chance of wresting the initiative from the attackers. The messages recorded in the *Africa Corps'* daily diary made clear how precarious was the hold of the thin screen of infantry lining the area of penetration and also how ineffective, under the British fire and air assaults, were the counter-attacks designed to relieve the pressure on the infantry. The system of narrow but deep battalion sectors, though perhaps ideal for sandwiching the two nationalities, made it difficult for the higher headquarters to appreciate the situation in detail, a factor which led to the misdirection of counter-attacks. Many of the infantry, both German and Italian, had fallen back

under the threat of the British tanks and then, in some cases, returned to reoccupy their positions, while other strongpoints thought to be holding firm were later found to have been overrun or abandoned.

The *Panzer Army's* worries were not lessened by the fact that for twenty-four hours it had had no commander. During the previous day General Stumme had set off on a tour of the front from which he failed to return, and it was not until midday on the 25th that his body was found. The accepted story was that he suffered a heart attack when coming under fire, probably in the vicinity of the Australian objective. On his disappearance, Rommel had been warned by the General Staff to resume his command and immediately flew over from **Germany**, arriving in the evening of the 25th and 'feeling that we would fight this battle with but small hope of success'. <sup>2</sup> News of Rommel's presence, however, soon spread round the front and raised the *Panzer Army's* morale.

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<sup>1</sup> GMDS 33142/5-6.

<sup>2</sup> *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 304-5.

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## vii

The events so far described up to the evening of 25 October were all part of the dying impetus of Eighth Army's first attempt to breach the *Panzer Army's* line. The first orders for the day issued by Montgomery at the early morning conference were for a continuation of the operation. The detailed orders to implement this decision were, in short, for **8 Armoured Brigade** to get its three regiments in line to the south of **24 Armoured Brigade** to form a hinge on which **9 Armoured Brigade**, supported by **5 New Zealand Brigade**, could exploit to the south-west, the New Zealand brigade's positions on the ridge being taken over by **133 Lorried Infantry Brigade**. At the same time both **2 and 24 Armoured Brigades** were to 'act offensively' against enemy armour and battle groups.

It is difficult to say when these detailed orders reached down to the New Zealand Division, but **Freyberg** certainly knew the gist of them well before 10.30 a.m. when they were officially recorded, and this knowledge was the basis for his decision to keep Currie's brigade out in the open. But the day had not far advanced when he heard from his brigadiers that **8 Armoured Brigade** was back behind the ridge. He then complained to Leese that, because of a lack of drive by Gatehouse's division, the ridge situation was 'rapidly becoming static warfare. I always thought we were going to form a common front – there is no common front – **9 Armd Bde** are not in touch. They have got to get the armour together and fight a battle'.<sup>1</sup> He still lacked faith in the armour's ability to withstand strong counter-attack and predicted that, should the *Panzer Army* regain the observation of the ridge, the Eighth Army would be forced back to its original line. With such doubts in mind, he was against the idea of letting Currie's tanks and 5 Brigade off on an unsupported exploitation role, and also of letting 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade replace 5 Brigade, especially as **Brigadier Kippenberger** and his staff advised him that 133 Brigade was too green to make a successful daylight relief.

He also gave Leese his opinion that the delays had allowed the enemy time to recover and prepare a new line of defence so that further operations to the south or south-west would have no element of surprise. In discussion later in the morning, both **Freyberg** and Lumsden agreed that since the impetus of the attack was rapidly dying, it would be wisest to pause and consolidate in preparation for the use of artillery and infantry as before to

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

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neutralise the enemy gun line before the tanks should be sent out again.

With such opinions finding their way back to his headquarters, and with more exact information of what had really happened to the



armoured advance, Montgomery soon decided that a change of plan was necessary, and accordingly called his two corps commanders to a conference at the New Zealand headquarters at midday. Though Gatehouse may have been present there is no record that he attended this conference, but **Freyberg** was called in to give his report and views: these were that the exploitation by his division to the south was now undesirable and that an infantry and artillery operation should be made to carry the line another 4000 yards to the west, clear of the mine-belts.

The wisdom of this proposal, shown in the records to have been accepted by Lumsden and probably by Leese, is doubtful. Infantry casualties would have put the New Zealand Division, and possibly the Highland Division as well, out of effective action for some time, while, even if the armour had broken out, coordinated action between the armoured groups had already proved too uncertain to ensure that the *Panzer Army* would have been bottled up and defeated. It is more likely the enemy would have withdrawn in reasonably good order to fight again another day.

As it was, while prepared to change the detail of his planning, Montgomery held to his main intention – to defeat the *Panzer Army* where it stood by the process of holding off the armour while ‘crumbling’ the infantry. Accepting **Freyberg**'s assessment that the southward exploitation was no longer feasible, especially as 13 Corps' northward thrust was showing so little results, Montgomery changed direction completely and in doing so started the action which, assisted later by **Hitler**, was to bring about the complete defeat of the *Panzer Army of Africa*.



# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 26 – MONTGOMERY CHANGES DIRECTION OF ATTACK

## CHAPTER 26

### *Montgomery Changes Direction of Attack*

**THE change of plan entailed a northward advance by 9 Australian Division to 'crumble' the enemy infantry in the defences that lay between the northern flank and the sea. To cover this operation 1 Armoured Division, now comprising 2 and 24 Brigades, was to take up positions to the west of the Australian area and, if possible, bring the enemy armour to battle and threaten the main lateral supply route of the *Panzer Army* along the *Rahman Track*. The rest of 30 Corps' front was to remain quiescent except for minor operations and improvements to the defences and communications so that certain adjustments could be made to release troops into reserve.**

**Montgomery had decided on this new plan, at least tentatively, well before the midday conference at the New Zealand headquarters, so that what was said there merely confirmed him in his decision. The Australian commander, Morshead, had already warned his brigadiers of the change of direction and preparations were sufficiently advanced for the first phase of the operation to commence that night. Plans prepared by 1 Armoured Division to take its tanks to the original first bound beyond the Australians' western front were allowed to stand as they fitted into the change, as did a final attempt by 51 Division to occupy its original objectives and form a continuous defence line. But while the Australians went smoothly ahead with their preparations, the armour and the Highlanders found themselves still at loggerheads over their map reading.**

**The Australians' intention was to advance the northern front up to *Point 29*, a small rise from which the enemy had observation over much of the ground to the east. This point lay about a mile and a quarter almost due north of the western limit of the advance, so that its capture called for the extension of the western defences and a swing forward of the whole northern front. The main task was given to 2/48 and 2/24 Battalions of 26 Brigade, with 2/17 Battalion to extend the western**

front to the north and the **Composite Force** pivoting forward to conform.

## *The Night of 25/26 October*

Reports from patrols and observation of the movement of enemy vehicles had already indicated that there were open channels in the minefields around **Point 29** when good fortune rewarded the Australians' always vigorous and intelligent patrolling. Among prisoners captured by 2/24 Battalion a sketch of the minefields was found and then, at dusk this very evening, an enemy party was seen approaching 2/48 Battalion's outposts. Allowed to come well inside the lines before being attacked, this party provided two valuable prisoners, the acting commanders of *125 Regiment* and its *II Battalion*. Besides providing a number of useful documents, one of these two officers confirmed the information gained from the captured sketch.

At midnight two companies of 2/48 Battalion set off due north for about 1100 yards to overcome several enemy posts and secure the intermediate objective. From this start line, a third company in carriers navigated a mine-free route at high speed to **Point 29**. Exactly timed to reach the point on the cessation of a heavy artillery concentration, the carriers completely surprised the German garrison and in a hand-to-hand engagement quickly subdued all resistance in the immediate vicinity. Attempts to exploit further north, however, met strong opposition. As this advance went forward, 2/17 Battalion of 20 Brigade took over 2/48 Battalion's front-line positions and also moved a company out to cover the western face of the line of advance.

The next phase of the operation did not go so smoothly. At 4 a.m. on the 26th, 2/24 Battalion, having assembled on the intermediate objective, advanced in a north-easterly direction, but found the enemy in deep and well-protected defences. Though the leading companies fought their way to the planned objective, the reserve companies met fierce resistance as they tried to link the left of this objective to **Point 29**, while the **Composite Force** failed to join up on the right. But although the leading troops had to fall back to conform with their

flanks, by dawn a valuable area of ground had been gained from which crumbling operations could continue. Prisoners taken numbered 240, most of them German. The *Panzer Army's* reaction to this Australian operation was immediate and violent, showing the importance attached, as the German records prove, to the possession of **Point 29**.

While this new phase of the British offensive was beginning, 51 Division was carrying out four minor operations intended to complete the first phase. On the right of the sector 1 Gordons tried to advance to the 'Aberdeen' locality, where the survivors of its D Company were thought to be still holding out. With nearchaotic congestion in the Gordons' area, where tanks, trucks, guns, and men of 1 Armoured Division were constantly on the move among the infantry positions, neither reconnaissance, observation, nor liaison with the armour was sufficient to pin-point the positions of the survivors or the enemy in 'Aberdeen' or of the leading elements of the armour nearby, so that artillery support could not safely be laid on. Accordingly, in a silent advance begun about an hour before the Australians' attack started, a company and a half of the Gordons set off, only to meet unexpected opposition. Somehow in the engagement, the group of survivors was discovered some way to the north of the point of attack and contact was eventually made with them. Portions of the 'Aberdeen' locality, however, still remained in enemy hands.

About the same time, the four companies of 5 Black Watch, with a squadron of **46 Royal Tanks'** Valentines in support, marched forward in a silent attack on the ' **Stirling**' locality, a little way to the south of 'Aberdeen'. Apart from some scattered firing, the Black Watch found the greater part of the ' **Stirling**' defences vacated, though two demolished 88-millimetre guns and some smaller guns in good order had been left behind.

The 'Nairn' locality, to the south-west of ' **Stirling**', was made the objective of 7/10 **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders**, which sent three companies on a silent advance at 11 p.m. Here the enemy was still in

position, and though the infantry gained part of the objective, fire from surviving posts together with mines and long-range shellfire prevented consolidation of the newly gained area for some time. Still further south, 7 Black Watch, in what was little more than a patrol action, drove the enemy out of a position from which machine-gun fire had hindered efforts to consolidate the battalion front.

According to the German records, the area against which most of the Highland Division's attacks this night had been directed was held by *III Battalion of 382 Regiment*. Threatened during the day of the 25th, and almost surrounded by the advances of 2 Armoured Brigade on its north and 24 Brigade to its south, the battalion had sent back reports on which *Africa Corps* had prepared an armoured counter-attack to relieve the infantry. What exactly occurred to the force detailed for counter-attack is far from clear, but it seems probable that elements of the force came through the gap between the two British brigades and found the battalion still holding out. However, the retreat from 'Stirling', where the headquarters presumably lay, was so precipitate on the Highlanders' approach that *Africa Corps* lost touch with the battalion and assumed it had been overrun.

Also on the Highlanders' front, an operation was planned for this night by 1 Armoured Division to place the reserve unit of 7 Motor Brigade, 2 Rifle Battalion, <sup>1</sup> on the 'Kidney' feature, part of the armour's original first objective. This feature was in effect merely a contour line on the map in the shape of a kidney and no true feature at all. In some accounts it is taken to be a slight hillock or low rise, in others as a shallow depression, but to the naked eye it presented no clearly distinguishable difference from the desert around it. As an objective, therefore, it could only be gained by careful navigation from a settled base. When news of this plan filtered through to 51 Division, the latter pointed out that the proposed area of operations overlapped that of the Gordons. It was then suggested that the motorised infantry of the Rifle Battalion should follow up the Gordons to 'Aberdeen', clearing routes for its numerous vehicles, and pass through to the Kidney objective. Further

co-operation, however, broke down when the old argument over map reading arose between the staffs of the armour and infantry, the motorised infantry's advance being then postponed until daylight.

A further opportunity for an advance by the armour was lost this night when 5 Black Watch, correctly gauging the state of the enemy's defences at ' **Stirling**' as the records show, passed back word that an immediate tank advance through this locality might catch the enemy off balance. By the time this suggestion passed up and down the chain of headquarters the night was nearly over before the Highlanders learnt that the armour's plan to go through 'Aberdeen' to the Kidney objective could not be changed—even though at that time it was still far from clear whether the route to be taken by the motorised infantry followed the path of the Gordons, or even whether 'Aberdeen' was still mainly in the hands of the enemy.

On the rest of 30 Corps' front, that is, on the sectors held by the New Zealand, South African and Indian divisions, no major operations were undertaken this night though patrols were sent out in some strength, all of which reported that the enemy appeared to be working hard on new defences and showed no signs of withdrawal. At dusk all the units of **10 Armoured Division** began to move out of the New Zealand front line, **8 Armoured Brigade** and

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Battalion, The Rifle Brigade.

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133 Lorried Infantry Brigade to the rear, and 24 Armoured Brigade into 51 Division's sector to cut across the front to join 2 Armoured Brigade. It is doubtful if 24 Brigade had any close liaison with the division into whose sector it was entering, and it seems to have had little knowledge of the Highlanders' positions or the extent of their nocturnal operations. Moreover, having learnt of its night move late in the day, the brigade had had little time for reconnaissance of the ground, so that it is not surprising that after a period of confusion the brigade commander sought, and obtained, permission to use the known

and marked routes leading back and across the rear. By dawn on the 26th, after nearly 12 miles of arduous night travelling, the brigade was assembling in the vicinity of the old start line in the north of the 51 Division sector, with only two tank squadrons missing.

The confusion over positions and objectives was brought to a head this night when the Motor Brigade's operations had to be altered in consequence of the last-minute discovery that its objectives and those of the Highland Division either coincided or overlapped. The Motor Brigade was finally given a general role of sending a reconnaissance group behind the Gordons' advance to check and clear a route for tanks to the Kidney feature. The reconnaissance appears to have been started late and, after dawn, was held up by enemy fire, the brigade reporting that it had run into opposition from the 'Nairn' locality. As this locality was so far from the intended route, the report was questioned, and when similar dubious reports from the armour reached Eighth Army headquarters, including one that the Kidney feature was occupied by Highland troops, Army insisted that the discord over map reading, which so bedevilled co-operation between armour, infantry and artillery, be settled once and for all. During daylight on the 26th it was arranged that certain tanks should fire signal rockets on which the Army's flash-spotting posts could take bearings. This check, which showed that few if any of the tanks were as far west as they claimed, was only reluctantly accepted by the armour.

When, on the morning of the 25th, Montgomery was making his decision to change 30 Corps' direction of attack, he had also under consideration alternative plans submitted by Horrocks of 13 Corps. Though the constricted bridgehead of the two beleaguered battalions of 131 Brigade west of the second enemy minefield offered a sallying point for the armour, Horrocks himself favoured a new line of attack further north, away from the dominating observation of the enemy on **Himeimat**. As his proposals for this operation entailed the use initially of infantry only, Montgomery was only too willing to agree to the change, for he was getting worried over the steady whittling down of 7 Armoured



Division's strength in actions which had succeeded so far in little more than containing *21 Panzer Division* in the south. In agreeing, he enjoined Horrocks to keep his armour 'in being' in case it was needed elsewhere.

The new plans illustrate how strong the spirit of the textbooks and tactical exercises remained in 13 Corps. Whereas the older desert formations preferred to move on compass bearings to grid references, trig. points, or features named on the map, newer arrivals peppered their orders with nostalgic code-names. So in 13 Corps the minefields were called after the months of the year, the gaps after English towns ending in gate or ford (with the odd inclusion of Henryford), areas were known as 'The Moor' or 'The Puddle' and objectives as 'The Cape' or 'The Twins'.

Horrocks' plan was in effect the second phase of the original plan, in which the infantry of 50 Division were to move up when the armour had succeeded in breaking out and swinging north to its final objective. Details of such an advance had already been prepared so that its choice may have been influenced by this as much as by its tactical value. The first moves, made in full daylight on the 25th and designed to give the impression of impending armoured action, were for units of the dummy tank brigade to move openly to the rear of the area of attack and for 4 Light Armoured Brigade to reconnoitre 'The Puddle', the minefield loop to the south of the objective which the light brigade was to 'dominate' in order to prevent the enemy from outflanking the infantry on the objective. The dummy tanks were brought up without trouble and may have had an effect on the enemy, but the light tanks, sallying forth in the afternoon on their reconnaissance, became involved in a minefield and then came under fire, losing fifteen tanks all told.

After dark on the 25th, while the Greeks from north of *Alam Nayil* made a raid in company strength against *Point 104* (where 25 Battalion kept its standing patrol before the *Alam Halfa* battle), two battalions of 69 Infantry Brigade, with strong artillery support in the form of concentrations, set off to capture 'The Moor' and 'The Cape' on the western escarpment of *Deir el Munassib*. On the right flank, 6 Battalion

The Green Howards took part of its objective, together with *45 Folgore* prisoners for a loss of 144 killed, wounded, or missing. On the left, 5 Battalion The East Yorkshire Regiment ran into trouble either from the supporting artillery fire or from the enemy, and with the loss of 106 men fell back before it reached its objective. This partial failure caused the next phase of the operation, an advance further north to 'The Twins', to be postponed.

While this action was taking place, the two battalions of 131 Brigade quietly withdrew from their bridgehead west of the outer minefield, the corps front then being established along the rear of this field.

## *26 October*

By the morning of the 26th Eighth Army was in possession, from documents and prisoners, including the Australians' valuable bag the previous evening, of information which made it seem unlikely that the *Panzer Army* would start a major counter-offensive. That this deduction was correct is borne out by the German records, the defence policy followed being for local counter-attacks to close breaches in the line and for the maintenance of a stubborn opposition to wear down the assault. Apart from the limited reserves of troops in North Africa, the main reason for this immobility, in an army noted previously for its mobility, was the petrol situation. So acute was the shortage that major movements could only be made at the expense of the daily maintenance of the troops in the defences. As at *Alam Halfa*, this shortage was not sufficiently understood by the British to be made a factor in their planning.

With fears removed of a counter-thrust, and also hopes disproved, by patrols and observation, that the enemy was thinning out, Montgomery devoted this morning to an appraisal of the situation. He was not yet aware of Rommel's return to the theatre the previous evening so did not anticipate any change in the *Panzer Army's* policy. His staff had prepared an accounting of Eighth Army's losses set against an estimate

of the enemy's, the latter of such staggering proportions that, had it been correct, the *Panzer Army* would have had few men or weapons left to fight with. <sup>1</sup>

The British casualties since the evening of the 23rd were assessed as 4643 men in 30 Corps, 455 in 10 Corps and 1037 in 13 Corps, a total for the army of 6135. Although this was not a high rate of loss in proportion to the number of troops involved, the casualties came mainly from those whose task it was to be in the forefront of the assault. In the New Zealand Division the 800 or so casualties represented about a third of the fighting troops, and at such a rate of wastage the offensive power of the Division would diminish rapidly. The accounting also showed that replacements and recovery set against losses brought the total of effective tanks to 900. Artillery losses had been small both in men and guns, and though the very heavy expenditure of ammunition had at times

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<sup>1</sup> The British official narrative records this estimate as 61,000 men, 530 tanks, 340 field guns, etc.

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strained the supply arrangements, there was no real shortage. The whole of the supply organisation dealing with food, water and other essential requirements was in fact working extremely well.

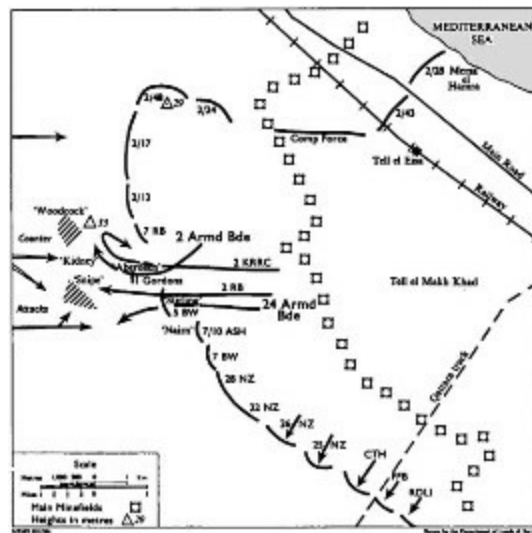
With these facts and estimates before him, Montgomery issued a general directive, the main point of which was that the infantry of 30 Corps should form a firm front facing west and prepare to withstand local counter-attacks. Freed thus from responsibility to support the infantry, the armour of 10 Corps was then to cover the west of the Australians' crumbling operations and draw the enemy armour to battle in an area where both artillery and antitank guns could take their part. The Air Force's role was to soften up the panzer units as they moved in towards 10 Corps. Montgomery also warned Horrocks not to let 7 Armoured Division suffer any more casualties from offensive action.

Later in the day detailed dispositions were issued by Army Headquarters. These included the relief of most of the Australians' original western front by 152 Brigade, the reserve formation of 51 Division, and the withdrawal of the New Zealand Division to reserve, the gap thus caused to be filled by a general side-step to the north, the South Africans and Indians moving up a sector and 13 Corps extending its northern boundary. The tanks of 7 Armoured Division were also to make ready to move to the northern sector as soon as word was received that *21 Panzer Division* was doing likewise. All this reorganisation was to be completed by dawn of the 28th, ready for the next major assault timed for the evening of that day.

While this planning was in progress the Australians' overnight gains were being subjected to a series of counter-attacks. The value of the newly won **Point 29** for observation to both west and north was obviously recognised by the enemy, who shelled the area heavily throughout most of the morning. Although observers and their radio equipment on the point suffered severely, the Australians managed to maintain observation with few breaks in communication back to the artillery. Exact details of the counter-attacks have become rather confused in the various records, but it would appear that the major advance came in as day broke from due west against 2/13 Battalion and the leading troops of 7 Motor Brigade nearby. Before the vehicles of this attacking force could come within effective antitank gun range, they turned away under heavy defensive tasks laid down by the artillery. The enemy then commenced probing further north until by midday the main effort seemed to be making for **Point 29** from west and north-west. For a time the defenders on and around the point were pinned to the ground by artillery fire, as well as by machine-gun and mortar fire from enemy troops who had worked their way within range, but once the observers were able to pin-point the areas from which the fire originated and call for artillery and mortar concentrations, the fire lessened until movement could be resumed.

By two o'clock in the afternoon the observers on the point reported

that there were some 200 enemy tanks within their area of observation—an estimate that must have included trucks and tracked troop-carriers—while groups of infantry could be seen collecting; at the same time the enemy fire noticeably increased. Under heavy air and artillery support called for by the Australians, however, the enemy vehicles dispersed to cover and only a few infantry came within rifle range of the Australian defenders of the point, and these men, divorced from their supporting tanks, either went into cover or withdrew. Gradually during the afternoon enemy movement and shellfire diminished until by last light the counter-attack appeared to have been abandoned, although up to one hundred vehicles could still be seen to the west of the point.



OPERATIONS IN THE NORTHERN SECTOR, 26-27 OCTOBER  
 OPERATIONS IN THE NORTHERN SECTOR, 26-27 OCTOBER

During this period, the tanks of 2 Armoured Brigade, claiming to be in the area held by 2/13 Australian Battalion and even as far forward as the Kidney feature, had received orders to fan out to the north-west and cover the western flank of the newly won Point 29 salient. The brigade, however, had not yet corrected its position by the flash-spotting check and was in fact further to the south and east, with units of 7 Motor Brigade on its north and in some confusion over their aims and objectives. The tanks, setting off to the north-west, met fire either from the enemy-held portion of 'Aberdeen' or from an early phase of the enemy's counter-attack and fell back through the area of the Motor

**Brigade, whose leading troops, the motorised infantry of 7 Rifle Battalion, then were engaged by about thirty-five enemy tanks. Possibly assisted by 2 Armoured Brigade, the rifle battalion drove the enemy back, claiming thirteen Italian tanks knocked out. A report that the armoured brigade reached as far north as the Australian sector is probably incorrect and refers to movement of 40 Royal Tanks, whose Valentines came up behind Point 29 to give support against the counterattacks.**

**Under orders to join 2 Armoured Brigade, 24 Armoured Brigade, its tank crews suffering by now from loss of sleep, took some time to get replenished and sorted out. An advance party, navigating on the map references supplied by 1 Armoured Division, got as far as the isolated group of Highlanders in the 'Aberdeen' locality but was unable to find 2 Brigade. The rest of the brigade, setting off about midday, became delayed in the near-chaotic conditions prevailing along the extensions of Sun and Moon tracks, where the confined areas between the minefields were full of Highlanders, motorised infantry, artillery, and replenishment columns serving them all. As it neared the front the armoured brigade came under the shellfire that accompanied the counter-attacks, so the tanks dispersed and the guns deployed as best they could to help in the defensive fire. One squadron of 45 Royal Tanks and two companies of 11 Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps, set off apparently on the directions of the advance party to blaze a trail to the north-west from the 'Aberdeen' locality. Advancing under a smoke screen, the tanks and infantry came under heavy fire from the enemy, who was still holding out in the north-west part of the locality, and fell back after the infantry lost about forty-three men.**

**Thus, by the evening of the 26th, the Army Commander's orders for a screen of armour on the west of the Australian front had not yet been fulfilled, a screen that was vitally necessary if the Australian crumbling operations were to continue without interference from the enemy's armoured reserve. The men of the tank formations were by this time beginning to show the strain of continuous action. In both 2 and 24**

**Brigades the tank crews had had little time for rest, their short periods out of action being filled by maintenance and replenishment of their vehicles, while the latter brigade had had a particularly gruelling period culminating in their long move round from the New Zealand to the Australian fronts. New orders issued by the commander of 1 Armoured Division allowed them only until 4.30 a.m. the next day before they were to advance again, this time from a firm base to be gained by the division's motorised troops on the west of the infantry's objective.**



Air support: a flight of Liberators sets out on a raid

**Air support: a flight of Liberators sets out on a raid**

Air Vice-Marshal Coningham and General Montgomery



**Air Vice-Marshal Coningham and General Montgomery**





Two of the 'Commonwealth commanders' confer in a shell hole:  
General Morshead (AIF), on the left, and General Freyberg

**Two of the 'Commonwealth commanders' confer in a shell hole: General Morshead (AIF), on the left, and General Freyberg**

Commander's conference. General Freyberg (with pointer) discusses  
plans for the Division's attack on Miteiriya Ridge.  
In the front row (facing camera) is Brigadier C. E. Weir (CRA)



**Commander's conference. General Freyberg (with pointer) discusses  
plans for the Division's attack on Miteiriya Ridge.  
In the front row (facing camera) is Brigadier C. E. Weir (CRA)**

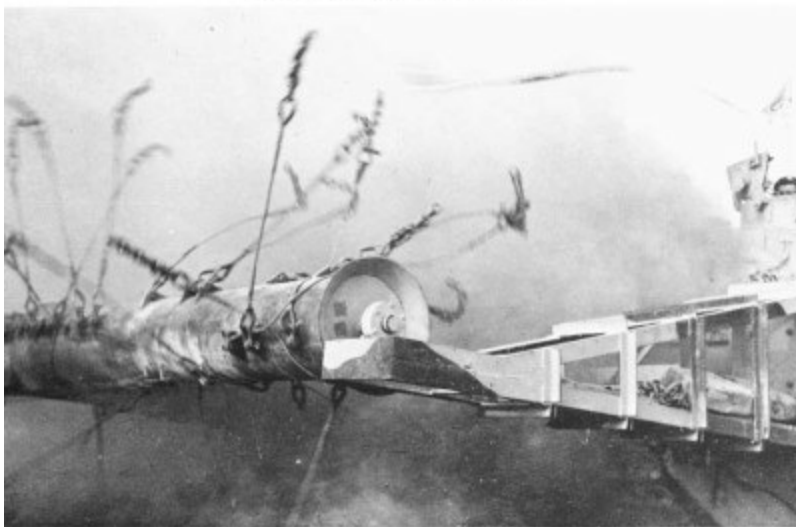




The barrage opens: a 5 Field Regiment 25-pounder

**The barrage opens: a 5 Field Regiment 25-pounder**

A 'Scorpion' flail tank in action



**A 'Scorpion' flail tank in action**



Miteiriya Ridge. Tanks and prisoners in 6 Brigade's area

**Miteiriya Ridge. Tanks and prisoners in 6 Brigade's area**

The congestion of tanks and trucks on 22 Battalion's front, 24 October



**The congestion of tanks and trucks on 22 Battalion's front, 24 October**



5 Field Regiment gunners watch aircraft overhead as the New Zealand Division's convoy moves through the gap in the enemy minefields

**5 Field Regiment gunners watch aircraft overhead as the New Zealand Division's convoy moves through the gap in the enemy minefields**

British tanks halt for maintenance



**British tanks halt for maintenance**



New Zealand convoy in soft sand

**New Zealand convoy in soft sand**



A shell bursts near the convoy

**A shell bursts near the convoy**

New Zealand main dressing station



**New Zealand main dressing station**



Italian prisoners

**Italian prisoners**





General Freyberg directs operations from the turret of his Honey tank

**General Freyberg directs operations from the turret of his Honey tank**

GOC's orders group conference, morning 1 November



**GOC's orders group conference, morning 1 November**



British tanks begin the pursuit

**British tanks begin the pursuit**

Wrecked enemy transport



**Wrecked enemy transport**



New Zealand convoy on Boomerang track

**New Zealand convoy on Boomerang track**

El Alamein railway station; the first train to the forward area after the Alamein breakthrough arrives at the station



**El Alamein railway station: the first train to the forward area after the Alamein breakthrough arrives at the station**



Heavy rain delays the convoy near Fuka

**Heavy rain delays the convoy near Fuka**







Past Fuka. Looking eastwards along the Western Desert road

**Past Fuka. Looking eastwards along the Western Desert road**

The New Zealand Mobile Casualty Clearing Station convoy stops for tea



**The New Zealand Mobile Casualty Clearing Station convoy stops for tea**



Nearing Mersa Matruh

**Nearing Mersa Matruh**





**Mersa Matruh**



Climbing Halfaya Pass; Sollum Point in the distance

**Climbing Halfaya Pass; Sollum Point in the distance**

A New Zealand engineer sweeps for mines near the top of the pass



**A New Zealand engineer sweeps for mines near the top of the pass**



The winding road up Halfaya Pass

### The winding road up **Halfaya Pass**

**The Highlanders on the northern part of their division's front came under fire throughout the 26th, but were saved from direct engagement against the counter-attacks by the tanks and motorised infantry sharing their front. The lost company of the **Gordon Highlanders** in 'Aberdeen' was found and reinforced, the wounded brought out and supplies taken in. Further south, away from the protection of the tanks, the Argyll and Sutherlanders in the 'Nairn' locality, approximately in the centre of the division's front and just short of the planned objective, could still only be joined by hazardous foot patrols. The garrison of three depleted companies was in fact, as one report stated, 'virtually isolated', short of water and ammunition and with only rifles and Brens to withstand attack. Fortunately no armoured attacks were made in this area, but the men had to remain in their precarious situation for some time longer as the Highland Division was still unable to straighten its front or secure it against counter-attack. The only effective defence of a large stretch of the front thus lay in the artillery fire tasks, but these needed a much better system of communication than had yet been established.**

**The men of the New Zealand Division and the tank crews of 9 Armoured Brigade, which now mustered fifty-nine tanks in two regiments, spent the day of the 26th under intermittent shell-fire. There was little enemy activity close to the ridge but observers reported considerable vehicle movement some two and a half to three miles to**

the west. Towards evening, after the artillery had laid some heavy concentrations on these vehicles, they appeared to withdraw. The artillery activity, however, drew the attention of enemy aircraft which bombed 6 Field Regiment's gun lines, causing casualties and damage in the regiment and also in the Divisional Cavalry and 28 Battalion.

During the day plans were prepared for reorganising and straightening the Division's front. For 5 Brigade the plans entailed the relief of 21 Battalion by 28 Battalion, and the reorganising of 22 Battalion's sector after the departure of the **10 Corps** lorried infantry, as well as the laying of a defensive minefield across the brigade front. The task for 6 Brigade was to take its front forward in conjunction with the South Africans to the originally planned final objective, a task which in retrospect might appear an unnecessarily rigid adherence to the letter of the plans, for the ground to be won, much of it on an exposed forward slope, was of little tactical value and more difficult to defend than the crest of **Miteiriya Ridge**.

On the South African front the day's activities were similar to those of the New Zealanders. Observers confirmed a trend of the movement of enemy vehicles towards the north from which it was deduced that troops were being moved from the southern sector. Initial preparations were made by the division to take over the New Zealand front and plans were made for the night advance to straighten the front. Next in line to the south, the Indians also prepared to 'side-slip' while continuing with their task of simulating offensive intentions. For this task, their artillery laid two bursts of high explosive and smoke on the western end of **Ruweisat Ridge** during the afternoon, but the enemy refused to be drawn and made little attempt at retaliation.

For 13 Corps the morning of the 26th brought a period of some confusion. When daylight allowed the results of 69 Brigade's night attacks to be clearly known, Horrocks cancelled the further phases of the operation and ordered 50 Division to prepare a plan for clearing the **Munassib Depression**, with the use if necessary of **2 Fighting French Brigade** from reserve. He also told 44 Division to continue clearing the

minefield gaps ready for another sortie by 7 Armoured Division. However, by midday he had received Montgomery's instructions not to endanger his armour, to ration his ammunition, and to limit operations to simulating an impending attack. The Corps Commander then modified his plans to selected artillery demonstrations designed to draw enemy reaction and a move by the dummy tank units just prior to dusk to simulate the start of an armoured advance. He, however, allowed 69 Brigade to carry out a daylight advance to the final objective on 'The Moor', for which a company of **6 Green Howards**, about eighty strong, moved out at 2.30 p.m. under strong artillery support. Against light opposition the company gained the objective, taking eighteen prisoners of *Folgore Division*, but before the men had settled in, the enemy came to life with heavy defensive fire under which the company withdrew, with sixty-six of its number casualties.

Until dusk on the 26th the enemy facing 13 Corps showed no signs of withdrawing or thinning out. Though his harassing fire was reduced, his reaction by artillery, mortars and small arms to any aggressive move by the corps was immediate and strong, while numerous tank patrols could be observed in the daytime watching the western side of the minefields. To 13 Corps' credit, its operations had so far succeeded in containing the enemy forces in the south.

### *The Night of 26/27 October*

By dint of concentrated staff work at all levels the details and timings for the changes in dispositions were ready for a conference held at headquarters of 30 Corps on the evening of the 26th. At the same time the motorised infantry of 7 Motor Brigade were getting ready for their advance beyond the FDLs to form a base of manoeuvre for 1 Armoured Division, while the Highlanders, New Zealanders and South Africans prepared their final efforts to secure those portions of the original objective as yet unattained.

On the part of their front facing north the Australians had a busy

night straightening out their line eastwards from **Point 29** and dealing with enemy troops who tried to regain some of their lost posts. The pressure of this infiltration, mainly by groups of infantry, was so persistent that three times during the early hours of the 27th the Australians had to call for artillery defensive tasks, but they ended the night with two Italian tanks knocked out, an 88-millimetre gun captured intact and forty-one German prisoners.

Matters did not go so well further south where 7 Motor Brigade planned to occupy two objectives, 'Woodcock' on the north and 'Snipe' on the south of the Kidney contour, and by pinching out the anti-tank posts in the area, allow the armour to pass through into the open. The troops of the Motor Brigade were then to follow the tanks, their places in 'Woodcock' and 'Snipe' being taken by 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade.

The commanders of the two motor brigade units concerned, 2 Battalion The King's Royal Rifle Corps for 'Woodcock' and 2 Rifle Battalion for 'Snipe', were told of the plan in time for them to reconnoitre routes forward and to observe the objectives, while an artillery programme was worked out for all available guns of 10 and 30 Corps to fire concentrations in the path of the infantry. With the confusion over map reading not yet fully settled, one battalion commander, with doubts whether the artillery fire would fall on the path he intended to follow, made a second reconnaissance but his return was too late to allow the plans to be checked and altered. In the event the advance began with some misgivings.

On the right 2 KRRC set off in Bren carriers at 9.30 p.m. with the intention of debussing 800 yards short of the map references given for 'Woodcock' and completing the advance on foot. With no moon to help, and in thick dust raised by the supporting fire and enemy retaliation, and by the wheels and tracks of their own vehicles, the motorised infantry lost distance and direction but pressed on with some changes of course as they attempted to follow the fall of the artillery supporting fire. They unexpectedly encountered an outpost of the **Gordon Highlanders** and overran some enemy anti-tank posts. As day began to

break, they found themselves with close on a hundred prisoners in hand, in a position so exposed to enemy fire that their commander ordered a short withdrawal. The battalion then fell back through the Gordon's outpost, to halt finally on the east of the Kidney contour.

In similar conditions of poor visibility and uncertain navigation 2 Rifle Battalion set off from a start line laid out in daylight, probably to the east of the ' **Stirling**' locality, with the carriers ahead and the infantry following on foot. As a result of the battalion commander's orders that the fall of the supporting fire should be taken as the main guide for direction, the line of advance had to be swung to the right when the artillery concentrations came down. After almost overrunning the Black Watch positions in the ' **Stirling**' locality, the men of the rifle battalion met little direct opposition and finally came to a halt, probably just short of the planned 'Snipe' objective, in the midst of an enemy store dump. About twenty six-pounder anti-tank *portées* and some vehicles with stores joined the infantry, the guns and stores being unloaded and the vehicles retiring, but unfortunately both the medical officer and the artillery observation officer were not with the battalion. Carriers on patrol to the south an hour after midnight had a short encounter with an Italian tank laager, while in the increasing light towards dawn the men on the north of the position reported a number of German tanks not far off. By opening fire as soon as visibility permitted, the anti-tank gunners claimed fourteen tanks knocked out before the enemy retired.

The orders issued by 1 Armoured Division were that at 4.30 a.m. 2 Armoured Brigade should proceed via 'Woodcock' and face north while 24 Armoured Brigade made for 'Snipe' and faced west, but at 4 a.m. 2 Armoured Brigade was ordered to wait until dawn, when it was hoped that reliable information of the 'Woodcock' operation would be available. As reports indicated that 'Snipe' was occupied, 24 Armoured Brigade was told to advance as planned. Having set its own zero hour half an hour later, this brigade had to hasten its start but eventually managed to assemble and set off in the dust, darkness and congestion through the



minefield gaps, its tank crews close to physical exhaustion.

The Highlanders took advantage of the armour's activities on the evening of the 26th to send a company to reinforce the isolated garrison holding 'Aberdeen', which lay almost midway between the 'Woodcock' and 'Snipe' objectives and about 1000 yards to the east. Some two hours after midnight men and vehicles of 2 KRRC passed through the locality and towards dawn marched back again, drawing a considerable amount of fire on the troops of 1 **Gordon Highlanders** holding the defences. Further south the men of 5 Black Watch holding out in the ' **Stirling**' locality hastily took cover as they were fired on when 2 Rifle Battalion cut through their northern flank, and again when 24 Armoured Brigade's tanks came up behind. On the rest of 51 Division's front no major attempts appear to have been made to straighten the front, for the group of 7/10 Argyll and Sutherland men in the 'Nairn' locality still remained virtually isolated, short of food and water.

The reorganisation of the New Zealand front and the extension of the left wing to the original final objective were completed during the night of the 26–27th in spite of heavy enemy fire drawn down by 6 Brigade's attack. By 10 p.m. the men of 28 Battalion had taken over the front-line defences of 21 Battalion and the companies of 22 Battalion were being resettled after the departure of **10 Corps'** lorried infantry and tanks. Engineers meanwhile had started laying a minefield to cover the whole brigade front.

Under artillery support, the details of which were not clearly recorded, 26 Battalion set off at 10 p.m. to advance its right flank a short way to conform with 22 Battalion's line and to swing its left about 400 yards forward in conjunction with 25 Battalion's operation. Except for a heavily booby-trapped minefield which brought several casualties, B Company on the right met little opposition but was harassed by mortar and machine-gun fire as the new positions were being sited and dug. The longer advance by A Company on the left was met by similar fire and brought to a halt, and, though C Company from reserve was sent up to assist, the objective was not reached. Anti-tank and Vickers guns were

then brought up behind B Company to cover the battalion front.

At the same hour 25 Battalion advanced under a creeping barrage with its three companies in line. The start was not auspicious for the battalion strength was too low for the riflemen to spread over the whole front in contact, and accordingly the companies had to operate almost independently. On the right flank, C Company overran some Italian-held posts and, after losing several men to booby traps in the minefields and nearly as many to escort prisoners to the rear, reached the area of the objective very low in numbers. A patrol exploiting further to the west met strong opposition from German posts, so the company dug in where it stood, in a position which daylight disclosed to be overlooked by enemy ahead and on both flanks and with a very exposed route to the rear. In the centre D Company was delayed as much by having to round up numerous prisoners as by opposition, but finally settled in rather better positions some way to C Company's left.

On the southern flank, B Company advanced without proper contact with the South Africans on its left. The two leading platoons were caught in a concentration of fire, possibly from the New Zealand or South African guns, and only one platoon covered the 800 to 1000 yards which brought it on to the line of the objective.

Though 6 Brigade could claim to have gained most of its objective by midnight, the enemy continued to react strongly with mortars and machine-gun fire, hindering attempts to establish contact between the companies and with the South Africans, though the latter could be heard and seen in action well off to the south. From the start of the operation enemy machine guns swept the minefield gaps over the ridge in 25 Battalion's old front, holding up the passage of support weapons. About 3 a.m. a message from C Company reached the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant, to report the movement of enemy tanks and lorried infantry on the company's front. Calling on the artillery for the defensive fire tasks prepared for this sector, the battalion commander went forward to the ridge, where he directed fire



from a tank against the enemy covering the gaps. With the help of Major **Reid**<sup>1</sup> and his party of 8 Field Company sappers detailed to clear routes and lay the protective minefield, several vehicles including mortar-carriers and eight anti-tank guns ran the gauntlet of the gaps and threaded their way through the mines to reach the rear of D Company's new position. By dawn of the 27th, although a line of sorts had been formed along the original objective, both 26 and 25 Battalions were rather precariously situated, with wide gaps between companies and routes to the rear exposed to enemy fire. However, with good observation over the front, the artillery, together with Vickers guns, anti-tank guns, and the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade on and behind the ridge, could have held off any but the strongest of counter-attacks.

Enemy reaction to 6 Brigade's advance remained lively until well into daylight, with machine guns and mortars firing at any movement in the company areas and 88-millimetre guns laying

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col H. M. Reid**, MC and bar, m.i.d.; born **Auckland**, 21 Mar 1904; civil engineer; OC **6 Fd Coy** Jun–Jul 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; died **Christchurch**, 21 Jul 1964.

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salvoes on any vehicles that showed themselves over the ridge, and under this fire the engineers found it impossible to lay the proposed defensive minefield. Casualties in the brigade amounted to some sixty men, but these losses were offset by over seventy prisoners, almost all Italians of *2 Battalion, 61 Regiment of Trento Division*, the battalion's headquarters being among the positions overrun.

Immediately to the south of 6 Brigade's area of operations, **2 South African Brigade** had the task of bringing its front to the line of the original final objective by pivoting on its left flank to swing its right about 1000 yards to the south-west. Starting at 10 p.m. with artillery support in the form of concentrations on known enemy positions, the

**South Africans gained their objective except for the extreme right flank against the New Zealand sector. To clear this gap and also to subdue some enemy posts which lay just ahead of their final line and were hindering consolidation, they called up Valentines of their supporting armour, 8 Royal Tanks. This action, though successful, caused five Valentines to be lost on mines. Prisoners for the night came to 65 Italians and two Germans, for a cost of 34 South African casualties.**

**On the left sector of the South African front, 3 Brigade, already fully on the original objective, managed to improve its front by occupying several posts from which the enemy retired when attacked by patrols.**

**No major activity was undertaken by 4 Indian Division during this night as the division was concerned with preparations for the reliefs planned to start next day. These entailed the move on the 27th of 161 Brigade, on relief by 2 Fighting French Brigade of 50 Division, into 1 South African Brigade's sector and of 5 Indian Infantry Brigade, from 30 Corps reserve, to take over 2 and 3 South African Brigades' front after dark. With its 7 Brigade staying on the western end of Ruweisat Ridge, 4 Indian Division would thus have 5, 161 and 7 Brigades in line across its front by the morning of the 28th.**

**Apart from the showing of its dummy tanks and the employment after dark on the 26th of a 'sonic unit' to simulate the noises of tanks in movement, 13 Corps passed a quiet night. That hopes of further offensive action had not been entirely abandoned is shown by directions given by Horrocks for the engineers of 44 Division to continue gapping the February minefield 'by stealth'. The corps' main concern was, however, the problem of spreading its infantry over its extended front and the release of 7 Armoured Division.**

**Had Horrocks been aware of the enemy's growing insecurity and fuel problems, he need not have worried about defence, for during this night the Panzer Army finally decided that it would have to bring the reserves from the south to bolster the northern front and risk a breakthrough in the south. Once the reserves moved, there was unlikely to be enough**

petrol available for a return journey. Although a northward trend in enemy movement had been noted during the day by observers on the ground and in the air, Eighth Army's intelligence staff had not gathered sufficient evidence by the evening of the 26th to report any significant changes in the dispositions of either *21 Panzer* or *90 Light Divisions*. But on the morning of the 27th, intercepted wireless messages gave a hint that *21 Division* was in movement, while a study of tactical air reconnaissance reports indicated that the southern front had begun to lose vehicles to the northern. Shortly after midday, further intercepts confirmed that *90 Light Division* had come forward to face the Australians and that units of *21 Panzer Division* were opposite the Highlanders' front. Eighth Army, however, was still unaware of Stumme's death and Rommel's return.

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 27 – THE FOURTH DAY OF BATTLE

## CHAPTER 27

### *The Fourth Day of Battle*

*27 October*

**THE fourth day of the battle saw one of the most gallant actions of the desert war, an action that, though unpremeditated in its form and almost unknown at the time to the higher command, had a great effect on the enemy. It began in the half light before dawn when 2 Rifle Battalion, hastily dug in short of its 'Snipe' objective, opened fire on the enemy tanks and vehicles almost surrounding it. In thus disclosing its position the battalion seems to have relied on the planned arrival at dawn of 1 Armoured Division's tanks. At the headquarters of the division it was believed, from wireless messages received, that both the motor battalions were on or very close to their objectives, 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps holding 'Woodcock' with a company, the rest of the battalion being only a little way to the rear, and 2 Rifle Battalion in full strength on 'Snipe', though, owing to the prevalent vagaries in map reading and navigation, the exact positions held were uncertain. With the Rifle Corps battalion apparently somewhat scattered, the commander of 1 Armoured Division told 2 Armoured Brigade to make a daylight reconnaissance before sending its regiments to 'Woodcock' but directed 24 Armoured to start at 4.30 a.m., as previously planned, for 'Snipe'. The latter brigade, after its first quiet night for some days, was unprepared for so early a start, but eventually got its leading regiments, 47 and 41 Royal Tanks, on the move to the west about the same time, 6.30 a.m., as 2 Armoured Brigade, having completed its reconnaissance, set off in a north-westerly direction.**

**Collecting on its way a number of enemy stragglers, mostly German, 2 Armoured Brigade came up behind and to the south of the main body of 2 KRRC, then a little way east of the Kidney contour, where it came under anti-tank gun fire. Halting in hull-down positions, the brigade proceeded to engage these guns, 10 Hussars on the left claiming to have destroyed one 88-millimetre and a Russian 7.62 centimetre gun.**

Further south 24 Armoured Brigade worked its way forward on a wide front, **47 Royal Tanks** on the right, 41 on the left and 45 in reserve. Troops of the Black Watch in the ' **Stirling**' locality had to take cover from indiscriminate firing as one group of British tanks passed through their right flank, while some of the brigade seem to have gone even further south to overrun positions still held by *III Battalion of 382 Regiment*, a unit which, though out of touch with the rear and reputedly overwhelmed earlier according to the *Africa Corps'* diary, had been mainly responsible for upsetting the Highlanders' efforts at clearing up their front.

As the tanks came slowly forward, the rifle battalion on 'Snipe' continued its lone battle, its guns firing on the enemy tanks to damage or destroy several and force the rest to move further away. Shortly after dawn broke, the whole battalion area was subjected to heavy fire to which, without an artillery observation officer, the battalion could not retaliate. Hopes of help rose about 7.30 a.m. when, through the haze raised by the shelling and the smoke of burning vehicles, tanks were seen coming up from the rear, but these at first opened fire at long range on the battalion's vehicles and the derelict tanks around. Only a brave sortie by one of the rifle battalion's officers persuaded them, then identified as a squadron of **47 Royal Tanks**, to engage the enemy instead. Meanwhile a force of enemy tanks had approached from the south-west into range of the battalion's six-pounders in that quarter. After losing three tanks to these guns, the enemy sheered off to the east to come face to face with the British tanks, which by 8.30 a.m. had drawn nearly level on the south of the rifle battalion's defences. A fierce and confused battle ensued between tanks and anti-tank guns on both sides, but, unable to call on artillery support after its artillery truck went up on a mine, **47 Royal Tanks** was forced to fall back under the dominating fire of the enemy's 88-millimetre guns. With six tanks knocked out in one squadron and all but one destroyed or damaged in another, the tank battalion withdrew to hull-down positions well off to the south-east of 'Snipe'. The enemy also drew back out of range but the rifle battalion was given little respite. About 10.30 a.m. a dozen Italian

tanks drove at high speed from the west at a point where they could only be engaged by a few of the infantry's six-pounders. These, however, quickly accounted for four of the Italians, on which the remainder turned tail, but a larger force of German tanks also advanced on the Italians' right, passing to the south of the defences. Upon being engaged by the six-pounders on this front, some of the Germans turned north while the main force continued on to the east to encounter the hull-down survivors of **47 Royal Tanks**. After the anti-tank gunners had accounted for eight of the tanks facing them, the whole enemy force retired slowly out of effective range.

With only eleven runners left, **47 Royal Tanks** also withdrew, leaving **41 Royal Tanks**, well to the south and engaged only at long range, to cover the southern flank of 2 Rifle Battalion.

During these engagements around 'Snipe', 2 Armoured Brigade had been trying to gain the high ground by **Point 33** on the right rear of the proper 'Woodcock' objective, but had been held up by intense enemy fire. Claiming five German and two Italian tanks, four 88-millimetre guns and over 100 prisoners, the brigade withdrew to reorganise for a further attempt under prepared artillery support.

Thus by midday the men in 'Snipe', on the withdrawal of British tanks to north and south, were left completely unsupported, but fortunately the enemy also chose this time to slacken his efforts. The pause enabled 2 Rifle Battalion to check its losses, which were now serious. Casualties in men were steadily mounting and only thirteen of the original nineteen or twenty anti-tank guns remained in action. Ammunition for the guns was also running low. The respite was short, however, for about 1 p.m. the Italian tank force on the west again probed forward towards the sector which had had the heaviest losses in guns. Only one of the six-pounders could be brought to bear effectively but this one gun, courageously manned, drove the Italians off, accounting for nine of the tanks, some at a range of only 200 yards.

While this engagement was still on, the Bays of 2 Armoured Brigade



had begun their second attempt to gain **Point 33** with artillery support. Little progress had been made, and one tank lost, when the armoured division's headquarters issued a warning, gained from intercept, that **21 Panzer Division** (then estimated at a strength of 120 tanks) was on the point of launching an attack. The Bays accordingly fell back to form a defensive line with **9 Lancers** and **10 Hussars** across the sector held by troops of **2/13 Australian Battalion**, **2 King's Royal Rifle Corps**, **7 Rifle Battalion** and **1 Gordon Highlanders**.

The first indications of enemy movement appear to have been seen by the Australian observers on **Point 29** who reported tanks and infantry coming from the north-west towards **2/17 Australian Battalion**. Under massed artillery fire this movement stopped, but about the same time a force, estimated at 30 German and 10 Italian tanks, came in from the west past the northern flank of 'Snipe' to clash with the tanks of **10 Hussars**. About half this force then turned away to the south towards the **Rifle Battalion**, where there were only three six-pounders still in firing order, and these with only ten rounds apiece. Undeterred, the anti-tank gunners opened fire to score three hits and, with the Hussars claiming further victims, the enemy slowly withdrew by bounds as daylight began to fail. The crew of one anti-tank gun, however, managed to cripple one tank with the last round on hand. Three of the enemy tanks, possibly damaged, stayed in hull-down positions from which they could sweep the whole of the rifle battalion's defences with their machine guns.

Coinciding in time with this engagement, but proceeding much more cautiously, another enemy force advanced under a smoke screen to the south of 'Snipe' and commenced a long-range duel with **45 Royal Tanks**, the reserve regiment of **24 Armoured Brigade**, which had come forward to cover the withdrawal of **47** and **41 Royal Tanks**. When British artillery fire was added to the tank fire the enemy withdrew.

The enemy's final effort for the 27th was an advance from the north-west against **Point 29** by tanks and infantry, who reached within 400 yards of the Australian defences before being dispersed by artillery fire.

When darkness fell on the 27th, and the British tanks carried out their normal manoeuvre of retiring to laager, 2 Rifle Battalion was left isolated in 'Snipe', its wireless out of action and with no physical contact with friendly troops. The senior surviving officer decided that his task was still to hold fast until relieved by 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade, as originally planned and as promised earlier in the day by 7 Motor Brigade when the wireless was working. He had the wounded collected and sent back in some of the remaining vehicles and reorganised the surviving men, guns and ammunition as best he could. About 9 p.m. heavy fire fell on one company area, probably as a diversion for the enemy's efforts at tank recovery for no attack developed, but the company, out of ammunition, retired to battalion headquarters. Then, when 25-pounder concentrations began to fall in and around the position, the acting commander decided that the relief force was on its way and gave orders for the surviving guns to be demolished and the men to start marching back. Against a casualty list of under 100 of the 300 or so men who made up the battalion group and the loss of most of their vehicles, carriers and anti-tank guns, 2 Rifle Battalion was credited, after an official investigation, with a score of thirty-two tanks. <sup>1</sup> Several of its members were awarded decorations for gallantry, with the Victoria Cross going to the acting commander, Major V. B. Turner.

On a claim of 47 enemy tanks, 2 Armoured Brigade was allowed by the same investigation a total of 12 to 15, most of which fell victim to **10 Hussars**. The brigade's own losses were extremely light, though no exact record exists. No claims by 24 Armoured Brigade have survived except for a bag of 200 prisoners, and its own losses appear to have been about 44 men and 26 tanks. After dark the brigade sent 47 and 41 Regiments back to reorganise and brought up its lorried infantry, 11 King's Royal Rifle Corps, and two anti-tank batteries to form a line with **45 Royal Tanks** some way to the left rear of the 'Snipe' locality.

The Highland Division, except for its artillery, took little active part in the actions of the 27th, though its men in the northern part of the

sector spent an uncomfortable day as the British tanks passed and re-passed, drawing enemy fire. The division took the opportunity of the presence of the tanks to strengthen its line and make firm contact with the various isolated groups scattered over its front. In doing so, the Highlanders gathered in the occupants of several enemy posts who were disturbed by the comings and goings of the tanks, principally of 24 Armoured Brigade, whose tanks spread so far to the south that some were clearly visible to the men of 5 New Zealand Brigade.

On neither the New Zealand nor the South African front was there any counter-attack, though both sectors reported air attacks and heavy shellfire in the morning. **Freyberg** himself, after viewing the battlefield from **Miteiriya Ridge**, felt that the shelling possibly signified the thinning out of the enemy in front and ordered vigorous patrolling for the evening. The plan for the general post of divisions, to allow the New Zealanders to be withdrawn, was commenced with the move of **2 Fighting French Brigade**, under 4 Indian Division, into part of the South African sector and reconnaissances made by the South Africans preparatory to taking over the New Zealand sector overnight.

There were few hostile exchanges on 13 Corps' front during daylight on the 27th. Having sent its main armoured reserve to the northern part of the battle, the southern half of the *Panzer Army* had little desire to invite attack. At the same time 13 Corps was busy with regrouping to extend its front into 30 Corps' area and to fill up the gaps caused by the transfer of the main part of 7

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<sup>1</sup> The six-pounders were manned by the Battalion's 'S' Company which had 11 or 12 guns in the defences, and 239 Battery of 76 Anti-Tank Regiment, **Royal Artillery**, with about eight guns. Detailed accounts of the 'Snipe' action are given, *inter alia*, in **M. Carver's *El Alamein*** and **C. E. Lucas Phillips's *Alamein***.

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Armoured Division to the north. The most Horrocks could do offensively was to order deliberate and careful shoots on guns and

infantry, to the extent of his ration of ammunition, in the hope of preventing the enemy from sending further reinforcements northwards.

Owing to the general confusion over positions and the lack of reliable information being sent back, the significance of the actions on the 27th was not clearly understood until much later at the headquarters of the army or the two corps. Early in the morning Army Headquarters had warned the corps that *21 Panzer Division* was likely to be thrown into the battle, upon which Lumsden asked that the reserve armour, *8 Armoured Brigade* (58 Shermans and 24 Crusaders), should be kept in readiness and that all artillery available be prepared to lay down defensive fire. At the same time he called on 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade to prepare for a night advance to 'Woodcock' and 'Snipe'. Any thought he might have had of going over to the defensive was nullified by pressure from Montgomery to exploit the overnight advance of his two rifle battalions, and it was particularly fortunate for 2 Rifle Battalion that both the armoured brigades attempted to continue the breakthrough operation on the lines originally planned.

A report on a reconnaissance of the objectives by the lorried infantry brigade illustrates how the situation appeared during the day. The report stated that the objectives were over a rise past the Highlanders' forward posts, bare of cover, swept by machine-gun fire, unmarked and impossible to recognise on the ground. There was no point of observation from which they could be seen and no reliable guides. In fact, the brigade was left to work out for itself the route and positions to be gained, and could be offered no assistance other than artillery support which might, or might not, fall to its advantage.

On the *Panzer Army's* side, the fighting on the 27th was called by the diarist of the *Africa Corps* a noteworthy defensive success against a powerful attempt to break through the line. The overnight advances of the New Zealanders and South Africans against *433 Regiment's* sector were reported as having been beaten off with losses to the Italian *61 Regiment*. The action here enabled the compilers of the *Corps'* situation

maps finally to remove *II Battalion of 382 Regiment* from the centre of the New Zealand front.

The progress of 7 Motor Brigade gave more concern, for both 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps and 2 Rifle Battalion had cut gaps in a part of *15 Panzer Division's* front where the infantry defences were thin and to some extent badly organised. Infantry of *21 Panzer Division*, arriving overnight, were sent at once to back up this sector, but before dawn *15 Panzer Division* reported that it had restored its line except for some small infiltrations. The early morning tank losses (sustained by a detachment of *II Battalion, 8 Panzer Regiment of 15 Division* and *3 Battalion, 33 Armoured Regiment of Littorio Division*) and the appearance of the two British armoured brigades in daylight caused *15 Panzer Division* to change its mind and call for assistance. Rommel viewed the situation as so critical that he ordered a major counter-attack on the front from the Kidney area north to *Point 29*, with *21 Panzer Division* coming in from the south-west, *15 Panzer Division* in the centre, and *90 Light Division* from the north-west, the infantry in the line co-operating and the whole operation to be preceded by a short softening-up by artillery, the 88-millimetre batteries, and Stuka raids. After some ill-coordinated efforts in the morning, the counter-attack proper got going in the afternoon, under Rommel's direct order for it to continue after nightfall until all the gaps in the line were plugged.

With as poor communications and as much confusion as on the British side, the attack broke up into a number of independent actions. The infantry, accepting as their task merely to regain the line held the previous evening, did not press their advance further than was necessary against the British artillery concentrations, and never, as far as is recorded, reached the British defences.

The tanks, on most of the front, were prepared to withdraw once they found that the infantry were not coming up to take over the ground gained. Only at 'Snipe' did the tanks reach within range of the British infantry's anti-tank guns. This pocket of resistance is not specifically mentioned in the German records, but it was clearly the appearance of

the rifle battalion so far forward, together with the early morning advance of the British tanks behind it, that brought *21 Panzer* and *90 Light Division* into the fight. The *Panzer Army's* tank losses on this day cannot be clearly established, but between the 26th and 28th, *15 Division's* strength went down by 18 battleworthy heavy tanks, and *21 Division's* by 53, leaving the two divisions with but 67 heavy tanks between them. In the same period *Littorio Division* lost 27 of its 60 'runners'.

Towards evening, with such evidence that even with all his available armoured reserve, his *Panzer Army* could not even dent the Eighth Army's line, Rommel called the counter-attack off, directing that 'present positions' should be held.

### *The Night of 27/28 October*

As dusk fell on the 27th the *Desert Air Force* concentrated on harassing the enemy forces in the battle area to impede the assembly of forces for the counter-attacks anticipated the next morning. Forward landing grounds, the main road and the railway received attention, while special efforts were made to jam the enemy's wireless traffic. This 'war of the wavelengths' was carried out by bombers circling the battlefield and caused *Africa Corps* considerable annoyance, slowing its communications and adding to the fog of battle. Though it probably had little effect on the outcome of operations, it at least reduced the efficiency of German communications down to the level of those prevailing in much of the Eighth Army.

On the ground, 152 Brigade of 51 Division set out from its reserve position to travel north into the Australian sector and then west to take over the western front held by 20 Brigade, whose two battalions, on relief, were to sidestep into the *Point 29* area, 2/13 Battalion occupying the right flank and 2/17 Battalion the point itself. The troops then around the point, under 26 Brigade, were to go back to prepare for the next phase of operations.



The Highlanders were several hours late, holding up the movement of 20 Brigade. In the meantime 2/48 Battalion on **Point 29**, while packing up preparatory to relief, had to withstand a determined attack by infantry who came from north and west. Though this was repulsed by small-arms and artillery fire, with the capture of twenty-four Germans of *I Battalion, 104 Regiment*, the total delay held up the completion of the relief until nearly dawn. The Australian front, on the morning of the 28th, was then held by 24 Brigade on the coastal sector and by 20 Brigade, with the **Composite Force** under command, facing north as far as **Point 29**. Also during the night the bulk of the New Zealand artillery moved into the Australian sector to have its guns in action by daylight.

As the Australian regrouping was taking place, the front to the south of **Point 29** was the scene of confused troop movements and action. The men of 152 Brigade, due at midnight, eventually reached **20 Australian Brigade's** area by about 4.30 a.m., settling in, fortunately without enemy interference, as day broke. Just to their south, that is, east of **Point 33**, 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps clashed with an enemy force, capturing an Italian tank intact. To the rear of this engagement, the men of 7 Rifle Battalion were so well dispersed that some hours had to be spent in assembling two companies to provide cover for tank recovery attempts. Then, on marching south to a rendezvous with the tank recovery party, both companies became lost. Further south still, the survivors of 2 Rifle Battalion were marching back in the dark from 'Snipe', their gallant stand—and survival—as yet unknown at the headquarters of their brigade or division. As late as 4.30 a.m. 7 Motor Brigade thought they might still be on 'Snipe' while 1 Armoured Division reported them as overrun.

Moving forward ostensibly to 2 Rifle Battalion's relief, 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade had delayed its start, and its artillery support, for an hour owing to various confusions, chief of which was lack of information on the rifle battalion's exact location and its survival. Finally, with an hour's artillery support laid on 'Woodcock' but well west of 'Snipe' in case of the riflemen's survival, the three lorried infantry

battalions set off about 10.30 p.m., 4 Royal Sussex making for 'Woodcock', 5 Royal Sussex for 'Snipe' and 2 Royal Sussex for the area in between. The leading troops of 4 Royal Sussex were soon in action but their opponents turned out to be the **Gordon Highlanders** in the 'Aberdeen' locality. After several casualties had been suffered on both sides, the error was discovered and the **Sussex** men moved on to a point probably a little short of the true 'Woodcock' locality, where two companies dug in as best they could in very rocky ground. Patrols demolished several abandoned guns and a tank and brought in over 100 prisoners.

The third company had earlier turned off to the south to deal with fire coming from that quarter. What happened then is uncertain, but the company seems to have been captured almost intact, for the German diaries record a large bag of prisoners taken about this time.

The left-hand battalion, 5 Royal Sussex, passed through the Black Watch troops in '**Stirling**' without untoward incident and about midnight reported to its brigade headquarters that the objective had been gained against little opposition. The actual position taken up appears to have been well east of the proper 'Snipe' locality, not even as far west as 2 Rifle Battalion had gone, while, in spite of the lack of opposition, casualties amounted to 86, of whom 26 were later posted missing and the rest killed or wounded.

In the centre, 2 Royal Sussex seems to have gone slightly further west than the left-flank battalion and was possibly nearly level with that on the right. Its advance was relatively uneventful, though it became separated from its anti-tank guns and other support weapons which were not brought forward until well after daylight.

With the advance of 133 Brigade, Gatehouse of **10 Armoured Division** had begun, on Lumsden's orders, to take command of the operations from Briggs of 1 Armoured Division. The necessary changes were arranged in a piecemeal fashion, 24 Armoured Brigade reverting to **10 Armoured Division's** command on the evening of the 27th, though 2



and 8 Brigades did not pass over until the next morning, while 7 Motor Brigade, with its three battalions still forward, remained under 1 Armoured Division. This method of switching riders in mid-stream, allied to the bombing of Tactical Headquarters of **10 Armoured Division** at 5 a.m., had considerable effect on the lack of information received and passed on during the night.

By 3 a.m. Gatehouse claimed that all information received indicated that the three battalions' objectives had been occupied. His headquarters confirmed this in a message which reached Army Headquarters three hours later. However, the wireless link with the headquarters of 133 Brigade was working erratically and at 4 a.m. failed completely. Neither the artillery observation officer with the brigade nor the armoured division's liaison officer, both of whom could have provided alternative wireless channels, were of much help for both had lost touch with the brigade headquarters group as it moved forward behind the centre battalion.

Shortly before dawn three squadrons of the **Yorkshire Dragoons**<sup>1</sup> drove forward in the wake of 4 Royal Sussex with the task of covering the gap between the fixed defences of 152 Brigade and 'Woodcock'.

On the southern flank of the operation, on hearing that 5 Royal Sussex had gained 'Snipe', the commander of 24 Armoured Brigade ordered **45 Royal Tanks**, reinforced by the surviving 'runners' of his other two regiments, to advance with the brigade's lorried infantry (11 King's Royal Rifle Corps) and anti-tank guns to protect the southern flank of 'Snipe'. However, the commander of **45 Royal Tanks** had just led his night laager to the rear, on a false warning of an impending attack by enemy infantry, and replied to the order with the complaint that his men were exhausted and that he was not in touch with the lorried infantry or with the other regiments. His protest was overruled and, by dint of strenuous staff work, some 13 'runners' of the other regiments were added to **45 Royal Tanks'** total of 21, the regiment then setting off in the early dawn from its uncertain laager position on a westerly course over the almost featureless terrain. Whether contact was made with 11

**KRRC or what action the lorried infantry took is not clear, but 45 Royal Tanks was promised that it would be relieved as soon as possible by a regiment of 8 Armoured Brigade.**

**On the rest of 30 Corps' front there was little hostile activity this night. Early in the evening the three New Zealand field regiments with their attached anti-aircraft batteries pulled out their guns and moved to positions in the rear of the Australian sector. Here the regiments, under the divisional artillery headquarters, were**

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**<sup>1</sup> The motorised infantry of 2 Armoured Brigade, comprising one anti-tank and three motor companies or squadrons.**

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**integrated into the corps defence framework. At the same time preparations were begun to hand over the New Zealand infantry positions to the South Africans, but before the latter arrived, several patrols were sent out from 6 Brigade's lines, as ordered by Freyberg earlier, to test whether the enemy was withdrawing. Reports of enemy parties working on defences and minefields, as well as information gleaned from five prisoners captured by the patrols, made it appear that no withdrawal was in the offing.**

**During the night troops of 1 South African Brigade came up in transport and, in spite of a heavy bout of mortaring from the enemy, took over the front line in a smoothly organised relief. The New Zealanders and their armour then travelled back to a bivouac area a few miles to the rear.**

**The southern front also passed a quiet night as 13 Corps extended its front northwards into 4 Indian Division's sector and made preparations to relieve 7 Armoured Division of responsibility in defence. Patrols were unable to find any evidence of enemy withdrawal on this front.**

**28 October**

The dawn of 28 October saw almost a repetition of the situation that had existed twenty-four hours earlier. Once again lorried infantry had advanced overnight into a salient in which the exact locations of the battalions were uncertain and communications with the tanks and artillery unreliable or non-existent. As before, the enemy came to life in the increasing light with counter-attacks before defences and communications had been established, but on this morning the doughty resistance of the Rifle Battalion was not repeated.

At first light 2 Armoured Brigade broke night laager and sent the Bays and 9 Lancers off under orders to gain Point 33 and support both the Yorkshire Dragoons and 4 Royal Sussex. Through some confusion in the receipt of orders, the Bays halted for breakfast while the Lancers continued towards Point 33. After overrunning some gun positions and taking a number of prisoners, the Lancers came up behind B Squadron of the Yorkshire Dragoons but then came under enemy fire. On losing three tanks, the Lancers retired to find cover, and their withdrawal was followed up by a small force of about eight enemy tanks which swept through the Dragoon squadron. Unprepared for defence, with anti-tank guns not dug in, the Dragoons scattered, abandoning many of their vehicles and guns. About the same time, A Squadron of the Dragoons further north came under fire and retired to the east as enemy infantry advanced towards its position, while another group of enemy tanks approached 4 Royal Sussex, using their machine guns from hull-down cover against the battalion's anti-tank guns. In hastily dug defences in hard ground, the men of the Sussex battalion could offer little resistance, and within a short time the enemy broke into the defences, rounded up the survivors and marched them away. This action appears to have passed unnoticed by other British forces nearby, except that 10 Hussars reported a column of prisoners seen marching to the west about eight o'clock.

When lack of communication with his battalions brought the commander of 133 Brigade forward on reconnaissance, all he could find of 4 Royal Sussex, apart from some abandoned anti-tank guns, were

members of the Headquarters Company who had been following up the main battalion group.

Further south, and possibly slightly to the rear of 4 Royal Sussex, the men of 2 Royal Sussex were fortunate in not being directly attacked, as they also were poorly dug in and were not joined by their anti-tank guns until well after daylight. The presence of **10 Hussars** to their rear may have helped in keeping the enemy off. The battalion spent an uncomfortable day under constant fire.

On the southern prong of the advance 5 Royal Sussex also suffered under enemy fire but was not directly attacked, again possibly because of the uncoordinated action of British tanks in the vicinity. The Crusader squadron leading **45 Royal Tanks** to the lorried infantry's support first reported finding some British infantry in its path and then went off the air. The regiment's commander, unaware of any exact positions, presumed these were troops of the Highland Division in the forward defences (when, in fact, it seems likely they were 5 Royal Sussex) and accordingly ordered the advance to continue. The regiment then came under anti-tank and artillery fire, losing one tank, and withdrew on to an unidentified infantry area. Here the regiment stayed for some time, firing on enemy tanks which approached from the west.

Action continued in the area during the morning when enemy tanks, possibly the same that had attacked 4 Royal Sussex and the Yorkshire Dragoon squadron, advanced to threaten 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps some way to the east of the 'Woodcock' locality. The enemy withdrew on meeting fire from the battalion's anti-tank guns and probably from the tanks of 2 Armoured Brigade, for **9 Lancers** in the vicinity claimed five victims during the morning.

The extremely fluid method of command practised by the armour was in full evidence this morning for, instead of being urged to break out to the north-west as originally planned or even to press forward to the support of the Royal Sussex, 2 Armoured Brigade was told as early as nine o'clock that it was due for relief by **8 Armoured Brigade**.

Fortunately for the various bodies of lorried infantry in the area, the armoured brigade found it impossible to move from its hull-down positions in daylight without danger from the enemy's 88-millimetre guns or it might have pulled out and left the front without any tank support, for **8 Armoured Brigade** (less 3 RTR already on its way to the left flank) took some hours to arrive. Also under orders to withdraw, 2 KRRC was in the same predicament and stayed in action until the late afternoon, when the arrival of **8 Armoured Brigade**, and a lull in the firing, allowed it to disengage.

Shortly before noon on the 28th the most determined counter-attack of the day began with heavy artillery fire on **Point 29**, where 2/17 Australian Battalion had relieved 2/48 Battalion in the early morning. Lorried infantry and tanks came in on a wide front from the north-west, picking up several groups of the enemy in their forward defences until the whole body of the attacking force was in considerable strength. Although subjected to artillery fire directed by the observers on the point, the force continued to advance until the leading infantry were within tommy-gun range of the Australians, with the tanks not far behind. Only under the concentrated fire of all weapons did the forward movement cease and the tanks take up hull-down positions. During the afternoon the main enemy force disengaged, but several parties of infantry remained close enough to the Australian defences to harry them with mortar and machine-gun fire.

Coinciding with this midday attack on **Point 29**, the enemy to the south showed similar signs of activity, but a series of sweeps by the **Desert Air Force**, aided by concentrations fired by the medium guns, appeared to break up his tank concentrations and the battle resolved itself into artillery exchanges and long-range tank duels in which the three regiments of 2 Armoured Brigade claimed a rather ambitious total of twenty-eight tanks knocked out during the day. Activity decreased as the afternoon wore on, permitting some movement about the battlefield. Patrols out searching for the lost Dragoon squadron and 4 Royal Sussex found some of the squadron's men and brought back several of its anti-

tank guns intact, but could gain little further information of the fate of the **Sussex** battalion. By 5 p.m. the 'Woodcock' front was quiet enough for 2 Armoured Brigade and 2 KRRC to start moving back, support of this part of the front then being assumed by **8 Armoured Brigade**, whose two regiments were by this time ready to take over.

On the 'Snipe' front the commander of **45 Royal Tanks** withdrew his regiment during the afternoon well back into the Highland lines. This action, which seems to have been prompted by the losses suffered by enemy fire and the tank crews' need to rest and refit, makes it appear that the commander had no clear idea of his role in support of 5 Royal Sussex or of the battalion's situation. Casualties in the three regiments of 24 Armoured Brigade in this day's operations, based on rather uncertain reports, amounted to over fifty men, ten tanks lost by direct enemy action, and possibly another fifteen by mines and other causes.

On the withdrawal of **45 Royal Tanks**, **3 Royal Tanks** (of **8 Armoured Brigade**), which had moved into this sector during the morning, was given orders to support the front. Advancing on to the low ridge along which the Highland front ran, the leading squadron lost a tank to enemy fire. On this, the regiment halted and took up hull-down positions on the east side of the ridge.

This was the situation when dusk fell on the 28th. The two surviving battalions of 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade, 2 and 5 Royal Sussex, were still in their isolated and exposed positions well west of the main defence line. The supporting armour, the three newly arrived regiments of **8 Armoured Brigade**, were within the main line, with no clear idea where the two infantry battalions were or, in fact, whether they still existed. Fortunately for the **Sussex** men, the enemy was just as confused.

Apart from the actions on the north-west corner of Eighth Army's front, there was little activity other than the limited harassing programmes of artillery fire by 13 Corps designed to keep the enemy from regrouping. Both the South Africans and the Indians, as well as 13

Corps, were busy with organising their rearranged sectors and preparing for further troop movements to fit the Army's latest plans. In the morning of the 28th the Army Commander held a conference at which he laid down that further offensive operations through the 'Woodcock' and 'Snipe' objectives would cease until the next morning, when **10 Corps** would make another attempt at exploitation to the west. The troops of the two armoured divisions on this part of the front—as well as **1 Gordon Highlanders**, to prevent further misunderstandings—were to come under command of **10 Armoured Division**, which itself was to be under the operational command of **30 Corps** until the evening, while Headquarters **1 Armoured Division** was to withdraw to prepare for the next phase of action.

Montgomery's action in permitting this switch of command while many of the troops involved were still in action offers some evidence that he was not yet fully aware of how haphazard were the methods under which the British armour still operated. The channels along which information was sent back and orders forward were normally far from perfect as the records show, and this switch only helped to cause confusion and discourage determined and united action. As earlier in the campaign, a great deal of bitter comment arose over the failure of the tanks to support the infantry as expected, against which the tank regiments brought out their old bogey of the '88s'. The trouble, however, lay deeper, in factors such as the command structure of the armoured corps, the acceptance of reports from tank commanders at their face value, and the continuing inability of the armoured regiments to co-operate closely even with the infantry with which they had trained. <sup>1</sup>

Further conferences this morning confirmed the plans for the next Australian push, to begin that night while **51 Division** went completely over to the defensive on a front composed of strong-points linked by wire and mines. The commander of the Highland Division also arranged for a set of beacons to be erected in an attempt to reconcile the discrepancies in map reading which had added to the confusion whenever the armour and its artillery were involved.



After a visit to the Australian sector, **General Freyberg** had lunch with the Army Commander to discuss the new major operation, **SUPERCHARGE**, intended to be the final blow of the battle. He had earlier made submissions to Leese that the New Zealand Division should be kept in being for its original role as part of the 'break-out' force and, because of its low strength and lack of immediate reinforcements, should not be used for further 'break-in' operations. But as there was no other commander with greater desert experience—except Morshead who was fully occupied with his own operations—the Army Commander decided that **Freyberg** should be given the command of the 'break-in' phase with a collection of brigades from other formations under his command. <sup>2</sup>

The provisional plan at this stage was for a New Zealand brigade to take over part of the Australian sector on the night of 30–31 October as a base from which the heterogeneous collection of attached brigades would advance practically parallel with the coast, with **10 Corps** moving on the left, or inland, flank prepared to exploit once the main enemy defence line was breached. The

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<sup>1</sup> 'Jorrocks ... said that the "G" Staff in **10 Corps** was quite frightful; no proper system; no organisation....' Extract from letter dated 18 Dec 1942 from Montgomery to de Guingand quoted in de Guingand, *Generals at War*.

<sup>2</sup> This in spite of Montgomery's earlier assertions that he would fight divisions as divisions and not piecemeal. Here his action was perhaps justified for **Freyberg** had a trained and efficient staff in all branches, particularly artillery, which no other division available could have supplied at short notice.

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New Zealand Division itself, with 9 Armoured Brigade, was to be under **10 Corps** for the exploitation role. As will be seen, events caused the detail of the plan to be altered.

The rest of **Freyberg's** day was taken up with further discussions on the plan, and ended with a conference at Headquarters 30 Corps on the



administrative problems of routing the break-in and break-out forces—equivalent to more than two infantry and two armoured divisions—along the narrow and congested channels to their various start lines, and ensuring that they arrived in the right order and at the right times.

At the end of this day Army Headquarters released the news that an enemy tanker had been sunk off **Greece**, thus adding to the *Panzer Army's* fuel problem,<sup>1</sup> and that so far in the battle 175 tanks had been destroyed or badly damaged. Of this total, thirty-one had definitely been demolished by British engineers and the balance was an estimate based on claims. The German records seem to support this estimate for by the 28th the three divisions most affected, *15*, *21* and *Littorio*, were 271 'runners' down on the total with which they had started the battle on the 23rd. This figure includes tanks out of action through mechanical failure as well as through mines or other battle damage, but by this time repairs and replacements were hardly keeping pace with daily losses.<sup>2</sup>

On the German side the continuing action around the 'Woodcock-Snipe' area led Rommel to the conclusion that this was the intended focal point of the Eighth Army's offensive, though the commander of *Africa Corps*, von Thoma, seems to have had his doubts. The advance of 4 Royal Sussex and the **Yorkshire Dragoons** had caused outposts of *I Battalion of 104 Regiment* to fall back, but an immediate counter-attack at dawn by a scratch group of German and Italian tanks with infantry restored this part of the main defence line with the capture of 300 prisoners and numerous anti-tank guns. Later prepared attacks, however, met heavy defensive fire and developed into tank duels in which the British tanks 'firing from hull-down positions at over 2000 yards range simply outshot our tanks'<sup>3</sup> and, against a claim of only fifteen British tanks destroyed, *21 Panzer Division* lost heavily. In the afternoon the *Africa Corps* commander called off all counter-attacks in order to form a reserve ready to operate to the south as, for some reason,

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<sup>1</sup> Contrary to popular belief, *Africa Corps* had enough petrol for its immediate battle needs for its Quartermaster had built up

an undisclosed reserve. There was, of course, a shortage throughout the *Panzer Army* for general transport purposes.

<sup>2</sup> The surviving enemy tank states indicate that from the 28th to the 31st the two German divisions found it difficult to muster 100 tanks in running order between them, while *Littorio* had between 30 and 40. *Ariete* and *Trieste* still had their original strengths of about 129 and 34 respectively on the 28th.

<sup>3</sup> *Panzer Army* campaign narrative, GMDS 34375/1-2.

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possibly reports of British troop movements, he thought action might be needed in that direction. This halt in operations coincided with the more or less unplanned halt in the British armour's efforts to find and relieve the surviving Royal Sussex battalions. Rommel himself continued to expect a British advance to the north or northwest, and in anticipation of this *90 Light Division's* front was strengthened with reformed units of *Trento Division*. Rommel also asked Kesselring to reinforce the *Luftwaffe*, particularly with fighter aircraft, as the 'vast English air superiority' <sup>1</sup> was having its effect on operations and morale. Eleven raids by flights of eighteen bombers were suffered by *21 Panzer Division* alone this day. The *Panzer Army's* claims of British tanks destroyed since the 23rd amounted to 293, together with 510 prisoners of war brought in. Its own losses were recorded as 1994 Germans and 1660 Italians 'missing', with those taken prisoner mostly wounded. <sup>2</sup>

Both petrol and ammunition were bringing Rommel greater worries each day. Although he had not yet seriously considered leaving the fixed defences for a war of manoeuvre, as he still had hopes of holding on until the Eighth Army wore itself to a stand-still, he knew that petrol stocks were diminishing at a rate that would limit the possibilities of withdrawal and manoeuvre.

The ammunition problem was of a different nature, for it was only in certain types of ammunition that the dumps were running short. On appeal to von Rintelen in *Rome*, he got a promise that submarines would

be used to bring over the required ammunition to be landed at **Mersa Matruh** or **Tobruk**, but the petrol problem was almost insoluble. The Italians would not risk sailing their tankers further east than **Benghazi**, where the long road haul and the shortage of trucks made their loads almost valueless, but, on a suggestion that they could supply strong naval cover to allow the use of **Tobruk** or **Matruh**, retorted that they could only do so if the Germans allowed the Italian fleet sufficient fuel oil. The Italians were also unable to supply effective air cover, while Kesselring's air fleet was already feeling the effects of the demands of the winter offensive in **Russia**.<sup>3</sup>

However, Rommel managed to get a promise that both Italian and German transport aircraft would fly in petrol, but von Rintelen,

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<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Army* campaign narrative, GMDS 34375/1-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* The exact number of British tanks put out of action by the *Panzer Army* is difficult to assess but was nowhere near this total, although the British loss of available 'runners' by all causes was possibly higher. The count of prisoners in Eighth Army's cages on the evening of the 28th gave a total of 1268 Germans and 1810 Italians. The German casualty total may therefore be correct as it allows for over 700 killed, but the Italian total merely shows how badly the Italians kept their records.

<sup>3</sup> It was in the last week of October that the assault on **Stalingrad**, with troops and supply lines over-extended, ground to a halt.

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in a report made on 29 October stated that, unless **Malta** could be dominated, 'in the long run the means necessary to carry on fighting cannot be brought to the German-Italian Panzer Army'; he estimated the middle of November as the time when shortages might become critical.<sup>1</sup>

The *Panzer Army* had acquired by capture a British operation order,

presumably for **LIGHTFOOT**, in which the intention was given as exploitation north-west to the coast after the defence line was breached. The mass of movement during the day in the north-west corner of the British salient confirmed Rommel in his appreciation that a renewal of the attack would commence from this point, probably during the night of 28–29 October, ‘which could only be beaten off by the greatest possible effort by all arms’. <sup>2</sup> He directed the army artillery commander to concentrate on this area, using observed salvos rather than harassing fire, and urged all troops to open fire with their machine guns at long range. He also directed that *20 Italian Corps* should assume control of the southern front with *10 Italian Corps* under its command, and that the reserve stiffening of *21 Panzer Division's* tanks left in the south should come north in exchange for the detachment of *Ariete's* tanks which had moved up with the main body of the panzer division. *Ariete* at this time still possessed about 128 tanks in going order.

For its general reserve the *Panzer Army* had the *Trieste* motorised division with about thirty-four tanks, its three reconnaissance units, 3, 33 and 580, manning armoured cars and captured light tanks, and the *Army Battle Group* which, except for the few tanks of the headquarters defence unit, was little more than a staff prepared to take command of any troops—reinforcements, service and supply units, and similar bodies—who might be drawn into the battle. Further to the rear there were the *Young Fascist* and *Pistoia* divisions, but there were no other formed units of German troops available. In the light of after-knowledge it is surprising that Rommel retained the well-trained paratroops of the *Ramcke* brigade in the Ruweisat and El Mreir area, but there were several factors, including the transport problem as well as uncertainty over 13 Corps' intentions, that must have affected any proposal for their relief by spare Italian troops.

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<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Army* campaign narrative, GMDS 34375/1–2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 28 – AUSTRALIANS KEEP THE INITIATIVE

## CHAPTER 28

### *Australians Keep the Initiative*

#### *The Night of 28/29 October*

**NIGHTFALL** on 28 October heralded the start of the final phase of Montgomery's effort to overwhelm the *Panzer Army*. Although the battle so far had not gone exactly to the letter of the plans—for the armour's break-out had not yet occurred, while the 'crumbling process' had been restricted to the relatively narrow front of 30 Corps' salient—much had been achieved in inducing the enemy to lay on costly and fruitless counter-attacks. The transfer of *21 Panzer Division* to the north was a sign that the Eighth Army retained the initiative, for all of Rommel's reserves of any value were now being drawn into the battle at the point where Montgomery intended to use his superior strength in tanks and artillery. Rommel was also playing into Montgomery's hands by allowing *164 Division* to hold out in its coastal pocket. Any threat of encirclement of this pocket had to be countered by attacks made within observation and artillery range of the salient that reached out to **Point 29** where, instead of the customary weak link along the boundaries between corps or divisions, there had developed an unusual overlapping in which two corps with two infantry and two armoured divisions were involved; though this made for some muddle and cross-purposes in offensive operations, it gave the defence an abundance of observers backed by tanks, anti-tank guns and artillery.

As part of his plan of enticing counter-attack, Montgomery had always intended to 'crumble' the defences between the north of the Australian penetration and the coast, an operation that would not only remove the most complicated and strongly defended sector of the *Panzer Army's* line but would also free the coast road and railway for a break-out and pursuit. As already recorded, the first stages of this crumbling had been attempted and a further operation was planned for the evening of the 27th, but owing to various factors had had to be postponed; so that on the morning of the 28th Morshead's headquarters was faced with the



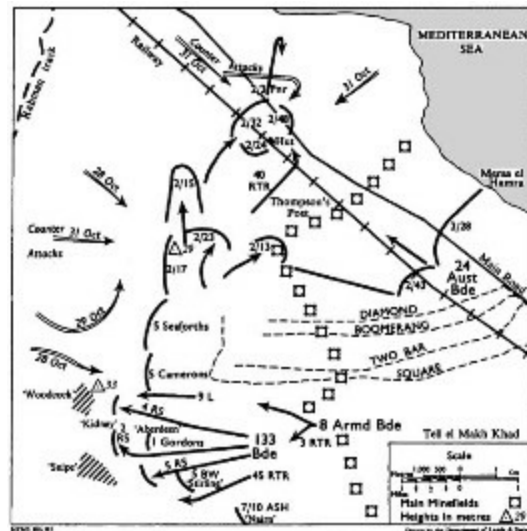
task of working out an entirely new set of detailed orders to fit the changes in situation and deployment of troops. As the whole plan, particularly the artillery programme, presented some unusual features of timing and direction, much of the detail was not settled until the middle of the afternoon, allowing little time for preparation of the task tables and ammunition allocation. The operation was divided into three interlocking phases, starting with the extension of 20 Brigade's positions around **Point 29** for some 3000 yards to the north and 2000 to the north-east. Next, 26 Brigade was to drive another 3000 yards to the north-east from this base to gain the road and railway, and then swing to the south-east along the road to join with a separate advance to be made from the south against Thompson's Post, an enemy strongpoint on the inland side of the railway on the **Composite Force's** front. In the third phase, 24 Brigade in the coastal defences was to take advantage of any successes and advance between the road and the sea. Armoured support was to be provided by the Valentines of 23 Armoured Brigade and artillery support by nearly 300 field guns and some of the mediums, with a total expenditure of close on 50,000 rounds (of which the New Zealand gunners would fire 9320).

The first phase opened at 10 p.m. with 2/13 Battalion moving north-east from its defences on the east of **Point 29**, and 2/15 Battalion advancing north from 2/17 Battalion's area around the point. Though fairly strong opposition was met on the right, by midnight both battalions had troops on their objectives, after which the divisional commando platoon patrolled as far north as the railway and returned with some prisoners.

As 2/15 Battalion's new position formed a narrow and vulnerable salient, strenuous efforts were made to secure it firmly, with the four companies dug in for all-round defence and a Hawkins minefield laid on north and west.

As soon as information sent back indicated that Phase I was going well, Morshead ordered that Phase II should proceed as planned. In this phase 2/23 Battalion (26 Brigade) was to marry up with **46 Royal Tanks**,

with whom it had trained before the offensive, and move by an intricate route, in dust and darkness, through 2/13 Battalion on a two and a half mile drive to the railway. First mines, then enemy resistance forced the infantry to dismount from the tanks and carriers and, though some of the men fought their way to the railway, the battalion finally reorganised close to the start line with the surviving tanks in support.



30 CORPS' OPERATIONS FROM NIGHT 28-29 TO 31 OCTOBER

30 CORPS' OPERATIONS FROM NIGHT 28-29 TO 31 OCTOBER

As news of this action filtered back, Morshead called off further operations, directing 2/23 Battalion to go under 20 Brigade's command and join its front with 2/13 and 2/15 Battalions. Australian casualties for this night were not excessive, while the whole operation brought in some 200 to 300 prisoners, mostly German. Fifteen Valentines were put out of action, mainly by mines, but most were later recovered.

The *Panzer Army* recorded that this night started with a 'terrific' artillery preparation that rose 'to a violence not before experienced'. After a gallant defence lasting six hours, *II Battalion of 125 Regiment* and *11 Battalion of the Bersaglieri* were overrun, the Italians being almost completely destroyed, though the Germans fought on even when surrounded by tanks and infantry. Dawn counter-attacks were prepared by *90 Light Division*, which was given command of all troops in the coastal pocket including the survivors of *164 Division*, with orders to

construct a new defence line from the west of **Point 29** north-east to the coast. The defences east of that line were, however, to be held for at least two more days. <sup>1</sup>

With most of their artillery firing for the Australians on this night of 28–29 October, neither 10 Armoured nor 51 Division attempted any major action. With a strength of 46 heavy and 17 Crusader tanks, **8 Armoured Brigade** deployed east of 'Woodcock' while patrols went out to find the Royal Sussex battalions of 133 Brigade. From a few survivors of the reserve company of 4 Royal Sussex a little was at last learnt of this battalion's fate, and both 2 and 5 Battalions were located and supplied. On the rest of 30 Corps' front and the northern portion of 13 Corps', most of the units were still organising their defences after the widespread reliefs, so that local reconnaissance patrols only were operating. Owing to delays in movement and a last-minute change of plan, one brigade sector of 13 Corps' front was left almost unoccupied overnight. Only in 44 Division's sector was there any hostile activity and here 132 Brigade lost about a dozen men in patrol clashes, which showed that the enemy had apparently no intention of withdrawing as yet.

## *29 October*

At dawn on the 29th the Australians were well settled in their new gains. Though the finger pointing north from **Point 29** appeared on the map to be extremely vulnerable, the excellent observation and communications developed on the point allowed massive defensive artillery fire to be brought down where and when needed, even the heavy shells of the medium guns arriving within ten to twenty minutes after the observers called the target. The enemy on the other hand was still in some confusion, several trucks driving unconcernedly into the Australian lines. It was not till well after daylight that the counter-attack ordered by *90 Light Division* was observed in the form of groups of infantry forming up to the north-east of 2/13 Battalion. Under the defensive fire, the troops disappeared from view and no further attempts

were reported during the morning, though enemy shellfire, particularly of airburst salvoes, was heavy at times over the newly-won area. About midday Stukas flew overhead, dropping their loads rather indiscriminately on their own as well as the British lines east of the point, and at the same time the enemy shelling increased. Both tanks and infantry were then seen advancing from the west against 2/15 Battalion. Artillery fire called down by the observers on **Point 29** stopped all movement well before this force could reach the Australians' forward posts.

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<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Army* campaign narrative, GMDS 34375/1-2.

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The fog of war was particularly thick this day for the enemy. Not only around **Point 29** but further south, the front-line units reported constant British attacks continuing until the late afternoon. The Australians, however, did little more than attempt to improve and organise their gains won overnight. Further south, under fire laid down by **10 Armoured Division** across the front of 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade's salient to screen the movement of supply vehicles to the **Sussex** battalions, several groups of infantry came out of their trenches with hands up to surrender to patrols of 2 Royal Sussex and **8 Armoured Brigade**, more than 100 altogether being gathered in, mainly of *115 Regiment* ( *15 Panzer Division*). This caused a gap in the defence line held by *15 Panzer Division*, which thought its front was under attack and consequently ordered a counter thrust to regain the line. *Africa Corps* directed that this thrust should be co-ordinated with the operations by *90 Light Division* against **Point 29**, but the strain on both divisions was such that preparations and assembly were not completed until late in the afternoon. The advance was first seen by **10 Armoured Division** and 152 Brigade but, though a few Italian tanks came into range of **8 Armoured Brigade** which claimed several hits, the main force of tanks and infantry swung north-west towards **Point 29**. Here it disappeared in the dust raised by the fire of over 300 guns and by 7 p.m. had disintegrated. For its share *15 Panzer Division* reported that it had

successfully regained the gap in its line, but *90 Light Division* was more honest, claiming no headway at all.

The *Panzer Army* was given quite a scare towards evening of this day when the Italian headquarters commanding the rear area reported that a British column of two divisions was moving deep in the desert south of **Matruh**, a report probably arising from the activities of one of the British raiding parties. Air patrols were sent out to locate the mythical force, the *Young Fascist Division* and *288 Special Force* were alerted, and the proposed relief of *21 Panzer Division* by *Trieste* was delayed.

On the British side the 29th was noteworthy as the day that an innovation long proposed was finally translated into action. Many soldiers, particularly among the armour, had been asking why the 3·7-inch anti-aircraft gun, used to protect rear areas and headquarters, could not be brought into the line and used in an antitank role as the German 88-millimetre gun was used. A trial in which these guns were brought forward and laid on derelict tanks in the front line proved clearly what the artillerymen already knew, that they were not designed for rough travelling or speedy action.

As well as suffering disappointment in its hopes of retaliation against the 88s, the armour also came under a serious criticism this day when the headquarters of **10 Armoured Division** admitted to 30 Corps, who in turn told Eighth Army, that the tank codes, call signs and recognition signals had probably been captured by the enemy in a tank lost as long ago as the 27th. No satisfactory explanation was given of this delay, but it brought the need of preparing and issuing new documents to all concerned at a moment when all staff were immersed in the new plans.

The partial failure of the Australian operation during the night, together with information reaching him on the enemy's dispositions, persuaded Montgomery, early on the 29th, to change the detail of his plans. From prisoners, intercepts, and other sources, it had become evident that *90 Light Division*, the last German reserve considered of

consequence, had been at last committed to battle, joining the concentration of German formations in the north of the line, and from this Montgomery deduced that Rommel, of whose return he learnt this day, was apprehensive of an offensive directed along the coastal road.

The Eighth Army's analysis of the *Panzer Army's* dispositions was far from accurate in any detail, and understandably so in the circumstances. At the opening of the battle, *164 Division*, with Italians sandwiched among its units, had held the whole front facing 30 Corps, but, under attack, it had been forced to spread its infantry into some of the Italian positions and had then been split by the penetration from **Point 29** to 'Woodcock' and 'Snipe'. Its infantry in the coastal pocket and round to the west of **Point 29** were now being taken over by *90 Light Division*, leaving it in command only of the troops left in the southern part of its original front. In the central portion there was a confusion oddly similar to that on the British side. Here infantry of both *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions*, sent in to plug the gaps, were mixed with survivors of *164 Division* and the Italians, but unlike the British confusion in command, Headquarters of the *Africa Corps* retained direct control over this sector.

The Eighth Army did not as yet know how heavily *21 Panzer Division* had been involved in the fighting, and though British intelligence estimated the surviving tanks in *15 Panzer* and the Italian armoured divisions with some accuracy (an estimate of 40 and 225 respectively against an actual strength of 31 and 190), *21 Panzer Division* was still given a strength of 110 when in fact the division was down to 57 'runners'. A more serious intelligence miscalculation, possibly caused by information gleaned about the proposed relief of *21 Panzer Division* by *Trieste*, was that the German formations were combining to block the coast road, leaving the Italians to hold the desert further south. As Montgomery himself put it, 'The Germans had been pulled against our right and were no longer "corsetting" the Italians.... the dividing line between them appeared to be just north of our original corridor.' <sup>1</sup> There is no hint in the German records that



**Rommel intended to drop the system of sandwiching the two nationalities and give the Italians any sector to themselves; his problem was to get his armoured formations free of commitment in the line so that they could act as a mobile reserve to be thrown in wherever German or Italian units gave way.**

**However, on this assumption, Montgomery was open to the influence of the proponents of the old 'Hit the Italians' policy and accordingly changed the thrust line of SUPERCHARGE from the coast to the 'dividing line' between the two Axis nationalities, while the Australians continued their crumbling process towards the coast to hold the German formations. Though based on error, the change of direction had several advantages, chief of which was that it would lead the armour into open desert instead of along the coast where the terrain and defences were less suitable for armoured deployment. Timings for the change were for the Australians to start their next crumbling operation on the evening of the 30th, with the New Zealand opening of SUPERCHARGE taking place the next evening. Whether the infantry managed to make a breach or not, **10 Corps'** armour was to pass through the infantry early on 1 November.**

**When he learnt of the change of direction, **Freyberg** told Leese 'That is what I wanted to do originally. Are any more [tanks] to be put under my command. It is in command that the thing breaks down.'** <sup>2</sup>

**The new plan gave the New Zealand infantry attack a narrower front, of about 4000 yards with an equivalent depth of advance. This allowed a greater concentration of artillery fire from the thirteen field and three medium regiments available to cover the path of advance. The Australians and Highlanders were given subsidiary tasks designed both to deceive the enemy on the main point of assault and to assist the clearance of the flanks, while the Air Force promised to step up its operations to the maximum, especially on known positions of enemy armour at dawn on 1 November. The alteration in the plans brought in its train a mass of staff work to rearrange assembly areas and movement routes and tables, as**

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<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> GOC's diary, GOC 2 NZEF/45.

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well as some changes in command and the extension of 13 Corps' front to take over 4 Indian Division *in situ*.

### *The Night of 29/30 October*

To assist land operations by keeping the enemy's available reinforcements well spread out, the **Royal Navy** sent off three destroyers and seventeen smaller vessels in daylight of the 29th to sail from **Alexandria** on a westerly course along the coast. At dusk most of the force turned about, leaving eight torpedo boats to demonstrate with flares, smoke and automatic fire off beaches to the west of **Fuka**, an effort which the enemy did not take very seriously.

For the army, the night of 29–30 October was relatively quiet on all fronts except in the Australian salient north of **Point 29**. Here, with an unopposed advance of up to 1000 yards, 2/23 Battalion straightened its front to join its right and left flank neighbours.

While this occurred, the troops on the left, 2/15 Battalion, were laconically reporting a series of minor counter-attacks from midnight until nearly daylight. Under artillery fire these attacks were not resolutely pressed, gaining no ground and losing twenty-three prisoners, all of *90 Light Division*. What was apparently happening was that this division was sending reserves up to form its new defensive line but, in the general uncertainty and the darkness, the troops ran foul of the Australian outposts. The German division complained that it was under incessant air attacks and artillery fire throughout the night.

Further south, 10 Armoured and 51 Divisions made some minor readjustments of their combined front, the two **Sussex** battalions of 133 Brigade being brought back to a less exposed reverse slope and tied into



the Highlanders' defences on their flanks. On the rest of the army front the night was uneventful except for some small patrol clashes. A noisy demonstration by the Sonic Unit in the far south brought little enemy reaction.

### *30 October*

The 30th October dawned fine and clear, the meteorologists of the Eighth Army promising several days of good weather ahead. This was officially the day when the desert summer ceased, but Montgomery decided to retain Egyptian Summer Time for his army, mainly to save any upset that might arise in the timings of the mass of movement and artillery tables already prepared for the new offensive. It was probably a wise decision but, as it was confined to the army in the field, it brought a little confusion in contacts with the Navy, Air Force and certain base installations which had automatically reverted to standard time. <sup>1</sup>

Throughout this day conferences at all levels were held on the new offensive, and further orders issued. At the New Zealand divisional conference, **General Freyberg** made public the reason why the break-in was to be made by formations attached from other divisions. He stated that the New Zealand Division had already lost 97 officers and 1481 men since the battle opened and, as reinforcements available were few, the Division could not afford the possible casualties of the initial action without endangering its role in the pursuit for which it had trained. He also promised that his final orders would be issued the next morning.

Apart from the conferences, the day passed quietly. Air reconnaissance about midday warned the Australians of a possible attack against **Point 29**, and preparations, including heavy bomber support, were made to repulse it. Apart from several Stuka raids, however, nothing eventuated and, when Australian observers reported that several guns in the coastal area were no longer operating, it was presumed that the movements seen from the air might have been connected with the withdrawal of the enemy's heavy artillery.

The concentration of the large force due to operate under the New Zealand Division into its assembly area by **Makh Khad** was delayed by the inertia of several bodies of **10 Corps** who resisted being shifted to other areas. By nightfall most of the New Zealand units were in place, though 9 Armoured Brigade, now built up to 75 heavy tanks and 49 Crusaders, did not get beyond **Alamein** station while 151 Brigade failed to reach its appointed bivouac area. Travelling independently at dusk, 6 New Zealand Brigade left the Division to go forward to relieve 152 Brigade, and at 12.35 p.m. passed temporarily under the command of 51 Division.

As the various units sorted themselves out, **Freyberg** went round the troops and as far forward as the Highland Division's front. Impressed by the fatigue of many of the infantry due to take part in the offensive, he returned to his headquarters to reconsider all the factors involved in mounting the offensive—the strain on the artillerymen in switching without a break from the Australian operations, the difficulties inherent in the co-operation of the various troops from the different divisions, the shortness of time allowed

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<sup>1</sup> The *Panzer Army* changed from its summer to standard time on the following night, avoiding confusion by adding 'old time' or 'new time' to any timings in its orders for the next few days.

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them for reconnaissance of the routes, points of assembly and start lines, and the still near-chaotic congestion of the area shared by Australians, Highlanders and armour through which most of his assaulting troops would have to make their way to their start lines. Shortly before midnight he called on Leese to say that in his opinion a twenty-four-hour postponement was imperative; the advantages were many and the disadvantages mainly that the delay might allow information to leak to the enemy, and that the timings would have to be put two hours later because of the later rising of the moon, thus leaving less time before daylight for consolidation.

Leese agreed with his arguments which he passed on at once to the Army Commander, who some hours later issued an official notice of postponement until the night of 1–2 November. Later, Montgomery enlarged on his action, stating that although the decision was taken with reluctance, it was necessary as, once **10 Corps** and the New Zealand Division were committed, he had virtually no reserves ready to complete the break-in or to reinforce success.

While the complicated movements of assembly were taking place in their rear and the postponement of the offensive was under consideration, the Australians went steadily ahead with the next step in the crumbling process. This was in effect an enlargement of the previous attack, its first objectives the gaining of the railway and a swing along it to the south-east, as before, with a thrust from this base due north to the coast, the whole operation to be undertaken by 26 Brigade. For Phase I, 2/32 Battalion (from 24 Brigade in place of 2/23 Battalion, which was to remain under 20 Brigade in the defences by **Point 29**) was to advance in a north-north-easterly direction from the area of the point to the road and railway. For the second phase, 2/24 and 2/48 Battalions were to follow and consolidate a base between the road and railway. From this, for a third phase, 2/24 Battalion was to clear up Thompson's Post from the north while 2/48 Battalion 'exploited' towards the coast. In a final phase, 2/3 Pioneer Battalion was to attempt to carry the exploitation right to the coast. There were also two subsidiary actions planned, one by 24 Brigade to reduce a strongpoint on the railway just east of Thompson's Post and another by 9 Australian **Commando Platoon** to attack a suspected enemy headquarters off to the north of 2/15 Battalion's salient. The operation was to have the support of the field regiments of the Australian, New Zealand and Highland divisions augmented by some of the armoured divisions' field batteries and the corps' medium guns, a grand total of 312 field and 48 medium guns scheduled to fire more than 64,000 rounds on a flexible timetable permitting postponements of the various phases and sub-phases.

Although time allowed for preparation was short, the operation was

**on the same lines as those attempted before, and the Australians felt they had sufficient experience to iron out many of the earlier hitches. A detailed engineer plan was made for clearing and laying mines, and particularly for blowing and bulldozing gaps in the railway embankment, known to be a difficult and hazardous obstacle for tanks and vehicles. One problem that could not be overcome was the long and involved route to the first start line, the final northerly leg of which was exposed to enemy observation from east and west, so that the approach march could not be commenced until darkness limited observation.**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

**CHAPTER 29 – AUSTRALIANS UNDER COUNTER-ATTACK**

## CHAPTER 29

### *Australians under Counter-attack*

#### *The Night of 30/31 October*

**AT 6.45 p.m. the first units began to move up, the tail following some three hours later. In spite of delays caused by congestion along the first leg of the route and the churned-up tracks and thick dust throughout, the leading unit, 2/32 Battalion, reached its start line only a few minutes late. Hurrying forward to catch up with the supporting fire, the men overcame some light opposition to reach their intermediate objective about half an hour after midnight. Stronger resistance was met on the way to the final objective, but positions on the road and railway were soon gained and the infantry dug in while engineers of 2/3 Field Company, having lost their bulldozer on a mine, set to work to dig a gap in the embankment with picks and shovels, a task which took three hours. Although the gap came under enemy observation and fire, several vehicles with anti-tank and Vickers guns were rushed through, the weapons being set up in the defences.**

**With good news of the initial progress coming back, the second phase was allowed to continue as planned. This involved an advance, starting at 1 a.m., through 2/32 Battalion's gains, by 2/24 Battalion on the right and 2/48 Battalion on the left in a south-easterly direction between the railway and road for some 3000 to 4000 yards. Both battalions were delayed on the approach march, while 2/48 Battalion, in the lead, had to detach a company to subdue an enemy post which prevented the men from forming up on the start line. In the meantime, 2/24 Battalion, reaching its start line just after the supporting fire opened and assuming the other battalion had already started, set off at speed to catch up, but was quickly slowed down by stubborn opposition. This allowed the two battalions to regain contact, and together they fought slowly forward until losses and exhaustion brought them to a halt. One final effort was made by the commander of 2/24 Battalion who, on hearing a rumour that Thompson's Post was abandoned, led a**

patrol there only to find the position still strongly defended. With a muster of fewer than 150 riflemen between them, the two battalions then fell back on to 2/32 Battalion, 2/24 digging in south of the railway and 2/48 further north.

In the meantime 2/3 Pioneer Battalion <sup>1</sup> had arrived in 2/32 Battalion's defences and had had a battle with enemy posts to secure its start line. At the appointed time, 4.25 a.m., without clear information of the other battalions' situation, the Pioneers set off for the sea. Covering about 1500 yards without much trouble, the battalion halted while one company exploited further. With possibly about 1000 yards to go to reach the sea, this company was held up by heavy artillery fire, which continued until the approach of dawn made further movement unwise. Digging in where it stood, the company sent out a patrol which met heavy small-arms fire and was driven back with severe losses. Daylight showed the company to be almost surrounded by enemy posts and its line of withdrawal cut off. The second company, on the first objective, was in little better straits, while the third, further to the rear, had tenuous contact with 2/32 Battalion.

The diversion by 24 Brigade to assist the main operation was only partly successful. In an attack from the east along the railway, one enemy position was reduced, but the main position around Thompson's Post remained extremely active so that the opening of a direct route to 26 Brigade's gains was not achieved.

From the reports sent back by the German troops defending the coastal area it is evident that, in the belief that they had repulsed major attacks in the diversion on the opening night of the offensive and in later raids by the Australians when other fronts had given way, their confidence in their ability to stand fast was high, and it was not until the extent of this night's encirclement became known that their morale began to sag.

Although this Australian operation failed to gain the encirclement desired, it kept the *Panzer Army's* attention to the coastal area, as well



as bringing in over 500 prisoners and silencing several artillery batteries. For the *Panzer Army* it pointed the difficult decision whether to relieve the coastal pocket by counter-attacks across ground clearly dominated by the massed British artillery, or whether to withdraw at once to the new line being laid out by *90 Light Division* from **Point 29** to the sea. On the 30th the *Panzer Army* recorded that the 'systematic attrition tactics' employed by

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<sup>1</sup> See *Mud and Sand*, Part IV, the official war history of the 2/3 Pioneer Battalion, AIF, published by the 2/3 Pioneer Battalion Association, **New South Wales**.

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Montgomery could not fail to break through in the long run, <sup>1</sup> and Rommel had then ordered a new line running south from **Fuka** to be reconnoitred but had not put any particular urgency into actual defence preparations for this line.

Though all the information available to Rommel pointed to a major offensive in the north 'expected to begin at any time', <sup>2</sup> he still held to the possibility of an attack in the south, either as a separate or simultaneous operation.

There may have been a suspicion of wishful thinking in this, for a British attack in the south would have had the result of easing the pressure in the north and allowing him to swing the line back as originally planned, thus shortening his front and concentrating his defences. Whatever his reasons, he was unwilling to draw out the small but valuable stiffening of German troops in the southern sector, a transfer made possible at this time by the easing of the petrol shortage through the use of transport aircraft. The supply of ammunition had now become the major problem.

During the night of 30–31 October, *Trieste Division* had begun to relieve the front-line units of *21 Panzer Division* but was found on arrival to be too weak in numbers to take over all the German positions,

so that one battalion of *104 Regiment* had to stay in the line. The mobile units of *15* and *Littorio* divisions, now down to 39 German and 23 Italian tanks, the relieved infantry and the armour of *21 Panzer Division*, and those units of *90 Light Division* not already committed to the defences, were now to be grouped as a mobile reserve under the command of *Africa Corps*. The British operation this night caught the *Panzer Army* when reliefs were in progress and there was some doubt if a force could be assembled in time for an immediate counter-attack, but the cessation of the Australian advance at dawn allowed a respite. Early on the 31st, Rommel sent a hurried order for the commander of *Africa Corps* to counter-strike the **Point 29** area with a battle group from *21 Division*, elements of *90 Light*, and the army's mobile artillery. The diarist of the *Corps* entered the comment that 'this step was most incomprehensible as the Corps Commander had to leave his main front ... to direct a counter-attack on an unfamiliar front some distance away'.<sup>3</sup> On his arrival at *90 Light Division's* headquarters south-east of **Sidi Abd el Rahman**, von Thoma found Rommel in charge and was only allowed to take over when the operation had been going some time.

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<sup>1</sup> *Panzer Army* campaign narrative, GMDS 34375/1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> DAK diary, GMDS 25869/1.

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For the rest of Eighth Army's front the night of 30-31 October passed quietly except for some minor patrol engagements and harassing fire, which did not hinder the reorganisation plans. Dawn on the 31st saw 6 New Zealand Brigade under 51 Division's command in the positions previously held by 152 Brigade, with 26 Battalion to the south of the Australian defences around **Point 29**, and 24 Battalion with B Company of the 25th on the left, that is, on the east of 'Woodcock'. The rest of 25 Battalion was in reserve some 2000 yards to the rear. All the other troops for the New Zealand share in SUPERCHARGE were in their

**assembly areas except for 151 Brigade and some of the artillery which was supporting the Australians. There was considerable relief when news of Montgomery's decision was made known for, although most of the movement and artillery plans were completed, the troops themselves were in need of time to ensure that their weapons, equipment and vehicles were in order. There was also such congestion in the assembly areas and along the routes forward that Leese finally had to send out senior officers to get order into the chaos.**

**The postponement also gave the Army a chance to plan a 'general post' of brigades to build up a reserve but, except for the release of 131 Brigade from 44 Division to form the lorried infantry of 7 Armoured Division, most of these plans came to nothing as it became evident that the Australian operations had not cut off the coastal pocket but rather were drawing the enemy into counter-attacking.**

### *31 October*

**The exact situations in which the attacking Australian battalions had ended up were not all clearly known until daylight allowed observation. There were rumours that the Pioneers had reached the coast, that the Valentines of **40 Royal Tanks** were north of the railway in support of the bridgehead held by 26 Brigade, and that Thompson's Post had been taken. About 7 a.m. the first enemy attack came in, a weak effort from the north-east. This, and a later assembly of vehicles west of **Point 29**, was engaged and dispersed by artillery fire. The forward troops of the Pioneers came under local attack from all sides, but for a time the enemy contented himself with bombing and shelling the gap in the railway embankment cut by 26 Brigade's engineers. On the Australians' request, the Air Force provided fighter cover for this gap which offered the only route for vehicles. Even then, the passage remained hazardous as the enemy had it under observation and laid periodic salvos of 88-millimetre airburst over it. There is a confusion in the records over the course taken by the supporting tanks, but it would appear they were either deflected by mines or took a short cut, arriving**

at the railway on 2/24 Battalion's objective after dawn, that is, after that battalion had withdrawn. The engineers with the Valentines then cut a shallow gap through the embankment through which two troops emerged, but soon halted when several of the tanks fell victim to mines and fire.

Meanwhile the forces for the enemy's counter-attack had assembled under Rommel's direction and about midday came into view as they moved down the road and railway from **Sidi Abd el Rahman**. The remainder of **40 Royal Tanks'** two squadrons (one squadron had moved west to support 20 Brigade) then braved the embankment cutting and advanced between the road and railway to join 26 Brigade. Under fire from all available guns and a load of bombs from a flight of Bostons, the enemy force appeared to halt, but a portion swung round to the north, passing through the Pioneers' thin line. With fifteen or more tanks in support, this force then swung south towards 2/32 Battalion, overrunning the positions held by the two forward companies of the Pioneers who were out of ammunition, but failing to break into the main 26 Brigade defences. A confused battle rose and fell in intensity until the late afternoon, when the enemy appeared to make a final co-ordinated effort, with infantry advancing from the north-west down the railway as the tanks attacked from the north. The infantry were dispersed by artillery fire but the tanks worked slowly forward, forcing some of the anti-tank guns and the Valentines to fall back through one or other of the gaps to the shelter on the south of the embankment. The losses in **40 Royal Tanks**, whose crews with their two-pounders fought valiantly against the more powerfully gunned German tanks, were 44 men and 21 tanks.

The enemy's attacks were directed mainly at the new gains so that the 20 Brigade battalions around and north of **Point 29** were not directly threatened, though they came under a great deal of fire; the anti-tank screen set out in the wide gap between 2/32 and 2/15 Battalions was in continuous action.

From the enemy's point of view the operation appeared at first to be

going well. The commander of the battle group of tanks, infantry and artillery reported to Rommel that his force had captured over 100 prisoners and knocked out 18 tanks, though he admitted he had not broken through the small enemy force north of the railway and made contact with *125 Regiment*. In the afternoon Rommel handed over to von Thoma with orders to complete the task and contact was finally made with some of the isolated posts of *125 Regiment*, though the British bridgehead over the railway still stood firm. Reporting to Rommel, von Thoma advised the withdrawal of the regiment, even if it had to abandon some of its heavy weapons and equipment, for its situation was merely inviting attack. His advice was supported by the arrival after dark of the commander of the regiment with the information that only a few of his men were still holding their original positions. Rommel, however, insisted that the counter-attacks should continue, possibly in the hope that reoccupation of the pocket would provide a base for spoiling action against the offensive which he and his staff expected to be released at any moment.

While the Australians bore the burden of attack and counter-attack, the rest of 30 Corps' front was relatively quiet on the 31st. Most of the corps' artillery within range of the Australian front was busy all day with opportunity and 'on call' targets as well as defensive tasks, the guns of 7 Medium Regiment laying shells into the area of resistance around Thompson's Post for a solid five hours. Enemy shelling was also heavy, not only on the salient but also on the area to the rear, one burst catching 25 Battery of 4 New Zealand Field Regiment as it was moving out to assemble for SUPERCHARGE and causing several casualties. Stukas also were active, especially over the gun lines. At Eighth Army Headquarters plans were made, cancelled and reissued for **1 South African Division** to extend further north into 51 Division's front to release 154 Brigade to reserve.

**General Freyberg** used the extra time allowed by the postponement of the operation to hold a series of detailed conferences with the commanders and staffs of the troops under his command, using a scale

model of the ground prepared by his engineers to explain movement and artillery plans. For fire support, his CRA, Brigadier Weir, had advised similar arrangements to those used by the Division on the first night, of a thin barrage filled out by concentrations on known points of resistance timed to coincide with the barrage. **Freyberg** stressed the need for the infantry to reach and hold the objective firmly, so that the engineers could clear the tracks and the armour get forward by dawn. He warned those concerned that, on the objective, they would be in a dangerous salient, exposed to counter-attack which they would have to repulse with their own weapons and artillery fire; they should not rely on the tanks to defend them. By the evening of the 31st most of the troops under **Freyberg's** command for the attack were gathered in their correct assembly areas. The strength of 9 Armoured Brigade, after considerable pressure had been exerted by **Freyberg** against a proposal that one regiment should be cannibalised and replaced by a Valentine regiment, now stood at a total of 80 Shermans and 52 Crusaders. All other formations, including 151 and 152 Brigades, reported that they were complete in most essentials for the battle. Some temporary confusion was caused by a proposal by Leese that 131 Brigade (44 Division) should replace 152 Brigade, apparently so that the Highland Division should remain complete, but this was settled when the Army Commander ruled that 131 Brigade was to go as lorried infantry to 7 Armoured Division, which was then in process of moving to the rear of the northern sector.

In 13 Corps, deception measures designed to precede **SUPERCHARGE** were allowed to continue in spite of the postponement. During daylight a mass movement of vehicles was made to give the impression that the front was being reinforced, and this was followed after dark by a programme of raids, harassing fire, and simulated mine-clearing under smoke screens. Although the desired effect of keeping the enemy guessing was probably attained, the only genuine raid—by Fighting French troops against **Point 92**, west of Munassib—was firmly repulsed, while elsewhere the enemy conserved his fire until closely approached but showed no indications of withdrawal.



Towards evening the Australian commander, Morshead, having personally visited the salient north of the railway, decided that the surviving troops of 26 Brigade were in no fit state to withstand further attack and ordered that they be relieved by 24 Brigade, the latter's place in the original coastal defences being taken by a screen of the Divisional Cavalry. In one of the most efficient and quickest moves of the battle, 24 Brigade handed over to the Cavalry and, travelling the circuitous and difficult route to the salient, took over the defences under enemy fire and with the threat of attack possible at any moment. The brigade took its own 2/32 Battalion and the remains of 2/3 Pioneer Battalion under command *in situ*. The two fresh battalions, 2/28 and 2/43, were in nearly full strength, while the relieved units, 2/24 and 2/48 Battalions, had been at little more than company strength so that new positions had to be sited and trenches dug before the defences were firm.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately the night was quiet except for sporadic shelling and mortaring and the two battalions were well dug in before dawn on 1 November. A similar quiet prevailed across the whole of the army front, allowing 154 Brigade to be relieved by the South Africans and for some readjustments of 13 Corps' troops.

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<sup>1</sup> 2/24 Battalion was down to 140 men, most of whom had been in action for nine days and nights. The 2/28th arrived with the impression that a continuous defence line ran from the railway to the sea.— *The Second 28th*, p. 107.

‘As our weary men climbed aboard the transports to move to Tel el Eisa, they said farewell in typical Australian language with, “Start digging, you b—s, or you'll be sorry!”— *The Second Twenty-fourth*, p. 222.

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The planning for SUPERCHARGE called for an accounting by Eighth Army of its losses and of the resources still available. In men, 30 Corps had lost, between 23 and 31 October inclusive, some 1157 killed, 4229 wounded and 982 missing, a total of 6368. Comparative figures in such detail for 10 and 13 Corps are lacking but were included in a round figure of 10,000 men for the whole Army. Of the infantry divisions in 30

Corps, the Australians and Highlanders had been hardest hit with more than 1000 casualties each, and the South Africans had lost under 750. <sup>1</sup> All these three divisions were still battle-worthy as they had commenced the action with three full brigades each, their quota of divisional troops, and reinforcement pools of varying sizes.

The New Zealand Division, with two under-strength infantry brigades in the field, had sustained losses of 1860 men between the 1st and 31st of the month, of whom 1087 had been evacuated sick <sup>2</sup> and 773 were battle casualties.

Unless 4 New Zealand Brigade, training in **Maadi** for conversion to armour, were brought into the field—and this was against the accepted plan for the Division—the Division was hardly battle-worthy as almost all its trained infantry reinforcements had already been put in the field. However, with its experienced and efficient organisation and its integrated armoured brigade, the Division could still provide a valuable force for the mobile operations in which it was trained. For this reason the two British brigades, from 50 and 51 Divisions, were used for the opening phase. The Highland formation had sufficient reinforcements for its immediate needs and even with heavy loss in 152 Brigade would still be operational on a two-brigade basis, while 50 Division, from which 151 Brigade was drawn, had earlier been labelled as ‘expendable’ as its history since **Gazala** shows.

Comparative casualty figures for the *Panzer Army* cannot be readily assessed, for the few surviving returns shown in the records are clearly incomplete. British records list a total of 3921 prisoners counted into the Eighth Army cages by the evening of the 31st, and from this it could fairly be assumed that the *Panzer Army*, though on the defensive and thus likely to have lower losses than the attackers, had as high a casualty total as 30 Corps, if not as high as that of the whole of Eighth Army.

In armour the British were reaching a higher ratio of superiority as losses on both sides increased. On 1 November the runners available



amounted to 176 Shermans, 159 Grants, 272 Crusaders, 115

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<sup>1</sup> South African reports vary from 617 to 734, the higher figure possibly including losses from sickness.

<sup>2</sup> Jaundice (infective hepatitis) and malaria, developed in **Syria**, were responsible for much of this high sick list.

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Valentines and 97 Stuarts, a total of 819, with another 300 in process of recovery and repair. The *Panzer Army* was down to approximately 100 heavy German tanks and 189 Italian in the field, with possibly no more than 100 of all types under repair. <sup>1</sup>

## *1 November*

On the morning of 1 November it looked as if the postponement of **SUPERCHARGE** had caused no complications. From a prisoner taken by 6 New Zealand Brigade it was learnt that *Trieste* battalions had taken over 21 *Division's* infantry posts, and from intercepts and other sources it was assumed that the whole of *Africa Corps* was now assembled on the north of the front, leaving only Italians in the path of the attack. The interception of German wireless at this period was giving early warning of the preparations for counter-attacks against the Australians so that defensive fire could be ready on call.

There is a strong hint in the *Panzer Army's* records that Rommel had begun to lose faith in his ability to control the battle at this stage. He was aware that the British still had a pool of resources that would enable them to continue their attrition tactics for some time yet and, in fact, his staff had already supplied him with an appreciation in which a strong attack in the north, possibly with an outflanking move round the south, was considered certain and immediate. His own resources, particularly in men, petrol and ammunition, were being used up faster than they could possibly be replaced (two ships carrying ammunition to **Tobruk** were lost at this time), and his transport situation was such that

a speedy general withdrawal was impossible. Yet he seems to have relied on the hope that the British would tire and relax their pressure, for he took few steps to prepare the second line reconnoitred at **Fuka**, merely asking the Italian rear authorities to provide labour on it, while he continued to concentrate on what the *Panzer Army* narrative referred to as 'skilfully handled counter attacks' to hold a front line, much of which had been hastily prepared for defence and occupied by units in uncertain contact to flanks and rear.

On this day Rommel continued to supervise von Thoma's command, arriving at *90 Light Division's* battle headquarters shortly after 8 a.m. in time to watch a heavy attack by the *Luftwaffe* aimed at the Australian salient. This air effort was either precipitate or its results, in the form of Stukas flaming to earth, caused ground action to be deferred. Of the enemy bombers the Desert

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<sup>1</sup> Eighth Army's casualties and tank totals are based on information in the British official narrative and New Zealand records; the *Panzer Army's* on the campaign narrative, GMDS 34375/1-2.

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Air Force claimed seven certainly, three probably and five possibly destroyed, and the South Africans and the enemy's own troops seem to have received most of the Stukas' jettisoned bombs.

By 9 a.m. the *Panzer Army's* radioed instructions, intercepted by the Eighth Army, made it appear that an attack was imminent but nothing developed immediately, thus allowing the sixteen surviving Valentines of **40 Royal Tanks** to take up positions to support **24 Australian Brigade** and for the artillery to be ready 'on call'. Some of von Thoma's force was observed and fired on as it assembled on the road to the north-west of the salient about ten o'clock, but another two hours passed before a definite forward movement was seen. The enemy's objective was the 'Hut' or 'Blockhouse' at **Kilo 138** on the railway, a low stone building of uncertain origin used by the Australians as a collecting point for

wounded and prisoners. Around it the newly arrived 2/28 and 2/43 Battalions were disposed in far from ideal defences, overlooked by enemy outposts on surrounding ridges. By midday the defences were under heavy fire of all sorts as the counter-attacking force advanced from the north-west down the line of the road and railway where, according to the German records, there were unmined lanes on which the tanks and following vehicles could travel. Although tanks and infantry took full advantage of any cover the ground afforded, the advance faltered under the curtain of artillery defensive fire called down. The Australian anti-tank gunners and the Rhodesian 289 Anti-Tank Battery, RA, manning the front, including the gap between 24 Brigade and 2/15 Battalion, did much to keep the tanks from closing with the infantry defences and were probably responsible for causing part of the enemy force to turn away to the north before pressing on further east. Here the enemy regained contact with the troops of *125 Regiment* still holding out in Thompson's Post. Probing advances and heavy fire continued throughout the afternoon, to die down towards dusk, but nowhere had the counter-attack succeeded in doing more than cause some minor withdrawals of Australian outposts. Casualties in 24 Brigade, however, were heavy, equal in fact to the total number of men 26 Brigade would have had available had it not been relieved overnight. <sup>1</sup>

The Australians' determined resistance and heavy artillery fire took its toll of the enemy force, particularly of the infantry of *90 Light Division*, whose commander told Rommel towards evening that his troops were not strong enough to occupy a line to the surviving *125 Regiment's* positions or to mount another attack.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Second 28th*, p. 112.

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Rommel, however, refused to call up any of his thin reserves yet, as he had plans to draw the Eighth Army's attention from the coast by simulating attacks on *15 and 164 Divisions'* fronts, that is, on the southern flank of the area chosen by Montgomery for

. Reminiscing over this period of the battle, Rommel claimed that he was fully aware that he would soon have to retreat, 'But first we had to wait for the British to move, to ensure that they would be engaged in battle and could not suddenly throw their strength into a gap in our front and thus force a break-through'.<sup>1</sup> Even if he was mentally prepared for retreat, the lack of practical preparations would indicate that he gambled on his conviction that the British command would remain 'slow and cumbrous', unable to follow up strongly and quickly.

The British move that Rommel anticipated was being prepared methodically throughout 1 November. At an early morning conference at the Tactical Headquarters of the Army and at a co-ordinating conference held by **Freyberg** at his own headquarters, timings and movements were settled. The operation was to start at five minutes past one on the 2nd, when the infantry under New Zealand command would set off from the existing forward line under artillery support similar to that used by the New Zealand Division on the opening night, that is, a creeping barrage thickened by concentrations on known or suspected points of resistance. The advance was to lead due west for about three miles past 6 Brigade's front to reach the 863 easting grid by 3.45 a.m. Two hours later 9 Armoured Brigade was to pass through the infantry on this grid and, under another barrage, drive 2000 yards approximately to cross beyond the **Rahman Track**. Here the New Zealand armour was to deploy and prepare to repulse counter-attacks which were expected to come in from the north. With its leading regiment following an hour later, 2 Armoured Brigade was to pass through the gap cut by 9 Brigade, closely followed by 7 Motor and 8 Armoured Brigades. These three brigades were each given a definite objective on the ground and their task was to complete the destruction of the enemy's armoured forces and open a gap to the west. Though there are certain points of timing and movement which are difficult to reconcile in the various records of the plans, the generally understood intention was that, even if the New Zealand operation was not fully successful, **10 Corps'** armour should advance close behind 9 Armoured Brigade and complete the breakthrough. Once the armoured battle was joined, 9 Armoured Brigade was to pass to **10 Corps'**

command.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 314.

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To avoid previous muddles over desert navigation and map reading, Army ordered that direction beacons should be erected well forward from which bearing pickets could be surveyed in along the routes across the ground won. These beacons were poles about 20 feet high carrying the distinguishing shapes of the named routes—Diamond, Boomerang, and Square—and they quickly proved their value. After Lieutenant-Colonel Baker of 28 Battalion had attended a conference <sup>1</sup> at 151 Brigade's headquarters, he was so concerned over several details that he had his Intelligence Section check the position of the brigade start lines against the beacons, only to learn that the lines were well out of the correct positions. At dusk, these lines were hastily relaid.

Though little actual movement towards the start line could be made in daylight in case of enemy observation, some risks had to be taken in the rear areas over which strong fighter cover was maintained continuously. Most of the tactical headquarters for the operation were occupied during the day by advance parties, and guiding parties were sent along the various routes as far as the start lines. In the afternoon 5 New Zealand Brigade travelled from the Onsol area to the **Alamein** station, detaching 28 Battalion to join 151 Brigade. This latter brigade marched up to a position south of **Tell el Eisa**, where it halted at dusk across the Diamond and Boomerang tracks on the right of 152 Brigade, which was already assembled along Sun track.

No movement of the armour was made in daylight, the time being spent in getting the tanks into fighting trim and assembled in their various columns. No written orders were apparently issued for the armoured brigades or regiments, the final plans being passed on verbally at conferences held late in the day. The armoured plan was for a minefield task force of 2 Rifle Battalion, and three troops of Crusaders with engineers and other necessary troops, to travel in three sections,

one to a track, along Diamond, Boomerang and Square tracks as far west as the success of the infantry allowed. Following the cleared routes, the three regiments of 2 Armoured Brigade, then at a total strength of 90 Shermans and 66 Crusaders, were to lead the break-out. Next was to come 7 Motor Brigade, also in three columns carried in armoured cars, carriers and trucks, and with four of the new Churchill tanks.<sup>2</sup> Finally, **8 Armoured Brigade**, at a strength of 62 Shermans and Grants and 47 Crusaders, was to pass through the Motor Brigade and come up on the left of 2

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<sup>1</sup> ‘... the most unsatisfactory Bde or other conference I have ever attended. There was no orderly presentation ... of either information or of the job that had to be done ... the orders were very indefinite....’ Cody, 28 (*Maori Battalion*, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> Of these four tanks being tried out in battle conditions, one broke down on the way forward, one was knocked out later in the day, and two retired with guns out of action.

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Armoured Brigade. All three brigades were under 1 Armoured Division, which was to command the armoured battle. In the rear 7 Armoured Division with 22 Armoured Brigade<sup>1</sup> and its lorried infantry provided the reserve for exploitation, while those troops of **10 Armoured Division** which had been withdrawn from the front were placed temporarily under 30 Corps' command.

Along most of the Eighth Army's front except for the Australian salient the day of 1 November passed with little more than customary harassing fire by both sides and occasional sharp exchanges between guns or tanks. In the southern sector 13 Corps continued its deception movements during the day and prepared for raiding and reconnaissance patrols for the coming night under orders to keep in contact with the enemy and follow up any withdrawal.

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<sup>1</sup> The tank strength of 22 Armoured Brigade on 1 November has

**not been ascertained, but from later references it must have had some 50 heavy tanks, 40 Crusaders and some Stuarts.**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN



## CHAPTER 30 – OPERATION SUPERCHARGE

## CHAPTER 30

### Operation *SUPERCHARGE*

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#### *The Night of 1/2 November*

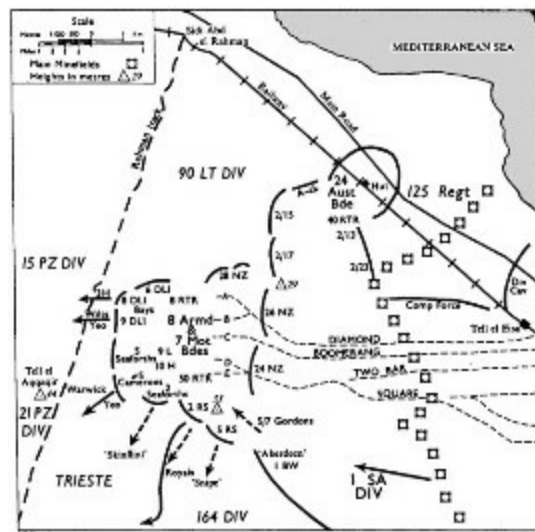
**TOWARDS** evening, as the setting sun blinded the defenders, enemy tanks closed in from the west against the salient held by **24 Australian Brigade** at the same time as infantry infiltrated from the east. Some of the movement fired on was possibly the withdrawal of equipment and wounded men of *125 Regiment*, but the proximity of the enemy round three sides of the salient brought constant sharp exchanges of fire which continued well into dark, even after the infantry advance of *SUPERCHARGE* had begun. At one time the Australian field gunners had to switch from their tasks in support of the advance to dealing with urgent calls from **24 Brigade** for defensive fire.

The *SUPERCHARGE* operations opened at sea where, about midnight, four motor torpedo-boats off the coast to the north of **Sidi Abd el Rahman** set adrift balloons and rafts carrying flares. The boats then sailed further west, where they fired such a variety of weapons and flares as to cause the enemy's coastal defence headquarters to report an attempted landing by 200 men. The air offensive also started before the ground action with bombing attacks on the areas where the panzer groups were thought to be and along the road between **Daba** and **Matruh**. The enemy's wireless frequencies also were jammed by the special aircraft of **162 Squadron, RAF**, and this, combined with some lucky hits on key points of *Africa Corps'* signal network, badly disrupted the enemy's communication system for some hours.

Ground operations did not start as auspiciously as they might for poor communications between the two attached brigades and the New Zealand headquarters brought some confusion in the assembly of the troops, especially among the support groups forming up behind the

infantry on the start line. Most of this was sufficiently straightened out by staff and liaison officers to allow the operation to start on time.

The first of the attacking formations to move was 151 Brigade, which left **Tell el Eisa** in trucks at 7 p.m. along the Diamond track, with 28 New Zealand Battalion in the lead followed by its own three **Durham** battalions <sup>1</sup> and its supporting arms, among which were 34 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, E Troop of 32 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, 4 Company and No. 3 Platoon of 1 Company of 27 NZ Machine Gun Battalion, and **244 Anti-Tank Battery**, RA. Engineers of 7 NZ Field Company moved with the forward troops and the forty-four Valentines of 8 Royal Tank Regiment brought up the rear. Artillery observation officers of 5 NZ Field Regiment in support of the brigade were distributed among the four battalions.



OPERATION SUPERCHARGE, NIGHT 1-2 AND 2 NOVEMBER  
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<sup>1</sup> i.e., 6, 8 and 9 Battalions of the **Durham Light Infantry**.

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The start line for **SUPERCHARGE** commenced close to **Point 29** and stretched due south through the defences held by 26 and 24 Battalions. From this line, 28 Battalion was to advance on a narrow front from just south of **Point 29** as far as the 865 easting grid, a distance of about two miles altogether, and form a front facing north, linked on the right to the Australians, and so covering the flank of the

main area of penetration. Immediately to the south of the Maoris, 8 Durhams on the right and 9 Durhams on the left were to advance on a 2000 metre <sup>1</sup> front as far as the 863 easting grid, about 2000 metres beyond the Maoris. Moving close behind the leading battalions, 6 Durhams were to wheel right when the objective was gained, and fill in the gap between the Maoris and 8 Durhams. The task given to the 7 Field Company sappers was to extend Diamond track in two lanes, Diamond A and Diamond B, behind the infantry as far as the final objective. <sup>2</sup>

Half an hour before midnight the four battalions under 151 Brigade, debussing close to their start lines, were deploying ready to follow the artillery barrage due to open at five minutes past one.

In the same manner 152 Brigade assembled on its start line, unfortunately suffering some casualties when one of its columns missed the track in the dust and darkness and ran into a minefield. Engineers of 8 NZ Field Company and the thirty-eight Valentines of **50 Royal Tanks** followed the infantry battalions. For keeping its men supplied with meals and other needs, this Highland brigade had an elaborate administrative plan which included the issue of strips of rifle cleaning cloth ('four-by-two') to be worn on the back of every man in the form of a St. Andrew's Cross in order to permit easy recognition. The men also wore full battledress, in contrast to the troops of 151 Brigade who were still in their summer uniform of jerseys, shirts and shorts. The plan of advance of 152 Brigade was for 5 Seaforths to take the right flank and 5 Camerons the left, while 2 Seaforths followed on the left to cover the southern flank. The attached New Zealand engineers' task was to extend the end of Square track from 24 Battalion's FDLs in two lanes about 500 yards apart and called Square D and Square E.

Responsibility for the protection of the southern face of the area of penetration was separated from the New Zealand Division's part in

**SUPERCHARGE**

and was placed on the shoulders of 51 Division, which allocated 133

**Lorried Infantry Brigade (attached from 10 Armoured Division) for the task. This brigade, which was already**

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**<sup>1</sup> Metres were used in this operation, rather than yards, to facilitate map reading; 2000 metres is a little less than one and a quarter miles.**

**<sup>2</sup> Of the three tracks on the SUPERCHARGE front, Diamond and Square were split, but not Boomerang. To prevent confusion they were named Diamond A and B, Boomerang C, Square D and E.**

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**holding a stretch of the front line, planned to send one of its two battalions, 2 Royal Sussex, to occupy the old 'Woodcock' locality, linking forward to 2 Seaforths while 5 Royal Sussex filled the rest of the flank back to the defences held by 153 Brigade. Profiting by recent experience in which lorried infantry methods had brought heavy losses in vehicles, the **Sussex** battalions planned to advance on foot with picks and shovels carried by the men and only essential vehicles following. A special artillery barrage was prepared for 133 Brigade, starting some twenty minutes after the supporting fire for the main operation, that is, at 1.25 a.m. Though the brigade had to await reliefs by troops of 153 Brigade, both of the **Sussex** battalions were on their start lines in good time.**

**Just before the main barrage was due to open at five past one, the men of the two battalions of 6 NZ Brigade, across whose defences the start line was laid out, moved back some 400 yards as a safety precaution. Prior to this some carefully selected hostile battery positions were fired on but in such a limited and seemingly erratic manner that the enemy would not take warning. The deception schemes in SUPERCHARGE were in fact generally successful for, having observed engineers working on the tracks leading north, the enemy was expecting further attacks from the Australian northern front. When a 'deception barrage' was fired on this front, at the same time as the main barrage, it so happened that *90 Light, Division's* communications to the rear were in order while**

***Africa Corps'* signal system was in chaos through the air bombing and jamming, so that the rear headquarters received news only of the deception barrage and consequently assumed that the attack was coming in where they had expected it.**

### **The main barrage for**

**SUPERCHARGE**

**began on time with smoke rounds to signal the opening line, the 867 easting grid, and further smoke to indicate the first lift twenty minutes later. The extreme ends and the centre of the main barrage were also marked by single smoke rounds as well as by tracer fired horizontally by Bofors guns. The artillery programme made use of 296 field guns firing nearly 50,000 rounds and 48 medium guns firing 4000 rounds in the barrage and concentrations, apart from the heavy counter-battery tasks to neutralise gun positions further to the enemy's rear. <sup>1</sup> From the first barrage lift, the fire in the main barrage lifted 100 yards every two and a half minutes until 2.20 a.m., when it had reached the 865 grid. It was then held on a line 100 yards further west for half an hour before moving on at the same rate until 3.45 a.m., when**

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**<sup>1</sup> Apart from defensive tasks fired on call, SUPERCHARGE plans allowed for an expenditure of 104,576 rounds of 25-pounder and 8284 rounds of medium ammunition.**

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**it reached the final objective, the 863 grid. For the next two hours a curtain of fire at slow rate (two rounds per gun per minute) was to fall forward of the objective, after which the barrage for 9 Armoured Brigade's advance opened. This barrage lifted at the rate of 100 metres every three minutes for an hour until it was falling close to the 860 grid.**

**As soon as the main barrage opened, the leading troops of 151 and 152 Brigades left the start line and closed up as near as safety permitted to the line of bursting shells ahead, and when the smoke shells signalled the first lift, the whole front advanced. On the far right the leading companies of 28 Battalion, C on the right and D left, met opposition**

almost from the start. Overcoming determined resistance by both German and Italian positions, C Company reached its objective by 2.30 a.m., though suffering heavy casualties in the process. D Company met less opposition and reached its objective a little earlier, but could then find no sign of either C Company on its right flank or 151 Brigade on its left. The company commander therefore set out his men in positions for all-round defence and had just got them organised when he was joined by B Company which, coming up behind to mop up, had been halted by a curtain of defensive fire falling in its path. When this fire ceased the company hurried forward, only to meet a line of enemy posts. Charging with bayonets and grenades, the men broke through the enemy line, collecting numerous prisoners in the process. The two companies then formed a defensive box with D facing west and B north. Here they were joined by survivors of C Company who found themselves too few and isolated to hold their objective. The fourth company, A Company, whose task had been to follow C Company in a mopping-up role and then extend the right flank to link with the Australians, met a great deal of unsubdued opposition in its path but eventually reached the area of its objective. Enemy posts on the east prevented contact being made with the Australians while, on the west, only a few wounded men could be found where C Company was expected to be. The company then dug in, rather isolated and under fire from three sides. By dawn therefore the battalion, though on the general line of its objective, was in two groups out of contact with each other and with the Australians on the right or the Durhams on the left. The positions were under enemy observation and any movement was greeted by fire from machine guns and snipers.

The support column was delayed by scattered mines but E Troop of 34 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, 3 Platoon of 3 Machine Gun Company and some of the battalion's 3-inch mortars managed to get into positions behind the main position before daylight made movement impossible. The attached **Royal Artillery** troop of antitank guns, <sup>1</sup> attempting to move further forward, was badly shot up but managed to site two of its guns, and the Valentines of B Squadron of **8 Royal Tanks** found cover of sorts in the rear. Casualties in 28 Battalion amounted to nearly 100 men



and included the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Baker, who was wounded early in the advance, as well as the second-in-command, Major Hart,<sup>2</sup> who was sent forward to take over. As many of the enemy posts overrun were manned by Germans who resisted to the last, the toll of enemy dead was high, while some 162 Germans and 189 Italians were sent back as prisoners. Under Major C. M. Bennett, who took command after Hart was mortally wounded, the Maoris held their exposed positions throughout daylight, constantly under fire and without communications to the rear, even by runner. Members of the battalion were awarded a Distinguished Service Order, a Distinguished Conduct Medal and two Military Medals for their share in this action.

On 28 Battalion's left, A and B Companies of 8 Durhams led off on time, with C Company following under orders to pull up on the right of A Company as soon as the Maoris had dealt with a known strongpoint a short way west of the start line. The leading troops came under heavy fire as they engaged a line of enemy posts, but broke through to overrun a headquarters area which included a dressing station and a tank recovery park. Many of the enemy in this area were too demoralised by the barrage to offer resistance. By 2.30 a.m. the two foremost companies had reached the first objective, but in a rather disorganised state as they had lost about a hundred men and several of their officers. The battalion commander therefore ordered C Company, still fairly intact, to pass through as the barrage resumed. This company, against little direct opposition, reached the final objective about four o'clock with some fifty Italian prisoners in hand. Here, however, the company could make no contact with the troops expected to be on either flank, while its wireless link to the rear had been destroyed; but before the men had completed digging-in, battalion headquarters with the support column and some of the other two companies arrived and were followed shortly by some of the British tanks. Before dawn the defences had been reinforced with two troops of 34 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, two platoons of 4 NZ Machine Gun Company and the battalion's own 3-inch mortars and two-pounder guns. Contact was later established with the other Durham battalions on the



<sup>1</sup> A troop of 244 Battery of 84 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA.

<sup>2</sup> Maj I. A. Hart, m.i.d.; born NZ 24 Oct 1904; barrister and solicitor; died of wounds 2 Nov 1942.

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flanks but the battalion was low in strength and not well sited for defence.

On the left of the brigade sector, 9 Durhams fared better up to the first objective but, on resuming their advance behind the barrage, encountered dug-in tanks and gun positions. These, however, were not defended with resolution, the enemy apparently being affected by the shellfire of the barrage, and by four o'clock 9 Durhams were up with their neighbours of 8 Durhams on the final objective. With support arms which included a troop of 34 Anti-Tank Battery and a platoon of 4 Machine Gun Company coming up before dawn, the two **Durham** battalions had established a continuous front to the west before the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade were due to pass through.

The third battalion, 6 Durhams, let the others get some 500 yards ahead before it left the start line, and met only desultory shelling and mortaring but no direct opposition for the first 1000 yards. Once beyond the area cleared by the Maoris the battalion came under heavy machine-gun fire from the north. One platoon of D Company, sent to investigate the source of the fire, was pinned to the ground and eventually the whole company had to be committed. Leaving this engagement still in progress, A Company moved from reserve and, with C Company on its left, overran some scattered infantry and Italian gun crews to reach the final objective in the rear of 8 Durhams. A battalion front was then set out facing north behind a screen of carriers and backed by the support weapons, which included two platoons of 1 NZ Machine Gun Company and 244 Battery (less a troop) of 84 Anti-Tank Regiment, RA. Upon D Company's disengaging and joining the rest of the battalion, a wide gap was left unprotected between the Durhams' positions and the Maoris.

However, 151 Brigade had achieved its task of occupying the north-west corner of the final objective though its infantry was very thin on the ground, the casualties amounting to 50 killed, 211 wounded and 87 missing, a brigade total of 348. Prisoners captured in 151 Brigade's sector amounted to about 350, and came mainly from *115 Panzer Grenadier Regiment, Littorio* and *Trento* divisions.

From first light onwards, the three **Durham** battalions could do little to improve their defences or communications because of the fierce tank battle that raged in and beyond their positions.

Behind the attacking infantry of 151 Brigade sappers of 7 NZ Field Company set out with two Scorpions to extend the two branches of Diamond track. Work on Diamond A went forward steadily under considerable fire and the carriers leading the Durhams' support column were guided through before 5 a.m. On Diamond B the engineers' transport with most of their gear was destroyed in a burst of shellfire, but the party then cut and marked a short junction from the point reached north to Diamond A. The commander of 151 Brigade, Brigadier Percy, relying on the wireless in the carriers of the support group for information of his men's progress, grew impatient and complained to **Divisional Headquarters** that the sappers were not working, upon which the engineer commander, Lieutenant-Colonel F. M. H. Hanson, sent staff officers to investigate, and called up a reserve party to complete Diamond B. Before the staff officers could report on the progress of the clearing, Brigadier Percy made another complaint, and this was supported by the Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks** who reported that the markings on their route had run out and they were among mines. Further investigation showed that the Valentines had missed the marked route and were stranded in a minefield, so a Scorpion was despatched to flail a way through to the marked and lit route. The complaints caused **Freyberg** to suggest to Leese that **10 Corps'** armour should be directed to follow 152 Brigade, whose mine-clearing appeared to be going smoothly. However, before any alteration could be made, word came in that both Diamond tracks offered a route to the objective. When the Valentines

were led clear of the minefield, the regimental commander ordered B Squadron, which was in the lead, to hurry forward to the support of 28 Battalion, while A and C Squadrons continued to the west to join the Durhams.<sup>1</sup> All three squadrons, each of about twelve runners, reached the forward troops about dawn.

On the left flank of the advance, 152 Brigade had on the whole an easier task. The men of 5 Seaforths on the right met very little opposition before the first objective and managed to bypass some dug-in tanks on the way forward to the final objective, which they gained shortly after 4 a.m. with extremely light casualties. The left-flank battalion, 5 Camerons, met similar tanks in greater depth, but the leading troops kept close to the barrage to reach the final objective before 4 a.m., though with company formation somewhat disorganised. Losses here were also low, one account giving the total as only twelve.

In the rear 2 Seaforths advanced with its four companies in line across the brigade sector to find that most of the enemy, even those manning the dug-in tanks, had either retreated or were demoralised by the barrage and the passage of the leading troops through their lines. The battalion collected some thirty prisoners, mainly of *Ariete* and *Littorio* divisions. On reaching the rear of 5 Camerons, the

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<sup>1</sup> The planned distribution was for A Squadron to join 28 Battalion and B and C Squadrons to join the Durhams.

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Seaforths swung left and quickly formed a front to the left rear facing south, later extending to join with the front of the Royal Sussex to the south-east.

Behind 152 Brigade, 8 NZ Field Company sappers extended Square D track close behind the infantry to let the brigade transport go forward, but had to gap a minefield to clear Square E for **50 Royal Tanks**. At a cost of ten casualties, both tracks were cleared and the Valentines moving up well before dawn. For some reason the battalion support

columns were delayed, 5 Seaforths' transport reaching the front after daylight and 5 Camerons' close to 9 a.m.

The Valentines on their way up received reports of enemy tanks on the left of 5 Camerons' front. One squadron turned off to engage them but lost three tanks to anti-tank fire. After two heavy concentrations by the artillery of the prepared defensive tasks for the southern flank, the enemy tanks appeared 'to be melting away', in the words of a message from 152 Brigade. Two squadrons then took up supporting positions behind 5 Camerons with the third squadron and regimental headquarters a little way further to the rear. From its starting strength of 38 tanks, **50 Royal Tanks**, through breakdowns, track damage by scattered mines and enemy action, was now down to 24 'runners'. However, they claimed to have destroyed two enemy tanks.

The task of forming a line to cover the southern flank of the main advance was carried out successfully by 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade against little enemy opposition. The leading battalion, 2 Royal Sussex, overran some gun positions and by dawn was in contact with the left of 2 Seaforths, while 5 Royal Sussex, meeting little direct opposition, carried the line on to the south-east to join 5/7 Gordons on 51 Division's front. Casualties in the lorried infantry were very few, but over sixty prisoners were gathered in during the advance and numerous stragglers were rounded up after daylight.

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Once the infantry advance had been successfully completed and the new front line formed and supported against counter-attack, the way was clear for the second phase of SUPERCHARGE, the advance of 9 Armoured Brigade. The task laid down was for the brigade to cross the infantry line on the 863 grid at 5.45 a.m. and, under a moving barrage, to occupy the rising ground on the 861 grid and there 'prepare to resist armoured counter-attack'. In effect the brigade was to draw out the enemy's armour and take the first blows to screen the arrival of 1 Armoured Division. This was the key action of the whole operation, for it

was expected to complete the gap punched by the infantry to the extent of smashing the rearmost anti-tank gun line along the **Rahman Track** and so allowing the armour free access to the enemy's rear. Montgomery himself announced that he was prepared for heavy casualties in the brigade.

Forming up near the **Alamein** station with 105 tanks in battle order, 9 Armoured Brigade set off in its three regimental groups as darkness fell about seven o'clock. The early part of this night was moonless and exceptionally dark, while the sandy tracks over which the brigade travelled had been pounded by months of heavy traffic, shelling and bombing into a powdery dust that rose with the slightest disturbance by wind or movement. Visibility was so bad that speed was often reduced to a crawl and numerous collisions occurred.

In the lead the **3 Hussars** group, of some 300 vehicles, made good time along Sun track, turning off to the west at the Diamond track junction to cross the railway near **Tell el Eisa** station. About midnight the column halted to refuel and then set off again for the infantry start line. Here it caught up with the tail of the **8 Royal Tanks** column whose head, as earlier related, had encountered a minefield. By the time the Valentines moved on, the mines blocking Diamond B had been cleared so the Hussars advanced again. Movement was still slow and stoppages frequent and it was not long before harassing fire from the enemy artillery began to fall, causing damage among the soft-skinned vehicles in the tail of the column. The lorried infantry of A Company of **14 Sherwood Foresters** and the gunners of A Troop, 31 NZ Anti-Tank Battery suffered numerous casualties and fell behind the tanks, the gunners eventually having to pull off to the side of the track to reorganise as so many of their guns and *portées* had been damaged by shellfire or collisions. Six of the Hussars tanks were damaged, four by breakdowns and two by mines, but by 3.30 a.m. the leading tanks were passing the infantry's intermediate objective and by 5.15 a.m. had reached the defences being dug by 9 Durhams. The attached squadron of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, following the tanks, managed to round up a

number of enemy stragglers.

The regimental column of the **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry**, together with brigade tactical headquarters, the Divisional Cavalry headquarters, and the headquarters support group, a total of 175 vehicles, followed the Hussars on Sun route, finding the going extremely difficult in the dusk and darkness. Turning off on to the Boomerang track, the Royal Wiltshires halted to refuel at 1.45 a.m. and then, having been joined by the engineer party from 6 NZ Field Company detailed to extend the track, set off along Boomerang C. The headquarters groups were delayed and did not follow the Yeomanry until some time later. After some scattered mines were met, the engineers brought up a Scorpion to keep the Yeomanry's progress up to schedule but, though the tanks kept going, the tail of the column slowed down when shell and machine-gun fire brought casualties to B Company of the **Sherwood Foresters** and the engineers. The leading tanks reached the forward infantry shortly after the Hussars and formed up on the left ready for their attack.

The third column of 9 Armoured Brigade, the **Warwickshire Yeomanry** with about 120 vehicles, travelled independently along Moon track and turned on to the extension that led to Square track, on which it halted at the rear of the **50 Royal Tanks** column. When the Valentines advanced on Square E, the Warwick Yeomanry took Square D and, though delayed by trouble in keeping to the marked route, the regiment's tanks were deployed among the forward infantry of 152 Brigade in time to advance at 5.45 a.m. Here again the soft-skinned vehicles in the rear of the column had suffered, mainly through mines which accounted for six trucks and two guns of D Troop of 31 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, and caused several casualties to the gunners and to C Company of the **Sherwood Foresters**.

As the three columns eased their way along the tracks in the newly-won ground, Brigadier Currie was disturbed by the reports of damage and delays and just before five o'clock asked **General Freyberg** if the advance of his brigade could be postponed for half an hour. From the reports then available it looked as if the brigade would not in any case be ready at the



planned time so, although the postponement might affect the artillery timings, **Freyberg** had little option but to agree. On receiving Leese's approval, he discussed the gunner problems with his artillery commander, Brigadier Weir, who pointed out that the curtain of fire laid down in front of the infantry objective would have to be kept up for the extra half hour, with consequent strain on the guns and gunners, and that the carefully timed counter-battery fire and concentrations might lose some of their effectiveness. It was nearly 5.30 a.m. before the New Zealand artillery headquarters could inform the various regiments of the changes required, but the programme was altered with no recorded hitches. Brigadier Weir even managed to have the rate of barrage fire increased, and at 6.15 a.m. the guns put down their second barrage for the night and 9 Armoured Brigade passed through the infantry as the first faint signs of dawn were showing.

On the right **3 Hussars** were now down to only twenty-three 'runners' through further damage and breakdowns. Instead of advancing on a wide front as intended, the commander sent the three surviving Crusaders of A Squadron ahead, with B, Headquarters, and C Squadrons following in that order, and A Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry bringing up the rear. Moving at the rate of 100 yards in three minutes behind the barrage, the column at first met little opposition but flushed a large number of the enemy, who were left for the Cavalry to round up. A few hundred yards further south the **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry**, with a strength of thirty-three tanks, set off at the same time with the twelve Crusaders of B Squadron in the lead, and C, Headquarters and A Squadrons level in line a short way behind.

From the beginning of dawn until well into daylight, the details of the operations of these two regiments are confused for, although individuals and units told their stories and made their official reports, few could correlate their actions with those of other troops around them. It would seem that the **Wiltshire's** Crusaders led the field, overrunning gun pits and shooting up trucks until they were well past the **Rahman Track**, a much-used route identifiable from other churned-up desert

tracks in the area by the line of telephone poles running alongside. Here the enemy defences appeared more scattered, but the growing light disclosed the Crusaders to heavier guns sited further west and to enemy tanks that approached from the south-west. The other squadrons also came under fire as they approached the track, upon which the commander ordered them into hull-down positions while he called B Squadron back so that artillery fire could be laid on the opposition. However, wireless communication with B Squadron could not be gained, while damage to the Stuart tank and equipment of the artillery observation party with the regiment prevented calls being made on the supporting guns. The commander therefore directed the two heavy squadrons to lay smoke under which B Squadron might withdraw. This smoke brought a decrease in fire from the north, but then tanks seen on the south, and thought to be those of the Warwick Yeomanry, began firing on the regiment. According to survivors' accounts, all but one of B Squadron's Crusaders went up in flames, after which the enemy switched his fire to the heavy squadrons. As fit and wounded tank crews bailed out of their blazing vehicles and sought to escape to the rear, they were caught between the fire of the enemy to the west and of the Durhams to their rear.

The Hussars on the north do not seem to have advanced as far or as fast as the Wiltshires, possibly through encountering a greater concentration of anti-tank guns. Their leading tanks certainly passed the telegraph poles marking the **Rahman Track** but then, as with the Wiltshires, the lightening sky behind outlined them in silhouette to the enemy gunners. Attempts to get artillery fire brought down on the gun positions failed as the Stuart tank of the attached New Zealand battery commander was knocked out and other wireless links would not work, while wireless communication within the regiment gradually ceased through injuries to operators and sets. Under the direction and example of the regimental commander, messages were carried by men moving on foot under heavy fire to the seven surviving heavy tanks, until eventually they formed a line in visual contact. Some time after first light the commander managed to send a message through his rear-link



radio to brigade headquarters to report his precarious situation. Of the support columns following the tanks of these two regiments, the anti-tank guns of A Troop, 31 NZ Anti-Tank Battery, and the lorried infantry of A Company of 14 Foresters with **3 Hussars** had, as earlier recorded, suffered casualties and damage in the approach march and had fallen well behind the tanks. One anti-tank gun and some of the infantry apparently reached the Durhams' line after dawn and formed a small defensive position facing north behind the Hussar line. The **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry's** column, of B Company of the Foresters and C Troop of 31 Battery, kept close to the tanks and halted about 300 yards to the rear of the heavy squadrons, where they hastily dug themselves in.

In this dawn attack by **3 Hussars** and the **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry** there were many acts of gallantry shown by the tank commanders and crews in a determination to carry out Montgomery's orders and **Freyberg's** plans both in the letter and the spirit. In a later examination of the ground, the two regiments were credited with overpowering some thirty-five anti-tank guns, mainly Italian 47-millimetre and German 50-millimetre and a few of larger calibre, thus making a dent, if not a complete breach, in the enemy's gun line that only needed immediate exploitation.

Brigadier Currie, keeping well forward with the Hussars and Wiltshires, and acting throughout with extreme courage and resolution, did his utmost to control the battle and keep the gap open for the arrival of 1 Armoured Division. Several times, as he saw his squadrons disintegrating in front of him, he radioed **Freyberg** to ask that the Division be hurried forward.

The third regiment of 9 Armoured Brigade, the **Warwickshire Yeomanry**, fought an independent battle a mile or more to the south of the other two. On reaching the forward infantry of 152 Brigade with 38 'runners' of the 44 with which it had started out, the regiment advanced on more of a south-westerly bearing than it should have done, possibly because of enemy opposition which the Valentines of **50 Royal Tanks**

had engaged in that direction or, according to one account, mistaking a rise to the south of **Tell el Aqqaqir** as its objective instead of the Tell itself. Just beyond the infantry line, the Warwicks ran head on into a concentration of anti-tank guns backed by enemy tanks. Although numerous guns were shot up or overrun, enemy fire took a heavy toll of the regiment's tanks, forcing the survivors to fall back on to a line hastily set up by the two remaining six-pounders of D Troop of 31 Battery and C Company of the Foresters.

Shortly after seven o'clock Eighth Army circulated a warning, gained through an intercepted wireless message, that the *Panzer Army* was preparing to counter-attack from the north. Between 7.30 and 8 a.m., **Freyberg's** requests, passed through his GSO I to Leese, became more and more urgent to get 1 Armoured Division into the battle. Currie himself was determined to keep the gap open if he could, but his brigade was down to about seven heavy tanks in **3 Hussars**, nine in the Wiltshires, and seven in the Warwicks. The support groups were very thin on the ground, the lightly armoured vehicles of the Divisional Cavalry, unable to face the heavy enemy fire, had fallen back with any prisoners they could collect on to the infantry positions, while artillery co-operation had broken down through damage and wireless failures. About eight o'clock enemy tanks were observed assembling to the west of the Wiltshires.

The advance of 1 Armoured Division was headed by the armoured cars of 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment on Diamond A track and 1 Royal Dragoons on Square E. Their cars loaded with ten days' supplies, the two regiments had orders to search for gaps in the enemy's lines, slip through before daylight, and continue well into the rear areas to harass communications and installations. On the north, the South Africans passed round the north flank of the **Durham** infantry but soon met resistance and swung west, only to find themselves facing an anti-tank gun line. After suffering some casualties and losing three cars, the regiment pulled slowly back as daylight approached and eventually withdrew to the rear.

The Dragoons <sup>1</sup> on the south were more fortunate, moving out to the south-west through 133 Brigade's positions and finding the enemy thinner on the ground and much less alert than in the north. Successfully bypassing several enemy positions in the half light without disclosing their identity, the Dragoons turned west at dawn into open country to begin a period of raiding which caused the *Panzer Army* considerable concern and some material losses. Only three cars were lost in this advance and these were all recovered later.

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<sup>1</sup> Two squadrons, mustering about 18 armoured cars.

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Next in order of the armoured division's advance came the three groups of the *Minefield Task Force* of forty-two carriers and trucks, each group led by three Crusaders. Starting off earlier than originally planned, the groups found their way blocked by the columns of support vehicles and armoured cars ahead. As the tail of each column hurried to keep in touch with the trucks ahead on the sudden forward moves, collisions were frequent in the thick dust and darkness. The task forces halted on the infantry start line to allow the armoured car columns to get clear, and finally started on their task of widening the extension tracks about 5.20 a.m. At least one of the three groups reported shortly after 6.30 a.m. that it had completed its task as far as the infantry's final objective, and it is believed that the other two reached the objective a little later.

The three regimental columns of 2 Armoured Brigade, each following its group of the minefield task force, also had a slow and trying journey to the infantry start line, where they complained they were delayed by congestion on all routes. However, reports indicate that the heads of all three columns passed the 867 grid, just west of 6 Brigade's FDLs, close to 6.30 a.m. As far as can be ascertained, the Bays on the right, owing to the confusion earlier recorded on the clearance of Diamond B, swung north on to Diamond A, but 9 *Lancers* in the centre and 10 *Hussars* on the left took their planned routes, Boomerang C and Square D

respectively. The fifty-nine armoured cars of 12 Lancers followed the tank columns to reconnoitre and mop up.

The sky was lightening and visibility improving every minute <sup>1</sup> as the regimental columns and the armoured cars moved slowly forward into the area of penetration, an area over which two brigades of infantry had fought their way, to be followed by an armoured brigade, as well as numerous armoured cars, carriers and trucks of all descriptions. The distance between Diamond A and Square E was less than a mile and a half, and from 6 Brigade's lines, where the extension tracks began, to the rear of the new positions gained by the Durhams and Highlanders little more than two miles. Damaged and broken-down vehicles were scattered along the tracks, trucks either singly or in small columns were trying to get essential weapons and stores up to their units, and everywhere parties of lorried infantry, anti-tank gunners, headquarters groups and others were digging in before daylight disclosed them to enemy fire, while ambulances threaded their way among the congestion to collect and evacuate the wounded. Salvoes of enemy shells fell haphazardly

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<sup>1</sup> The sun rose at 7.09 a.m. according to the sun and moon tables used by 2 NZ Division.

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and spasmodically, solid anti-tank tracer whizzed, bounced and ricocheted, and round the perimeter of the area lines of machinegun tracer rose and fell.

At what time the regimental columns of 2 Armoured Brigade joined the survivors of Currie's brigade is difficult to determine. Reports were received about a quarter to seven that the **9 Lancers** column in the centre was under fire from 88-millimetre guns on the north, and that **10 Hussars** on the south were engaging seven enemy tanks away to the south-west. Neither of these regiments was apparently as yet up to the infantry's final objective.

About 7 a.m., though the time is not definitely established, Brigadier Fisher, the commander of 2 Armoured Brigade, learnt that the Bays on the north and 9 Lancers believed they were through the last minefield, a piece of news which meant that the regiments were prepared to deploy off the cleared tracks on which they had been travelling. Fisher thereupon ordered the two regiments to advance to Currie's assistance. Bad visibility was said to be hindering deployment but, somewhere about this time, 9 Lancers, or more probably a reconnaissance party ahead of the main column, met Currie in person and were told forcefully that their assistance was late. Shortly after half-past seven, reports were received by Freyberg through New Zealand engineers that a lateral track had been cleared some way behind the forward infantry to allow the tanks freedom of movement, and that tanks of 2 Armoured Brigade had crossed this track, moving west. However, the burden of these engineer and other reports gave Freyberg the impression that the brigade was stopping among the forward infantry to engage the enemy at long range. In a message timed 7.43 a.m., but possibly despatched a little earlier by his GSO I to Headquarters 30 Corps, he suggested that a senior officer, presumably meaning Lumsden himself, should come forward to 'coordinate and invigorate' the armour.

About eight o'clock Lumsden spoke by radio from Main Headquarters 1 Armoured Division, situated just south of Alamein station, to the divisional commander, Briggs, who was at the division's tactical headquarters, then moving at the tail of the armoured columns and some five miles east of the battle area. He warned him of the counter-attack intercept and gave orders for the division to 'push on'. But then messages came in of enemy tank forces on the west and south-west, against which 9 Lancers and 10 Hussars had taken up hull-down positions. Three-quarters of an hour later, although reporting that their tanks had reached the Rahman Track, but could not get further because of a screen of 88-millimetre guns, the Bays and 9 Lancers had not drawn level with the remains of Currie's squadrons. Fisher himself was uncertain whether to whip his regiments on or fight a cautious hull-down duel while awaiting the expected counter-attack, so just after nine

o'clock he wirelessed Briggs for instructions. The divisional commander's reply was apparently ambiguously worded for it permitted Fisher to signal back that, in accordance with orders, his brigade had taken up positions against attack from west or north. Briggs immediately replied, 'Destroy opposition and get on', <sup>1</sup> but this exhortation came too late. At ten minutes past nine, by arrangement between 30 and **10 Corps**, **1 Armoured Division** took command of what was left of **9 Armoured Brigade**, and the opportunity passed of the massive breakthrough envisaged in Montgomery's plans.

The Bays cautiously worked their way up behind **3 Hussars'** line of heavy tanks, now down to six only, and sent their Crusader squadron to the north, but this movement drew fire in which two of the Bays' tanks were hit. The Crusaders then fell back and, on brigade orders, the Bays' tanks took up hull-down positions with their supporting arms and infantry stretched out to the rear, facing north.

It would appear that **9 Lancers** edged forward at the same time as the Bays on their north and took up positions in the infantry's FDLs. On **1 Armoured Division's** assumption of command of **9 Armoured Brigade**, the **Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry's** tanks, out beyond the infantry, were given permission to withdraw, but the message failed to reach the supporting arms with the Yeomanry column. When the surviving tanks, hardly one in fighting trim, moved back, the company of **Sherwood Foresters** and the gunners of C Troop of **31 NZ Anti-Tank Battery** were left out on their own under the crossfire of the Lancers behind them and the enemy on the west. On the south-western corner the surviving tanks of the **Warwickshire Yeomanry** fell back on the armoured division's orders to join **10 Hussars**. The Warwicks, **10 Hussars** and **50 Royal Tanks** were then concentrated in this corner, exchanging shots with the gun line on the **Rahman Track** and with enemy tanks off to the south-west.

About 9.30 a.m. a general warning based on intercepts was circulated by the Army of an impending attack by **21 Panzer Division** from the north and **15 Panzer Division** from the south. Almost at the same time the tank line of **3 Hussars** reported an enemy tank column



moving from north to south across the front. The Hussars opened fire, claiming five hits, and were quickly joined by the tanks of 2 Armoured Brigade and the Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks**, as

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<sup>1</sup> **C. E. Lucas Phillips**, *Alamein*, p. 364.

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well as by numerous anti-tank guns in the northern half of the front. The enemy column either veered off or went into hull-down positions, and after a short time the firing on both sides slackened down.

By this time columns of both 7 Motor Brigade and **8 Armoured Brigade** had begun to advance through 6 Brigade's positions into the area of the salient. The motor brigade appears to have halted and dispersed off the tracks, leaving the way open for the three regimental groups of armour to go forward, the **Staffordshire Yeomanry** on Diamond B, the **Nottinghamshire Yeomanry** on Boomerang C, and **3 Royal Tanks** on Square D. The Staffs Yeomanry soon reported that it was under fire from the north and had halted to return this fire, while the other two regiments appear to have continued forward to join the mixed group of tanks in the rear of 152 Brigade's positions. While this mass movement of the British tanks was occurring, the armoured cars of 12 Lancers, seeking the gap on the southern front used earlier by the Dragoons, overran an enemy position, taking sixty-nine German prisoners, but then had to pull back in the face of anti-tank gun fire.

By the middle of the morning the congestion in the small area of the infantry's overnight gains, an area as flat as a billiard table, was presenting a problem. Hostile fire was constant but apparently haphazardly placed, and it is possible that the dust raised by the continuous movement of vehicles, as well as the smoke from those hit and set alight, screened much of the area from enemy observation. Though numerous vehicles were damaged by the shellfire and by scattered mines, casualties among the troops were extremely light.

The Australians spent one of the quietest days for some time,

although patrols to north and west from their lines could not progress very far without meeting intense machine-gun fire. Movement in the 28 NZ Battalion's defences brought immediate fire from all sides until midday, when some armoured cars rounded up a large number of Germans who had remained to the rear of the battalion. Even then A Company on the right, though in visual contact with 2/17 Australian Battalion on its east, remained out of contact with the other companies and none could establish contact with the rear by either runner or radio. To the left of the Maoris there was a wide gap, though parties of lorried infantry, tanks and armoured cars were further south.

On 151 Brigade's front, 8 Durhams in the north-west corner of the salient fell back about midday when enemy activity seemed to forecast an attack, leaving the observation party of 5 NZ Field Regiment to hold the front. Later 6 and 9 Durhams extended their fronts inwards to cover this gap. No actual counter-attacks were made on the brigade front this day, all enemy movement being subjected to heavy artillery concentrations, but the Durhams spent an uncomfortable day in shallow defences while tanks and Vickers gunners fired over their heads and the enemy retaliated. Plans were being made for 8 Durhams to be replaced by a battalion of 6 Brigade when **Freyberg** visited the sector in the late afternoon. Finding the Durhams poorly organised in defence and communications, he decided to bring up the whole of 6 Brigade to relieve 151 Brigade overnight. <sup>1</sup>

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Casualties in the **SUPERCHARGE** operation so far had not been unduly heavy except in 9 Armoured Brigade. An evening check on 2 November gave the brigade about 24 'runners' in sufficient order to be used immediately out of the 94 tanks which crossed the start line. Casualties in men came to 163 in the tank regiments, 66 of the motorised infantry, and 22 among the attached cavalry squadrons, anti-tank troops and engineers. The tank losses in 2 and 8 Armoured Brigades were 33 all told from enemy action, mechanical breakdown, and other causes, and



casualties in men in the two brigades also totalled 33.

There is no doubt that the direction and sector chosen for **SUPERCHARGE** had not been anticipated by the enemy, just as Montgomery had hoped. The attack, however, did not meet a purely Italian defence, for part of the front was held by infantry of *15 Panzer Division*, and the grimly determined anti-tank line that broke up 9 Armoured Brigade was manned mainly by German gunners. Owing to the confusion caused by the disruption of the *Panzer Army's* communications, the customary immediate counter-attack was not made so that the gun line, unsupported and low in ammunition, was on the point of breaking as in the morning light the gunners were able to discern the mass of British tanks moving up behind the swirling smoke of 9 Armoured Brigade's wrecks.

**Freyberg** himself sensed that an energetic thrust was all that was needed and he got more and more uneasy as the battle settled down to an exchange of shots at long range. At ten o'clock he sent a message to Leese to say, in effect, that in his opinion 1 Armoured Division had given up any thoughts of advancing. This opinion was correct if an explanation of the armour's behaviour, given after the battle, is accepted; i.e., that a counter-attack was inevitable and

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<sup>1</sup> 151 Brigade's casualties in **SUPERCHARGE** were assessed at 489 all ranks, of whom a high proportion was listed as 'Missing'. Many stragglers were being held at this time in the Australian and New Zealand lines.

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had been delayed only by the unexpected direction of the attack, and that the task of 2 Armoured Brigade was to ward off such counter-attack. A truer reason lies in the late arrival of 2 Armoured Brigade, which then had the choice of a daylight advance through the havoc wreaked on Currie's tanks or of halting for orders and reconnaissance where the ground offered some cover. The orders issued from Lumsden through Briggs to Fisher were not sufficiently strong to overcome 2

Armoured Brigade's caution and, as the brigade slowed down, so Custance's **8 Armoured Brigade** behind followed suit. Whether Fisher was wise in not risking his tanks in a daylight advance will never be known. The Germans were recovering quickly and concentrating their mobile reserve, but the troops and tanks available were pitifully few.

Montgomery's reaction to the initial results of **SUPERCHARGE** is best seen in the light of the orders he then issued. Soon after dawn he joined Leese at the tactical headquarters of 30 Corps and, from the directives he sent out during the morning, he seemed to be in no doubt that the salient was secure against counter-attack. His first action was to order **7 Armoured Division** to assemble as quickly as it could in the area south-west of **Tell el Eisa** station. Here the division was to be joined by **4 Light Armoured Brigade** from 13 Corps, the 'probable intentions' of the reserve armoured division being in general to break out from the southern flank of the salient. For an infantry reserve the Army Commander called for **4 Indian Division** to reorganise its front in order to release **5 Indian Infantry Brigade**.

Montgomery appears to have accepted **1 Armoured Division's** failure to follow up **9 Armoured Brigade's** attack for he asked no further action during the day than an advance by **2 Armoured Brigade** to the **Rahman Track**, a request based on the armour's oversanguine reports that it was close to the track. By midday he and Leese had made plans for a late evening advance by infantry south-west from the salient to 'Skinflint', a ring contour on the map encircling **Point 38**, and the occupation of the old 'Snipe' objective. This action was to clear the immediate opposition from the south of the salient to allow armoured cars of **4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment** to exploit the gap found the previous night by the Royals, possibly followed by **22 Armoured Brigade** (of **7 Armoured Division**) and **3 South African Armoured Car Regiment**.

The switch of direction from the west to the south-west of the salient was based not only on the success of the **Royal Dragoons** in that direction but also on the information of the enemy's dispositions acquired from air and ground reconnaissance, intercept, and other

sources, all of which indicated that the enemy's reserves were to the north and west of the salient and were likely to be held there by the threat posed by 1 Armoured Division. Speed, however, was essential in exploiting the southern egress before Rommel redispensed his forces to cover the weakness there, but Leese was faced with the problem of finding troops for the operations desired by Montgomery. Plans were concocted and issued in such haste that, before **Freyberg** or his staff were aware of what was afoot, 51 Division was receiving orders direct from 30 Corps to use troops still under New Zealand command in the New Zealand sector. On **Freyberg's** representations, the confusion was settled by the division of the **SUPERCHARGE** salient along the 299 northing grid, with the New Zealand Division retaining command of the sector and the troops on the north of the line and 51 Division taking over the southern part of the salient. The day's misunderstandings did not then cease, for the orders issued by 51 Division under pressure brought signal errors and ambiguous wording that confused the roles of the various groups assigned to the operations. Apart from the necessary haste, the basis of these troubles lay in the shortage of infantry, which in turn caused divisions to be dismembered and put the Corps Commander in the position of having a direct say in the employment of brigades or even battalions.

When the majority of the misunderstandings had been settled, a plan emerged for 2 Seaforths of 152 Brigade to be relieved in the south-west corner of the salient by 5/7 Gordons (153 Brigade) and to advance on 'Skinflint' with the support of **50 Royal Tanks** with whom the Seaforths had earlier trained. At the same time 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade was to extend south-westwards to 'Snipe'. The various delays allowed no time for more than a very simple artillery support programme to be arranged before the start of the operation at 4 p.m. Further delays in the relief and assembly caused the infantry to ask for alterations to the time and, after a false start by some of the guns, the advance of the Seaforths appears to have begun in earnest at 6.15 p.m., led by a squadron of Valentines. *Trieste Division* troops in the defences showed little inclination to resist, at least 100 giving themselves up, and in a short

time 'Skinflint' was reached for the loss of two tanks by shellfire, two on mines, and no recorded casualties in the Seaforths. The tanks then withdrew, leaving the Seaforths to dig in and thus extend the western face of the salient for about a mile and a half to the south.

After settling a misunderstanding whether it would be relieved before or after its operation against 'Snipe', 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade made plans for an artillery supported advance by 5 Royal **Sussex** to this objective to coincide with the Seaforths' advance. Either through delays in preparation or through uncertain liaison, the **Sussex** set their starting time at seven o'clock, but before this time arrived, signs of surrender began to appear on the objective. Apparently the artillery fire and the advance of the tanks to 'Skinflint' led the Italian defenders on 'Snipe' to believe they were outflanked. The artillery support was then cancelled while 5 Royal **Sussex** marched forward, meeting little opposition other than scattered shellfire from distant guns. For a loss of seven men through mines, and the gain of some sixty prisoners, the battalion dug in on 'Snipe' as daylight faded. This action could be said to complete the first phase of SUPERCHARGE and the stage was set for the final breakthrough.

*iv*

On the enemy's side the initial effects of SUPERCHARGE were curious. Convinced that the next British assault would proceed from the north or north-west of the Australian sector, Rommel had planned to distract attention from this area by artillery deception programmes on *15 and 164 Divisions'* fronts, that is, on the SUPERCHARGE frontage and to the south. The panzer division's gunners were probably too busy on defence but *164 Division* seems to have fired its programme. The deception effect was, however, completely lost, the fire being taken by the Eighth Army as part of the enemy's retaliation to the assault barrage. When the British assault had broken into *15 Panzer Division's* lines, bombing and radio jamming had so disrupted the *Africa Corps* communications that most of the news received at *Panzer Army*

headquarters came through *90 Light Division*, and thus added to the conviction that the point of attack was where it had been anticipated. It was not until nearly dawn, when *Africa Corps'* communications had been partially restored, that some idea of the extent and direction of the attack was grasped. By this time counter-attack plans had been issued on the basis that the line of the coastal road and railway was threatened and a period of confusion ensued as the plans were revised. Finally, orders were given for *21 Panzer Division* to move against the SUPERCHARGE salient from a northerly direction and for *15 Division's* mobile reserve, augmented by tanks of *Littorio* and *Trieste* divisions, to drive from the west. Exactly how many tanks were involved in the operations is uncertain, but before the day was out most of the 90 German and 50 Italian 'runners' available on this part of the front were drawn into the battle.

In spite of emphatic urging by the Corps Commander, von Thoma, neither panzer division made much progress. Unable to find the infantry line they were expected to restore, and without infantry of their own to consolidate ground won, the counterattacking tanks could do little more than probe forward until the British fire became too heavy, when they went into hull-down positions. Many of the tank commanders appear to have encountered the Eighth Army's Shermans for the first time, to find themselves outgunned, and though both panzer divisions reported that they caused heavy casualties among their opponents, *Africa Corps* had only 35 German and about 20 Italian tanks still in battle order by the evening. Unfortunately no record exists of how these tank casualties occurred, so they must be attributed to a combination of the British bombing, tank, anti-tank and artillery fire.

As the day wore on the *Panzer Army* was better able to assess its situation. Its reserves were inadequate, its front was on the point of cracking and withdrawal in a short time was inevitable, while the opportunity that Rommel had been awaiting was at hand for a quick disengagement at the moment when the British appeared heavily committed and temporarily halted. Towards evening Rommel called for

von Thoma and, having ascertained how desperate were the straits of the thin line around the British salient, he gave his orders for the withdrawal to be set in motion. His first move was to call for *Ariete's* tanks from the south to thicken up the screen of mobile forces intended to cover the retreat, and in so denuding the southern defence of its last mobile reserve, he must have assumed that all the British armour was committed in the north, for the petrol shortage and the condition of *Ariete's* tanks made it impossible for the division to return. According to records of this time, Rommel did not expect to leave any of his German or Italian infantry in the lurch, for he seemed confident that, if the rearguards played their part properly, the bulk of his forces would be able to fall back in good order in spite of the petrol and transport situation. Clauses in the orders recorded by *Africa Corps* stated that as many fighting troops as possible were to be taken back in the available transport, with the Italians given priority 'as their fighting value is smaller'<sup>1</sup> and that not a single German soldier was to be left behind.

Rommel's confidence lay not only in his belief that his Germans would maintain their superiority in mobile warfare but that the British commanders would retain their customary pattern of caution, stepping up their artillery to each line of resistance provided by his

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<sup>1</sup> *Africa Corps* diary, GMDS 25869/1.

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mobile screen, behind which the rest of his troops would thus have time either to continue to retreat or to form a new line when the opportunity came. Opportunity in fact was the keynote in Rommel's planning, as it had so often been before; opportunity to disengage, to avoid the overwhelming concentrations that the Eighth Army could employ, and to form a new line whenever and wherever it might be feasible.

On both northern and southern fronts the first bounds to be reached by the evening of 3 November gave most of the front-line formations less than 20 kilometres to cover in twenty-four hours, so that, had the



rearguards played their part and the available transport been efficiently used, the majority of the *Panzer Army* might have got back to the first bound at least. Many of the Italians had already anticipated the order, on what authority it is hard to ascertain though it may have been on the 'priority' clause, for it was in the late afternoon, about the time that the Seaforths started for 'Skinflint', that the *Panzer Army* released the official order for front-line and rear troops to set the withdrawal in motion. By nightfall the Eighth Army was faced, except around the SUPERCHARGE salient, with a thin screen of rearguards of a company in each original battalion sector prepared to demonstrate noisily with automatic fire and flares. Though it may be supposed that the Italian commanders left their most reliable companies behind, the line of rearguards must have had many weak links.

v

Although the records show how Rommel saw the progress of the battle, they do not show so clearly what Montgomery was thinking at that time. His first orders after he learnt that SUPERCHARGE had bogged down were for regrouping while pressure was maintained on the enemy. The regrouping covered an extension northwards of the South Africans to narrow 51 Division's front, the reinforcement of 10 Corps with 7 Armoured Division, and the formation of an infantry reserve consisting of 5 Indian, 5 New Zealand, 151 and 154 Brigades. The maintenance of pressure, a current term which, like exploitation, allowed elastic interpretations, was left to suggestions from Lumsden as to what his armour could do.

Montgomery also set his administration staff to implement the first steps of existing plans to extend the chain of supply dumps, the water pipeline and the tracks. From this it may be assumed that he saw the end of the 'break-in' phase of the battle near if not immediately to hand. His intelligence staff, however, still insisted that the Germans had up to 80 tanks and the Italians 160 in going order. The staff in fact had not yet fully realised that SUPERCHARGE had broken clean through the

enemy's infantry line and had only been stopped by the factor discussed earlier in these pages—the resolutely manned anti-tank gun line that the Germans were so adept in forming in an emergency and the British so untrained in subduing.

**Freyberg**, having made a tour of the salient and studied the signs of destruction there and in no-man's land to the west, told his staff he was convinced that the enemy's withdrawal was imminent, if not already in progress, 'no doubt to some new position', and warned them to be ready for mobile operations early on the 3rd. <sup>1</sup> In a draft report he prepared for his Prime Minister, he wrote:

... I feel it is rash to make forecast regarding fighting here in **Western Desert** which has been productive of so many disappointments. For information of Government perhaps it would help if I gave my opinion

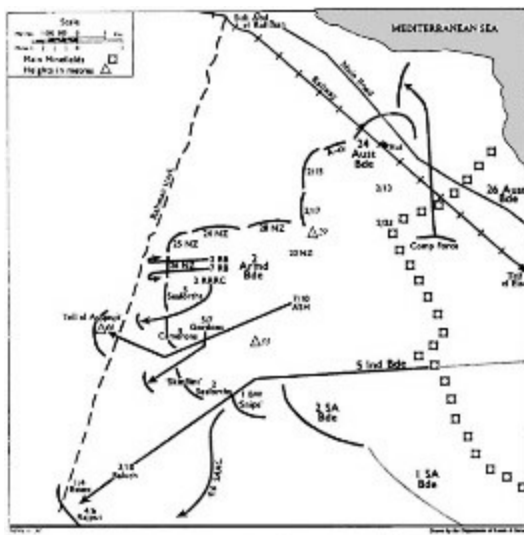
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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

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for what it is worth. I feel future here is bright. I believe German resistance was finally broken by last attack and cumulative effect artillery fire during last ten days. I feel present German position is precarious, that we shall push him back in near future to frontier and later under certain conditions I am led to hope we may eventually clear **Africa**. <sup>1</sup>





INFANTRY MOVEMENTS BETWEEN 2 AND 4 NOVEMBER

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The various rearrangements of the front already planned were set going towards evening of 2 November. In the Highland Division's part of the salient, 5/7 Gordons moved into the position vacated by 2 Seaforths as the latter advanced on 'Skinflint', and after dark 1 Black Watch extended its front to include the 'Snipe' feature, thus releasing 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade to rejoin its armoured division. <sup>2</sup>

When dusk made movement possible, 28 Battalion established contact with 6 Brigade and, on being told it was under the brigade's command and to hold its defences, rearranged its positions and brought up supporting arms while engineers laid a minefield across its front. This was accomplished with little enemy interference as activity practically ceased after dark. <sup>3</sup>

Also at dusk the battalions of 6 Brigade left the 'firm base' to take over the front from 151 Brigade, the northern part of the base then being occupied by 22 Battalion under the brigade's command. The southern half of the base passed to 51 Division's command and was occupied by a battalion of 154 Brigade. The relief of the Durhams proved a slow and difficult task for the locations of their defences were inadequately and, in some cases, inaccurately known to their headquarters while their communications were incomplete. As the men of 6 Brigade searched for the platoons and companies they were to

relieve, troops and vehicles of 7 Motor Brigade were passing through the area. It was well past midnight before the relief could be called complete, but by dawn the three battalions, 24 on the north, 25 on the north-west and 26 facing west, were firmly established with supporting arms sited, backed by the survivors of 9 Armoured Brigade and the Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks**.

Having seen the state of 151 Brigade in daylight, **Freyberg** was aware of the difficulties of the relief and warned Leese that the sector might for a time be vulnerable to enemy attack. However, such risk was practically obviated when in the evening Lumsden, implementing the Army Commander's direction to maintain pressure, announced plans for a night attack by 1 Armoured Division. His first orders, given verbally, were similar to the original plan, that is, a westward advance from the salient by 2 and 8 Armoured

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<sup>1</sup> GOC **2 NZEF/25A**.

<sup>2</sup> 133 Brigade's casualties from 23 October to the evening of 2 November came to 717, of whom 417 were listed as 'Missing'.

<sup>3</sup> Total casualties in 28 Battalion in SUPERCHARGE were recorded as 22 killed, 72 wounded, and 4 missing.

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Brigades, with 7 Motor Brigade following and wheeling out to the left to cover the armour's southern flank. Possibly through objections by his divisional commander or brigadiers, or even by Montgomery himself, he altered this an hour later to the less ambitious project of a night advance by the motor brigade to eliminate some known areas of resistance just on and over the **Rahman Track**. This was to be followed by an advance of 2 Armoured Brigade to a small area of high ground about a mile and a half beyond the track and a swing round the south by **8 Armoured Brigade** to high ground a little further on. The final move of this plan was a wide swing by 22 Armoured Brigade, with possibly other

forces of 7 Armoured Division, round the south of the other two brigades with **Ghazal station** as its objective.

The attack by 7 Motor Brigade, finally settled to start at 1.15 a.m. on 3 November, was planned, as in previous operations by the motorised infantry, more as a set of battalion raids than as a brigade action. The brigade had spent the day in the congested salient awaiting decisions for its employment, and accordingly few of the troops had taken the trouble to dig themselves in or disperse their transport so that casualties and damage had been suffered under the enemy's shellfire. Patrols had been sent to the front in daylight in view of possible night operations, but little clear information had been gleaned. Artillery support could be only hastily arranged in the form of concentrations on the right-hand objectives and a sort of box barrage on the left.

In the north of the salient, behind the front where the men of 6 Brigade were sorting out the defences after sending the Durhams back, 2 Rifle Battalion formed up on the right and 7 Rifle Battalion on the left, with a number of their men and vehicles missing, and with some uncertainty over their exact objectives. Passing through the New Zealand defences, the carriers leading the advance met opposition as they neared the **Rahman Track**. Although the artillery support had already moved on to the more distant objectives, the men of 2 Rifle Battalion overcame some enemy posts only to meet with fire from anti-tank guns and, it was claimed, enemy tanks, which caused the companies to break up in some confusion. The battalion commander thereupon asked, and received, permission from brigade headquarters to withdraw.

Moving on a course a few hundred yards to the south, the companies of 7 Rifle Battalion had trouble finding the start line and were accordingly well behind the artillery programme. Told to expect little opposition, the companies lost touch when they met the same area of resistance as 2 Battalion encountered, and the men scattered. Although some individual efforts were made to rally the troops, the survivors eventually made for home. As the sky began to lighten, individuals and

groups of the two battalions in carriers, trucks and on foot, filtered through 6 Brigade's lines and re-formed in the rear.

The third battalion of the motor brigade, 2 Battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps, had been given the task of advancing through the defences held by 5 Camerons on the south of the salient to occupy the low rise where the **Rahman Track** surmounted **Tell el Aqqaqir**. With trouble in making its way across the congested salient and with some misunderstanding of the plans, this battalion set off about an hour after the box barrage on its objective had been fired. Well to the east of the Aqqaqir feature and probably 500 to 1000 yards short of the track, 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps came under fire and halted. The commander then laid out a defence area, the men dug in as best they could and the antitank guns were brought up. The advent of dawn found the men overlooked by hostile posts on the feature and almost within a stone's throw of the nearest enemy positions. For some unexplained reason the headquarters of 7 Motor Brigade issued a report that the Rifle Corps battalion had gained its objective and, although infantry observers in the salient reported after daylight that the Aqqaqir feature was still in enemy hands, the battalion's true position did not percolate through to headquarters of **10 Corps** until well on into the afternoon, a delay that had odd repercussions.

The failure of 7 Motor Brigade to clear the ground brought the cancellation of further advances by the armour, which was due to start at 5.30 a.m. on the 3rd. However, in the belief that Aqqaqir was held, Lumsden told **8 Armoured Brigade** to 'feel its way forward' round the south of 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps and set 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment on its way from the south of the salient. The two squadrons of armoured cars involved encountered minefields and opposition, and failed to get very far before turning back.

While the various operations and reliefs were taking place this night, the British intercept service picked up a message sent by **90 Light Division** to tell its **200 Regiment** to send vehicles to help bring out the

**heavy weapons of *125 Regiment* in the coastal pocket. When this information reached 9 Australian Division, some two hours after the message was intercepted, patrols were hastily sent out and harassing fire commenced on the enemy's known tracks. All patrols met strong opposition, one suffering heavy casualties, but several small posts were overrun and some prisoners taken. It was obvious, however, that the German infantry were still in position, prepared to screen the withdrawal preparations.**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 31 – THE END OF THE ‘DOG-FIGHT’

## CHAPTER 31

### *The End of the 'Dog-fight'*

i

*3 November*

**THE 3rd of November was a curious day in the Battle of [Alamein](#) in which confusion, indecision and caution were more prominent than action. Overnight the troops in the southern part of 13 Corps' sector had continued their deception operations to contain the enemy and keep him guessing, but in the northern part activity had been confined mainly to reliefs and regrouping. As daylight grew, observers on 4 Indian and 50 Divisions' fronts noticed a number of fires and explosions apparently unconnected with any battle action. Then, as visibility lengthened, they could see an unusual amount of movement above ground. Air reconnaissance confirmed that columns of marching men and convoys of vehicles were moving westwards.**

**This news which, with the *90 Light Division* intercept, seemed to indicate the beginning of a general withdrawal by the enemy, reached Montgomery as he was holding a conference with Leese and Lumsden. The Army Commander therefore urged Lumsden to maintain strong pressure with his two armoured brigades so that the enemy would not disengage and slip away before the pursuit force was ready. Lumsden had already added to his previous orders by telling 2 Armoured Brigade to advance and support 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps at Aqqaqir while 8 [Armoured Brigade](#) moved out round the south between this feature and 'Skinflint', but the morning drew on with little appreciable advance by the tanks, who reported that the anti-tank screen on the [Rahman Track](#) was still very active. The method of advance by the tanks at this stage was the simple one of identifying each gun by drawing its fire and then 'shooting it out', a method that was sportsmanlike but slow. The field artillery did its best to help but was handicapped by the armour's weakness in map reading. The lack of infantry properly trained for co-**



operation with the tanks was sadly felt.

The enemy guns around **Point 44**, the highest point of **Tell el Aqqaqir**, were thus left to snipe the tanks almost unmolested until the early afternoon, when reports from artillery observers made it clear that the feature was still in enemy hands and that the foremost troops of the King's Royal Rifle Corps and the tanks were all well to the east of the **Rahman Track**.

Before this information had been received and digested by the headquarters staff of **10 Corps**, Montgomery's plans for the pursuit had already been outlined in some detail. In order to avoid the gun screen facing the SUPERCHARGE salient, an infantry advance was to be undertaken by 51 Division to occupy the **Rahman Track** immediately to the south of the presumed position of the Rifle Corps battalion on **Tell el Aqqaqir**. Pivoting on this base, 1 Armoured Division was then to swing to west and north in order to encircle the enemy forces against the coast, while 7 Armoured Division made an even wider sweep with **Ghazal station** as its objective. The New Zealand Division with 4 Light Armoured Brigade under command was to follow behind 7 Armoured Division, with **Sidi Ibeid** as its first objective and **Fuka** and **Matruh** as possible further objectives. On the rest of the front, the Australians were to clear up the coastal pocket and 13 Corps was to keep in contact and follow up any enemy withdrawal.

Montgomery also gave orders for preparations to be put in hand for Operation GRAPESHOT, a plan made before the battle for a drive on **Tobruk** by Headquarters 8 Armoured Division commanding a mixed force of Valentine tanks on transporters, armoured cars, mobile artillery, infantry and other arms, together with an Air Force component. All this planning, however, was altered and varied in detail as the situation developed in the next twenty-four hours.

By midday on the 3rd, air reconnaissance had confirmed not only the start of the enemy withdrawal in the south but also of dense convoys of vehicles on the coastal road and the tracks leading into it. The air

effort, hitherto concentrated mainly on the **Rahman Track** and the battle area, was now switched to the supply routes, especially the main road through **Daba** and **Fuka** and even as far west as **Matruh**, where the traffic was thick. The enemy's air force made an unusual effort to provide protection to the traffic, sending fighters to cover the road and Stukas to make diversions over the British lines, but by the end of the day the British air forces were plainly in control of the skies. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also Thompson, *New Zealanders with the Royal Air Force*, Vol. III, pp. 91-2.

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While the Eighth Army was limbering up for its final effort to crack the enemy line, the moment was fast passing when an armoured breakthrough might have thrown the whole of the **Panzer Army** into confusion. Rommel's plans for the withdrawal had passed down the channels of command, and the rear services had already started to ferry stores and supplies back from the forward dumps to the second-line dumps which could service the new **Fuka** line. In the front lines, the available transport had been allocated to the rearguards, mainly German, and any surplus vehicles used to bring out the remaining infantry, the Germans being given priority, so that the bulk of the Italians were expecting to plod the desert on foot to collecting points where their own inadequate transport was attempting to ferry them back to work on the new **Fuka** line.

The withdrawal was covered in the north by **21 Panzer Division** across the coastal road and by **15 Panzer Division's** thin line of anti-tank guns and a few tanks facing the **SUPERCHARGE** salient. To the south of **Tell el Aqqaqir**, where the **Trieste Division** had practically disintegrated under the attacks on 'Skinflint' and 'Snipe', there was a dangerous gap which **Africa Corps** hoped would soon be covered by **Ariete Division's** tanks from the south. The remainder of the front was protected by an extremely thin line of rearguards provided by **164, Bologna** and **Trento Divisions, Ramcke Brigade** and **Folgore Division**. There is evidence that

***Bologna*** troops, if not others, had already anticipated the signal for the withdrawal to commence.

Expecting that the British would employ their customary tactics of halting against any opposition to deploy their artillery, Rommel was relying on his thin screen of rearguards to allow him to disengage cleanly. Whether he really expected to re-form on the **Fuka** line is questionable and it is more likely he nominated this short bound to satisfy the **German High Command**, and to allay any panic among his troops. He may even have seen a retreat similar to the British withdrawal from **Gazala** to **Alamein** but in greater control, at the worst as far as **Agheila**, before his opponents became so overstretched that he could form a firm line.

After a morning visit to the forward area, where he learnt that the British were showing no signs of immediate aggressive action, Rommel decided the moment was opportune for disengagement and gave the signal for all but certain selected rearguards to make for the **Fuka** bound. Unfortunately no detailed order for any of the rearguards has survived, but it would seem Rommel expected them to hold firm, unless they were in grave danger of being overrun or encircled, at least until the early hours of the 4th, or possibly even longer should the British delay in mounting a major assault.

Then, running the gauntlet of the bombs of a 'Boston Tea Party' formation of the **Royal Air Force**, he reached the **Panzer Army** command post in the early afternoon to find awaiting him a message from **Hitler** that upset all his plans. Various versions of this message are given in the German records and elsewhere but the full text read as follows:

It is with trusting confidence in your leadership and the courage of the German-Italian troops under your command that the German people and I are following the heroic struggle in **Egypt**. In the situation in which you find yourself there can be no other thought but to stand fast, yield not a yard of ground and throw every gun and every man into the battle. Considerable air force

reinforcements are being sent to C-in-C South. The Duce and the Commando Supremo are also making the utmost efforts to send you the means to continue the fight. Your enemy, despite his superiority, must also be at the end of his strength. It would not be the first time in history that a strong will has triumphed over the bigger battalions. As to your troops, you can show them no other road than that to victory or death. **Adolf Hitler.** <sup>1</sup>

This order could hardly have reached Rommel at a more inopportune moment. Had it arrived before he issued the final withdrawal signal or when the movement had gone too far to be halted, he could have acted with decision. As it was, he himself admitted that 'for the first time during the African campaign I did not know what to do'. <sup>2</sup> In his customary way, Rommel had up till now been playing the battle by ear, waiting for the time when he felt the British might be pausing for breath and genuinely expecting that he could get the bulk of his army clear to fight another day. The issue of his definite order that morning had lifted a weight from his mind for, though the future might be uncertain, it meant that the wearying static battle of attrition would give place to the mobile battle of manoeuvre.

The German war diaries, even more clearly than his own account, underline his indecision in the next few hours. As a loyal officer he felt he had to obey his Fuehrer. As the commander of an army that relied on his leadership, he knew that such obedience would spell its doom. In discussion with von Thoma, he agreed that withdrawal might be made to the first bound, the 850 easting grid, without disobedience, but no sooner had he done this than warning of a British assault for the coming night came through intercepts, while all the time reports flowed in of the progress of the various formations in withdrawal.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by B. H. Liddell Hart in *The Rommel Papers*, p. 321n., presumably from the original message received and held in the Rommel collection.

The degree of compromise urged by von Thoma and his staff is well illustrated in a message issued by the *Africa Corps* to its subordinate formations:

The only measure left to us is to initiate a mobile defensive policy and withdraw a little to regain freedom of manoeuvre.... We can do this without abandoning our main policy of defending the *Alamein* front. <sup>1</sup>

However, Rommel was not as ready as his Corps Commander to deceive *Hitler* and, possibly to keep his record clean, he then issued his own order authorising the *Africa Corps* to fall back to its first bound but 'this line is to be held to the last man'. He followed this within the hour by, 'Stay in your defence positions. The Fuhrer's order does not allow for mobile defence'; and then, 'I demand all possible efforts to be made to retain possession of the present battlefield, so that the operations now in progress may be brought to a victorious conclusion'. <sup>2</sup>

In the parlous state of the *Panzer Army's* communications, and particularly in the always uncertain links through the various Italian headquarters to the men in the line, the task of halting the withdrawal just as it had started was practically impossible. Unfortunately most of the low-level records were lost or deliberately destroyed in the retreat so that it is difficult to discover in what detail *Hitler's* order was carried out. Rommel claims <sup>3</sup> that it had a powerful effect on the troops, and this was probably true of the Germans for the British records indicate that most of the resistance met, other than on *Africa Corps'* front, came from the pockets of German troops sandwiched among the Italians. It is known that contact could not be established immediately with large bodies of the Italians who were already on the march back, and possibly with some of the Germans, and it seems probable that such troops did not return to the front but, when finally contacted, halted where they stood and continued their withdrawal the next day. One thing certain is

that **Hitler's** order completely upset plans for the effective use of the transport available to ferry the men back.

In the rear areas, the administrative and supply services had begun to load trucks and railway wagons and to prepare demolitions of any dumps that could not be carried back, and well before Rommel issued his withdrawal order, road convoys were on the move. Some hint of **Hitler's** order seems to have been known in the rear before Rommel discussed it with von Thoma,<sup>4</sup> but on Rommel's signal

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<sup>1</sup> *DAK* messages, GMDS 25869/9–11.

<sup>2</sup> *Africa Corps* messages on GMDS 25869/6. These three messages are timed 1745, 1840, and 1842 hours, *Panzer Army* 'new' time, that is, Central European Standard time, two hours behind Eighth Army's summer time.

<sup>3</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 322.

<sup>4</sup> See *inter alia* the diary of the Quartermaster of the *Africa Corps* on GMDS 27669/1, where there are references to the order timed 0900 and 1200 hours.

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for the withdrawal, the movement was stepped up and some of the demolitions started. Then, Rommel's indecision in passing on **Hitler's** order firmly and immediately, and possibly the pre-knowledge of it, led to a confusion of orders and counter-orders. Some withdrawing convoys were allowed to proceed, others were halted or turned back, while the railway wagons were left without locomotives. All this added to the congestion on the supply routes, particularly the main road, and brought tempting targets for the **Desert Air Force**.

So, during the afternoon and evening of the 3rd, the whole of the *Panzer Army* was well off balance, most of its front held by a thin line of rearguards behind whom the bulk of the troops were on the march,

uncertain of their roles or destination. The *Africa Corps* alone, under von Thoma's firm direction, could have offered cohesive opposition but the two panzer divisions, at the time Rommel read Hitler's order to von Thoma that afternoon, had no more than twenty-four battleworthy tanks. <sup>1</sup>

Montgomery of course knew nothing of Hitler's intervention. The Australians, patrolling cautiously into the coastal pocket, found guns demolished and positions abandoned and booby-trapped. Opposition was not met until the patrols began to probe further west towards *Sidi Abd el Rahman*. In the southern part of the line, all observation seemed to confirm a major withdrawal, but patrols, after negotiating the heavily mined and booby-trapped line of abandoned outpost positions, invariably were brought to a stop by determined resistance from strongpoints covering the minefields. Most of the battalions of 13 Corps took their lines forward to occupy the vacated enemy outposts so that they could bring fire to bear on the rearguard positions, but nowhere was the enemy forced to retire against his will except on the front of *2 Fighting French Brigade*, where a fighting patrol overran a strongpoint around *Point 104*.

Several plans were considered by Horrocks for attacks to overwhelm the rearguards but he discarded them in place of a major breakthrough assault and encircling movement to take place on the 4th. However, with no armour and little more than essential transport for servicing his corps, he was forced to reconsider this plan and, in the event, no major action by his corps was found to fit in with Montgomery's plans.

Enemy fire on the *SUPERCHARGE* salient decreased as the day wore on, fortunately so, as the area was a hive of movement. On the northern and western faces, the tanks and observers were trying

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<sup>1</sup> Of *Littorio's* tanks about 17 survived, and *Ariete*, when it started its move from the south, mustered about 150.

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to deal with the enemy guns still firing, while behind them



preparations went ahead for the hoped-for final breakthrough. The first move was planned for 5.45 p.m. when 5/7 Gordons, with Valentine tanks in support, had the task of driving from the southwest corner of the salient to occupy the **Rahman Track** just to the south of **Tell el Aqqaqir** which, when the orders were issued, was thought to be held by 2 King's Royal Rifle Corps. Then, at 2.30 a.m. on the 4th, 5 Indian Infantry Brigade, brought from reserve and placed under 51 Division's command, was to extend the Gordons' objective further south along the track. Finally, 7/10 Battalion of the **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** was to pass through the Rifle Corps battalion and clear the enemy from the whole of the **Tell el Aqqaqir** feature to the west of the track.

The general orders for these infantry advances were issued in the morning of the 3rd, after which, on the assumption that the attacks would breach the enemy's gun line, the rest of the day was spent on plans and preparations for the break-out to be undertaken by 1 and 7 Armoured Divisions, and by the New Zealand Division with 4 Light Armoured Brigade under command.

At this time, **Freyberg** was confident that the enemy line could be 'cracked' at any moment and was keen to have heavy armour under his command for the pursuit role. It was, however, found impossible to reconstitute 9 Armoured Brigade as a whole, so the **Warwickshire Yeomanry** was built up from the survivors of the other two regiments to augment 4 Light Armoured Brigade. This brigade met considerable trouble when it attempted to assemble in the congested area in the rear of the salient but, on **Freyberg's** insistence, Eighth Army issued a firm order for an area to be cleared for it.

*ii*

The final infantry operations at **Alamein** got off to a shaky start. At 5.20 p.m. 5/7 Gordons and the Valentines of **8 Royal Tanks** had married up in the Gordons' sector, scattered mines in the route of the advance had been cleared by engineers, and everything was ready for the massive artillery support prepared together with bombing by Bostons, when a



message came through the headquarters of 152 Brigade that the enemy had vacated the objective. The origin of this information is obscure but it added strength to a belief held by 1 Armoured Division that the artillery and air support would fall on the Rifle Corps men and the tanks which the division still thought were further to the west than they actually were. Though more reliable information had been supplied by artillery observers and by the commander of **8 Royal Tanks** who had earlier reconnoitred the front, this was discounted and the Gordons were ordered to start, covered only by smoke. Led by a squadron of Valentines carrying three platoons of infantry, the advance went well until the smoke ceased, when enemy ahead opened up with anti-tank and machine-gun fire. The Gordons' wireless went out of operation but the commander of **8 Royal Tanks** managed to get a situation report back to his own brigade headquarters, which then asked 51 Division to have the originally planned supporting fire laid on. Though by this time in the battle the lesson of accepting 1 Armoured Division's map reading should have been learnt, this request was refused, as was a further suggestion to lift the supporting fire 300 yards to the west, but the Highland Division promised to get the artillery to continue and increase the smoke. The commander of 23 Armoured Brigade then instructed **8 Royal Tanks** not to attempt to advance against opposition but to get into cover and protect the infantry. This the Valentines did and, as the night fell, the Gordons were digging in about halfway between their old positions and their objective, still well to the east of the **Rahman Track**. Losses in **8 Royal Tanks** were heavy: 12 men killed and 15 wounded, 9 tanks destroyed and 11 damaged. The Gordons' losses were given as 67 killed and wounded, or 98 all told, the latter figure probably including those missing. While the action was occurring, 1 Armoured Division signalled 51 Division to admit that its troops were from 1000 to 2000 yards east of the map references on which it had based its objection to the artillery programme.

The failure of the Gordons to reach their objective was not allowed to prevent the next phase, the advance by 5 Indian Infantry Brigade to a point on the **Rahman Track** south of the Gordons' objective. This was to

be supported by **50/46 Royal Tanks**, an amalgamation of the surviving Valentines of these regiments, and by a powerful artillery programme. The Indians and the Valentines had been able to make a reconnaissance of the front early in the afternoon and mark out a start line and assembly areas, but no major movement was made until last light.

Although the Indian brigade was not trained to follow a barrage, the New Zealand CRA, Brigadier Weir, to whom Leese had entrusted the fire support, persuaded the brigade commander to accept the standard New Zealand method of a simple lifting barrage augmented by concentrations. In fact, Weir took the Indian brigadier and his staff forward in daylight and had his gunners demonstrate by laying a line of smoke on the start line and the lifts. This practical test also showed that the final lifts could not be reached by some of the field guns in their present positions and would have to be dealt with by the medium guns. With the short notice, the depleted staff of the New Zealand artillery headquarters had to work hard to prepare the barrage plan but managed to issue it by telephone in good time to the units concerned, which included field regiments from 1 Armoured, 51 Highland, and the New Zealand divisions and two medium regiments, firing in all a total of about 37,000 rounds. To help the Indian infantry to form up and fix their positions, Weir allowed for a 1 ½ hour standing barrage on the opening line. This would then be followed by 100-yard lifts every three minutes for one hour, a 20-minute pause and further lifts for 45 minutes, with Bofors tracer to mark the boundaries along the 230 degree line of advance.

The Indian brigade's operation started in even more confusion than the Gordons'. Zero hour for the artillery was set at 1.30 a.m. but by midnight only one battalion, ¼ Essex, was assembled and ready to move, so the start time was postponed for one hour. Then, when it seemed that 3/10 Baluch, <sup>1</sup> due to share the lead with the Essex battalion, would not get forward even for the late start, the reserve battalion, **4/6 Rajputana Rifles**, <sup>2</sup> was sent to take its place. Several of the supporting detachments of signals, engineers and drivers, some lent

by other formations, arrived in the assembly area without knowing the tasks allotted them and had to be hurriedly briefed, while at the original zero hour some batteries of 6 NZ Field Regiment and possibly others commenced to lay the standing fire as news of the postponement had not reached them.

However, at 2.30 a.m. the barrage began in earnest and the Essex battalion and two companies of the Rajputana Rifles were ready to follow as it lifted. In spite of the confusion and many loose ends still untied, the operation went with complete success. Brigadier Weir's artillery programme, though hastily concocted, proved the value of his methods of barrage fire and concentrations, for the Indian brigade met mostly demoralised or dead defenders and little direct resistance. The men of the Essex battalion on the right, after overrunning some gun positions, were on their objective by dawn with well over 100 prisoners, mostly German, while the Rajputs took some twenty prisoners at a cost of one man wounded by enemy action. The Valentines of **50/46 Royal Tanks**, warned to avoid unnecessary losses, navigated with caution the unknown going until the advent of daylight allowed them to catch up with the infantry. The companies of 3/10 Baluch Battalion straggled up later to join the tanks in a reserve position on the objective. This operation by 5 Indian Brigade was given high praise at the time,

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<sup>1</sup> 3 Bn, 10 Baluch Regt.

<sup>2</sup> 4 Bn, 6 Rajputana Rifles.

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probably in comparison with the lack of success of similar attacks previously, but the Indians, with inside knowledge, passed on the praise to Weir's artillery programme.

The final infantry operation for this night was an advance by 7/10 **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** to **Tell el Aqqaqir**. This battalion, which had taken over the 'firm base' position at the rear of the salient

from 6 NZ Brigade the previous night, assembled early in the night and at 1.30 a.m. started to thread its way through the mass of troops and vehicles which now filled every track and almost every square yard of the salient. Halting in the area where both the Gordons and the Indian brigade had laid out their start lines, and which consequently was being used as the route to the newly gained positions, the Highlanders formed up parallel to the **Rahman Track**, using as their guide the line of telegraph poles which, as the sky lightened, could be dimly discerned in the distance. With the uncertainties over the positions of the armoured division's troops now settled, the supporting barrage, fired by regiments of the armour under the control of the commander of 128 Field Regiment, RA, was allowed to commence as planned at 5.15 a.m. This consisted of a simple standing barrage for an hour along a stretch of the track, followed by the customary lifts over about 1000 yards and ending with a half-hour standing barrage. When the shellfire ceased at 7.10 a.m., the **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** found themselves in complete and unopposed occupation of the **Tell el Aqqaqir** feature for the loss of eight men killed and 23 wounded, mainly from scattered shellfire and mines. Two German prisoners only were captured, for the enemy had clearly abandoned the area in haste. Among the positions there was a headquarters, probably that of *164 Division*, where many documents, as well as much signal, medical and other equipment, were found undemolished.

*iii*

These three infantry operations ended the period which Montgomery called the 'dog-fight', though they could hardly be said to have completed the breach in the enemy's line, for by the end of this night there was no line as such to be breached. The front from Aqqaqir southwards had been held by *164 Light Division*, which had been told by ***Africa Corps*** to withdraw on the evening of the 2nd in transport provided by the *Corps* so that its troops could be divided among the two panzer divisions. When, by the early morning of the 3rd, none of the promised trucks had appeared, communication with the *Corps* had

broken down, and the Italian infantry and artillery had already decamped, the divisional commander decided that his front was too thinly held, and too full of holes where the Italians had been; accordingly he gave the order for withdrawal to start after dark on the 3rd. The attack by the Gordons arrived before the retreat had begun, but even the rearguards should have been away before the Indians' operation and it can only be assumed that the prisoners taken had not received the orders or were perhaps waiting for transport to ferry them back. As it was, the majority of the men of *164 Division* marched back on foot overnight to the vicinity of the 'Ariete' or 'Telegraph' track, the next north-south supply route west of the **Rahman Track**, where they later became involved in a tank battle, suffering numerous casualties. On being distributed among the *Africa Corps* formations, many units of the division found that they had to continue to retreat on foot owing to the *Corps*' lack of transport.

From the experience of *164 Division*, and similar experiences of *90 Light Division*, it is clear that **Hitler's** order and Rommel's consequent indecision did not materially affect the final result in **Africa**. Rommel's original plan of withdrawal was based on unreliable logistics, for the strained transport and supply situation which so affected the outcome at **Alam Halfa** had, under the pressures of the **Alamein** battle, already reached the breaking point. However much Rommel believed he could disengage and fight a mobile battle, only a small proportion of the *Panzer Army* could have been made mobile and all that **Hitler's** intervention did was to lessen this proportion.

The ' **Fuka** line', of which there is so much talk in the German records, was an impracticable proposition, even if the Eighth Army had delayed following up for several days. The bulk of the troops to man it would have arrived weary, dispirited and short of weapons and equipment. They would have had to be concentrated in the coastal area, the front could not have been mined owing to the shortage of transport and mines, and the whole line could have been easily outflanked to the south. Any such line-by-line withdrawal was impossible without adequate

transport and Rommel was inevitably committed to the hit-and-run retreat he eventually carried out. In fact, the transport problems of the *Panzer Army* were such that, once the *Alamein* battle had been joined, Rommel was faced with the alternatives of fighting the Eighth Army to a standstill or of a retreat in which the bulk of his infantry would have had to be left to fend for themselves.

By the evening of 3 November, the initiative was completely in Montgomery's hands. He was aware from air reconnaissance and the reports of the Royals and *Long Range Desert Group* patrols behind the enemy's line that there was no prepared line at *Fuka* or further back on which the *Panzer Army* could make a stand, so that he assumed Rommel intended to use his mobile forces to fight a rearguard action behind which the rest of the *Panzer Army* could withdraw. The whole of his planning, however, had been designed to avoid a repetition of the see-saw desert fighting and towards making the enemy stand and fight against his battering-ram of massed guns, tanks and infantry. Failing to realise fully the parlous state into which the *Panzer Army* had fallen, he resisted the pressures of those who wished to set off hot-foot in pursuit, especially as this would have meant letting the armour loose out of his direct control.

Accordingly the night of 3–4 November was spent in probing for a gap with the infantry operations already described, and careful preparations for sending the armour through at daylight if the gap should be found. Montgomery still insisted that a continuous infantry front be maintained, though he ordered several transfers and alterations of sectors so that troops could be released to his reserves. Horrocks of 13 Corps was given clearly to understand that no part of his corps was to rush forward and 'receive a bloody nose'.

The only experimental action he permitted was a renewal of the attempts to pass armoured cars through the enemy line. Just before dawn two squadrons of 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment and the rest of the Royals, that is, Headquarters and B Squadrons, slipped through the area where 5/7 Gordons had earlier been repulsed and



crossed the **Rahman Track** into the open desert. The South Africans made in the direction of **Fuka** while the Royals drove west to join their other two squadrons. Of the total effect of the actions of these armoured cars, it could be said here that they relayed valuable information to the Eighth Army and also proved a considerable nuisance to the **Panzer Army**. The first two squadrons through interrupted the supply routes to the southern part of the line, causing the enemy to waste valuable petrol and employ extra troops and trucks to provide convoy guards. An attempt to cooperate with the Air Force in an attack on a landing ground south of **Daba** met with only indifferent success.

At dawn on 4 November the **Alamein** defences had 'crumbled' and the pursuit began in earnest though, with the congestion on the tracks leading through the SUPERCHARGE salient and with memories still fresh of the anti-tank screen on which 9 Armoured Brigade had broken only a short time earlier, initial movement was slow and cautious. Screened by a dawn mist, all three armoured divisions sent reconnaissance groups ahead to test whether any opposition might still lie beyond the **Rahman Track**.

As the tanks of the three British armoured divisions reached the **Rahman Track**, the Australians were already busy clearing the road and railway in order to ease the supply problem, which was likely to increase the further west the armoured forces drove. South of the break-out area, there were still some pockets of Germans, fanatically determined to fight the rearguard battle that Rommel had asked for; but in the far south, where Italian troops had been predominant, 13 Corps' patrols found the defences abandoned. Resistance around the **Qattara Box** area where the *Ramcke* parachutists were stationed caused Horrocks to ask the Army Commander's permission to lay on an attack, on the assumption that a delaying stand was being attempted, but Montgomery was unwilling to waste his forces in an unnecessary battle, for the armoured advance would soon isolate all the enemy remaining in the south. This decision was also influenced by the strain already felt by the supply services in keeping the northern battle going, and the even

greater effort that would be needed to keep the advancing armour supplied. He therefore directed Horrocks merely to send out patrols all across his front to keep in touch with the enemy and, if possible, encircle any areas of resistance.

The balance sheet for the battle that raged at **Alamein** from 23 October to 4 November cannot be drawn up with detailed accuracy. Total British losses came to 13,500 men, of whom fewer than 3000 were killed, the remainder being mostly wounded and a few taken prisoner. Being victors on the ground, the Eighth Army was able to recover most of the 500 tanks put out of action, and of these only 150 were found beyond repair. Of field, medium and anti-tank guns the army lost, as far as can be ascertained, no more than about a hundred damaged beyond repair.

The battle-worthy tanks in the Eighth Army on the evening of the 3rd included 151 Grants or Shermans and 103 Crusaders held by the three heavy armoured brigades,<sup>1</sup> some 30 to 40 heavy tanks in 4 Light Armoured Brigade and the **Warwickshire Yeomanry**, 66 Valentines in 23 Armoured Brigade, and a large number of Stuarts in various of the formations, giving a grand total of over 400 tanks altogether.

The Axis casualty figures for the whole of October and November have been assessed as 12,900 Germans and 22,800 Italians, a total of 35,700. Of the 27,900 prisoners included in this total, more than

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<sup>1</sup> i.e., 2, 8 and 22 Armoured Brigades; 24 Brigade was 'cannibalised'.

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half must have been captured after 4 November.<sup>1</sup> The highest figures recorded for Axis tanks held at the start of the battle were 366 German<sup>2</sup> and 318 Italian.<sup>3</sup> Of these, when the Eighth Army advanced on the 4th, **Africa Corps** retained some 50 German tanks, with a number of captured British and about 17 of *Littorio's* Italian tanks in running order, while **Ariete Division**, with about 100 'runners', was moving up on



a collision course with the British armour. Of this total of about 150, only a handful survived the next few days.

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<sup>1</sup> Bayerlein, in a footnote to the *Rommel Papers* (p. 358), gives the German official figures as:

	<i>Killed</i>	<i>Wounded</i>	<i>Prisoner</i>	<i>Total</i>
Germans	1,100	3,900	7,900	12,900
Italians (estimated)	1,200	1,600	20,000	22,800
	—	—	—	—
Totals	2,300	5,500	27,900	35,700

Alexander in his Despatch ( *London Gazette*, 3 Feb 1948) estimated Axis losses for approximately the same period as 10,000 killed, 15,000 wounded, and 30,000 prisoners, a total of 55,000.

While it seems certain that Alexander overestimated the Axis losses, it is equally certain that the German figures underestimated them, particularly in the Italian totals of killed and wounded.

<sup>2</sup> 264 'runners' and 102 en route or under repair.—GMDS 25869/6.

<sup>3</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 336.

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 32 – THE PURSUIT

AS day dawned on 4 November, the set-piece battles of **Alamein** were finished. Montgomery could justly claim that his forecast of a twelve-day dogfight, to crumble the *Panzer Army's* fixed defences, had proved true.

<sup>1</sup> It was perhaps fortunate that the British armour, in spite of its repeated attempts, had not managed to break out earlier as the planning had envisaged, for this failure had prolonged the battle of attrition in the form in which the Eighth Army had the advantage. When, after the false start interrupted by **Hitler's** order, Rommel at last managed to get his army moving on the now unavoidable withdrawal, it soon became clear that, had the *Panzer Army* fallen back earlier when it still had cohesion and control, the British advance might have been slow and laborious. Montgomery has indicated in his writings that such an advance was in his mind, an advance consisting of bringing his superior weight of tanks and artillery methodically against each bound of withdrawal taken up by Rommel and, in fact, such was his method later. But in the initial stages of the enemy withdrawal, the inherent weaknesses in the Eighth Army became obvious. The British armour, as Montgomery had feared, 'swanned' about the desert, out of coordinated control in several fruitless encircling movements, while powerful armoured columns were at times held up by weak German rearguards which resisted only because they had no petrol for further withdrawal.

As one army fell back in some confusion and the other followed up across a desert noteworthy for its lack of easily recognisable landmarks, it is only to be expected that records of movement and event should be hazy in details of time and place. Many of the *Panzer Army's* surviving records are reconstructions made after the

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<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 126.

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originals were destroyed, deliberately or by battle, and cannot easily be correlated with the Eighth Army's accounts of running fights and rearguard actions.

The day broke with a ground mist hiding much of the front. Though news of the occupation of **Tell el Aqqaqir** had been passed around, no one on the British side knew whether the mist would lift to disclose the congestion in the SUPERCHARGE salient to enemy fire.

When the mist dispersed shortly after the sun arose, it became obvious that the enemy had gone except for some distant guns on the north-west which fired on Australian patrols and sent some random rounds towards 6 Brigade and the Maori positions. The German records disclose that on the northern flank *90 Light Division*, under orders to prevent a breakthrough along the coastal road, had placed rearguards about **Sidi Abd el Rahman** while its main body withdrew on **Ghazal**. South of the road and covering a front of about five miles, *21 Panzer Division* mustered possibly twenty tanks in battle order. Next, on an inconspicuous rise known as **Tell el Mansfra**, the *Africa Corps Headquarters Battle Group (Kampfstaffel)*, with no more than ten 'runners' at the most, sat slightly in advance of its neighbours. Some six or seven miles to the west of **Tell el Aqqaqir**, *15 Panzer Division* had as many as 27 'runners' and the 17 survivors of *Littorio Division*. Still further south, and probably to the west of *Africa Corps'* north-south line, *Ariete* had joined the survivors of *Trieste*, the two divisions coming under *20 Italian Corps* and mustering probably over 100 tanks, many of which, however, were in immediate need of repairs and maintenance. <sup>1</sup> To the south of this armoured front, troops of *Trento* and *Bologna* divisions of *21 Italian Corps* were supposed to be holding a position by **Sidi Ibeid** but, without transport, ammunition, or stores, were in fact in complete disorder.

Montgomery's provisional plan of the previous day had been for the New Zealand Division with its attached armour, under command of 30 Corps, to follow the route taken by the armoured cars of the Royals and

South Africans in a wide encircling movement round the south of Aqqaqir to gain the **Fuka** escarpment pass some 45 miles to the west, while **10 Corps'** armour made a shorter and sharper wheel of 10 to 15 miles to cut the coast road about **Ghazal**. In this way he hoped to bottle up the rearguard, in which he assumed

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<sup>1</sup> All these tank strengths are estimates but are close enough to indicate the opposition facing Eighth Army.

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the panzer forces would play the major part, against the coast while the New Zealanders cut off the fleeing remnants of the infantry. Lumsden, whether with Montgomery's agreement or not is uncertain, had intimated to his divisional commanders that they might be directed on **Fuka** but, during the night, as the attacks towards Aqqaqir were proceeding, he issued an instruction for an advance merely to outflank the enemy without specific directions. All the evidence shows that, up to this time, no one in the Eighth Army had an inkling of the disorganisation caused by **Hitler's** order and Rommel's indecision in disobeying it, or of the low fighting state to which the **Panzer Army** had fallen. The resistance met by 9 Armoured Brigade in the SUPERCHARGE operation was still fresh in the armour's memory.

As far as can be ascertained, the orders on which the armoured divisions acted were for 1 and 10 Armoured Divisions, on right and left respectively, to probe west from the salient while 7 Armoured Division advanced to the south-west across Aqqaqir, prepared to swing north against the flank of any opposition met by the other formations.

Montgomery's desire to fight a tidy battle was this morning flouted by circumstances. By following the precept of concentrating his attack at one point, he had channelled all his mobile forces, with their massive attendant tails of support, administration and supply columns, along the tracks leading into and through the narrow salient. When word got around that the enemy had gone and the advance was starting, groups of vehicles tried to press forward to be in at the kill while others,

obediently awaiting definite orders, blocked the tracks. The confusion and congestion, already bad, reached a peak this morning and it was only by the exertions of the control posts, aided by senior officers, that some sort of traffic order was gradually made out of the chaos as the day wore on.

One of the first to find his way clear of the confusion was **General Freyberg** who, fully convinced that the enemy had 'cracked', hurried out with a small reconnaissance group to test the route round the south of Aqqaqir. Impatient orders to get the divisional column following in his wake brought the news that 4 Light Armoured Brigade, due to take the lead, was still near **Alamein** station jostling for its share of the tracks; 5 Brigade was waiting at the base of the salient for the light armour to pass, while 9 Armoured and 6 Brigades were still in the defences on the north-west corner, the latter waiting for its transport which was held up in the rear.

In the salient itself, all three armoured divisions <sup>1</sup> had begun to assemble at first light in columns which at points intersected each other. About 6.30 a.m. **11 Hussars** led 7 Armoured Division towards Aqqaqir, but the need to sort units from the congestion in the morning mist, as well as patches of heavy going on the route, delayed progress so that it took nearly two hours for the head of the division to reach the ground won overnight by 5 Indian Brigade. Further north, 1 Armoured Division managed to get itself in some sort of order by the time the mist dispersed and then, about 7.45 a.m., 12 Lancers cautiously advanced due west at the head of 2 Armoured Brigade. On Lumsden's order, **10 Armoured Division** began to assemble facing west on 1 Armoured Division's southern flank but did not move immediately. Shortly after eight o'clock the

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<sup>1</sup> The order of battle of the main components of **10 Corps'** pursuit force was:

1 Armoured Division

- **2 Armoured Brigade**
  - **The Bays**
  - **9 Lancers**
  - **10 Hussars**
  - **Yorkshire Dragoons (motorised infantry)**
- **7 Motor Brigade (lorried infantry)**
  - **2 Rifle Battalion**
  - **7 Rifle Battalion**
  - **2 KRRC**
- **12 Lancers (armoured cars)**

## **7 Armoured Division**

- **22 Armoured Brigade**
  - **1 Royal Tanks**
  - **5 Royal Tanks**
  - **4 CLY**
  - **1 Rifle Battalion (motorised infantry)**
- **131 Lorried Infantry Brigade**
  - **1/5 Queens**
  - **1/6 Queens**
  - **1/7 Queens**
- **11 Hussars (armoured cars)**

## **10 Armoured Division**

- **8 Armoured Brigade**
  - **3 Royal Tanks**

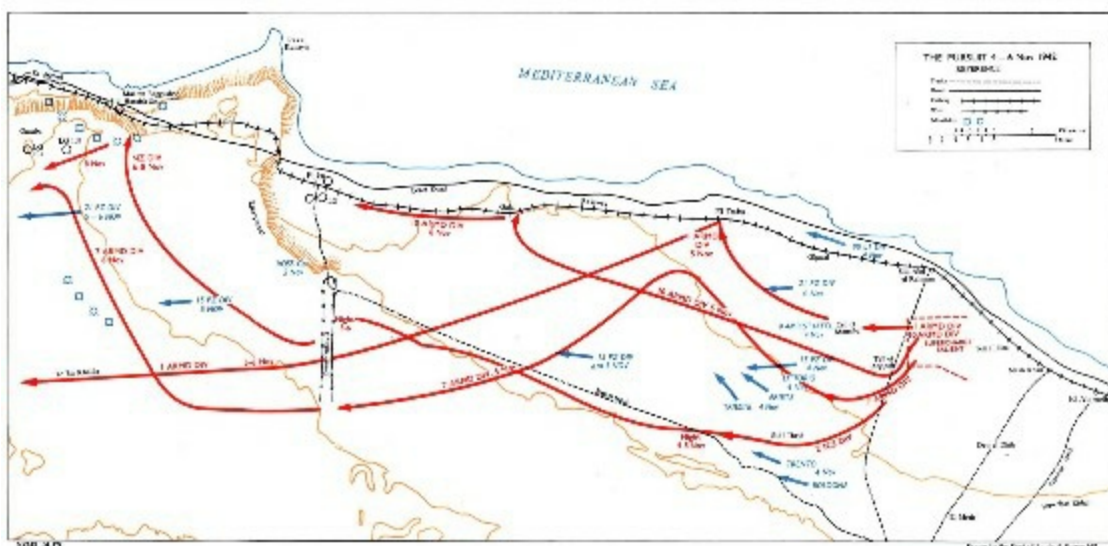


- **Notts Yeo**
- **Staffs Yeo**
- **1 Buffs (motorised infantry)**
- **133 Lorried Infantry Brigade**
  - **2 Royal Sussex**
  - **4 Royal Sussex**
  - **5 Royal Sussex**

### **Armoured Car force**

- **Royal Dragoons**
- **4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment**
- **3 South African Armoured Car Regiment**

**armoured cars of 2 Derbyshire Yeomanry, followed by the Royal Scots Greys of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, managed to thread their way out of the confusion to a point south-east of Aqqaqir, but here Freyberg held them back until the rest of his force could be organised.**



**Except for a little long-range artillery fire, all this initial movement by the British armour met with no organised opposition though increasing numbers of the enemy were encountered, most of whom, both**

German and Italian, had obviously missed the general withdrawal and, on the appearance of armoured cars and tanks, willingly surrendered.

The first clash with the enemy's new line came in the middle of the morning when 22 Armoured Brigade, leading 7 Armoured Division, had travelled some miles down the **Rahman Track** from Aqqaqir and then turned to the west. At the turn it came under 88-millimetre fire. As the brigade halted to deal with this fire, the divisional commander, Harding, ordered the rest of his column to keep going further south and swing round 22 Brigade's left flank. However, it soon became clear that the division was up against an extensive line of tanks backed by numerous guns, too strong to rush and too dangerous to leave menacing the division's line of advance. Harding therefore called up his field and anti-tank guns and settled down to a long-range duel. This enemy force seems to have been mainly the 100 or so tanks of **Ariete Division** with **20 Corps'** artillery, including some 88s, to back them up. There may also have been a few surviving tanks of **Trieste**, while the seventeen tanks left to **Littorio** and positioned on **15 Panzer Division's** right flank were possibly drawn into the battle. Numerous parties of Italian infantry as well as some of **164 Division**, in process of re-forming before being distributed among the panzer formations, were also caught up in the battle. When **Ariete** reported the engagement to **Africa Corps**, a battalion group was sent by **15 Panzer Division** to fill the gap between its right flank and the Italians. The role of **20 Italian Corps** was to guard the **Panzer Army's** right flank against encirclement and, according to the German records, Rommel was at first confident that, with over 100 tanks, the Italians would fulfil their task.

In the meantime, 2 Armoured Brigade of 1 Armoured Division had advanced slowly due west from the **SUPERCHARGE** salient and was heading for the rise at **Tell el Mansfra**, where **Africa Corps'** **Kampfstaffel**, of a few tanks and anti-tank guns, was filling the gap between the two panzer divisions. With the Corps Commander, von Thoma, present in person, the battle group put up an exceedingly fierce resistance in which several British tanks were knocked out, including

that of 1 Armoured Division's commander, Briggs, who then halted his armour while he called up his field artillery to suppress the enemy's fire. Under both tank and field-gun fire, the enemy resistance broke, five tanks and a few guns managing to withdraw, according to the German records. The corps commander was taken prisoner, along with several hundred German gunners and infantrymen who were sheltering in nearby trenches. Though the engagement ceased and von Thoma was captured shortly after midday, 2 Armoured Brigade does not appear to have advanced much further in the afternoon, possibly through meeting fire from the panzer divisions on its flanks.

Gatehouse's **10 Armoured Division**, comprising **8 Armoured Brigade** and 133 Lorried Infantry Brigade, had meanwhile assembled during the morning and, having extricated itself from the confusion in the salient, reached the **Rahman Track** just to the south of 1 Armoured Division's line of advance by midday. Lumsden then decided that, as both 1 and 7 Divisions seemed likely to be held up, Gatehouse should attempt an encircling movement to the south, though this meant that his columns would have to cut across the routes being used by 7 Armoured Division and the New Zealanders. However, enemy dive-bombers put in one of their rare appearances this day, causing the division to disperse in some confusion, and it was late in the afternoon before **8 Armoured Brigade** set off down the **Rahman Track**. Then, coming in sight of 22 Brigade's battle off to the west, the brigade halted to reconnoitre and finally laagered for the night about three miles west of the track.

By the end of the 4th, therefore, the three armoured divisions of **10 Corps** had advanced only a few miles west of the line gained in **SUPERCHARGE**. Unaware of the true state of the *Panzer Army*, Lumsden was in fact following the original policy laid down by Montgomery in which the armour, after breaking out, was to position itself to invite armoured counter-attack. It was on this policy that the shallow outflanking movements of the armour were based.

Had the *Africa Corps* stayed to fight to the last, this method would have paid off. But what the Eighth Army could not, and did not, know

was that, shortly after von Thoma's capture, Rommel's common sense finally overrode his loyalty to **Hitler**. Although neither *21* nor *15 Panzer Division* had been directly engaged, reports of massed tanks facing them and attacking *20 Italian Corps* on the southern flank caused him to issue in mid-afternoon an order that there was no longer any need to hold out to the last man or to permit unnecessary sacrifice, an order which may have reflected his personal feelings over the loss of von Thoma. He then issued detailed instructions for a withdrawal at dusk to a first bound on a line running south from **Daba**, where the formations were to set out strong rearguards to cover further retreat to the **Fuka** area. Both these bounds were for assembly and reorganisation, with no suggestion of prepared lines of defence. It is clear that Rommel was waiting to see what he could salvage of his army and what the British would do, and he hoped, or believed, that they would follow up as cautiously as was their custom.

However, there was one man in the Eighth Army who was impatient for bold action. Having gone forward and personally seen the quantities of guns, vehicles and equipment both destroyed and abandoned, and the groups of dispirited prisoners accumulating in ever increasing numbers, **Freyberg** was sure that the enemy was on the point of slipping away and was fretting to get his divisional column on the move. Whether he expected to carry out the major encirclement of the *Panzer Army* unaided is unlikely, but he certainly hoped to block its retreat in time to allow *10 Corps* to finish it off. His orders from *30 Corps* were for a fast advance, avoiding engagements, on a line south-west from the salient to **Sidi Ibeid**, and thence north-west along the old Barrel route to the **Fuka** escarpment and north to **Fuka** itself, a total distance of some 60 miles. He was warned that at **Fuka** he might be cut off and have to be supplied by sea, a warning that illustrates the thinking of the time.

In spite of his impatience, **Freyberg** had first to assemble his force, a task made no easier by the congestion on the salient routes. The Division's order of battle, with the approximate positions of the various components early on the 4th, was as follows:

**HQ 2 NZ Div** (Main HQ to the rear of the salient, and Tac HQ on the move forward)

**HQ 2 NZ Div**  
**Sigs**

**9 Armd Bde** in support of 6 NZ Bde in the north-west and north of the salient

**Warwick**  
**Yeomanry**  
**Composite**  
**Regt**

**4 NZ Fd**  
**Regt**

**31 NZ A-Tk**  
**Bty**

**41 NZ Lt AA**  
**Bty**

**6 NZ Fd Coy**  
**166 Lt Fd**  
**Amb**

**2 NZ Div**  
**Cav in the**  
**salient and**  
**to the rear**

**4 Lt Armd** moving forward from its laager about three miles east of  
**Bde** **Alamein** station

**Royal Scots**  
**Greys**

**4/ 8**  
**Hussars**

**2 Derby**  
**Yeomanry**

**3 RHA**  
**1 KRRC**

**Fd Sqn, RE**  
**Lt Fd Amb**

**5 NZ Inf Bde** between **Alamein** and **Tell el Eisa** except for 22 Bn (in the rear of the salient), 28 Bn (on the north flank), and artillery and other detachments scattered through the salient and by brigade headquarters

**21 NZ Bn**

**22 NZ Bn**

**28 NZ**

**(Maori) Bn**

**5 NZ Fd**

**Regt**

**32 NZ A-Tk**

**Bty**

**42 NZ Lt AA**

**Bty**

**2 Coy, 27**

**NZ (MG) Bn**

**7 NZ Fd Coy**

**Coy 5 NZ Fd**

**Amb**

**6 NZ Inf Bde in the north-west defences of the salient**

**24 NZ Bn**

**25 NZ Bn**

**26 NZ Bn**

**6 NZ Fd**

**Regt**

**33 NZ A-Tk**

**Bty**

**43 NZ Lt AA**

**Bty**

**3 Coy, 27**

**NZ (MG) Bn**

**8 NZ Fd Coy**

**Coy 6 NZ Fd**

**Amb**

**27 NZ (MG) with Main HQ 2 NZ Div**

**Bn (less two  
companies)**

**7 NZ A-Tk**

**Regt (less**

**three**

**batteries)**

**( Note: Four platoons of 4 NZ Res MT Coy were needed to make the  
infantry of 5 Bde mobile, and three platoons of 6 NZ Res MT Coy had to  
drive through the salient to pick up 6 Bde's infantry.)**

The Division's original orders were for 4 Light Armoured Brigade to deploy at 8.30 a.m. on the east of **Tell el Aqqaqir**, ready to advance to **Sidi Ibeid**. The **Warwickshire Yeomanry** Composite Regiment of 9 Armoured Brigade with the Divisional Cavalry was to assemble by nine o'clock and await orders, while Main Headquarters, the Reserve Group and 5 Brigade were to be ready to move by ten o'clock and 6 Brigade by midday.

As earlier related, some of 4 Light Armoured Brigade reached its deployment area on time, but the whole of the brigade was not assembled until after ten o'clock. **Freyberg** meanwhile had been trying without much success to get information on the progress of **10 Corps**, but he at least knew from his own reconnaissance that 7 Armoured Division had met opposition close to his proposed line of advance. Some time after 10.30 a.m. he sent the armoured cars of the **Derbyshire Yeomanry** to find a route round the south of the battle and later despatched the tanks of the **Royal Scots Greys**.

Gradually throughout the day the various groups of the New Zealand force assembled and threaded their ways through the congestion and the gaps in the minefields before opening out into widely dispersed desert formation. In his diary **Freyberg** described the gaps as

feet deep morasses of dust which spouted up in front of and into the vehicles. By this date thousands of vehicles and hundreds of guns and tanks had pounded the loose fine-grained surface of this part of the desert into something resembling discoloured flour. What will it be like if it rains? **9 Armd Bde** and 5 Bde moved up and the congestion of vehicles in the forward area would have done credit to **Piccadilly**. Fortunately the **RAF** ruled the skies. Div [Headquarters] moved up at 1100 hours and squeezed into the crush.... <sup>1</sup>

Though many of the divisional groups moved up along Boomerang and Square tracks, it is uncertain exactly where they broke out into the open, but their guiding sign was the black diamond used to mark the



**Diamond track** which led into 6 Brigade's defences. From somewhere near the end of this track a party of New Zealand divisional provosts with engineers had set off early to find a minefree route, which led in a southerly direction round the east of Aqqaqir and then turned north-west along the path of the reconnaissance group of 4 Light Armoured Brigade. At first these 'Diamond signs', of black painted tin set on iron pickets, were placed at frequent intervals, but once in the open one sign sufficed for every 700 yards. Thus marked, the **Diamond Track** eventually stretched from **Alamein** to **Tripoli**.

Shortly after midday 4 Light Armoured Brigade reported to **Divisional Headquarters** that the Greys in the lead had halted against opposition. At this time **Freyberg** was holding a conference with his brigadiers, but before the conference broke up the Greys had signalled that they had taken the surrender of 300 prisoners with 11 guns. It would appear that, on swinging round the south of the Italian tanks which 7 Armoured Division was engaging and then turning to the north-west, the Greys had come under fire from the *20 Corps* artillery sited behind the tank line. The artillery had put up a token fight, but had soon ceased fire once the Greys worked round to the rear.

At the divisional conference Gentry of 6 Brigade proposed an all-night advance to reach **Fuka** by the early hours of the morning, asserting that the men of the Division had waited for three years for such a victory as was now offered and would willingly endure the strain of a long night drive. **Kippenberger** of 5 Brigade was more cautious, fearing that in the dark and unknown going, the formations might become separated and be left in some confusion by morning. **Freyberg** himself was full of confidence that the enemy was on the point of breaking and, though 7 Armoured Division was still fighting not far away, he decided to get his column clear of

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

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the confusion and the fighting, and out into the open desert where



concentration would be easier. He therefore set off with his Tactical Headquarters to catch up with the light armour, leaving orders for the rest of the force to follow as soon as possible. Main Headquarters, the Reserve Group, 5 Brigade and 9 Armoured Brigade cleared the minefields by late afternoon but 6 Brigade, having to wait for its transport to negotiate the congestion in the salient, did not get going until 6 p.m.

Carrying eight days' water and rations, 360 rounds for each field gun, and petrol for 200 miles, the New Zealand vehicles, though heavily laden, made good progress once they drew clear of the powdered sand of the battle area and reached the hard sand along the **Barrel Track**. Of the journey, **Freyberg**, riding on the outside of his Stuart tank, entered in his diary:

... we began to pass through enemy positions and tanks of the Panzer Divisions which will fight no more, burning transport, and large calibre guns. It was a change much appreciated to speed across open desert away from the dust heap of the **Alamein** front. As the Div swept south-westwards the guns of the tanks and arty were in action to the north where the British armour were fighting the Panzer rearguard. **4 Lt Armd Bde** was ahead. Behind them marching apparently quite cheerfully were columns of PWs with a solitary armoured car or truck as an escort, carrying a few wounded and a single guard armed with a Tommy gun. We passed an infantry [? artillery] position almost intact with guns in position and ammunition boxes empty.... <sup>1</sup>

During this afternoon, 22 Armoured Brigade continued its action against the Italian *20 Corps* until dark but it is hard to say how this battle really went. The German records, including Rommel's own account, give the impression that *Ariete Division*, fighting gallantly to the last tank, was completely surrounded and annihilated. Yet 22 Armoured Brigade claimed only 29 tanks destroyed and 450 prisoners, against a loss of one tank and a few casualties, while events next day indicate that quite a large part of the Italian force managed to disengage

overnight. The Italian stand at least deterred **10 Corps** from the encircling movement Lumsden had proposed and allowed *Africa Corps* an unimpeded withdrawal overnight.

Some ten miles past **Sidi Ibeid** and 15 miles due south of **Daba**, **Freyberg** halted 4 Light Armoured Brigade as dusk was falling, to allow the rest of the divisional force to catch up. Though the commander, Brigadier Roddick, wanted to carry on to the **Fuka** escarpment, **Freyberg** had learnt through 30 Corps of an intercepted message that *15 Panzer Division* was also making its way to **Fuka**.

Liaison officers were sent back to find the other formations and, by the use of wireless directions and flares, 5 Brigade was guided

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

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to the laager by midnight. No sooner had this brigade halted than a minor battle ensued at the tail of its long column. A party of Germans approached one of the rear vehicles apparently to ascertain if the column was friendly or hostile, and the signals officer in the truck did his best to make them believe he was Italian. As the enemy moved off apparently satisfied, this officer went forward on foot to warn 23 Battalion ahead, but before he could regain his truck firing broke out and a rather wild battle ensued. The mortar platoon of 23 Battalion took the initial brunt of the fighting, first using rifles and then getting their mortars into action against fire from automatic weapons, and probably from a light anti-tank or infantry gun which accounted for one of the mortars. Carriers and 4 Light Armoured Brigade's tanks, as well as infantry of 23 and 28 Battalions, then joined in, upon which the enemy withdrew, taking eight men of the Divisional Signals with them as prisoners, and though chased by several vehicles, got clean away. It was later estimated that the enemy party was about seventy strong, probably a group of *Ramcke* parachutists searching for transport or petrol. The alarm brought some indiscriminate firing, even **Divisional Headquarters** some distance away coming under fire, and casualties were recorded as 8

men killed, 5 missing, 26 wounded and 8 taken prisoner; of these last, seven subsequently were recaptured or escaped. The enemy left 17 bodies behind.

**Freyberg** had been under pressure from **Roddick** and other enthusiastic members of his staff to continue the advance through the night, but this small battle convinced him of the need to get his force concentrated and organised before going any further and he decided to wait for the rest of the force. The firing had set alight an ammunition truck belonging to 23 Battalion and this continued to blaze for some hours, providing a handy beacon for 9 Armoured Brigade and 4 Field Regiment when they drew near the divisional laager. It was still burning when, only two hours before dawn, the head of 6 Brigade's column arrived.

Montgomery's intentions for the night of 4–5 November were for 1 and 7 Armoured Divisions to keep the enemy facing them in engagement while the New Zealand column continued to **Fuka**, and 10 Armoured Division, following inside the New Zealand wheel, cut the coast road halfway between **Daba** and **Fuka**. However, the evening reconnaissance reports of vehicles massed in retreat between these two places, and other indications, convinced him that the opposition to the armour was likely to fade away overnight and he accordingly told Lumsden to push on boldly everywhere, using the Royals and South African armoured cars to act as a delaying force on the **Fuka** escarpment until the New Zealand column could get there.

As the night wore on, Lumsden issued a number of orders, presumably based on information sent back by his divisions. He told 1 Armoured Division to stay in engagement with the enemy ahead while 7 Armoured Division, having reported its victory over the Italian armour, drove for the high ground south-east of **Daba**. Then 10 Armoured Division was to cut the road between **Daba** and **Fuka** with its 8 Armoured Brigade, but its lorried infantry was to take up a position south of **Daba**. Just before dawn, and before the armour broke night laager, Lumsden

changed these plans, instructing Gatehouse to send his lorried infantry direct to the **Fuka** escarpment pass, where it would be joined as soon as possible by **8 Armoured Brigade**, while 1 Armoured Division moved directly to **Daba** with 7 Armoured Division on its left. As Lumsden gave many instructions in face-to-face discussion or conversation over the wireless, not officially recorded, it is possible that there were further variations of his orders.

No clear exposition of **10 Corps'** plans reached **Freyberg** and it was only later in the day that he learnt of them through contact with the armoured formations themselves. Accordingly, as the sky lightened early on the 5th, he sent 4 Light Armoured Brigade to lead his column, ignorant that he was sharing the rush to the **Fuka** escarpment with three armoured car regiments <sup>1</sup> as well as the lorried infantry and armoured brigades of **10 Armoured Division**.

Montgomery's misgivings about what might occur if his mobile forces passed beyond centralised control now began to prove well founded. Some time during this morning he told Lumsden to take the New Zealand column under **10 Corps'** command, but **Freyberg** did not receive news of this change until some hours later. At 10.40 a.m. he was in receipt of a 30 Corps order repeating the **Fuka** assignment, and adding the extra task of sending a detachment to the **Qasaba** landing grounds that lay some 15 to 20 miles further west.

Much had happened before this order arrived for, only an hour after setting out from the night laager, the Greys encountered an enemy force reported to include twenty German tanks. This must have been the panzer regiment of **15 Panzer Division** which had been travelling only a few miles ahead on the same course as that taken by the New Zealanders. According to the **Africa Corps** message log, the division had up to twenty-seven runners on the 4th and suffered no casualties by battle overnight, but this day it

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<sup>1</sup> 3 South African Armoured Car Regiment had been sent out

to join the Royals and 4 SAAC Regiment.

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began a rearguard action soon after daylight. About midday (Eighth Army time) it reported to *Africa Corps* that its strength was down to 8 tanks in running order, 200 infantry, 4 anti-tank, 12 field, and no heavy anti-aircraft guns, i.e., 88-millimetre. <sup>1</sup> How much of the panzer division's losses were due to battle and how much to mechanical failures or lack of petrol is uncertain for the Greys claimed only six or seven of the German tanks, including two captured intact.

While the Greys were in action some vehicles appeared on the south of the New Zealand column and opened fire when the commander of 4 Field Regiment, Lieutenant-Colonel *Stewart*, <sup>2</sup> left the column to identify them. When the tanks of 9 Armoured Brigade returned the fire, most of the vehicles drove off at high speed, leaving two trucks behind from which Colonel Stewart took the surrender of about sixty men. About the same time 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps, the motorised infantry of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, turning to the north to investigate a body of men and vehicles, was met by numerous white flags. Among several hundred Italian and German infantrymen and gunners captured here, the riflemen found the commander of *Trento Division* with most of his senior officers and staff.

By the middle of the day the New Zealand column was stretching out over several miles of the desert. After the enemy facing the Greys had broken off the engagement and retired, the armoured cars took over the lead and were close to the point where the *Barrel Track* swung north towards the escarpment pass. About this time enemy aircraft swept down the column to drop a few bombs on 5 Brigade. Several men were wounded but the Bofors gunners got quickly into action, claiming hits on two Messerschmitts.

Just a few miles east of the pass, the leading vehicles, with which *General Freyberg* himself was then travelling, were halted by shell-fire. Reconnaissance established that this shelling came from two enemy

groups. One of them, probably *Voss Group* of armoured cars, artillery and possibly a few tanks, was close to the lip of the escarpment pass, and the other, of *15 Panzer Division's* rearguard, was on high ground to the west. Together the two groups dominated the approaches to the pass, while *Voss Group* was in a position to fire on vehicles negotiating the track down the escarpment to the coastal plain.

**Freyberg** had by this time decided not to use the pass but to keep on the top of the escarpment and follow it round to the west

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<sup>1</sup> GMDS 25869/9–11.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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of **Fuka**, with the **Sidi Haneish** landing ground and the Division's old defences at the **Baggush Box** as his objectives. From this point he could control the chain of desert landing grounds south of **Baggush** and operate westwards to the **Qasaba** grounds.

As the **Derbyshire Yeomanry** probed forward to find a way between the two enemy groups, they met a marked minefield running north and south. The armoured brigade's tanks and vehicles then began to bank up behind the armoured cars and the enemy fire increased, so **Freyberg** called on Brigadier Weir to deploy the artillery. Under the fire of the field guns, the enemy group on the west withdrew, on which the armoured cars followed up and found a gap, probably the one the enemy had used. Passing through, though still under fire, the armoured cars came in sight of a large concentration of vehicles, stretching several miles to the west behind the northern group of the enemy. According to the German records this must have been the main body of *21 Panzer Division*, then beginning to suffer from an acute shortage of petrol. Both to deny the pass and observation over the coastal plain, and to extricate themselves



from their precarious situation where they might be encircled and cut off from expected petrol supplies, the German forces opened heavy fire, from medium and field guns as well as 88-millimetres, on all attempts by the British tanks to pass through the minefield gap. During this period of the afternoon several parties of stragglers, including a large body of *Bologna Division*, had given themselves up to the divisional column. The Division was also joined by the commander of 7 Armoured Division, Harding, who stated that he had been to **Daba** and found no enemy there.

What had actually happened further east was that 1 Armoured Division had reached **Daba** in the morning and had met with some resistance. The tanks of 2 Armoured Brigade had then cut the coast road to the west, while 7 Motor Brigade had laid on an attack which netted numerous guns and vehicles and much equipment but only a small bag of prisoners. Harding with his division had then appeared and, anticipating Lumsden's next orders, had led his men back into the desert and on to the New Zealand route. In the meantime **8 Armoured Brigade ( 10 Armoured Division)** had somehow cut ahead of the other two divisions to reach the coastal road at **Galal**, halfway between **Daba** and **Fuka**. Here it was just in time to catch the enemy flushed by the other divisions, the only sizable body caught by any of the British encircling movements. After having dealt with some small parties of stragglers, the brigade waited as a large column of tanks, trucks and marching men came unsuspectingly straight towards it. Under fire at almost point-blank range, the enemy was thrown into confusion and offered little resistance. The total of tanks accounted for here by **8 Armoured Brigade** was put as high as 14 German and 29 Italian. About 1000 prisoners were taken as well as numerous guns and vehicles in good order. It was generally accepted in the Eighth Army that this engagement completed the annihilation of the Italian *20 Corps* which 7 Armoured Division had begun the previous day, but, according to the *Rommel Papers*, elements of this corps with 'about ten tanks' were in **Matruh** on 7 November. <sup>1</sup> As the German records do not mention either the composition or the loss of this group at **Galal**, it was probably not part of any formation but a

mixed group of rear and front-line troops, including German and Italian technicians and tanks from the **Daba** workshops.

From Harding the New Zealand staff learnt that he intended to cut round the left of the Division and secure the landing grounds on the south of **Sidi Haneish** and cut the coast road. It is uncertain if Harding was at this time able to pass on the full extent of **10 Corps'** latest plans. Lumsden had in fact realised at last that the narrow wheels of his armour had encompassed mainly laggard Italians and few combatant Germans, and that the main striking force of the *Panzer Army* was slipping from his grasp. After telling **10 Armoured Division** to clear the coastal plain as far as **Fuka**, taking care not to engage the New Zealand column by mistake, he sent 1 Armoured Division on a last desperate, and almost impracticable, sweep. Shortly before 2 p.m. he sent a radio message to Briggs with instructions to despatch Fisher's 2 Armoured Brigade, then in laager on the west of **Daba**, on a 70-mile trek to **Bir Khalda**, which lay a few miles south of **Minqar Qaim** and some 35 miles as the crow flies south of **Matruh** township. From this point the brigade was to operate towards the north to block the routes leading west out of **Matruh**.

Such a manoeuvre might have had an element of success had Lumsden told Harding and **Freyberg** to engage and contain the enemy facing them in order to give Fisher's brigade time to get into position, but these two commanders appear to have been unaware of this new plan and its implications. They continued with their aim of cutting the coast road in the **Baggush - Sidi Haneish** area where **10 Corps** Headquarters, from air and ground reports already received, should have known that few of the enemy would be entrapped.

**Freyberg's** appreciation of the situation in his immediate area was that the enemy group on his north-west would probably try to break out to the south-west after dark. On this basis he gave

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<sup>1</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 343.



**4 Light Armoured Brigade orders to take the 'high ground', presumably that to the north-west of the minefield gap, while 9 Armoured Brigade was to get through the gap and deploy facing north, all to be completed before dark but all qualified by an 'if possible'. The Divisional Cavalry was to cover the north on the eastern side of the minefield, 6 Brigade was to stay in reserve at the rear of the divisional column, but 5 Brigade was to attempt the passage of the gap and take the 'high ground' if the light armour failed to do so. What Freyberg had in mind is doubtful, for the deployment he ordered would have left the enemy a clear route of withdrawal to west or north-west, but he may, at the time he issued the orders, have been expecting Harding's 22 Armoured Brigade to come up on his left.**

**In the early afternoon the New Zealand guns fired a smoke screen to cover infantry and sappers of the light armoured brigade, who removed the wire and pickets bordering the minefield and marked a route in which apparently no mines were found. The tanks, well dispersed against the enemy's shellfire, then drove through and turned north, where they rounded up about 150 of the enemy, mostly *Ramcke* paratroops. The advance of the armour drew the attention of most of the enemy gunners away from the gap, so that just before dusk 5 Brigade, travelling in column at high speed, navigated the gap without casualties or damage, and halted in a hollow sheltered from enemy observation. After darkness fell, the brigade moved some way further north in order to clear the exit from the gap and to make contact with the armour. However, no other part of the New Zealand column followed for some hours. Brigadier Kippenberger recorded that his instructions from Freyberg were to harass the enemy but not to get involved with 'the still powerful German armour', <sup>1</sup> a remark which helps to explain the caution exhibited by individual commanders but hardly condones the lack of concerted action. In his short night move, Kippenberger had lost touch with his artillery, 5 Field Regiment, and was unable to make contact with the headquarters of 4 Light Armoured Brigade. Estimating that he was still ten miles from the coast road he decided that, without guns or armour,**

his brigade should stay in a defensive laager overnight.

At 9 p.m. **Freyberg** conferred with his two brigadiers still east of the gap, that is, Gentry of 6 Brigade and Weir of the artillery. He told them that his intention was to proceed at daylight direct to the escarpment overlooking the coastal strip to the east of the **Baggush Box** area, with 9 Armoured in the lead, followed by 6

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<sup>1</sup> **Kippenberger**, *Infantry Brigadier*, p. 242.

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Brigade and the Divisional Artillery. The other two brigades, whose whereabouts were uncertain, would be collected on the way. He also stated that 22 Armoured Brigade <sup>1</sup> would be operating on his division's left, its objective the escarpment to the west of **Baggush**. This last statement indicates that **Freyberg** had now received more detailed information of 7 Armoured Division's progress and intentions than Harding could have given earlier in the day. Roberts' brigade had in fact reached the minefield some miles to the south and, without enemy interference, had quickly found that there were no mines between the fences. However, no sooner was it through than it found itself short of petrol. About seven o'clock the brigade laagered, some ten miles southwest of the New Zealand position, to wait for petrol and its lorried infantry, 131 Brigade, which had become disorganised in attempting to catch up and was scattered over many miles of the desert route.

How much more of **10 Corps'** plans **Freyberg** knew at this time is uncertain, nor is it certain that he knew he had been transferred to the corps' command. In fact, the wireless message issued by Lumsden just after midday and giving the latest plans reached the New Zealand Division just twenty-four hours after it was despatched. However, he must have gained some information from Harding and, not long after his conference with Gentry and Weir, he received first-hand news of 1 Armoured Division's plans when a column of trucks and carriers suddenly tangled with the divisional laager. This turned out to be part of 7 Motor Brigade on its way to join 2 Armoured Brigade at **Bir Khalda**.

The orders for 1 Armoured Division to proceed at once to **Bir Khalda** were issued by **10 Corps** shortly before 2 p.m. and received by the division within half an hour, according to the available records, but for some reason the division was not ready to start until 6 p.m. Admittedly the difficulties, of communication, replenishment and preparations, were great at this period, but the late start meant that even 12 Lancers in the lead had not gone far before dusk made travelling hazardous. In fact the tail of the divisional column was not able to get clear, before dark, of the maze of old defences, slit trenches, minefields, and criss-crossing tracks in the well-occupied coastal strip. However, the division ploughed on gamely on a gruelling all-night march, which took the head of the column some 55 miles by dawn. The Lancers and 2 Armoured Brigade, still some miles short of **Bir Khalda**, were finally halted by lack of petrol shortly after sunrise, with the rest of the division spread out over more than 20 miles of the desert to the east.

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<sup>1</sup> Under Brigadier G. P. B. Roberts.

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During the morning of 5 November, Rommel seemed at first to think that his *Panzer Army* was in better shape than it actually was, due perhaps to early messages from *Africa Corps* and *90 Light Division* which gave an appearance of some order in the withdrawal, while news of how far or fast his opponents were following up was scanty. First thing in the morning he established his headquarters two miles south-west of the **Fuka** landing ground and, while there, received authorisation from **Hitler** and Mussolini for a withdrawal, with the proviso that the non-motorised forces would be extricated.

We could do nothing but shrug our shoulders, for extricating the infantry was precisely what the original order had prevented us from doing.... Now only Fate could show whether the British would permit us to stay at **Fuka** long enough for the Italian and German infantry to catch up. <sup>1</sup>

He then let his staff issue an order that the **Fuka** position, that is, an imaginary line running due south from **Fuka** station, was to be defended to the last man according to Mussolini's directions, together with a sharp reminder to the Italians to get their surviving formations organised on that line. Driving north to the road, he watched vehicles streaming past under constant air attack, and returning into the desert he found **Africa Corps** in engagement with a British column. Back at his headquarters, he took to a slit trench when the **Royal Air Force** made two bombing runs over the area, having apparently located the headquarters position through wireless intercepts.

By this time he must have realised, from all that he had seen and heard, that most of *10* and *21 Italian Corps* could be written off. **Africa Corps** had already warned that it was in danger of being outflanked from the south, and then 'several Sherman tanks came in sight and opened fire on everything they could see. We apparently no longer had any troops between us { *Panzer Army Headquarters*} and the British.'<sup>2</sup> The **Panzer Army** narrative goes on to recount that in the afternoon a breakthrough by strong tank forces between *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* could not be prevented while *Voss Group* was tied down by a strong tank force, and as there were no more reserves and little petrol, no counter-attack was possible.<sup>3</sup>

As no British forces, except for armoured car patrols, were far enough west to engage **Africa Corps** at this time of the day, the *Corps* must have been reacting to the tentative probings of the New Zealand column. The Sherman tanks that fired on Rommel may have been armoured cars or the tanks of 4 Light Armoured Brigade that captured the *Ramcke* troops. Whoever they were, the situation

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<sup>1</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339

was enough to persuade Rommel to accept *Africa Corps'* proposals for retreat by another bound to **Matruh**. Accordingly, he gave orders for any available remnants of *10* and *21 Italian Corps* to occupy the **Matruh** defences, and for *90 Light Division* and *Africa Corps* to retire on the minefields along the **Matruh- Siwa** road to a point just south of **Charing Cross**, covered by rearguards supplied by *90 Light Division* at **Garawla** and to the south.

By the timing of messages issued by its headquarters, *15 Panzer Division* began to retire almost as soon as the New Zealand column arrived to face it across the dummy minefield and, after dark, it made all speed for the **Siwa** track. Both *Africa Corps Headquarters* and *21 Panzer Division* seem to have waited until later in the day, when the panzer division set off but got no further than the vicinity of **Qasaba** before it ran out of petrol, and *Corps Headquarters* moved north towards the main road. *Voss Group*, which must have been responsible for most of the spasmodic fire on the New Zealand forces, joined *21 Division* after dusk. Through poor communications in its direct link with *Panzer Army* headquarters, *90 Light Division* did not learn of the orders until well after dark and its assembly was then hindered by heavy bombing of the coast road. Attempts to disperse its columns on the desert tracks running parallel with the road met trouble with the old minefields, but it finally managed to collect its units, spread between **Fuka** and **Sidi Haneish**, and despatch them to **Matruh** by dawn, leaving a rearguard at **Garawla**.

On the morning of the 6th, therefore, the New Zealand forces were preparing to advance to the north, with *22 Armoured Brigade* a little way behind on the left, to meet the coast road at a point where only a few laggard *Panzer Army* troops might still be cut off, while *1 Armoured Division* was some 25 miles or more away, deep in the desert to the south-west, but well placed to attack the still critical road junction at

**Charing Cross** had its men and machines not been so fatigued by their long night journey. Off to the south and west of **Charing Cross**, 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment, having reached this area the previous evening, reported that its operations were impeded by the mass of prisoners it had so far collected.

At first light **Freyberg** sent the Divisional Cavalry through the minefield gap with orders to screen the advance of 9 Armoured Brigade and 6 Brigade to the escarpment overlooking the **Sidi Haneish** landing ground. As the armour was filtering through the gap, a column of vehicles came from the north-east, apparently intending to pass round the south of the divisional laager area. Before the column could be identified, armoured cars and troop-carriers on its flank opened a rather indiscriminate fire obviously intended to cover the passage of the soft-skinned vehicles. The New Zealanders, however, were now not so ready to be taken by surprise and the men of 25 and 26 Battalions immediately returned the fire with Brens and rifles while the six-pounders of 34 Anti-Tank Battery and the two-pounders of 25 Battalion swung into action. Then the men of 3 Machine Gun Company of the Reserve Group, with their Vickers guns firing from their vehicles, and the carriers of 25 Battalion raced out in an attempt to head off the enemy. Although a portion of the column escaped, a large number of prisoners was collected, variously estimated at from 400 to 600, mostly Italians but including 100 men of *90 Light Division*. Among the enemy were some fifty British troops, together with some of their vehicles, who had been captured the previous evening while bringing up supplies for 7 Armoured Division.

This incident was over before the Cavalry and armour had negotiated the gap so, leaving the prisoners to the Reserve Group, 6 Brigade followed without delay, the whole force advancing steadily in a north-westerly direction throughout the morning. No opposition was met, and shortly before midday the leading Cavalry patrols reached the high ground overlooking the **Sidi Haneish** landing ground.

Back in the desert, **Freyberg** had called **Kippenberger** and **Roddick** to



a conference just after ten o'clock to give them instructions to move up on the right of the two leading brigades towards the south-east corner of **Baggush Box**. However, news from the patrols soon made it evident that the enemy had slipped away and, with petrol running low and the going becoming increasingly difficult, neither brigadier felt the need for haste.

Earlier in the morning, pilots of the **Desert Air Force** had met low cloud and rainstorms along the coast. As the day advanced the rainstorms increased in volume and frequency, spreading steadily inland. The Daba landing grounds from which the fighters were operating became unusable, so that the fighters had to return to all-weather fields well behind the **Alamein** line. When air reconnaissance revealed that the road east of **Matruh** was clear of traffic, unescorted light bombers, relying on the low cloud for cover, were sent to attack the road from **Charing Cross** to the **Sidi Barrani** area.

On the New Zealand left, 22 Armoured Brigade had set off early from its laager deeper in the desert. An enemy column, possibly the survivors of the one that 6 Brigade had engaged, passed across the line of march but drove off to the west before it could be identified; but a second group of vehicles, which seems to have been the rearguard of *Voss Group*, was engaged and some prisoners taken. These two incidents, allied to a shortage of petrol, delayed 22 Brigade's advance so that the brigade was still a good ten miles or more from the coast when, about midday, its supply trucks caught up and it stopped to refuel. Meanwhile, 1 Armoured Division at **Bir Khalda**, its tanks in need of maintenance and petrol, made no move before midday. Although some of its lost B Echelon vehicles appeared, they carried far from enough petrol to move the whole of 2 Armoured Brigade, while the main RASC petrol column was still struggling through bad going some 50 or more miles back.

Montgomery himself had driven forward during the morning along the coast road in an attempt to 'ginger things up'. Here he met Gatehouse of **10 Armoured Division**, whose leading troops were reported to be through **Fuka** just before noon. Montgomery ordered Gatehouse to

halt his men and clear the area to his rear of stragglers, and at the same time to despatch all the petrol he could spare to 1 Armoured Division. About one o'clock Lumsden appeared at **Freyberg's** headquarters and, while lunching there, stated that he hoped to get 1 Armoured Division into **Matruh** before the day ended, and that he was sending 7 Armoured Division to the west of **Matruh**. He ordered **Freyberg** to occupy and clear the landing grounds in the vicinity of **Baggush** and, once the **Royal Air Force** was operating from them, to clear the area from **Baggush** to **Charing Cross**.

The opportunity of encircling the fighting units of the *Panzer Army* at **Matruh** passed during the afternoon of 6 November when the weather joined hands with the caution of the Eighth Army's commanders in exploiting their victory. All along the coastal belt the morning's rainstorms developed into a steady downpour which the desert sands were soon unable to absorb. On the escarpment plateau widening pools filled the hollows where the sand lay deep, turning them into morasses impassable to most vehicles and then, overflowing, gouged channels down to lower levels. Only on the rocky ridges was travel possible, but many of these soon stood isolated like islands in the sea of rain. From the escarpment, miniature waterfalls cascaded down to the coastal plain to form streams which swept across the road and railway towards outlets through the sand dunes on the beach.

As the New Zealand brigades drove north towards the road, first the trucks with only rear-wheel drive, then those with four-wheel drive, fell behind. As each truck sank to its axles in the wet sand, the men aboard dismounted from the shelter of cabs and canopied trays and, in the cold persistent rain, dug channels for each wheel. With camel thorn, sand trays, discarded enemy tents, or anything that would help the wheels to grip placed in the channels, the men hauled and heaved their vehicles to firmer ground. At first the tracked carriers and tanks were able to tow some of the wheeled vehicles, but soon too many trucks were immobilised and even the tracked vehicles were finding the going treacherous. The rearmost vehicles, driving over ground whose crust had



been churned up by those in front, were the first to succumb, so that before long the brigade columns were stretched over many miles of the desert. By late afternoon the men in charge of most of the heavy trucks carrying troops and stores had given up the struggle and the advance slowly ground to a standstill.

In the van, however, two squadrons of the Divisional Cavalry which had reached the rim of the escarpment worked their way with some difficulty down cuttings that led to the **Baggush Box**, where the Division had been encamped less than a year ago. Crossing the railway on to the main road, one squadron made its way to the Box defences and the other to the **Sidi Haneish** landing ground. In neither area was there any sign of opposition, though German and Italian stragglers were found as well as quantities of equipment, much of it in good condition. Several hundred Indian prisoners were released from a compound by the landing ground, where the Cavalry also discovered a large stock of petrol with which they filled up their vehicles. When some of the **Warwickshire Yeomanry's** tanks and 4 Field Regiment's guns followed down the escarpment, the whole force started up the main road to the west. After covering a few miles, the regiment received orders to rejoin 9 Armoured Brigade Headquarters which had halted on the escarpment above **Sidi Haneish**. The rain had increased by this time and it was with some difficulty that the heavier vehicles ascended the escarpment to the brigade laager. Some of the armoured cars of the **Derbyshire Yeomanry**, of 4 Light Armoured Brigade, had also gained the road and, receiving no orders to return, stayed to laager by the railway station.

As the New Zealand columns struggled forward in the afternoon, **11 Hussars** of 7 Armoured Division, on a parallel course a few miles to the west, were reconnoitring ahead of 22 Armoured Brigade. The Hussars fired on a group of vehicles, probably the headquarters of **Africa Corps**, which retreated rapidly to the north-west; following up, the armoured cars observed a larger group, including some tanks, stationary to the south-west. This force consisted of the remnants of **21 Panzer Division**, with up to thirty tanks, <sup>1</sup> and **Voss Group**, waiting for petrol in the

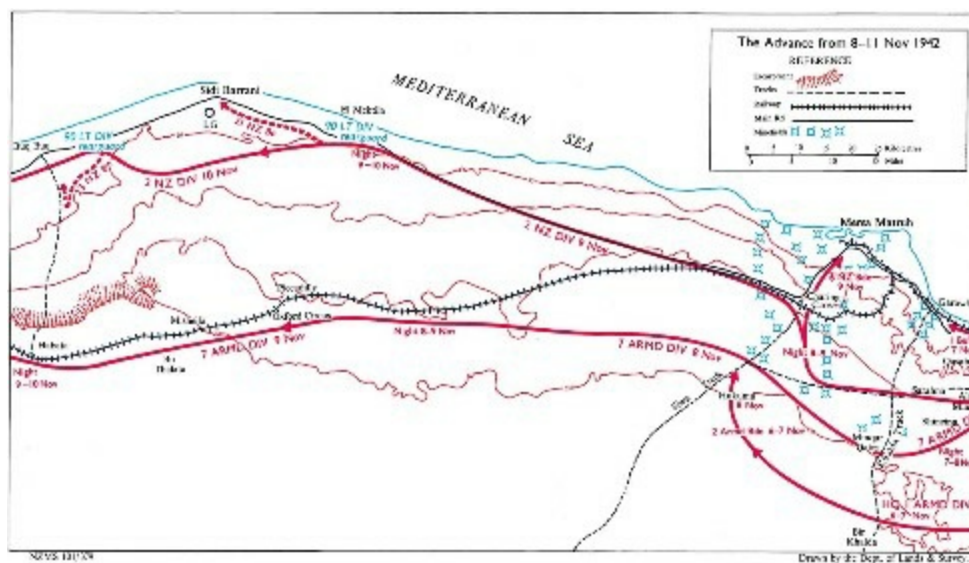
vicinity of the **Qasaba** landing grounds. Under cover of the reduced visibility brought by the afternoon's rain, tanks

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<sup>1</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 343. It would appear that the panzer divisions had collected a number of tanks from the rear workshops as they withdrew.

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of 22 Armoured Brigade followed the Hussars and actually turned the flank of the Germans, who were expecting an attack from the south or south-east. According to the German records, the panzer division was unable to deploy its tanks where they were needed through lack of fuel, and an artillery unit, after firing at the British tanks over open sights, was overrun. The British commander intended to work round the rear of the German force but the increasingly poor visibility and the flooded going prevented much movement, so that night fell with the two groups of tanks still firing at each other.



Away at **Bir Khaldia**, Briggs was still trying to get 1 Armoured Division assembled ready for an advance on **Charing Cross**, but when his petrol columns were still reported to be many miles to the east, he sent 2 Armoured Brigade off, but without the Bays whose petrol was extremely low. Although not quite so badly affected by the rain as the forces nearer the coast, the brigade made slow time over the broken ground south of **Minqar Qaim**. At a halt in the late afternoon when it was still east of the **Siwa** road and some 15 to 20 miles south of **Charing**

**Cross**, the brigade found that the heavy going had used up most of its petrol so, with the ground becoming increasingly waterlogged, it laagered where it stood. By nightfall elements of 1 Armoured Division were extended from 2 Armoured Brigade, south of **Charing Cross**, to the divisional headquarters at **Bir Khalda**, and for many miles to the east, with tanks and trucks out of petrol or stuck in the wet sand.

Wireless communication on 6 November was probably the worst experienced in the campaign. Although the Eighth Army was now well equipped with transmitter/receivers of relatively good quality, so that detached units and supply columns should theoretically have been able to keep in touch with their parent formations, all wireless contacts had suffered for various reasons since the pursuit began. The great distances involved were of course partly responsible, as was interference from the enemy's radios, but the main fault lay in what might be called 'over-indulgence'; spread out as they were and on the move, everyone in the pursuit forces with a set available—and that included practically every tank, armoured car, supply column, and all the various headquarters, high and low—was either asking for or sending instructions or information all through the day. On this particular day the weather also took a hand, with atmospheric interference which at first was intermittent, apparently preceding each rainstorm, and then in the afternoon became continuous, blotting out reception almost completely in many wireless sets.

*ii*

If the Eighth Army's pursuit forces found 6 November a trying and exasperating day, for the *Panzer Army* it was a time of near-panic and depression. As the fighting troops moved back on **Matruh**, the German commanders realised that this important forward base, with its stores and workshops augmented to congestion by materials brought from further east, would have to be evacuated as quickly as possible. Leading west and south from **Matruh** there were several routes threading their ways through the uncharted minefields of past campaigns and deep in

soft sand through constant use, so that they could not take any great volume of traffic at any speed. As the rain increased these tracks turned into quagmires, forcing all vehicles leaving the area on to the main tarmac road. But this portion of the road, as the New Zealanders had found to their cost in June, was lined on both sides by mines from **Matruh** to **Charing Cross** and beyond so that movement off the tarmac at any point was hazardous.

The situation met by the New Zealanders when moving against the Eighth Army's retreat some six months earlier was now to be repeated along this same stretch of the road. Rommel's own account was as follows:

Conditions on the road were indescribable. Columns in complete disorder—partly of German, partly of Italian vehicles—choked the road between the minefields. Rarely was there any movement forward and then everything soon jammed up again. Many vehicles were on tow and there was an acute shortage of petrol.... <sup>1</sup>

The diaries of the *Africa Corps* and lower formations offered an even worse picture, of officers in panic, drivers out of control, trucks and guns being demolished and just abandoned to block the narrow road, and of the summary execution of offenders. As the Eighth Army had been saved on this same stretch of road by the *Luftwaffe's* inability to keep up with Rommel's ground advance, so the *Panzer Army* was saved by the weather, but to a lesser extent. Although the rain-soaked forward landing grounds put the area out of the range of fighters and fighter-bombers, the *Desert Air Force's* light bombers made numerous sorties and found occasional breaks in the cloud through which they bombed and machine-gunned the road through **Charing Cross**.

By this day Rommel, having relinquished any hopes he may have held that some of the lost groups of his army might reappear, could now make a candid accounting of the pitiful handful of fighting men on whom he could rely. To add to his worries, after hearing that

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ships had arrived in **Benghazi** on 4 November with 5000 tons of petrol, a belated reply to his earlier urgent demands but still welcome, he was then told that nearly half this quantity had been lost through British air attacks. When an envoy from Cavallero appeared, Rommel stated flatly that his available force could do no more than delay the British advance east of the Egyptian frontier. However, his spirits rose when so little happened on 6 November for he wrote, 'During that day, we succeeded in forming a fairly firm front and beat off all enemy attacks. Although the enemy must have been aware of our weakness, he still continued to operate with great caution.' <sup>1</sup> He then proposed to reorganise his motorised forces to hold **Matruh** for a few days while defences were prepared at **Sollum**.

The presence of British armoured car patrols to the south and southwest of **Charing Cross** had earlier been reported but Rommel discounted this danger. Towards evening, however, a force of tanks, obviously 2 Armoured Brigade, was observed in the same area, and *15 Panzer Division*, which had just settled down with its back to the **Charing Cross** minefields, became worried lest it be outflanked and bottled up. Then, at dusk more bad news arrived in messages from *21 Panzer Division*. With petrol drained from all bogged or damaged tanks and trucks, which were then demolished, the division had begun to fall back under cover of darkness from the danger of encirclement by 22 Armoured Brigade. The heavy going caused more vehicles to break down or become bogged, these in turn being demolished or abandoned, and soon the petrol of the remaining vehicles was exhausted. Somehow the division met a supply column carrying fuel and, after an arduous all-night drive, reached the *Africa Corps* area in the vicinity of **Charing Cross** by daylight on the 7th. How this journey was accomplished on a night when most other desert traffic was at a standstill remains a mystery, but it left *21 Panzer Division* with a total strength of four tanks, a battalion of infantry, and skeleton units of field, anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery, engineers

and signals.

*iii*

For the majority of the men of both armies the night of 6–7 November was memorable for the discomfort it brought. Although the heavy downpours became less frequent as darkness fell, light showers and drizzle persisted throughout the night. In the New Zealand column there were few men who had not already become soaked to the skin in their efforts to push and haul their vehicles

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<sup>1</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 341.

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through the wet sand. Such activity ceased towards last light which, with the heavy clouds above, came early and thoughts turned to food and rest. In the tanks and carriers, the crews improvised covers to keep the rain out and huddled in their seats. The infantry's 3-ton trucks, loaded with reserve ammunition, weapons, water and rations, could offer cover from the rain but little comfort to the men crowded aboard. There were few places on the sodden ground where bivouac tents could be erected. As for a meal, the heavily laden cooks' trucks, following the units they served, were among the first to succumb to the wet sand and were in many cases miles to the rear.

In spite of orders for the conservation of fuel, the lights of many petrol and sand fires flickered through the rain squalls just before blackout time as billies were hastily boiled and reserve rations or hoarded tins from Patriotic Fund parcels produced and shared around. Then, grumbling impartially at the conduct of the war and the weather, the troops retired to whatever cover they had devised from the drips and runnels of rain, and even welcomed being disturbed to take a turn at sentry duty. And at 2 a.m. the Eighth Army put its clocks back an hour.

Dawn on the 7th showed clearing skies but the sand had been too well soaked to dry out quickly. Although tracked vehicles and the lighter



types of wheeled vehicles such as jeeps and staff cars were able to move provided they avoided the worst of the wet areas, no formed body of the Eighth Army could move any distance without constant halts to dig and winch out the heavier trucks and guns. Moreover, having used up more than their estimated consumption in attempts to keep going the previous day, most groups were running low in petrol. Replenishment, however, proved difficult, for the New Zealand ASC columns bringing up supplies and the Division's B Echelon trucks which ferried the supplies from the replenishment points to the brigades and units were themselves hampered by the waterlogged going. The main supply column, commanded by Major **Bracegirdle**,<sup>1</sup> the Division's Senior Supply Officer, had left the **Alamein** area in the afternoon of the 5th, intending by that evening to set up a replenishment point on the Division's axis south of **Galal**. Caught up in the still-thick traffic flowing after the pursuit forces, the convoy, which included 5 Field Park Company, 4 Company of 27 Machine Gun Battalion, and a guard of three armoured cars and amounted in all to some 200 vehicles, had not threaded its way out through the enemy's old defence lines by nightfall when the thick dust and the danger of mines and abandoned weapon pits brought it to a halt. Next morning it reached the

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col O. Bracegirdle**, DSO, ED, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Auckland**, 14 Aug 1911; clerk; 2 i/c HQ Comd NZASC, Nov 1943–Jun 1945.

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appointed rendezvous, some eighteen hours late, to find only one B Echelon truck waiting to draw supplies. More divisional transport arrived in the afternoon, together with Lieutenant-Colonel **Hillier**,<sup>1</sup> the Division's AA & QMG. Loaded with 13,700 gallons of petrol as well as water and rations, the B Echelon trucks set off for the Division and, after arranging for another replenishment point for the afternoon of the 7th at a landing ground on the escarpment south of **Baggush**, Hillier followed.

As the earlier rain showers turned to a solid downpour, Bracegirdle

began to doubt whether his supply convoys could keep the new rendezvous and accordingly set off to find the Division. On the way he overtook Hillier, whose vehicle had become stuck in the wet sand. With considerable difficulty the two officers reached the Division, only to find that few of the B Echelon trucks had made the journey and that the division was practically out of petrol. Urged by the possibility that the weather might improve and the advance be resumed, Bracegirdle first collected a number of guides from the various units and showed them the position of the proposed replenishment area on the landing ground; he then made his way to the main road. Fortunately, while other vehicles of his column had gone back to the **Alamein** area to refill, the petrol-carrying section had been sent to **Daba** and was already moving up the main road. Bracegirdle then led it by a route of hard going that he had found from the road to the landing ground, arriving just as night fell, but owing to the difficult conditions, only a little petrol was issued to units after dark.

*iv*

Some time during the night of 6–7 November, and before the effects of the heavy rain had been appreciated, new orders were sent out by **10 Corps**. Although some of the details are not clearly recorded, Lumsden's new proposals were for **10 Armoured Division** to advance along the main road to deal with any forces holding out at **Matruh** while the New Zealand and 7 Armoured Divisions joined 1 Armoured Division in the **Minqar Qaim - Charing Cross** area. From this point, one formation was to block escape from **Matruh** while the others moved through the desert to encircle **Sidi Barrani** and **Sollum**.

As far as is known, the major part of 1 Armoured Division, bogged and short of petrol, made no major move on the 7th, but 7 Armoured Division managed to struggle to a point a few miles east of **Minqar Qaim**, passing on its way the tanks and trucks

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col A. E. Hillier**, OBE; AA & QMG **2 NZ Div** Jun-Nov



1942; formerly served in British Army.

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wrecked or abandoned by *21 Panzer Division*.<sup>1</sup> On the main road the leading troops of *8 Armoured Brigade* (of *10 Armoured Division*) drew level with the New Zealanders on the escarpment above *Sidi Haneish*.

The New Zealand orders based on Lumsden's plans and issued shortly after midnight gave *Minqar Qaim* as the immediate objective, from which point the Division was to force a passage through the minefields to the west. Acting on these orders and in spite of the weather, Roddick attempted to lead *4 Light Armoured Brigade*, then a few miles south of *Baggush*, due west across the desert, but he soon found progress too slow and costly in petrol. The armoured cars of *2 Derbyshire Yeomanry*, which had stopped overnight at *Sidi Haneish* station, were then sent west along the main road to see if any of the tracks leading inland from the road might be passable. In the vicinity of *Garawla*, the cars came under anti-tank gun fire and withdrew. Efforts were made to get the nineteen remaining tanks of the *Warwickshire Yeomanry* to follow up the armoured cars but these ceased when it was realised that, though the tanks and the Divisional Cavalry's tracked vehicles, topped up with captured petrol, were able to move, the guns of *4 Field Regiment* and the wheeled vehicles of *9 Armoured Brigade* were either stuck in the sand or out of petrol. For the same reason, the two infantry brigades, further south in the desert, were immobile and there is reason to believe, though there are no recorded orders to this effect, that *Freyberg* was unwilling to let part of the Division advance without the whole, not only because of the danger of enemy action but also of the danger that he might lose command of his armour to one of the armoured divisions.

In the late afternoon tanks of *8 Armoured Brigade* moved up the main road past the New Zealanders on the escarpment at *Sidi Haneish* and past the roadblock that had stopped the *Derbyshire Yeomanry* earlier. The enemy outpost, however, had fallen back to a stronger rearguard position at *Garawla*, where heavy machinegun and anti-tank gun fire met the British tanks. As the state of the ground made an

outflanking move off the road practically impossible, and an advance by the tanks in single file along the road offered too vulnerable a target, the brigade commander called up his infantry, 1 Battalion of the Buffs. The infantry deployed over the sodden ground against defences which stretched across the road and some way to the south, but made little headway before dusk, when the attack was called off.

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<sup>1</sup> In the engagement the previous evening and the follow-up this day, 7 Armoured Division claimed the capture or destruction of 15 tanks and 7 heavy guns and a bag of 2000 prisoners.

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For the *Panzer Army* the rain proved a mixed blessing. It gave a short but valuable respite in which the chaos of supply and fighting troops on the road from **Matruh** westwards could be partially sorted out under the cover of the cloud which hindered the British air efforts. It also gave the fighting formations a chance to rest, reorganise and distribute supplies. Well before daylight on the 7th, on Rommel's order to hold **Matruh** for as many days as possible, the *Panzer Army* headquarters instructed *90 Light Division* to deploy from **Garawla** across to the **Siwa** road, with *Voss Group* on its south, to cover the assembly of *15* and *21 Panzer Divisions* in the **Charing Cross** area. When this order arrived, *90 Light Division* had already recalled its rearguard at **Garawla** and was preparing to retire through **Charing Cross**. The division then sent *220 Reconnaissance Unit* to establish a roadblock east of **Garawla** and *361 Infantry Regimental Group* to back it up. The reconnaissance unit fell back during the day under attack but *361 Regiment* held until nightfall, claiming heavy losses inflicted on tanks and infantry which engaged it. In **Matruh** itself, the fighting troops found that many of the stores and installations on which they relied for replenishment had been removed or demolished in the previous days' panic. To meet immediate requirements, petrol had to be sent by air from **Benghazi** to **Sidi Barrani** and then taken up in trucks. By this means enough arrived on the 7th to give *Africa Corps* 100 kilometres of travel, sufficient to ensure another bound in the retreat. Then news reached Rommel that Colonel Ramcke

had arrived near **Sidi Barrani** with 600 survivors of his parachute troops after an epic journey deep in the desert, during which they had fought several engagements and captured enough vehicles and petrol to keep going. <sup>1</sup>

Although the wet weather allowed the *Panzer Army's* transport already on the main road to keep moving back, it also caused heavy losses of sorely needed vehicles which were travelling off the road. When such vehicles became bogged, the men aboard destroyed or just abandoned them, and often jettisoned their weapons; they then made for the main road to thumb lifts on the already overcrowded trucks passing by. In this way German rear-line troops and Italians of all units and formations became so inextricably mixed that the control points on the road found it impossible to re-form any of the Italian fighting units, and Rommel had to tell *20* and *21 Italian Corps* to get their men back as quickly as they could to **Buq Buq** and **Capuzzo** before attempting to organise them.

The low cloud and the soggy ground hindered the *Panzer Army's* reconnaissance so that the presence of the British armour in the

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<sup>1</sup> On 20 October, *Ramcke Brigade's* 'ration strength' in **Africa** was 4610, of whom more than 2000 were listed in the *Panzer Army* records as casualties by the end of November.

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**Minqar Qaim** area was not detected until the middle of the afternoon, when air reconnaissance reported a column of tanks 30 kilometres south of **Matruh** and armoured cars 40 kilometres further west. Stukas and fighters sent up claimed four tanks or armoured cars destroyed, but this claim was counter-balanced by news of another tanker sunk in **Tobruk** harbour and of naval gunfire on the **Halfaya** and **Sollum** passes. Realising that a stand at **Matruh** would only last until the desert dried out, Rommel decided to take what advantage was left of the wet going to whip his fighting formations back overnight for some 70 kilometres along the main road.

When the meteorologists forecast that the rain was passing and the weather would clear, the 'old desert hands' knew from their experience that a few hours only of wind and sun would make the desert navigable again except perhaps in the sandiest hollows. With the best part of four divisions almost encircling **Matruh**, the Eighth Army knew that the reduction of the defences there would be only a matter of time. What air and ground reconnaissance had been possible during the stormy period all confirmed that an almost unbroken line of transport had been moving west from the town. This and other signs seemed to indicate that the enemy might be leaving the area to no more than a delaying rearguard.

Accordingly, early on 8 November, Eighth Army issued a new set of orders in which 30 Corps was to move up and assume responsibility for clearing the ground up to **Baggush**, and **10 Corps** was to drive hard to the west with its main line of advance along the railway on the inland plateau. The armoured corps' main tasks were to clear the landing grounds at **Misheifa**, to the south of **Sidi Barrani**, for Air Force use, and then to encircle **Sollum** from south and west and clear the landing grounds at **Sidi Azeiz** to the west of **Bardia**.

On receipt of these orders Lumsden told 7 Armoured Division to start as soon as it could along the railway with **Bardia** as its possible objective. The New Zealand Division was to clear up any resistance left at **Matruh** and then send 4 Light Armoured Brigade and one infantry brigade along the main road through **Sidi Barrani** to approach **Sollum** from the east. The rest of **10 Corps** was to reorganise and replenish, ready to follow.

Sunday the 8th of November dawned fine and clear. The morale of the pursuit forces, depressed to some extent by the rain, the hard travelling and inability to come to grips with the enemy, rose with the sun and then rose again when news began to spread of the **TORCH** landings in North Africa. Already much of the desert had become passable and the

New Zealand replenishment point, established overnight on the landing ground south of **Baggush** through the admirable efforts of officers and drivers of the NZASC, became a scene of activity as petrol, rations, and water were distributed. Over 50,000 gallons of petrol alone were issued during the morning.

**Freyberg's** orders were that the brigades should move as soon as they were replenished to a concentration area north of **Minqar Qaim**. From this area 5 Brigade was to feint towards **Matruh** from the south while 6 Brigade attacked from the west. On the fall of the town, 6 Brigade was to clear and occupy the defences, assuming control until relieved by 51 Highland Division, while the rest of the Division, using the main road, cleared the coastal plain as far as **Sollum**.

With many trucks still bogged to the axles and having to be towed or dug out, few of the units had completed their replenishment and assembly when **Freyberg** left, at 8.30 a.m., to attend a **10 Corps** conference in the **Baggush Box**. While he was there, news arrived that a force of 1 Armoured Division, unaware of the latest orders, had penetrated the **Matruh** defences and had encountered no organised resistance east of **Charing Cross**. **Freyberg** also learnt that 7 Armoured Division, having received the new orders, had moved out at daylight from its laager to the east of **Minqar Qaim** and had already crossed the **Siwa** road some miles south of **Charing Cross**. Further reports coming back during the day showed that the division was making good time in spite of occasional patches of heavy going. By nightfall its leading troops had travelled over 60 miles to reach the railway line only a few miles east of the **Misheifa** area.

The New Zealand advance was considerably slower. The reconnaissance group of 4 Light Armoured Brigade had set out early but had come up against a minefield on the flat below **Minqar Qaim**. Unable to find a passable gap, the group finally led the brigade on to the high ground to the south and along 7 Armoured Division's route to the **Siwa** road. **Divisional Headquarters** and the two infantry brigades left late in

the morning, using the track to the north of **Minqar Qaim**, along which many of the men had watched the enemy's columns trying to encircle their positions the previous June. Patches of still wet ground and suspected minefields slowed the progress of the infantry's heavily laden trucks, offering the opportunity for some of those who took part in the **Minqar Qaim** fighting to revisit the battlefield. It was getting dusk before contact was made with 4 Light Armoured Brigade. Bringing up the rear, 9 Armoured Brigade, travelling due west from its laager above Sidi Haneish, ran foul of the difficult wadis around **Qasaba** and halted at nightfall several miles east of the rest of the Division.

**Freyberg**, after an eventful trip back from **Baggush** during which his escort had to open fire on a party of Germans before they would surrender, rejoined the Division in the afternoon with the latest orders. These were for an advance along the main road to **Sidi Barrani** and **Sollum** the next morning, with 4 Light Armoured Brigade in the lead. This brigade was to send a party to occupy and garrison the **Misheifa** landing ground, a curious task in the light of 7 Armoured Division's orders and progress, and one which may be explained by a confusion in the records between the landing ground just south of **Sidi Barrani** and that at **Misheifa** some 30 miles further south. While the rest of the Division followed the light armour, 6 Brigade was to move into **Matruh**, its brigadier, W. G. Gentry, taking over the task of Town Major in charge of prisoner-of-war cages, dumps and installations until relieved by 51 Division.

The **Panzer Army** had only just got its tail clear of **Matruh** before the Eighth Army moved in. Split up into small groups to lessen the danger of air attacks, and mixed up with the last supply columns to leave the township, **Africa Corps** had filtered most of its vehicles on to the main road before dark on the 7th. Progress was slow as the road in places had been washed out by the rain. Numerous vehicles were lost by **Royal Air Force** bombing and strafing and more were abandoned when, dispersing off the tarmac under air attack or negotiating the washouts, they became bogged. Acting as rearguard, **90 Light Division** reported that it



had destroyed anything of value left in the township and harbour before its own rearguard troops pulled out almost at dawn on the 8th. <sup>1</sup>

Because of Rommel's sudden decision to pull back from **Matruh** instead of holding for some days longer, the fighting formations' withdrawal crowded the transport already on the road up against the bottlenecks of the **Halfaya** and **Sollum** passes, both of which had become extremely difficult through the effects of the heavy rain. The two panzer divisions overnight reached a point east of **Buq Buq**, where they were halted by the congestion on the road further west. Here Rommel learnt from his Quartermaster that it would take two more nights to get the army over the two passes and, because the old minefields east of **Sollum** restricted dispersal against air attacks, it would be best to keep the columns spread out as far to the east as possible. He then gave orders that the **Sidi Barrani - Buq Buq** area should be held until the morning of the 10th. On

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<sup>1</sup> The scale of demolitions and particularly booby traps increased steadily after 7 November, on which day Major-General Karl Buelowius became Chief Engineer to the *Panzer Army*. In February 1943 Rommel recommended his promotion for his 'outstandingly careful and anticipatory actions' in the retreat.

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receipt of these orders, *90 Light Division* set up a roadblock some 15 miles east of **Sidi Barrani** with *Voss Group* watching the desert to the south.

Rommel had already learnt of the Allied armada approaching the coast of **Africa** and later this morning he received news confirming the landings. He must also have been told, or perhaps he had knowledge of Axis plans for such an event, that Axis forces would occupy **Tunisia**, for otherwise he might just as well have driven down the road to meet Montgomery. In any case he realised that the chances of receiving reinforcements for his *Panzer Army* were now even slimmer than they had been and that Mussolini's latest order, to defend **Sollum**, was quite

impracticable. The best he could do would be to make a steady withdrawal from base to base round the bulge of **Cyrenaica** to **Agheila**, where the terrain offered a chance of holding a short front. The desert route across the bulge was out of the question owing to the petrol situation and the state of the *Panzer Army's* vehicles. The need to explain his action in disobeying Mussolini brought an assessment of the troops available for the defence of **Sollum**, which amounted to 2000 Italian and 2000 German fighting troops, 15 German antitank guns, and 40 German field guns with some Italian artillery. For a mobile reserve to cover the wide open southern flank of the **Sollum** position he could muster 3000 German and 500 Italian troops, 11 German and 10 Italian tanks, and German artillery consisting of 20 anti-tank, 24 anti-aircraft and 25 field guns. <sup>1</sup>

Towards evening Rommel himself drove back to **Sollum** to find that the congestion, under forceful control, was easing and vehicles moving in a steady stream over the two passes, the steep **Halfaya** pass a few miles west of the village and the zigzag road at the village itself. From *90 Light Division* he learnt that only armoured cars had approached the rearguard east of **Sidi Barrani**, but had fallen back after two had been knocked out. So, unless the British moved with unaccustomed speed, there was now a chance that *Africa Corps* and *90 Light Division* might be able to use the good going of the main road rather than the desert route through **Habata** to pass the frontier wire. Good demolitions and small holding forces at the passes and suitable points on the road further west might then allow time for the *Panzer Army* with its drawn-out tail to be organised and stepped back to **Benghazi** before the British could prepare a force to cut across the bulge of **Cyrenaica**. Throughout the night of 8–9 November a steady flow of vehicles climbed the two passes, in spite of heavy bombing. By morning only about 1000 of the rear-line trucks were still east of the escarpment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Rommel Papers*, p. 347.

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On the evening of the 8th, **Freyberg** issued a detailed order for the Division to move at first light next morning, with 4 Light Armoured Brigade in the lead, followed by **Divisional Headquarters**, the Reserve Group, 5 Brigade and 9 Armoured Brigade. As soon as the last of the column passed **Charing Cross**, 6 Brigade was to move up the road into **Matruh**. Before it was completely light, a detachment of the Divisional Provost had marked a route with the black diamond sign through the minefields on to the **Siwa** road. Following the signs, 4 Light Armoured Brigade travelled up the road to **Charing Cross** and then turned west on to the tarmac. At this crossroads, surrounded by the old uncharted defensive minefields, skeletons of British vehicles lost in the June retreat lay side by side with bombed, burnt, and abandoned Axis transport, in places lining the road verges like a fence. Behind the armour the **Divisional Headquarters** column was followed by 5 Brigade in the order of 21 and 28 (Maori) Battalions, 5 Field Regiment, 5 Field Ambulance, 23 and 22 Battalions, and ancillary units. With no deployment possible off the route, the vehicles moved in single file so that it was high noon before the way was clear for 9 Armoured Brigade. The tanks of the **Warwickshire Yeomanry**, however, were nowhere in sight, having been delayed by petrol and mechanical troubles, so the Divisional Cavalry led the rest of the brigade, leaving the tanks to follow later.

Although in the rear of the Division's column the journey was one of stopping and starting, the head of the column advanced fairly rapidly until the afternoon when, some 15 to 20 miles short of **Sidi Barrani**, 4 Light Armoured Brigade's leading vehicles came under artillery fire. For the loss of one Stuart tank, 4/ **8 Hussars** surrounded one outpost, taking 150 prisoners of *90 Light Division*, but were then engaged by stronger positions further west. On hearing of this resistance, **Freyberg** told **Kippenberger** to speed up his advance by opening 5 Brigade into desert formation off the road, but hardly had this been done before the brigade encountered mines and its vehicles had to be channelled back on to the tarmac again. As dusk fell the Division's vehicles were stretched over more than 50 miles of the road, so **Freyberg** told Roddick to disengage

and laager until the Division could be concentrated.

As the leading brigades were threading their way past **Charing Cross**, the commander of 24 Battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Gwilliam, on instructions from Gentry, took his A Company and a party of engineers into **Matruh** to report on conditions there. On reaching the area of buildings, dugouts, and dumps which surround the harbour, the men of the 24th found a surprisingly large number of the enemy still in occupation—engineers who had been working on last-minute demolitions and booby traps, doctors and medical orderlies caring for the sick and wounded in a field hospital, and innumerable stragglers, some unaware that they had been left behind and others just waiting to be taken prisoner. There was no resistance, but a compound of Basuto labour corps troops had to be forcibly restrained, when released, from looting, rioting and attacking the enemy. When he heard that Gwilliam could do with assistance, Gentry himself drove into the town with a party of provosts, field security men and more engineers, and after the tail of the Division had cleared **Charing Cross**, the whole of 26 Battalion and the remainder of 24 Battalion followed. Before sunset 26 Battalion had occupied the Egyptian Barracks by the lagoon and 24 Battalion had taken up quarters on the east of the harbour. The whole of the defence area by this time was full of activity as supply columns came in along the main road from the east to establish replenishment points, engineers searched for booby traps and demolition charges and started to repair the damage to the wharf installations and railway, and prisoners were rounded up and packed aboard empty trucks to be taken to cages further east, while from the sea light naval vessels arrived with petrol in drums.

The next day 25 Battalion, which had been held up by the mass of other traffic attempting to get on to the main road at **Charing Cross**, moved into **Matruh** to take up quarters by the lagoon. Though initially intended to rejoin the Division within a few days at the most, and kept on short notice to do so, 6 Brigade remained in **Matruh** until 20 November, when it moved up to the **Bardia** area. This was partly because the brigade was not needed for action and partly to ease the supply

problem. **Matruh** appeared to be damaged more by British air action than by the *Panzer Army's*, attempts at demolition, and in its scattered buildings and dumps a surprisingly large quantity of material was recovered in usable condition, both of enemy stocks and British stores left behind in the June retreat. One partially damaged store of the Egyptian barracks was piled to the roof with Italian boots; nearby was a heap of British spigot mortars, and elsewhere were found quantities of medical equipment, machinery, and tinned food, of both British and enemy origin, as well as much Italian issue wine of the type known to the Eighth Army as 'plonk' or 'purple death'. With periods allowed for swimming and sport, the men of 6 Brigade spent the waiting period in **Matruh** in tidying up the area, unloading vessels at the landings, and assisting in the railway yards. The first train from **Alexandria** reached the station on 14 November.

When 4 Light Armoured Brigade halted against the opposition east of **Sidi Barrani** late on the 9th, the rest of the New Zealand Division, strung out behind on the coast road, had to keep going throughout the night to catch up. After his brigade's unsuccessful attempt to travel off the road, **Kippenberger** had hurried ahead with his leading troops but at dusk was still some miles behind the armour. He then called a halt to get the brigade concentrated, but it was midnight before the tail of the brigade drew up and the advance could be resumed.

A first-light reconnaissance on the 10th by 4 Light Armoured Brigade revealed that the opposition had melted away overnight. In fact, according to its war diary, *90 Light Division* had fallen back in the middle of the previous afternoon, its rearguard of *361 Infantry Regiment* being chased by an armoured force, of which four tanks and four armoured cars had been destroyed in a battle in which its own losses had been considerable. As no other battle appears to have occurred in this area, *90 Light Division's* report must refer to the loss of its rearguard outpost to 4 Light Armoured Brigade, which reported one light tank as its only casualty. By the evening of the 9th, the main body of *90 Light Division* was just east of **Buq Buq**, some 20 miles west of **Sidi**

**Barrani**, under orders to hold firm overnight in order to let *Africa Corps* negotiate the escarpment passes. In spite of widespread attacks by the **Desert Air Force** on **Sollum**, **Halfaya**, **Capuzzo** and **Bardia**, the *Panzer Army's* withdrawal had become more orderly now that the Italians and supply transport were west of the two passes, so that the two panzer divisions were able to ascend the passes during the night. By dawn of the 10th, only the light division and some artillery units were still east of **Sollum**.

By this time 7 Armoured Division, following a route to the south of the railway reconnoitred the previous evening by armoured cars, was approaching the frontier with the intention of making a wide sweep to west and north to encircle **Capuzzo**. On the coast, 4 Light Armoured Brigade set off at daylight, cutting across the desert in a direct line for **Buq Buq** and passing the **Sidi Barrani** landing ground, which was found littered with abandoned and burnt-out Axis aircraft, vehicles and equipment. Having caught up with the armour in time to follow its daylight advance, **Kippenberger** found that the unrestricted travel in open formation over the desert caused his leading transport to overrun the armour's tail, so called a short halt for breakfast. At 8.30 a.m. the brigade resumed its march, after detaching 21 Battalion to move on the coast road into **Sidi Barrani** village. Here some forty of the enemy, offering no resistance, were rounded up, after which the battalion hurried west on the road to join its brigade. Its B Company, however, was left to occupy the landing ground, some two miles inland, with orders to start clearing it for **Royal Air Force** use.

About nine o'clock the armoured cars of the **Derbyshire Yeomanry** came in sight of vehicles and guns on the road just to the east of **Buq Buq**. As the armoured brigade halted and deployed to engage the enemy, 5 Brigade's tactical headquarters drove up just in time to receive the 'overs' from the enemy guns. **Freyberg**, whose tactical headquarters had kept pace with the armoured brigade, then told **Kippenberger** to take his brigade to the south, presumably on the **Buq Buq - Habata** track, and to climb the escarpment, following it to the north-west to reach the top of

**Halfaya Pass. Kippenberger** immediately sent 23 Battalion off to lead the way, with instructions to travel at maximum speed and to fight if necessary. In this way **Freyberg** hoped to cut off at least the end of the enemy's tail, for the occupation of the escarpment above **Sollum** by one determined battalion could deny the enemy's escape up the two passes for some time. However, it was after midday before the orders had been issued and the necessary preparations made. The battalion, with brigade tactical headquarters, then set off, while the rest of the brigade assembled ready to follow, but the leading troops had covered only about seven miles of extremely bad going when **Kippenberger** received orders from **Freyberg** to return on his tracks. On gaining the main road, the column had considerable difficulty in forcing a space for itself in the almost stationary press of vehicles that had piled up nose to tail along the 20 miles between **Sidi Barrani** and **Buq Buq**.

**Freyberg's** cancellation of the outflanking move had been brought about by the receipt of news that 7 Armoured Division had already passed through **Habata** on the inland escarpment with **Capuzzo** as its objective, as well as by the fact that the enemy rearguard on the main road had begun to fall back just before 4 Light Armoured Brigade's tanks, working their way through the desert south of the road, could cut off its escape.

It would appear that all *90 Light Division's* troops still on the coastal plain, including the rearguard, hurried back over **Halfaya Pass** to join the main body in laager a mile or so west of the top of the pass. This enabled 4 Light Armoured Brigade to advance and helped to ease the congestion on the road, but, about ten miles west of **Buq Buq**, the tanks met the old minefield laid early in the war as part of the Egyptian frontier defences. It was now late afternoon, and as the tanks, still travelling on the desert south of the road, reconnoitred for a gap, they came under shellfire. This fire came from a **Panzer Army** artillery group which, through lack of liaison, had been left unprotected and unaware that it was the last enemy force still on the coastal plain. The tanks deployed behind the minefield and returned the fire, upon which the

enemy guns were hastily withdrawn under a smoke screen. As dusk began to fall the **Derbyshire Yeomanry's** armoured cars found a gap in the mines and led the brigade through. While this engagement was occurring, enemy aircraft flew down the main road to drop several bombs which fell close to one of the New Zealand artillery columns, damaging some vehicles and wounding three men.

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## CHAPTER 33 – HALFAYA PASS



**THE New Zealanders' approach to the Sollum escarpment, a natural defensive position against attack from the east, offers an interesting study of possibilities. Air reconnaissance had reported that numerous guns, some of heavy calibre, had been observed on the escarpment, sited among infantry positions and minefields, but so far none had fired on the vehicles congregating in the failing light within ten miles of the top of Halfaya Pass. Still of the opinion that the *Panzer Army* had a sting in its tail that could maul his light armour and infantry, Freyberg was faced with the immediate alternatives of a surprise assault up the pass in the darkness or of exposing the mass of British transport to the enemy's observed fire in daylight in an area where the old minefields hindered dispersion of the vehicles and deployment of the artillery. The second choice would commit him to an artillery duel followed by a prepared night attack, which might prove costly, or to a wait of unknown length while the position was encircled from the south. That the defences would fall eventually to a concentration of 10 Corps' available forces was certain, but at this time Freyberg was not fully aware of 7 Armoured Division's exact position and progress, nor of whether it still had sufficient tanks in battle order to subdue the enemy on its own. In the event, however, Freyberg pinned his faith on 7 Armoured Division for his diary carries the comment, 'Kippenberger thinks they will have gone from Halfaya tomorrow morning as 7 Armd Div are due behind them tomorrow. If not, difficult to get up the defile road.'<sup>1</sup> He gave no orders for the dispersion of the columns on the road or for the deployment of artillery.**

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

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**In the failing light Freyberg established his tactical headquarters**

just to the east of the minefield, where he discussed the situation with Roddick and accepted the latter's assurances that his light armour and motorised infantry would attempt the ascent overnight. However, he seems to have taken out the insurance of warning both **Kippenberger** and Harding of 21 Battalion that their infantry might be called on.

**Kippenberger** then sent word that his battalions were not to halt for the night until they had closed up on his headquarters, but the units were so extended that it was nearly midnight before the last of the brigade column came to a halt, and even then the units were stretched over several miles of the road. Behind 5 Brigade the Divisional Cavalry had been deliberately making slow time to allow the **Warwickshire Yeomanry's** tanks to catch up. On hearing that the tanks were still suffering from mechanical troubles brought on by wear and tear and insufficient time for maintenance, **Freyberg** told 9 Armoured Brigade that the tank regiment would not be needed for further operations. The tanks therefore stopped some distance east of **Sidi Barrani**, while the rest of the armoured brigade carried on to laager on the east of **Buq Buq**.

Although the day's going had been better on the whole than that previously encountered, by evening the Division was already suffering a new crop of replenishment difficulties and it was becoming clear that the Eighth Army's estimates of petrol consumption made before the pursuit began were far from accurate, so much so that, on figures kept by the NZASC, petrol was being used at almost twice the quantity calculated. The reasons for this were attributed to various factors, including deviations from direct routes to avoid the enemy or difficult ground, the rain and the soft going, night driving in low gear and, to a lesser extent, certain faults which had developed in the system of replenishment. A great deal of petrol was, however, wasted through damage to the American-style four-gallon tins or 'flimsies', quite unsuitable for the heavy wear of desert travel, and a certain amount went up in flames when, several times each day, every one of the thousands of vehicles in the pursuit force had its separate petrol and sand fire to boil the billy. On this day 2 NZ Petrol Company manned a

petrol point just east of **Sidi Barrani** to which the Division's B Echelon transport came to draw supplies, but, owing to the petrol demands by the supply columns of 7 Armoured Division, the petrol company was unable to bring up enough to meet the Division's requirements.

By the evening of 10 November all units of the *Panzer Army* had surmounted the escarpment by one or other of the passes. On Rommel's orders, *90 Light Division* was to defend them, in company with a large detachment of *Pistoia Infantry Division*, by all accounts of a strength equivalent to two battalions, which had occupied defences on the escarpment some days earlier. According to its war diary, the light division placed a German battalion with some artillery to cover **Halfaya Pass** and two companies in position above **Sollum**, but these were *ad hoc* units formed from survivors and stragglers of *164 Division*, who, on retreating ahead of the fighting formations, had been collected in this area. Units of the light division itself went into laager between the escarpment and the frontier wire.

The German and Italian troops guarding the passes provided a formidable rearguard with excellent observation by day over the movement of any troops approaching over the plain below. However, Rommel had earlier refused to add the burden of *Pistoia Division* to his *Panzer Army* command, so that it was operating under what was left of the Italian fighting command and was thus without effective liaison with the German troops. In the event, *90 Light Division* seems to have settled down for a night's well-earned rest behind the protection of the defenders of the passes without warning either the units of *164 Division* or the Italians of the close approach of the British along the coast, while *Pistoia Division* left control of the defences and the blowing and mining of the pass roads to the Germans.

On the evening of the 10th *Panzer Army Headquarters* had reports of armoured cars in the desert to the south and south-west of **Capuzzo** and also on the coastal road east of the passes, but as yet was unaware of the progress of 7 Armoured Division which, with some fifty tanks still in going order, laagered at dusk for replenishment close to the railway

line running west from **Habata**. A curious message reaching the headquarters, of heavy shellfire on **Halfaya Pass**, must have been investigated and discounted. During the night German engineers worked on demolitions on the **Sollum** zigzag, but the **Halfaya** road was left untouched, as if it was thought that either German or Italian detachments were still on the coastal plain.

The task given to 4 Light Armoured Brigade, embodied in an order issued by the New Zealand Divisional Headquarters, was to seize and hold **Halfaya Pass** and reconnoitre towards **Sollum** to see if the zigzag was held. The brigade was to stop on top of the escarpment to cover the Division's ascent. Just as daylight was failing, tanks of 4/ 8 Hussars set off up the road to a point where the turn-off to **Halfaya Pass** branched from the main road to **Sollum**. Along this stretch three Stuart tanks scouting ahead fell victim to mines, on which Roddick halted the Hussars and called on 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps to send forward infantry patrols to reconnoitre the road on foot for mines, demolitions and enemy defences.

Two patrols of four to five men each then came up, one under Lieutenant N. J. Warry and the other under Lieutenant M. Fyfe. Warry's party set off on the northern side of the road, cutting across the bends by scrambling up slopes and through wadis, and making considerable noise in the process. However, the patrol reached the top of the escarpment in about two and a half hours undetected by enemy sentries. By this time the moon was bright enough for the men to discern, only a few hundred yards away, numerous vehicles with the forms of sleeping men around them. Several sentries were on duty and, like most Italians at night, were making it known they were alert by calling out or singing. The patrol had just taken cover in some empty sangars near the escarpment lip when a motor-cyclist came in view on the road and drove past down the pass.

Meanwhile Lieutenant Fyfe's party had been climbing up the road itself, examining it for mines and demolitions, and was nearly at the top

when the motor-cyclist appeared. Stopping the rider, an Italian, Fyfe sent him down the road with one man as escort carrying a report that the road was clear of mines and negotiable for transport. Fyfe's patrol joined Warry's in its sangars just before midnight, to face a curious situation. The behaviour of the enemy was hardly that of an alert rearguard preparing to defend the pass against imminent attack, but rather that of a convoy resting overnight away from immediate danger. The officers then decided to test the enemy's reaction by firing a few short bursts from their two Bren guns. This brought immediate and heavy, but indiscriminate, retaliation from several automatic weapons. With limited Bren ammunition, the Rifle Corps men held their fire and manned their sangars against attack, but the enemy made no attempt to reconnoitre or even to move his trucks out of danger. Other than Italian ineptitude, the only reason that can be offered for the defenders' behaviour is that the men of *Pistoia Division* had had previous clashes with *Panzer Army* columns withdrawing through their positions and assumed that the Rifle Corps patrol was just another trigger-happy group passing by. The patrols then stayed to watch the enemy settle down as before until, about 2 a.m., the prisoner's escort arrived with orders for Fyfe to return. Warry and his patrol continued their watch for another two hours, undisturbed by the enemy. Shortly after 4 a.m. sounds of movement up the pass were heard and, on going down to investigate, Warry met New Zealand infantry on its way up.

While Roddick's men were still investigating the pass, *Kippenberger* had established his tactical headquarters shortly before midnight at a point estimated to be only three miles from the *Halfaya* turn-off. About half an hour after midnight, Harding stopped his two companies (B Company had not returned from the *Sidi Barrani* landing ground) some two or more miles further to the east, but at this time the tail of 5 Brigade was still on the road east of *Buq Buq*. The rest of the divisional columns were strung out as far back as *Sidi Barrani*, mixed up with B Echelon transport and supply columns of *10 Corps* and *Royal Air Force* convoys, often nose to tail as they waited their turn to negotiate deviations caused by bomb damage to the road or blockages of derelict

(and in some cases still burning) enemy vehicles, a model target of which the *Luftwaffe* failed to take advantage.

The sequence of events is somewhat confused, with personal and official accounts disagreeing in details, but it would seem that, on receiving the patrol report from Warry and Fyfe, brought to him by the prisoner's escort about half an hour after midnight, Roddick considered sending his tanks up the pass but decided that they would be too vulnerable to gun fire as they passed over the crest. He then further decided that his lorried infantry, of 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps, were too few to take and hold the pass firmly enough to let the armour up. These deliberations took about an hour for it was at 1.30 a.m. that he sent a signal to **Divisional Headquarters** intimating that he needed assistance, and also despatched a liaison officer for the same purpose.

Another half hour passed before the news reached **Kippenberger** who, after the initial warning, had been told that his men would not be needed, and had settled down to sleep. It would appear that he sent an immediate signal to Harding and then drove back himself to ensure that the need for speedy action was appreciated, for only a few hours were left until dawn should disclose the packed columns to enemy observation. Harding, however, needed no urging and was already rousing his men. Even then it took the best part of an hour for the men of the two companies, sleeping in and around their scattered transport along the verges of the road, to be awakened, equipped and assembled in trucks on the road. Then, led by Harding and his second-in-command, Major **McElroy**,<sup>1</sup> the small column of C Company under Major N. B. **Smith**<sup>2</sup> and A Company under Captain Roach<sup>3</sup> drove in the darkness along the road to the

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<sup>1</sup> **Lt-Col H. M. McElroy**, DSO and bar, ED; **Auckland**; born **Timaru**, 2 Dec 1910; public accountant; CO 21 Bn Jun 1943–Jun 1944; four times wounded.

<sup>2</sup> **Maj N. B. Smith**, ED; **Hamilton**; born NZ 6 Nov 1909; clerk;



wounded 16 Dec 1942.

<sup>3</sup> Maj W. J. G. Roach, MC; **Wanganui**; born **Levin**, 12 Oct 1909; bank officer; 2 i/c 21 Bn Oct 1943–Mar 1944; wounded 22 Nov 1941.

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foot of the pass. Arriving here about 4 a.m. the column was met by **Kippenberger**, who had gone ahead to discover what was known of the situation from Roddick. The latter gave Harding to understand that the top of the pass was held by a weak company, or even half a company, of Italians, but at the same time he expressed concern at the small number of men provided, for the two 21 Battalion companies mustered no more than 110 fighting men. **Kippenberger**, however, considered the force strong enough as all the officers and men were experienced and capable infantry fighters, and that what by report was no more than an unprepared enemy outpost would give way to a 'brusque' attack.

In a short discussion on the method of attack, **Kippenberger** and Harding agreed that an assault on the lines laid down in pre-war training manuals would best suit the conditions, with the infantry advancing up the road to deploy against opposition and then charging with the bayonet under covering fire from Bren guns. Having watched the small column start up the pass road, **Kippenberger** returned to his headquarters to issue orders for 23 Battalion to prepare to follow up the attack under artillery covering fire, if needed. McElroy, with reluctance, also went back to wake the rest of his battalion, many of whom were still asleep and unaware that the two companies had left. He ordered the cooks to have a hot breakfast ready to take to the top of the pass for the victors.

Guided by an officer of 1 King's Royal Rifle Corps (probably Lieutenant Fyfe), Major Smith, who had travelled over **Halfaya Pass** in previous campaigns, led the way with his C Company, followed by Harding with two signallers, and then Roach and A Company. The men made good time up the road and, on nearing the top, were met by

Lieutenant Warry who told Smith what he had observed of the enemy's positions. Within an hour the column had reached the point where the road began to level off before it surmounted the true crest of the escarpment, but, in spite of this fast climb, there was little time left before the sky would lighten.

Harding told Roach to bring his men up on C Company's right while Smith, with some of his officers and NCOs, made a reconnaissance towards a ruined stone hut close to the road, from which he observed enemy troops and vehicles in front and to the right of the battalion position. The two companies then advanced in line, and within a short distance C Company flushed some Italians from sangars on the north side of the road. However, A Company, keeping pace but meeting no enemy, found itself faced with a steep-sided and rocky wadi and moved in towards the centre to avoid it. Harding then told Roach to take his men round the rear of C Company and advance on its left.

From this point, the action developed into a display of initiative by individual officers and men. On C Company's right, Lieutenant McLean's <sup>1</sup> platoon, aiming at some positions observed on a ridge to its right, collected over fifty prisoners before it had gone 50 yards. The other two platoons, under Sergeants Kelly <sup>2</sup> and Jennings, <sup>3</sup> came up quickly to help and, against little organised resistance, added another batch of Italians to the collection. Within a short time, there were over 200 prisoners assembled by the headquarters Harding had established at the head of the pass, close to some abandoned light anti-aircraft guns with stacks of ammunition and other light weapons. As the headquarters was manned by the commander, a signaller and two runners only, Harding recalled one of C Company's platoons to stand guard.

On the left flank, Roach led two platoons of A Company along the road, with the third moving wide on their left. With sticky bombs ready for dealing with armoured vehicles, the thirty-seven men of the two platoons with Roach advanced by textbook fire and movement towards some vehicles seen in the half light ahead and, against little retaliation, quickly found themselves in possession of five trucks and forty Italians.



A search of sangars and trenches nearby brought more prisoners as well as much 'loot' in the way of pistols, binoculars and masses of documents.

The platoon on the left, of fourteen men under Lieutenant **Chalmers**,<sup>4</sup> met the only genuine opposition in the initial part of the action. Here the enemy positions were covered by a minefield through which Chalmers' men had to thread their way under machine-gun fire. While they were engaging one point of determined resistance, Corporal **Ellery**<sup>5</sup> with two men of his section made a wide outflanking march which brought him unexpectedly into another sector of the defences, which then sprouted a forest of improvised white flags. As Ellery by himself, under covering fire from his two men, advanced further, the whole position facing him capitulated. With at least 143 prisoners on their hands, the three men set off to rejoin their platoon. In the meantime Chalmers' party had broken through the minefield and, after losing one man killed and one wounded, attacked the main point of resistance with vigour, killing quite a number before the rest would surrender. It was full daylight by this time and, with some 250 prisoners in hand, including Ellery's bag, the platoon set off to return to the head of the pass.

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<sup>1</sup> **Capt R. W. McLean**; **Wellington**; born **Marion**, 15 Jan 1909; line erector.

<sup>2</sup> **Lt B. F. E. Kelly**, m.i.d.; **Manurewa**; born **Hamilton**, 12 Jan 1917; schoolteacher.

<sup>3</sup> **WO II R. A. Jennings**, MM, m.i.d.; **Auckland**; born **Te Aroha**, 7 Apr 1916; motor driver, NZ Railways.

<sup>4</sup> **Capt J. C. Chalmers**; **Auckland**; born **Greymouth**, 8 Feb 1914; schoolteacher.

<sup>5</sup> **Sgt F. W. Ellery**, MM; **Katikati**; born **Wanganui**, 28 Jul 1902; farmer.

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Further over to the north, the other two platoons of A Company were still spread out in their search for hidden stragglers and loot, and Roach was trying to assemble them when a column of eight vehicles, some with anti-tank guns on tow, appeared in the west, driving on a track that led to a gap in a minefield. Two men near the gap opened fire as the enemy column drew close and, as the trucks stopped and the men aboard went to ground, others of the two platoons joined in, advancing and firing at the same time. Under this summary attack, the enemy offered little resistance and another party of prisoners was added to A Company's total.

Away on the right of the road, McLean's platoon of C Company saw in the growing light a group of five guns which German artillerymen were hastily hitching to their tractors. While some of the platoon gave covering fire, others raced for a gap in the minefield wire where they hoped to cut off the guns, but the Germans managed to get their vehicles moving and through the gap before the attackers came within effective range.

Believing his area clear of the enemy, Major Smith was returning to Harding's headquarters to report when he came under machine-gun tracer fired from a position in the rear of A Company's line of advance. On reaching the headquarters he sent Sergeant Jennings and three of the men guarding the prisoners there to deal with this position. With his Bren-gunner firing from the hip, Jennings led his small party in a charge through a minefield to overcome the machine-gun nest and then, seeing some trucks ahead, he set off to investigate, but found his way barred by an anti-personnel minefield. As the four men sought a way clear of the mines they were seen and fired on by enemy around the trucks, but the Bren-gunner retaliated, keeping the enemy's heads down while Jennings managed to start the engine of an abandoned truck standing nearby. With the Bren-gunner and his two riflemen firing from the moving vehicle, Jennings drove straight at the enemy, who thereupon surrendered. This action brought in five trucks in good order,

**10 machine guns, two anti-tank guns, and some 50 prisoners.**

**Just before daybreak a troop of 4 Light Armoured Brigade's anti-tank guns appeared at the head of the pass and deployed round Harding's headquarters. About the same time an officer of the brigade in a Dingo came up and drove along the road, where he met Roach who was then on his way to reconnoitre some distant vehicles which he thought might include anti-tank guns sited to fire at vehicles emerging from the pass. The officer refused Roach's request to use the Dingo for a reconnaissance, stating that he was returning at once to report the road clear for his tanks. Harding, whose wireless was proving ineffective, had already sent a runner, on an abandoned Italian bicycle, to **Kippenberger** with the news that his men had cleared sufficient ground at the head of the pass for other troops to come up. It was not long before the tanks could be heard grinding up the road, Roddick himself being in one of the first to reach the top. Passing Harding, he established his headquarters about a mile along the road where Harding joined him. At first treating 21 Battalion's claim of 600 prisoners with reserve, Roddick changed his attitude when invited to look over the collection the two companies had assembled, and congratulated Harding heartily.**

**The battalion had in fact secured about that number for well over 500 were counted as they were marched down the pass, while a large number of wounded and those left tending them were later collected. Some sixty of the enemy had been killed, and the booty included 30 vehicles in going order, 20 anti-tank guns, several field guns, and a large collection of machine guns and other light weapons. All this had been gained for the loss of the one man killed and one wounded. The action brought the battalion several awards, which included the DSO for Lieutenant-Colonel Harding and Military Medals for Sergeant Jennings and Corporal Ellery.**

**The success that fell to 21 Battalion's two slender companies cannot be attributed simply to the weakened morale of the enemy's troops. Admittedly the Italians encountered showed little desire to live up to *Pistoia Division's* motto of 'Valiant unto Death', but the collapse of**

their resistance was not due to any foreknowledge that they had been left on their own to face the British pursuit. Prisoners' statements and all other evidence—the reaction to the fire of the Rifle Corps patrol, the action of the despatch rider, and initial reaction to 21 Battalion's appearance—indicate they were unaware of their true situation. Although the defences were not well sited, being too far back from the lip of the escarpment, as if the Italians thought the German units would be covering them, the men of *Pistoia Division* were entrenched among minefields and well supplied with arms and ammunition, so that under good leadership they could have inflicted severe casualties on any troops attempting to ascend the pass.

In the event, the surprise effect of 21 Battalion's unexpected appearance was exploited to the full by both officers and men. Had there been any hesitation by the infantry, the few Germans present might have set an example to the Italians, especially those covered by the minefields, and held up the New Zealand advance for at least several hours. Instead, one of the best delaying positions on the *Panzer Army's* line of retreat fell in a matter of a few hours to the efforts of a handful of determined and enterprising men.

*ii*

While the **Halfaya Pass** engagement was being waged, *90 Light Division* was resting, with a feeling of security in the protection afforded by the pass garrison, in its laager only a few miles to the west and within sight of the frontier wire. This wire barrier, breached in many places in previous campaigns, offered no shelter, but to many minds in the desert it marked not only the boundary between **Egypt** and **Libya** but also the point where the rigours of the Egyptian desert sands gave way to the greener and more interesting Italian colony of **Marmarica**. In the *Panzer Army* records, there is a distinct impression that fortunes might change after the wire had been reached, that the British might pause and give the harried troops time to get their breath. When news got around that the British were not pausing at the wire, the order and

control imposed to clear the passes was lost and panic and desperation again seized a large part of the German and Italian forces. Rommel himself was under no illusions that either the frontier wire or even the fortress of **Tobruk** would offer a breathing space. Though he received orders from the Italian *Supreme Command* and *Combined Headquarters* to hold on to **Marmarica** as long as possible so that positions around **Agheila** could be prepared, he felt certain that the British would cut across the bulge of **Cyrenaica** direct for **Benghazi**, while the state of his transport and the still difficult petrol situation forced his army to use the long and narrow road along the coast, where minefields, defiles and other obstacles kept trucks in single file. Before he knew that **Halfaya** had fallen he replied to the *Supreme Command* that he would attempt an orderly evacuation of **Cyrenaica**, but the time factor depended on the strength of the British pressure.

This reply could hardly have been prepared before Rommel learnt that the Eighth Army was not stopping at the frontier. No sooner had 4 Light Armoured Brigade assembled at the top of the pass than its reconnaissance unit, shortly before 8 a.m., set off towards **Capuzzo** and made contact with elements of 7 Armoured Division coming up from the south. The commander of *90 Light Division*, probably driving east to see for himself the situation at **Halfaya**, came in sight of the mass of British armoured vehicles and had just time to turn back and alert his division, which retired northwards at speed under cover of a rearguard. This rearguard reported having to fight a hard action before it could disengage and fall back through **Bardia**. Before 11 a.m. the head of 4 Light Armoured Brigade was in **Capuzzo** and by midday reached **Sidi Azeiz** after capturing or destroying numerous vehicles and guns. In the afternoon of the 11th, 4 Light Armoured Brigade received orders from **10 Corps** to pass from New Zealand command to direct corps command, and to assume command of 4/6 South African Armoured Car Regiment and the Royals.

As soon as the armoured brigade had cleared the head of **Halfaya Pass**, the rest of the New Zealand column prepared to follow. One of the

first tasks was to search the area of the turn-off from the coast road and the ascent for mines and booby traps, for already several had been discovered. Engineers of 7 Field Company began work at daylight and continued well into the next day, finding at least twenty unexploded Teller mines on the ascent. Most of these had been laid double and were booby-trapped against easy removal, and it was only good fortune that more vehicles had not fallen victim to them. After dealing with the pass, the sappers cleared and marked gaps in the defensive minefields on the top of the escarpment and then searched the track leading to the **Sollum- Capuzzo** road, and on to **Capuzzo** itself. As the progress of the heavily laden vehicles up the pass was slow and in single file, the traffic along the coast road piled up in a solid block reaching for several miles to the east and offering a tempting target for air attack. The desert Air Force, however, managed to maintain sufficient fighter cover to keep enemy aircraft away except for some hit-and-run attacks by single planes. Owing to the congestion below **Halfaya**, **Kippenberger** was advised to take his brigade along the road to **Sollum** and up the zigzag, but he then learnt from the engineers that the zigzag was impassable so the brigade had to regain its place in the queue at the foot of **Halfaya**. Later in the day 6 Field Company took over the task of clearing the **Sollum** route and, working in shifts with the help of 5 Field Park's machinery and men of C Company of 28 Battalion, had the road open for traffic within twenty-four hours. One crater blown by the enemy on the zigzag needed an estimated 5000 cubic yards of spoil. In the meantime New Zealand provosts, controlling traffic at **Halfaya**, counted nearly 5000 vehicles grinding up the pass. Most of 5 Brigade managed to get up the pass during the morning of the 11th and was then led through **Musaid** to **Capuzzo** and on to the **Trigh Capuzzo**. On **Freyberg's** orders, the brigade laagered for the night close to **Sidi Azeiz**. During the afternoon a detachment from 23 Battalion was sent to **Bardia**, which it found vacated by the enemy but mined and booby-trapped as well as damaged by air raids and demolitions. **Divisional Headquarters** and the Cavalry caught up with 5 Brigade before dark, but the remainder of the Division waited below the escarpment until next day.

The fall of **Halfaya Pass** brought a period of indecision over the employment of the New Zealand Division. **Freyberg** and Lumsden met while the Division was waiting at the bottom of the pass and held a discussion which prompted **Freyberg** to enter in his diary:

I thought of saying to the Corps Comd that no one minds criticism which is constructive but that does not apply to the uninformed criticism of his staff. <sup>1</sup>

There appear to have been two points at issue: one, that the Division had not been reporting its position at the exact hour laid down by Corps Headquarters; and the other, that the Division had not advanced fast enough. The New Zealand records indicate that sufficient situation reports had been sent back to allow Corps to follow progress, though possibly not at the exact hours specified, and their receipt may have been affected both by the difficulties of communication and the methods of operation of the Corps Headquarters.

The complaint that the New Zealand Division had not pressed its advance as it might have done was more serious. In his report on the pursuit operations **Freyberg** wrote:

The policy was not to get involved, but, if possible, to position our forces to cut the enemy off. <sup>2</sup>

This of course was the policy agreed with Leese when the Division set off on the pursuit under the command of 30 Corps, and perhaps it had not been fully understood by **10 Corps** when the latter took over. The New Zealand Division was a motorised infantry force which, stationed across the enemy's line of retreat, could have employed its infantry, and particularly its powerful artillery component, in what would have been, for that limited phase of action, a defensive role. The veteran survivors of 9 Armoured Brigade would have provided protection in such a defence, while the light armoured brigade was intended to reconnoitre and act as a spearhead for movement rather than for offence against panzer formations. As **Freyberg** understood it, the policy was for his men to hold



up the enemy while the three British armoured divisions acted offensively against the enemy's armour. As the pursuit developed, there were two major factors, apart from the unexpected rain and replenishment difficulties, which influenced his actions. The first, and most important, was the belief generally held throughout the Eighth Army that the *Panzer Army* still retained a force of armour that could mount a powerful counter-stroke, and the second factor was the manner in which Lumsden had employed his three armoured divisions. For a blocking role, the New Zealand Division had to be

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

<sup>2</sup> 'Narrative & Lessons on Operations', p. 21 (unpublished).

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concentrated at the point of resistance, and **Freyberg** was determined that his force would not be placed in a situation where it could be overrun piecemeal by an armoured counter-stroke away from support by the British armour.

It is clear that Lumsden and the **10 Corps** staff did not always see eye to eye with **Freyberg**. After the pursuit passed **Halfaya**, Lumsden, faced with replenishment problems, was thinking in terms of an *ad hoc* force of any troops available to continue the advance, all others being left behind or even sent back to the east where they would interfere less with supply of the forward area. **Freyberg**, firm against the dismemberment of his force, asked for a short rest in which to bring up the tail of the Division, including 9 Armoured Brigade and 6 Brigade, and to organise replenishment. His request for 6 Brigade seems to have received a favourable answer from Lumsden for he sent a signal to warn it to stand by, ready to move, but the final permission was withheld by **10 Corps** Headquarters, possibly on the grounds of the supply problems. As for 9 Armoured Brigade, wear and tear had reduced its armour to a mere squadron of the **Warwickshire Yeomanry** by this time.



**Freyberg** was thus in a bad bargaining position if he wished both to concentrate his force and to continue with the pursuit, and he had accordingly to release 4 Light Armoured Brigade, with the **Warwickshire Yeomanry** attached, on its arrival, to go under corps command for immediate operations. In return he received a promise from Lumsden to be given **8 Armoured Brigade** (of **10 Armoured Division**), but then either Corps or Army Headquarters insisted that the whole of **9 Armoured Brigade** be sent back to re-form under **10 Armoured Division**. The **Warwickshire Yeomanry** therefore handed over its few surviving tanks to the light armoured brigade and prepared, with the rest of **9 Armoured Brigade**, to join **10 Armoured Division** in the **Matruh** area.

These arrangements were settled by the evening of 11 November and, having been given an estimate of three days before **8 Armoured Brigade** could be brought forward and assembled for action, **Freyberg** planned to use the time in catching up with administrative details. He told his AA & QMG to bring up 'pay, beer, and battle dress' and the units to organise recreation and swimming, while he himself settled down to prepare reports and deal with a back-log of correspondence with the **Maadi** base. An area near **Menastir**, a few miles inland from **Bardia**, was selected on ground unlikely to be flooded in wet weather and offering flat spaces for parades and sports, and by morning of the 12th most of the Division was in occupation, with bivouac tents being erected, medical aid posts in operation, and communications established between the various headquarters. The pause in active operations brought a considerable increase in the number reporting sick.

**Freyberg's** office work, however, was interrupted early that morning by the arrival of Lumsden with a plan for the Division to advance on **Tobruk**. Of this visit, **Freyberg's** diary recorded, 'According to Lumsden, Germans have withdrawn in orderly fashion and are not unduly perturbed at reverse', <sup>1</sup> and both commanders were agreed that the **Panzer Army** would probably attempt a stand at **Tobruk**. On this appreciation, Lumsden wanted to get as many of his forces as possible within striking distance of the fortress, but **Freyberg** pointed out that he

had released his armour on the understanding that it would be replaced and, until it was, he 'did not propose to take Division anywhere where we were likely to be bumped by tanks'.<sup>2</sup> This comment was followed by the short sentence 'Lumsden understood',<sup>3</sup> but it is not clear whether the understanding was of **Freyberg's** solicitude for his men or of a possible invocation of the powers of his charter.

On a promise that armour would be provided before the Division went into action, **Freyberg** agreed to move further to the west, with the Divisional Cavalry starting off immediately to open up the **Gambut** landing grounds for Air Force operations, and the remainder of the troops following at first light the next morning.

The Cavalry set off at once, but the necessary warning messages for the early morning move had not yet reached all units, upsetting their plans for the rest period, before Lumsden's arrangements with **Freyberg** were upset by the corps staff, who insisted that the combined problems of bringing up **8 Armoured Brigade** and overcoming the replenishment difficulties could not be solved in a matter of a few days. Furthermore, the latest reports from air reconnaissance indicated that the **Panzer Army** seemed to be vacating **Tobruk** as fast as it could, so that it was doubtful if the fortress would be defended. If this were so, the next effective encircling operation would have to be aimed directly at **Benghazi** and **Agheila**, and for this, the **Sollum- Bardia** area was the obvious springboard.

On learning merely that the movement of the Division had been cancelled, **Freyberg** appears to have suspected that **10 Corps** might wish to detach the Cavalry to join the forces encircling **Tobruk** for he took some trouble to ensure that Lieutenant-Colonel **Sutherland**,<sup>4</sup> the regiment's commander, understood that he could complete the reconnaissance of the **Gambut** landing grounds but was not to go

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<sup>1</sup> GOC 2 NZEF/45.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> **Lt-Col J. H. Sutherland, MC; Masterton; born Taieri, 10 Dec 1903; stock inspector; CO 2 NZ Div Cav Oct 1942–Jan 1943.**

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beyond that point. After further indecision on the Division's employment, **10 Corps** finally told **Freyberg** on 16 November that his force would stay in the **Bardia** area for organisation and training for an indefinite period. This period in fact lasted until 4 December.

The urgent message to the Cavalry was received by Lieutenant-Colonel Sutherland on his way to **Gambut**, which the regiment reached on the evening of the 12th after a journey delayed by mines and demolitions. Two men of the regiment, killed when a carrier ran over a mine on the main road, were the last battle casualties suffered by the Division in this phase of the campaign. <sup>1</sup>

The battle of **Alamein** claims a place in military history if only because it was the first victory of any magnitude won by British forces against a German command since the Second World War began. Preceding the seaborne invasion of North Africa by just sufficient time to allow the Eighth Army's achievement to be viewed on its own, it was a battle that caught the popular imagination as an example of Commonwealth solidarity, with its employment of English and Scots, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans and Indians. Also it brought into prominence the personality of the latest Eighth Army commander and, in doing so, has led several writers to explain why the tide of fortune should turn at this moment in terms of personalities rather than facts. Alexander, Auchinleck, Gott and, of course, Rommel all suffered their share of this form of criticism by comparison.

Though there is no doubt that the characters and abilities of the

commanders affected the campaigns, the importance of the personal influence has perhaps been unduly emphasised by the voluntarily accepted briefs of opposing literary lawyers, for there were many other factors besides generalship that helped to turn the tide at **Alamein**. Axis commitment in **Russia**, relegating North Africa to a minor theatre of war, was one. Another was the fact that **Britain**, no longer under the threat of invasion, had with American assistance at last geared her economy to supplying the **Middle East** with the quantities of aircraft, tanks, guns, shells, petrol, trucks, and other equipment needed to give the Eighth Army not only initial superiority but the continuing superiority called for by Montgomery's method of attrition.

The imminence of the TORCH landing was known to the higher levels of the **Middle East** command, adding vigour to their prose-

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<sup>1</sup> For the period at **Bardia** and subsequent operations, see W. G. Stevens, *Bardia to Enfidaville*.

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cution of the battle as the opening round of the long-awaited Allied counter-offensive, while the *Panzer Army*, under a deputy commander, short of equipment and stores, and feeling forgotten by the Axis high command, was far from the top of its form. It is to their credit that the Axis troops resisted so stoutly and so long.

Finally, tribute for the victory should be bestowed on all those Allied troops who had a share in the fighting and behind the lines. Among them the men of the New Zealand Division rank high, for their experience and example had a great influence in the planning and operations. How much **General Freyberg** personally contributed to victory may never be truly assessed, but it was certainly more than appears in the surviving records. On 20 November he completed a report on the two operations, **LIGHTFOOT** and **SUPERCHARGE**, for which Montgomery, never effusive in sharing the honours, wrote the following foreword:

The Battle of **Egypt** was won by the good fighting qualities of

**the soldiers of the Empire. Of all these soldiers none were finer than the fighting men from New Zealand.**

**This pamphlet tells the story of the part played by the 2nd New Zealand Division in that historic battle. The Division was splendidly led and fought magnificently; the full story of its achievements will make men and women in the home country thrill with pride. Possibly I myself am the only one who really knows the extent to which the action of the New Zealand Division contributed towards the victory. The pamphlet contains many lessons that will influence the future training of our Army.**

**I am proud to have the 2nd New Zealand Division in my Army.**

**( Signed) B. L. MONTGOMERY**

**General,  
G.O.C.-in-C.,  
EIGHTH ARMY**

**Middle East  
December, 1942**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## APPENDIX I – COMMANDERS AT 23 OCTOBER 1942

### *Appendix I*

#### *COMMANDERS AT 23 OCTOBER 1942*

**Commander-in-Chief, Middle East: General the Hon. Sir Harold Alexander**

**Commander, Eighth Army: Lieutenant-General B. L. Montgomery**

**Air Commander, Middle East: Air Marshal Sir Arthur Tedder**

**Air Commander, Western Desert Air Headquarters: Air Vice-Marshal A. Coningham**

**Commander, 10 Corps: Lieutenant-General H. Lumsden**

**Commander, 13 Corps: Lieutenant-General B. G. Horrocks**

**Commander, 30 Corps: Lieutenant-General O. Leese**

### *Divisional Commanders*

**1 Armoured Division: Major-General R. Briggs**

**7 Armoured Division: Major-General A. F. Harding**

**8 Armoured Division: Major-General C. H. Gairdner**

**10 Armoured Division: Major-General A. H. Gatehouse**

**44 (Home Counties) Infantry Division: Major-General I. Hughes**

**50 (Northumberland) Infantry Division: Major-General J. S. Nichols**

**51 Highland Infantry Division: Major-General D. M. Wimberley**

**9 Australian Infantry Division: Major-General L. J. Morshead**

**1 South African Infantry Division: Major-General D. H. Pienaar**

**2 New Zealand Infantry Division: Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg**

**4 Indian Infantry Division: Major-General F. Tuker**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## APPENDIX II — ORDER OF BATTLE, 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION, — 23 OCTOBER 1942

### *Appendix II*

### *ORDER OF BATTLE, 2 NEW ZEALAND DIVISION, 23 OCTOBER 1942*

#### *Divisional Troops*

**2 NZ Divisional Signals**

**2 NZ Divisional Cavalry Regiment**

#### *Divisional Artillery*

**4 NZ Field Regiment**

**5 NZ Field Regiment**

**6 NZ Field Regiment**

**7 NZ Anti-Tank Regiment**

**14 NZ Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment**

#### *Divisional Engineers*

**6 NZ Field Company**

**7 NZ Field Company**

**8 NZ Field Company**

**5 NZ Field Park Company**

#### *Machine Gun Battalion*



**27 NZ Battalion**

*Medical*

**5 NZ Field Ambulance**

**6 NZ Field Ambulance**

*5 NZ Infantry Brigade*

**21 NZ Battalion**

**22 NZ Battalion**

**23 NZ Battalion**

**28 NZ (Maori) Battalion**

*6 NZ Infantry Brigade*

**24 NZ Battalion**

**25 NZ Battalion**

**26 NZ Battalion**

*9 Armoured Brigade ( United Kingdom)*

**3 Hussars**

**Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry**

**Warwickshire Yeomanry**

**14 Foresters**

**166 Light Field Ambulance**

# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## APPENDIX III – NEW ZEALAND CASUALTIES IN THE BATTLE FOR EGYPT – 20 JUNE-21 NOVEMBER 1942

### *Appendix III*

### *New Zealand Casualties in the Battle for Egypt*

### *20 June-21 November 1942*

	<i>Western Desert 'C' 20 June – 31 August 1942</i>			<i>Western Desert 'D' 1 September– 22 October 1942</i>			<i>Western Desert 'E' 23 October– 21 November 1942</i>		
	<i>Officers</i>	<i>Other Ranks</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Officers</i>	<i>Other Ranks</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Officers</i>	<i>Other Ranks</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Killed in Action</b>	44	492	536	3	48	51	24	255	279
<b>Died of Wounds</b>	24	262	286	2	25	27	8	93	101
<b>Deaths on Active Service *</b>		33	33		13	13		4	4
<b>Wounded</b>	122	1,958	2,080	24	310	334	92	1,198	1,290
<b>Prisoners of War</b>	107	1,712	1,819	5	85	90	2	39	41
<b>Totals</b>	<b>297</b>	<b>4,457</b>	<b>4,754</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>481</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>1,589</b>	<b>1,715</b>

\* \*Includes deaths through sickness, accident, and causes not otherwise classified.

In June 1942 the New Zealand Division's strength stood at nearly 20,000 men. Wounds, sickness and the departure of 4 Brigade to **Maadi** brought it down to just over 13,000 in July. After Alam Halfa, it reached its nadir with 648 officers and 10,913 men, but by November had crept back to nearly 13,000.

**Among the 7350 graves of Allied servicemen in the [Alamein](#) cemetery are those of 1049 known and 56 unknown New Zealanders.**

***Source: Statement of Strengths and Losses in the Armed Services and Mercantile Marine in the 1939–45 War, Parliamentary Paper H-19 B, 1948.***

**Compiled by the [War History Branch](#), Department of Internal Affairs.**

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**These narratives, covering the period January to November 1942, fill twenty volumes, eleven of which were written by R. Walker, seven by R. L. Kay, and two by W. D. Dawson. They are based on some 1083 war diaries kept by New Zealand units in the Middle East, together with such records as casualty lists, intelligence logs, censorship reports, strength statements, official cables and correspondence, and General Freyberg's diaries and papers. Also used were a large number of private diaries and accounts written by eyewitnesses, as well as material collected by units for their own unit histories.**

**Of particular value for information outside the sphere of the New Zealand Division have been the narratives prepared by Brigadier C. J. C. Molony and Lieutenant-Colonel M. E. S. Laws for the Historical Section of the United Kingdom Cabinet Office.**

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# ALAM HALFA AND ALAMEIN

## GLOSSARY

### *Glossary*

<b>AA</b>	<b>anti-aircraft</b>
<b>AA &amp; QMG</b>	<b>Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster-General</b>
<b>A/Q</b>	
<b>Ack</b>	<b>Acknowledge</b>
<b>ACV</b>	<b>Armoured Command Vehicle</b>
<b>ADC</b>	<b><i>aide-de-camp</i></b>
<b>Adm, Admin</b>	<b>Administration</b>
<b>ADMS</b>	<b>Assistant Director of Medical Services</b>
<b>ADOS</b>	<b>Assistant Director of Ordnance Services</b>
<b>ADS</b>	<b>Advanced Dressing Station</b>
<b>Adv</b>	<b>advance(d)</b>
<b>adv</b>	
<b>A Echelon</b>	<b>Transport usually taken into battle</b>
<b>AFV</b>	<b>Armoured Fighting Vehicle (tank or armoured car)</b>
<b>AG</b>	<b>Adjutant-General</b>
<b>AGRA</b>	<b>Army Group <b>Royal Artillery</b></b>
<b>AIF</b>	<b><b>Australian Imperial Force</b></b>
<b>Air Support Control</b>	<b>Combined Army- <b>RAF</b> organisation to bring air support to bear on ground operations</b>
<b>Alam</b>	<b>Cairn; isolated hillock ( <b>Alamein</b>, twin cairns)</b>
<b>ALG</b>	<b>Advanced Landing Ground</b>
<b>amn</b>	<b>ammunition</b>
<b>AOC-in-C</b>	<b>Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief</b>
<b>AP</b>	<b>Armour-piercing</b>
<b>armd</b>	<b>armoured</b>
<b>armd Cs</b>	<b>armoured cars</b>
<b>armoured brigade</b>	<b>formation of fast cruiser tanks, etc.</b>
<b>army tank brigade</b>	<b>formation of slow infantry tanks, etc.</b>
<b>Arty</b>	<b>artillery</b>

<b>ASC</b>	<b>Army Service Corps</b>
<b>A tk</b>	<b>anti-tank</b>
<b>A/Tk</b>	
<b>a-tk</b>	
<b>A-Tk</b>	
<b>Aust</b>	<b>Australian</b>
<b>B24</b>	<b>Liberator bomber (US)</b>
<b>B25</b>	<b>Mitchell bomber (US)</b>
<b><i>Bab</i></b>	<b>a pass</b>
<b>Barrage</b>	<b>a line of artillery fire</b>
<b>Bays, The</b>	<b>The Queen's Bays (2nd Dragoon Guards)</b>
<b>Bde</b>	<b>Brigade (British or Allied formation, normally of three infantry battalions, or tank regiments or battalions)</b>
<b>B Ech(elon)</b>	<b>Transport sometimes temporarily dispensed with in battle</b>
<b>BERESFORD</b>	<b>Code-name for Eighth Army operation on 3–4 Sep 1942 against the flank of Rommel's advance on <a href="#">Alam Halfa</a></b>
<b><i>Bersaglieri</i></b>	<b>Italian motorised infantry, organised in regiments each of two or three battalions</b>
<b>BGS</b>	<b>Brigadier, General Staff (chief staff officer at Corps or Army)</b>
<b><i>Bir</i></b>	<b>well or cistern (pl. <i>Abiar</i>)</b>
<b>bivouac (tent)</b>	<b>Small portable tent, a 'pup-tent'</b>
<b><a href="#">Blenheim</a></b>	<b>British twin-engined bomber</b>
<b>BM</b>	<b>Brigade Major (chief staff officer at Brigade)</b>
<b>Bn</b>	<b>Battalion (a unit of tanks or reconnaissance troops, normally three squadrons plus HQ; or infantry, four rifle companies plus HQ company; or machine-gunners, four companies of Vickers guns)</b>
<b><i>Bn</i></b>	<b><i>Battalion</i> (German unit of tanks, anti-tank or anti-aircraft guns, engineers, infantry, machine-gunners, or motor-cyclists) (Italian organisation was similar)</b>
<b>Bofors</b>	<b>Automatic 40-millimetre light anti-aircraft gun of Swedish design</b>
<b>Box</b>	<b>All-round defensive position for battalion, brigade or division in static operations</b>
<b><a href="#">Breda</a></b>	<b>Italian heavy machine-gun or light automatic cannon</b>
<b>Bren</b>	<b>standard British light machine-gun</b>
<b>"-carrier</b>	<b>light armoured tracked vehicle intended to carry Bren</b>

guns, but also used for reconnaissance, carrying ammunition or wounded under fire, etc.

<b>Brigs</b>	<b>Brigadiers</b>
<b>BTE</b>	<b>British Troops in Egypt</b> (command excluding Eighth Army)
<b>Bty</b>	<b>battery</b> (two, three or four troops of guns)
<b>Bufs</b>	<b>The Royal East Kent Regiment</b>
<b>BULIMBA</b>	<b>Code-name for diversionary attack by 9 Aust Div, 1 Sep 1942</b>
<i>Burg</i>	<b>a hill</b>
<b>carrier</b> <b>(Universal)</b>	<b>See Bren-</b>
<b>Cav</b>	<b>Cavalry</b> (light tanks, armoured cars, carriers)
<b>CB</b>	<b>Companion of the Order of the Bath; counter-battery</b> (fire), locating and silencing of hostile guns
<b>CBE</b>	<b>Commander of the Order of the British Empire</b>
<b>CCS</b>	<b>Casualty Clearing Station</b>
<b>CE</b>	<b>Chief Engineer</b> (Corps or Army)
<b>CGS</b>	<b>Chief of the General Staff</b>
<b>Churchill</b> <b>(tank)</b>	<b>British infantry support tank, experimental in 1942</b>
<b>CIGS</b>	<b>Chief of the Imperial General Staff</b>
<b>C-in-C</b>	<b>Commander-in-Chief</b>
<b>CLY</b>	<b>County of London Yeomanry</b>
<b>CMG</b>	<b>Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George</b>
<b>CO</b>	<b>Commanding Officer</b> (usually of a unit)
<b>Col</b>	<b>Colonel</b>
<i>Comando</i> <i>Supremo</i>	<b>Italian Supreme Command</b> (counterpart of OKW)
<b>Comd</b>	<b>Commander; Commanding</b>
<b>comn</b>	<b>communication(s)</b>
<b>concentration</b>	<b>a pattern of artillery fire</b>
<b>Coy</b>	<b>Company</b>
<b>CRA</b>	<b>Commander, Royal Artillery</b> (of division)
<b>CRASC</b>	<b>Commander, Royal Army Service Corps</b> (of division)— later in 2 NZ Division called CNZASC
<b>CRE</b>	<b>Commander, Royal Engineers</b> (of division)

<b>CRUSADER</b>	<b>Code-name for British offensive resulting in relief of <a href="#">Tobruk</a>, November 1941</b>
<b>Crusader</b>	<b>British Cruiser tank, with 2-pdr gun (later 6-pdr)</b>
<b>CSM</b>	<b>Company Sergeant-Major</b>
<b>CSO</b>	<b>Chief Signal Officer</b>
<b>DAK</b>	<b><i>Deutsches Afrikakorps</i> (German <a href="#">Africa Corps</a>)</b>
<b>DCM</b>	<b>Distinguished Conduct Medal</b>
<b><i>Deir</i></b>	<b>Depression</b>
<b>det(s)</b>	<b>detachment(s)</b>
<b>Div</b>	<b>Division, Divisional</b>
<b>Div Arty</b>	<b>Divisional Artillery (Headquarters, often HQ NZA)</b>
<b>Div Cav</b>	<b>Divisional Cavalry</b>
<b>Div Workshops</b>	<b>Ordnance unit for maintaining guns, vehicles and other equipment</b>
<b>DLI</b>	<b><a href="#">Durham Light Infantry</a></b>
<b>DSO</b>	<b>Distinguished Service Order</b>
<b>Ech</b>	<b>First, Second, Third, three main contingents of <a href="#">2 NZEF</a> in order of embarkation, chiefly comprising 4, 5, and 6 Brigades respectively (see also <a href="#">A Echelon</a>, <a href="#">B Echelon</a>)</b>
<b>Echelon</b>	
<b>ED</b>	<b>Efficiency Decoration</b>
<b>EM</b>	<b>Efficiency Medal</b>
<b><i>en portée</i></b>	<b>(of 2-pdr gun) carried on special lorry</b>
<b>fd</b>	<b>field</b>
<b>Fd Amb</b>	<b>Field Ambulance (medical unit)</b>
<b>Fd Coy</b>	<b>Field Company (of engineers)</b>
<b>FDL(s)</b>	<b>Forward defended locality (localities)</b>
<b>Fd Pk Coy</b>	<b>Field Park Company (of engineers)</b>
<b>Fd Regt</b>	<b>Field Regiment (unit of artillery)</b>
<b>FF</b>	<b>Free French (changed to <a href="#">Fighting French</a>, Oct 1942)</b>
<b>flail tank</b>	<b>See <a href="#">Scorpion</a></b>
<b>FMC</b>	<b>Field Maintenance Centre</b>
<b>FSD</b>	<b>Forward Supply Depot</b>
<b>fwd</b>	<b>forward</b>
<b><i>GAF Brigade</i></b>	<b>German Air Force Brigade</b>
<b>G Branch (Office)</b>	<b>Staff of division or higher formation or command dealing with operations</b>
<b>'G' staff</b>	

<b>GCMG</b>	<b>Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George</b>
<b>Gebel</b>	<b>Hill or high ground</b>
<b>GHQ</b>	<b>General Headquarters</b>
<b>Gk</b>	<b>Greek</b>
<b>GMDS</b>	<b>German Military Documents Section, <a href="#">Washington</a></b>
<b>GOC (-in-C)</b>	<b>General Officer Commanding (-in-Chief)</b>
<b>Gp</b>	<b>Group (Battalion or Brigade) force of all arms</b>
<b>Grant</b>	<b>American heavy tank with 75-mm. gun</b>
<b>Greys</b>	<b>The Royal Scots Greys</b>
<b>GSO (I, II, III)</b>	<b>General Staff Officer (Class 1, 2, 3)</b>
<b>GYMNAST</b>	<b>See <a href="#">TORCH</a></b>
<b>H</b>	<b>Hussars</b>
<b>51 (H) Div</b>	<b>51 (Highland) Division</b>
<b>Half-track</b>	<b>Vehicle with wheels in front, tank-like tracks in rear</b>
<b>He.</b>	<b>German Heinkel bomber</b>
<b>HE</b>	<b>high explosive</b>
<b>HMG</b>	<b>heavy machine-gun</b>
<b>Honey</b>	<b>nickname for General Stuart tank (American M3)</b>
<b>HQ</b>	<b>headquarters</b>
<b>hrs</b>	<b>hours</b>
<b>hy</b>	<b>heavy</b>
<b>I</b>	<b>Intelligence (of enemy)</b>
<b>Int</b>	<b>Intelligence (of enemy)</b>
<b>2 i/c</b>	<b>Second-in-command</b>
<b>incl</b>	<b>inclusive; including</b>
<b>Ind</b>	<b>Indian</b>
<b>inf</b>	<b>infantry</b>
<b>IO</b>	<b>Intelligence Officer</b>
<b>Ju86</b>	<b>German stratospheric reconnaissance aircraft</b>
<b>Ju87</b>	<b>German Stuka dive-bomber</b>
<b>Ju88</b>	<b>German medium bomber</b>
<b>KBE</b>	<b>Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire</b>
<b>KCB</b>	<b>Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath</b>
<b>KDG</b>	<b>King's Dragoon Guards (a reconnaissance unit)</b>
<b>K</b>	<b>kilometre; e.g., K23, a distance sign on road or railway</b>
<b>kilo</b>	

<b>km</b>	
<b>KRRC</b>	<b>The King's Royal Rifle Corps</b>
<b>LAA</b>	<b>light anti-aircraft</b>
<b>laager</b>	<b>defensive disposition of unit or formation halted in mobile operations, open order by day and close order by night</b>
<b>LAD</b>	<b>Light Aid Detachment (Ordnance establishment for repairing guns, transport, etc.)</b>
<b>LG</b>	<b>Landing Ground</b>
<b>LIGHTFOOT</b>	<b>Code-name for Eighth Army attack at <a href="#">Alamein</a>, 23 Oct 1942</b>
<b>line (transport)</b>	
<b>1st</b>	<b>unit</b>
<b>2nd</b>	<b>divisional (carrying between FMC and division)</b>
<b>3rd</b>	<b>rear (carrying between railhead and FMC)</b>
<b>LMG</b>	<b>light machine-gun</b>
<b>LO</b>	<b>Liaison Officer</b>
<b>LOB</b>	<b>Left out of battle</b>
<b>L of C</b>	<b>Line(s) of communication</b>
<b>LRDG</b>	<b><a href="#">Long Range Desert Group</a></b>
<b>Lt</b>	<b>Lieutenant; light</b>
<b>2 Lt</b>	<b>Second-Lieutenant</b>
<b><i>Luftwaffe</i></b>	<b><a href="#">German Air Force</a></b>
<b>M13</b>	<b>Italian medium tank</b>
<b><i>Maaten</i></b>	<b>shallow wells</b>
<b>MANHOOD</b>	<b>Code-name for Eighth Army attack on 27 July 1942</b>
<b>Mark (I, II, etc.)</b>	<b>designation of production type, especially of tanks</b>
<b><i>Marsa, mersa</i></b>	<b>port, anchorage</b>
<b>Matilda</b>	<b>British infantry support tank</b>
<b>MBE</b>	<b>Member of the Order of the British Empire</b>
<b>MC</b>	<b>Military Cross; motor-cycle</b>
<b>MC 202</b>	<b>Macchi C 202, Italian fighter aircraft</b>
<b>MDS</b>	<b>Main Dressing Station</b>
<b>ME(F)</b>	<b><a href="#">Middle East (Forces)</a></b>
<b>Me109</b>	<b>single-engined Messerschmitt (German) fighter</b>
<b>Me110</b>	<b>twin-engined long-range fighter or fighter-bomber</b>
<b>Med</b>	<b>Medium</b>



<b>(M)MG</b>	<b>(Medium) machine-gun</b>
<b>m.i.d.</b>	<b>Mentioned in Despatches</b>
<b>Mk</b>	<b>See <a href="#">Mark</a></b>
<b>MM</b>	<b>Military Medal</b>
<b>mm.</b>	<b>millimetre, as in 88-mm. gun</b>
<b>MO</b>	<b>Medical Officer</b>
<b>Mot</b>	<b>motorised</b>
<b>m.p.g.</b>	<b>miles per gallon</b>
<b>m.p.h.</b>	<b>miles per hour (actual rate)</b>
<b>MT</b>	<b>mechanical transport</b>
<b>'Murder'</b>	<b>massed artillery fire on a single target</b>
<b><a href="#">NAAFI</a></b>	<b>Navy, Army, Air Force Institute(s)</b>
<b><i>Naqb</i></b>	<b>ascent, pass</b>
<b>NCO</b>	<b>non-commissioned officer</b>
<b>n.c.o.</b>	<b>non-commissioned officer</b>
<b>Notts Yeo</b>	<b><a href="#">Nottinghamshire Yeomanry</a></b>
<b>50 (N) Div</b>	<b>50 (Northumbrian) Division</b>
<b>NZA</b>	<b>New Zealand Artillery</b>
<b>NZASC</b>	<b>New Zealand Army Service Corps</b>
<b>NZE</b>	<b>New Zealand Engineers</b>
<b>NZEF</b>	<b>New Zealand Expeditionary Force</b>
<b>NZLO</b>	<b>New Zealand Liaison Officer</b>
<b><a href="#">NZMC</a></b>	<b>New Zealand Medical Corps</b>
<b>NZOC</b>	<b>New Zealand Ordnance Corps</b>
<b>NZR</b>	<b>New Zealand Railways</b>
<b>OBE</b>	<b>Officer of the Order of the British Empire</b>
<b>OC</b>	<b>Officer Commanding (squadron, battery, company)</b>
<b>offrs</b>	<b>officers</b>
<b><i>OKH</i></b>	<b><i>Oberkommando des Heeres</i> (High Command of the German Army)</b>
<b><i>OKL</i></b>	<b><i>Oberkommando der <a href="#">Luftwaffe</a></i> (High Command of the <a href="#">German Air Force</a>)</b>
<b><i>OKM</i></b>	<b><i>Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine</i> (High Command of the German Navy)</b>
<b><i>OKW</i></b>	<b><i>Oberkommando der <a href="#">Wehrmacht</a></i> (Supreme Command of the German Armed Forces, roughly equivalent to the War Office)</b>

<b>OP</b>	<b>Observation Post</b>
<b>Ops</b>	<b>Operations; staff branch dealing with same</b>
<b>ORs</b>	<b>other ranks (not officers)</b>
<b>P40</b>	<b>Kittyhawk fighter aircraft (US)</b>
<b>PA</b>	<b>Personal Assistant (to GOC)</b>
<i>Panzer</i>	<b>German tank; armoured unit or formation</b>
<i>Pz</i>	<b>German tank; armoured unit or formation</b>
<i>Panzergruppe Afrika</i>	<b>Panzer Group Africa</b>
<i>Pz Gp Africa</i>	<b>Panzer Group Africa</b>
<b>PEDESTAL</b>	<b>Code-name for <a href="#">Malta</a> convoy, August 1942</b>
<b>pl</b>	<b>platoon</b>
<b>Point</b>	<b>Height marked on map, usually in metres above sea level</b>
<b>Pt</b>	<b>Height marked on map, usually in metres above sea level</b>
<b>POL</b>	<b>Petrol, oil and lubricants</b>
<i>portée</i>	<b>See <i>en portée</i></b>
<b>pr</b>	<b>pounder</b>
<b>provost</b>	<b>military police</b>
<b>PW</b>	<b>prisoner(s) of war</b>
<b>p.w.</b>	<b>prisoner(s) of war</b>
<i>Qaret</i>	<b>low hill</b>
<b>QM(G)</b>	<b>Quartermaster(-General)</b>
<b>quad</b>	<b>lorry for towing British field gun or anti-tank 18-pdr</b>
<b>Queen's, The</b>	<b>The Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surreys)</b>
<b>RA</b>	<b><a href="#">Royal Artillery</a></b>
<b>RAC</b>	<b><a href="#">Royal Armoured Corps</a></b>
<b>RAMC</b>	<b>Royal Army Medical Corps</b>
<b>RAP</b>	<b>Regimental Aid Post (unit medical establishment)</b>
<i>Raqabet</i>	<b>dry watercourse</b>
<i>Ras, rass</i>	<b>cape, headland, summit</b>
<b>RASC</b>	<b>Royal Army Service Corps</b>
<b>rd</b>	<b>road, round</b>
<b>RE</b>	<b><a href="#">Royal Engineers</a></b>
<b>recce</b>	<b>reconnaissance; reconnoitre</b>
<b>Regt</b>	<b>Regiment (unit of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or</b>

<i>Regt</i>	artillery; in British Army also groups of tank, artillery or infantry units, e.g., RTR, RHA, Black Watch) <i>Regiment</i> (enemy) (formation of armoured troops or infantry, roughly equivalent to 'brigade'; also unit of field or medium artillery)
<b>Reinforcements</b>	Successive contingents of <b>2 NZEF</b> after <b>Third Echelon</b> (4th, 5th, etc.)
<b>Res</b>	reserve
<b>RHA</b>	<b>Royal Horse Artillery</b> (motorised, usually supporting armoured troops)
<b>RHQ</b>	Regimental Headquarters
<b>RMO</b>	Regimental Medical Officer (of a unit)
<b>RMT</b>	Reserve Mechanical Transport
<b>Res MT</b>	Reserve Mechanical Transport
<b>Royals</b>	The Royal Dragoons (reconnaissance unit)
<b>Royal West Kents</b>	The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment
<b>rpt</b>	repeat (message)
<b>RSM</b>	Regimental Sergeant-Major (senior NCO of unit)
<b>R/T</b>	radio-telephony (wireless transmission of speech)
<b>RTR</b>	The Royal Tank Regiment
<b>R Tks</b>	The Royal Tank Regiment
<b>runner</b>	a tank in working order
<b>SA</b>	South African
<b>SA</b>	small arms
<b>s.a.</b>	small arms
<b>sangar</b>	rocks piled up for protection in lieu of slit trench where ground was too hard to dig
<b>Sanyet</b>	deep well
<b>SC</b>	Staff Captain (administrative staff officer at Brigade)
<b>Scorpion</b>	tank fitted with a flail device for clearing a path through a minefield
<b>sec</b>	section (2-3 guns; detachment of Signals; third of infantry platoon; third of ASC company, etc.)
<b>Sherman</b>	American heavy tank with 75-mm. gun
<b>Sidi</b>	saint or marabout
<b>Sigs</b>	Signals (responsible for R/T, W/T, DR, telephone and other communications)

<b>sitrep</b>	<b>situation report</b>
<b>slit trench</b>	<b>one- or two-man trench; 'foxhole'</b>
<b>'S' mine</b>	<b>German anti-personnel mine</b>
<b>SP</b>	<b>self-propelled (gun); Starting Point</b>
<b>Sp.</b>	<b>Special</b>
<b>spandau</b>	<b>nickname for standard German light and medium machine-gun</b>
<b>sqn</b>	<b>squadron (of tanks, reconnaissance troops, or aircraft)</b>
<b>ST</b>	<b>Starting Time</b>
<b>Staffs Yeo</b>	<b>Staffordshire Yeomanry</b>
<b>'Stonk'</b>	<b>A quick defensive artillery concentration according to a prearranged pattern</b>
<b>Stuart (General)</b>	<b>American M3 light cruiser tank; 'Honey' tank</b>
<b>Stuka</b>	<b>Junkers 87 dive-bomber</b>
<b>'Sunshields'</b>	<b>Code-name for dummy vehicles, made from canvas, used for camouflage purposes</b>
<b>SUPERCHARGE</b>	<b>Code-name for operation to break through at <a href="#">Alamein</a></b>
<b><i>Superlibia</i></b>	<b>Italian Command in North Africa</b>
<b>Svy</b>	<b>Survey</b>
<b>'Swordfish' area</b>	<b>Training area behind the <a href="#">Alamein</a> line, near <a href="#">Alam Shaltut</a></b>
<b>Tac Army</b>	<b>Tactical Headquarters, Eighth Army</b>
<b>Tac HQ</b>	<b>Tactical Headquarters</b>
<b>tank-buster</b>	<b>Hurricane aircraft with anti-tank cannon</b>
<b><i>Tell</i></b>	<b>high ground, small hill</b>
<b>temp</b>	<b>temporary</b>
<b>tentacle</b>	<b>wireless detachment, usually of Air Support Control</b>
<b>Tk</b>	<b>tank</b>
<b>Tommy gun</b>	<b>Thompson sub-machine gun</b>
<b>TORCH</b>	<b>Code-name for Anglo-American landings in French North Africa, November 1942</b>
<b>tower</b>	<b>a towing vehicle. See <a href="#">quad</a></b>
<b>tp(s)</b>	<b>troop(s); part of squadron of tanks or reconnaissance troops (usually four tanks or armoured cars); part of battery (4–6 guns)</b>
<b>Trg</b>	<b>Training</b>
<b>Trig</b>	<b>See <a href="#">Point</a></b>
<b><i>Trigh</i></b>	<b>track</b>

<b>TWELVEBORE</b>	<b>Eighth Army's code-name giving warning of Rommel's offensive, 30 Aug 1942</b>
<b>U-boat</b>	<b>German submarine</b>
<b>UDF</b>	<b>Union Defence Force (of South Africa)</b>
<i>Umm</i>	<b>Mother of (in place names)</b>
<b>USAAF</b>	<b>United States Army Air Force</b>
<b>Valentine</b>	<b>British infantry support tank</b>
<b>VC</b>	<b>Victoria Cross</b>
<b>VD</b>	<b>Volunteer Officers' Decoration</b>
<i>wadi</i>	<b>watercourse, usually dry</b>
<b>wastage</b>	<b>reduction of manpower</b>
<b>WD</b>	<b>Western Desert</b>
<b>WDF</b>	<b>Western Desert Force</b>
<b>WE, war establishment</b>	<b>authorised full allotment (of men, weapons, etc.)</b>
<i>Wehrmacht</i>	<b>German Armed Forces</b>
<b>West Surreys</b>	<b>The Queen's Royal Regiment</b>
<b>West Yorks</b>	<b>The West Yorkshire Regiment</b>
<b>Wilts</b>	<b>Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry</b>
<b>WT</b>	<b>Wireless telegraphy</b>
<b>Zero (hour)</b>	<b>time given for an operation to start</b>
<b>zeroing</b>	<b>checking gun sights, etc., for accuracy</b>

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