

by the coast road and also by the tracks leading east from Bir Temrad towards Acroma along the top of the coastal escarpment, which is a marked feature of the terrain in that neighbourhood. The strongpoint near Sidi Muftah blocked the approaches from Segnali by the Trigh Capuzzo and Trigh el Abd towards El Adem and Bir el Gubi. The purpose of the Bir Hacheim strongpoint was to force the enemy to move wide to the south, should he try to out-flank the position, and to canalise his advance should he break through the position to the north, as well as to block the direct approach to Bir el Gubi from Tengeder.

The whole front of over forty miles from the coast west of the Gazala inlet to Bir Hacheim was eventually covered by minefields, and most of the defensive positions were mined on their flanks and rear as well as in front. From Bir Hacheim northwards to beyond the Trigh el Abd the main minefield was duplicated, and the "V" thus formed was blocked in the north by another minefield across its mouth. Depth was given to the position in the north by the Tobruk defences, still in reasonably good order and, as time went on, by the construction of strongpoints and minefields around Acroma, El Adem, at El Mrassas below the escarpment, and, later, at Knightsbridge. The defensive positions on the frontier, which I had already ordered to be prepared, gave added depth to the Gazala line and should prevent its isolation by the enemy. They comprised two main defended areas; one round Sollum and Halfaya, and the other round Hamra some twenty miles to the north-east of Maddalena. Subsidiary strongpoints were to be established covering the defiles through the escarpment running south-east from Sollum.

Several of the formations with the Eighth Army needed to reorganise and refit after their strenuous experiences. Their relief could only be effected gradually as fresh troops became available, but eventually the 5th Indian Division relieved the 4th Indian Division, which meanwhile had been employed in preparing the frontier positions. The Polish Brigade Group and the 5th New Zealand Infantry Brigade were withdrawn and replaced by the remainder of the 50th (United Kingdom) Division, which I was able to bring back from Iraq. The 1st and 2nd South African Divisions had been reorganised after playing their part in the offensive and on the 12th February, General Ritchie reported that they were certainly fit to hold defensive positions and after another six weeks good training would be ready to undertake offensive operations.

As for armoured forces, General Ritchie already had the 1st Armoured Division. The 7th Armoured Division, which had been training hard in the Delta after being reorganised and re-equipped with American medium (General Grant) tanks, moved up later to join the Eighth Army and continue their training in the desert. In addition, two brigades of heavy infantry tanks eventually reached the forward area.

Detailed plans were made to meet an enemy attack in force, and reconnaissances were carried out and exercises held to test and improve them. The infantry and artillery were to hold fast in their prepared positions, while the armoured divisions were to counter-attack the enemy and destroy him, making the fullest

possible use of the support afforded them by our defensive positions and minefields. This plan was to apply equally whether the enemy tried to turn the position from the south or to break through the centre. The armoured formations were to be held centrally in reserve ready to meet either eventuality.

Planning for a Fresh Offensive.

The months of February, March and April were chiefly taken up with intensive planning and preparation, not only to make the Gazala line a secure base from which to launch a fresh offensive, but also for the offensive itself. Ways and means of undertaking this offensive were constantly being studied by General Ritchie and myself and by our senior staff officers.* After discussing the various schemes in detail, we came to the conclusion that we must at all costs prevent the enemy escaping into Tripolitania. Therefore he must be induced to attack us on to ground favourable to us instead of our attacking his prepared positions in the area round Derna, Tmimi, Bir Temrad and Mechili. I decided that the Eighth Army should advance on Bengasi which was the most important and vulnerable link in his communications.

The advance was to be made well to the south of the enemy's established positions, so as to force him to fight at a distance from his forward reserves of supplies. It was to be carried out by stages; strongpoints were to be established as each stage was reached, and held by artillery, and infantry so as to form pivots of manoeuvre for the armoured forces. South of this line of strongpoints, forward maintenance centres were to be formed, out of reach of the enemy's armoured divisions. This process was to continue until either the enemy attacked us or we were in a position to cut his communications.

It was estimated that the infantry required for this operation, including those needed to hold the Gazala positions while the advance was taking place, were one motor brigade group, four infantry divisions and two infantry brigade groups. The infantry were available, but the whole project turned on the relative strengths in armour. Our experience taught us that we should require a 3 : 2 superiority in tanks at the start of the operation as well as a fifty per cent. reserve. The date on which the offensive could be launched therefore depended upon how soon we could attain that superiority. In the event, the rate at which the enemy was able to bring new tanks over to Libya exceeded our calculations, chiefly owing to our lack of means with which to interfere with his shipping. In consequence the enemy was ready to launch his offensive before we had accumulated sufficient armour to undertake our own.

The administrative arrangements involved were extensive and highly complicated, but they were carried out with great rapidity and thoroughness owing to the energy displayed by Brigadier C. H. Miller, Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster-General of the Eighth Army. Three forward bases were established, one at Tobruk, another at Belhamed which was to be the new railhead, and a third at Giarabub. The Capuzzo railhead opened on the 13th March and the stocking of the forward bases for the offensive began at once. Within a week

* Note on the Libyan Offensive—I, 21st March 1942—Appendix 12.