

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

(PART 3)

British Plans

In December 1941 as 'Crusader' ground to a halt, Auchinleck was already being pushed by his political masters in London to consider the complete eviction of Axis forces from North Africa. Various plans had been mooted by Churchill, who for some time past had exhorted his generals to provide a convincing victory in the one theatre where British land forces were at grips with the enemy. Operations had been suggested in which the Allies would land in French North West Africa and drive simultaneously from there and from Cyrenaica towards Tripoli. With Rommel out of Africa a start could be made with the removal of Italy from the armed camp of the Axis and the Mediterranean might be opened to Allied shipping once more.

The question of opening this route was becoming increasingly important to the Allied cause, not only so that the supply route to the Far East could be shortened, but so that Russia could more easily be supplied from the south. Indeed the defence of Russia was vital if Germany was to remain embroiled on an expensive front and be prevented from pouring through the Caucasus and descending on Turkey. Should the Germans make a break-through here the essential Anglo-Iranian oilfields would be at their mercy and Egypt could be attacked from east and west. In 1941 it seemed likely that the Red Armies would collapse, and Auchinleck had to make provision for this contingency, for the threatened area lay within his command. Thus while he could employ the equivalent of six divisions in the front against Rommel, another two were deployed in Syria and Palestine to bolster the confidence of Turkey and to prevent an Axis descent on the Palestinian coast. Further north another four divisions were holding on to Iraq and Iran, awaiting the possibility of an attack from the Caucasus. Fortunately the news from Russia was

heartening. The Wehrmacht's offensive broke down before Moscow, and Zhukov launched a crushing counter-attack which appeared to ensure the continuation of the Soviet war effort at least into 1942.

Developments further east were about to put an immediate strain on Allied resources however, for on the same day that Churchill received news of Zhukov's counter offensive he heard of the Japanese attacks on Malaya and Pearl Harbour. By 8 December 1941 the British Empire was at war with another major naval and military power, and for the Allies the first rounds of this new conflict constituted a tale of unmitigated disaster. Despite the fact that the Japanese attack brought the United States fully into the Allied camp, time would be needed to bring the complete war potential of the Americans into play, and in that time immediate and irretrievable disaster might still strike.

The lightning Japanese move against Malaya and the catastrophe which rapidly overtook the Allied fleets in eastern waters made it essential to provide large reinforcements to protect India, Burma and Australasia. The only troops available were those already earmarked for the continuation of Auchinleck's offensive. The diversion of these forces with their equipment and air cover was insufficient to bolster the crumbling British front in South East Asia however, and Auchinleck was asked to send additional troops from Middle East command in January.

At the same time Hitler was being forced by winter conditions to close down air operations on the Russian front and was able to transfer a Luftwaffe Corps to the Mediterranean to intensify the assault on Allied shipping and the aircraft-carrier island of Malta. This, the removal of warships to the east and the sudden damaging of two British battleships at Alexandria had a dramatic effect on the supply situation in North Africa.

The partial neutralisation of Malta and the diminished size of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean fleet now made it possible for the Axis to ferry fresh supplies across to Rommel while Auchinleck was having to adjust to straitened circumstances.

Despite his problems Auchinleck remained determined to accomplish the grand plan initiated in 'Crusader'. The pressure on Rommel would be maintained, especially in view of the heartening news from Russia, which would allow a certain moment of weakening of the Allied forces in Iraq and Persia. Yet in planning his next stroke Auchinleck virtually had to abandon hope of mounting any amphibious operation on the north west coast of Africa to block the Axis rear, and could not afford to take chances with his forces in Cyrenaica, for additional reinforcements and equipment would be hard to come by.

In the light of this need for special caution the British commander realised that the country between El Agheila and the Egyptian frontier afforded no natural position where a solid defence line could be organised should the Axis forces make a determined counter-attack. To his mind therefore if Rommel launched an offensive the simple alternatives facing 8 Army were either to fall back on Egypt or to oust the Axis forces from the El Agheila line. Having no intention of giving up the hard won gains of 'Crusader' he decided on a further offensive to push Rommel out of his strong defensive position. This offensive however would have to wait until mid-February at the earliest, for Benghazi was inadequately repaired to cope with the necessary flow of supplies and XIII Corps were still reorganising after the heavy losses which their recent victories had demanded.

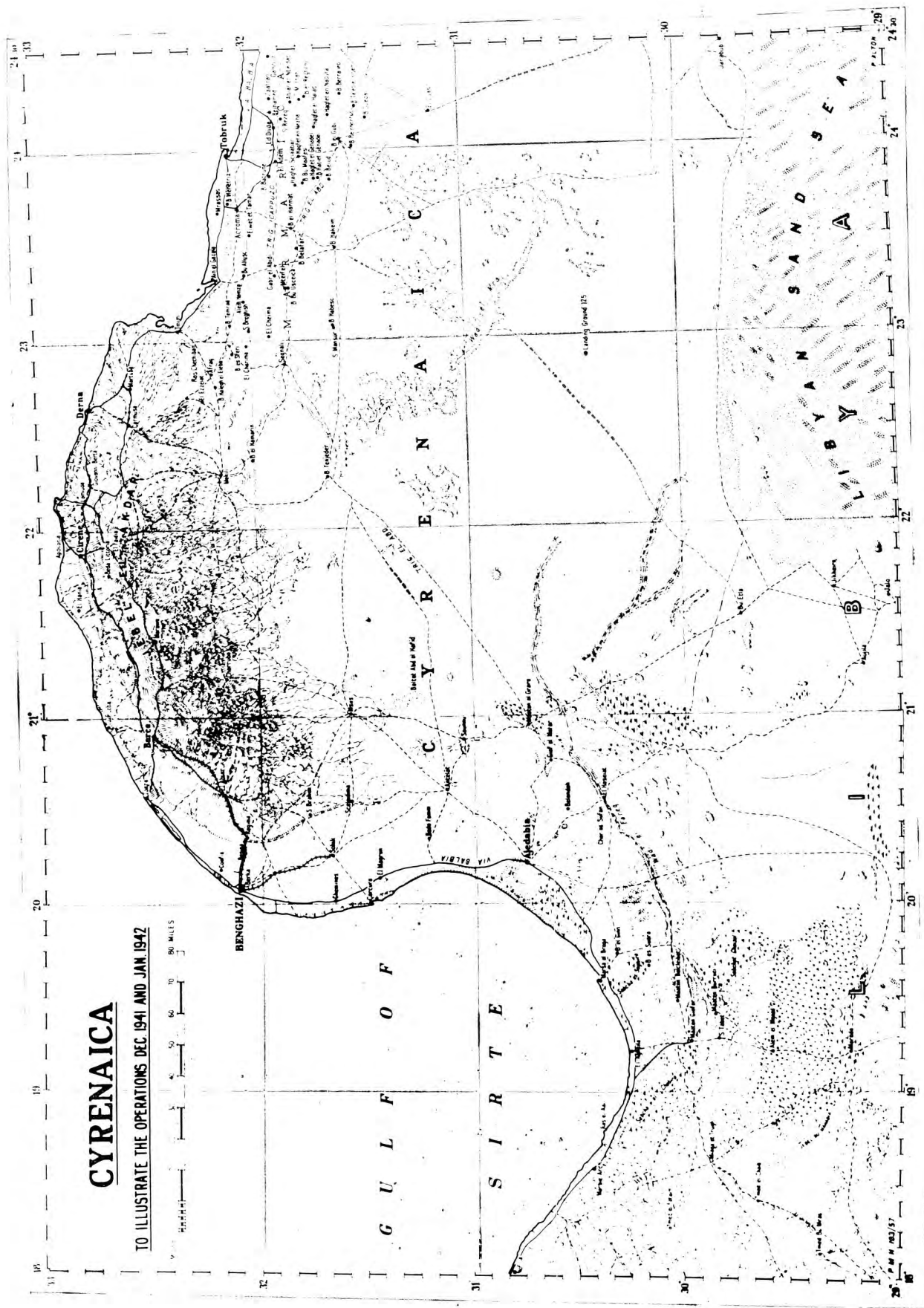
2 Anti-Tank Regiment Joins 2 Armoured Brigade

Thus matters stood when Lt Col Parkin received orders to take 2 A/Tk Regiment westwards from the Egyptian frontier on 5 January 1942. The unit's immediate destination was El Adem, where it would come under the command of XIII Corps. After making a rendezvous at Bir Hafid on 5/6 January the Regiment moved off in battery groups on the first stage of a 200 mile journey across the desert which would lead it to XIII Corps

Headquarters, near Msus, south-east of Benghazi.

The first stage of the march took the Regiment past Ed Duda, where the relics of the recent battles were still visible. The night of 6/7 January was spent at El Adem and that of 7/8 January at Bir Hafid, and the next morning the four batteries moved off along the so-called 'A' route. The latter was nothing like a road, but was merely a route marked every mile or so by a post painted with the letter 'A'. The journey was completed almost without incident, although 5 Battery lost one truck which had to be abandoned after losing a wheel to a Thermos mine. The journey provided 2 A/Tk Regiment with excellent training in desert navigation, which was to prove of great value in the coming months.

On the evening of 8 January Lt Col Parkin made contact with Advance Headquarters of XIII Corps, then some 2 miles South east of Antelat, while the remainder of the Regiment laagered 6 miles east of Msus. The next 24 hours were spent overhauling vehicles and refuelling but on the morning of the 10th the Regiment was on the move once more, to Giof Ardun, north east of Antelat, where it was to join 2 Armoured Brigade for training. 2 Armoured Brigade Group, under Brig R. Briggs, now constituted the sole armoured brigade in Maj Gen Messervy's 1 Armoured Division. The other, 22 Armoured Brigade, had left England ahead of the rest of the Division, had taken part in 'Crusader' and was now in no state to play an immediate part in operations, and had been withdrawn to Egypt to refit. The major formations in 2 Armoured Brigade were The Queen's Bays, 9 Queen's Royal Lancers and 10 Royal Hussars. These regiments had arrived in Egypt only in the second half of November, their tanks had been sent by rail to Matruh and from there the tank crews had brought their vehicles across the 450 miles of desert to Antelat. This journey had provided the only training in desert navigation these regiments had received, and had also furnished a warning of losses which the desert itself could inflict without an enemy in sight. Twenty Crusader tanks had broken down in the march, and the three armoured regiments reached Antelat with about 26 Crusaders and 18 Stuarts apiece.



For training purposes at Giof Ardun three of the anti-tank batteries were attached to armoured regiments; 5 A/Tk Battery to Lancers, 7 A/Tk Battery to 10 Hussars and 8 A/Tk Battery to the Queen's Bays. 6 Battery was held briefly as a mobile reserve, but on 11 January was ordered to report to 22 Guards Brigade, redesignated 200 Guards Brigade on 14 January, and moved off southwards towards Saunnu on the 12th.

For the next few days the three anti-tank batteries joined 2 Armoured Brigade in such exercises as were permitted by the rationing of petrol, which limited each vehicle to a maximum movement of 15 miles per day.

Other problems were encountered in the organisation of communications, for 2 A/Tk Regiment and the field artillery units which had joined the Brigade were equipped with wireless on a lower scale than that of the units they had replaced. Other technical difficulties were created for the artillery when the ramps for some of the 2-pdr portees were removed for repairs.

Between 13 and 21 January extensive conferences were held by the senior artillery officers and their counterparts in the armoured regiments, on the tactics to be employed by the Brigade Group in the forthcoming operations. The officers of the field regiments were particularly concerned that the non-artillerymen should disavow the dangerous heresy that the 25-pdr field gun was a miraculous weapon capable of performing wonders in an anti-tank role. Although this field-piece was the finest accomplishment of British gun designers yet to reach the front, the shortcomings of the specialised anti-tank weapons had led to the 25-pdrs frequent employment in this role, usually in conditions guaranteed to result in costly failure. Field guns were frequently scattered in an anti-tank screen where they were certain to be outflanked and destroyed before they could inflict casualties on the enemy armour. The field artillerists were of the opinion that if the guns were concentrated and employed in a normal way, at normal ranges, better results could be obtained. The conclusion was that the Brigade's artillery should be concentrated and that the guns should form a firm base around which the British armour would manoeuvre. This would hopefully enable the

British tanks to lure the German armour on to the guns, in apparent imitation of the tactics used so effectively by the Afrika Korps. If the plan was to have any chance of success the Brigade group would have to move more or less in its fighting formation, to allow quick concentration and gunnery control by observation officers attached to the armoured units.

It was decided therefore that the guns would travel in the middle of a three sided box, with front and flanks covered by the armoured regiments. Zero lines for the field guns were fixed dependent upon the axis of advance, and using this system it was hoped that the guns could bring down sufficient weight of shell to break up any enemy concentrations before they came into range of the lighter British tanks.

Enough fuel was now collected for the Brigade to practice this new formation in the area of Msus, and although the wireless problems remained unsolved the commanders felt optimistic about the efficacy of these new tactics so long as the principle of concentration was rigidly adhered to. While three of the batteries of 2 A/Tk Regiment were thus familiarising themselves with Brigade operations, 6 Battery was heading south towards the front line. It will be recalled that in early January Rommel had successfully completed a withdrawal through western Cyrenaica, and despite the fact that his forces had dealt some severe blows to the British formations following his forces around Agedabia, the German commander decided that the El Agheila line provided the security his exhausted troops needed in their period of recuperation. He therefore deployed his front line troops from Mersa el Brega on the coast, southwards to Sidi Tabet, with lighter elements covering the flank at Marada.

Lt Genl Ritchie, the 8 Army commander, had delegated only 200 Guards Brigade and 7 Support Group to maintain contact with the enemy in his new front line, for supply problems prevented the maintenance forward of any larger formations. Indeed the Guards Brigade had already been weakened by having to leave 2 Battalion Scots Guards to clear up around Agedabia, and by the removal of 8 Field Regiment RA to 2 Armoured Brigade. The remainder of 200 Guards Brigade consist-

ed largely of 3 Battalion Goldstream Guards, and 1 and 51 Field Regiments RA. These units were now organised into four mobile columns, each comprising an infantry company, a field battery and detachments of anti-tank and light anti-aircraft artillery. By 14 January the Guards' columns were in touch with Rommel's forces along a fifteen mile front stretching southwards from Mersa Brega. The next fifteen miles southwards was held by 7 Support Group's columns, until that formation's relief by 1 Support Group between 17 and 19 January.

With The Guards' Columns

On 13 January 6 A/Tk Battery detached itself from the remainder of the Regiment and moved southwards to reach 200 Guards Brigade Headquarters at midday on the 15th. Here the Battery Commander received orders to send one troop of 2-pdrs to the northernmost column, commanded by Major H. M. Ingledew, and his two other troops to the centre column commanded by Major D. W. A. Forbes. The next day at 1030 hours,

the three troops arrived at Forbes's Headquarters but E Troop was unable to proceed north to Ingledew's column until the 17th because of heavy sandstorms. From the 18th until the 21st E Troop, with Forbes, accompanied 25-pdr and 4.5-inch guns on harassing missions against the enemy strongpoints guarding the disused harbour of Mersa Brega.

This routine seemed likely to continue until Auchinleck was ready to launch his new offensive in mid-February. Then it was intended that 4 Indian Division, currently in the Benghazi area, would send a brigade to replace the Guards in the coastal sector, while 1 Armoured Division turned the enemy's southern flank and secured the area around 'Marble Arch' — Ras el Aali — Bir el Merdu — Bir el Merdunna, and another brigade from 4 Indian Division made a landing on the coast between Ras el Aali and Ras Lanuf. As has been seen Auchinleck was at least conscious of the possibility of a new counter-offensive and ordered the forward formations to prepare plans for withdrawal in such a contingency, while 2 Armoured Bri-



Armoured cars kept the enemy front lines under observation.

gade should be ready to make a counter thrust from the El Haseiat area.

At the moment the British XIII Corps, which included all the formations on Western Cyrenaica, was spread out somewhat alarmingly, 2 Armoured Brigade was 90 miles from the enemy line and 4 Indian Division even further away. On top of this were the crippling problems created by shortages of transport and petrol, which the delays in the mopping up of the Axis garrisons on the Egyptian frontier had aggravated.

In the forward areas the very bad going in the soft dunes which composed much of the terrain meant that tracked vehicles could move faster than wheeled vehicles, petrol consumption was exceedingly high and tyres needed replacement after a very short period of use. To add to their other discomforts the troops at the front were compelled to live on hard rations for much of the time. The inexperienced 1 Armoured Division was being forced to adjust to some of the most difficult conditions possible in the Western Desert while its members should have been learning gradually and thoroughly about the intricacies of desert fighting.

Strengths and Intentions

In this campaign tank and gun states were one indice of comparative strengths. All in all 8 Army's tank state on 20 January was approximately 107 Crusaders and 117 Stuarts, plus 93 'I' tanks back with 1 Army Tank Brigade at Bir Lefa in mobile reserve. Of these 2 Armoured Brigade, the foremost armoured formation, had 82 Crusaders and 57 Stuarts. General Headquarters estimated that another 500 tanks were at Army workshops in a repairable state.

On 15 January 8 Army Intelligence estimated Rommel's strength as 17 000 Germans and 18 000 Italians; the actual total was not much different for in fact he had about 12 500 Germans and 25 000 Italians. In its estimates of the enemy's tank strength Intelligence made a rather more serious error, maintaining that the enemy had only 87 medium and 20 light tanks. Unbeknown to the British a convoy had brought reinforcements, crews and fuel to Tripoli earlier in the month and Rommel now had 84 German and 89 Italian tanks, with more expected from workshops

soon. Equally important was the fact that the Axis forces had made good use of their fairly unencumbered withdrawal and short sojourn in the El Agheila line.

British Intelligence had concluded from its estimates that Rommel was in no position to launch an offensive in the near future. Certainly, despite the arrival of the vital tank reinforcements, the Axis transport situation remained precarious and the Italian formations were very much under strength. Rommel was far from satisfied with the arrangements of his defences despite the natural strength of his chosen position.

But the scattered dispositions of 8 Army and the latter's maintenance problems had not escaped Rommel's intelligence officers and on 12 January Rommel's senior intelligence officer, Major F. L. von Mellenthin, predicted that the Axis forces would enjoy a slightly favourable local balance over the Allies for the next two weeks. After the beginning of February the Allied forces would become comparatively stronger in the front areas. Even a concentration of the Allied forces now could severely compromise the defensive position at El Agheila and he therefore urged that a disorganising pre-emptive attack be made. Col Westphal, Rommel's Staff Officer Operations, thought that the British dispositions invited a spoiling attack in the area of Agedabia although he believed that the Axis shortage of troops and supplies would prevent any proper exploitation. Rommel havered at this initially but was eventually convinced of the possibilities of at least a local success to upset British plans for the forthcoming offensive.

Rommel Prepares

On the 18th Rommel issued his orders for the attack, which was to take place on the 21st. The Afrika Korps was to advance with its right flank on the Wadi Faregh, the Italian XX Corps would be in the centre while a special group under Col Marcks would advance on the left, along and to the north of the coastal road, with the later option of either moving on Agedabia or turning south-east. Neither Bastico, Commander in Chief Africa, nor the Italian and German High Commands were informed of the intention to launch a counter-attack, for fear that they

would intervene to prevent this risky undertaking.

Certainly the element of risk was high, for many of the Axis formations were gravely under strength despite the reinforcements recently landed at Tripoli. Rommel was also short of transport, both for his mechanised infantry and for the supply of front line elements. In the artillery units there was a severe shortage of gun-tractors, and captured vehicles had to be made to serve, with the result that only half the required ammunition could be carried forward. Nevertheless the Axis tank state continued to improve and by 20 January Rommel had 121 German tanks operational in addition to 89 Italian. Another 46 German tanks could be expected from workshops shortly.

In the air the Luftwaffe was able at last to put as many aircraft over the front lines as the Allies. Indeed as the 21st approached, sandstorms made British aerial reconnaissance ineffective and the subsequent squalls of rain rendered the main British airfield at Antelat unusable, forcing the Allied aircraft back to Msus and Gazala. The sandstorms also helped Rommel to disguise the assembly of his attacking force and allowed some forward movement by day. Otherwise only westward traffic was allowed by daylight, to create the impression that Rommel was about to slip out of the El Agheila positions towards Tripoli. On the night of 20/21 January this impression was further strengthened by a series of mock demolitions and 'destructions of stores'.

Rommel's plan for the first day of his attack was for his forces to envelop and destroy the forward Allied troops facing the El Agheila line. In the south the 21 and 15 Panzer Divisions of the Afrika Korps were to move forward with their right flank resting on the Wadi Faregh, to prevent a British breakout to south or east. North of them, the Italian XX Corps, consisting of the armoured Ariete Division and motorised Trieste Division, would attack along and to the south of the coast road, the Via Balbia. Their objective was Bir Bilal, which was to be secured by early afternoon to prevent the Allies escaping towards Agedabia. To the Italians' left was the Marcks Group, a mixed Italo-German force of two lorried infantry battalions with substantial artillery support and a

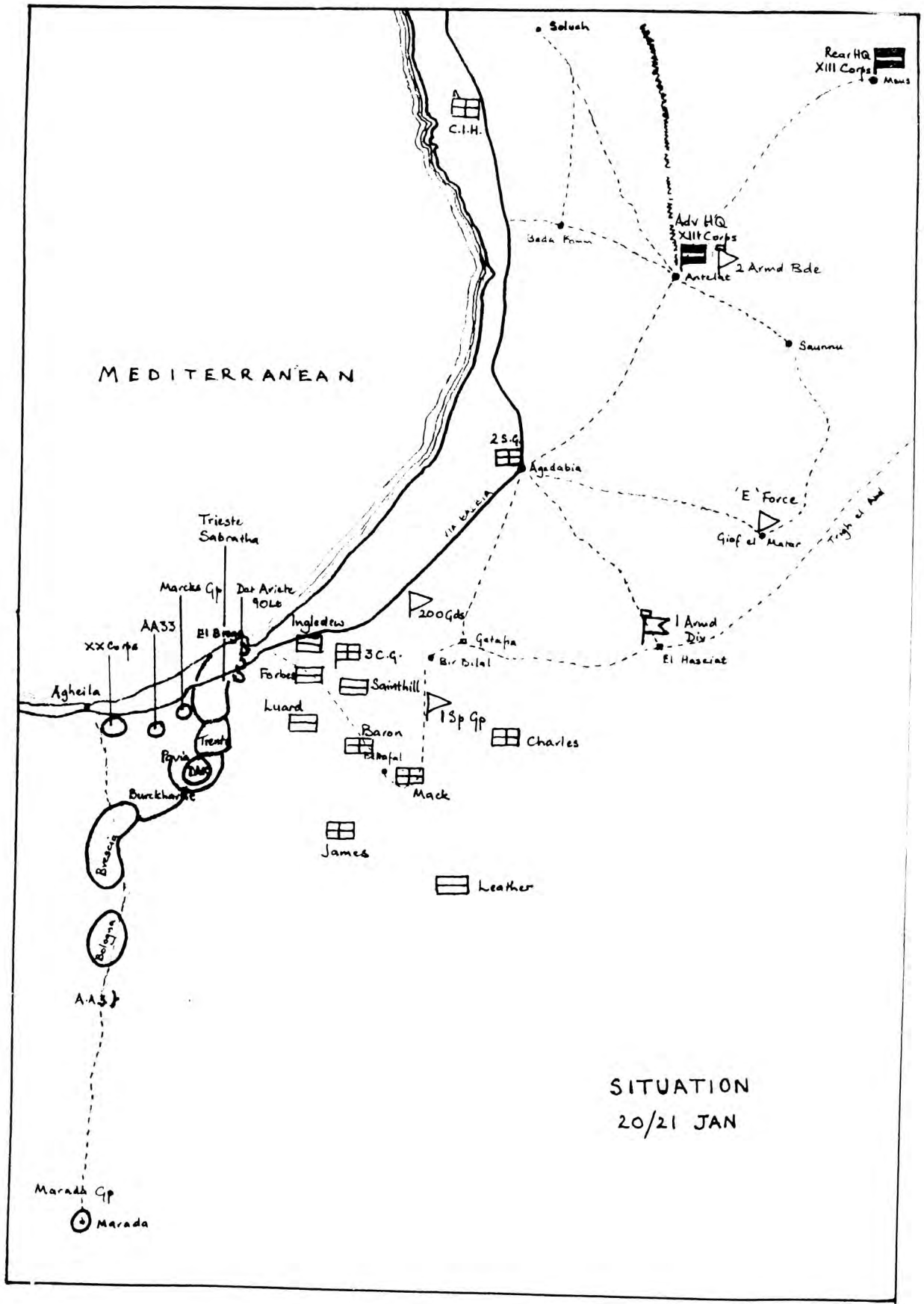
detachment of tanks from 21 Panzer Division. Marcks Group was to move along the coast to secure Melah en Nogra, only 25 miles south-west of Agedabia. Meanwhile other Axis formations would consolidate the El Agheila positions to form a firm base for operations.

The Opening Moves: 21 January

At 0830 hrs on 21 January the Axis artillery, mostly concentrated west of Mersa Brega, began harassing and counter-battery fire and Rommel's forces moved into the attack. There was no great clash of forces on this first day, for the weak British columns concentrated mainly on making a withdrawal with as few losses as possible. In the north the columns of 200 Guards Brigade identified approaching enemy armour, about 35 or 50 tanks strong. It now appears that this may have been Ariete Division and not German armour as identified by the Guards. As Ingledeu's column fell back Sgt Avenstrup's section of F Troop 6 A/Tk Battery fought an action in co-operation with the anti-aircraft gunners to cover the escape of the 4.5" guns. Two enemy tanks were claimed destroyed in addition to six other enemy vehicles. In the confusion of the retreat Sgt Avenstrup's two guns were separated from the main body, and it is an indication of the chaos of the next four days that his crew rejoined 6 Battery only on the 27th at Charuba, while Bdr Garden's gun eventually reached Mechili in time to attach itself to the Battery's E Troop on 2 February.

G Troop and the other section of F Troop, with Forbes's column withdrew 20 miles from their position at Bir el Ginn after being subjected to heavy shellfire. Before the end of the day Forbes had made another move, 13 miles northwards.

Although the Guards' columns escaped fairly lightly from this unexpected encounter with heavy enemy forces, they were pushed south from the road, leaving the Via Balbia open to the advance of the Axis troops. Ariete pushed on to take Bir Bilal towards evening while Marcks Group had encountered only light resistance before reaching Melah en Nogra in the afternoon. Trieste Division was then able to take over at Melah en Nogra having done no fighting at all. The



Guards' columns spent the night east of the Via Balbia about 15 miles south of Agedabia.

To the south the Afrika Korps met no opposition on the 21st until about 1100 hrs when 15 Panzer Division bumped units of 1 Support Group already retiring eastwards. The difficult going in the dunes affected pursuer and pursued alike, with 1 Support Group having to abandon some of its wheeled vehicles which became bogged in the soft sand. By afternoon the Afrika Korps was badly split up however, with only tracked and light wheeled vehicles able to move unaided through the soft going. The artillery and supply train had been left behind the attacking force and the heavy petrol consumption of the rest of the force was reaching alarming proportions. It was eventually decided that Afrika Korps would have to complete its encircling movement to join the Italians even if the main British force had escaped, and it was impossible to continue the forward drive with the Korps in a state of disorganisation. The day was therefore a disappointing one for Rommel. Afrika Korps was very dissatisfied with its own day's tally, of 14 armoured vehicles, 41 guns, 165 other vehicles and 30 prisoners, although Brig Vallentin, commanding 1 Support Group, thought his losses severe enough. Indeed for Vallentin's formation the day had been an alarming one, with the deep sand reducing the retreat to a speed of 2 mph in places and with vehicles sticking and having to be abandoned. Disorder had been the keynote and his columns had laagered widely dispersed. 1 Support Group had lost particularly heavily in guns, which augured badly for a continuation of the withdrawal.

Vallentin still interpreted Rommel's thrust as a reconnaissance in force, an opinion which was borne out by the destruction of abandoned British vehicles. At 1 Armoured Division Headquarters, Maj-Genl Messervy was inclined to support this assumption or at most to believe that Rommel merely intended to regain his old positions to the north and east of Agedabia. With the enemy concentrating at El Gtafia Messervy became concerned for the junction of 200 Guards Brigade and 1 Support Group. Their columns were ordered now to fight delaying actions but only to make a provisional stand on the Agedabia-El Haseiat line if Rommel continued

his push. 2 Armoured Brigade meanwhile would move at first light on the 22nd to the area just south of Giof el Matar in order to counter-attack if the enemy continued his advance. E Force, consisting of 3/2 Punjabs, 7 SA Recce Battalion less two companies, and 4 Battery 2 Field Regiment SAA, would postpone their intended move to the Delta in order to reconnoitre south of the Wadi el Faregh. The most glaring omission in Messervy's orders was to ignore the fact that the Guards no longer covered the Via Balbia, and that this was therefore the most vulnerable spot in his line. The only possible explanation of this error is that no one had passed on the information.

At XIII Corps Headquarters Godwin-Austen agreed with the subordinate commanders that a general Axis offensive was unlikely to develop. He instructed 1 Armoured Division to stop the enemy on the line Agedabia-El Haseiat, but gave Messervy the option of withdrawing along the axis Agedabia-Antelat-Msus if necessary. In the event of an enemy push beyond Agedabia, 4 Indian Division would cover Benghazi, but should be prepared to make a co-ordinated withdrawal. Once again, orders failed to comply with reality, for 1 Armoured Division was already south and east of the main road which was to provide its axis in the event of a retreat.

Agedabia and Saunnu: 22 January

It seemed to Rommel that Messervy's forces would continue their withdrawal on the 22nd, and so he determined to concentrate his efforts on cutting the British line of retreat and pushing Messervy away from the Via Balbia and from his supplies. The two Panzer Divisions of the Afrika Korps were ordered to reach the Via Balbia by first light, for it was vital to put a large force on the coast road before the British realised the seriousness of their position. The Korps was then to drive on to Agedabia at speed to cut off the British retreat. The soft going in the south seriously hindered this lightning stroke however, for the two Panzer Divisions were scattered across a wide area, and artillery and supply vehicles had to be manhandled across the dunes to reach the armour before setting off for the Via Balbia.

At 0500 hrs Marcks Group set off down the

Via Balbia towards Agedabia without waiting for the tanks, and was held up by strong artillery fire from the south. Part of this fire came from the guns of 6 A/Tank Battery, still with the Guards Brigade. The latter was soon forced away again and at 1100 hrs elements from the Brigade were sent towards Agedabia in an attempt to forestall the enemy force said to be approaching it. Marcks Group was already in possession of the Agedabia landing ground shortly after 1100 hrs however, as the Guards belatedly discovered when they arrived at 1700 hrs.

Throughout the morning the Afrika Korps struggled towards the Via Balbia to support Marcks Group. The bad going and consequent problems with the fuel supply delayed their arrival on the coast road until 1300 hrs and then the foremost armoured units were promptly ordered off towards Antelat at full speed in Marcks's wake, for by now Rommel had spotted the opportunity to make another rapid encircling movement, including 2 Armoured Brigade within the Axis net. 2 Armoured Brigade, including the other three batteries of 2 A/Tk Regiment, had been ordered off at 1000 hrs to a point just south of Gof el Matar. At 1130 the Brigade started to arrive at Saunnu and was immediately directed to the south-west to deal with enemy forces moving towards Antelat from Agedabia. No contact was made with Rommel's troops and the only incident worthy of note from 2 A/Tk Regiment's point of view was the arrival from Halfaya of Major Hudson's 18-pdr gun group to bring the batteries up to four-troop strength again.

The fighting units of 2 Armoured Brigade spent the night about 18 miles south-west of the Saunnu Depression while the supply, administrative and maintenance units, the Brigade's 'B' Echelon, actually halted in the Depression as evening drew near. By this time Marcks Group had reached Antelat and had pressed on rapidly eastwards. En route the Group had several clashes with small British formations evidently trying to make for Msus, and finally on reaching Saunnu Marcks force bumped into the 'B' Echelon, which was scattered over a wide area. The confused nature of mobile warfare in the desert and the consequent difficulty of securing any clear overall picture of the cause of a contact actions is illustrated by the fact that Marcks Group

reported taking Saunnu after overcoming brief resistance while the British claimed to have beaten off the Axis forces inflicting losses and capturing 30 Italian prisoners.

Another account of this particular encounter, in a statement by a lieutenant who was a Regimental Quartermaster in the 'B' Echelon gives evidence of how little a participant knew of the shape of an action in which he was involved.

'... one of my NCO's came up to me saying that an officer had just come up from the rear of the column in a great hurry and was urgently asking for an officer. I was told that this officer had stated that his company had just been shot up by German tanks about 3 miles back. In the meantime, this information seemed to have reached everybody, and before I could contact this officer, he had already departed. Soon afterwards I received the same report from SM van der Merwe, and I passed it on to a senior officer in a staff car who was on his way to see Major Cook. About 4 or 5 minutes later a number of vehicles, believed to have belonged to some signal company, stopped close to our lines and circulated the same news as the officer abovementioned concerning an attack made on them by tanks. Within a few minutes they had moved off again. At that time the whole column started to move, but having gone about 100 yards, stopped.

'About half an hour later . . . firing was suddenly observed in the rear of the column, coming from the left and exploding somewhere in the distance on the right of the column. A vehicle was hit and set ablaze. After a while shells were coming from the right flank as well, and one of the vehicles in our column was also hit and fired. This undoubtedly enabled the enemy to see the other vehicles. Thus far everybody seemed to have kept quite calm, although several men took cover behind vehicles and others were lying flat on the ground. At about that time some of my men enquired from me whether we were going to stay in that position, and I replied that we were staying, as I was expecting to receive instructions at any time. Intensive machine-gun and shell-fire, accompanied by Verey lights, thereupon came directly from the rear of the column in our direction, and shells were exploding amongst our vehicles. The whole column then started

to move forward. I called to my driver to bring my car, which was about 20 yds away from me, and I set off intending to stop my vehicles. Having passed several vehicles after having gone about a mile, I stopped, realising that I couldn't get to the head of the column owing to the difficulty of the ground and darkness. I then stopped all vehicles coming up from the rear of the column, irrespective of the unit they belonged to.

'A captain then came up to me and told me he was the padre. Thereupon 5 or 6 other officers also appeared. One of them enquired who was leading the column. I replied that I didn't know, and said that apparently the head of the column had got away and was being led by someone. The firing from the rear had not yet ceased, but by this time we were out of range. I checked up on my vehicles, and found that three of them were missing . . .

'After I had checked up on my vehicles, the officers present got together to decide what action should be taken. Someone remarked that it would be useless to go back, as every-

body had by now moved away from the original position and the firing had not yet ceased, and suggested that we should move in a southerly direction for some distance. I observed that we did not know where Brigade was, or their position, and suggested that we move eastward for a short distance, so as to enable us to contact the main body again in the morning. Somebody asked if I had a compass: I replied that I had, and was then asked if I would navigate, and I said that I would.

'Having covered the distance of 5 miles, we stopped. Everybody was paraded and given orders for the night and in the event of a move. The 2/Lt of the tank unit volunteered to make all the necessary arrangements for our protection, and stock was then taken of all available arms. These consisted of the following:— 2 Bren machine-guns, 3 Lewis machine-guns, 3 Tommy-guns, several .303" rifles and one tank. Several sentries were posted in front and on the flanks of the column, with the tank guarding the rear. The time was now about 0100 hrs on the 23 January. At about 0300 hrs I heard tanks moving. This continued for about an hour and then stopped. We did not know whose tanks they were, but knew that they were not far off, and, as a precautionary measure, instructions were given that no vehicle engine had to be started until so ordered. It was decided to move a further 5 miles on the same bearing in the morning; engines were started up at first light, and directly we moved off. The enemy, hearing the noise of the engines, at once opened fire on us, their opening shots dropping slightly to the right of the column. As it was not quite light yet they also fired Verey lights, and flares. Our column then came under intensive shell- and machine-gun fire. One of our vehicles was hit and set alight. Then the firing became more severe, and, after having gone only 2 miles, pursued by the enemy, I decided to change course northwards. The firing then slackened down, but a salvo of 4 rounds was dropped between my vehicle and those following in rear of me. We continued on this course for a few miles and called a halt. There was no longer any firing coming from the enemy. Throughout the whole of this move only one vehicle was lost and there was one casualty, . . . an officer informed Lt McClean that he was



Brigadier R. Briggs, commanding 2 Armoured Brigade.

parked in a wadi quite close to the enemy tanks. He at first thought it was our tanks, until they opened fire on our column. He counted 36 tanks in all, and stated that the distance between where we parked the night and where the enemy had stopped, was approximately 400 yards . . .'

Eventually this group rejoined the major portion of the Brigade 'B' Echelon and arrived at Msus by the afternoon of the 23rd.

While Marcks Group had moved on to Saunnu, advance units from 15 Panzer Division were occupying Antelat in their wake, although the bulk of the Afrika Korps was spread out over a considerable distance due to the failure of supply and maintenance sections to keep up with the tracked vehicles. Thus the advance units of the Afrika Korps were strung out along the track from Agedabia towards Antelat. The Italian XX Corps moved forward via Agedabia to occupy the area on both sides of the track to Antelat in order to prevent any British interference from north-east or south-east. As his move gathered momentum Rommel ordered X and XXI Corps back at El Agheila to prepare to send one division each to the Agedabia area.

The 22nd had seen little fighting, for Rommel had been urging his forces into position before springing the trap.

Ritchie Reacts

Until the afternoon of the 22nd, the direction of the British forces had rested on the shoulders of Godwin-Austen and Messervy, for Ritchie, the commander of 8 Army, had been busy at Cairo Headquarters. At 1630 hrs on the 22nd however he arrived back at 8 Army Advance Headquarters at Tmimi to be greeted with reports of Rommel's offensive.

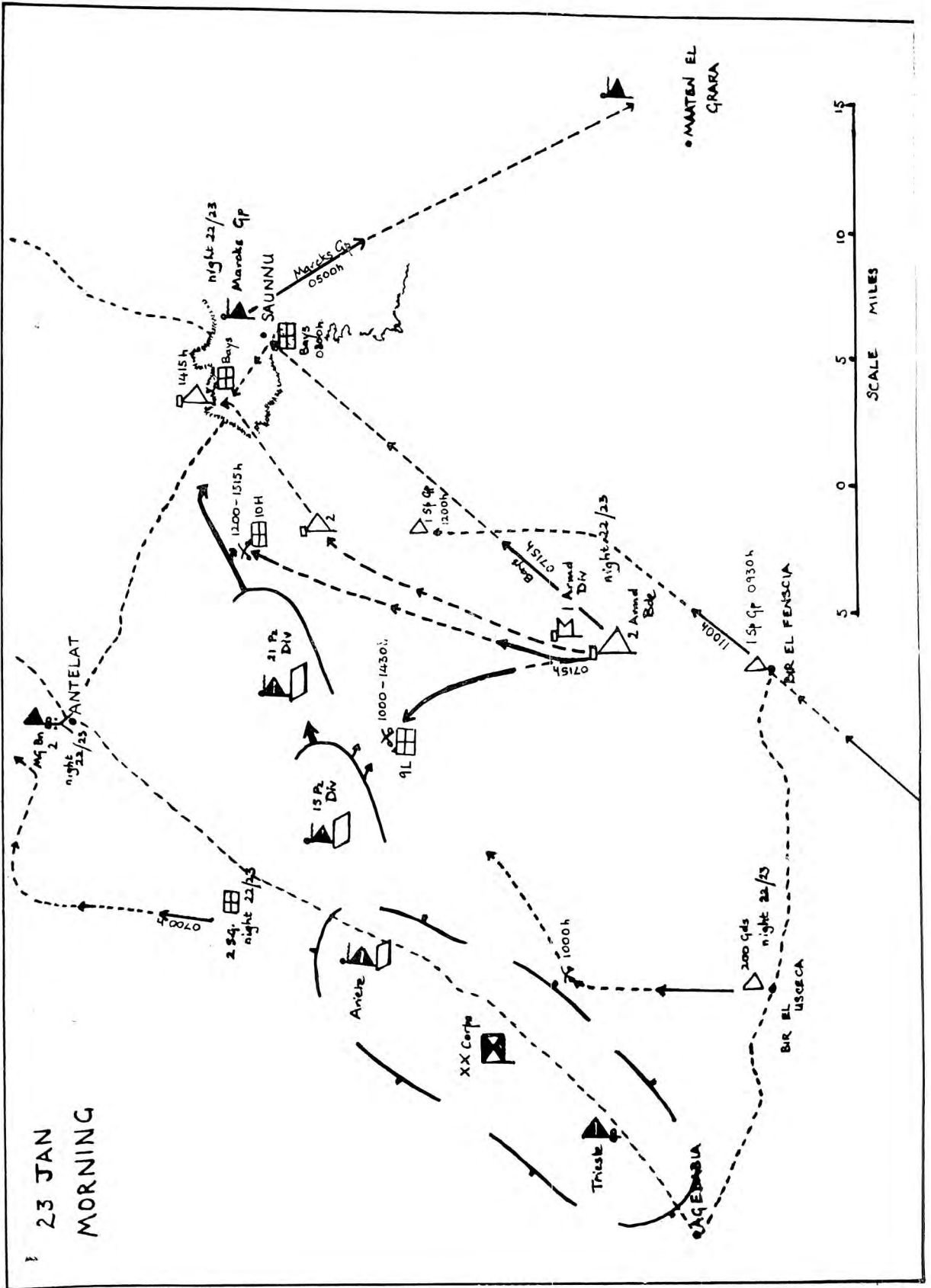
By 1950 hrs he had digested the incoming information and sent a message to Godwin-Austen giving his appreciation of the situation and instructions for the British reaction. Ritchie believed that the enemy was trying to establish his forward elements on a new line east of the El Agheila defile, in order to mount a full-scale offensive once reinforcements had arrived and his maintenance situation was adequate. Until then it seemed unlikely to him that Rommel would be able to send more armoured reconnaissance pat-

rols north of the general line Agedabia-El Haseiat. Indeed, for reasons best known to himself, Ritchie believed that most of the enemy armour was still 90 miles south-west of Agedabia, unable to be maintained forward of that position. Ritchie was confident that Rommel had in fact played into the hands of the Allies, by emerging from the El Agheila positions. The important thing now was for the 8 Army to quickly prepare a counter-stroke to destroy the Axis forces. For this purpose 4 Indian Division should move south from Benghazi as soon as possible to operate on the right flank of XIII Corps. In the unlikely event of a further Allied withdrawal being necessary beyond the line Magrun-Saunnu, Ritchie felt that the Corps must avoid the Jebel roads and bad going of the Mechili area. The axis of any retreat should be Msus — Desert route — Bir Hacheim, with strong flank guards moving via Mechili and the Trigh el Abd.

Ritchie's interpretation of events and his optimistic reaction to Rommel's move were at variance with those of Godwin-Austen, commanding XIII Corps, in certain significant ways. Although the latter was still not convinced that Rommel intended a general offensive he was certainly not persuaded of the wisdom of committing 2 Armoured Brigade to a battle, or of moving 4 Indian Division south in anything more than a covering move to screen Benghazi. The situation of 1 Armoured Division was already a matter for concern in fact, and at 0447 hrs on the 23rd Godwin-Austen informed Messervy that he must move his force as soon as possible to prevent any further enemy advance on Msus, for failing this XIII Corps could not ensure the Division's further maintenance.

The Germans were known to be already in possession of Antelat and Saunnu, and Messervy now ordered Briggs to send a tank regiment from 2 Armoured Brigade to clear up the latter position. The remainder of the Brigade was to get astride the Msus track north east of Antelat. The Support Group and the Guards Brigade were to join up also north-east of Antelat, skirting the Axis forces by moving towards Saunnu or further east if necessary.

The practice that 2 Armoured Brigade had had in co-ordinating its various arms in brigade group formation was already being ig-



nored, and the next few days would prove once again that the balanced composite forces of Rommel's army could deal relatively easily with their fragmented British counterparts. The latter were committed piecemeal to battle and owed survival to the courage and self sacrifice of their tank crews and artillerymen rather than to any application of sound tactical principles.

Rommel Closes The Net: 23 January

The essence of Rommel's plans for the 23rd was to prevent the escape of the British forces south of Antelat and Saunnu. The Afrika Korps was to spread out between these two points, Group Marcks would be sent south-east to Maaten el Grara, to cut off any units attempting to escape north-westwards along the Trigh el Abd, XX Corps would meanwhile deploy along the road north of Agedabia, prepared if necessary to deal with a southward thrust from Benghazi.

At first light on the 23rd Briggs despatched the Queen's Bays towards Saunnu, with C Battery of 8 Field Regiment RA in support. The morning was extremely foggy, and the tank squadrons found it difficult to maintain visual contact with each other. Saunnu was reached by 0800 hrs however, and was clear of enemy troops, for Marcks Group had departed for Maaten el Grara at 0500 hrs that morning and a message from Panzerarmee Headquarters urgently ordering 21 Panzer Division to move to occupy Saunnu had gone astray.

While the Bays were carrying out their mission the remainder of 2 Armoured Brigade set off northwards, with the tanks of 9 Lancers in the lead.

200 Guards Brigade was also heading northwards from the area of Bir el Uescaca to the east of Agedabia. After 6 miles travelling this column came under heavy shellfire from the Italians' positions, to which the 25-pdrs replied. Sgt de Villiers's section of 2-pdrs from 6 A/Tk Battery were brought into action against two vehicles towing anti-tank guns, and managed to destroy one of these plus its gun before the Guards broke off eastwards.

At about 1000 hrs to the north-east of the Guards action 9 Lancers in the van of 2 Ar-

moured Brigade reported a large body of motor transport to the left flank. A squadron of tanks was immediately pushed forward on to a ridge and three were lost at once to the anti-tank guns evidently dug in there. The enemy position was just north-west of Bir el Feheid. A Squadron of 9 Lancers on the left, meanwhile, feeling for the enemy flank reported 32 tanks with guns in position and a large number of other vehicles. It became apparent that the Brigade had bumped the edge of a large enemy column moving eastwards from the Agedabia-Antelat track. This was in fact 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions, moving towards Saunnu to prevent 1 Armoured Division's break-out. 21 Battery of 7 Field Regiment SAA went into action beside 9 Lancers, and the enemy's flanking forces withdrew into the desert haze. Nevertheless the Lancers and South African gunners had to remain in their positions to protect the great flow of Brigade and Divisional vehicles which was now moving off towards Saunnu. It was 1430 hrs before 9 Lancers could move off again.

Even as the main body of the Brigade was passing behind 9 Lancers, the vanguard had run into enemy forces once more, for just before noon 10 Hussars were fired on by German anti-tank guns, which were promptly chased off. While this brief encounter was in progress, some 14 enemy tanks were seen moving towards Brigade Headquarters. Two squadrons of 10 Hussars were promptly sent into the attack, supported by the 25-pdrs of 19 Battery, 7 Field Regiment SAA. 7 enemy tanks were stopped in this hour-long action but 10 Hussars lost 7 Crusaders and 2 Stuarts, and suffered particularly heavy casualties among their officers.

While the Hussars were thus engaged Brigade Headquarters accompanied by the bulk of 5 and 7 Batteries 2 A/Tk Regiment continued moving towards Saunnu to meet the Bays, who were now returning. At 1415 hrs the Brigade Headquarters with Queen's Bays leading crossed the Saunnu-Antelat track about 1½ miles west of Saunnu and turned north-west. 9 Lancers were still protecting the transport column and 10 Hussars were continuing their battle, reporting at 1515 hrs that they were picking up their wounded and destroying damaged vehicles. This was the last that Brigade Headquarters heard from 10

Hussars until 1830 hrs. Headquarters, the Bays and 8 Field Regiment RA continued their north-westerly course until they reached the Antelat-Msus track just north of Antelat at 1630 hrs. Here they were soon under shell fire from the German unit holding Antelat and were forced to move off north-east for three miles before laagering for the night.

1 Support Group had begun their move at first light via Bir el Fenscia, whence they were ordered north by Divisional Headquarters. The next stage of the move began at 1100, and soon became chaotic as the large battle involving 10 Hussars began immediately ahead of their line of march. Between 1 Support Group and the battlefield passed the streams of vehicles which composed the transport of 2 Armoured Brigade and 1 Divisional Headquarters.

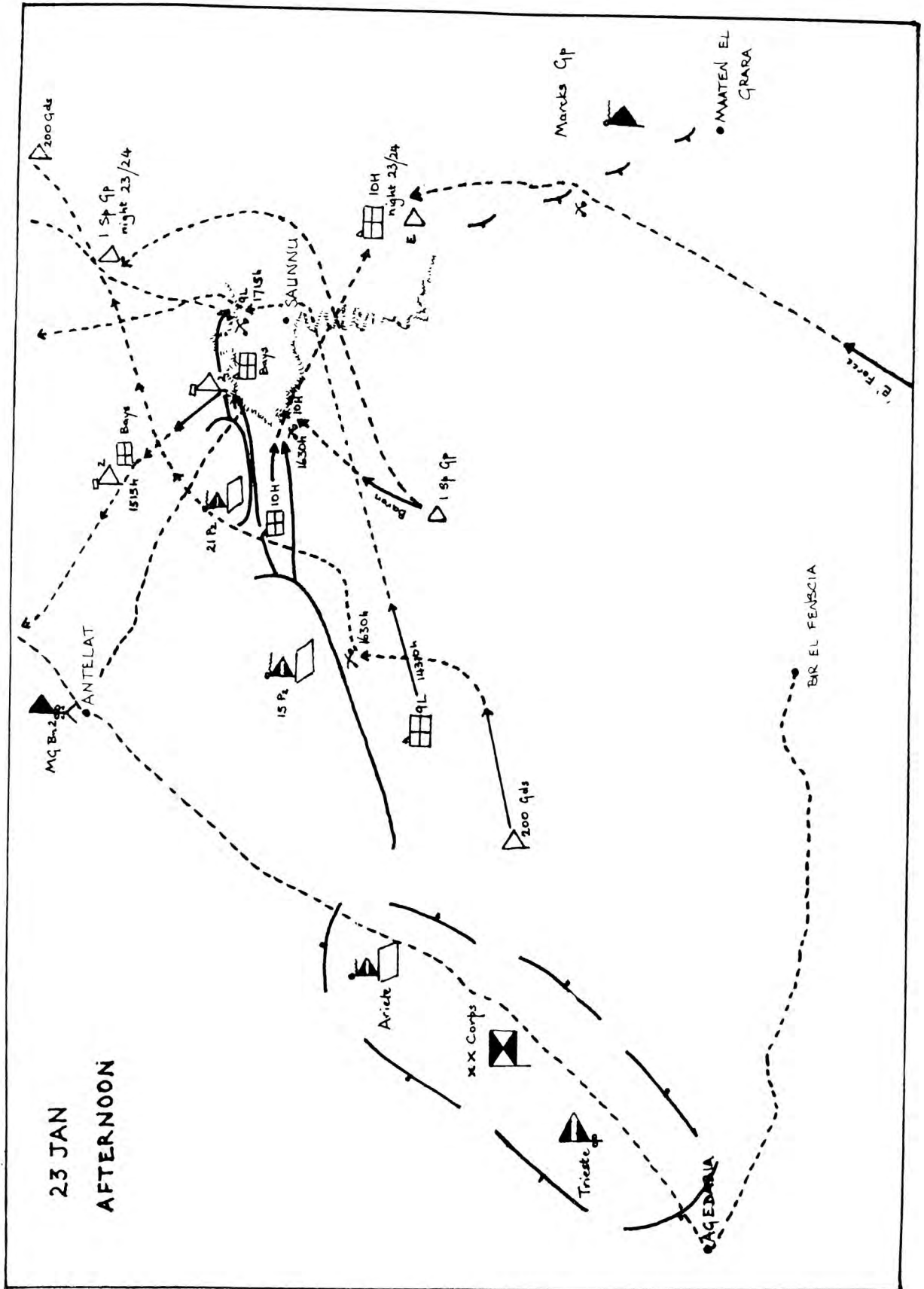
At about 1630 hrs, Baron Column, a part of the Support Group, ran into enemy forces about 5 miles west of Saunnu. They were attacked from the left by about 20 tanks, and the remaining two 25-pdrs of A Battery 11 Royal Horse Artillery and the five 2-pdrs of 237 Battery, 76 A/Tk Regiment went into action. At the same time as Baron Column came under attack, 10 Hussars, slightly to the west, were surprised by 14 tanks which opened fire from 4 000 yards. The Hussars, with 19 Field Battery SAA in support, retired eastwards and joined Baron's force. Two of the South African guns bogged down in the soft sand during this hectic move and had to be abandoned. The remaining guns were brought into action as the German tanks came over the ridge and swept the position with fire, from less than 2 000 yards. The Hussars' tanks were sent to hull-down positions behind the guns, which were operating at a great disadvantage through having to fire into the sun. The two British 25-pdrs soon suffered direct hits, and the surviving gunners moved across to aid the South Africans, who also fell victim to accurate shell and machine-gun fire. Three more 25-pdrs were destroyed by direct hits and 2 others were hit and brought out of action. The remaining South African gun stayed in action until its ammunition was exhausted.

As a result of the gunners gallantry most of the soft vehicles in the column managed to escape destruction, and five enemy tanks

were claimed as destroyed. The South African gunners lost touch with their own tanks after breaking off the action and made off independently towards Msus to reform. The remainder of 1 Support Group meanwhile moved eastwards around the Saunnu Depression and laagered about 5 miles north of the windpump. The remnants of 10 Hussars laagered to the south east of Saunnu.

At almost the same time as this action was taking place west of Saunnu, 9 Lancers and their supporting artillery were attacked in the Saunnu Depression itself. As has been mentioned, 9 Lancers had only managed to break away from the area of Bir el Feheid at about 1430 hrs. They then fell in behind the Brigade's transport as it moved towards Saunnu. The regiment was frequently held up by columns of transport and at about 1700 hrs, with sufficient petrol for only 10 miles further travel, the Regiment entered the Saunnu depression with its supporting artillery, 21 Field Battery SAA and TSM Fowler's troop from 8 A/Tk Battery, under the command of Lt W. R. Brown.

The 9 Lancers halted in the depression and received an order from Brigade to move towards the latter's position. This meant turning to the north-west and the column took up formation with C Squadron leading. The change of course brought the formation into the east-west arm of the 'L' shaped depression which is Saunnu, and the column's route to rejoin the Brigade would take it up the steep escarpment at the western end. Almost immediately as the formation turned into the east-west arm, and emerged from the cover afforded by the north-west arm, large numbers of enemy vehicles appeared out of the dust and the setting sun on top of the escarpment to the north-west. The British tank commanders were still trying to make out the composition of this formation when the Germans opened fire, and enemy tanks came down the left of the escarpment to engage the forward squadron. Major E. H. T. Thompson of 21 Field Battery immediately brought his guns into action. The Battery's F Troop was 500 yards forward of E Troop and engaged the enemy tanks coming along the south side of the depression. E Troop directed its fire on the enemy artillery and vehicles turning the tip of the escarpment. TSM



Fowler brought his 2-pdrs into action to the left of the field guns.

The Colonel of 9 Lancers ordered his A and B Squadrons to move round to attempt to attack the enemy right flank, but the much larger German formation was simply extending its flank with towed anti-tank guns, and despite A Squadron's success in destroying about five of these, the British tanks suffered heavy losses.

By this time the South African gunners were heavily engaged and running short of ammunition. E Troop had succeeded in silencing two German guns on the escarpment but it was necessary to turn one of the Troop's sections to aid F Troop who were finding it impossible to repulse the enemy armour. F Troop had in fact exhausted the supply of ammunition in its limbers and were unable to bring up further supplies through the hail of fire. Two guns were knocked out by direct hits and the crews of the other two were forced to abandon their weapons. After overrunning F Troop the Germans advanced on E Troop of 21 Field Battery, which had now turned through 90° to face the enemy tanks. F Troop too had now exhausted its ammunition supply and as each gun ran out, the crews had to abandon them and attempt their escape.

The crews of the 2-pdrs were in a slightly better position, for their guns were in effect self-propelled and they were able to stagger the withdrawal of their four portees, with guns still in action. Even so, before the men of Fowler's Troop could escape they lost 3 of their guns, Lt Brown and one other man were wounded and 6 others were later reported missing. The anti-tank gunners claimed four tanks destroyed, out of the seven that were seen smouldering in the Saunnu depression the next day.

The Guards too had run into the Afrika Korps net. That afternoon after having moved north-eastwards on a bearing calculated to bring them between Antelat and Saunnu the Forbes Column was again attacked at about 1630 hrs by about 15 tanks of 15 Panzer Division just south of Got el-Meccegheh. This onslaught came as a complete surprise to the 25-pdrs and G Troop of 6 A/Tk Battery, for Stuart tanks borrowed from 1 Support Group were supposed to be acting as a

screen. The artillery, caught in a depression, were immediately engaged and two of the anti-tank guns were destroyed almost at once, after firing only two and sixteen rounds respectively. One man was killed and another six injured. Despite the fierce fire Sgt de Villiers and Bdr Lesley continued to fire their guns from very exposed positions still on the portees, and claimed to have put 5 tanks out of action before Brigade Headquarters ordered them to break off the action. The column's remaining guns were brought into action from higher ground and after two more determined attacks the Germans broke off at sunset. After reforming, the column travelled all night and arrived about 12 miles north-east of Saunnu by first light on the 24th.

Rommel was fairly pleased with the events of the 23rd. Even though a staff error had allowed some elements of 1 Armoured Division to escape his net. Details of the day's actions indicated that considerable damage had been done and that Messervy's attempt at a break-out had been largely frustrated. On the 24th the task of destroying the enemy forces now trapped in the pocket between Agedabia and Maaten el Grara would be resumed.

Counsels of Caution

Fresh troops, the Burckhardt Group and the Italian Sabratha Division, had been brought up towards Agedabia as reserves and to protect the Axis lines of communication. But the attitude of the Italian High Command began to provide a new factor for Rommel to consider. The problem of dual Italian and German command in the North African theatre was becoming increasingly difficult. The retreat after 'Crusader' had seen serious flaws opening between German and Italian tactical appreciations, and Bastico, the Italian Commander, now began to show alarm at the extent of Rommel's current operation, which threatened to develop from a limited counter-attack into a full-scale offensive. Bastico was strongly of the opinion that the Italian troops were insufficiently recovered from the effects of 'Crusader', and that the supply position did not yet allow of extensive operations. In view of the possibility of a renewed British offensive and even of Anglo-French landings to the west he wanted Rommel to fall

back on the Agheila line once more lest disaster should now overtake the Axis forces in their exposed positions and the whole North African campaign be lost. Bastico's opinions therefore accorded with those of Ritchie rather more closely than with those of Rommel. Cavellero was hurriedly flown over from Rome with a directive from Mussolini backing Bastico's orders, but Rommel refused to discontinue his advance unless directed to by Hitler himself. Nevertheless Bastico was able to prevent the movement of any Italian infantry besides Sabratha Division from the El Agheila positions.

23 January for all its confusion and conflict had gone better for 1 Armoured Division than Messervy had any right to expect. The failure of the Panzer Divisions to fill the gap between Antelat and Saunnu in time had allowed the greater part of his force to slip through. Nevertheless, even the Panzers' delay would not have availed much if the tanks and the South African gunners had not fought with such gallantry. The damage to armour and guns was a worrying factor, for 10 Hussars were down to 8 fit tanks and 9 Lancers to 28, with only the Bays fairly strong at 34. Losses in 25-pdrs and 2-pdrs were also a matter for concern. In addition the British forces were still scattered, only 2 Armoured Brigade Headquarters with the Bays being where Messervy had intended, blocking the Antelat-Msus road, which would presumably form the axis of the enemy's next advance. The Scots Guards were also on this track, about 17 miles further north, having as yet operated separately from the remainder of 200 Guards Brigade. The bulk of Messervy's force, insofar as it was in a position to oppose an enemy advance could really only deal with one starting at Saunnu. The British forces then were ill-balanced and under-strength if Rommel should continue northwards, and even retreat looked difficult in the face of the continuing acute shortage of petrol.

Godwin-Austen, at midnight on 23/24 January, realised that 1 Armoured Division had not succeeded in doing a great deal of damage to Rommel's forces, and that it was unlikely to hold the enemy on the Antelat-Msus route. He therefore wanted preparations made for a possible withdrawal via Msus

and Mechili while 4 Indian Division made preparations to abandon Benghazi if necessary.

Ritchie however, persisted in thinking that Rommel's maintenance and supply problems would prevent any strong forward movement.

He continued to think in terms of a counter-stroke, for which forces should be stabilised and built up in the area of Msus and south of Benghazi, and although he authorised Godwin-Austen to use his discretion about withdrawal, he dictated that ground should be given only where tactically necessary.

On the night of 23/24 January, Rommel had still not received the full reports of the Afrika Korps' achievements for the day. Consequently he still believed the bulk of 1 Armoured Division to be south of the line Antelat-Saunnu, and directed the Afrika Korps, Gambara Corps, Marcks Group and Reconnaissance Detachment 33 to attack into that area on the 24th with a view to liquidating the main British force trapped there. Crüwell, commanding the Afrika Korps, realised that se-



Major-General Frank Messervy, commander of 1 Armoured Division.

vere losses had been inflicted on Messervy's formations, although not quite as severe as German reports claimed, and thought there was little point in this southward push, especially when a northward drive could prevent the reorganisation of the British forces. Rommel persisted with his plan however and only one of his battle groups made any contact, with E Force, south of Saunnu. Some damage was done and confusion caused, but the bulk of E Force still managed to work around Saunnu to the east, to laager south of Msus. Afrika Korps' claim to have destroyed 35 tanks and 7 armoured cars on the 24th must be discounted as almost pure myth.

While the main Axis forces were expending their energies to the south, smaller detachments were left in position along the Antelat-Saunnu line.

2 Armoured Brigade, with the Queen's Bays at its disposal, threw patrols forward towards Antelat, where they became involved in an exchange with German artillery and armour. 5 and 7 A/Tk Batteries were up in support of the Bays, but the majority of the action amounted simply to intermittent shelling. While this was going on, Brigade Headquarters, with 8 A/Tk Battery and the remnant of 10 Hussars, moved slightly further north towards Msus. The Brigade was now well below strength, for 9 Lancers had been attached to 1 Support Group north of Saunnu and were refitting to act as reserve. 200 Guards Brigade meanwhile moved eastwards towards the Antelat-Msus track. Godwin-Austen was very anxious that XIII Corps should not become involved in a running fight with the enemy, which would almost certainly end in major disaster and deprive the British forces in Benghazi and the Jebel of their flank guard. Nevertheless, Ritchie failed to take advantage of the respite afforded by Rommel's misdirected sweep on the 24th to pull his forces back to consolidate a sounder defence. Indeed the accent continued to be on a counterstroke, although it was still only possible for one brigade from 4 Indian Division to operate in the front area.

That night Ritchie told Auchinleck that he thought the situation was at last stabilising on the general line Antelat-Saunnu. He believed that Rommel had now exhausted his

forces and even thought that the Germans might withdraw to the general line Agedabia-El Haseiat. Every effort would now be made to stabilise a new line from Beda Fomm to Saunnu.

By the evening of the 24th however, Rommel had formed a more accurate picture of the British dispositions. Aerial reconnaissance had confirmed that there were about 2 000 British vehicles and 150 tanks in the area between Antelat, Saunnu and Msus. Although the size of the tank force was overestimated it did indicate the whereabouts of 1 Armoured Division. On the 25th the pursuit would begin from the Antelat-Saunnu line. At first light the main body of the Afrika Korps would drive towards Msus, with a Battle Group from Machine-Gun Battalion 2 and Reconnaissance Unit 3 on the left. 21 Panzer Division on the right flank would advance on Bir el Melezz, about 10 miles east of Msus, in order to prevent the British escape eastwards.

'The Msus Stakes'

On the morning of 25 January 2 Armoured Brigade Headquarters with the Queens' Bays and supporting artillery, which included three batteries of 2 A/Tk Regiment, was still just north of Antelat on the Msus track. A squadron of tanks was dispatched towards Antelat in order to reconnoitre the village, just as the German Machine-Gun Battalion 2 began its northwards move from Antelat. The Bay's supporting artillery was quickly involved in a fire fight and the tanks going to the gunner's aid were able to inflict some damage, though not without loss to themselves. It was soon evident however that the advancing German force was far stronger than had been anticipated and Brigade Headquarters ordered the tanks to withdraw. This they did, under the covering fire of 5, 7 and 8 A/Tk Batteries SAA. Lt Masterax of 5 A/Tk Battery has left a very graphic account of the ensuing action, in all its chaotic detail.

'We went nearer to Antelat to take up a defence-position, and as we got near it Honey tanks started to come back through us very rapidly. They just went through us without saying anything. Actually, we were now the most forward troops. The Queen's Bays were still behind us with their tanks, and a regi-

ment of field artillery had put down two guns just behind us. We naturally got very worried, and we searched with our glasses for signs of the enemy. There were more than signs — coming towards us, about three miles away, was a thick black enemy column, pouring over the hill. I counted about 40 tanks . . . Then, when we looked around the Queen's Bays had gone. We had had no orders to withdraw. In fact, we had asked the Colonel of the artillery regiment attached to the Bays for orders, and he had said: "Put your guns on the ground and stand." He had said the same thing to Maj Hudson, commanding our 7th Battery. The Colonel was then off, after the Queen's Bays'.

There was nothing more the anti-tank gunners could do but pull out themselves, and as the withdrawal got under way, other enemy columns were observed to the south and east, these formed the bulk of 15 Panzer Division. As the South Africans fell back to where Brigade Headquarters had been, they came under heavy shellfire and lost 3 men killed when one of 5 Battery's guns received a direct hit.

At about 1000 hrs the Brigade was ordered north-west for although 9 Lancers had rejoined the Brigade, their tank strength was too weak to offer significant resistance. The gunners and the Queens Bays now rejoined their Brigade and moved in box formation towards 'F' track, which ran eastwards from Msus. The rear of the column was under constant fire from the pursuing Germans and 5,7 and 8 A/Tk Batteries had to take turns in covering the Brigade box in this exposed position. After about an hour, the inevitable happened and 7 A/Tk Battery suffered a direct hit on one of their portees, and had to leave the five men to fall into enemy hands.

8 A/Tk Battery also lost a vehicle when one of their 8-cwt trucks struck a mine and had to be abandoned. A little further on, one of the Battery's gun lorries towing an 18-pdr was hit by shellfire and WOII W. T. Smith and L/Bdr W. Jones returned heavy fire to rescue the entire gun crew of six, with enemy tanks only 200 yards away. Later in the day WOII Smith rescued the crews of two Queens Bays tanks, and for his actions on the 24th he was awarded the Military Medal.

While 2 Armoured Brigade was running hard towards Msus 200 Guards Brigade, further north along the Antelat-Msus track was suddenly caught up in that mass of British transport making off to the north-east. The four Guards' columns were soon separated. Further columns with part of 6 A/Tk Battery came into action as early as 0830 having moved into the path of 15 Panzer Division's advance. Ingledew Column, also accompanied by 6 A/Tk Battery guns also ran into enemy formation and eventually pulled back 10 miles east of Msus.

Fortunately for 1 Armoured Division, Rommel's advance on the morning of the 25th had not gone precisely according to plan. 2 Armoured Brigade's rearguard was putting up enough resistance to make it necessary for 15 Panzer Division to turn north-westwards from their intended axis while 21 Panzer Division, which had been ordered to make an encircling move to the east of Msus, started later than planned owing to supply problems.

In front of the centre of the German advance 1 Support Group withdrew northwards in orderly fashion to arrive 15 miles south-east of Msus by about 1430 hrs. For 2 Armoured Brigade however the situation became increasingly confusing as transport attempted to break round and through the fast-moving German formations.

Lt Masterax of 5 Battery provides an eyewitness impression of the Brigade's withdrawal which illuminates a rapid disintegration of text-book procedures.

'There was no control; it was a disorganised run, with tanks, 25-pdrs — everyone mixed up together. We were still under fire from the enemy, which showed he was keeping up with us quite well. We came across Brigade Headquarters with the support group under Brigadier Briggs . . . and found some of our 8 Battery guns with him. I couldn't see anyone from 5 Battery with him — they must have gone on ahead. The group kept running until we were out of enemy fire, when we stopped, having covered about 15 miles. I found Col Parkin near the Brigade Armoured Command Post . . . and told him that I could not find 5 Battery. He sent me to find them, but although I searched among all the vehicles I was unsuccessful.

'Then we started up again and moved off. The run was so disorganised that groups of vehicles were continually breaking away from the column, moving into different sections of it and becoming hopelessly mixed up . . . Another officer . . . and I organised our guns, also some strange guns which I thought belonged to 73 Regiment RA, into a sort of rear fringe . . .

'We were still with a large group of Queen's Bays tanks. They formed up in squadrons and west back from us. What happened I don't know, but we didn't see them again. Other tanks dropped out through mechanical trouble or lack of petrol . . . We stopped then, and when we resumed our run part of the column, including our 8 Battery, reared off to the left towards Msus. I am not sure why they went that way, but it was probably to warn the people in Msus to get going. We kept going north-east to pass south of Msus. Later in the day 5 Battery rejoined us. They had been wandering around and just ran into us again.'

8 Battery's commander had in fact been given wrong information about the Brigade's rendezvous point and his guns, having lost contact with the rest of the Regiment, spent the night just south of Ras Nefiet.

By 1500 hrs the most of the Brigade box had succeeded in reaching 'F' track about 10 miles east of Msus, which had already fallen to 15 Panzer Division. As the move continued a dust storm blew up and visibility became very poor. In these conditions 7 A/Tk Battery lost contact with 2 A/Tk Regimental Headquarters, and the latter in turn became detached from Brigade Headquarters.

Lt Masterax describes Col Parkin's dilemma:

'We were travelling north-east, and knew vaguely that Mechili was somewhere to our east, and beyond that, Tobruk. There was no fortified area nearer than Mechili, and that was over 100 miles from Msus. We made for the road running east-west to Mechili, going through dry river beds, breaking down stone walls — generally keeping moving — and after a while stopped. The CO got on the blower to Briggs, who estimated that he was 12 miles ahead of us. We wanted to catch up with him so he said he would put up three green Verey lights. We were to take a bear-

ing on them and drive for an hour or two to meet up with him. Our objective was Charruba, roughly 70 miles west of Mechili. We had one tank left from the Queen's Bays, and this navigated on the Verey light bearing, but when we had travelled for an hour we found no sign of Brigade Headquarters.

'We stopped and Col Parkin again got on the blower. He said afterwards "It's no use. I am through to Brigade Headquarters but they don't know where they are, and don't know how to get to Charruba". We were ordered to go to Mechili. We travelled all that night — checking our petrol at about midnight. We were dog tired; as soon as we stopped most of the men went to sleep.

'The Colonel gave me the job of checking what we had in the column and what stores we had. Fortunately we had two 3-tonners loaded with petrol which had been going to the Queen's Bays. They had met us on the way and came back with us. I also found a Bren carrier company, Bofors guns, 25-pdrs, some tanks, and two colonels hanging around in the rear of the column. They didn't seem to care who was leading the column or where we were going. Col Parkin had taken over the column and was responsible for it. We divided the petrol between the various groups and they filled up as best they could. We were the only ones who did any sort of organising. We ourselves had enough petrol to take us to Mechili. All our food and water dumps were on the Mechili road and we came across all the echelons.

'As we went back more and more vehicles joined us, and in the darkness our guns joined various groups and so became separated. I did not know where the Colonel was. Capt Scruby's batman got into a truck with my batman and we lost them too.

'We travelled all that night until early morning, when we had an hour's sleep before resuming our journey. We got to Mechili at midday next day, 26 January, and were the first in.'

The Guards Brigade's adventures had also continued well into the afternoon. The 2-pdrs of 6 A/Tk Battery were still with this Brigade's columns and at about 1500 hrs as the petrol situation began to get critical a number of vehicles stopped at Msus aerodrome to

refuel. Sections of F Troop and G Troop 6 A/Tk Battery were travelling on the flank at this stage and soon came under enemy attack, for Msus had been occupied by German forces about three hours earlier. Forbes's column was cattered in all directions, with the bulk of the group making its way south for 3 miles before reforming.

A number of the South Africans' trucks and two 2-pdr guns were lost in the precipitous retreat, although of these all except one gun found their way eventually to the Regiment's B Echelon at Tmimi. After the narrow escape at Msus the column moved northwards towards Charruba, arriving at 0900 hrs on the 26th.

1 Support Group meanwhile had managed to escape without severe loss, at the enemy's hands, but only by siphoning petrol and destroying empty vehicles did it manage to get within 5 miles of Charruba by the morning of the 26th. By the end of the 25th Rommel's forward troops had consolidated a line from Msus to Melezza, where they had been halted by order at about 1630 hrs. The Italian XX Corps moved up to Antelat and to the north-east of Agedabia while the German 90 Light Division came up to the area south of Agedabia. Rommel's estimate of the situation was that the bulk of 1 Armoured Division's fighting strength had been destroyed, and that only 35 tanks could be left to the enemy, while the Afrika Korps alone had 57 fit with many more under repair. He also concluded that the bulk of the Division's artillery and supply services had been destroyed and that the British High Command now had no large formations in Cyrenaica with which to resume the offensive. As a spoiling operation to forestall Ritchie's plans for an offensive against the Agheila position the events of the last four days had amounted to an unqualified success. Nevertheless, the pursuit must now pause, for the Axis fuel position did not allow of any immediate movements in strength, and the 26th would be spent taking on supplies and salvaging the extensive booty which littered the area south of Msus.

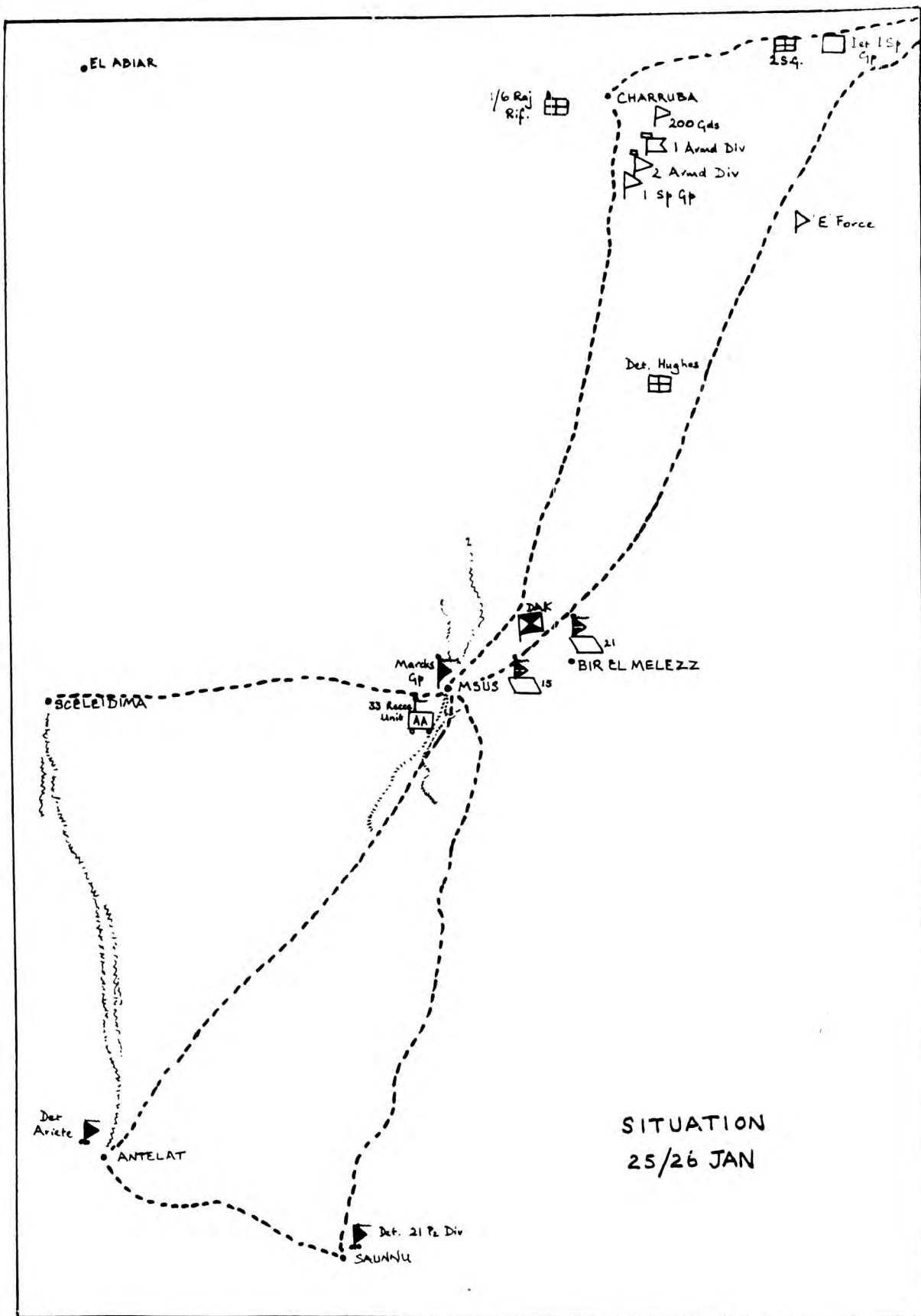
The renewed German onslaught on the morning of the 25th had rapidly convinced Godwin-Austen at XIII Corps Headquarters that Ritchie's hopes that Rommel had outrun his supplies were ill-founded. It seemed to him that with 1 Armoured

Division being forced northwards the evacuation of Benghazi must be ordered shortly in order to pull 4 Indian Division out of harm's way. Genl Ritchie however, although authorising Benghazi's evacuation in an emergency, still appeared to believe that a concerted attack by Tucker's Indian Division and the Desert Air Force could threaten Rommel's extended lines of communication and bring him to a halt. His Intelligence staff urged that as the enemy had not yet exploited the coast road they could not be intending a prolonged stay and could be expected to withdraw before very long. It was stressed however that Rommel was well known for taking advantage of any opportunity offered by his opponents, even to the extent of taking dangerous chances, the hint being that a premature retreat by XIII Corps could bring about a German success which would otherwise have been unlooked for, even by the enemy commander. On the afternoon of the 25th Auchinleck himself arrived at 8 Army Headquarters and agreed with Ritchie that there was still time to stop Rommel.

Meanwhile Godwin-Austen was issuing orders for the evacuation of Benghazi and for 1 Armoured Division to withdraw to Mechili to cover the Indians' retreat. Later that evening Ritchie began to waver over XIII Corp's withdrawal to the Derna-Mechili line, and finally just before midnight he countermanded the Corps' withdrawal. Instead Ritchie ordered 4 Indian Division to operate columns against Rommel's communications north of Agedabia while 1 Armoured Division should oppose any further advance on Charruba and secure the Indians' left.

Godwin-Austin was somewhat disturbed by Ritchie's taking control in this manner, for he did not think the 8 Army commander could have formed an accurate impression of the actual state of XIII Corp's armoured formations. Nor was Tucker very pleased about the role he was called upon to play.

That same evening Auchinleck received a signal from the Prime Minister. Churchill was extremely upset by the retreat of XIII Corps and by the evident necessity of abandoning Benghazi. Rommel seemed to have dashed the plans for a great Allied success in North Africa to offset the tales of disaster from the Far East. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly the news from North Africa implied the



failure of 'Crusader' and the ruin of 'Acrobat', the proposed landing in French North Africa. All that Auchinleck could do in response was to assure his chief that efforts were being made to stabilise the situation and that even now there was a chance of regaining the initiative.

But on the 26th, 1 Armoured Division was still pulling itself together at Charruba and Mechili, and by midday had only managed to collect 41 tanks, 40 25-pdrs and 20 anti-aircraft guns. Nor did Messervy think there was much more to come, and he submitted that at this strength he could scarcely promise to protect Taker's flank that day. But Messervy, Taker and Godwin-Austin were not to be heeded by their superiors and at midnight on 26/27 January orders were issued for 1 Armoured Division to patrol westwards from Charruba towards El Abair, to hold the former point in order to prevent any German advance and to move positively against any enemy armour moving westwards. The Polish Brigade was being moved up to hold the Mechili area and 150 Infantry Brigade was coming in to occupy defences across the Trigh el Abd.

Rommel Exploits His Success 26-29 January

While Ritchie was setting up his counter-stroke, Rommel planned to exploit his success. Throughout the 26th the Axis forces made no significant moves. Wireless intercepts made by the German command that day showed that if Rommel advanced towards Mechili, 4 Indian Division would attack southwards to destroy his communications. It also seemed that there was some disagreement among the British commanders and that Benghazi might be evacuated. Rommel therefore concluded that his most practical move was to turn to cut off 4 Indian Division's retreat eastwards by moving unexpectedly across the bad terrain to the east of Benghazi on the 28th. Only part of the Axis force would be used there, to conserve fuel, while the Afrika Korps would demonstrate towards Mechili. On the 27th Rommel's forces moved into position under cover of sand and rain storms, while 21 Panzer Division feinted to the north-east. Both moves were observed by 8 Army reconnaissance in fact, but Ritchie drew false conclusions from the observations. He decided that

Rommel had divided his forces and that both 4 Indian Division and 1 Armoured Division were now superior to the individual groups facing them. He also decided that the force apparently heading towards Mechili was the stronger of the two Axis groups, and ordered Messervy's Division to advance southwards against its rear, leaving Taker's men to watch their own flank.

With The Guards Again

While all this was in progress the gun groups of 2 A/Tk Regiment was moving back from Mechili to Charruba, leaving the Regiment's wagon lines at the former with a group of 18-pdrs as protection. The gun group spent the night of 27/28 January at Charruba where they were reunited with their 6 Battery, which had arrived there with the Guards' columns on the morning of the 26th. On the morning of the 28th 2 A/Tk Regiment was placed in support of 200 Guards Brigade. 5 and 8 Batteries were attached to the Coldstream Guards column while 6 Battery and a troop of 5 Battery accompanied the Scots Guards, who had joined their Brigade after the disasters of the 25th.

On the morning of the 28th Rommel's drive on Benghazi was well under way and had succeeded in reaching Regima by about 1100 hrs. By noon it was apparent to Taker that unless 1 Armoured Division came to his assistance Benghazi was lost. Ritchie at last accepted that the evacuation of Benghazi



General Auchinleck at his Headquarters.

must be ordered, but that afternoon Rommel's forces had already taken Regima, Benina and Coefia, and by evening the Indian Division had been forced out of Sceleidima and Solluch. Only by destroying large amounts of equipment were elements of 4 Indian Division able to make their escape though the Axis net around Benghazi that night. By 1000 hrs on the 29th Rommel was in possession of Benghazi.

While Toker's men had been fighting their brief battle to the west, 1 Armoured Division had been occupied in a southwards probe towards Msus, to strike at the communication of 21 Panzer Division's push towards Mechili. The two battalion groups of the Guards Brigade supported by 2 A/Tk Regiment SAA led the Divisional reconnaissance and in the late afternoon encountered tanks sent out by 15 Panzer Division.

Accounts differ as to the number of enemy tanks in the force, some estimates being as high as 18, but a troop of 5 A/T Battery under TSM Swart engaged 4 of the enemy and claimed to have disabled 2 in the failing light. Both sides claim that the other withdrew into the twilight and certainly the Armoured Division returned to Charruba, arriving there at 0300 hrs the next morning.

By midnight on 28/29 January Ritchie had reconciled himself to a withdrawal through the Jebel, although he thought it unlikely that Rommel would follow up and therefore determined to give as little ground as possible, 8 Army would in any case fall back on a line from Mechili to Tengeder, troops to the north swinging eastwards on the hinge of these two positions as the situation dictated.

By the morning of the 29th Rommel was in possession of Benghazi, and was preparing to salvage the considerable quantities of war material which would aid his army's further progress. For the present however, lack of fuel made it impossible for him to launch a full scale pursuit of 8 Army, and only smaller battle groups could be used to attack the British rearguard as 4 Indian Division made its way east through the Jebel. Nor least of the advantages afforded by Rommel's recent success was that it had eliminated any chance of a British offensive in the near future. Western Cyrenaica could be occupied by small

advance groups while the remainder of the Axis forces made a final recuperation from the effects of 'Crusader'.

As Toker's men fell back in the north, columns from 1 Armoured Division, including 2 A/Tk Regiment's guns, were sent to cover their retreat. Serious fighting would not start again for some months however, and in the absence of a determined pursuit by Rommel, Godwin-Austen began to urge the organisation of a defensive position in the Gazala-Alem Hamza area, some 30 miles west of Tobruk. Although it might prove necessary in the long run to fall back on the Egyptian frontier positions around Sollum and Halfaya, the advantages of building up Tobruk as a base for future operations were increasingly tempting, and by 4 February, the decision had been taken by 8 Army, to put all possible reinforcements into the Gazala Line.

Since 21 January the British had had 1 390 men killed, wounded or captured, 42 tanks destroyed in action and another 30 damaged or broken down and abandoned, as well as 40 field guns lost, in addition to a great deal of transport and supplies either destroyed or captured. 2 A/Tk Regiment's losses were 1 officer and 4 men killed, 1 officer and 11 other ranks wounded, and another 17 other ranks missing presumed captured. In addition 8 2-pdrs had been lost and 3 18-pdrs, as well as several other vehicles. The strength of the unit was now 23 officers, 472 white other ranks and 122 Non-European Army Service Corps Troops.

For Auchinleck and Ritchie however, perhaps more worrying than these physical losses, was the exposure of the shortcomings of the 2-pdr tank- and anti-tank gun, and of the mechanical weakness of the Crusader tank. The failure of 1 Armoured Division to inflict more than the lightest casualties on Rommel's Mediterranean supply line, would the dangers of committing to battle troops unused to desert conditions. As for the strategic results of the setback; the loss of western Cyrenaica was a serious blow mainly because its airfields were of such importance. Malta, the launching point for the assault of Rommel's Mediterranean supply line, would come under increasingly severe attack, which would inevitably allow Axis shipping a degree of immunity and which would hasten Rommel's build-up for a renewed offensive.