

2 ANTI-TANK REGIMENT, SAA: TANK AND ANTI-TANK IN THE WESTERN DESERT, 1940-1942

(Part 2)

Reorganisation on the frontier

On 28 November 1941 Rommel temporarily abandoned the frontier garrisons to their fate and turned westwards to return to the Tobruk-Sidi Rezegh area. Freyberg's New Zealanders had made the most of the Panzer Division's absence and had taken Belhamed and Duda, recaptured Sidi Rezegh and linked with the garrison of Tobruk. The German armoured divisions now turned back towards Sidi Rezegh along the Trigh Capuzzo where they were further damaged in encounters with New Zealand units, but the poor tactical handling of the British 22 Armoured Brigade allowed Rommel's weakened forces through. The German artillery inflicted heavy losses again on 7 Armoured Division and battle was once more joined around Sidi Rezegh, where the British forces on 29 and 30 November were employed with characteristic lack of co-ordination and were defeated in detail. The unprotected New Zealand Division was badly mauled in consequence and Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh changed hands once more; Tobruk was besieged again.

On the 28th with XIII Corps preoccupied by the renewed fighting around Tobruk, responsibility for the frontier area was assumed by Maj-Genl Messervy, the commander of 4 Indian Division. Having seen off Rommel's tanks, his forces were now preparing to assault the enemy still holding out in Libyan Omar. Other preparations were also afoot to tidy up the confused situation created by Rommel's dash to the wire.

The departure of the enemy armour from the vicinity of Capuzzo on the 27th and 28th left 23 and 28 New Zealand Battalions of 5 New Zealand Brigade still in possession of this vital area. These units were now desperately short of food and ammunition however, and succour had been promised by 4 Indian Division.

On the morning of the 28th detachments from 5 Indian Infantry Brigade were already moving towards Capuzzo, accompanied by 1 Field Regiment RA and C Battery of 2 A/Tk Regiment SAA.

At Menastir the enemy continued to be active and 22 New Zealand Battalion, isolated from the rest of its Brigade and perilously short of ammunition, felt unable to oppose the isolated German armoured formations in that area. On receiving the news from NZ Divisional Cavalry Regiment that 4 Indian Division Headquarters were at the Omars the commander of 22 Battalion decided to withdraw there for supplies and fresh orders. After dark on 28 November 22 Battalion headed south with its 220 vehicles and halted at Point 201, five miles north of the Omars, at 0230 hrs the next day. Later that morning Messervy, commanding 4 Indian Division, sent orders for Lt-Col Andrew of 22 Battalion to assume command of 5 New Zealand Brigade, establish a new headquarters to replace that captured on the 27th and to hold a line from Capuzzo through Musaid to Upper Sollum. Ritchie, commanding 8 Army, was under the erroneous impression that the Afrika Korps was being supplied largely from Bardia, and wanted the reconstituted 5 New Zealand Brigade, augmented by 5 Indian Brigade, to continue to mask that town. In addition to stopping enemy maintenance parties from entering or leaving Bardia the Brigade was to prevent the Axis frontier garrisons along the line from Point 207 to Halfaya from breaking northwards.

Messervy was eager to avoid weakening his Division further by incurring heavy casualties however and units engaged in the harassment of enemy troops were to avoid fixed positions until the arrival of the field and medium artillery made possible a more strenuous prosecution of the siege. 5 Indian Brigade would

send patrols along the Trigh Capuzzo, and along the west of the frontier wire between Omar Nuovo and Bir Sheferzen. Meanwhile the New Zealanders would turn their full attention to the Via Balbia, and shortly after D Battery 2 A/Tk arrived in Omar Nuovo, its M and O Troops were detached to accompany the mobile columns of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry.

For the next few days patrols were carried out along the Bardia-Tobruk road, and on 30 November O Troop found itself in action in support of the Divisional Cavalry's A Squadron, accounting for four armoured vehicles and two 3-ton lorries.

Ever since the excitement of the 25th, 2 A/Tk's A Battery had been operating with mobile columns of the Central India Horse and 6 South African Armoured Car Regiment in the vicinity of FSD 50 and Bir Sheferzen. On 28 November the 2-pdrs of A Battery joined a mobile column of guns and light armoured vehicles under Major Newall to sweep the area south of the wire between the Omars and Halfaya. While engaged on these escort tasks the anti-tank guns came under fire on several occasions but always at too great a range to join in the retaliation. Meanwhile A Battery's 18-pdr troop had been ordered into Omar Nuovo, where 7 Indian Brigade had been told to hold the position at all costs, should Rommel return. N and P Troops of D Battery 2 A/Tk also formed part of the anti-tank defence.

The Omars Secured

It had been decided now to try to take the remainder of the Omar position and on the night of 30/31 November 3/1 Punjab Regiment attacked Libyan Omar from the north, supported by 31 Field Regiment RA and the Central India Horse, and secured a lodgement in the position after very severe fighting. 4/16 Punjab Regiment was thrown into the battle on the next day, and by nightfall on 31 November only a force of about a hundred Germans remained unvanquished. This small party attempted to escape but were rounded up by patrols, and dawn on 1 December the whole of the Omar position was in Allied hands. The severity of the Axis resistance had, however, caused some disturbance to the plans for relocating 4 Indian Division. Nevertheless,

by 1 December 5 Indian Brigade had completed its partial relief of 5 New Zealand Brigade and had occupied the Capuzzo — Musaid — Sollum line while the New Zealanders concentrated around the Via Balbia to the north.

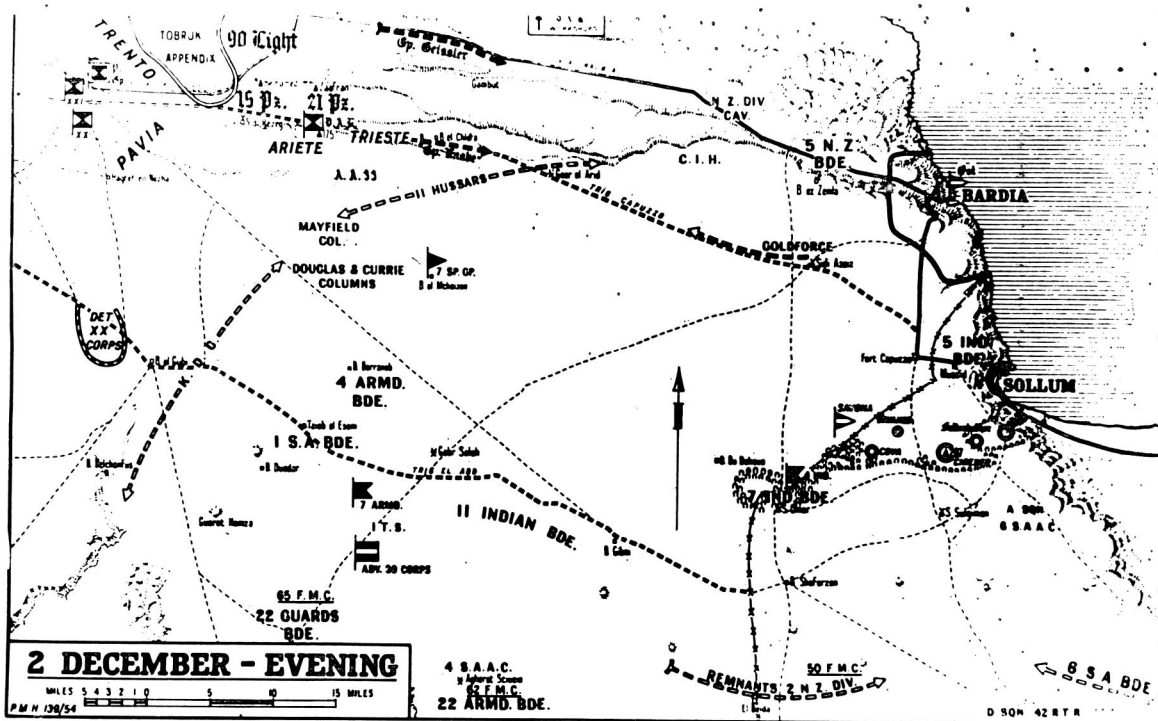
Despite the setbacks around Belhamed and Sidi Rezegh and the elimination from the battle of most of the New Zealand Division, Ritchie remained optimistic about the eventual success of 'Crusader'. He had concluded, rightly, that Rommel's forces were nearer exhaustion than his own, and that the Axis lines of supply and reinforcement were still effectively blocked by Allied air and naval strikes. In Ritchie's opinion it was vital for the Allies to retain the initiative and give Rommel no respite, and in this view he was emphatically seconded by Auchinleck.

With Rommel's armour now settling behind anti-tank defences in the Sidi Rezegh area Ritchie proposed to have XIII Corps hold its ground in the Tobruk salient while he launched XXX Corps to seize El Adem, a vital communications centre whose capture would be just as damaging to Rommel's position as another successful assault on Sidi Rezegh. For the El Adem operation XXX Corps would use 7 Armoured Division, 22 Guards Brigade, 1 SA Infantry Brigade and 4 Indian Division. From the latter 11 Indian Brigade had already been moved south of the Omars to form part of XXX Corps reserve, and the remainder of the Division would follow as soon as it could be relieved along the frontier by 2 SA Division which was earmarked for this more static role as it was yet insufficiently equipped or trained for mobile operations.

By 2 December Rommel realised he had won the local battle around Sidi Rezegh and had once again prevented the relief of Tobruk.

Rommel Waylaid

Intercepted signals indicated that Ritchie was unlikely to renew the offensive before the 3rd and Rommel was therefore tempted to assay another relief of the frontier garrisons. His forces were now in far worse shape than when he had mounted his previous dash to the wire however, and he decided to try to disguise this fact by using advance guards to clear the Gambut area. These advance guards were to move off immediately along



the Trigh Capuzzo and Via Balbia. At the same time Rommel ordered General Gambara to move Ariete and Trieste Divisions to the Sollum front to renew the battle of encirclement.

On the afternoon of 2 December an advance guard provided by 15 Panzer Division pushed along the Via Balbia towards Bardia. This force, under the command of Lt Col Geissler consisted of the Headquarters 200 Regiment, 15 Motor-Cycle Battalion, and detachments of anti-tank and field artillery; Geissler Advance Guard spent the night of 2/3 December at Gambut.

As we have seen, patrols of New Zealanders were also making use of the Via Balbia, while the escarpment overlooking the road from the south was being watched by 'Goldforce', a composite group consisting of the Central India Horse with detachments of field and anti-tank artillery. On the morning of the 3rd, A Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry with O troop of D Battery 2 A/Tk in attendance spotted Geissler's force. The New Zealand patrol pulled back quickly to Bir ez-Zemla to warn 5 Brigade Headquarters, and all other patrols were rapidly withdrawn while the Brigade put itself in a state of defence. Geissler Advance Guard came down the Via Balbia

cautiously and the German Infantry dismounted some two miles west of 28 New Zealand (Maori) Battalion's positions.

At 1130 hrs a few shells landed on the escarpment south of the road and at 1200 hrs part of 28 Battalion was subjected to heavy automatic fire. The enemy had now remounted and were moving towards the Maori positions but concentrating their attention on the escarpment for any signs of ambush. Only at 1300 hrs, with the enemy vehicles well past the Maoris' advanced positions and only 60 yards from the battalion's automatic weapons, did the New Zealanders open fire. The small arms and automatic weapons were augmented by fire from the supporting artillery and the front of Geissler's column was rapidly reduced to a shambles. The Germans, once they had begun to recover from this initial shock, attempted for the remainder of the afternoon to find a way around the New Zealand position, but were held off by close infantry-artillery co-operation. Eventually the column was forced into retreat and the New Zealand infantry and carriers rounded up large numbers of enemy troops. Geissler's report showed his casualties as 8 wounded and 231 missing, although New Zealand Brigade Headquarters claimed 239 killed, 129 wounded and 100 prisoners. Whatever the correct figures it

had been a severe blow to German arms and had caused the northern push to recoil, at a cost to the defenders of only 2 dead and 9 wounded. O Troop D Battery 2 A/Tk supporting the Maoris suffered no casualties and claimed to have destroyed 24 troop carriers, 1 armoured fighting vehicle, 4 gun tractors and 2 guns, in addition to capturing 2 German 50 mm anti-tank guns; BSM Mason was commended for his gallant conduct and decisive leadership during this encounter.

Further to the south, Knabe Advance Guard had been slightly more fortunate. Knabe's group consisted of II Battalion of 104 Infantry Regiment, an anti-tank company, artillery, and three tanks. Armoured cars of the Central India Horse retreated tantalisingly in front of the German column until their victims were drawn on to the guns of 31 Field Regiment RA and 65 A/Tk Regiment RA. Blenheims and Hurricane fighter-bombers added their share to the defenders' fire and by dusk Knabe pulled back, with considerable loss.

Rommel's second dash to the wire had began most inauspiciously, but this did not herald any early abandonment of the plan. Crüwell's anxieties about the situation at Ed Duda had some effect however and 21 Panzer Division was recalled to join Mickl's composite group in an attack on the meagre Allied forces holding that vital point. The push along the Via Balbia was therefore abandoned, while that along the Trigh Capuzzo was reinforced, and 15 Panzer Division set off to join Ariete Division and Group Knabe at Gasr el Arid on the morning of 4 December. This move created some alarm at 8 Army Headquarters, and for a while threatened to divert forces from XXX Corps operations around Bir el Gubi. News of Geissler's defeat was reassuring however and even the greatly reinforced Knabe Group failed to do any more than push 'Goldforce' towards Bardia without inflicting much loss. Before 15 Panzer Division could come to grips with the New Zealanders or Indians in the frontier positions the whole Axis force on the Trigh Capuzzo was suddenly recalled by Afrika Korps Headquarters.

The stout Allied defence of Ed Duda and XXX Corp's sudden attack on the Italians at Bir el Gubi had thrown the Axis plans into disarray. The Afrika Korps now began to regroup to concentrate against the unexpected, and as

yet undefined, menace from the south. The Axis assault on Ed Duda was called off, the drive towards the frontier abandoned and various supply units stationed in the Gambut area recalled. Ironically just as Rommel abandoned his hitherto ineffective dash for the wire, Ritchie's concern about German activity on the Trigh Capuzzo led him to divert valuable forces to cope with a threat which had already been removed, and postpone his push towards El Adem.

The Axis Withdrawal

But Rommel was still unaware that his movements had belatedly pushed 8 Army off balance. His own thoughts were dominated by a message received from Italy on 5 December to the effect that only essential supplies could be ferried across the Mediterranean in the face of Allied interceptions; no reinforcements would be forthcoming in the near future. This was serious news to a commander who had only 40 of the tanks out of the 250 with which he had begun the battle, and with nearly 20 000 of his troops now isolated in frontier garrisons. At this stage the German commander began to consider a tactical withdrawal to prevent a British outflanking movement through the desert to the south.

8 Army was still very dispersed and had taken some heavy blows in the confused fighting which developed around Bir el Gubi on 4 and 5 December. On 6 December Ritchie was still uncertain of Rommel's intentions, although the latter's withdrawal from the Ed Duda area had allowed the second 'relief' of Tobruk to take place.

Throughout the 7th the desultory fighting continued, with constant intervention from the air forces of both sides. No decisive combat took place on this day, yet Rommel now decided that in the absence of a victory he could leave withdrawal no later. On 8 December Rommel began his bitter retreat, towards the Gazala position which had been constructed in May 1941.

2 SA Division Enters the Fight

2 SA Division finally began to emerge from its position in reserve on 4 December. On that morning the advance elements of the Di-



Maj. Genl. I. P. de Villiers
Commander of 2 SA Division.

vision began to arrive at the Omars from Misheifa and Matrûh and the two remaining brigades of 4 Indian Division were released from the frontier to join 11 Indian Brigade in the west. Headquarters of 2 A/Tk Regiment SAA remained at the Omars and the unit reverted to South African command. In the north the withdrawal of 5 Indian Brigades also brought 5 New Zealand Brigade under the command of the South African Division, for the New Zealanders, having been moved back to the line Capuzzo — Musaid — Sollum, had surrendered their transport to allow the Indians to move forward. C Battery 2 A/Tk moved with the New Zealand Brigade to Capuzzo.

Rommel's withdrawal towards Bir el Gubi, and later towards Gazala, isolated the frontier area from the battle between the main forces. From now on for more than a month 2 SA Division, and 2 A/Tk Regiment, were more or less separated from the clash of the main forces of the 8 Army and DAK. A great deal of fighting remained to be done in this area however, miles to the east of the central conflict, for as has been seen, Rommel's retreat had left substantial garrisons blocking the coast road which was increasingly important to the supply of Ritchie's forces in the west.

A garrison of nearly 9 000 men remained in Bardia under Maj-Genl Schmitt, while strung from Sollum through Halfaya Pass to Faltenbacher, Cirener (Point 207), Cova (Got Adhidiba) and Bir Ghirba were a series of outposts mustering over 6 000 defenders under the command of Maj-Genl Fedele de Giorgis of the Savona Division.

On the Division's arrival at the frontier 3 SA Infantry Brigade was detailed to take over the northern part of the line isolating Bardia, relieving 5 Indian Brigade for tasks with XXX Corps. On 5 December 3 SA Brigade set out in two groups, with B Battery 2 A/Tk in support, the latter having finally made its way into the operational area in the company of 2 SA Division after nearly three weeks defending the Sofafi area. By 1700 hrs on 5 December the Brigade was in its new position at Menastir on the escarpment overlooking Bardia from the west, and experiencing enemy artillery fire for the first time, although this inflicted no damage on the newcomers. The Brigade's task was to prevent any communication between Rommel and the Bardia garrison, and to keep the garrison in check with demonstrative preparations for attack.

On 6 December a start was made with the mopping up of the detachments of enemy support troops scattered through the wadis along the coast to the north west of Bardia. In addition the Trigh Capuzzo and Via Balbia were to be kept open to beyond Gambut. To carry out these tasks 3 SA Brigade organised four 'Jock' columns, composite groups comprising a platoon of infantry, a section of 25-pdrs, a troop of 2-pdrs, a troop of Bren-carriers from the Zealand Divisional Cavalry, and armoured cars. These columns would operate under the direction of Divisional Cavalry Headquarters, which had considerable experience in such matters.

'Vic Column' Enters Tobruk

One of these columns was immediately detached for a separate job however. Major V. E. Wepener, of 1 Imperial Light Horse, was to take his group, called 'Vic Column' to contact the garrison at Tobruk. Under the command of WOII Phillips F Troop from B Battery 2 A/Tk accompanied this force in its risky mission, which involved a move along the Via Balbia through an area known to be

occupied by hostile groups of unknown strength. 'Vic Column' set off at 1830 hrs with the carriers of the Divisional Cavalry leading the way down the escarpment to the road, and past the macabre relics of the Maoris' ambush of Geissler's Advance Guard, a solemn reminder of the fate which could overtake desert columns. Several derelict German tanks were passed but no contact was made with the enemy until the column moved through Gambut. Here one of F Troop's guns slipped from the road and an Italian emerged from the surrounding darkness having mistaken the crew's Afrikaans for German. He offered the men a cigarette and informed them that another 25 Axis soldiers were hiding near the road. These were promptly loaded into a truck as prisoners. The column then proceeded to Tobruk, waiting for an air raid to finish before entering the defences.

While 'Vic Column' was making its way to Tobruk the three other 'Jock' columns from 3 SA Infantry Brigade were sent on patrols through the desert south of the escarpment. No contact was made with the enemy on the 7th however, and in the afternoon a more definite project was launched with the intention of securing the vital Gambut landing ground for the Desert Air Force. A platoon of 2 Transvaal Scottish Regiment was detailed for this task, supported by a section of 25-pdrs from 1 Field Regiment SAA and G Troop of B Battery, 2 A/Tk. This small force, labelled 'Mac Column', was fortunate in finding the airfield unoccupied that night and Allied fighters would soon be operating from this landing ground in support of 8 Army's advance through Cyrenaica.

Clearing the Coast

The columns which 3 SA Brigade had sent to scout the escarpment had established that Rommel had withdrawn his main forces from this area. Enemy units still between Bardia and Tobruk appeared to be situated below the escarpment, towards the sea. The next job was therefore to round up these scattered forces.

This work was left mainly to 1 Imperial Light Horse under Lt-Col Blake; the plan was for this battalion to move out as far west as Gambut and then make a five stage sweep

eastwards along the coast up to the Bardia defences. The Imperial Light Horse's positions around Bardia would meanwhile be occupied by 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry which had arrived from the Omars on the 7th with B Troop of A Battery 2 A/Tk in attendance. When 1 Imperial Light Horse set out at 0800 hrs on the 8th its artillery support included a section of two 2-pdrs from E Troop, B Battery 2 A/Tk.

Moving along in the rear of this force was 'Met Column', a force commanded by Major Metcalfe and consisting of two platoons from 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry, with six anti-aircraft guns of 2 Light A/A Regiment SAA and four 2-pdrs of B Troop, A Battery 2 A/Tk under TSM Taylor, their task being to consolidate the defences of Gambut airfield, now occupied by 'Mac Column'. At 1330 hrs that day the combined columns reached Halfway House, due north of Gambut, and 'Met Column' was detached to occupy the aerodrome. Here, just as Metcalfe's men were moving into position two vehicles packed with German troops hurtled through the lines and away before anyone realised what was happening. This was not the last excitement for 'Met Column' during their period of occupation at Gambut. A few days later three motor cars were spotted on the far side of the airfield. The Metcalfe's men had no armoured cars with which to investigate the visitors and as the latter appeared to be behaving suspiciously Taylor's anti-tank gunners decided to open fire. The vehicles disappeared rapidly and the mystery of their identity was only solved two days later when a patrol located them in the Sidi Rezegh area. The occupants were American war correspondents who had been very badly shaken by their Gambut experience, for they had seen the tracer heads of the anti-tank shells miss one vehicle by only two feet.

While the Royal Durban Light Infantry were settling in at Gambut on the 8th the main column had lost no time. Blake's force had been reinforced by the troops of New Zealand Divisional Cavalry which had come to Gambut with 'Mac Column', and now had a full squadron of Bren-carriers under command. 'A' and 'B' Companies, Imperial Light Horse moved out on their first sweeps eastwards and at 1610 hrs patrols from 'B' Company saw an enemy tank moving along the wadis towards

the coast. Capt R. E. Bodley, commanding 'B' Company, decided to follow the tank, which led the patrol to a wadi containing about 15 tanks and 30 other vehicles. Capt Bodley went forward himself to make a personal reconnaissance with a Bren-carrier from the Divisional Cavalry, and accompanied by the two anti-tank guns of E Troop. The 2-pdrs were brought into action at about 1 000 yards and immediately drew fire from the 6-pdrs of the enemy tanks. Capt Bodley then withdrew his Company about 1 000 yards and reported to Lt-Col Blake by wireless.

Maj S. B. Gedye with 'A' Company, Imperial Light Horse was then sent to the east of Bodley's position with three New Zealand Bren-carriers. In a wadi there he found another 15 tanks, and Lt-Col Blake decided to mount an attack as soon as reinforcements could be brought up.

Since 5 December the carriers of the Divisional Cavalry, aided by two troops of D Battery 2 A/Tk had been sending mobile columns west of Bardia and on the 8th 'B' Squadron of the Divisional Cavalry, with M Troop, D Battery 2 A/Tk had been patrolling

the same area as Blake's force, though approaching it from the east, and had also spotted the enemy concentration.

By 1730 hrs 25-pdrs had also been borrowed from 'Mac Column' at Gambut and Brigade had been asked to provide air and extra artillery support. These were expected in the morning and meanwhile a section of B Company was left in position to maintain contact with the enemy tanks through the night while the remainder of the force moved up to leager south west of Halfway House.

Visibility was very bad, as a dust storm swept over the area, and the force did not leager until very late, to spend a cold and unpleasant night under the imminent threat of an attack by enemy armour.

Early next morning the Divisional Cavalry's A and C Squadron arrived with M and O Troops of 2 A/Tk's D Battery, to add their weight to the attack, and at 0800 hrs 'Mac Column' under Maj Sawyer joined forces with Lt-Col Blake's men, bringing G Troop of B Battery 2 A/Tk with them. At 0820 hrs 'A' and 'B' Companies were moved forward again with



A German tank workshop destroyed on 9 December 1941.

artillery and carriers in support to make contact with the enemy armour. As the company commanders felt their way around the enemy position a platoon from 'A' Company, Imperial Light Horse, was sent northwards along the enemy's wadi, and immediately drew heavy fire from the tanks, forcing it to go to ground. The 2-pdrs were now brought into action and their fire was augmented with heavy rifle and machine gun-fire. The Germans now evidently concluded that the surrounding force was a more substantial one than they could cope with for they began to destroy their own tanks, and a large number of heavy explosions were seen. Blake's force was now closing in very rapidly, and the Germans began to break away westwards. Some were intercepted and 1 officer and 22 men were taken prisoner. Of the enemy tanks, only one managed to break through the encirclement, and this made off to the west. The remaining tanks were now destroyed by fire by the Imperial Light Horse, bringing the total destroyed in this engagement to 38. The large quantities of spares, stores, equipment and fuel indicated that Blake's men had stumbled on a tank repair base. This explained the brevity of the resistance and although with hindsight the decision to complete the job of scuttling the tanks was regrettable, it seems that Lt-Col Blake did not know that the Germans were unlikely to retake this particular area in the near future. Indeed, only that afternoon, Maj Genl de Villiers, who had arrived at 3 SA Brigade Headquarters, gave instructions that no equipment captured east of Tobruk was to be destroyed in future. At all events the South Africans had had a most successful baptism of fire, for their victory had been achieved without loss.

On the same morning as Lt Col Blake's force were attacking the tank workshops, Maj Genl de Villiers, at 3 SA Brigade Headquarters, was urging his commanders to prosecute their offensive more aggressively.

Maj Wepener's force had returned to Menastir from Tobruk, escorting survivors of the battered New Zealand Division to the Egyptian frontier, and a new 'Vic Column' was now sent out. Maj Wepener's new column would include two 2-pdrs of E Troop B Battery 2 A/Tk under Lt R. J. Robinson. Their task would be to clear the Marsa Lucch area, some ten miles eastwards from where Blake's

force had located the tank workshop. Although no enemy were encountered by 'Vic Column' at Marsa Lucch, Maj Wepener's and Lt Col Blake's forces continued to scout the coastal area for further detachments whose presence was still suspected, and at 1410 hrs on 10 December 'C' Company, Imperial Light Horse, located 3 enemy tanks with other vehicles and about 300 troops at Ras el Aora, seven miles east of Marsa Lucch, and requested reinforcement before attacking. The Regiment's 'B' Company was moved up in support and Lt-Col Blake decided to carry out an attack at 1700 hrs despite failing light. The supporting artillery opened the attack with a ten minute preparation and after only five minutes the enemy were seen to be withdrawing eastwards. The attack was pressed home rapidly and by nightfall the South Africans were in possession of a German orderly room which yielded a large store of enemy documents for transfer to Brigade Headquarters. The Imperial Light Horse had again had a bloodless victory, but escaping enemy vehicles ran into an ambush party of 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry at Menastir II and inflicted losses of 4 killed and 3 wounded before breaking away again.

Imperial Light Horse patrols continued to search the coast area with their anti-tank escorts for the next few days. More prisoners were taken on the 10th and three Australian sailors, survivors of **HMAS Ballara** were picked up. These sailors had been hidden from the enemy by friendly Libyan Sanusi tribesmen, and spoke very highly of the care they had received from their rescuers. By the 12th the columns had reached the area of Menastir II where they came across numerous abandoned enemy transport, motor-cycles and two anti-tank guns. These were probably the property of the force which had clashed with the Royal Durban Light Infantry, the owners having fled by foot to the temporary safety of Bardia. By 13 December Blake's men were all back at Menastir, preparing to patrol the Bardia defences. The sweeps along the coast had been remarkably successful for, in addition to the vehicles and equipment destroyed and captured, the combing of the rocks, caves and wadis had netted over two hundred prisoners, and the force had itself sustained no casualties throughout the operation.

Meanwhile 'Met Column', including B Troop

of A Battery was still at Gambut, maintaining its guard over the aerodrome and sending out occasional patrols. These were mainly in the nature of scrounging expeditions, for the column was by now very short of food. One such party under Lt Goodwin received a severe shock on the afternoon of the 12th when looking into a wadi on the coast near Marsa Balafarit. There they saw two German Tanks only fifteen yards away, with a group of eight enemy soldiers talking together. For two hours the patrol watched before returning to report to Maj Metcalfe. The Major was in something of a quandary, for his essential job was to defend Gambut and he did not know whether he should attack this position without reference to Brigade Headquarters.

Deciding to inform Brigade of his discovery, and having no code key, Maj Metcalfe decided to send the message in Zulu. This message and Brig Borain's reply have been reproduced elsewhere, but nowhere correctly, and it is worth a digression to reproduce the exchange in its definitive version, as recorded on the message pads of 3 Brigade Headquarters.

Maj Metcalfe's message, timed at 1950 hrs on 12 December was received as follows:

'Borneli shumi skelm ndawo mani hlanu hlanu mani mabili hlanu. Munya sparrow bona lungela. Na imoto ezinge. Cela ngena bulala kosasa koseni na half impi uwani.'

It should be mentioned that this is an example of fairly corrupt 'fanakalo' Zulu, but translated it reads:

'I saw fifteen skelms. Which place? Which five? Two fives. One sparrow can see very well. There are many motorcars. Ask to go in. Kill early tomorrow. . . . A with your half impi.'

From which, according to the Brigade message log, the following was understood:

'Observed 50 enemy at Pt 455425. One tk [sparrow was the code for tank] seen alright. Lots of MT. Can I attack tomorrow early with half my force.'

In answer to this, imperfectly understood, message Brig Borain sent the reply:

'Kulungile hamba aba bulala.',
meaning:

'Its alright to go and kill.'

At first light on the 13th Metcalfe left half a platoon and the anti-aircraft guns in defence of Gambut while he set out with the remainder of his company and TSM Taylor's four 2-pdrs from A Battery. There was no sign of the enemy at the wadi where they had been seen the previous day, but a German despatch rider appeared briefly and quickly made his escape, having seen the anti-tank guns. The motor cyclist led Metcalfe's force to another wadi where there were two enemy tanks but no soldiers. The 2-pdrs were put in a position overlooking the tanks and covered by the infantry, and one gun was sent into the wadi with Lt Goodwin as a passenger. Goodwin instructed the gunners to fire a shell into a cave only 200 yards distant. After a second round had exploded in the cave's mouth Germans poured from caves and dugouts all around the wadi. The enemy troops were quickly rounded up and loaded into trucks for transport to Gambut, there were 115 of them. Just as welcome to the South Africans was the huge haul of food and wine which they uncovered and carried off. The anti-tank gunners were particularly fortunate in that they were able to load an ample share of loot on to their portees.

The areas immediately to the west of Bardia had now been cleared and 2 SA Division could safely turn its attention to the seizure of the frontier defences.

Rommel Eludes 8 Army

Before returning to the operations against the frontier garrison's it would be as well to sketch briefly the course of events on the main battlefield to the west.

On 9 December, with Rommel pulling back from Tobruk, an adjustment was made in the functions of the two British Corps. XIII Corps, with 7 Armoured Division and 4 Indian Division, was to attempt to destroy the main enemy force while XXX Corps was to take over control of operation to destroy any enemy still resisting to the east of Tobruk. An attempt by Godwin-Austen, commanding XIII Corps, to outflank the Germans in the Gazala position, ended in failure and Rommel was able to break off the battle success-

fully on the night of 16/17 December to make his way to Mechili and Derna. On 17 December another British flanking move forced a further withdrawal to Benghazi and Agedabia, but Ritchie would have preferred a decisive engagement to a pursuit, however extensive. It was in Ritchie's interests to fight the 'final' battle as near to Egypt as possible, for this would enable him to supply a larger force in the field than he could support in Western Cyrenaica. On 24 December Benghazi was taken, but the harbour was badly damaged and would be of little use as a supply point for some time.

Heavy losses were being inflicted on the retreating Axis transports and the German and Italian air forces were being pushed off the valuable airfields of 'the Bulge', between Tmimi and Agedabia. But while the Desert Air Force caused losses, the gallant efforts of the Jock columns had little chance of damaging the still intact formations of Rommel's army. On 27 December Crüwell exploited a gap between the British 22 Armoured Brigade and 22 Guards Brigade and inflicted severe losses in the former. Another attack on 30 December forced the Armoured Brigade to withdraw for a refit, and Rommel was able to pull back his forces unmolested between 1 and 6 January 1942, to make a defence along a line stretching south from El Agheila.

The Frontier Again

As has been mentioned, one of the main imperatives for the reduction of the Axis positions on the frontier was the supply position which became increasingly acute as the main army moved west. To enable operations to continue beyond Benghazi it was essential that the railway be extended seventy miles westwards from Misheifa, to Fort Capuzzo. This would halve the mileage of lorried convoys to Tobruk and would enable them to use the Via Balbia and Trigh Capuzzo, instead of the ruinous desert tracks which bypassed the frontier posts. The opening of this shorter route was obviously a matter of great urgency and the commander of 8 Army soon began to urge this enterprise forward.

On 7 December Ritchie instructed Maj Genl de Villiers to begin his mopping up of the Axis frontier positions by moving against

Cova, the post immediately north east of Sidi Omar. He urged de Villiers to avoid heavy casualties and was optimistic that the fall of some of the garrisons might be affected by simply cutting off supplies of food and water which were coming from Bardia.

While 3 SA Infantry Brigade had been isolating Bardia from the west, since 5 December 6 SA Infantry Brigade was gradually closing in on the enemy still occupying the Sollum-Halfaya area.

On 7 December a troop of 25-pdrs from 2 Field Regiment SAA was detached with a Troop of A Battery 2 A/Tk as anti-tank protection to join Maj Henderson's Squadron of 6 SA Armoured Car Regiment in an aggressive reconnaissance of the line from Ghot Adhidi-ba through Point 207 to Abar Abu Talaq. Major Sired, commanding the artillery group, sent back some particularly useful information to Divisional Headquarters on the whereabouts of enemy batteries. Now the South African artillery began to concentrate on the eastern frontier positions of Cova, Bir Ghirba and D'Avanzo, and between 10 and 12 December the enemy evacuated these positions. 2 SA Division's success here had the immediate result, however, of providing reinforcements for the remaining positions centring on Point 207, Faltenbacher and Halfaya, and this consequently strengthened the enemy hold on the vital pass at Halfaya.

Now the South Africans took over the line interposed between Bardia and the positions along the frontier from Bir Ghirba to Sollum and Halfaya. On the morning of 9 December, 5 New Zealand Brigade pulled out of their positions preparatory to moving west to re-join the main battle although their Divisional Cavalry remained on loan to the South Africans; in their place Genl de Villiers put 'Comgroup', under Col J. O. Henrey. 'Comgroup' was a composite brigade group formed from elements of 6 SA Infantry Brigade and including 1 Rand Light Infantry, 2 Transvaal Scottish and, among its supporting artillery C Battery 2 A/Tk, which had previously aided the New Zealands during their tenancy of the line. 'Comgroup's main work was to contain the enemy south of their line from Bir Hafid to Sollum Barracks and to prevent supply columns from Bardia from reaching these forces. In addition to this Col Henrey was



Bardia.

instructed to destroy supply and maintenance installations or other isolated Axis forces found in his general area. C Battery's part in this was to provide defence against such tanks as might have found their way into the frontier garrisons during Rommel's late push to the wire.

On 12 December 'Comgroup' was reinforced by the arrival of 1 South African Police, and the next day D'Avanzo was occupied by South African troops, who used the new position to intensify fire on Point 207.

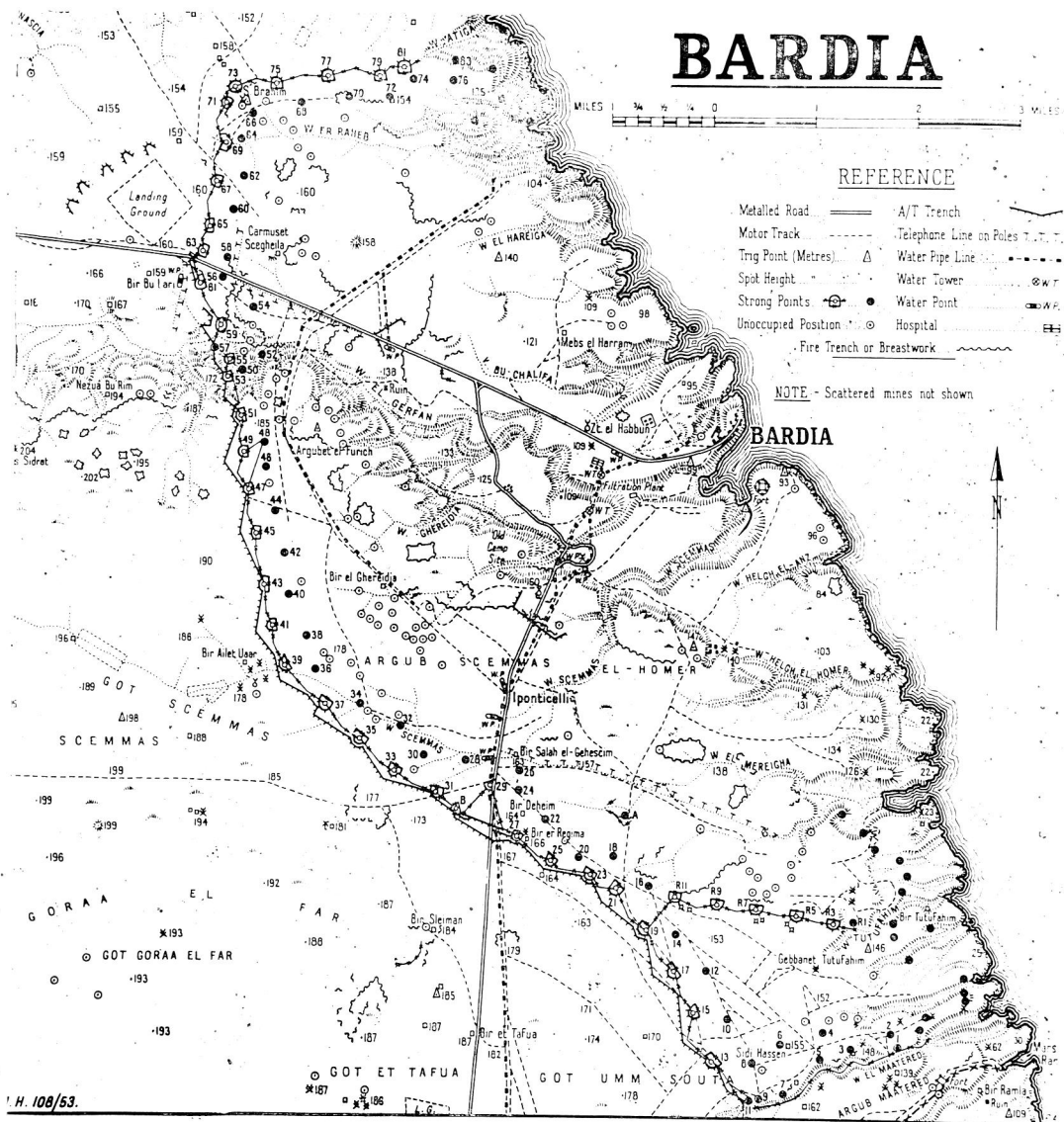
While 6 SA Infantry Brigade was moving in on Sollum and Halfaya the Divisional front to the west was protected by patrols of 7 South African Armoured Recce Battalion, operating between Omar Nuovo and Bir Hafid. Anti-tank defence for the Omars was still being provided by three troops of A Battery and N and P Troops of D Battery 2 A/Tk.

Advance Headquarters of 2 A/Tk moved out of the Omars on 12 December with 2 SA Division Advanced Headquarters, to Bir Hafid, in closer touch with the besieging forces. To

the south, A Troop of A Battery 2 A/Tk had been providing anti-tank protection to 67 Medium Regiment RA, now operating against Got Adhidiba from the area of Abu Shalif. This sector was reinforced by the arrival of Die Middellandse Regiment, and on 15 December, 2 Royal Durban Light Infantry was ordered to this part of the front from 4 SA Infantry Brigade, the leading units of which had arrived at the frontier on the previous day. Meanwhile, further to the east the element of 2 SA Infantry Brigade were using their artillery against Halfaya Pass. The forces around Halfaya and Sollum were thus steadily increasing in strength.

Bardia: Dingaans Day 1941

The first determined blow however, was to be struck against Bardia, and for this purpose 1 Rand Light Infantry reverted to 3 SA Infantry Brigade command on 14 December and moved northward from Capuzzo. The first Brigade order for the attack was issued on the afternoon of 15 December, with zero



hour scheduled for 0630 hrs next day. In addition to the troops of 3 SA Brigade three troops from B Battery 2 A/Tk were to participate. The essence of the plan to capture Bardia was for 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry to penetrate from the north and 1 Rand Light Infantry from the south, while elements of Die Middellandse Regiment and 7 SA Recce Battalion, under Lt Col W. L. Kingwill, staged a demonstration from the west. This latter force, known as Kingforce also included G Troop of B Battery 2 A/Tk. B Battery's F Troop would provide anti-tank protection to the guns of 68 Medium Regiment, RA and a battery of 1 Field Regiment, SAA at Point 212, Bir Bel Chonfus, as part of Maj Burton's 'Burtforce' firing at Bardia's defences, while E Troop was with the Reserve Group, which consisted mainly of 1 Im-

perial Light Horse. This adequately describes 2 A/Tk's part in the plans for the first attack on Bardia, which is perhaps just as well in the light of events.

The plan for the Dingaans' Day attack on Bardia was not a well-conceived one. Ritchie's optimistic disposition had led him to believe that de Villiers' troops could quite possibly capture Bardia with little more than strong fighting patrols and infiltration. The fortifications of Bardia had been developed steadily for nearly six years and were accordingly formidable; yet 3 SA Brigade had managed very little preliminary patrolling and had little idea of the defensive layout of Bardia or of the number of the defenders.

Divisional Intelligence put the garrison at about 2 500 men; it was in fact nearer to

8 800. There was no reliable information about either the enemy's artillery or armour. This was the position which 3 SA Brigade, still inexperienced in serious fighting, was to infiltrate, from two widely separated directions and with its supporting artillery scattered around a wide front. That 1 Rand Light Infantry's thrust from the south failed without casualties being sustained was little short of miraculous in the face of the fire they encountered. To the north, 1 Royal Durban Light's Infantry's attack was less fortunate: by the time the operation was abandoned, on the afternoon of 17 December, this battalion had lost 21 killed and 32 wounded.

Q Troop

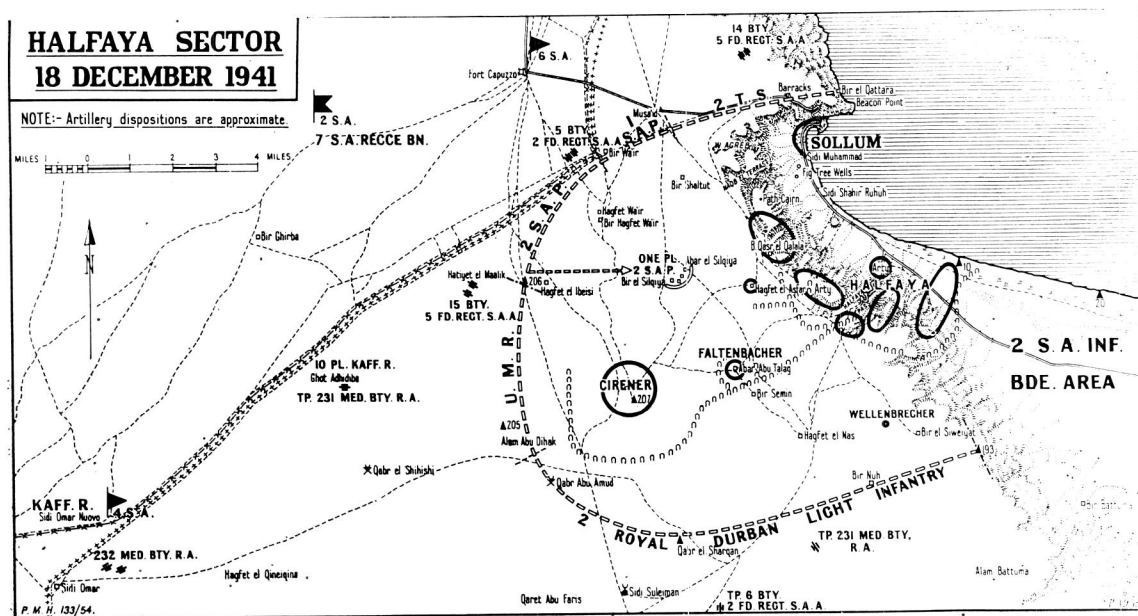
While 3 SA Brigade was attacking at Bardia, 4 and 6 SA Brigades continued to mask the Sollum-Halfaya sector. Nothing particularly noteworthy was happening but on 14 December Lt Col Parkin, OC of 2 A/Tk, had told Maj Tuttle, commanding A Battery, to send the four Italian 75 mm guns captured by the Indians at the Omars to Bir Hafid. They would be manned by men drawn from the 18-pdr troops of A and D Batteries, currently inactive at Omar Nuovo, and would aid the artillery bombarding Point 207. This move was delayed by dust storms and it was only on 17 December that Lt Masterax, from A Battery, had positioned his guns; on 18 December the new zone was registered. On that first day a large fire was started in the enemy lines and this scratch troop, later

christened Q Troop, was able to continue firing at night. For the next ten days the captured guns continued to shoot at Point 207 expending some 4 000 rounds in all. A few days after starting the crews of Q Troop were replaced by men from Regimental Headquarters, cooks and clerks included, who evidently enjoyed this more violent role. A Battery's A Troop was still with 4 SA Brigade to the south near Abu Shalif where it was joined shortly by C Troop. After the failure at Bardia, both patrolling and artillery bombardment were increased.

2 A/Tk was little involved in this work however, except for providing anti-tank protection to the various medium and field batteries to guard against the unlikely event of an attack by armour. D Battery continued its task of escorting the patrols sent along the perimeter west of Bardia by the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, while G Troop of B Battery operate with 'Kingforce' in the same area.

Alarums and Excursions

By 18 December 2, 4 and 6 SA Brigades were in positions right round Halfaya, Sollum, Point 207 (Cirener) and Faltenbacher (Abar Abu Talaq). In addition to constant patrols and heavy shelling there were a few clashes as South African forces closed in; one of the earliest of these involved a two gun section from 2 A/Tk.



On 18 December a patrol of 6 SA Armoured Car Regiment was fired on from an outpost south of Point 207. This post was also being used to direct artillery fire on a South African observation post and a patrol from 2 Royal Durban Light Infantry under Lt G. S. Anderson was ordered to eliminate it. After making a reconnaissance that night, Anderson led his platoon the next day to seize the position, which they did after killing seven Italians and capturing twelve. Anderson's platoon now came under heavy machine-gun fire from Point 207 and in the afternoon was repeatedly attacked by four Italian light tanks and a captured British Matilda tank, although these were fortunately prevented from pressing home their attacks by the defensive minefields. In order to aid Anderson's escape from this predicament two 2-pdrs on portees from C Troop A Battery 2 A/Tk were ordered forward under Sgt C. Swart, with three armoured cars of 6 SA Armoured Car Regiment. The gallant handling of the guns and armoured vehicles forced the enemy to pull back their own armour to a discreet distance. Even this did not prevent the 2-pdrs from scoring hits with some of the 100 or so shells they fired. One Italian tank was put out of action and abandoned by its crew, but the thick armour of the Matilda prevented serious damage despite some twenty hits, many of which had admittedly been at extreme range. As the afternoon wore on the fire from Point 207 became increasingly severe and the portees and armoured cars concentrated on evacuating Anderson's wounded. After destroying the weapons in the enemy position Anderson retired under cover of darkness. For his gallant leadership he was awarded the Military Cross while Pte D. B. Clark also of the Royal Durban Light Infantry, won the Military Medal. Sgt C. 'Bokkie' Clark's actions on this occasion contributed to his winning the Distinguished Conduct Medal after his further gallantry at Msus later in January 1942.

Also on 18 December a patrol from 2 South African Police operating north west of Point 207 discovered wells near Bir es Silqiya, containing upwards of 60 000 gallons of water. A platoon sent out under Lt Coryndon-Baker to deny their use to the enemy came under immediate shellfire, which continued for the next four days. Reinforcements were sent to Coryndon-Baker's aid, including K Troop of

C Battery 2 A/Tk under TSM Vic Schwegman. On 24 December the enemy intensified their efforts to retake the wells at Silqiya, beginning with a heavy bombardment at 0700 hrs. This was followed by an attack by four Italian tanks and the captured Matilda, the same that had attacked Anderson's platoon five days previously; now however they were supported by lorried infantry. Schwegman had his troop hold their fire until the Matilda was within 300 yards range.

As the heavily armoured tank approached, some thirty to forty hits were scored, some at a range of only 75 yards, without immobilising the vehicle, although the latter made off towards Point 207, to be abandoned before gaining the enemy lines. In engaging the heavy tank the 2-pdr teams had been compelled to expose their backs to machine-gun fire from the light tanks and once the Matilda had retreated were able to turn quickly on their erstwhile tormentors. The four Italian tanks were knocked out with only seven rounds, and thereupon the enemy infantry withdrew. Then with machine-gun fire from Point 207 sweeping the ground Schwegman and Sgt C. F. Meyer rushed out in an attempt to save a wounded Italian trapped in one of the tanks. The man unfortunately died after being rescued from the burning hulk. For his part in this successful encounter, which lasted only fifteen minutes, TSM Schwegman was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Christmas 1941, Western Desert

By 20 December de Giorgis's garrison was in desperate straits, while at Bardia morale remained high, for limited supplies continued to arrive by sea. By the 20th however, Rommel had decided that the eventual capitulation of the frontier fortress was only a matter of time and that their defence had delayed XXX Corps for as long as could reasonably be expected of them. He therefore asked the Italian Navy to evacuate the garrisons to Crete and, when this request was refused as too dangerous, he gave Genl Schmitt, commanding at Bardia, permission to surrender. Schmitt refused to accept defeat yet, asking Rommel for further supplies and for additional artillery with which, he believed, the frontier positions could hold out for another three or four months.

Ritchie meanwhile was becoming impatient to clear his shortest supply route and use the virtually unscathed 2 SA Division for his operations in the west. On 19 December he told Genl Norrie of XXX Corps that the enemy positions on the border must be secured by 29 December. De Villiers was told therefore to produce plans to reduce Bardia, Halfaya and Sollum by that date at the latest. The Division would be reinforced by 1 Army Tank Brigade for the purpose of reducing the enemy positions as quickly as possible.

On 2 A/Tk's first Christmas on overseas service Lt Col Parkin visited all the batteries of his Regiment and Capt Daneel held services at the gun positions, even coming under fire on one occasion. That day three troop carriers arrived from Tobruk bringing 384 sacks of parcels for 2 A/Tk. Every man in the regiment received beer, lemonade, cigarettes and sweets which had been provided from contributions sent by friends and relatives of the unit in South Africa.

2 A/Tk's celebrations formed a sharp contrast with the desperate strait of de Giorgis's garrison, for the latter, harassed by South African artillery fire and constant offensive patrolling, were suffering from a worsening shortage of food and ammunition. Nevertheless the Italian commander was determined to continue his resistance for as long as possible and the last week in December provided a brief respite as the South African forces besieging Sollum and Halfaya were thinned out to provide forces to attack Bardia.

Plans for a Battle

While haste was the keynote of Ritchie's instructions de Villiers was also told to keep casualties to an absolute minimum, evidently because of the difficulty of obtaining South Africa reinforcements should the Division suffer any great losses. By 23 December de Villiers had presented his plans for an attack on Bardia to his brigade commanders; the 29th was set as the date for the assault, but the artillery required more time to prepare and the operation was subsequently postponed until the 31st. This delayed the attack for longer than Ritchie had wanted, but the South African commander was obviously intent firstly on not wasting men and secondly on providing sufficient time for the attack

to be planned, rehearsed and for reconnaissances to be made. The debacle of 16 December had provided a salutary lesson against rushing things, and it was important not to take unnecessary risks in an operation where the infantry battalions would be co-operating with tanks for the first time.

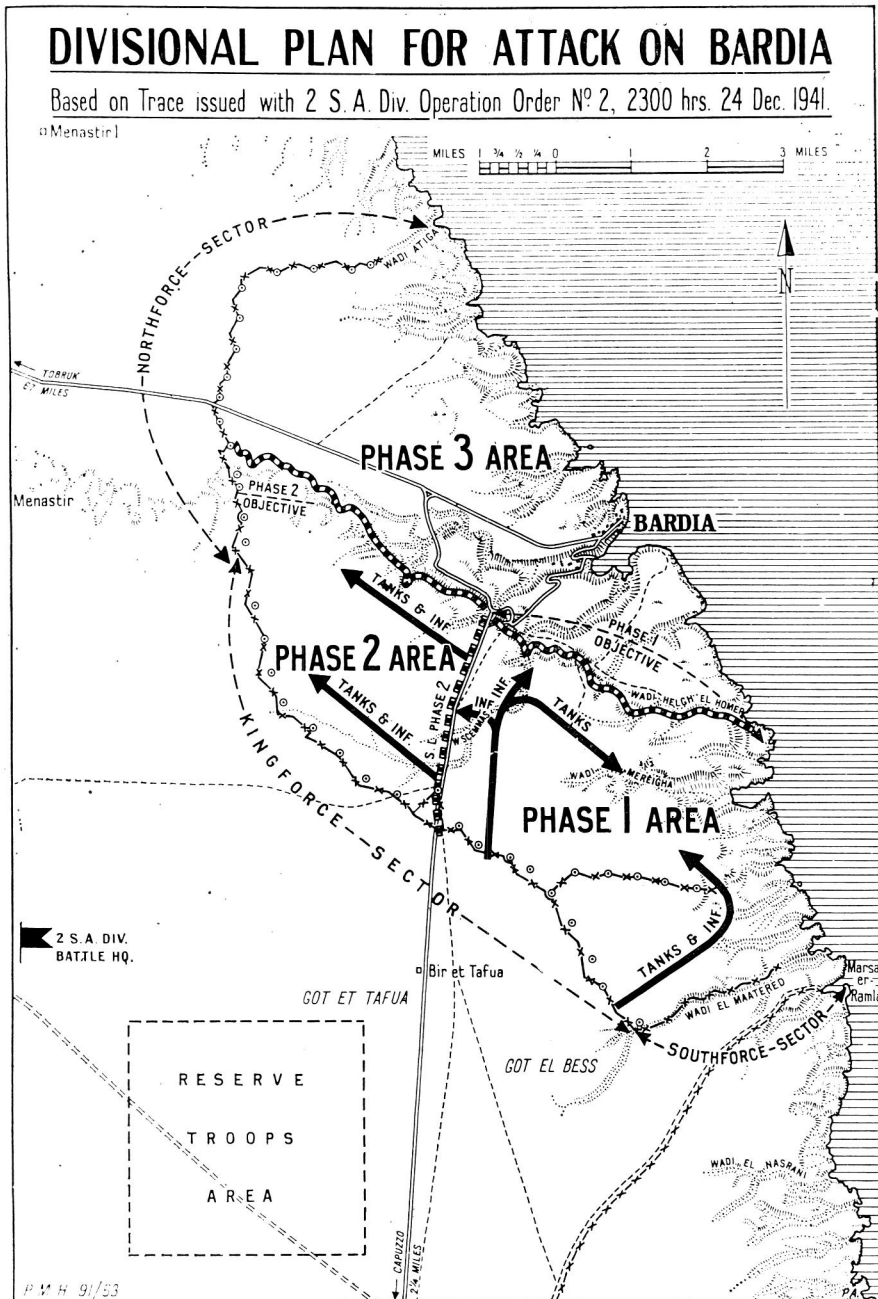
The attack on Bardia was to be in three phases. Phase 1 was the responsibility of 3 SA Brigade, which was to penetrate the Bardia defences in two places south-east of the Capuzzo-Bardia road.

After gaps had been made in the wire, 1 Army Tank Brigade, partially supported by infantry, was to move through and secure the area beyond the perimeter defences. The infantry would consist of 1 Imperial Light Horse, the Rand Light Infantry and The Kaffrarian Rifles, the latter supported by three troops of 2 A/Tk under the command of Maj Tuttle of A Battery. The Kaffrarian Rifles with the support of two platoons of Die Middellandse Regiment and these twelve 2-pdr guns would establish the western flank of the captured area during Phase 1.

For his part in this job Maj Tuttle had B Troop of A Battery, under TSM Taylor, TSM Hooper's J Troop of C Battery, and TSM Fowler's O Troop from D Battery.

In Phase 2,1 South African Police and The Kaffrarian Rifles would advance north-west from the Capuzzo-Bardia road and establish a line linking with that formed in Phase 1 and giving the South Africans control of that section of the Bardia defences above the escarpment. Phase 3 would complete the seizure of the fortress.

While the main assault was being prepared and made, other forces were to maintain a tight hold on the defences beginning in the morning of 26 December. In the northern sector was 'Northforce', consisting mainly of 1 Royal Durban Light Infantry and supported by the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, with M and N Troops of D Battery 2 A/Tk. 'Kingforce' and 'Southforce' completed the net around Bardia. Some 32 medium and 104 field guns were to provide support for the attacking infantry. The artillery was placed in three groups named after their commanders: Du Toit; Sherwell and Dimoline. In the latter group P Troop of D Battery 2 A/Tk, with its 18-pdrs, provided anti-tank protec-

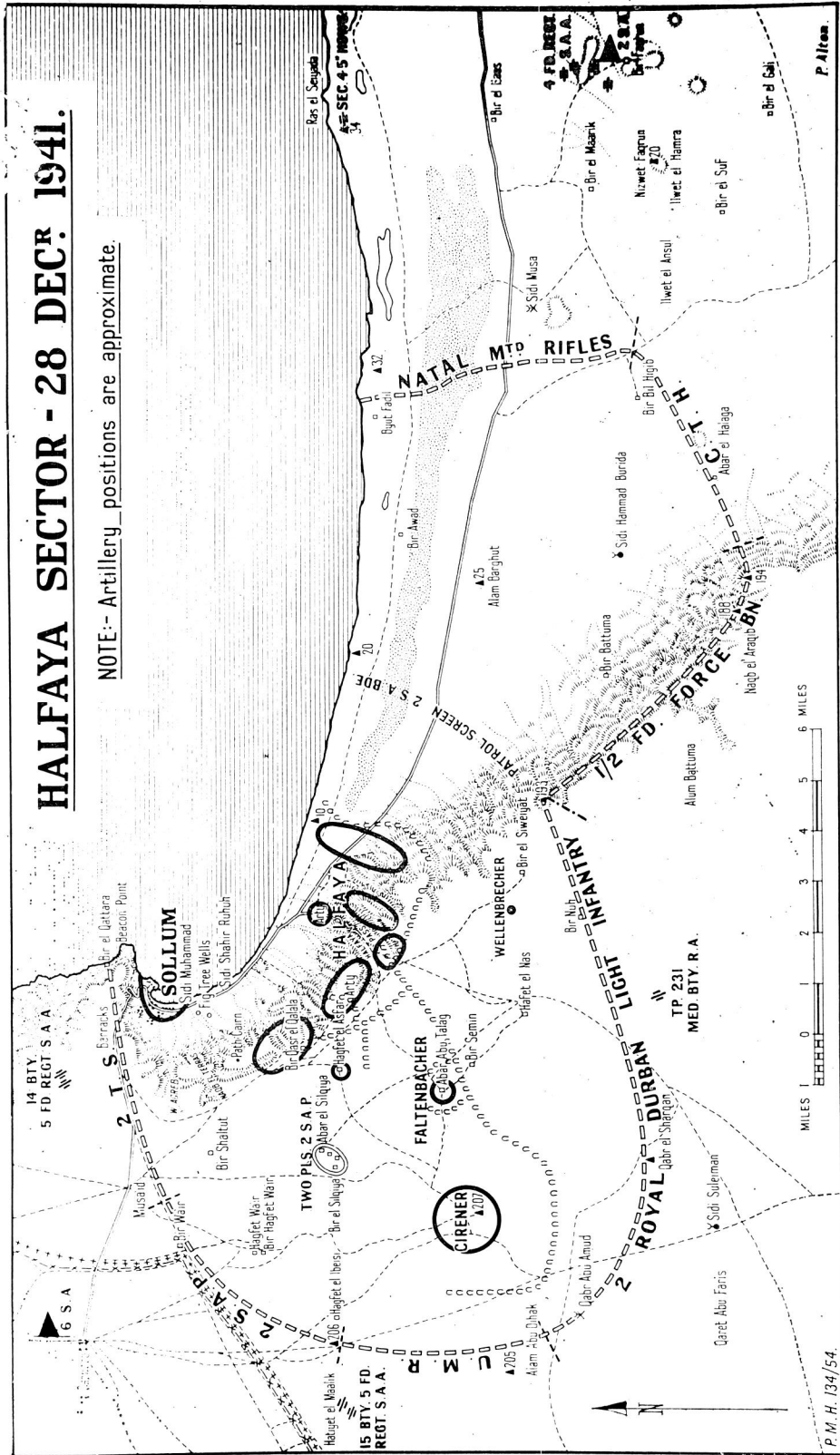


tion for 211 Medium Battery RA, H Troop from B Battery was with 253 Medium Battery RA and 2 captured 50 mm guns were provided for 234 Medium Battery by D Battery RA and 2 captured 50 mm guns were situated with the Division's mobile reserve near Battle Headquarters.

2 SA Division's plans were prepared in great detail, which tended in the event to demand too precise an adherence to lines and objectives. Plans of such intricacy could not really be expected to fit any situation far beyond the initial entry of the defence perim-

eter, especially as Intelligence persisted in underestimating the defending garrison by over 4 000 men. Nevertheless the advantage lay with the attackers, for Genl Schmitt's troop had to defend a perimeter some 17 miles long against a well-supplied and superior force which could choose its point of concentration.

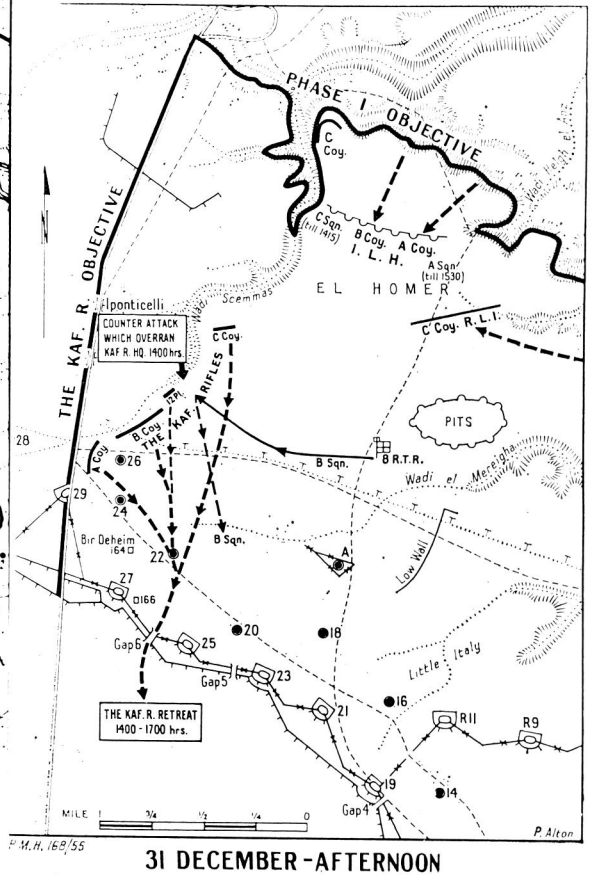
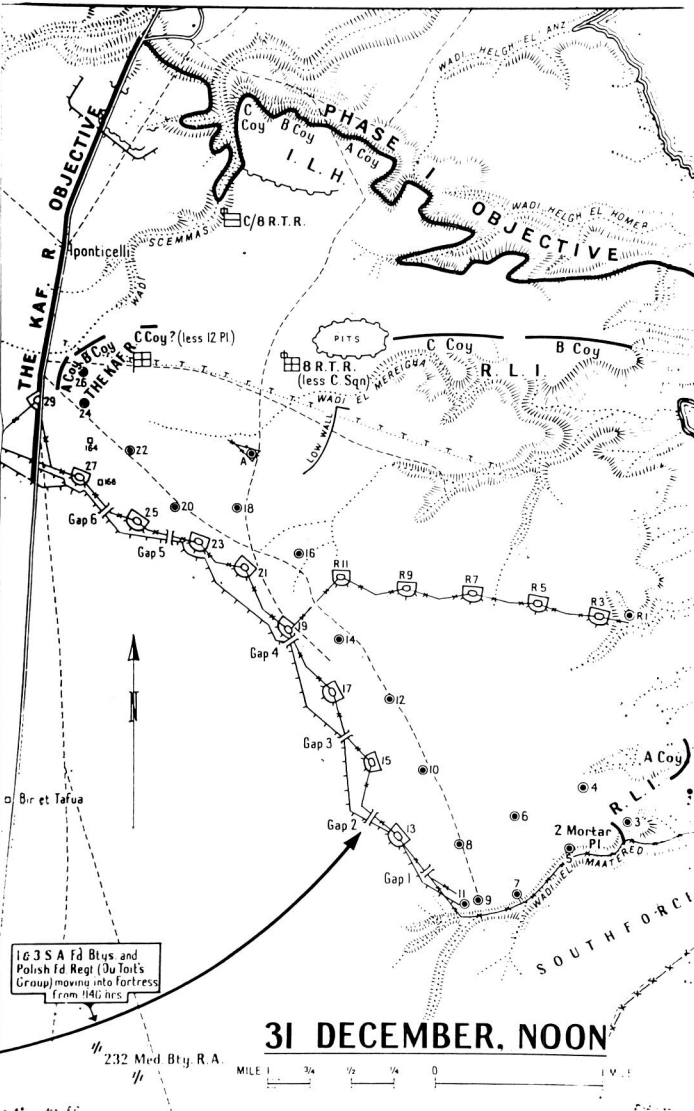
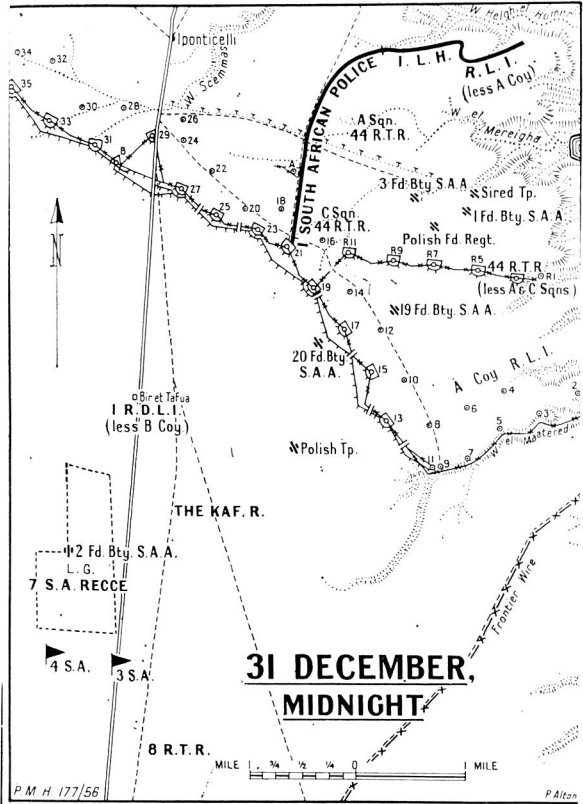
To further complicate de Villiers's plans, verbal arrangements modifying the original and written orders were made by battalion commanders, intending thereby to improve co-ordination. Nevertheless, rehearsals went



fairly smoothly and the artillery began to pound the defences on one aided by the bombers of the Royal Air Force.

Second Bardia

At 1800 hrs on 30 December Maj Tuttle took his three troops of 2-pdrs forward to the assembly areas. He would retain B and J Troops with the Imperial Light Horse while Lt Wilson took O Troop to the Rand Light Infantry positions. Maj Tuttle left Lt Robinson in command of his two troops while he went forward to join Lt Col Blake at Imperial Light Horse Headquarters on the start line. At 0620 hrs gaps were blown in the wire, the artillery opened fire and the tanks went in. Maj Tuttle accompanied the infantry and

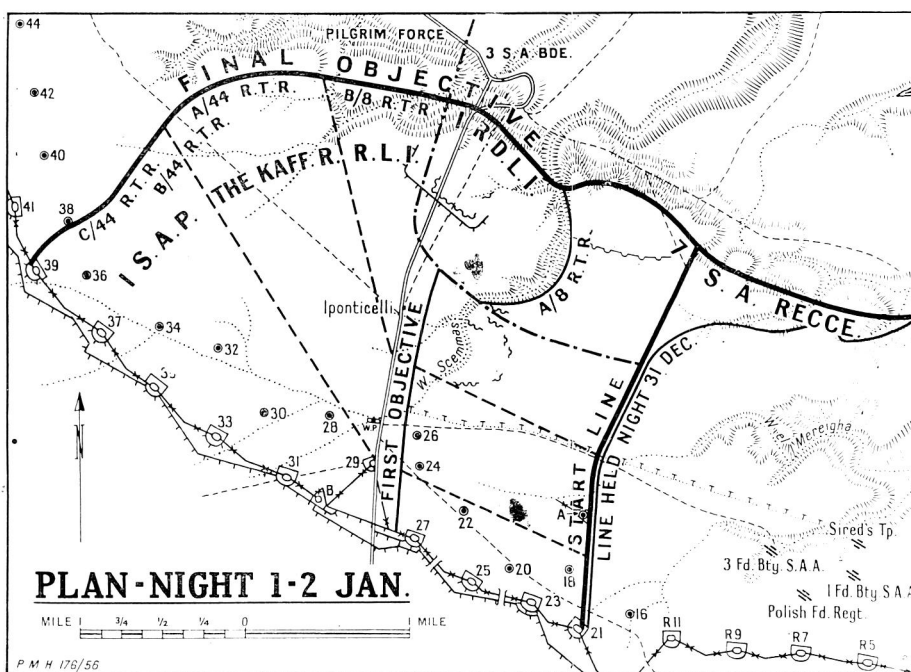


at first little opposition was encountered. Before long however the interdependant defence posts were taking their toll although it was only by afternoon that there was real cause for concern. On the left wing of the Imperial Light Horse a gap was opening between the unit and its flanking battalion, The Kaffrarian Rifles. This may have been caused by confusion over later verbal changes in orders, and certainly owed something to the unexpected difficulties provided by the Wadi Scemmas, which intelligence had underestimated. Maj Tuttle of 2 A/Tk went forward to Kaffrarian Rifles Headquarters to investigate the situation, portioning B Troop on their left flank. At about 1400 hours a sharp enemy counter-attack was launched on Kaffrarian Rifles and Maj Tuttle ordered B Troop to cover the subsequent withdrawal of the battalion, whose Headquarters staff had all been captured in the confusion.

The left flank of the Imperial Light Horse was now in mid-air and this battalion began to suffer heavily. To fill the gap 1 South African Police was rushed in from the reserve, with Maj Chaplin's E and F Troops 2 A/Tk in attendance. These guns were immediately taken over by Maj Tuttle and moved to the support of the Imperial Light Horse, while O Troop moved across to aid the Police.

The first day of the new year saw the South Africans trying to straighten their line for a was resumed on the night of 1/2 January, the anti-tank guns were moved forward to provide close support to the advancing infantry. Fortunately the Regiment sustained only one further casualty, a gunner in B fresh push into the Bardia defences. The situation was still confused however and at first light on 1 January 1942 Maj Chaplin of B Battery moved off with a small reconnaissance party to seek information about the role they would be expected to fill. By 0900 hrs disaster had overtaken this group, Lt du Preez had been wounded and he, Maj Chaplin and four other ranks captured, with their two 8-cwt trucks and all their equipment. The Battery's E and F Troops sat out most of the remainder of the day at their rendezvous.

In support of the South African Police still, Bdr Bacon and Bdr Taylor from O Troop ran their guns forward to drive the enemy from a strongpoint which was holding up the infantry. TSM Fowler and Sgt Layman meanwhile, managed to get a captured 88 mm gun operating, and used it to some effect to silence another post. When the main assault Battery being slightly wounded when his portee was struck by an enemy anti-tank shell.





Allied prisoners of war released at the capture of Bardia.

By the morning of 2 January Genl Schmitt had realised that further resistance was hopeless and surrendered his garrison. The Allies total losses during the second battle for Bardia had been heavy, 9 officers and 130 men killed and 22 officers and 273 men wounded. Nevertheless nearly 8 000 enemy soldiers were captured and over 1 000 Allied prisoners released, including the six men captured only 24 hours earlier from 2 A/Tk Regiment.

Mopping Up

The New Year heralded several changes for 2 A/Tk Regiment. Firstly, in accordance with a new policy of battery designation for units of the South African Artillery, numbers were to replace the batteries' letter designations. Thus, with effect from 1 January:

- A Battery became 5 A/Tk Battery
- B Battery became 6 A/Tk Battery
- C Battery became 7 A/Tk Battery
- D Battery became 8 A/Tk Battery.

The fall of Bardia did not, of course, solve the problem of the 8 Army supply route, and

2 SA Division was now being pressed to capture Halfaya. Just as the South Africans began were preparing for this next stroke, orders arrived from 8 Army which removed 2 A/Tk from 2 SA Division and propelled them westwards, to the battle being fought by XIII Corps in western Cyrenaica. On the afternoon of 5 January Lt Col Parkin received orders for the larger part of 2 A/Tk Regiment to move to El Adem, where they would come under XIII Corps's command. Only the 18-pdr troops of 6 Battery and 7 Battery and the 2 50-mm guns of 8 Battery would remain at Capuzzo, under the command of Maj Hudson.

It would be as well therefore, to provide a brief sketch of events on the frontier during Maj Hudson's detachment's participation, before turning to the somewhat more dramatic events in which the main body of the Regiment was about to participate.

Economy was still the watchword in planning the reduction of the remaining enemy strongholds. The attempt was to be made to bring about de Giorgis's capitulation simply



Genl Schmitt on his way to captivity.

with heavy artillery fire and a tightening of the siege. Intensive artillery programmes were fired and offensive patrolling was carried out, gradually closing in on the Axis defences. During the whole of these operations Maj Hudson's guns provided anti-tank protection for 5 Field Regiment, SAA near Capuzzo and for 2 Field Regiment, SAA near Siweiyat.

On 9 January it was realised that the continued supply of de Giorgis's garrison from the air and sea was prolonging the defence indefinitely and it was decided to make a direct attack, to take Sollum and to invest the Halfaya Pass more closely. The attack was carried out on 11 and 12 January, and was eventually successful despite the valiant resistance of the Axis troops. The fall of Sollum deprived Halfaya, Faltenbacher and Cirener of their only outlet to the sea, and placed the main water supply at Fig Tree Wells virtually in South African hands. The artillery and aerial bombardment was intensi-

fied and on 16 January planning was begun for a further assault. In the event this was unnecessary, for de Giorgis, realising the hopelessness of the position, surrendered with more than 5 000 men.

The Crusader battle had ended at last. The Axis had lost 38 300 men of an army which had numbered 119 000 on 18 November 1941; the capture of the frontier garrison had yielded over 14 000 prisoners in all. Of the British forces numbering 118 000, 17 700 had become casualties, although losses in material had been higher. An exhausting, slogging match rather than a brilliantly conceived or executed rout, 'Crusader' had nevertheless been a victory, won with a courage and doggedness made all the more necessary by the absence of a sound body of British tactical doctrine and desert experience. Yet the achievements of Rommel's armour sounded a warning note of what was to come.