

# 2 ANTI-TANK REGIMENT, SAA – TANK AND ANTI-TANK IN THE WESTERN DESERT 1941-1942 (PART 4)

## Moving into the Gazala Line

By the end of January Rommel's counter-attack had put him in possession of Benghazi, while XIII Corps attempted to make the best of a fighting retreat eastwards across the Jebel. The Axis forces' petrol difficulties had convinced Rommel that he would have to halt the main body of his advancing troops in the Benghazi area, although Afrika Korps might be pushed forward to the vicinity of Gazala. Meanwhile Ritchie, commanding 8 Army, at last believed his subordinates' protestations that they were at present unable to successfully oppose any enemy armoured force and agreed to a withdrawal to a line running from Gazala to Bir Hacheim.

By 1 February the 2 Armoured Brigade with 2 Anti-Tank Regiment SAA was at Wadi el Hamman, and on the next day 6 A/Tk Battery moved to Mechili in support of the Polish Carpathian Brigade, while the other guns of the Regiment moved to Mangar el Teserim in support of 150 Infantry Brigade. By the 4th all the Regiment's 2-pdrs were concentrated at Bir Hacheim in support of 150 Brigade, at the southern end of the Gazala Line, and during the next few days there was the chance of undertaking the reorganisation necessitated by the Regiment's losses. All the 18-pdrs were formed into a temporary 6 Battery under Major Chaplin, while the remainder of 6 Battery's guns and personnel were divided among the rest of the Regiment to make up complete 2-pdr batteries. The latter were placed in support of 150 Brigade's infantry battalions, 5 Battery with 5 Green Howards, 7 Battery with 4 East Yorks and 8 Battery with 4 Green Howards, while the 18-pdrs were sited for defence in depth in the middle of the Bir Hacheim box. On 13 February Major Chaplin took the 18-pdrs to a point five miles west of Knightsbridge, where they were placed under the command of 200 Guards Brigade.

At the northern end of the Gazala Line other

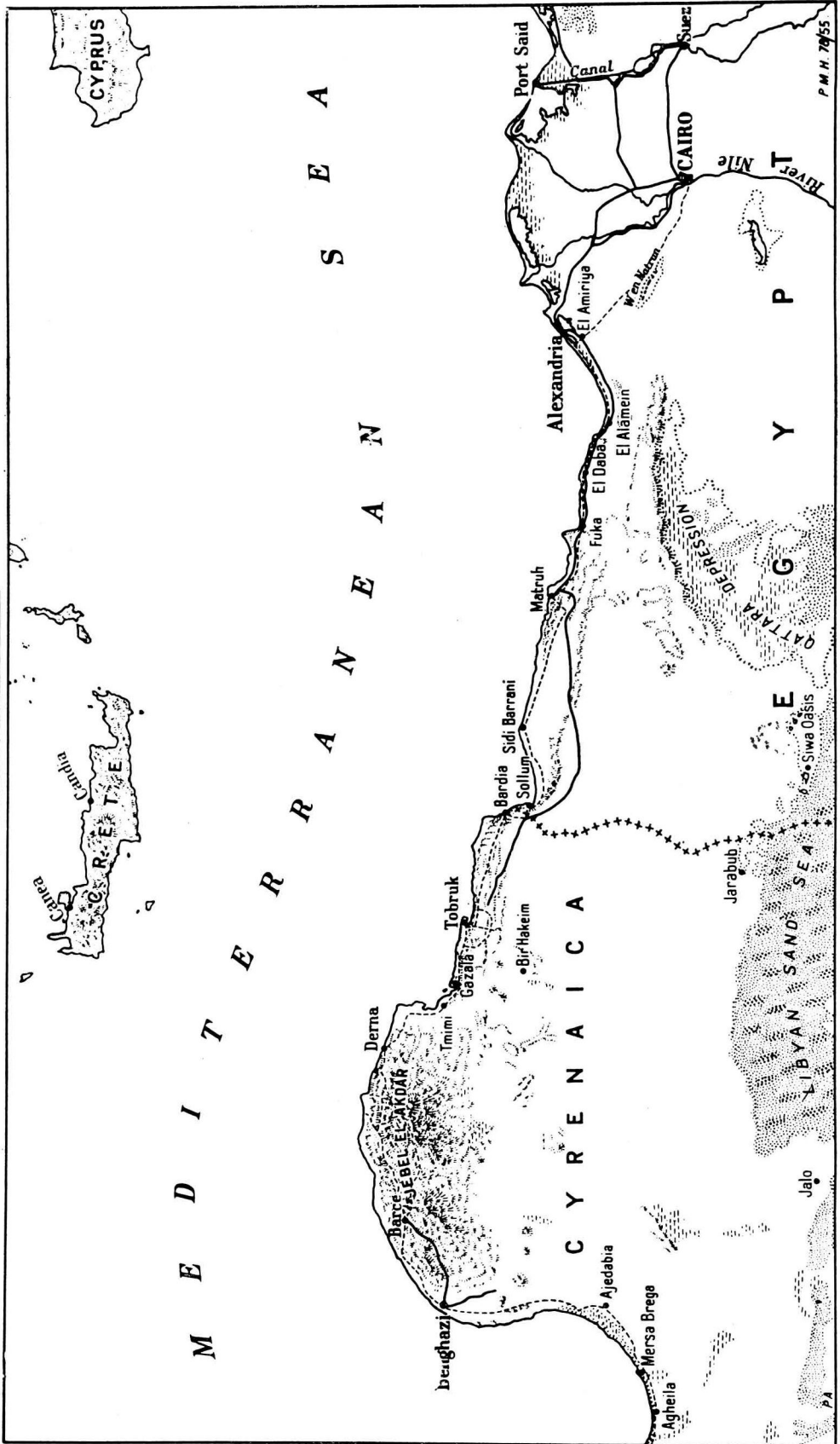
South African units were making a reappearance at the front. Since its mauling in the early stages of 'Crusader' 1 SA Division had been resting and retraining in the area of Mersa Matruh. On 25 January 1 SA Brigade and supporting units had moved to provide cover should it be necessary for 8 Army to retreat to the frontier, and when the decision was taken to establish the major defence line at Gazala this brigade was moved up to begin the task. On 31 January, 1 SA Division entered XIII Corps area, with 1 SA Brigade, the Polish Carpathian Brigade and Free French Brigade under command. The South African Divisional front constituted the northernmost 9½ miles, and on 10 February 4 Indian Division took over the southern end of the line. 2 SA Brigade now began to arrive and the Free French Brigade moved under Indian command, while 2 SA Brigade immediately moved to cover the coastal strip to the north of the escarpment between Gazala and Acroma. There were three important landing grounds here, and there was always the chance that paratroops or a small landing force could push into this position.

On 16 February 7 and 8 A/Tk Batteries moved north to come under 2 SA Brigade command, the former moving one mile south of Acroma Fort with 1 Natal Mounted Rifles, and 8 Battery digging in in support of the Cape Town Highlanders in the coastal area. Two days later 5 Battery moved into the coastal area in support of 1/2 Field Force Battalion in the area of the Ruined Village.

The remainder of the month passed fairly uneventfully for 2 A/Tk Regiment, apart from brief defensive exercises and occasional fighter-bomber raids.

Another change in deployment was made between 15 and 18 March, when the Polish Brigade was moved southwards and 6 SA Brigade moved up under 1 SA Division's command, taking over Acroma and the coastal sector, while 2 SA Brigade replaced the

# THEATRE OF WAR MAY - JULY 1942

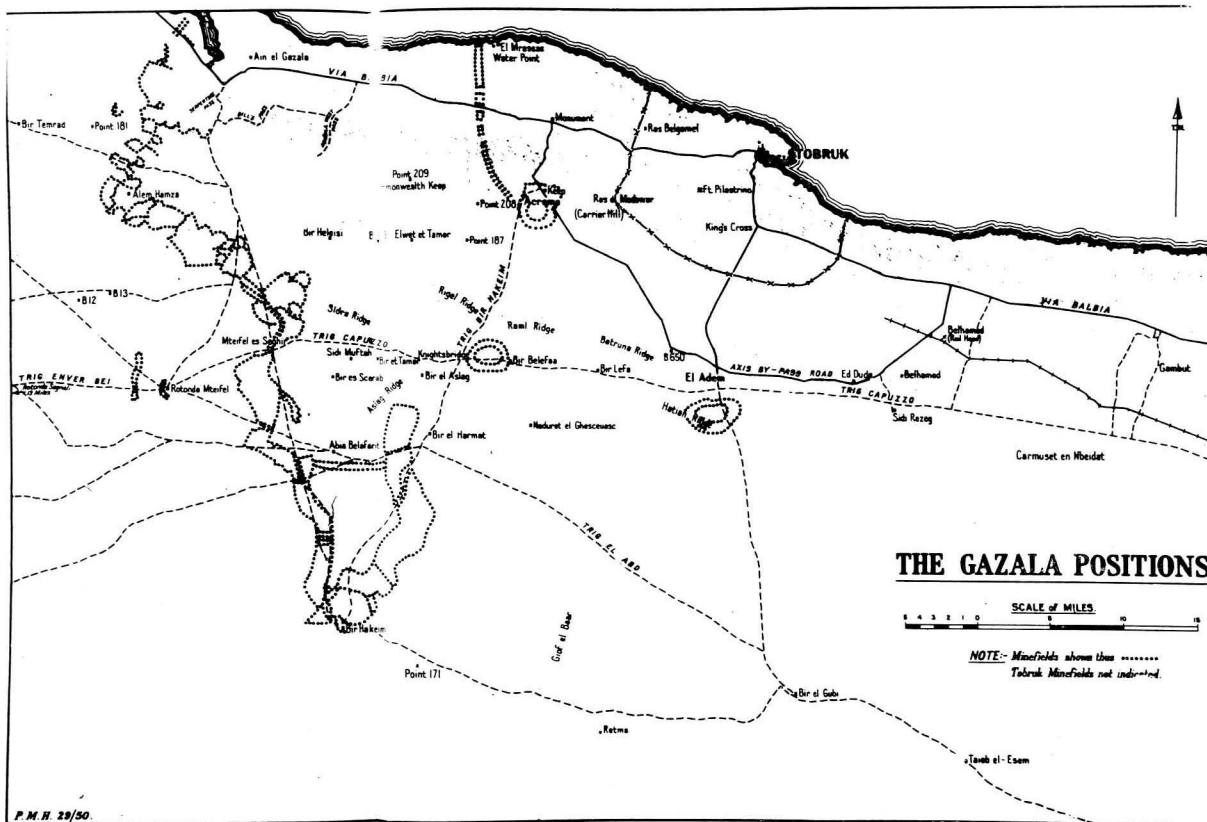


Polish Brigade. Most of 2 A/Tk Regiment remained in its old positions although the 18-pdr composite Battery was broken up and the guns redistributed: 5 Battery with 12 2-pdrs and 3 18-pdrs occupied Ruined Village with 2 Transvaal Scottish; 7 Battery with 12 2-pdrs and 2 18-pdrs was at Gazala and 2 South African Police; and 6 Battery with 8 2-pdrs and 14 18-pdrs was back near Acroma with 1 South African Police. The remaining 8 2-pdrs and 4 18-pdrs were under 8 A/Tk Battery at Carmusset-er-Regem, still in support of 2 SA Brigade in the latter's new area.

**Operation 'Fullsize'**

By the end of the first week in March Rommel appeared to be stabilising his main defence line between Derna and Mechili, and there were no signs as yet of any Axis intention to launch an offensive. Later that month the British intended to run a convoy from Alexandria to Malta and Ritchie proposed to draw off enemy aircraft by attacking Martuba landing-ground and the Tmimi area. These areas were screened by a series of enemy positions and it was intended that columns from the British 50 Division should attack the

airfields while other forces from 1 SA Division and the Free French Brigade forced the enemy out of his strongpoints. The South African contribution would be handled by a force from 2 SA Brigade under Brigadier W. H. E. Poole, and comprising three columns, 'Jock-col', 'Quinn-col' and 'Harecol'. 8 A/Tk Battery, which had been attached to 2 SA Brigade for some weeks now, would provide its 'M' and 'O' Troops as anti-tank protection for 'Harecol', under Lt Col L. M. Harris of the Natal Mounted Rifles. 'Harecol's' task was to occupy and hold Bir Temrad until the offensive columns had done their work and retired to the Allied lines, and this they did, without coming into action. As a whole the operation, called 'Fullsize', was a success and, at the cost of about 80 casualties, 3 enemy officers and 118 men were captured and several guns destroyed. Enemy aircraft were temporarily drawn off from the convoy, although the latter was unfortunately spotted by U-boats and transport aircraft and came under heavy attack before reaching Malta. Less than a quarter of the convoy's cargo reached its destination, and it was obvious that only after the permanent recapture of Cyrenaica's airfields would it be possible to resupply the island.



After 'Fullsize' Allied patrols were sent out daily to harass the enemy's front line and gain intelligence while denying Rommel detailed knowledge of the British defences. 8 A/Tk Battery was called upon to send out sections of 2-pdrs to protect 2 SA Brigade's patrols.

On 6 April 2 A/Tk Regiment received 107 reinforcements from 7 SA Reconnaissance Battalion, and these were drafted into the four batteries to bring them up to equal strength, and two days later the Regiment received 3 18-pdrs and 8 2-pdrs, as replacements for equipment lost in January.

From now on the Regiment's stay in the Gazala Line was occupied with training, with daily patrols and occasional bombing attacks. The unit's batteries continued to be moved under different commands as formations were moved into the Gazala Line to strengthen it. On 18 April 1 SA Division's front was extended southward and 3 SA Brigade moved into 1 SA Brigade's position. 5 A/Tk Battery now came into the Rand Light Infantry — Imperial Light Horse sector and 8 Battery was relocated with the Royal Durban Light Infantry. Other minor organisational changes were made, with 'H' Troop of 6 Battery moving under 8 Battery's command, and 'K' Troop of 7 Battery under 5 Battery.

6 SA Brigade had now reverted to 2 SA Division's control and the remaining 3 troops of 6 A/Tk Battery were placed under 6 SA Brigade at Acroma, in a mobile reserve column role. Here they were joined by 'J' Troop from 7 Battery on 29 April, to provide the 6 A/Tk Battery with four troops of 2-pdr guns.

While the military action of both sides was thus restricted to reconnaissance, aerial combat and occasional offensive patrols, the commanders of the desert armies were planning their next major move.

### **Auchinleck Welcomes Rommel's Attack**

Auchinleck's main problem was to convince his political and military masters in London that before he could launch an offensive he needed a greater superiority in tanks over his opponent than they considered necessary. In the Far East, the Allies' tale of woe continued with the fall of Singapore and

the Netherlands East Indies, followed by a Japanese invasion of Burma. In the provision of reinforcements and equipment the urgent claims of the Far Eastern front were to receive prior satisfaction. Churchill and his colleagues still maintained strong pressure on Auchinleck for an offensive to take place in May, if for no other purpose than to relieve Malta of the terrible weight of Axis air attacks and to allow an island fortress to be re-supplied. Unless Malta could be held and could continue to function as a base for attacks on the Axis shipping lanes, Rommel's force could be supplied and expanded at will, with dire results for the Allied forces in the Western Desert. The vicious circle of strategic consideration continued to bind Auchinleck.

By early May it was already obvious to the British commanders that Axis preparations for an offensive were in a more advanced state than their own. This was welcome intelligence, for it meant 8 Army could fight in its prepared positions. The whole front line from Gazala to Bir Hacheim was thickly sown with mines, in an attempt to cover the large distances between the defended localities held by the brigades. Behind the main line were other defended positions, at Commonwealth Keep, Knightsbridge, El Adem and Acroma, to cover the main desert tracks and communications. The direction of the anticipated Axis offensive was problematic but whichever way Rommel came, 1 and 7 Armoured Divisions, now under Major Generals Lumsden and Messervy respectively, were to delay and counter-attack him. Between Gazala and Tobruk were two other columns, 'Stopcol' and 'Seacol', placed there by 2 SA Division to guard the coastal plain against air- or seaborne landings and to hold the pass through the escarpment near Acroma.

'Stopcol' is of special interest, for it included 6 Battery of 2 A/Tk Regiment. The remainder of the formation was composed of 8 Royal Tank Regiment, less one squadron; two companies of the Transvaal Scottish; part of A Squadron, 7 SA Recce Battalion; 6 Battery 2 Field Regiment, SAA; a machine-gun platoon from Die Middelandse Regiment; 5 Battery, 2 Anti-Aircraft Regiment SAA and detachments of engineers and medical staff. The whole column was under the command



**A wadi in the Gazala Line.**

of Lt Col Brodie of 8 Royal Tank Regiment, but was to operate under the overall control of 2 SA Division.

In the Axis camp, the High Command in Berlin was at last beginning to regard the North African campaign as something more than an opportunity to demonstrate support for a faltering ally. Hitler was now persuaded that if Egypt, Iraq and Persia were to fall to his troops this would prove disastrous to Britain's fuel position. The North African campaign now fell into place in the Führer's grand strategic plans. If Rommel was to be provided with more support though, the problem remained of how it was to be transported to North Africa and how it was to be supplied once there. Malta remained the constant problem, and plans were set in train to reduce the island, first by aerial bombardment and later by invasion. The Luftwaffe's intensive attacks through the March and April of 1942 had a definite effect in drastically reducing Malta's capacity to launch attacks on Axis shipping, and Hitler willingly abandoned the plan for in-

vasion as unnecessary. In May 1942 sufficient reinforcements, equipment and fuel arrived in Cyrenaica for Rommel to be able to launch his drive towards Tobruk and the Egyptian frontier in an operation code-named 'Aida'.

#### **The Flanking Attack**

The essence of the German plan was for 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions and elements of 90 Light Division to pass around the south of the British defences before moving northwards into the area behind the Gazala Line. While this flanking move was in progress, diversionary attacks would be launched by the main body of the Axis infantry against the western front of the Allied defences, to create the impression that this was Rommel's main stroke. Meanwhile the German tanks would defeat the British armour and destroy the rearward communications of the Gazala defenders, aided in this task by Battle Group Hecker which would be landed on the coast. Once the Gazala Line had been thus isolated, its defenders would be over-

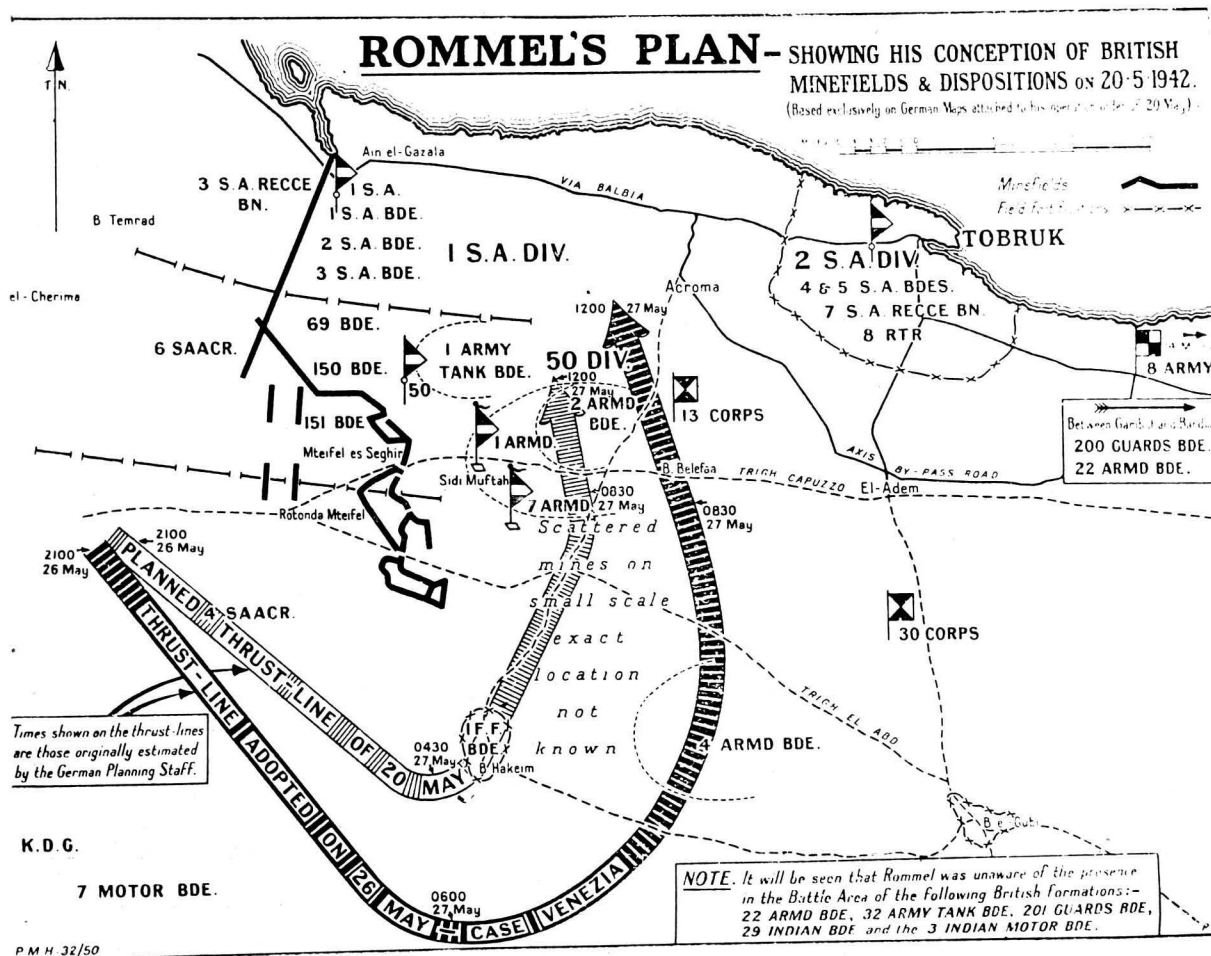
run by a concerted attack from east and west. With the destruction of 1 SA Division and the British 50 Division thus accomplished, it would be easy for Rommel to seize Tobruk and open the road to Egypt.

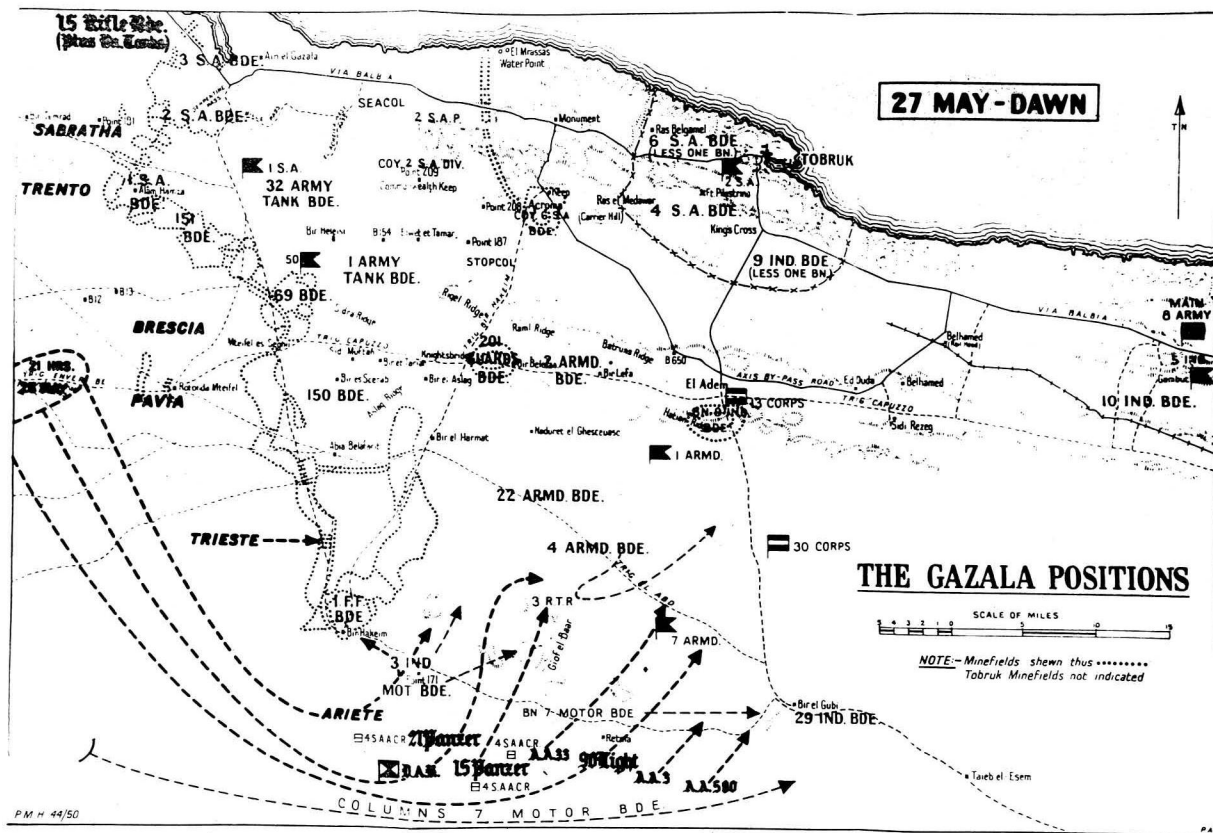
Rommel's plan as it first stood ignored the strength of the minefield defences linking Bir Hacheim and Sidi Muftah, and last-minute changes were made to the direction of the southward sweep. This would now be directed south of Bir Hacheim while Ariete Division would be moved to take the Free French positions there.

On 26 May Rommel's armour moved southwards to its concentration areas prior to rounding Bir Hacheim. That same afternoon 1 SA Division in its positions in the Gazala Line was subjected to a heavy artillery bombardment co-ordinated with eleven low-level attacks by German dive-bombers. Despite the intensity of the Axis onslaught few losses were suffered by the South Africans, while heavy casualties were inflicted upon the enemy aircraft. While the artillery and aerial

bombardment were under way General Crüwell, commanding the Axis troops to the west of the Gazala positions, moved the Italian X and XXI Corps towards the Allied Line, supported by tanks. The weak Allied forward detachments fell back before the Axis infantry but artillery fire soon forced an Axis withdrawal and, despite the use of about 30 tanks, Rommel's deception plan had been less successful than he later imagined.

Indeed British intelligence had predicted both the timing and the direction of the Axis offensive fairly accurately, and the southward movement of Rommel's armour had been spotted on the 26th by South African reconnaissance units. There was still a considerable difference of opinion among the British commanders as to the composition of the Axis flanking force however and this disagreement, together with the cumbersome nature of Ritchie's command structure and the relative inefficiency of communications, led the British to make a less effective re-





sponse to Rommel's moves than might have been expected.

Only at dawn on the 27th did it become clear from aerial reconnaissance that the main Axis force was already south of Bir Hacheim, and 3 Indian Motor Brigade was quickly swamped by enemy tanks, although more than fifty of the latter were destroyed by the defending artillery. At about 0830 hrs 7 Motorised Brigade at Retma came under attack and was forced back to Bir el Gubi, while 4 Armoured Brigade, moving south to meet the threat, ran into larger Axis armoured formations, was badly mauled and had to pull back to the east of El Adem. The coherence of the British response was further impaired by the dispersion of 7 Armoured Division's Headquarters, attacked suddenly by German armoured cars. General Messervy, the Divisional commander was captured for a short while, and 7 Armoured Division remained without unified command until the afternoon of the 30th. By now the rest of the British armour was responding to Rommel's thrust, which had changed direction northwards as planned. General Norrie, commanding XXX Corps had ordered

1 Armoured Division south to give battle. 22 Armoured Brigade moved southwards and ran into both 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, losing 30 tanks in the resulting fight. Lumsden, commanding the Brigade, pulled out towards Knightsbridge to reform and deliver a second blow while 2 Armoured Brigade moved in to strike from the east, and 1 Army Tank Brigade moved in on the German left flank. Despite suffering heavy losses the British tanks had dealt heavy blows to Rommel's armour, reducing its strength by  $\frac{1}{3}$  in the course of the day. The new Grant tanks had provided the British crews at last with a weapon with which they could meet their German counterparts on equal terms.

By the end of the 27th the Panzer Divisions had reached as far north as Bir Lefa and Maabus er Rigel, where they came under fire from the guns of 'Stopcol' before night-fall. Despite this penetration Rommel's overall situation was far from satisfactory. 15 Panzer Division was chronically short of fuel and ammunition, the 90 Light Division was isolated from the German tanks, and further to the south Ariete Division had failed to take Bir Hacheim. The Axis supply columns



**A Grant tank; these weapons came as a most unpleasant surprise to Rommel's Panzers during the Gazalabattles.**

were still back at Bir el Harmat with XX Corps, well separated from the striking force, which found itself in a precarious position between the Gazala minefields and El Adem surrounded by hostile forces, very short of supplies and with its line of communication dangerously extended by the defenders of Bir Hacheim.

### **Rommel's Crisis**

While the main tank battles had been raging to the east of the defences and the Italians had been wasting their efforts to the south around Bir Hacheim, the defenders of the Gazala Line itself had coped with another unavailing attack from Crüwell's forces. The latter had made no impression on the minefields in front of the Gazala positions and the Allied artillery broke up any serious attempts at a breakthrough. Axis bombers continued to range the battlefield however, and a Junkers 88 was brought down very close to the 2 A/Tk Regiment's wagon-lines near the El Adem defence box. As the enemy bomber crash-landed Lance-Corporal

Petrus Tabete, a Zulu driver attached to 2 A/Tk Regiment, rushed out of the line with a rifle loaded with only one round to capture the four crewmen. Royal Air Force specialists were also very pleased with the aircraft, which proved to be a new variant not yet examined by the Allies.

During the night of 27/28 May Crüwell's forces organised themselves to defend against any attempt by the Gazala defenders to break out westwards. By early morning however, orders were received to attempt to break through the British line to establish contact with XX Corps in the area of Bir el Harmat and thus open a route for Axis supply. Throughout the 28th Crüwell's forces attacked towards Eluet et Tamar, but with little success.

2 A/Tk Regiment were little involved in all this, although four of the 2-pdrs were moved from the Imperial Light Horse's sector to just north of the Ruined Village (Pt 181) in anticipation of an attack on the South Africans from the south. Otherwise the unit's only worries were caused by the enemy's



supporting artillery, and 5 Battery had two men wounded by shellfire.

### 'Stopcol'

To the east 6 Battery, with 'Stopcol', had a rather more hectic day. Early in the morning of the 28th Rommel ordered his tanks forward to continue with the original plan of cutting the British lines of communications. Given the situation in which his forces found themselves this was a remarkable instruction for, besides the dilemma in which the striking force found themselves, 15 Panzer Division was temporarily down to a strength of 29 fit tanks, and even these were immobile for want of fuel. Nevertheless 21 Panzer Division was still able to advance northwards from Maabus er Rigel and did so.

'Stopcol' meanwhile moved towards Point 187, east of Eluet et Tamar, at first light, and at about 0800 hrs ran into 21 Panzer Division. In a short action 8 Royal Tank Regiment lost 9 tanks and 6 Field Regiment SAA lost a 25-pdr, with three men killed and four wounded, before retreating northwards. Throughout the main action the German tanks were out of range of the 2-pdrs but G Troop of 6 A/Tk Battery, under WOII Layman, stayed to cover the withdrawal of the field-gunners aided by a smoke-screen. 'Stopcol' was ordered to move around the Acroma box and then to head southwards again, detaching its infantry component, which returned to the safety of Tobruk.

21 Panzer Division meanwhile, having brushed 'Stopcol' to one side pushed on northwards, overcame the small garrison of 'Commonwealth Keep' after a sharp encounter, and moved on to the escarpment overlooking the coastal strip. From here the German tanks opened fire on 'Seacol' and 2 Battalion, South African Police, although this created more alarm than actual damage.

As 21 Panzer Division moved northwards 'Stopcol' made its move towards Maabus er Rigel and 15 Panzer Division. During the afternoon 'Stopcol's' field gunners, covered by the 2-pdrs, opened fire on the stationary German formation, although by 1930 hrs enemy tanks came up to drive off their tormentors and 'Stopcol' pulled away south-eastwards to bivouac for the night near to El Adem.

By the end of the 28th Rommel's overall position was no better than it had been in the morning, but he could count himself fortunate that his opponents were so slow to take advantage of his precarious position. 22 Armoured Brigade had been satisfied to sit watching the immobilised tanks of 15 Panzer Division at Maabus er Rigel while the other German armour, as we have seen, was offered no serious resistance as it drove northwards to the escarpment. 4 Armoured Brigade made an attack on 90 Light Division which caused some damage and forced the latter into a defensive position, while 1 Army Tank Brigade moved against Ariete Division. But the British command was taking its time concentrating its armour for a blow against the spearhead of Rommel's forces, the German armoured divisions, despite the fact that intelligence reports and captured enemy documents had now provided a clear picture of both the enemy's whereabouts and his intentions.

### Rommel Abandons His Plan

On the morning of the 29th 'Stopcol' returned to worry the German vehicles still at Maabus er Rigel, engaging them with fire from its field artillery; this activity continued for most of the day. But on this day the main action was fought between the major armoured formations. Early that morning Rommel managed to lead his supply columns through to the isolated Panzer Divisions from Bir el Harmat, and the German armour was able to move to the west and south-west of Knightsbridge. Here it was attacked at 0800 hrs by 2 Armoured Brigade and elements of 22 Armoured Brigade. Ariete Division also joined in the battle, which continued until at about 1700 hrs a sandstorm made further action impossible. Casualties had been heavy on both sides, and Rommel's tank ammunition was now virtually exhausted.

Despite the unco-ordinated nature of the British attacks the savagery and determination of the fighting forced an abandonment of the German plan. Group Hecker would not be used to make a landing east of Gazala, nor would the Panzer Divisions be able to fall on the rear of 1 SA Division. Instead Rommel would have to pull away to

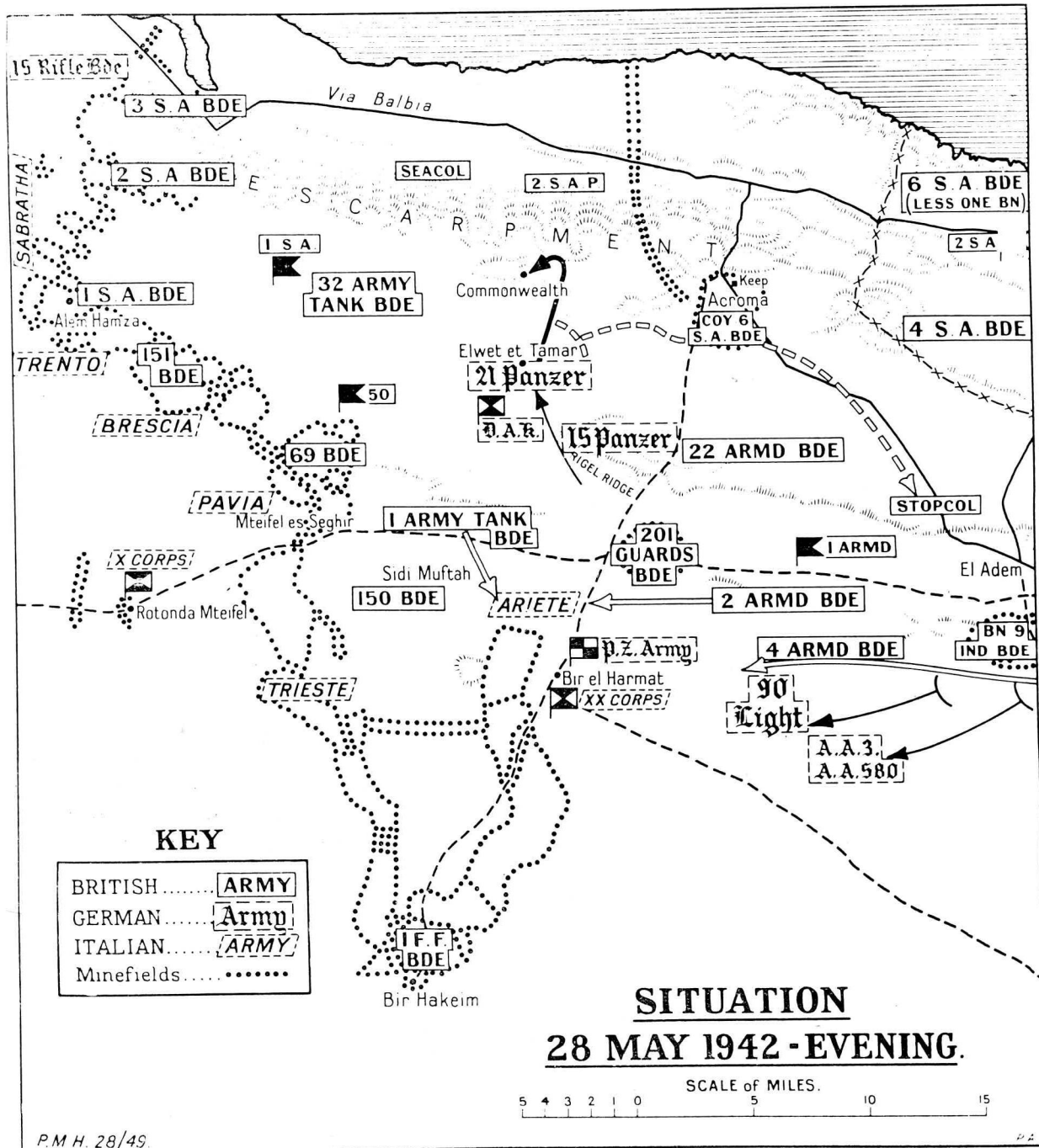
the south-west, against the line of the British minefields, hoping to open a gap through them and re-establish direct communication with his base. As the Axis vehicles pulled back southwards from Maabus er Rigel 'Stopcol's' tanks put in an attack and succeeded in dispersing the enemy column.

General Ritchie was very satisfied with the results of the day's fighting, Rommel had evidently been contained and forced into a defensive posture, and the British commander thought that it might now be possible

to concentrate his artillery and smash the enemy's remaining armour, while his own tanks and motorised infantry destroyed Rommel's supply lines. After this there even seemed to be the prospect of a counter-offensive.

### The Gazala Line Breached

Events to the west of the Gazala Line were already beginning to upset Ritchie's plans however. During the 29th Crüwell's forces had again pitched themselves against the



Allied defences. At Alam Hamza the Italians suffered particularly heavily at the hands of the South Africans. Further disaster struck the Axis camp when Crüwell, reconnoitring the front in a light aircraft, was shot down over the Allied lines and taken prisoner. The capture of this extremely able commander was a grave blow to Rommel, which was fortuitously lightened by the presence of Field-Marshal Kesselring, on a visit to the front. Kesselring now took over Crüwell's command west of the Gazala Line. Not all the Axis attempts west of the defences had been failures. Further to the south good progress had been made in removing the mine-field defences between 69 and 150 Brigade, for here there were no concentrations of artillery or infantry strong enough to prevent the activities of the Axis troops.

Early on the morning of 30 May, 'Stopcol' moved to occupy Maabus er Rigel in the wake of the withdrawing Germans. From here the column would be able to watch against any attempted penetration between Knightsbridge and the escarpment. Apart from some ineffective dive-bombing, 'Stop-

col' encountered no opposition during this move.

Rommel in any event was far more concerned with the concentration of his forces, and had pulled his armour back behind a strong anti-tank screen, into the area which was to become known as the 'Cauldron', between Sidi Muftah and the Hagiag es Sidra. From here he sent strong detachments from the Afrika Korps to attempt a breakthrough westwards, hoping to link up with Kesselring's troops and re-establish his lifeline to the rear. But 150 Brigade was still to Rommel's west and proved stronger than anticipated. Rommel was forced to call off his westward attacks after losing several tanks. To his east 2 and 22 Armoured Brigades closed in on the Panzer Divisions, but ran straight into the German anti-tank screen and suffered heavy losses which reduced both brigades to the strength of composite regiments without achieving anything. 201 Guards Brigade also ran unawares into enemy opposition and was badly knocked about. The attack on Rommel's trapped forces now had to be postponed while the



A camouflaged 2-pdr gun in the Gazala Line.

British reorganised, and this gave the Germans the time they needed to eliminate 150 Brigade in its vital position. As Rommel brought Trieste and 90 Light Division into the battle on this front, the main British forces were inactive. 'Stopcol' moved on 31 May to Eluet et Tamar to shell enemy transport moving westwards, and later that same day were moved southwards to give some relief to 150 Brigade. The field artillery was once again provided with anti-tank protection from 6 A/Tk Battery SAA. The next day was spent quietly by 'Stopcol', but 150 Brigade's position had by now become critical, ammunition was low and the British position was subjected to intense bombing attacks. Finally in the afternoon 150 Brigade was overrun and the British armour moved to its aid too late. Now, instead of being isolated between the British armour and minefields Rommel had opened up his supply lines and had effectively driven a wedge into the middle of the British defences. The fall of 150 Brigade had reversed the tactical situation dramatically.

#### **'Stopcol' Split**

On the night of 1/2 June the British Command, under the impression that 150 Brigade was still functioning, launched two abortive infantry attacks. Only then did news come through that these attempts at relief were too late, and Ritchie now needed some 48 to 72 hours to organise any new large-scale action. Rommel was not slow in seizing his newly-won initiative. 90 Light and Trieste Divisions were sent southwards to help reduce the Free French garrison of Bir Hacheim. On 2 June 21 Panzer Division was sent north once more from the 'Cauldron', with orders to occupy Eluet et Tamar and Point 209 in order to prevent any east-west movement on the part of British units, strong forces would also be pushed on to cut the Via Balbia.

Before the main body of the Division moved north however, a reinforced tank company with artillery support was sent towards Bir el Harmat to retrieve some damaged tanks there. 'Stopcol', patrolling in the Harmat area, found itself in violent contact with these strong elements of 21 Panzer Division. 6 Field Battery's 25-pdrs were evidently brought into action before the gun trails had even hit the ground. From 6 A/Tk Battery J,

E and F Troops were placed in protective flanking positions around the field guns while G Troop moved on to the enemy's right flank in an attempt to engage the tanks from a hull-down position in a wadi. In this they were unsuccessful, for by the time the wadi was reached, the Germans had withdrawn, having been warned off by the arrival of reinforcements from 4 Armoured Brigade.

4 Armoured Brigade was now ordered to clear the area between Eluet et Tamar and the Trigh Capuzzo, but movement was prevented at first by a severe duststorm. 21 Panzer Division was similarly delayed but at 1630 hrs the German tanks moved off and shortly afterwards bumped into small groups of armour from 4 Armoured Brigade. By about 1800 hrs a violent armoured battle was in progress just south of Point 208, and 'Stopcol' moved to aid the British tanks. Despite the covering fire of the South African gunners 13 of 8 Royal Tank Regiment's Valentines were knocked out in the space of 5 minutes, and the surviving tanks were forced to rally behind 6 Field Battery's guns while the latter made a fighting withdrawal under cover of smoke. The tank regiments of 4 Armoured Brigade had also been severely mauled and 'Stopcol' pulled away to the Acroma gap where it joined 'Ogcol', under Lieutenant-Colonel O. W. Sherwell of 2 Field Regiment.

The tank regiments of 4 Armoured Brigade had also been severely mauled and 'Stopcol' pulled away with 6 Field Battery and E and G Troops 6 A/Tk Battery heading towards Rigel while the remnants of 8 Royal Tank Regiment headed for Acroma with F and J Troops 6 A/Tk Battery.

Sherwell took command of the combined force and told Major Compton of 8 Royal Tank Regiment to take his three remaining tanks and keep them under cover. The gap was wired to deceive the enemy into assuming the presence of a minefield and covered by the field guns of 5 Field Battery, SAA supported by anti-tank guns and automatic weapons. 21 Panzer Division approached the defences but made no attempt to break through and withdrew to maintain contact with the rest of Afrika Korps.

With the danger temporarily past, Sherwell took command of the remains of 'Stopcol',

collected some 12 tanks belonging to 8 Royal Tank Regiment, and began to put Point 208 in defensive order. Meanwhile 6 Field Battery and E and G Troops of 6 A/Tk Battery stayed at Maabus er Rigel, where they came under command of 2 Scots Guards.

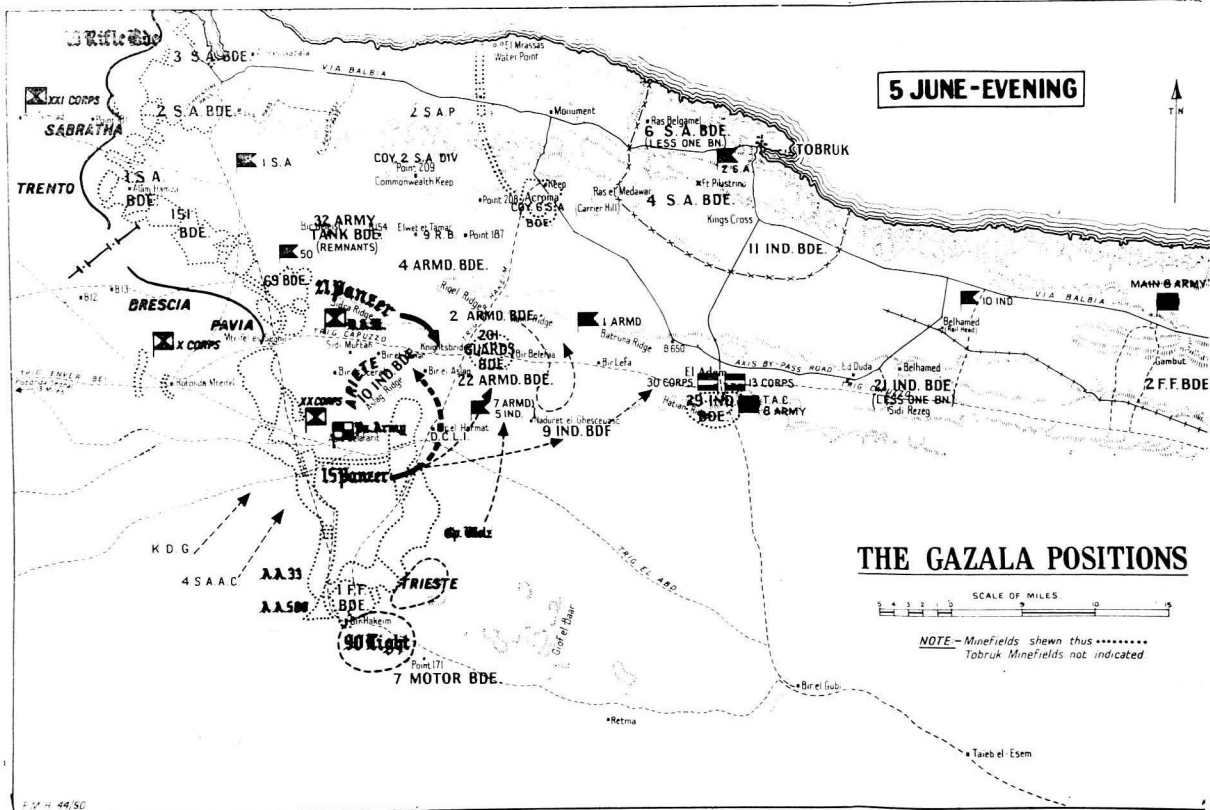
**Disaster in the 'Cauldron'**

For two days after the fighting of 2 June both sides occupied themselves with repairs and reorganisation. Rommel's forces made especially good use of the breathing space being afforded them, and the battle continued to slip from Ritchie's grasp. The British commander however, continued to play with the idea of destroying the enemy armour in the area of the 'Cauldron'. Having discovered to his cost that the British armour could not hope to penetrate the German anti-tank screen unaided, Ritchie decided that XXX Corps should move westwards from its position south of Knightsbridge and penetrate the enemy's defences by infantry infiltration under cover of darkness. The British tanks would then pass through the gaps made by the infantry, and pin the Axis forces against the Gazala minefields.

These operations started on the night of 4/5

June, but after a promising start things began to go awry. The infantry made what proved to be an inadequate penetration of the German defences and the tanks were still badly battered by the anti-tank guns. Rommel quickly counter-attacked while the British reeled, off balance, and trapped and destroyed 10 Indian Brigade itself in the 'Cauldron'. The British armour and artillery suffered huge losses in the battle which continued into 6 June.

On 7 June a diversionary move was mounted from 1 SA Division's area, in the Gazala Line. A force of brigade strength was to strike westwards between Bir Temrad and the coast. TSM Schwegman's Troop from 7 Battery was placed in support of the Dukes for this operation, but was not itself involved in any of the subsequent fighting. In any event the attack was a costly waste, resulting in some 280 South African casualties in exchange for a very meagre haul of prisoners. If this operation had any positive result, this was merely to the effect that it showed how strongly entrenched Kesselring's forces were, west of Gazala, and that any attempt to launch a breakthrough here, for offensive or defensive purposes, would need to be conceived on a very large scale.



While the battle flared west of Gazala and in the 'Cauldron', the Trieste and 90 Light Divisions had been battering away at the defences of Bir Hacheim. Rommel was determined to remove this Free French position before losing his forces against the rear of the Gazala position. On 8 June 15 Panzer Division was dispatched southwards to add its strength to that of the attackers, and the assault by bomb and shell intensified. Finally Ritchie decided to evacuate the survivors of the garrison on the night of 10 June, and the relief was carried out with reasonable success. The courageous defence of Bir Hacheim was one of the few bright spots in the tale of the Gazala battle so far, for it had initially created grave supply difficulties for Rommel's tank force, had cost him many casualties and had also given the British armour the much-needed chance to recover, at least partially, from the losses suffered in the 'Cauldron' battles.

### **A New Defence Line**

Certainly by now the initiative had been lost by 8 Army, and all Ritchie could hope to do was wear Rommel's forces down and compel him to accept a position of stalemate. In the long run this would be serious for the Axis position, for the Allied supply and reinforcement programme would gradually swing the balance in Ritchie's favour. With the fall of Bir Hacheim Ritchie had to decide whether or not to withdraw from the Gazala positions in the north. He made up his mind to hold these, and to use them on the right flank anchor of a new series of positions stretching to Tobruk and facing south against the 'Cauldron'. The key points along the new defence line would be the Knightsbridge and El Adem Boxes, held respectively by 201 Guards Brigade and 29 Indian Brigade, well entrenched, with wire and mines and their own artillery support. Knightsbridge Box covered the junction of the Trigh Bir Hacheim and Trigh Capuzzo, while El Adem Box protected the road junction at El Adem and the escarpment to the north which commanded the desert right up to Tobruk. Beyond these two positions lay a number of defensive points forming a complex system which would be difficult to attack.

The basic weakness of the British armour had been its tactical handling, which had led to expensive casualties at the hands of the German anti-tank gunners; this problem, it was

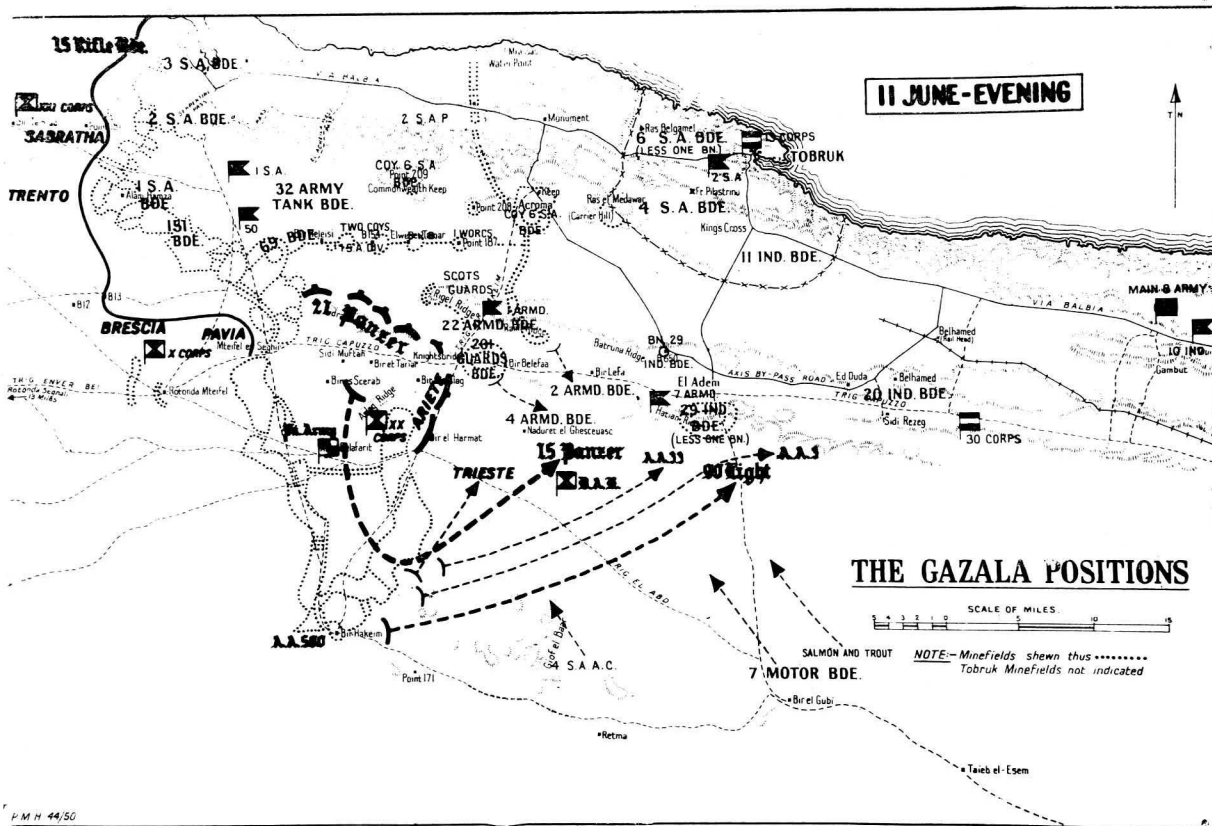
hoped, would be solved by providing artillery cover in the defended areas, under which the British tanks could find shelter. Rommel must attack immediately and this would give Ritchie the chance to defeat him and make a counter-stroke from a firm defensive base.

Behind Knightsbridge and El Adem the first line of posts ran from 69 Brigade's area in the Gazala Line itself, first to Bir Heleisi, occupied by 69 Brigade troops, then to B.154, or Williams Post, Eluet et Tamar, or Best Post, and Point 187. On 10 June two companies of South African infantry, with anti-aircraft and anti-tank support, took over Williams Post, and on 12 June three companies of South Africans moved into Best Post. These positions, from 69 Brigade's to Point 187 were spaced at intervals of 3 miles distant from the next, linked by minefields and protected by wire. Joining this line in Knightsbridge was the position at Maabus er Rigel, Rigel Ridge, held by 2 Scots Guards with the remnants of 6 Field Battery SAA and the two troops of 6 A/Tk Battery SAA which had arrived there after 'Stopcol's' engagement on 2 June. Behind this position were Commonwealth and Acroma Keeps, each held by a company from 2 Transvaal Scottish, protecting the passes which went down through the final escarpment before the sea. On the left wing of this defensive system the perimeter of Tobruk provided the anchor.

By 11 June, with Bir Hacheim taken, Rommel was ready to move against the British positions in the north. His armoured strength was now up to 124 in German main battle tanks, with about 100 lighter German and Italian types. Against this Ritchie could muster 77 of the powerful Grants, 52 Crusaders and 56 Stuarts supported by 63 'I' tanks. The battles of the last six months had demonstrated that of the Allied armour, only the Grant could really hold its own against the enemy's main types, and the Stuart, though fast, was an unpleasant vehicle in which to go into action, for it was fuelled with high-octane aviation spirit. The Axis infantry had suffered heavily during the battle so far, and had lost a third of their number already, while in artillery the British had taken heavy losses, and many captured pieces were being brought into action by the German gunners.

### **Knightsbridge**

The Axis plan for tackling the new Gazala-



Tobruk defence line was for 21 Panzer Division to advance northwards from the Sidra Ridge to hold the British front while 15 Panzer, 90 Light and the Trieste Divisions moved north-east against El Adem on the eastern flank. On the 11th Rommel ordered his troops forward, but the strain of sustained action was beginning to tell and neither of the Axis thrusts penetrated far before nightfall. By now the British command had seen the direction of the Axis thrust and Major-General Norrie, commanding XXX Corps, saw what he believed to be an opportunity to hit Rommel while the latter's forces were well dispersed. The next morning Norrie ordered 2 and 4 Armoured Brigades south from Knightsbridge and Rommel, deciding to make the most of the opportunity thus offered, ordered both his Panzer Divisions to attack the British armour that afternoon. As 15 Panzer Division closed in from the south 21 Division attacked from the rear, and although the Axis tank crews showed less initiative than was usual, the German anti-tank gunners did great execution. The intervention of 22 Armoured Brigade merely involved that formation in the disaster, and by nightfall it was obvious that the British armoured formations would be hard pressed to hold Knightsbridge the

next day, so serious were their losses. Indeed, the losses suffered could not even be partially made good, for the Armoured Brigades had been forced northwards from the battlefield, leaving damaged and immobile tanks in enemy hands.

The night of the 12th found the Germans in occupation of much of the escarpment between Knightsbridge and El Adem. A breach had now been made in the main Allied line of defence covering the road from Gazala to Tobruk, the by-pass road had been cut and if Ritchie now decided to evacuate the Gazala garrison it would have to fall back through Tobruk itself. From his position on the escarpment Rommel could inspect all the British dispositions as far as the perimeter of Tobruk.

On the morning of the 13th the orders to Gott, commanding XIII Corps emphasised that the essential positions at Acroma, Eluet et Tamar, Knightsbridge and El Adem must be held, although Knightsbridge was now at the end of a very exposed salient and El Adem had been dangerously isolated. This time the remain British armour would attempt to fight under the artillery cover of the fixed defences. The only aggressive action contemplated by Ritchie was for 7 Motorised

Brigade to attack the Axis forces in the rear between El Adem and Knightsbridge, while 10 Indian Division was to take the offensive against 90 Light Division east of El Adem. Rommel's intentions for the day were for 15 Panzer Division to push westwards along the Raml Ridge while 21 Panzer Division drove east towards Maabus er Rigel in an attempt to cut off the vital Knightsbridge position; 90 Light Division would be used to press the attack on El Adem.

On the morning of 13 June, 2 and 22 Armoured Brigades managed to hold off a rather halfhearted attack by 15 Panzer Division just east of Knightsbridge while 90 Light Division under attack around El Adem, was forced to withdraw westwards in some confusion.

### **Attack on Rigel Ridge**

21 Panzer Division's attack on Rigel Ridge did not get under way until the afternoon of the 13th. At 1330 hrs the South Africans at Williams Post saw the German armour moving towards the start line for the attack. The South African field guns opened fire and the Germans wheeled to the right, heading towards Best Post where 7 Field Battery SAA was dug in. As 21 Panzer Division wheeled to begin its attack on Rigel the South Africans at Best Post opened a vicious fire from the flank. This fire and the minefields and gunners protecting Rigel both threatened to hold up the German armour, but the Division's commander deployed a screen of tanks and anti-tank guns to prevent any more determined outside interference and set to work with a systematic reduction of the defences. The British 2 and 4 Armoured Brigades were ordered in to give assistance to the Scots Guards at Rigel, but a duststorm blew up and after a very confused battle the tanks were unable to penetrate the German screen.

For the defenders of Rigel, 2 Scots Guards and the guns of 6 Field Battery SAA with E and G troops of 6 A/Tk Battery SAA and a battery of 11 Royal Horse Artillery, the fight began well enough. The enemy tanks working up and down the minefield suffered casualties from shellfire and withdrew, the German commander having decided to soften up the position first with a heavy artillery preparation. Only then were the enemy tanks and infantry able to penetrate the mine-belt which

sheltered the South African 2-pdrs. 6 A/Tk Battery positions were heavily machine-gunned and seven of the eight anti-tank guns overrun. Although the position was by now hopeless Sergeant M. W. Burgess and Lance-Bombardier J. J. Liebenberg both resisted fiercely with Bren guns. Of the entire Battery only WOII W. Layman and 15 other ranks made good their escape, bringing out a 2-pdr, four portees and an 8-cwt truck to join the rest of 6 Battery at Point 208. Two other ranks from 6 Battery were killed, the gallant Sergeant Burgess was mortally wounded and Lt W. R. Brown and 31 other ranks were captured.

Although the vital ridge was now lost, 6 Field Battery decided to continue the fight, and each gun was commanded individually and fought the enemy armour over open sights. The German tanks, supported by anti-tank and field artillery, gradually surrounded the South African 25-pdrs, and despite the fact that half the Battery personnel had become casualties, the gunners continued to serve their weapons until all 8 guns had been disabled. The survivors were then rounded up as prisoners.

6 Field Battery's stand had played a large part in enabling two companies of the Scots Guards to hold out until dark, when these troops were able to escape towards Acroma.

With the evacuation of Rigel the position of the British force at Knightsbridge became untenable and at 2100 hrs on the 13th orders were received for the troops there to withdraw. This move began at 0100 hrs on the morning of the 14th, and by 0500 hrs a position was taken up hastily between the Acroma minefield and Point 208, which was still occupied by 'Stopcol' with the two surviving troops of 6 A/Tk Battery.

### **A New Line**

General Ritchie had realised by now that the battle was lost. The erosion of his tank strength in the last few days and the loss of the battlefield itself meant that it was no longer possible for him to compose an armoured force capable of protecting the long southern flank of the British position from Alem Hamza to El Adem. It could now be only a matter of time before 1 SA Division and 50 Division were isolated and destroyed



where they stood, in the Gazala defences, so that the decision to withdraw had to be made quickly. The question remained: where were the Allied forces to withdraw to?

In February 1942 when the retreat from Agheila was being considered it had been the British High Command who had agreed that no Allied forces should be left to be besieged in Tobruk in future. From a tactical point of view it was felt that the effort involved in defending the port and keeping the garrison supplied was simply outweighed the difficulties which any force isolated there could cause Rommel's forces. On the basis of this decision a great deal of the wire and many of the mines which composed the static defences of Tobruk during the first siege had been removed to construct the vast Gazala position.

It had also been agreed in February that the best place to establish a defensive line in the west of an eastward retreat was on the Libyan-Egyptian frontier, where an armoured force could be assembled to harry the Axis southern flank. Yet now, despite all these arguments, Tobruk was a large supply depot,

built up to support the British offensive which had been aborted by Rommel's attack around Bir Hacheim. Despite the soundness of the tactical argument, could 8 Army afford to destroy the storehouse of Tobruk, thus foregoing the chance of a counterstroke against Rommel in the near future? 8 Army had taken a beating, and had suffered heavy losses, but Rommel too must be nearing the end of his tether, and it seemed unlikely that he would be able to maintain active operations for much longer. Ritchie decided therefore that a short siege of Tobruk was acceptable; indeed, it seemed possible to prevent the fortress from being completely cut off, if the British deployed their strength simply along the western perimeter of the Tobruk defences and from there to El Adem and Belhamed, while a mobile force operated to the south to protect the flank and to help keep the coast road open for supplies.

Auchinleck's view was even more determined: it should not be necessary to contemplate even temporary isolation of Tobruk if sufficient Allied forces were kept to the west to deny Acroma, El Adem and Belhamed and if



Hagiag er Raml — Raml Ridge, one of the vital positions covering Tobruk

Rommel's attempts to pass this defensive line were stoutly resisted. Over the next few days Churchill added his voice to the concord that Tobruk must not be given up, and although his imperative order took little stock of the tactical situation, his was a voice that no British commander could ignore.

Unfortunately, although this was not at first apparent, there was a significant difference in the size of forces which Ritchie and Auchinleck intended to commit in order to deny Tobruk to the enemy, for whereas the former has ready to accept the port's isolation, if only for a brief period, Auchinleck thought that every possible effort should be expended to make any second siege unnecessary. By the time Auchinleck's views were clearly impressed on Ritchie however, orders had already been issued which would make the problem of keeping Tobruk open difficult if not impossible, and key positions had been yielded.

### **The Gazala Gallop**

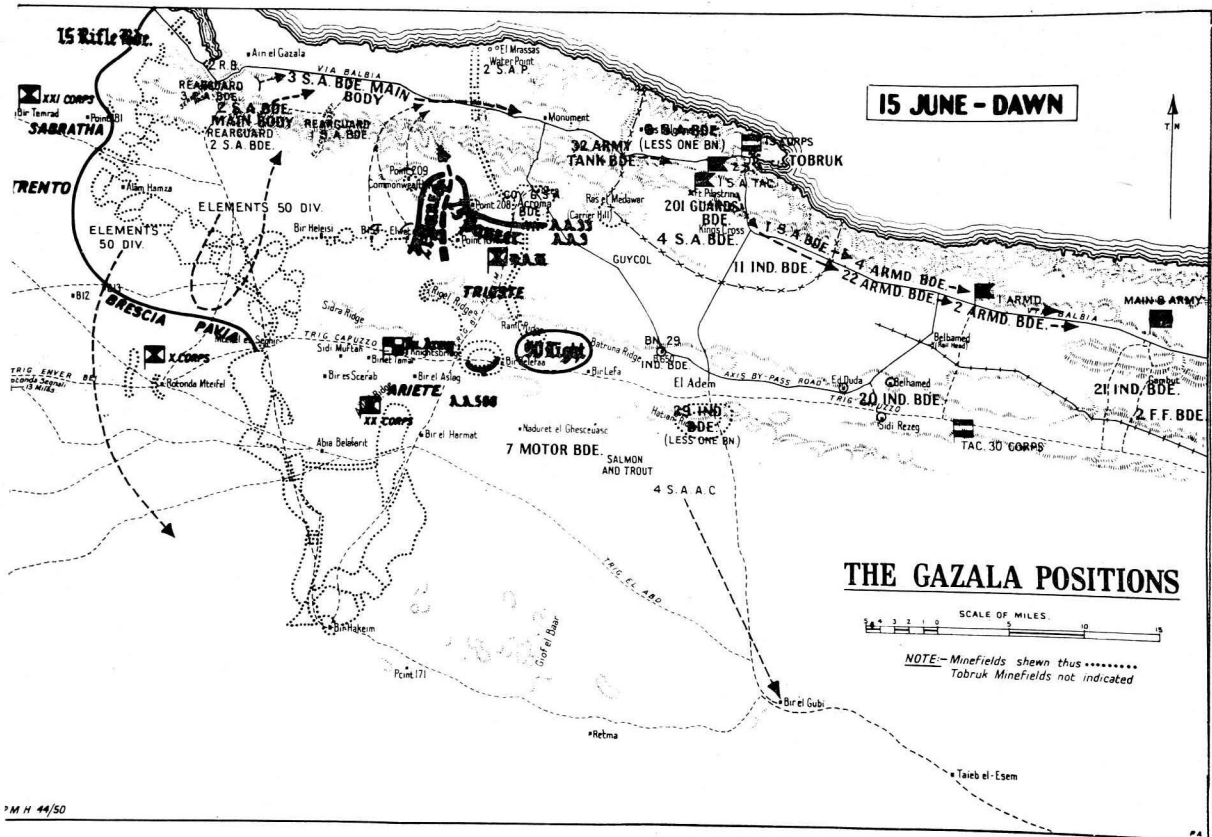
On the morning of 14 June Ritchie ordered 1 SA Division and 50 Division to fall back through Tobruk to the Egyptian frontier. This move was to start during the night of 14/15 June, with the Gazala positions being held until 2300 hrs on the 14th. 1 SA Division would move directly eastwards, but the British 50 Division would have to break west through the Italian lines before turning south and east again to avoid the rear of the Axis forces now attempting to break through to the coastal road.

The natural pre-requisite for the successful withdrawal of these two divisions was of course that Rommel's forces should be prevented from cutting the Via Balbia, and on the morning of the 14th the Axis commander was urging his tired Panzer Divisions to break the thin line of defences still covering the vital road.

As the South African Division sent back streams of 'soft' vehicles and non-essential equipment towards Tobruk throughout the 14th, only the small garrison of Williams Post, Best Post, Point 187, Acroma and Commonwealth Keep stood between the defenceless transport and Rommel's tanks. On the morning of the 14th Rommel launched his armour at a point halfway between Best

Post and Point 187, into the gap where the remnants of 1 Armoured Division were situated. The minefields and the well co-ordinated artillery fire of the defenders successfully held the attack however and only at 1700 hrs that day, when a misunderstanding led to the premature abandonment of Point 187, did Rommel's tanks move north and west. Best Post came in for a great deal more attention as the Axis forces attempted to widen the gap created by the evacuation of Point 187, but a full scale assault was repulsed with heavy loss. Meanwhile the remainder of the German armour pushing towards the Via Balbia came into conflict with the British armour now assembled before Point 208 and covered by the guns of 'Stop-col'. By nightfall Rommel's forces had been fought to a standstill and the Gazala garrison had been saved, at least for another day.

1 SA Infantry Brigade had in fact been able to make its move by daylight on the 14th, this withdrawal fortunately being covered by a duststorm. 2 and 3 SA Brigades were to leave after dark, the latter being accompanied by the bulk of 2 A/Tk Regiment. Rearguards were drawn from each brigade and comprised a company of infantry from each brigade, with supporting artillery detachments. TSM Middleton's Troop from 8 A/Tk Battery was attached to the 3 Brigade rearguard, which was under the command of Major Hampson of 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry. As the South African troops fell back down the passes towards the coastal road they came under heavy air attack, but casualties were slight and there was no serious interruption of the retreat. 3 SA Brigade was the last formation to leave the Gazala positions, but by 1030 hrs on the morning of the 15th all the rear parties were clear of the escarpment and the passes were demolished to prevent pursuit. There was still the danger of Rommel's Afrika Korps descending the escarpment further east however, and at 1050 hrs came a report that the small detachment of South Africans holding the Mrassas water-point had been driven off by a composite force of German infantry and armour, and that the latter were now blocking the escape route of the 1 SA Division rearguards, which were also coming under heavy shellfire from the Acroma escarpment. 1 SA Brigade's rearguard had managed to alter its course of retreat in time, and had swung north to



M.H. 44/50

pass through the minefield near the coast, but 2 and 3 SA Brigade's rearguards were now effectively trapped. They were now joined by some elements of 50 Division which had been unable to force a path through the Italian lines and had therefore followed the South Africans eastwards. An officer from this motley group, Lieutenant-Colonel J. E. S. Percy of 9 Durham Light Infantry, now collected a miscellaneous force with which to attack the German troops barring the road to Tobruk. That afternoon Percy's force smashed through the Axis road blocks, inflicting heavy casualties, and made good their withdrawal. Unfortunately the bulk of 2 and 3 SA Brigades' rearguards failed to make the most of this opportunity, and as the Germans rapidly retrieved the position most of these, including Middleton's Troop, were taken prisoner.

Apart from this incident 2 A/Tk Regiment's withdrawal from Gazala had been achieved virtually without loss. The difficulties of negotiating packed roads by night on mountain passes had led to the loss of one 2-pdr and two 18-pdr guns in accidents, and 7 Battery had come under heavy shellfire which wounded its commander, Major Hudson. Otherwise,

the three batteries of the regiment which had been at Gazala made Tobruk safely and then passed on independently towards a rendezvous west of Capuzzo on the Egyptian frontier.

### Tobruk Besieged

As 1 SA Division pulled through Tobruk on the 15th, Rommel was continuing his assault on the southern outposts of the fortress. 90 Light Division's attack on El Adem was beaten off, but the strongpoint at B.650 fell after three hours of fighting and cost 29 Indian Infantry Brigade a battalion in prisoners. There were still insufficient mobile troops available to the Allied commanders with which to support the vital positions of Belhamed and El Adem. Indeed, there seems to have been some doubt in the minds of Ritchie and his subordinates as to the importance of these defensive boxes in relation to Tobruk. Rommel grasped the strategic importance of the defensive boxes on Tobruk's southern flank however and on the 16th he struck again at El Adem and launched 21 Panzer Division against 20 Indian Infantry Brigade on the old battlefield of Sidi Rezegh. Although both attacks were held, Norrie,

commanding XXX Corps, decided that his armour, now down to 66 tanks, was far too weak to prevent the encirclement of the El Adem — Sidi Rezegh positions. Authority was eventually given for El Adem to be evacuated and the move was successfully carried out during the night of the 16th/17th. The southern lynch-pin of Tobruk's defences had now been removed.

On the next day Rommel's tanks moved to encircle Tobruk to the east, intending to cut the coast road at Gambut. While manoeuvring prior to striking north the Panzer Division ran into 4 Armoured Brigade, which pulled away after several hours hard fighting. Rommel's tanks completed the move to Gambut that night, in time to intercept 20 Indian Infantry Brigade as it abandoned the Belhamed-Sidi Rezegh position.

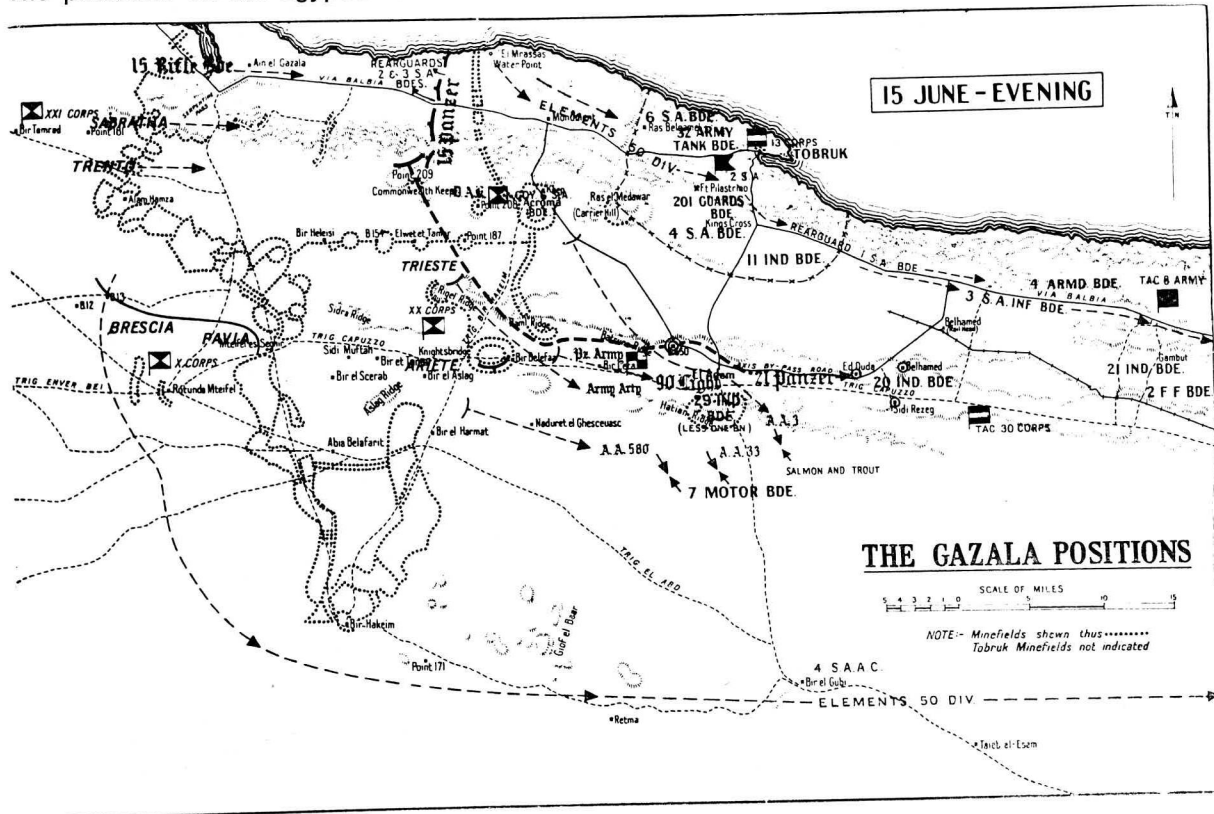
While disaster overtook the outer defence line of Tobruk, Ritchie was trying to organise the remnants of 8 Army which had reached the Egyptian frontier, while also providing some sort of striking force to attack Rommel's southern flank.

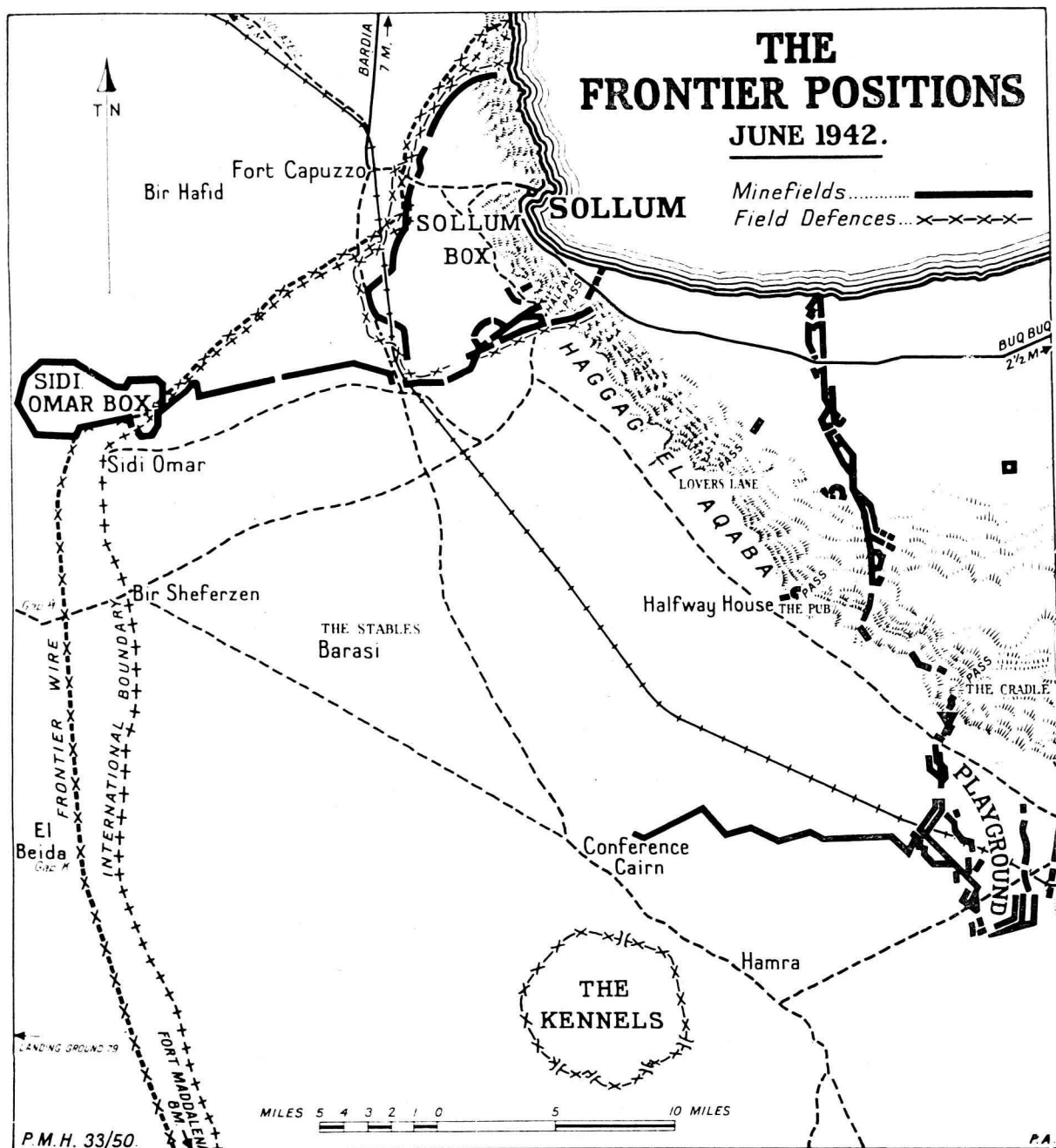
### The Frontier Again

The positions on the Egyptian frontier started

in the north with defensive boxes at Sollum and the Omars, linked by minefields, and extended southwards to a series of other boxes stretched across the escarpment. The original defence scheme was still incomplete in June 1942 however and of the latter boxes only those known as 'Playground' and The Kennels, or the El Hamra Box, were ready for use. It was to the latter that the three batteries of 2 A/Tk Regiment were diverted, in company with 3 SA Infantry Brigade, shortly after reaching the frontier on the 17th. For the next two days 5, 7 and 8 A/Tk Batteries were busy reconnoitring and selecting gun positions in the 'Kennels', but no fixed posts were occupied as the area to be defended was too great, and the guns were therefore held in a mobile reserve role within the box, to be used wherever the perimeter was threatened.

Other units were detailed to hold the boxes at Sollum, the Omars and the 'Playground', while 1 Armoured Division reorganised back at Buq Buq. If Rommel's forces surrounding Tobruk were to be harassed a more active posture would have to be taken however, and Ritchie began to debate the use of four brigade groups of infantry and artillery drawn from 1 SA Division and 50 Division to carry out this





offensive role. On the afternoon of the 17th 1 SA Division ordered the formation of two mobile columns, each comprising three-quarters of a battalion of infantry with a field battery, 12 anti-tank guns, a troop of anti-aircraft artillery, and detachments of engineers and medical personnel. These columns were to be formed by 1 and 3 SA Brigades, and on 18 June, 5 A/Tk Battery was told off to join 3 Brigade's column under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas, of 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry. The columns moved forward a few miles toward Point 202, but did nothing more, for already the news of the disasters

at Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed had come through.

Ritchie was now in a quandary, for his forces were scarcely strong enough to both hold the frontier and worry Rommel's flank. Indeed the defensive position on the frontier was scarcely viable without a strong armoured force to hold the southern flank, which simply trailed off into empty desert. All Ritchie's mobile forces would be required to see that the defensive boxes were not cut off and destroyed in detail should Rommel decide to leave Tobruk for the time being and drive straight for Egypt.

In fact Rommel had no intention of doing any such thing and over the last two days he had been carefully planning his assault on the isolated fortress.

### **Tobruk Falls**

On 15 June Major-General Klopper, commander of 2 SA Division since General de Villier's departure on 14 May 1942, had taken over command of all troops within the Tobruk perimeter. These troops included the 4 and 6 SA Brigades of his own Division, 32 Army Tank Brigade, 201 Guards Brigade and 11 Indian Infantry Brigade, plus a scattering of other units. Among the Divisional Artillery available to Klopper were the nine remaining 2-pdrs of 6 A/Tk Battery which had survived the adventures of 'Stopcol'. These latter were placed under the command of 3 Field Regiment SAA on 16 June and were positioned in defence of the western perimeter of the fortress from strongpoint R1 to R9. The direction of the anti-tank defences in this sector was in the hands of Major Berry, second-in-command of 3 Field Regiment, and Captain F. M. Townshend, senior officer now in 6 A/Tk Battery, took his orders from him. On the 19th Townshend received reinforcements in the shape of two more 2-pdrs, nine captured Italian 47-mm guns and one of the new British 6-pdr anti-tank guns. One of the Italian guns was completely unserviceable and nearly all were without sights, although these were improvised for five of the weapons by the 20th. Nor were the personnel allocated to these guns very satisfactory, for they consisted of about thirty stragglers from British units, most of whom were recently released prisoners-of-war and were in a badly shaken state. The new guns were used to replace those of 95 A/Tk Battery RA which was now to be employed in a mobile counterpenetration role within the fortress perimeter. By the 20th the 6 A/Tk Battery had five 2-pdrs in the Imperial Light Horse sector, six 2-pdrs and three 47-mm guns in that of the Umvoti Mounted Rifles, and one 6-pdr and two 47-mm guns with 2 Royal Durban Light Infantry.

But 6 A/Tk Battery's part in the story of Tobruk is one of escape rather than defence, for when Rommel's forces attacked on the morning of the 20th, the weight of the assault fell on the south-eastern edge of the perimeter, well away from the major South

African positions. Once the attack started events moved with bewildering speed. Shortly after 0500 hrs a severe air bombardment began on the threatened sector of the defences while German engineers worked forward to prepare the way for the assault troops. Before 0800 hrs the German tanks were in action and half an hour later they had cleared their main obstacle, the anti-tank ditch. As the attack developed, the Allied failure to develop any co-ordinated plan of defence, together with the dilapidated state of the physical defences and a rapid disintegration of the command system gave Rommel an opportunity that even he could not have expected. By 1400 hrs the harbour itself was under shellfire and two hours later Klopper dispersed his headquarters, then under threat from German armour. All hope of co-ordinating a significant defence was now past, for control had been lost. At 1800 hrs demolitions began, although headquarters had been partially re-established in 6 SA Brigade zone and some sort of resistance in the Meduar area was under consideration. If the surviving defensive formations, many of them as yet uncommitted to battle, could establish a line from Meduar to Fort Pilastrino, it was felt that something might be saved until relief could be organised from the frontier. Captain Townshend of 6 A/Tk Battery records that by now however it was impossible for him to move his guns from their strongpoints even had he been ordered to do so, for the Battery's vehicles were already in enemy hands.

### **Townshend's Escape**

By dawn on the 21st Klopper decided that any further resistance would merely involve futile waste of life, and orders went out for units to destroy arms, equipment and supplies. There was widespread shock and disbelief at the surrender, especially among those units which had as yet done little or no fighting. Some individuals planned to chance an escape rather than fall into enemy hands however, and those included Captain Townshend.

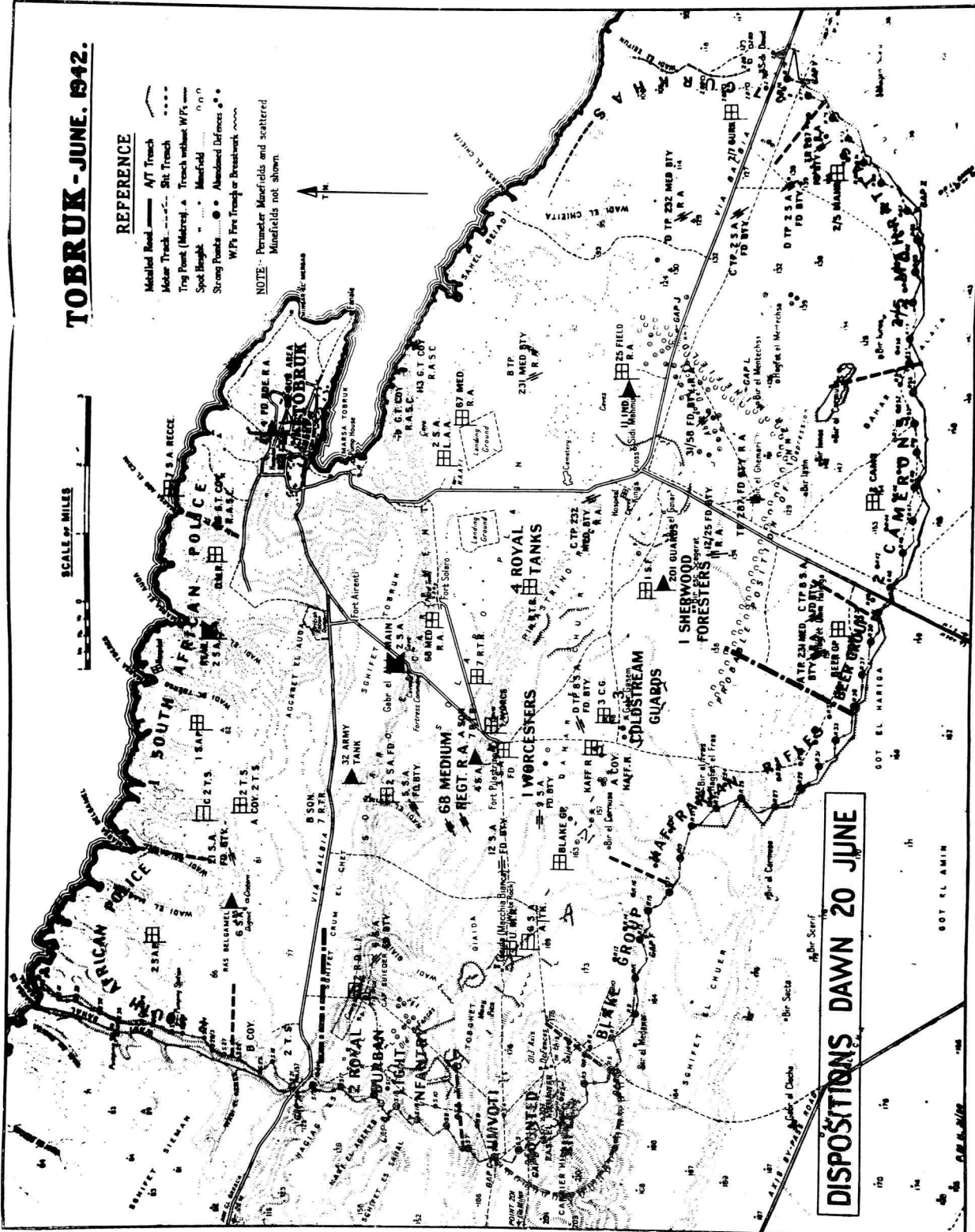
After seeing that his men had destroyed their guns and equipment Captain Townshend told the personnel of 6 A/Tk Battery that he had decided to escape and offered others a place in the attempt. Lieutenant

# TOBRUK - JUNE, 1942.

## REFERENCE

- Metallic Road ——— AT Trench
- Mine Trench - - - - - Shit Trench
- Trig Point (Metry) ▲ Trench without W/Ps ———
- Spot Height ○ ○ ○ Manifold
- Strong Points ● ● ● Abandoned Defences ● ●
- W/Ps Fire Trench or Breastwork ~~~~~

NOTE: Perimeter Minefields and scattered Minefields not shown.



**DISPOSITIONS DAWN 20 JUNE**

R. J. Robinson, five European and an African other rank accepted the offer, and the party, who also included Lieutenant Gower of 1 Anti-Aircraft Regiment SAA, travelled out in two trucks. The route of the escapers took them south-west of El Adem to a point south-west of Bir el Gubi. On the way seven escapees from a Royal Artillery unit were picked up, and at Bir el Gubi Townshend's group joined with some thirty vehicles led by Major Sainthill of the Coldstream Guards, who had organised the largest of the successful escaping parties. By 1830 hrs on the 21st the convoy had safely reached the frontier wire and on the next day Townshend led his party into the 'Kennels' Box. The rest of 2 A/Tk Regiment was already under orders to move back to El Alamein, and Townshend and the handful of survivors from 6 A/Tk Battery had another arduous journey to make before reaching 'home'.

The fall of Tobruk was a devastating blow for 8 Army, for it had been so sudden and unexpected, and the reasons for the collapse were not, at that time, apparent or even vaguely explicable. To the South African forces in particular it came as a setback, and while the disaster remained unexplained it was seen as a blot on the nation's military record. To Churchill, receiving the news suddenly in Washington, it ranked as a blow to British pride and skill at arms, and it may be said that from this time on, Auchinleck's days as Commander-in-Chief Middle East were numbered, whatever his share of the responsibility for the disaster.

In Egypt itself the fall of Tobruk drastically altered the Allied picture of what Rommel could do next. With the supplies and vehicles captured there, and with a victorious army and a dynamic commander to use them, the Axis forces could now make a very strong drive towards Egypt. Ritchie's only thought now was to put as much distance as possible between 8 Army and the enemy, for it was evident that he would need far stronger forces than he had at his disposal if the frontier positions were to be denied. Instead Ritchie proposed to build another position around Matruh, to be held by the New Zealanders, 50 Division and 10 Indian Division, with a brigade from 5 Indian Division. 1 SA Division should be moved back to El Alamein, and behind this screen an

attempt would be made to restore the battered armoured formations.

### Leaving The 'Kennels'

On the afternoon of 21 June the order arrived for 1 SA Division to pull out of the 'Kennels' Box and make for El Alamein. That evening 3 SA Brigade moved out, accompanied by 2 A/Tk Regiment Headquarters and 7 and 8 A/Tk Batteries. 1 SA Brigade followed next day and 2 SA Brigade on the 23rd, bringing 5 A/Tk Battery with the divisional rearguard. By the evening of the 25th the whole of 1 SA Division was in position at El Alamein.

Although the future pattern of the Axis strategy had been agreed before Rommel's successful Gazala offensive, the sudden collapse of Tobruk induced the desert commander to press for his masters' consent to a continued offensive into Egypt. He was well aware of the dislocation and weakness of the British forces now retreating before his army, and was intent on preventing Auchinleck from re-establishing a firm front behind which reinforcements could be organised. Hitler welcomed Rommel's view; he had never been fond of the plan for an assault on Malta and was concerned that the British should be cleared out of Egypt before the arrival of American weapons and troops. Mussolini too was tempted by the prospect of seizing Egypt and overrode the counsel of his military advisers who kept complaining of the hold that Malta had over the Axis Mediterranean supply route.

Ritchie meanwhile began preparing his new defence line at Matruh, where some embryo defensive works had been constructed on the coast. The main defensive potential of Matruh however, lay not so much in the works which were now hurriedly thrown up, nor in the sketchy minefields which stretched southwards into the open desert, but in the waterless 120 miles which separated Matruh from the Cyrenaica frontier. As Gott's XIII Corps fought a delaying action against the Axis vanguard on the frontier the Desert Air Force would pound Rommel's ever-extending supply lines in the open desert.

This was the intention; in fact when Rommel crossed the frontier on the 23rd Gott's delay-



ing action rapidly became an orthodox withdrawal. Most of the Allied stores were successfully destroyed however and the air attacks of the Desert Air Force began to tell as Rommel's forces pushed towards Matruh.

The plans for the defence of Matruh were worked out under considerable pressure between 22 - 24 June. The basic plan was for the newly arrived X Corps Headquarters under Lieutenant-General Holmes to stand on the coast at Matruh and Gerawla, with 10 Indian Division and 50 Division under command. Inland, XIII Corps under Gott would organise an armoured and mobile striking force with 29 Indian Infantry Brigade near Sidi Hamza, the New Zealand Division at Minqair Qaim and 1 Armoured Division in the open desert to the south-west. The tactical plan was to hold Rommel in front of Matruh and Sidi Hamza, striking him in the flank with XIII Corps should he either break between these positions or swept around the southern end of the defence line.

If Auchinleck had been worried that insufficient opposition had been organised before Tobruk and at the frontier to hold Rommel's advance, he was even more concerned that 8 Army should continue to exist and not be destroyed in detail in an untenable position.

### **Auchinleck Takes Command**

On 25 June he flew up to 8 Army Headquarters to take command of the field army himself. With the current weakness of his formations in tanks and artillery he considered that Matruh and Sidi Hamza were unlikely to hold. Early in the morning of the 26th orders were issued for the reorganisation of 8 Army's component formations. Infantry divisions were to be reorganised to become brigade battlegroups, each one composed of all the divisional artillery accompanied by only so much mobile infantry as was necessary for the guns' protection. The immobile parts of the divisions would reassemble back at Alamein.

Attempts were already being made to augment the sparse artillery of the Matruh defences and on the evening of 25 June Lieutenant-Colonel Parkin, commander of 2 A/Tk Regiment, left for Baggush in the company of his adjutant, to report to the officer com-

manding 50 Division. At 0200 hrs on the 26th the gun groups set out for Baggush arriving there at 0800 hrs, moving then along the main coast road to settle down some 7 miles east of the Matruh defences for the night.

Rommel struck on the morning of the 26th however, before any reorganisation of the infantry units could be carried out. On that day 90 Light Division pressed through the scattered detachments of 29 Indian Infantry Brigade, giving the misleading impression that Rommel was pushing strong forces along the escarpment and between X and XIII Corps. In fact the victorious progress of the Axis forces had taken a considerable toll in men and machines, and all of Rommel's front line formations were acutely below strength, a fact not fully appreciated by 8 Army Intelligence.

On the morning of the 27th 2 A/Tk Regiment were allocated positions with 50 Division's units. In 69 Brigade 5 A/Tk's Battery's three troops of 2-pdrs were attached respectively to 6 and 7 Green Howards and 5 East Yorkshire Regiment. A 2-pdr troop from 7 A/Tk Battery was also sent to support 6 Green Howards and five 18-pdrs grouped under 7 Battery in support of 124 Field Regiment RA. 8 A/Tk Battery was detached to aid 151 Brigade, the two 2-pdr troops going to 6 and 8 Durham Light Infantry and a troop of five 18-pdrs supporting the latter battalion.

That day the enemy advance continued, but 90 Light Division, after eliminating 9 Durham Light Infantry, was forced away by the artillery of 50 Division. Further south the Afrika Korps began an attempt to surround the New Zealanders at Minqair Qaim. Unaware of the real weakness of Rommel's forces and of German commander's audacity in attempting this move Auchinleck told Holmes and Gott that if a withdrawal proved necessary he would call on them to fall back to a line on the meridian just west of Fuka. That Gott, commanding XIII Corps, should have considered the New Zealanders in great danger from such a depleted Afrika Korps goes some way to demonstrating the moral ascendancy that Rommel had now established over the British generals. Even when a counter-stroke and the commitment of the British armour could have sent Rommel's forces reeling the Allied commanders felt themselves defeated





fore Matruh by 10 Indian Division, with heavy loss. At about 1800 hrs 8 Durham Light Infantry, further east, with 50 Division, came under assault from German infantry supported by six captured Stuart tanks. 8 A/Tk Battery still had two troops of guns attached to this battalion, and these guns destroyed five of the six tanks, themselves losing one gun, on which the crew were all wounded. This assault having been successfully driven off, final preparations were made for the break-out.

The anti-tank troops were ordered to destroy their 18-pdr guns, their self-propelled 2-pdrs were divided among the escaping British columns and at 2100 hrs the retreat began. Many of the participants, both Allied and German, have left accounts of the chaotic fighting which took place as X Corps ran across the encamped Axis troops; Lt Masterax of 5 A/Tk Battery has recorded his own impressions of the retreat.

'I got my soft vehicles together in a column, in which I also found some of our guns. More of our guns were in another column. By this time the enemy had moved up on the north-east of us, and we could see them about 1500 yards away bringing up guns and machine-guns. They fired with a "baboon" gun (20 mm) but apparently they couldn't see us and their shooting was hopeless. they also opened with Spandaus, but nothing came near us.

'I got information that we were to go out in four columns and that I was in No. 3 Column. This included Bren carriers from the Cheshires which were to break through the enemy lines and hold the gap while the columns got out. The first column moved forward up a slight ridge with the Bren carriers ahead, and just then the enemy opened fire, very heavily. Within 20 minutes about six vehicles were burning. The column kept going slowly, however, and this indicated to us that a gap had been successfully forced in the enemy's lines. We were taking no offensive action.

'Then we noticed that the enemy was moving down the hill towards us, and our column commander decided to move. The second column also began moving, however, and we could see that the gap would be too crowded. Our column commander therefore decided to

make another break-through altogether, about 500 yards to the left of the first gap, and we moved off, nose to tail . . . As soon as the head of our column reached the enemy lines, up went lights and tracers. Our vehicles went through, however. The Bren carriers ran up and down the enemy lines, shooting whenever they saw a burst of enemy fire. They did wonderful work.

'Just ahead of me were two 15-cwt trucks. When they reached the middle of the gap they were hit by enemy fire, and the occupants jumped out and went to ground. Tracer was lighting up the whole area. The fellows in front shouted. "It's no use — you can't go on!"

'I had got out of my truck and now hopped on the running board and said to the driver "Drive like blazes." We swung round the two trucks ahead of us, and for 150 or 200 yards went through terrific fire. Further down the road was an anti-tank gun, which I had seen lobbing rounds at vehicles coming up the road, and I was very anxious about it. The gun opened fire on me, but I got through all right, and travelled for about 500 yards all on my own. Then I slowed up and looked around, and to my relief saw a column. I drove towards it and joined it . . . .

'We came to a road, and found a Brigadier sitting on a staff car. He told us that Fuka was in enemy hands, and that we should go 25 miles south and make for Duba. We left at once. On the way we passed five or six enemy laagers, but we were not stopped and we went right past them. Later we passed an enemy column going west, it crossed just ahead of us. One truck detached itself and came towards us, but a Bren carrier dashed up to it and the Jerries jumped out and ran off. We stopped some distance further on and I found that all my trucks were there. Two men had been wounded and were in great pain, but we had to continue as fast as we could.

'During the night we ran right into an enemy tank laager in a hollow. When we realised our position we turned and slowly made our way out round the tanks. No one stirred. We got out safely and continued until early morning, when a heavy mist set in. Our fellows were dog tired, and veered off the road quite often. Once, after we had moved in a big

circle, we found that our column commander was asleep. We stopped and made tea.'

After other minor adventures Lt Masterax's column, reduced to about a quarter of its original strength, regained the British lines. On the 29th, the toll of the break-out was counted: 5 A/Tk Battery had lost 53 men, 7 A/Tk Battery had lost 1 man killed, 4 wounded and had 13 missing, while 8 A/Tk Battery arrived at Alamein with 3 officers, 54 European other ranks and 21 men of the Non-European Army Service Corps. The total strength of 2 A/Tk Regiment when it reached Alamein on the 29th was 18 officers, 214 European other ranks and 92 Non-Europeans, the unit's main armament was down to 11 2-pdrs.

As Rommel poised his forces for yet another attack, this time on the Alamein positions, the remnants of 2 A/Tk Regiment were moved back to Helwan. Throughout the July of 1942 the weary and depleted Axis forces flung themselves furiously at the Allied defences in a desperate effort to cross this last barrier

protecting the Delta. 2 A/Tk Regiment took line for the first time since November 1941. This relief was permanent for the unit as a whole, for there were insufficient reinforcements to rebuild the regiment to its proper strength. Instead its guns were sent to 1 A/Tk Regiment SAA and on 22 July 1 officer and 85 other ranks were transferred to that Regiment as reinforcements.

Thus ended 2 A/Tk Regiment's desert war. The unit had fought from Sidi Omar to Agheila and back to Alamein, and had shared in some of 8 Army's most desperate engagements. Although at the beginning of July 1942 the campaign seemed, on balance, to have resulted in almost unmitigated disaster, Rommel's forces had been worn down and had suffered irreplaceable losses in experienced men and tried equipment. 2 A/Tk Regiment had played no mean part in this achievement. The process of attrition was to continue before the defences of Alamein in the summer of 1942, and after the Allies' autumn offensive there would be no Axis counter-stroke.