

of an attack and the direction it would take. Rommel's plan was to break through our lightly held line of observation on our southern flank and then, turning north, drive to the sea behind 30 Corps and encircle our centre and right. It was the same plan as he had used at Gazala in May and he proposed to use the same force as then, with the addition of one extra Italian armoured division. On the left flank of his marching wing, at the hinge of the encircling movement, was 90 Light Division, under Army command; south of it was the Italian XX (Mobile) Corps with Ariete and Littorio Armoured Divisions, Trieste Motorized Division and a regiment of the Folgore Division; on the extreme right, the outside of the wheel, was the main striking force consisting of the German Africa Corps with 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions. On the remainder of the front XXI and X Corps held their positions and carried out diversionary attacks. This intention was no surprise to me and, as has been seen, our dispositions had been made to meet just such an attack, facing west and south with a strong armoured force disposed centrally. 13 Corps was to meet the enemy striking force of six divisions with four divisions: 7 and 10 Armoured, 2 New Zealand and 44 Infantry. In armour and artillery the two forces were evenly matched. Both had about three hundred field and medium and four hundred anti-tank guns; the enemy had five hundred medium and light tanks, equally divided between German and Italian; 13 Corps had three hundred medium and eighty light tanks and two hundred and thirty armoured cars. A further hundred tanks with 23 Armoured Brigade constituted a reserve. We had the advantages of ground and prepared defensive positions while the enemy's advantage of the initiative had been diminished by the loss of surprise.

The enemy offensive opened on the night of 30th August with two diversionary attacks on 30 Corps. A German parachute battalion secured temporary possession of one of our positions on Ruweisat ridge but 5 Indian Division won back the position by dawn. An attack in the coastal sector against 9 Australian Division was completely unsuccessful. At 0100 hours on 31st August, shortly after moonrise, the main striking force began to lift the minefields on the southern flank, in the area from Deir el Munassib to Himeimat. During this operation they were enfiladed by the artillery fire of the New Zealand Division and harassed both frontally and from the south by 7 Armoured Division who had excellent shooting in the bright moonlight. In face of the opposition of two artillery regiments and a motor battalion of 4 Light Armoured Brigade it took six hours to clear two gaps for the two German Panzer divisions and it was not until 0930 hours that the Africa Corps was concentrated east of the minefield. Even after overrunning this obstacle they did not advance with their customary speed, largely because the Italians on their left and the 90th Light still further north were encountering even greater difficulties in breaking through the minefields there which were heavily enfiladed by the New Zealand artillery and under direct fire from 7 Motor Brigade. The two Italian armoured divisions, indeed, hardly came into action at all in this battle. For nearly four hours the two Panzer Divisions were known to be gather-

ing in and about the Ragil Depression, where they presented an admirable target. Unfortunately a dust storm which rose about 1100 hours greatly curtailed our air effort, which in favourable weather might have disrupted the enemy's plan at the outset.

When, at about 1530 hours, the German armoured divisions began to move from Deir el Ragil the crucial stage of the battle was reached. The danger was that they should try a wide encircling movement round Alam el Halfa ridge, moving north-east to cut our communications with Alexandria. We had taken steps to discourage such a move in the mind of the enemy* and it soon became clear that these had borne fruit. The two divisions headed north and north-north-east, across the very soft going of the Deir el Agram, and launched a heavy attack on the area where 22 Armoured Brigade was stationed, around Point 102, a small feature just off the western end of the Alam el Halfa ridge. This area had meanwhile been reinforced by 23 Armoured Brigade which had been placed under 13 Corps as soon as the situation on Ruweisat ridge had been re-established. Our positions were prepared and 13 Corps artillery brought concentrated fire to bear with the result that, when the Germans finally retired at dusk, over a quarter of their tanks were believed to have been disabled. They did achieve a minor success, however, in that a score of tanks settled hull-down well forward in a depression from which they could not be dislodged until the following night.

7 Armoured Division had withdrawn in face of the enemy advance south-east and north-east, either side of the Ragil Depression, and had continued to harass the rear of the armoured column. This drew a reaction just before dusk when part of the enemy armour turned on 4 Light Armoured Brigade at Samaket Gaballa. After a brief engagement the brigade fell back, in accordance with previous instructions, to avoid becoming too closely involved in their isolated position. When night fell the task of harassing the enemy leaguers was taken up by the Royal Air Force who flew over the area continuously, assisted by flare-dropping aircraft of the Fleet Air Arm. 13 Corps artillery joined in also and kept one leaguer, estimated as made up of about a hundred tanks, under fire all night. At the same time the New Zealanders, at the hinge of our positions, sent out parties to prevent 90 Light Division from digging themselves in. In the northern sector the Australians attacked and made a gap through which a raiding force was to pass after daylight. The enemy counter-attacked before dawn, however, and closed the gap, inflicting heavy casualties on the Australians.

Now that it was clear that the enemy was making a short hook rather than a wide sweeping encirclement it was possible to strengthen

* Shortly before the battle Eighth Army allowed to fall into enemy hands, abandoned in a purposely sacrificed armoured car, what purported to be a "going" map of the area. It showed an area of very bad going extending across the route we did not wish the enemy to take and a belt of good going extending up to the crest of the Alam el Halfa ridge and thence along the ridge to the railway. From General von Thoma, whom we subsequently captured, we learned that this ruse had been effective; the enemy had intended to outflank the ridge to the north-east but had altered his plan on the basis of this false information.