

2 ANTI-TANK REGIMENT, SAA - TANK AND ANTI-TANK IN THE WESTERN DESERT 1940-42

Recruitment and Training

The outbreak of war in September 1939 caught the UDF in a state of unpreparedness and it was not until March 1940 that the decision was taken to expand South Africa's Field Army Artillery to a proper war strength. The plan was to retain one battery of each type of gun at Potchefstroom and to send the remaining equipment to various centres where new ACF units could be established. Three batteries would be formed and trained on each type of equipment and would consist of 100 full-time volunteers per brigade, acting as a core, while the remainder of the personnel would be part-time volunteers.

Already in January 1940 some 175 citizens of Witbank had approached the Prime Minister with a request that the Transvaal Scottish recruiting area be extended to include their district so that they could join the Regiment's 3rd Battalion. Although the idea was approved by the CGS the authorities responsible for recruitment pointed out the confusion which could result if recruiting boundaries were encroached upon. The Adjutant General suggested instead that a field battery should be established at this centre, and trained on mortars for the time being. On 14 February this suggestion was passed on to the Magistrate at Witbank. A month later recruiting for a field battery was in full swing and preparations were made for the OC Voortrekkerhoogte and Transvaal Command to meet the Mayor of Witbank and the town's Recruiting Committee for the purpose of selecting officers for the unit.

On 17 April 1940 25 Field Battery SAA was officially established as an ACF unit, with effect from 1 April, and it was possible to proceed with the attestation of volunteers, and by 17 June when the unit was called up for full-time training at Potchefstroom its strength was one officer and 125 other ranks.

In Durban meanwhile 4 Light Brigade SAA was in the process of forming. Recruiting had begun on 1 May 1940 under the direc-

tion of Maj G. S. Ellis, MC. There was an immediate response, particularly from the Durban professional and business classes, and when the first voluntary parade was held, on 26 May, 300 men attended. On that same day four stripped 13 pdrs arrived from Potchefstroom and part-time training was started on 3 June. Four dummy guns and dial sights presented to the Brigade by local factories, speeded up matters and on 17 June training began on a full-time voluntary basis.

The newly established units of the SAA were being concentrated at Potchefstroom as quickly as shortages of equipment and accommodation allowed. 4 Light Brigade itself entered for Potchefstroom on 13 July 1940, with a strength of 3 officers and 480 other ranks. Here the unit was formally established under the command of Maj Ellis, and began training as a field brigade with 18 pdr guns and 3.5" howitzers.

A year or two before the war, the British Army had reorganised its Field Army Artillery on a regimental basis, abolishing the old artillery brigades and establishing regiments divided into batteries which were subdivided into troops. The South African command had considered the introduction of the same system but had rejected it for various reasons. The experience of the Royal Artillery in France and Belgium in 1940 had led to a re-organisation of field batteries in the British Army. For anti-tank regiments this meant a subdivision into four batteries of four troops, each of four guns, making 64 guns to a regiment. In December 1940 the South African CGS agreed in principle to the adoption of the Royal Artillery organisational pattern. The reorganisation saw 4 Light Brigade join with 25 Field Battery to become 2 Anti-Tank Regiment SAA, organised as follows:

- Regimental HQ — Light Brigade (Durban)
- A Battery — 10 Light Battery (Durban)
- B Battery — 11 Light Battery (Durban)
- C Battery — 12 Light Battery (Durban)
- D Battery — 25 Field Battery (Witbank)

2 Anti-Tank Regiment was formally established on 25 January 1941 under the command of Lt-Col W. M. P. Johnstone, DSU, VD.

The first months of 1941 were occupied with training, and various exercises were carried out with 2 SA Division in the Eastern Transvaal and the Kalahari Desert. By April the strength of the regiment was 24 officers and 596 other ranks, and on 8 May 1941 Lt-Col C. L. Parkin, MC, took over as OC 2 A/Tk Regiment.

Early in June 1941 orders were received for an advance party of 5 officers and 115 other ranks of 2 A/Tk to proceed to Egypt, under the command of Capt Hudson, OBE. This party formed part of the 2 SA Divisional Artillery advance party and entrained at Potchefstroom on 8 June 1941, the remainder of the Regiment following on 12 June. On 23 June the Regiment embarked at Durban aboard SS **Nieuw Zeeland** and Lt-Col Parkin had to act as OC Troopship. The convoy of which the troopship was part was escorted by HMS **Exeter**, of River Plate fame.

Arrival in Egypt

On 5 July the **Nieuw Zeeland** arrived at Aden to take on oil and fresh water, leaving next day and anchoring off Suez on the 9th. Two days later the regiment disembarked and was taken to Amiriya whence it moved to 2 SA Division's camp at Mareopolis. There intensive training began, with what equipment was available. A shortage of 2 pdr guns meant that one troop in each battery had to be equipped with 18 pdrs, which would be fired at tanks over open sights, and although 18 pdr ammunition was likely to be ineffective against tanks unless the shells actually hit the tracks, it would be useful against the 'soft' vehicles in armoured formations. From now until the summer of 1942, 2 A/Tk Regiment was part of the massive Allied force in the Western Desert, and if any sense is to be made of the unit's role in the campaign it is necessary to look at the overall position in that theatre. The Allied forces in Egypt were on the defensive by the time 2 SA Division arrived. On 15 June Wavell had launched his 'Battleaxe' offensive intending to reach and relieve Tobruk and exploit an Axis defeat



Genl Sir Claude Auchinleck (at right), C-in-C Middle East.

there if possible. The offensive failed, and a great deal of Allied armour was destroyed; Wavell could do nothing more for three months but station light forces near the Egyptian frontier while awaiting the enemy with the bulk of his troops at Mersa Matruh. It was at this juncture that Churchill decided to appoint Auchinleck in Wavell's place.

Auchinleck began at once reorganising and regrouping his formations. A pause was to be expected now as both sides made good their losses.

While at Mareopolis, Capt Hudson of 2 A/Tk sited the anti-tank defence positions along the 71 mile front of the Delta Defence Scheme. Finally, on 23 August orders arrived for 2 A/Tk to move up to El Alamein, where the unit occupied a forward defence position. Here defences were planned and prepared, close to the Mediterranean coast.

Soon Lt-Col Parkin received orders to collect transport, equipment and stores from Cairo, prior to moving up to the front. As it was impossible to secure the transport allocated by establishment, Lt-Col Parkin collected 3 ton trucks which were later exchanged with units in the line for the 8 and 15 cwt trucks required by 2 A/Tk.

'The Best Laid Plans . . .'

After he had dealt with Wavell's offensive, Rommel, recently appointed commander of **Panzergruppe Afrika**, had begun to make preparations for his own. His supply position was particularly serious, for British air and naval strikes in the Mediterranean were destroying a great deal of Axis shipping. Nevertheless it was Rommel's intention to reduce the isolated Allied fortress of Tobruk as soon as possible and his two German armoured divisions, the 15th and 21st were kept at training, with special emphasis on the use of their excellent 50 mm and 88 mm anti-tank weapons in close co-operation with armour and field artillery.

Wavell's assault had shown the problems which might be created if the British should launch an attack on the Cyrenaica frontier while the main Axis forces were engaged against Tobruk. Rommel therefore laid out an elaborate 25 mile line of prepared positions along the frontier from Sollum to Sidi Omar. This, it was hoped, would compel any

attacking force to either assault a strongly held line, or move inland into an area away from tracks and communications. The frontier line was held by the Italian Savona Division, strengthened by several German Oasis Companies and a substantial number of anti-tank guns, sited behind extensive minefields.

Meanwhile Auchinleck, Allied C-in-C Middle East, had told Lt Genl Cunningham, commanding 8 Army, to prepare a plan for the recapture of Cyrenaica, with the elimination of the Axis armour as the immediate objective. In essence Cunningham's plan was for XXX Corps, consisting of the bulk of his armour, to cross the undefended frontier between Sidi Omar and Fort Maddalena, before travelling north-west towards Tobruk. Thus he hoped to draw the enemy's armour into a destructive battle, so that once the Axis tanks had been destroyed the garrison of Tobruk could break out and join with XXX Corps to attack their erstwhile besiegers. Meanwhile XIII Corps would contain and envelop the enemy defences on the Egyptian frontier to prevent any interference with XXX Corps offensive, and would clear up the area between Bardia and Tobruk, before returning to reduce any pockets of resistance in the frontier area itself.

On 8 November Lt-Col Parkin reported to 4 Indian Division HQ for 2 A/Tk's instructions in the forthcoming offensive, for the Regiment was to be loaned to this Division as part of XIII Corps. As has been mentioned XIII Corps role centred on the enemy's frontier defences. As far as 4 Indian Division was concerned these amounted to two defended areas, one at Pt 207 which was also covered by defensive minefields mainly facing east, and one at Sidi Omar, with a lightly defended gap between the two points. 2 A/Tk's role was to provide anti-tank defence for 5 Indian Infantry Brigade in its position along the minefield between 'North Point' and 'Playground', facing the Axis defence line.

On 11 and 12 November Lt-Col Parkin and his officers made a detailed reconnaissance of the position and the Regiment packed its equipment rapidly in order to leave Alamein on 13 November. The night of 13 November was spent at Fuka, where the adjutant met the Regiment and guided it on to Kilo 58 on the Sidi Barrani road for the next night's halt. At dawn on the 15th the Regiment was split

into three groups: guns and fighting vehicles; Regimental HQ and wagon-lines; and B Echelon, the non-fighting part of the unit. On the night of 15/16 November the Regiment's gun groups moved through the minefields into their allocated positions in the 5 Indian Infantry Brigade area. C Battery less 2 troops occupied the so-called North Point, B Battery the 'Playground' while A and D Batteries were kept behind the minefields to the south west. Two troops of C Batteries were held in mobile service to the south and south-east of 'North Point'. Meanwhile RHQ and the battery wagon lines moved into Sofafi NW camp and B Echelon into Sofafi SW Camp. On 17 November the Regiment suffered its first casualties when the Quartermaster's party, coming up to RHQ, passed a burnt out aircraft at Kilo 91. A bomb aboard the aircraft exploded, killing one soldier and wounding two others.

The 'Crusader' offensive inaugurated a series of complex battles which raged intermittently over the next few months to cover an area of vast size. Observation and the possibility of attack from the air made it necessary for the opposing armies to avoid concentration while in movement, and this is one reason why the battles appear generally in the shape of a constant confusion of swirling movement. In order to describe 2 A/Tk's role in the offensive and to place it in perspective it

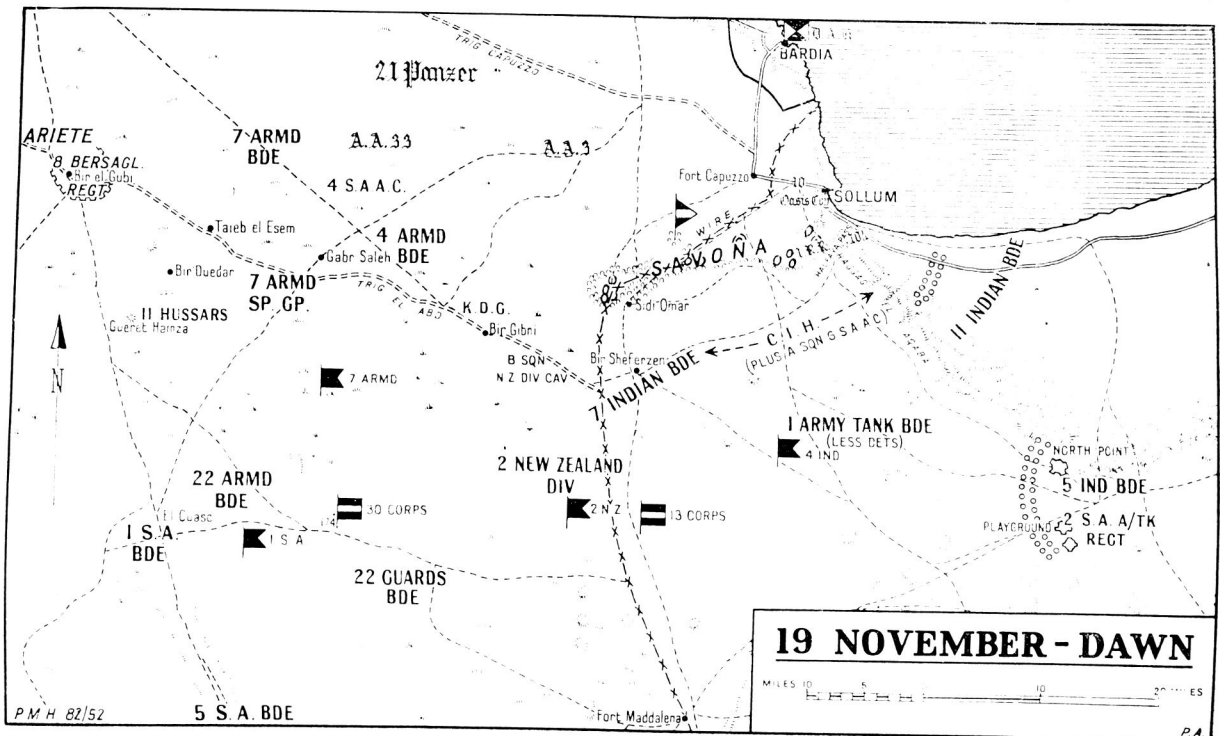
is necessary to refer at some length to the general progress of the Allied armies in the Western Desert.

'Crusader' Begins

The offensive began on 18 November with XXX Corps crossing the Libyan frontier and 7 Indian Brigade moving up to mask the enemy positions at Sidi Omar, 2 A/Tk, were not to be involved in any actual fighting for almost a week, for 5 Indian Infantry Brigade, to which the Regiment was attached, was responsible only for holding the line from Buq Buq southwards, and for covering the Allied base and the railhead at Misheifa. For 2 A/Tk the first days of the attack merely meant camouflaging gun positions and waiting for news of XXX Corps' push.

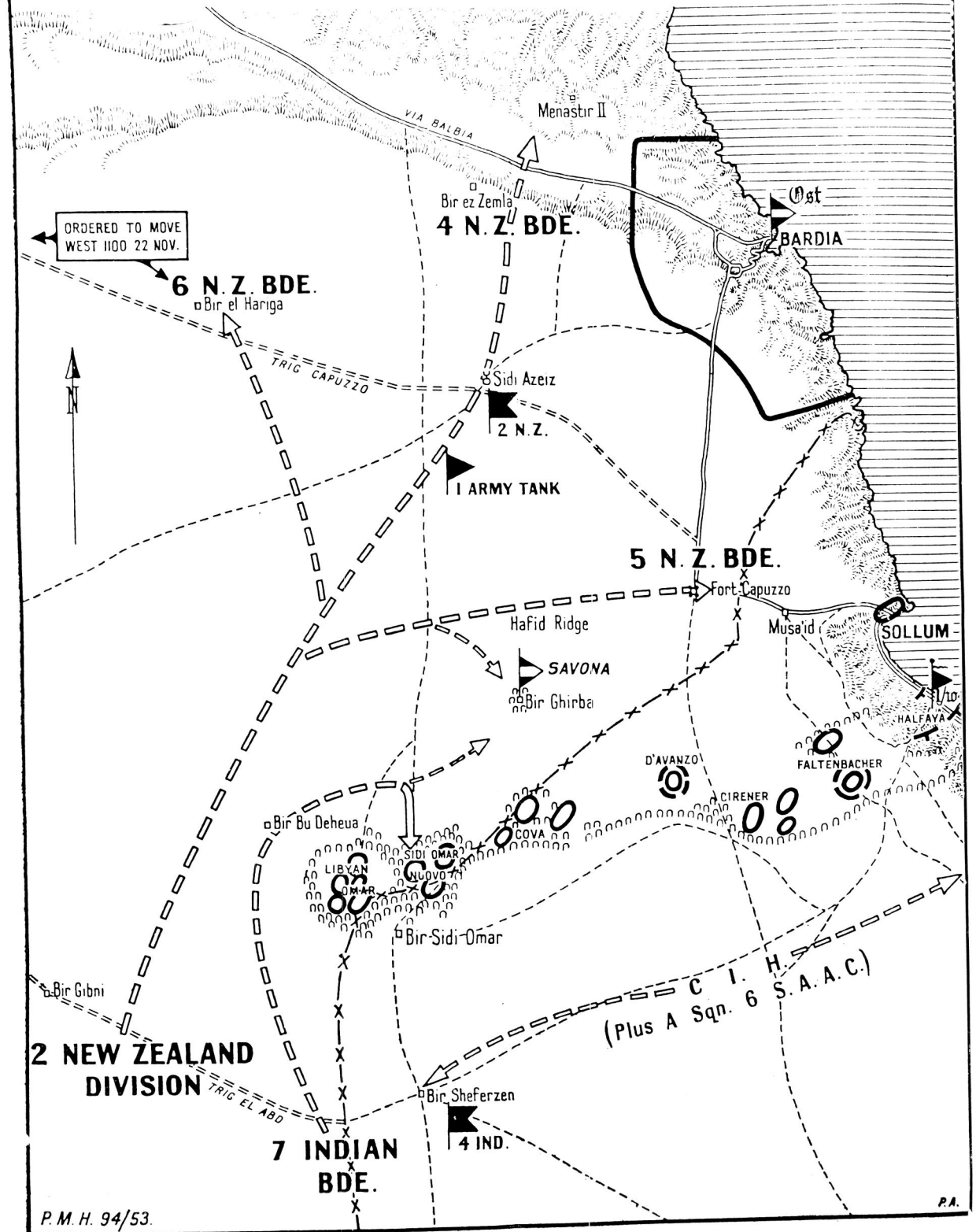
The first day of 'Crusader' had been relatively quiet and no real contact had been made with enemy formations. The next day, 19 November, was the same, and XXX Corps' move had still failed to bring the German armour to battle. On the frontier 7 Indian Infantry Brigade lapped around the Omars and the New Zealand Division was ordered forward.

It was only on 21 November that the battle started in earnest, with the fiercest fighting yet seen in the Western Desert, around To-



13 CORPS 21/22 NOV.

MILES 5 4 3 2 1 0 5 10 15 MILES



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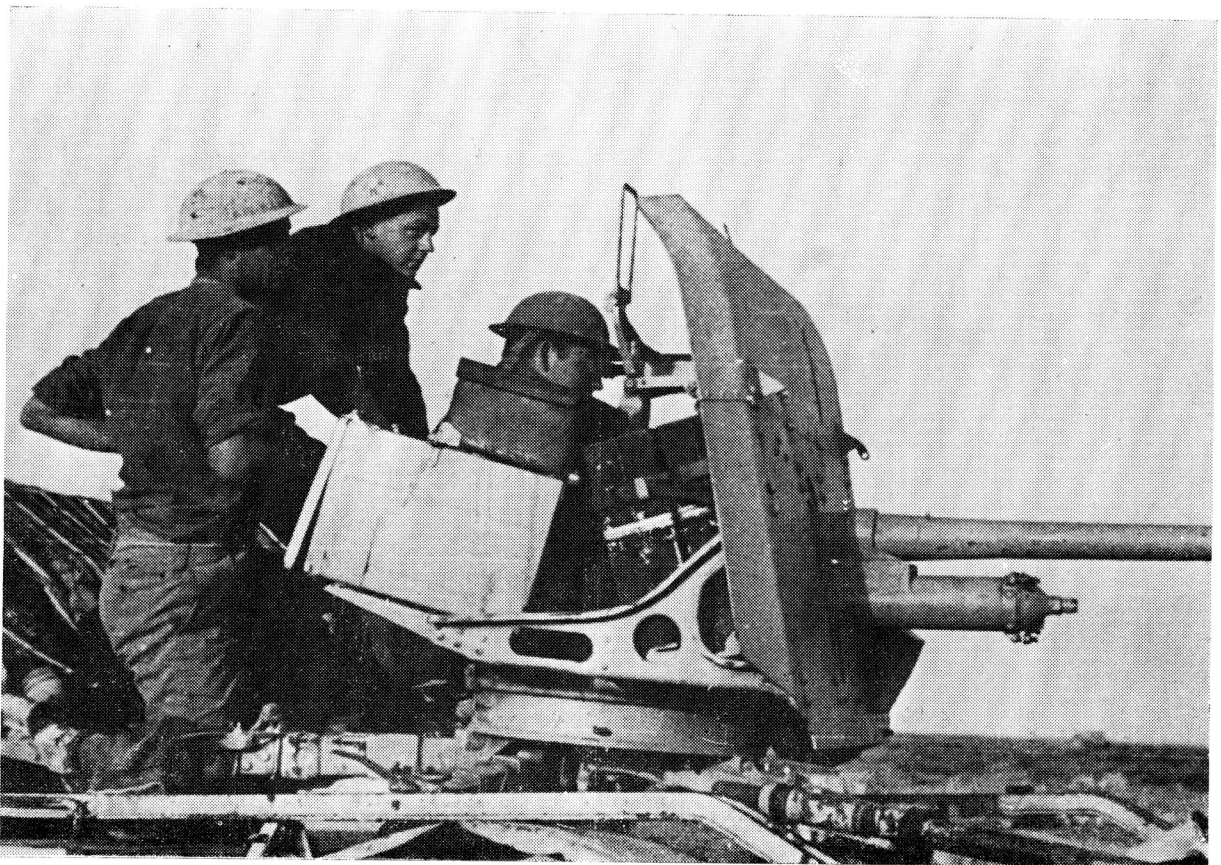
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bruk and Sidi Rezegh. In a confused situation with the German armour being moved westwards to prevent the breakout from Tobruk, 8 Army HQ identified what they believed to be a German withdrawal, and XIII Corps was ordered to advance. At this stage their main body of enemy armour had still not been engaged. The New Zealand Division was to move northwards towards the Trig Capuzzo to get behind the enemy positions in the Bardia-Sollum area. 7 Indian Infantry Brigade was to attack the positions which centered on Sidi Omar Nuovo and Libyan Omar, two large defended areas which formed part of the frontier defences described earlier.

On the 22nd the confusion continued on the XXX Corps front. The German armour recaptured Sidi Rezegh airfield and an attack on Pt 178 was driven off. To the east the Allies fared better; the New Zealanders took Musaid and Fort Capuzzo and blocked the Bardia-Tobruk road. I Royal Sussex and 4/16 Punjab, with tank support from 42 Royal Tank Regiment and a squadron of 44 Royal Tank Regiment took Sidi Omar Nuovo and the

better part of Libyan Omar, in an action that was particularly costly in tanks.

The results of the first few days of the offensive had been pleasing to the British command but by 23 November however it was becoming evident to Cunningham that the relative strengths of German and British armour were far from satisfactory. Early reports of substantial losses to the Panzer Divisions had been vastly over-estimated while British losses, largely from anti-tank guns had been extremely high. By the 23rd it appeared that far from destroying Rommel's armoured formations the balance was in the region of 44 fit British tanks against 120 German. To Cunningham this suggested that Egypt would be in grave danger should Rommel launch a counter-offensive and that many of the British formations, being purely infantry, were extremely vulnerable. In the light of this realisation Cunningham asked Auchinleck if he wished 8 Army to adopt a defensive posture. The C-in-C showed considerable moral courage in ordering the offensive to continue, with the destruction of Rommel's armour still as the main objective.



South African anti-tank gunners in action.

In order to allow XXX Corps to reorganise before carrying on with the attack XIII Corps would take over the offensive, moving most of the New Zealand Division along the Trig Capuzzo towards Tobruk and leaving 5 NZ Brigade to mask Bardia.

On that same day however 15 Panzer Division and the Ariete Division had joined to smash 5 SA Infantry Brigade near Bir el Gubi, and had badly mauled 22 Armoured Brigade into the bargain. Delayed and imperfect intelligence reports were not a purely British prerogative and Rommel seems to have been under the impression that the whole 1 SA Division and 7 Armoured Division had been eliminated from further contention. If this was so then the Axis forces around Tobruk were safe from interference and Rommel felt free to come to the aid of the beleaguered frontier garrisons at the same time as pursuing what he imagined to be a broken and fleeing 8 Army.

'The Matruh Stakes'

Rommel's plan for the drive towards the frontier was for a holding force to move along the northern track, the Trig Capuzzo, while the two Panzer Divisions with Ariete and Trieste Divisions struck south along the Trig el Abd to cross the frontier wire south of Sidi Omar, thus cutting XIII Corps' lines of communication and supply. So confident was the German commander that his lightning strike would swiftly destroy 8 Army's remaining powers of resistance that he abdicated his place at Panzergruppe HQ to Lt Col Westphal, with instructions to look after things on the Tobruk front during the 24 hours that he, Rommel, expected to be absent. Refusing the more cautious counsels of Crüwell, commander of the Afrika Korps (DAK) Rommel arrived at 0400 hrs on 24 November at 15 Panzer Division HQ to take personal command of the DAK.

Despite Rommel's insistence on speed and decisive action the Panzer Divisions had to wait for petrol and ammunition before heading eastwards, and it was not until 1000 hrs on the 24th that Panzer Regiment 5, comprising 21 Division's armour, was sent off by the commander himself. Two hours later 15 Division set off in the wake of 21 Panzer Division. The haste with which the enterprise had been launched had prevented the

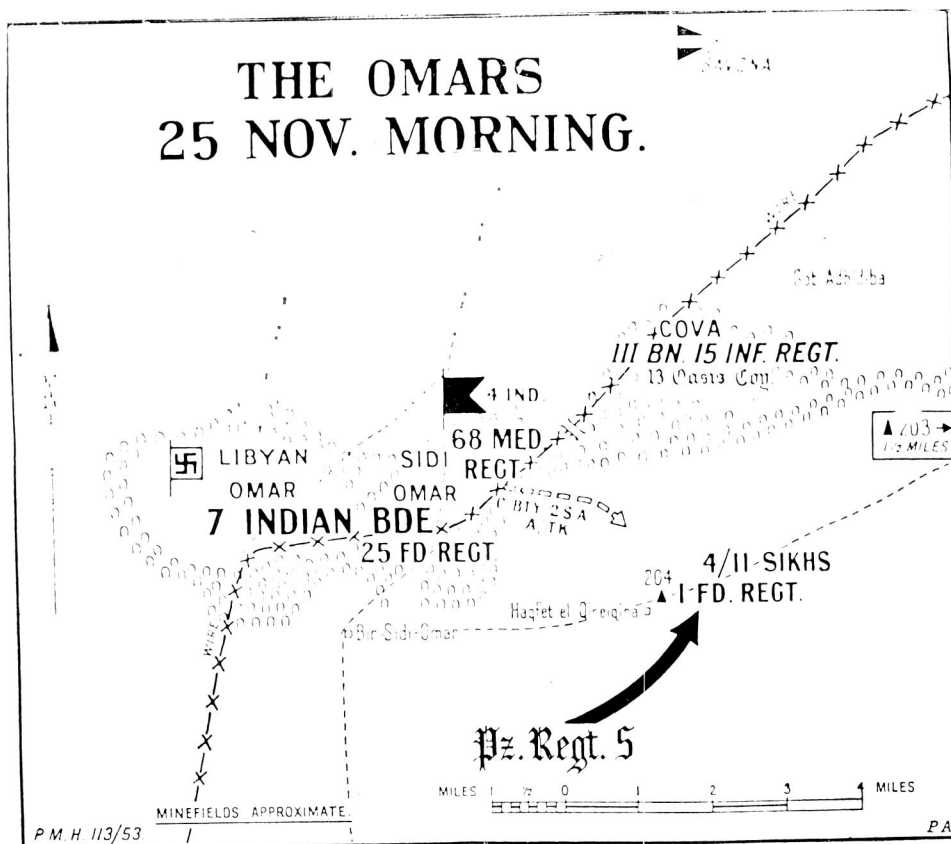
proper formation of battle groups however, and the DAK set off without the co-ordination of arms which had been noted in their earlier efforts.

DAK's route from Sidi Rezegh to Gabr Saleh and thence along the Trig el Abd brought them unexpected to contact with 1 SA Infantry Brigade to remnants of 7 Armoured Brigade and 7 Support Group, and several other battered survivors of the previous fighting. The sudden descent of two German armoured divisions upon these disorganised units initiated a mad scramble for safety in what was later referred to as the Matruh Stakes'. Some isolated tanks and guns made an attempt to stem the German tide but most simply removed themselves as far as possible, many driving straight for Egypt.

It was somewhat ironic that Rommel's drive had unwittingly started the retreat he already believed to be in progress. The German armour refused to engage seriously despite the flanking fire of Allied units and pressed eastwards. Their supply transports were less fortunate and essential loads of petrol and ammunition were destroyed or scattered. Panzer Regiment 5, already disorganised by the flying start to the day, suffered heavy casualties and lost 9 tanks, leaving less than 30 in the Regiment. To make matters worse, Battlegroup Knabe, with most of 21 Panzer Division's artillery and motorised infantry, overtook Panzer Regiment 5 and shortly disappeared over the horizon, while 21 Division's HQ under Von Ravenstein, was already at the wire by 1600 hrs. Two hours later Panzer Regiment 5, with all the Division's armour, was still in Cyrenaica, out of petrol and ammunition.

15 Panzer Division was in slightly better state, having lost 7 tanks during the day's fighting and having 56 still fit for action. Of Ariete Division there was no sign, for Dan Pienaar's 1 SA Brigade had effectively barred its progress in the wake of Rommel's armour. Trieste Division does not appear to have moved at all.

If Rommel had any idea of the upsets of the day his plans gave no indication of it. At 1600 he was already at Gasr el Abid, urging Von Ravenstein onwards with his HQ; the latter eventually spent the night some 10 km south of Halfaya. The plan was now



Here A Battery received its first news of the fighting at Sidi Rezegh from supply and soft vehicles retreating towards the east, each group insisting that Rommel's Panzers were right behind them. At 0300 hrs on the 25th the Battery was stopped by an officer of the Central Indian Horse with special orders for it to join his Regiment at Beer Bottle Hill.

On the morning of the 25th Rommel modified his orders once more. One battle group was ordered south to seize Jarabub and to disorganise the British attacks on the line of southern oases. Another group was detailed to move eastwards into Egypt to take Habata and to dominate the routes leading along and through the coastal escarpment towards Matruh. These were strange orders to issue in the light of the non-arrival of two Italian Divisions, and with the DAK spread over miles of desert, with the enemy holding out at Gabr Saleh and with the supply position therefore extremely critical. Certain necessary changes were made to the movements planned for 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, but these too demonstrated a completely false impression of the situation along the frontier defences. 15 Division was now to move north along the Cyrenaica side of the wire and then

turn eastwards to attack the New Zealanders between Sidi Azeiz and Sidi Omar. 21 Panzer Division was to attack westwards from the direction of Halfaya, but the Divisional HQ was presently separated by many miles from its tank regiment and supporting arms. These were in fact sent separately towards von Ravenstein, south of Halfaya, Panzer Regiment 5 crossing the wire as far south as el Baida, and it was probably a detachment of this unit which caused momentary alarm at 50 FSD that morning.

50 FSD was responsible for the huge stocks of supplies required by XIII Corps. The supplies themselves were dispersed over an area of over 60 square kilometres, and it was impossible for the handful of New Zealanders at the depot's administrative HQ to make any kind of effective defence against enemy columns. At about 0815 hrs on the 25th a column of German vehicles drove into the area of the Depot, captured or dispersed most of the staff and began filling up with water and rations. Another party moved off towards Beer Bottle Hill where it encountered A Battery of 2 A/Tk with the Bren-carriers of the Central India Horse, approaching in box formation. The anti-tank guns, still on their por-



Lt. Genl Neil Ritchie, Commander of 8 Army.

tees, were quickly run behind some low mounds to secure the best positions from which to engage, while one gun was detached by the Battery Commander, Major Tuttle, and sent forward to snipe. This gun succeeded in destroying an armoured personnel carrier. The Germans quickly broke off the action and reorganised their convoy before moving off to the north-east. By early afternoon the Central India Horse and A Battery, aided by eleven 'I' tanks of 42 Royal Tank Regiment, were making sure that the Germans had left the area of the Depot. It was typical of desert warfare that 50 FSD, occupied by the enemy in the morning was unloading Allied maintenance convoys again in the afternoon, with little damage to the stocks, hardly any of the well-hidden petrol supplies touched, and a cage of 900 enemy prisoners still intact. The very dispersal which had created difficulties of control had proved to be 50 FSD's greatest defensive strength, for it is unlikely that Rommel's troops would have been driven so easily from the area had

they realised the value of the prize within their grasp.

Mildebrath's Attack

C Battery of 2 A/Tk had left its defensive positions inside Egypt on the night of 24/25 November and moved directly towards Pt 204, but was directed into a defensive box at Pt 202, where 4 Indian Division HQ was already being heavily shelled, and was placed under the command of 1 Field Regiment RA which was stationed to the south of the box near Quineiqina with 4/11 Sikhs. Major Hudson, the Battery Commander, collected his men and noticed that heavy shelling was already in progress in the area reported to be held by 1 Field Regiment.

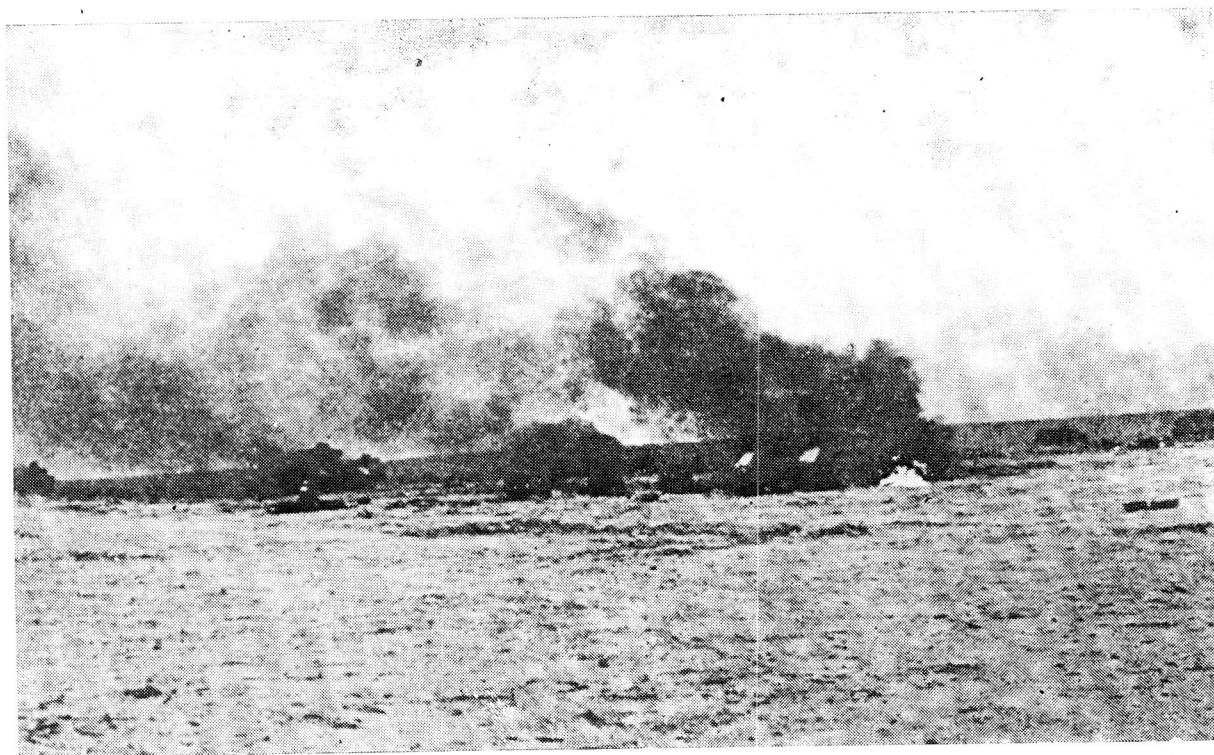
In fact 1 Field Regiment had been in action since shortly after dawn when 28 tanks of Panzer Regiment 5 under Major Mildebrath approached its position from the south. The guns had moved into position to cover the infantry and some New Zealand transport, but there had been no time to prepare gun positions, and at 2 000 metres the Germans opened heavy shell and machine-gun fire. The British gunners lay by their 25 pdrs and waited until the enemy was within 800 metres of the position before opening fire. Within the next 300 metres the Panzers had been halted, and shortly retired to hull-down positions from which they continued firing at a more advantageous range. After another ten minutes the tanks charged again, at the Regiment's 52 Battery to the east, and were halted at 300 metres before wheeling off to the south-east, having failed to outflank the position. Major Hudson had brought his battery up just as the enemy withdrew and Brigadier Dobree, commanding 1 Field Regiment, immediately ordered two troops of C Battery to follow the Germans in order to destroy any damaged stragglers. The 2 pdrs followed the retreating Germans for about 10 kilometres and despite long-range fire from the tanks managed to knock out a damaged tank while it was refuelling. All in all Panzer Regiment 5 had lost 8 tanks during the action, while few of its remaining tanks and guns were unscathed. 1 Field Regiment too had paid a heavy price, with 18 killed and 44 wounded, while its 52 Battery had 5 guns damaged. After his setback at Hagfet el Quineiqina Mildebrath fell back to Qabr el Hazar, seven



2 pdr anti-tank gun firing off its portee.

miles to the south. By 1230 hrs he had made contact with his rear line transport and was busy reorganising when his formation was thrown into confusion by two bombing raids. Rommel now arrived to urge the Regiment to further efforts with orders which simply commanded the unit to attack northwards to break through the enemy columns south of

the frontier wire and to halt in sight of the frontier. These were bold instructions but somewhat unrealistic, as Panzer Regiment 5 was by now at little more than reinforced company strength, was short of both petrol and ammunition, and had already been repulsed by only a portion of those forces it was now ordered to attack. In addition von



German tanks burning outside Sidi Omar.

Ravenstein was already at Halfaya awaiting the arrival of this Regiment, which was now being thrown against Sidi Omar, in a weakened condition and without artillery support. It was still not realised that Savona Division had lost a vital part of the frontier defences, and that the main body of the enemy was sitting behind Axis minefields. At 1430 hrs Mildebrath's tanks approached Hagfet el Quineiqina again from the south, and began a new move towards Sidi Omar. The artillery at Hagfet el Quineiqina comprised C Battery 2 SA A/Tk less one troop and 1 Field Regiment RA. The Panzers opened fire from 1 000-1 200 metres; C Bty responded, and several hits were observed before the Germans tacked westwards towards Sidi Omar. At 1515 hrs Mildebrath's tanks were observed approaching the Sidi Omar box, where they made a reckless assault against artillery which had been well dug in behind old Axis minefields. The Allied artillery comprised 68 Medium Regiment RA, 25 Field Regiment RA and A Troop of C Battery 2 A/Tk, under TSM R.F. McBride, as well as some guns from 57 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment RA. The artillery opened fire at 800 metres range with the medium guns adding heavy shell to the barrage. In a very short time the Germans had lost five tanks and before the action was broken off had lost another two. Of the seven, five had been pierced by 2 pdr shot from A Troop's guns firing from their portees and the Troop had suffered 3 men wounded. TSM McBride was awarded the DCM for his part in the defence. II Battalion of Panzer Regiment 5, out of touch with Mildebrath, now moved into Libyan Omar which was still held by Axis forces, leaving the Regiment's I Battalion with only 10 tanks of which only three had guns in working order. The action at Sidi Omar had effectively destroyed Panzer Regiment 5 as a fighting formation, and the remnants of the unit moved to a position about 4 miles south-west of Sidi Omar to spend the night, without supplies of fuel or ammunition, and out of contact with the rest of the Afrika Korps.

It had been a disappointing day for Rommel although 15 Panzer Division had enjoyed an easy victory over 18 Matilda tanks in various states of unserviceability in a desert workshop of 1 Army Aziz and Sidi Omar in severe straits through lack of supplies. The thrusts towards Habata and Jarabub had been aban-

doned before they began for want of petrol, and von Ravenstein had spent a day of enforced inactivity near Halfaya waiting for Panzer Regiment 5 to arrive. Air attacks had added to the losses of the German units and to the dislocation of their forces, and the New Zealanders had just taken Gambut, with its valuable airfield.

Crüwell senses that all is not well

By the morning of the 26th Crüwell was becoming uneasy about the situation in the Tobruk-Sidi Rezegh front, for Westphal was sending messages of increasing urgency. Rommel however was insistent that the frontier situation should be cleared up first, but the dislocation of German headquarters and the issuing of conflicting orders to ill supplied and widely dispersed units made decisive action impossible. 15 Panzer Division ignored an order to attack the New Zealanders holding Capuzzo, and after a clash with the light tanks of the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry, moved into Bardia to replenish. 21 Panzer



Genl Erwin Rommel.

Division, still minus its tanks, broke through the New Zealand line between Musaid and Capuzzo with heavy loss and ran into 15 Panzer Division.

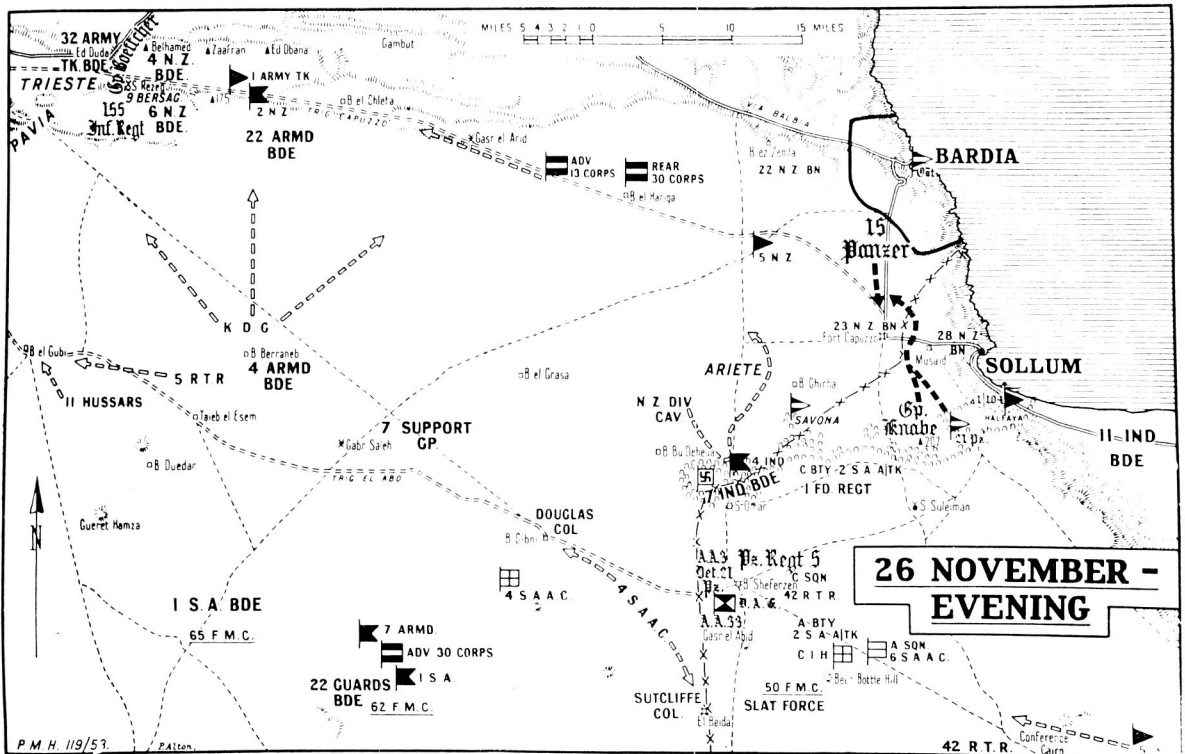
Meanwhile I Battalion of Panzer Regiment 5 had drifted into Bir Sheferzen in the morning. Rommel issued fresh orders to the hapless unit, and Mildebrath's tanks were sent into action against the Omars once more that afternoon. 2 A/Tk's C Battery's position bore the brunt of this assault, coming under heavy 20 mm and 15 pdr gunfire. One man in D Troop was severely wounded, but the Troop's 18 pdrs drove off the rather half-hearted assault before the range had closed to 600 metres.

II Battalion was still operating somewhat ineffectually west of Sidi Omar, unable to support the Axis troops still holding out there because of their own anti-tank ditches and mines. D Battery of 2 A/Tk under Major Barnes had now moved out of the 'Playground' position to join a mobile column of the 4/16 Punjabs under Major Scott. The column brushed with II Battalion Panzer Regiment 5 and B Troop of D Battery knocked out one tank before the column returned to leaguer at Pt 59.

The day had seen one other important development. Auchinleck had been gradually coming to the conclusion since the 23rd that Cunningham lacked the confidence necessary to push 8 Army into a sustained offensive. The 8 Army commander, whose health was also troubling him, had not really recovered from the shocks of the 23rd and 24th. Accordingly on 26 November Auchinleck sent Lt Genl Ritchie to take command of 8 Army.

On the 27th Rommel could no longer ignore Westphal's pleas for help. Ariete Division had already been ordered westward the previous day, but before moving DAK in the same direction Rommel had determined on a last effort to relieve his frontier garrisons. 15 Panzer Division attacked 5 NZ Brigade at Sidi Azeiz and inflicted severe losses, but von Ravenstein's 21 Division attempting to reach Tobruk unopposed ran straight into 22 New Zealand Battalion at Menastir and was held up for a whole day.

To the south too there was a fresh outbreak of fighting. Just before dawn 4/16 Punjabs had made an attempt to finish off Axis resistance in Libyan Omar but had managed to gain only a few hundred yards. That same morning Advance HQ 2 A/Tk moved towards Omar Nuovo with a column



of vehicles and the 25 pdrs of 31 Field Regiment RA. After being shelled briefly by his own anti-tank guns Lt Col Parkin arrived at Omar Nuovo and was placed in charge of the anti-tank defences. Only two hours later I Battalion Panzer Regiment 5 with its supporting troops, re-christened Group Wechmar, made another attack on the Omars, but as Mildebrath's 10 tanks approached C Battery's positions some 6 inch howitzers opened fire and the German armour withdrew at speed hastened by C Battery's 18 pdr shellfire. Panzer Regiment 5 was now ordered to follow 15 Panzer Division through Sidi Azeiz.

Rommel's drive to the east had petered out, having caused some temporary and local confusion to the Allied forces, but without forcing any change of plans. Not only had Rom-

mel failed to relieve the frontier garrisons; the latter's 'rescuers' had consumed vast stocks of valuable supplies and hastened the end of the now isolated Axis troops on the Egyptian border. Whatever may be said of the tremendous discipline, skill and efficiency of the DAK in even mounting such an operation after three days of hard fought mobile battles around Sidi Rezegh, the enterprise had cost about one third of the Germans' remaining tank force and had given the British valuable time in which to refit and reorganise their battered armour. Nevertheless, had the New Zealanders and 4 Indian Division, with its supporting arms, been made of lesser stuff the improvised plan of driving into Egypt might well have succeeded. In making sure that it did not 2 A/Tk had played an important and gallant part.