000463

DESTRUCTION OF AN ARMY

The First Campaign in Libya Sept. 1940–Feb. 1941

THE ARMY AT WAR

CONTENTS

To be purchased from His Majesty's Stationery Office at: York House, Kingsway, London, W.C.2; 120 George Street, Edinburgh, 2; 39–41 King Street, Manchester, 2; 1 St. Andrew's Crescent, Cardiff; 80 Chichester Street, Belfast; or through any bookseller.

Printed by Harrison & Sons Ltd., London. S.O. Code No. 70-382. Wt. 2098

PRICE 7D. OR 20S. FOR 40 COPIES.

DESERT ATTACK. A British motorised column moving towards Bardia.

The Army  *at War*

Destruction of an Army

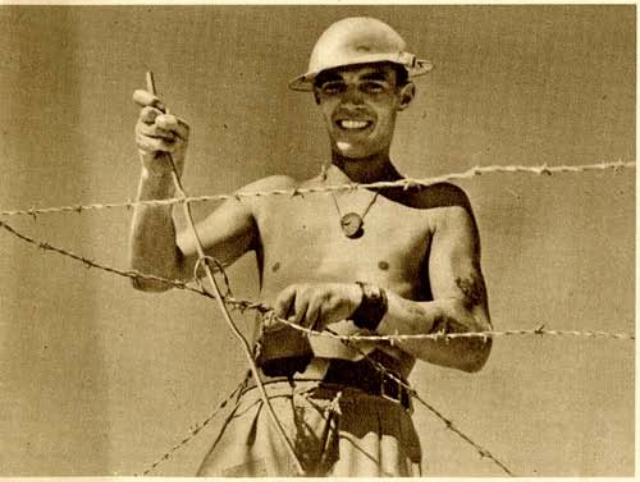
The First Campaign in Libya: Sept. 1940–Feb. 1941

Issued for The War Office
by The Ministry of
Information

LONDON: HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE

SAND . . .

DUST . . .



HEAT . . .

COLD . . .

ROCK . . .

WATER

1

A Desert the Size of India

THE LIBYAN CAMPAIGN was the first example of a desert war between two fully mechanised armies. The nature of the country presented special problems—great distances, lack of water, and absence of cover—but its very size and featurelessness offered the fullest advantages to the army possessing superior mobility.

To understand the course of the campaign itself, and the conditions in which it was fought, it is necessary to form a mental picture both of the immediate theatre of war and of the gigantic background of desert. And here a word of caution is needed, for the flowery phrases of novels and of fifty-year-old guide books, conceived in the days when camels plodded silently from one oasis to another, no longer apply. The odour of romance must give way to the smell of petrol; journeys which in former campaigns took weeks to accomplish are now made in a single day.

North-east Africa, taken as a whole, is the driest area in the world. Rain falls in sufficient quantity to support a thin drought-resisting vegetation, only on the hills bordering the Red Sea and along the Mediterranean coast. Inland lies the vast triangle of the Libyan Desert, roughly the size and shape of India. In the north it extends from Cairo for 1,200 miles westward to the hills of Tunisia, and southward for a thousand miles to where the light summer rains of the Sudan cover the sandy wilderness with scrub. A continuous desert thus stretches over the whole of western Egypt and the north-western Sudan, and over the whole of Libya. A single belt of highlands, consisting of the rock masses of Ennedi, Erdi and Tibesti, alone separates it from the deserts of the French Sahara farther west.

Over all this country showers of rain occur only at intervals of many years. Wind erosion, continued for countless ages, has made the surface as naked and lifeless as the face of the moon. Yet in isolated spots, separated from one another by distances of several hundreds of miles, this very erosion has produced water in the desert. For so much land has been blown away, and the surface lowered to form such deep depressions, that a water-bearing stratum which elsewhere lies at a great depth underground has here been reached and exposed. The source of the water is doubtful, but much certainly seeps in from rainier parts of Africa far south of the confines of the desert. At the bottoms of some of these depressions this artesian water stands in shallow wells, shaded by clumps of date palms. In others, such as the great oases of Siwa and Kharga, it gushes out so freely as to support a settled though isolated population and to irrigate gardens and crops, before draining away to evaporate in malarial lakes and treacherous swamps of crusted salt.

The desert landscape is one of sharp contrasts both in colour and form. Under a vivid blue sky a column of army lorries will bump for days along a desert track at 15 to 25 miles an hour, over a grey plateau of broken stone, or at a faster speed across limitless plains of brown pebbles, dotted here and there with flat-topped hills of black or white rock. Sometimes the ground is hard; sometimes a bed of

DUST CLOUDS AND WHEEL TRACKS betray the movement of mechanised forces in the war zone near the coast. These Bren-gun carriers, manned by Australians, are on manœuvres under typical conditions.

powdered clay will be thrown up by the wheels into choking clouds of white dust, visible for miles to watchful enemy aircraft. Then suddenly the whole ground falls away in a series of terraces from the brink of an escarpment, possibly a thousand feet in depth, which runs both to right and left for a hundred miles or more. One overlooks a vast depression in which shimmering sand dunes, the debris of an erosion from which the dust has long since blown away, reach out in long lines to the farthest horizon. Not a vestige of life can be seen anywhere.

A desert as such is not an obstacle to motor transport. Rather the reverse. For though movement is slower, and the wear and tear to vehicles is greater than along a road, it is possible to take tanks and lorries across most of the country to any destination without any of the usual restrictions of route imposed by rivers, bridges or mountains. Ranges of dunes and the steep cliffs of the greater escarpments form the only real barriers.

But this freedom of movement presents its special difficulties. For it implies a lack of physical features and recognisable landmarks by which one can find one's way. Though the wheel-tracks of a single vehicle may be traced over the surface for many years after they were made, an army in a short time makes such a multiplicity of tracks in all directions that it is not safe to assume that any of them will lead eventually to the spot required. Moreover, in war-time, transport movement must be done largely at night, and without lights, in order to avoid enemy air observation. The consequent difficulties of navigation, and the continuous risk of losing the way on the journeys of 50 to 100 miles which have commonly to be made, can readily be imagined.

Lack of frequent watering places is not in itself a serious problem. A force in rapid movement can travel great distances on the water it carries with it. But when an army remains concentrated in a desert theatre of war, its strength is limited by the total water supplies available. And since the necessities of war demand the largest possible concentration, the daily allowance per man must be cut down to a level which causes much hardship, dirt and discomfort. These troubles are accentuated by the climate and by the nature of the ground.

The climate is harsh. The violent changes of temperature always associated with a desert increase progressively the farther one goes inland away from the steadying effect of the sea. The prevailing northerly wind is mild enough, and thanks to it even in summer the nights are cool. But for periods of from one to four days on end, disturbances cause the wind to swing round to the east, south or west, and to rise to storm strength. In winter bitterly cold, it defies all attempts to keep it out. It whistles through clothing and bivouacs, and blows down tents precariously pegged into the few inches of soft ground which is often all that covers the solid rock beneath. In summer these southerly winds, desiccated and superheated by the great sands of the interior, may rise to such temperatures as to feel like blasts of flame. In spring and autumn hot and cold may alternate within a few days.

Dust gradually loosened from the crumbling rock is swept away by the wind as soon as it is formed ; and over remote, untrodden areas the quantity picked up by even a high wind amounts to no more than a thin mist. But an army, by constantly breaking up the surface with its feet and wheels, produces, wherever it goes, an ankle-deep dust. This the wind raises into clouds of unbelievable density. The sun becomes obscured ; dust cakes on skin and clothes ; it swirls into food, and darkens the visors of fighting tanks.

Dust is a serious nuisance only in the main war zone near the coast. In much of the interior, where the ground is buried beneath rolling billows and breakers of clean sand

ALGERIA
SHOTT MELRHIR
SHOTT EL JERID
TOZEUR
SFAX
GABES
ZUARA
TRIPOLI
KHOMS
MOSURATA
GULF OF SIDRA
BARCE
BENGHAZI
BININA
SOLUK
TUGGURT
NALUT
MIZDA
TRIPOLITANIA
TRIPOLI
GHADAMES
GIOFRA OASES
HON
MARADA OASIS
JALO
AUGILA OASES
SELLA
FUHJA
SOUTHERN
FORT FLATTERS
LIBYA
FEZZAN
CLAYTON
TRAGHEN
MURZUK
GATRON
GHAT
ALGERIA
SAHARA DESERT
TUMMO
CLAYTON CAPTURED
TURKU
DORMANO
LECLERC
TEKRO
FRENCH EQUATORIAL AFRICA

THE DESERT ARENA

APPROXIMATE ROUTES OF LONG RANGE PATROLS

RAILWAYS — RIVERS

ROADS — TRACKS

SCALE MILES.

0 100 200 250

CRETE
CYPRUS
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
CYRENE
APOLLONIA
DERNA
EBEL AKHDAR
EL GAZALA
TOBRUK
EL ADEM
BARDIA
SOLLUM
SIDI BARRANI
MERSA MATRUH
ALEXANDRIA
PORT SAID
ISTHMUS OF SUEZ
SUEZ CANAL
CAIRO
SUEZ
HAIFA
PALESTINE
JAFFA
SYRIA
TRANS-JORDAN
DISUSED RAILWAY
SAUDI ARABIA
RED SEA
CYRENAICA
EL DEFFA
HAZI
MOGHARA
SINAI PENINSULA
WARABUB OASIS
SIWA OASES
BAHARIYA OASIS
BAWITI
GREAT SAND SEA
FARAFRA OASIS
DAKHLA OASIS
EGYPT
NILE
KHARGA OASIS
LUXOR
KUFRA OASES
BARIS DESERT
KUR KUR OASIS
ASWAN DAM
EL JOF
BISHARA (WELL)
MOORE'S MARCH
SARRA (WELL)
OWEINAT
EL SHEB OASIS
WADI HALFA
SELIMA OASIS
ANGLO EGYPTIAN SUDAN
PORT SUDAN
SUAKIN
MEROWE
BIR EN NATRON
ATBARA
LIBYAN MTS.
G.H.DAVIS

hundreds of feet in height, the conditions are different. It is here that true sand-storms occur, when the whole surface begins to move, and heavy masses of stinging grains sweep low over the land like vast aerial rivers, under an almost clear sky.

It may be helpful to consider the Libyan Desert as divided into two zones, an inner and an outer. The outer desert consists of an inverted " L " of country whose arms stretch southward up the west bank of the Nile and westward along the Mediterranean coast. Since in this zone the oases lie within easy reach of one another, the country has been known from ancient times. Across the northern and western arm of the " L," some 150 miles in width, caravan traffic has for ages plied between the sea coast and the long east-west depression which contains the oases of Siwa, Jarabub, Jalo, Augila, Marada and Hon, and reaches far into Tripolitania. Another chain of oases runs from Siwa in a south-easterly direction away into Upper Egypt. Access to these from the Nile has always been possible.

Most of this Outer Desert came into prominence during the war of 1914–1918, when we were fighting the Senussi. It became known to the army in Egypt as the " Western Desert," to distinguish it from the Sinai or " Eastern Desert," where other operations were taking place. The name has stuck, although, as can be seen from the map, it constitutes but a narrow borderland to the great Inner Desert behind. For two reasons the hinterland remained unknown and almost unexplored until long after the last war. The country beyond the nearer oases is entirely waterless for distances of 300 to 400 miles, until the remote oases of Kufra are reached. In addition to this, the Inner Desert is cut off from the north and east by the greatest continuous mass of sand dunes in the world—The Great Sand Sea, which forms an almost impenetrable barrier 600 miles long and 150 miles wide along the western frontier of Egypt.

We must now turn our attention to the Mediterranean portion of the Outer Desert : to the coast itself and the long strip of plateau immediately inland—featureless, stony and infinitely drab—which the Bedouin call Ed Deffa. For it was here that the main operations of the Libyan Campaign took place. In looking at this part, one must think in terms of hundreds rather than thousands of miles. Further reference to the immensities of the Inner Desert can be left until the later chapter which deals with the activities of the Long Range Desert Group far away in the south and south-west.

The coastline from Alexandria westward to Cyrenaica is flat. The beach is protected from the waves by a series of limestone reefs. In most places the beach rises to a single range of coastal dunes made up of a peculiar limestone sand of dazzling whiteness, formed from the debris worn from the outer reefs. Below the loose surface sand the grains in the course of centuries have become re-cemented together to form a porous rock. Water from the winter showers, which penetrate some 30 miles inland over the plateau behind, is held up by these dunes, and collects in the porous rock beneath as a shallow layer only 3 feet deep, resting upon a substratum of salt water filtered in from the sea. Hence it is impossible to sink wells. Long ago the Romans overcame this difficulty by making a network of stone-lined galleries or aqueducts into which the fresh water could trickle, and out of which it could be pumped without drawing up the salt water from below. Centuries of decadence have allowed most of the Roman work to become buried and forgotten, till now only a long straggling line of date-palms and Bedouin settlements can maintain a mean existence. But the re-use of the ancient aqueducts, cleaned out and extended by the Royal Engineers, made it possible to obtain enough water to support our army during the campaign.

Behind the dunes and the water belt, a strip of earthy country, 1 to 4 miles wide, which is a quagmire after rains and a dust-

bowl at other times, rises gently to the foot of the low escarpment. Enough rain falls in winter to maintain sparse bushes, and here and there a fitful patch of cultivation. Beyond and above stretches the stony Deffa, featureless save for slight hollows floored by flat pans of red dried mud.

As one travels southward over stony tracks, the scanty vegetation ceases altogether with the decreasing rainfall at a distance of 50 miles from the coast. But even here in ancient times wandering nomads and their flocks managed to get enough water. At the edges of the pans they dug deep cisterns out of the solid rock, and in these was stored the water which at intervals of several years still fills the pans by drainage from the land around. From time to time the cisterns or " birs " have been cleared of debris, and the excavated material, accumulating through the centuries, has grown into mounds which form the only landmarks that can be located on the map. The water in these cisterns has been used for the army's needs, but the supply, being local, is uncertain, and varies from year to year.

No accurate census of the modern peacetime population between Alexandria and the Libyan frontier has been made, but it has been estimated at about 70,000. It is composed almost entirely of nomadic or semi-settled Bedouin, who raise camels and small cattle, and grow a little grain. Mersa Matruh (with a population of 6,000) and Sollum (up to 4,000) are the only towns worthy of the name.

Both Mersa Matruh and Sollum provide small harbours, and there are one or two other points of anchorage. For instance, it is possible to land stores at Sidi Barrani by boat from vessels lying a mile off shore, but ships may have to wait several days for favourable conditions. Elsewhere, owing to the reefs, landing on the coast is always attended with risk even in a moderate breeze.

At Sollum, and westward of it along the coast of Cyrenaica, the plateau closes in, so that the cliffs in most places fall direct to the water's edge. Bardia, Tobruk, Derna and Apollonia possess small harbours, but there are no good ports between Alexandria and Benghazi.

Inland, the desert plateau of Cyrenaica continues westward as far as Derna. From there onwards it is separated from the coast by the rolling highlands of the Gebel Akhdar or Green Hills, a comparatively smiling country where streams of water flow, and farming is possible.

Communications are easy to describe. From Alexandria a single line of broad gauge railway runs west as far as Matruh ; and a tarmac road as far as Sidi Barrani. From there to the frontier at Sollum, until the Italians started work on it after their advance into Egypt, there was nothing but a rough track through the coastal dust and mud. On the Italian side they had constructed an excellent tarmac road along the whole coastline of Libya as far as the Egyptian frontier, and subsidiary roads between Benghazi and Derna. Inland, communications consisted merely of the tracks which the wheels of motor traffic had worn for themselves during the past twenty years.

KUFRA, remote oasis of the Inner Desert, where water, seeping below the desert from the far south, gushes freely enough to support a settled life.

2

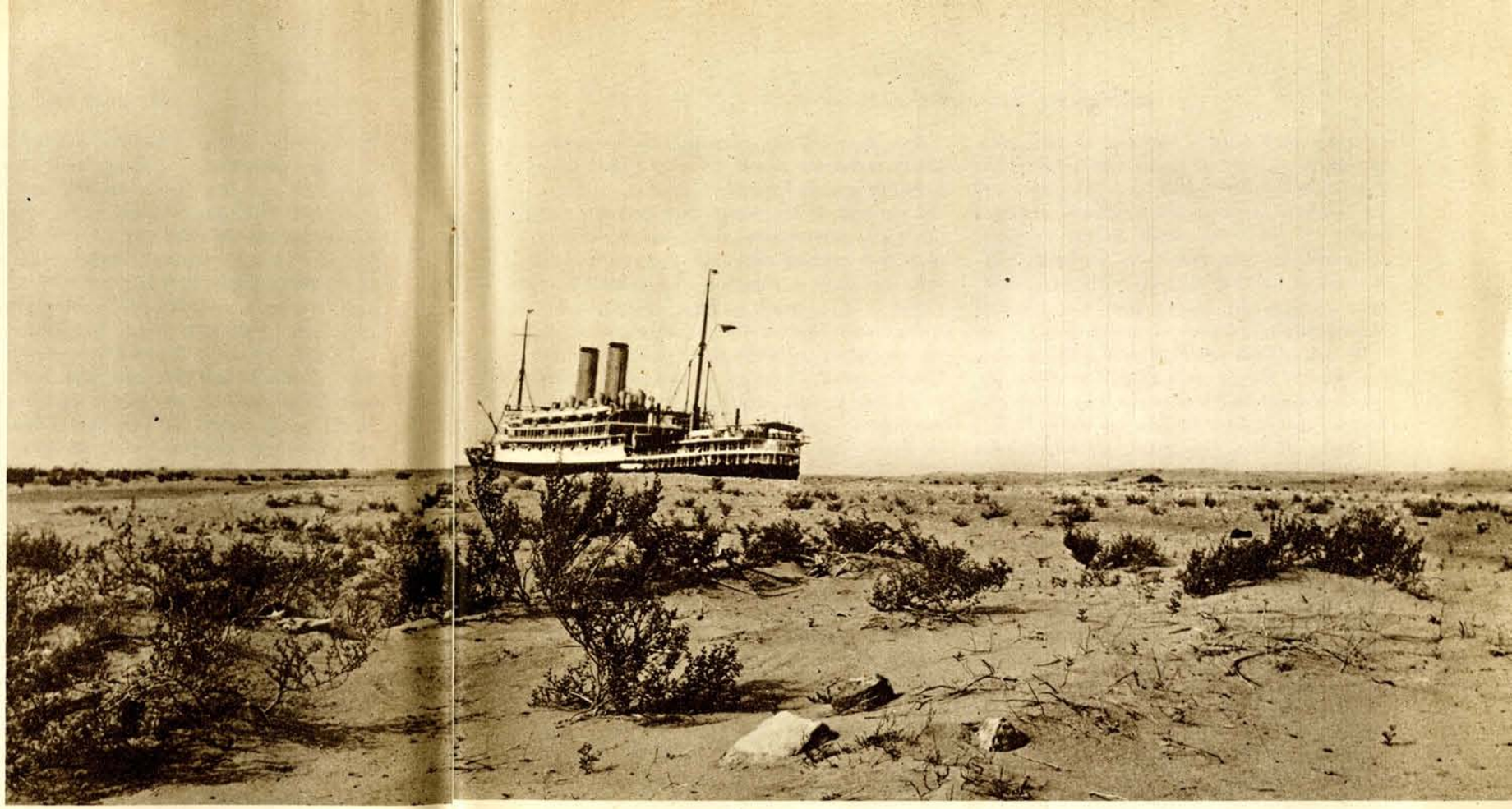
The Prize was Suez

THE CHIEF strategic importance of Egypt lies in the command it gives of the Suez Canal, which connects the eastern oceans with the Mediterranean. Even before the canal was cut, the Isthmus of Suez had been for centuries a route of great trade and military importance. The route which runs along the northern coast of the Sinai Peninsula, although little more than a scarce-defined camel track, has in the course of history seen the movement eastward and westward of many armies and many famous soldiers—Rameses, Alexander the Great and Napoleon among them—all struggling for possession of the vital artery that links east and west.

The opening of the canal in 1869 turned Egypt from a terminus into a halt on the world stage route. Not only is the canal important as a line of communication, but it is scarcely less so as a potential base, thanks to the ports of Port Said and Suez, and their connection with Alexandria.

The maintenance of the Suez Canal as a highway, open to every peaceful nation, has long been one of the keys to British foreign policy. The need to defend Egypt and the canal against attack by nations bent on world domination explains much of the fighting in the Middle East in the last war, as it explains why to-day British forces are fighting against the enemy on a bleak desert in North Africa.

Modern warfare is swift, and we have seen how vast mechanised armies can swoop upon great areas. To-day the outer defences of an objective must be deep and extensive. The canal area itself is well defended, but the threats to it came from forces that were situated hundreds of miles away. The chances of a German attack from the east after a drive through the Balkans and Asia Minor originally seemed remote. But there was a clear and immediate threat from the west, where, on the Libyan frontier of Egypt, the Italians had massed a huge army.



THE SUEZ CANAL, strategic focus and a main artery of the world's trade, is vulnerable to attack by mechanised armies from distances seemingly remote.

In the north the territories of the Levant under French mandate, and the British-mandated territory of Palestine, together with a friendly Turkey in the background, seemed to provide an adequate bulwark against an attack from that direction. To the west the Egyptian desert formed an obstacle to an invader, while the strong French forces in North Africa were ready to harass the Italians on their western frontier, and so relieve any pressure on the Egyptian front.

The sudden collapse of France dramatically changed the situation. When on 17th June, 1940, Marshal Pétain asked for armistice terms, the British High Command in the Middle East hoped that the French colonies and overseas possessions would continue the struggle. But after some hesitation General Nogues in North Africa and General Mittelhauser in Syria decided to obey the orders to capitulate. Their capitulation threw down the barrier of Syria. Moreover, it released very large Italian air and ground forces for use against the western frontier of Egypt, since they no longer had anything to fear from the French North African Army.

Also the Balkan aspect became more important. Germany was looking that way, and the defenders of Egypt could not ignore the possibility of the war spreading through Eastern Europe to the Black Sea and the Levant.

The British withdrawal from Dunkirk had a marked, if not an immediately apparent, effect on the Middle East. To cope with the growing Italian menace from Libya, reinforcements of men and material were necessary to make good the loss of power caused by the

defection of France. The loss of men and equipment at Dunkirk meant that the Middle East had to go short for a time. Not only were our forces numerically below the safe number needed to resist the enemy in the changed circumstances, but there was a shortage of reserves of fighting material. Moreover, the short route to the Middle East, through the Mediterranean, became precarious.

We had always known that if Italy entered the war we should be subjected to strain in the Mediterranean ; but we had never reckoned that we should have to bear the strain alone. In spite of the difficulties, reinforcements began to flow into Egypt, but on 28th October, at a time when the situation was looking more promising than it had since the Italian entry into the war, Italy invaded Greece. We had to take the risk of weakening the air arm in Egypt to help the Greeks. The decision to do so proved to be not only honourable but also wise. The heroic resistance of the Greeks, and our own sure and steady accumulation of reinforcements, dashed the Italian hopes on two fronts. Their attack on Egypt was brought to a standstill, and while they hesitated our forces grew. Something like a miracle had been accomplished. In June the situation had seemed bleak. We had lost our Allies to the north and west ; we were outnumbered by the enemy ; we were short of men and equipment, and our communications with Britain were slow and uncertain.

Happily we could rely on our communications with the East, and this meant the arrival of a steady stream of reinforcements from Australia, New Zealand and India. Troops of this quality greatly relieved the original anxieties about the defence of Egypt, and rendered possible the later launching of our counter-offensive.

Thus in the six months that passed we grew in strength, and by the end of the year it was possible for General Wavell to order an offensive in the Western Desert and to hurl the Italian invaders off Egyptian soil.

But, in the autumn of 1940, Graziani, as he gazed across the desert towards Egypt, must have felt quietly confident. He did not know the strength of our forces, but he knew that he greatly outnumbered them, and the history of the last war had taught him that even a small force could be a threat to the defenders of Egypt. If a small number of tribesmen, strengthened by a handful of Turks, could lock up a substantial British force in the Western Desert during the first World War, what could he not do with his vast army, his mechanised equipment, the aid of a strong air force, and a navy that had promised to take charge of the Mediterranean ?

A grim disillusion was coming to the Italian army—the loss of 133,000 prisoners, 1,300 guns and 420 tanks in two months !

Marshal Graziani, at fifty-nine, was the most spectacular of Italian generals. He was commissioned in 1906 and had a fairly good record in the Great War ; but it was on his colonial service after 1919 that he built up his reputation. His ruthless suppression of the Tripolitanian revolt, the occupation of Cyrenaica, the crushing of the Senussi, and the fine administrative feat of occupying Kufra were all successes that increased his reputation among his compatriots ; but it must be remembered that in all these campaigns he was using the instruments of modern war against medieval opposition.

He had further successes in the Abyssinian campaign, but he was in command in the easier terrain in the south, and had an opposition divided in loyalties. The administrative handling of the campaign was excellent, but the reputation for boldness was perhaps not too hard to earn, for he had everything in his favour. Even so, he had to be ordered to the attack three times by Badoglio, because he did not think his numerical superiority great enough.

All his campaigns had been against primitive peoples whom he had been un-Roman enough to persecute after subjection. He had little

experience of modern warfare or of fighting under difficulties. He might prove to be a good commander and director of modern warfare, but at this time he was almost an unknown quantity. He knew, however, that our forces in Egypt had been limited under the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936, and that reinforcement on a large scale was therefore impossible until the outbreak of war.

From the beginning, the Royal Engineers had been working on defensive preparations at Matruh and elsewhere in the vicinity, and the preparation of concrete pill-boxes, anti-tank ditches, mine-fields and other defences was pressed on continuously. This entailed providing and moving quantities of stores, main-

THE DEFENCE GOES UNDERGROUND. (*Above*) The entrance to an H.Q., deep under the sand. (*Below*) Battalion H.Q. in an old Roman tomb. Bunks are rigged in the coffin niches.

taining hundreds of miles of road, and, to supplement the water supply, laying many miles of water-piping and installing pumping plant. This work both maintained the defensive garrison and prepared for the time when our forces should take the offensive ; for it was clear that water and communications would be crucial considerations when the time to advance came.

Matruh became a town of troglodytes, for there was a vast system of dug-outs, and as Italian air raids increased we went underground so that work could be carried on with the minimum of interruption. Sleeping quarters, company and other offices, and the casualty clearing and main dressing stations were all deep under the sand, and to the casual visitor there were times when Matruh seemed a deserted village, though in actual fact it was teeming with life. The garrison was small but it was well trained, and the troops had a good knowledge of the terrain. Such was the base on which General Wavell decided to fall back.

But our story begins earlier than that. It begins with the preliminary work of the British patrols.

3

Skirmish : British Patrols Play Cat and Mouse

FROM THE OUTBREAK of war until the Italians moved forward in September, our forces played a cat-and-mouse game with the numerically superior enemy forces. From the very beginning of the war with Italy our mobile patrols from the 7th armoured division provided a good deal of exciting activity. There was an elusiveness about these patrols which soon became something of a legend with the rest of the Army of the Nile ; and their various adventures—the capture of an Italian general well inside his own lines, the cutting of an important water pipe-line, or minor battles with enemy armoured units at almost incredible distances from their bases—were retailed with zest and admiration in every mess from Sollum to Cairo.

The patrols had various objects—not only to gain information about enemy movements and formations, but also to keep him continually on the alert, to harass him in different ways, and generally to prevent him from settling down comfortably. These things they did with conspicuous success. The men of the patrols, though certainly not desert born or reared, took to the desert with astonishing ease.

In the opening phases of the war the initiative clearly lay with the British in all spheres. The R.A.F. showed marked superiority in the air, despite the much-boasted strength of the Italian air force. Daily visits were paid to the Italian bases in Libya ; aerodromes, supply stores, petrol and ammunition dumps and other objectives were thoroughly pounded. The Italians retaliated with raids on Sollum, Sidi Barrani, Mersa Matruh and other posts, but their aim was inaccurate and ineffective, and as a whole they had little stomach for a fight. This opening stage of the air war over the desert resulted not only in heavy damage to Italian military objectives and personnel, but also in heavy losses of Italian aircraft.

On land our first job was to break gaps through the 400-mile barbed-wire fence which ran south along the Libyan frontier from the sea. The fence, some 12 feet in thickness and 5 feet high, comprised a triple row of uprights each embedded in concrete. During the tension between Britain and Italy in 1935–1936, the Italians had established a series of fortified posts which were garrisoned by native troops. Opposite each post was a gap, closed by a " knife rest " big enough to allow a car through. The fence had been put up by Marshal Graziani to prevent the Libyan tribesmen from wandering out of his clutches across the

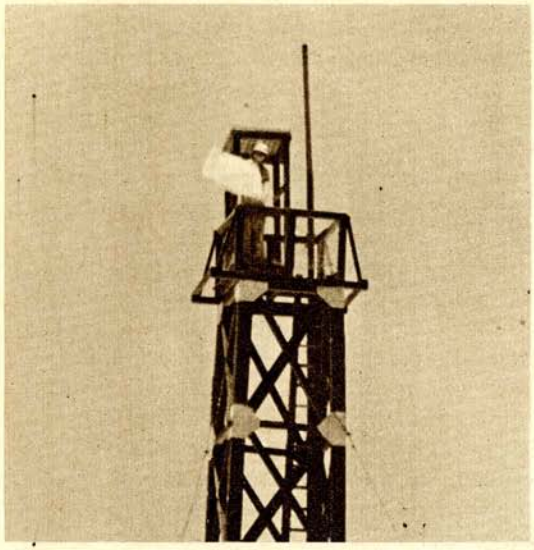
THROUGH THE FRONTIER OF WIRE. An armoured car passes through the 400-mile-long barrier of Italian wire which was the first obstacle to British patrols.

frontier into the safety of Egypt, and although it was not a formidable obstacle to a modern army, it had to be removed if we were to raid Italian territory.

At the beginning of July, Lieut.-General Sir H. M. Wilson, G.O.C. in C. in Egypt, was able to say that the wire had been successfully broken down by our patrols. "Our object," he told a war correspondent, "was to destroy the frontier posts which were garrisoned by Italian officers and Libyan troops, and render them uninhabitable, leaving the situation fluid and giving scope for our mechanised patrols. In spite of the heat, the lack of water, and the sand-storms our operations have been so successful that our patrols have been operating deep into enemy territory. It is a guerrilla campaign." Actually, about 4,000 square miles of Libyan territory were being patrolled by us.

From the very beginning our patrols scored some remarkable successes. Two days after the war began a patrol from the mechanised 11th Hussars crossed the frontier and captured a detachment of two Italian officers and fifty-nine other ranks. Two days later small mobile forces made a daring attack across the frontier and captured the Italian frontier forts of Capuzzo and Maddalena along with about 220 prisoners.

About this time there was reported one of those dramatic incidents which were almost daily occurrences. An armoured car patrol of the 11th Hussars penetrated 60 miles into enemy territory and boldly bearded the Italians at their Field Headquarters at Bir el Gobi. On



PATROL SUCCESS. An Italian soldier waves the white flag on the tower of Fort Maddalena.

their way back from this dashing raid one of the cars was damaged and lost touch with the others. After wirelessing their position to their base, the three men from the car began to trek across the desert on foot. Rescue patrols set out, and after searching for two days in the blazing sun they were attracted by a rifle shot. This led them to the three men, gaunt, haggard and delirious after their two days and nights in the pitiless desert. " We buried the maps and guns," the sergeant kept repeating. When he was taken back to the base hospital the sergeant kept muttering " Maps and guns. The Bedouin's tomb. The Bedouin's tomb." The patrol went back to where the three men had been rescued, and a search revealed a tomb in which they had buried their maps and guns before abandoning their car.

There were many such incidents which, while not important in themselves, help to build up the picture of heroism and enterprise that characterised the British activity at that time. One day an armoured car broke down well inside Italian territory. The driver waited till an Italian lorry appeared on the scene, held it up and forced it to tow the car back to our lines, where the Italian lorry and its crew were immediately captured.

Again, at Girba, 5 miles inside Libya, a young officer—the late Lieut. W. V. H. Gape—on patrol with two cars saw a strong enemy force consisting of about twenty lorries filled with soldiers, escorted by seventeen light tanks. In spite of the very great difference in strength, the officer decided " to have a crack at the enemy." He slipped past the tanks and opened fire on the lorries, which were then unloading the soldiers. The enemy tanks at once attacked, and the two cars, having fulfilled their object, retired ; but they kept on firing as they went, and two of the enemy tanks were damaged and fell out of the action.

One of the cars had a tyre shot, but they pushed on towards the frontier as fast as they could go, hotly pursued by twelve tanks. A wireless S.O.S. had been sent out by the cars, and two more of our armoured cars which had been about 5 miles away at the time appeared on the scene and joined in the fight. By this time the enemy artillery was in action and blazing away at our four cars, which, however, kept on firing and succeeded in disabling a third Italian tank.

The situation looked very unpromising for our small force when a squadron of our tanks arrived on the scene, swept round the rear and cut off the enemy tanks. Then they attacked the lorries, which by this time were trying to escape. Some of them managed to get away, but many were set on fire or blown up. The engagement was short, and when it was over our forces were able to make a very satisfactory reckoning. Ten tanks had been captured, seven lorries and a great deal of ammunition had been destroyed, and more than fifty Italians, including a colonel, had been killed or captured. Our casualties were *nil*.

About the same time a troop from a mechanised cavalry regiment—the 11th Hussars

again—intercepted an enemy convoy on the Tobruk-Bardia road well inside enemy territory, destroyed thirty lorries, and captured a number of prisoners. It was on the same day that we captured our first Italian general—General of the Engineers. The fact that the captive was an officer of high rank and the first general in the bag gained a good deal of well-deserved publicity for the incident, but it was much more than a mere dramatic episode.

The general had been driving in his car well behind the lines, followed by two other cars, when he was stopped by some native women who were being evacuated from Bardia. One of them was about to have a baby, and she asked the general if he would kindly drive her to the nearest maternity hospital. The general agreed, and the expectant mother and her friends got into the cars.

If the general as he drove along in the direction of Tobruk had paused to think, he would have considered the chance of being captured by the British as fantastically small. Between him and us lay the wide and intricate defence perimeter of Bardia, calculated to stop anything but the most determined onslaught, to the south lay the scrubby waterless desert, and to the north the Mediterranean.

There he was, miles within his own frontier, and protected by the formidable barriers of man and nature, when there was a sudden burst of fire, and a British patrol appeared across the road. After a brief engagement, during which the general's staff captain was shot dead, the Italian party surrendered. The occupants of the cars were taken back to our lines and sent back in due course into Egypt—the general to a prisoners-of-war camp, and the expectant mother to a maternity hospital in

FORT CAPUZZO, the frontier focal point which suffered from daring attacks by British mobile forces.

Alexandria, where the baby was duly born under British auspices.

There were many other successful patrol operations, though sometimes the climate interfered with one which had been prepared. For example, an operation to capture the Jarabub Oasis had been planned for early July, but had to be abandoned owing to the great heat, which sometimes made desert warfare in the glare of the summer sun impossible for both men and vehicles.

Meantime our air reconnaissance and patrols reported troop concentrations, and it was known that large enemy forces, amounting to at least two divisions, had advanced towards the frontier. An enemy brigade reoccupied the ruins of Fort Capuzzo, which had been destroyed by us, and began a cautious advance north towards Sollum. This advance was repulsed, and the enemy's position in Fort Capuzzo was made extremely uncomfortable for him. His force was subjected to a continual pounding by our artillery, while the fort was also heavily shelled by units of the Royal Navy. The vital water-line from Bardia —the garrison's only source of water—was cut, and transports bringing up water and supplies of food and ammunition were constantly harassed.

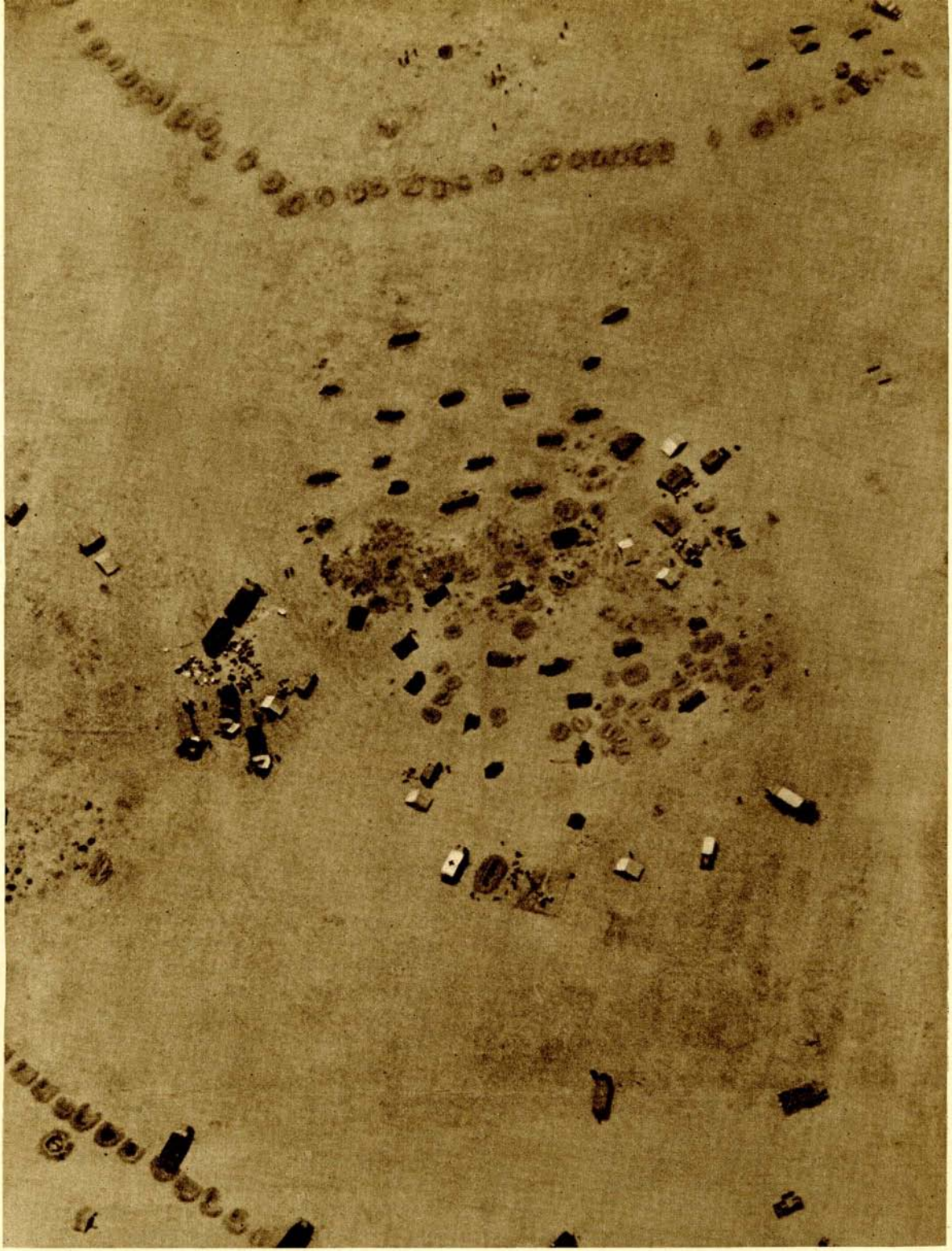
The bare communiqués which announced the cutting of the water-line gave no inkling of what the feat entailed. Fort Capuzzo—like a grandiose version of the toy forts we used to play with when we were children—occupies a focal point on the road which leads down to Sollum ; it was heavily fortified, and it was only 12 miles from Bardia, which, until its fall in January 1941, was the Italian strong-point. To come right into the heart of the Italian defences, cut the vital pipe-line and get away with it was a considerable feat.

In some ways the most daring actions of the patrols were the attacks on Fort Capuzzo itself. At night the patrols would penetrate stealthily through the Italian lines right round to the back of the fort, and then a group of men, perhaps thirty strong, would force their way in at bayonet point, play havoc among the startled defenders of the fort, get back to their vehicles, and withdraw under the fire of the Italian guns as they came into action. During their difficult and dangerous tenure of the fort the Italians suffered constant casualties in both men and vehicles.

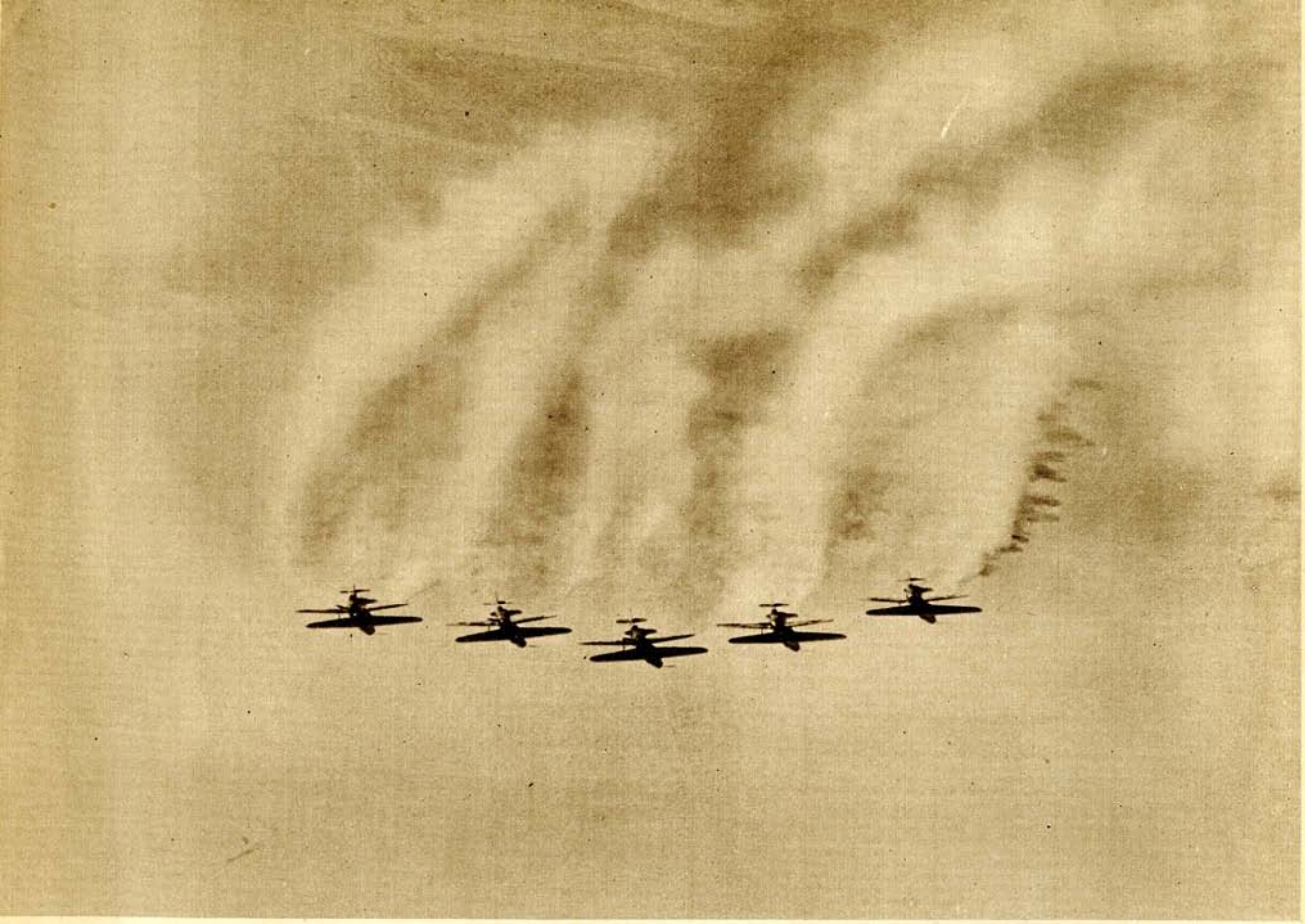
An Italian officer who afterwards fell into our hands expressed his great admiration for the work of the patrols, and mentioned particularly one incident in his own knowledge, when a patrol cut twelve telegraph poles only 15 miles from Tobruk and held up communications for twenty-four hours. During the rest of July, operations continued on the same lines, our patrols being continuously active.

But although our comparatively small forces continued to dominate the open country and inflict considerable losses on the enemy, the Italians gradually reinforced their troops in the Sollum area. By the end of July they had two complete divisions and the elements of two more on the Egyptian frontier. Their camps were moved forward till they had at least four complete divisions close enough to be used in immediate operations.

The movement of large forces is not easy to hide in the desert, for movement raises clouds of dust. Lack of cover is one of the great problems of a commander in the desert, and advantage must be taken of every patch of scrub and camel thorn. It is amazing how large a camp can escape notice when this is done. If you read of a " troop concentration," that may mean that the men are spread loosely over 50 miles. But the Italians, concentrating their forces in a comparatively small area mainly drawn close together in the coastal angle between Bardia and Capuzzo, were severely bombed by the R.A.F. Their camps were protected by barbed wire and artillery, while for the most part the rest of the frontier was left unguarded. The Italians made no patrols into Egypt similar to ours : when they undertook a reconnaissance it was with strong



GRAZIANI GATHERS HIS STRENGTH. An Italian photograph of one of their advanced supply bases. The pitched tents are dispersed against bombing and pits are dug in the sand to protect trucks and supplies from blast and splinters.



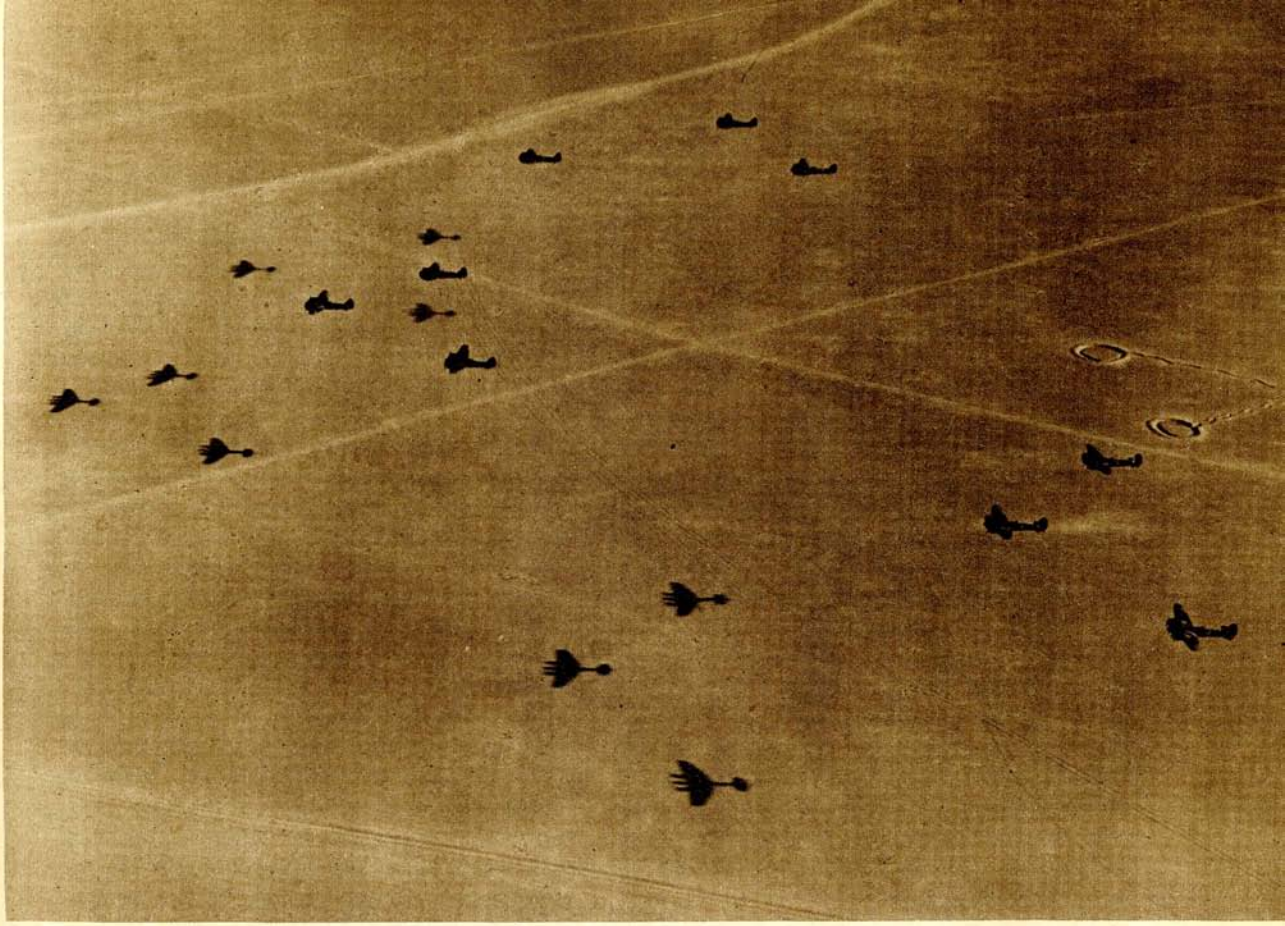
FIGHTER DEFENCE. Hurricanes throw dust-clouds behind them as they take off from the desert.

columns escorted by tanks, and even then they did not venture far.

By this time it was apparent that the Italian advance was imminent, and it was thought that it might coincide with Italian activity in British Somaliland or a German invasion of Britain. There were, however, obvious disadvantages in an advance in the desert at this time of the year. The temperature was round about 100 in the shade—not that there was any shade—and Graziani had many worries about supplies, particularly water. All provisions had to be carried, for the territory was barren, and even the small towns and villages which he might take were practically useless to him as a source of water and provisions. Behind the lines the Italians were finding their positions untenable through constant air attack, and our naval blockade was making reinforcement difficult.

Graziani must have decided therefore that inactivity was having a lowering effect on the morale of his troops, while the politicians in Rome were urgently in need of a " propaganda " victory to encourage their own people and placate their rather cynical colleagues in Berlin. The attack was therefore to be expected, and the Italian preparations suggested that it was about to be launched.

By this time our vehicles were beginning to bear traces of the strain to which they had been subjected during the past strenuous and exciting weeks, and replacement of spare parts was difficult owing to the distance from the railhead ; besides there was at that time no reserve of tanks to meet war wastage. General Wavell saw that unless the armoured vehicles



BOMBER ATTACK. Blenheims, escorted by their own winged shadows, leave to harass the enemy.

were withdrawn for repair and overhaul they would be largely out of action when the enemy advance began. Accordingly the armoured brigade was withdrawn and replaced by a force under the Support Group of the armoured division, consisting of the 3rd Coldstream Guards, the 1st K.R.R.C., the 2nd Rifle Brigade, the 11th Hussars, one squadron of the 6th R.T.R., and two batteries R.H.A., while a section of a medium artillery regiment was brought forward to harass the enemy. This small force was spread out over a front of some 60 miles from Sollum to Maddalena. The troops continued the same policy of active patrolling; but the enemy's numbers were now very much increased, his artillery was numerous and active, and the opportunities for effective action were less.

Yet this small force continued to inflict casualties on the enemy practically without loss to itself, and to hold in check for six weeks a force of four or five divisions. During that time the communiqués from General Headquarters Middle East reported laconically from day to day, "Patrol activity continues." At that time it was impossible to reveal how small our forces were or to draw attention to their gallantry and dash in holding up a vastly superior force. Even now all the figures cannot be given: but when the time comes, after the war, to reveal the whole story of the Western Desert during these weeks, it will be learned that our forces with quiet, unobtrusive courage wrote a page as brave as any in the history of British arms.

4

Graziani Crosses the Waste Land

THE ITALIAN advance into Egypt began on the 13th of September, when the enemy moved a strong force under cover of heavy artillery fire against the escarpment above Sollum, which had been evacuated by our troops. At the same time another enemy column advanced through the Halfaya Pass down the escarpment towards Sollum.

It had been obvious for three days that the attack was about to begin, and the first stage of our withdrawal from the frontier had been put into operation according to General Wavell's plan. During our retirement the Royal Engineers had been active in work to hamper the Italian advance. They had mined roads, salted water supplies, and torn up the coast road, which would be a vital line of supply to the enemy, sowing the resultant rubble with land mines to add to the difficulty of repair.

It had been uncertain whether the enemy would make his main advance along the coast road or would attempt a wide movement south of the escarpment. The latter may have been his original intention—the General Staff had good reason to think that it was—but he decided to confine his advance on a narrow front along the coast road with two divisions in the front line and two in support, while he kept one more and the famous Maletti mobile group in reserve. He was supported by numerous artillery, and about 200 light and medium tanks.

Part of our covering force was north of the escarpment, and consisted of detachments of the 3rd Coldstream Guards, artillery, and a medium artillery regiment, subsequently supported by a detachment of the 1st K.R.R.C. and a company of Free French. The remainder of the covering force was south of the escarpment to provide against an enemy move from that flank.

For four days, from the 13th to the 16th September, our small force withdrew along the coast from Sollum to the east of Sidi Barrani. The enemy reached Sidi Barrani, which is merely a collection of a few houses and a landing ground, on the 16th, and there halted.

Although the enemy had large numbers of tanks with his forward troops, and the leading infantry was in motor transport, it was the opinion of the British High Command that his advance was slow and unenterprising. He did not make enough use of his superior numbers or his mobility to outflank our forces. His artillery, however, was boldly used, and in fact in all the Italian actions in this sector the artillery has been his strongest feature. One of its characteristics was its mobility. Sometimes the guns were fired direct from the lorries, on other occasions they were manhandled from the lorries and put into action with remarkable rapidity, although it was noticeable that accuracy of fire was usually sacrificed for speed.

The advance was headed by motor-cyclists, whose primary object was to act as ground-bait and draw our fire. Whether or not these were picked men, they showed considerable courage and initiative; for theirs was not an enviable task in view of the withering fire which met them from our covering forces. Behind them came the main columns, headed by groups of tanks, supported by guns carried in lorries, followed by other groups of lorries carrying infantry equipped with quick-firing guns. Some of the tanks were even brought up in lorries, and an officer, in hunting metaphor, remarked, "The enemy box their tanks, guns and soldiers to the meet." As these advancing columns came down the zig-zag paths they looked in the distance "like long black worms."

The rôle of the tanks was to make the forward thrusts. Usually they operated in groups of three or four with an escort of ten or a dozen

gun-lorries, although several groups sometimes combined when stronger opposition was expected, and other groups acted as flank guards.

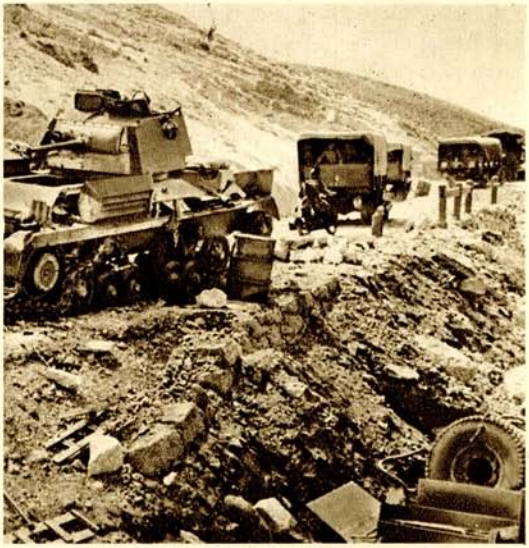
The infantry was to occupy the ground seized by the tanks, and defend it. The lorries forming these groups moved in clusters with the infantry in the centre, and guns and machine-guns on the periphery—a formation which was dubbed " hedgehog " by our staff officers. The accompanying armament included field-guns, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, and machine-guns, which often presented an excellent target. During their advance, and particularly during their descent of the escarpment, the Italians did in fact suffer heavy losses. As they lumbered down the zig-zag roads from the escarpment they came within range of our gunners, who could see lorries tumbling over as our shells got home.

The journey down the two tracks of the escarpment must have been altogether a period of horror for the Italians, for before we departed we had mined it and otherwise rendered it precarious, while our artillery and the Royal Air Force kept up a constant attack. As mines exploded, the Italian troops were forced to dismount from their lorries and scramble down the pass on foot. This led to congestion and confusion, and as the Italian troops pushed and struggled forward they came into range of our artillery.

At Alam Hamid, on the coast, the enemy suffered heavily, for our artillery waited for them as the columns breasted a hill and scored direct hits on lorries. The enemy was temporarily halted, and our artillery was then able to withdraw in good order—and with a good deal of quiet satisfaction.

At night the enemy formed " laagers "—temporary strong points with stores and ammunition in the centre, protected by barbed wire, surrounded by lorries with field-guns, and by searchlights which continually swept the surrounding desert. One night a small party of gunners, evading the lights and keeping to the cover of wadis and dunes, dragged their guns close up to one of these " laagers " and opened fire, pouring in a great quantity of shells. A number of vehicles were blown up and fires started, and our artillery were on their way again before the enemy had recovered from the surprise. By the time their artillery came into action our men were out of range ; they reached home without a casualty. The enemy used anti-tank guns firing red, white and green tracer bullets, and when he got home the officer in charge of the party was asked " What was it like ? " " Like Blackpool on a Saturday night," he replied.

From Sollum to Sidi Barrani is only 56 miles, and the fact that the Italians took three days to cover this distance shows how cautiously they moved. From Sidi Barrani there is a good metalled road through Mersa Matruh to Alexandria, and it was expected that Graziani would push on. Unless the advance was aimed at the Nile Valley there seemed little point in it, and a halt at Sidi Barrani exposed his forces to attack from both flanks—sea and desert.



GRAZIANI MOVES. The Italian columns suffered heavily as they came over the escarpment. A disabled tank can be seen, and wreckage of a truck.

THE ARTILLERY IN ACTION. A forward observation post watches our shells bursting over Halfaya Pass.

Nevertheless, Graziani halted at Sidi Barrani, a village which in peace-time acts as a distributing centre for the Bedouin of the coastal belt, and began to dig himself in. Up till then he had encountered no prepared positions, and yet had suffered heavy losses: he obviously wanted to bring up supplies and reinforcements and protect his lines of communication, before advancing against stronger opposition than he had so far encountered.

Up till then he had gained 65 miles or so of barren desert, and had suffered 2,000 casualties as well as losing a great quantity of equipment, while our losses had been less than fifty men and a dozen vehicles. Altogether, from the beginning of the war in June to the occupation of Sidi Barrani, the Italian admitted losses were 3,500. Ours were 150, and we had taken 700 prisoners. Moreover, we had captured or destroyed many guns, tanks and lorries.

The Italian success, such as it was, could not therefore be regarded as unmitigated. Nevertheless, the Italian Press and Radio spoke as if the march on Sidi Barrani had been one of the world's great victories: and in the light of what subsequently happened it is interesting to read some of the Italian statements of that period:

"The British say that the occupation of Sollum is of no importance to them, but they should realise that they have been beaten and have no hope of winning."

"There is no doubt that it is easy for us now to enter Sidi Barrani and proceed to Mersa Matruh."

"The German newspapers joyously comment on the rapid advance of the Italians in Egypt, and say that Egypt will not be any more a prison for the Italians but for the British."

"The British continue to say that we will never get to Mersa Matruh, but this we deny. The roads have already been made and we are marching towards our objective."

" In North Africa the Italians continue their victorious advance and have occupied Sidi Barrani. British resistance has been smashed."

In their efforts to magnify in the eyes of their own people the importance of their advance, the Italians were told by their radio that " a few days after the occupation of Sidi Barrani, thanks to the skill of Italian engineers, the tramcars were again running." This must have been startling news to those Italians who knew that Sidi Barrani was only a small native village.

Graziani himself was overjoyed at the occupation of Sidi Barrani, and sent a grandiloquent message to Mussolini.

" The great success of our advance into Egypt has surpassed all expectations. Anglo-Egyptian authorities had stated that it was not possible to attack the country till the middle of October at the earliest, and that fifteen to twenty thousand troops would be the most the Italians could employ. Although we have had to fight against dust storms and a temperature of 110 in the shade we have completely succeeded. More than 2,000 mechanised vehicles have crossed the waste land, and it is estimated that British casualties amount to roughly 2,000. In these circumstances it is not necessary for me to add further to this communiqué. Results and figures speak for themselves."

If the figures spoke to Mussolini they did not give him a very sound forecast, for a month passed and Graziani was still at Sidi Barrani. By the middle of October, however, the Italian propagandists began to drop hints that the offensive was about to be resumed.

" As the weather is favourable Graziani will continue his advance. The experience of the troops from the Abyssinian campaign places Graziani's forces in a superior position, allowing them to march first to Alexandria and then on to the Suez Canal to drive away the great

SLOW-MOTION ADVANCE. An Italian picture of their infantry moving forward near Sidi Barrani.

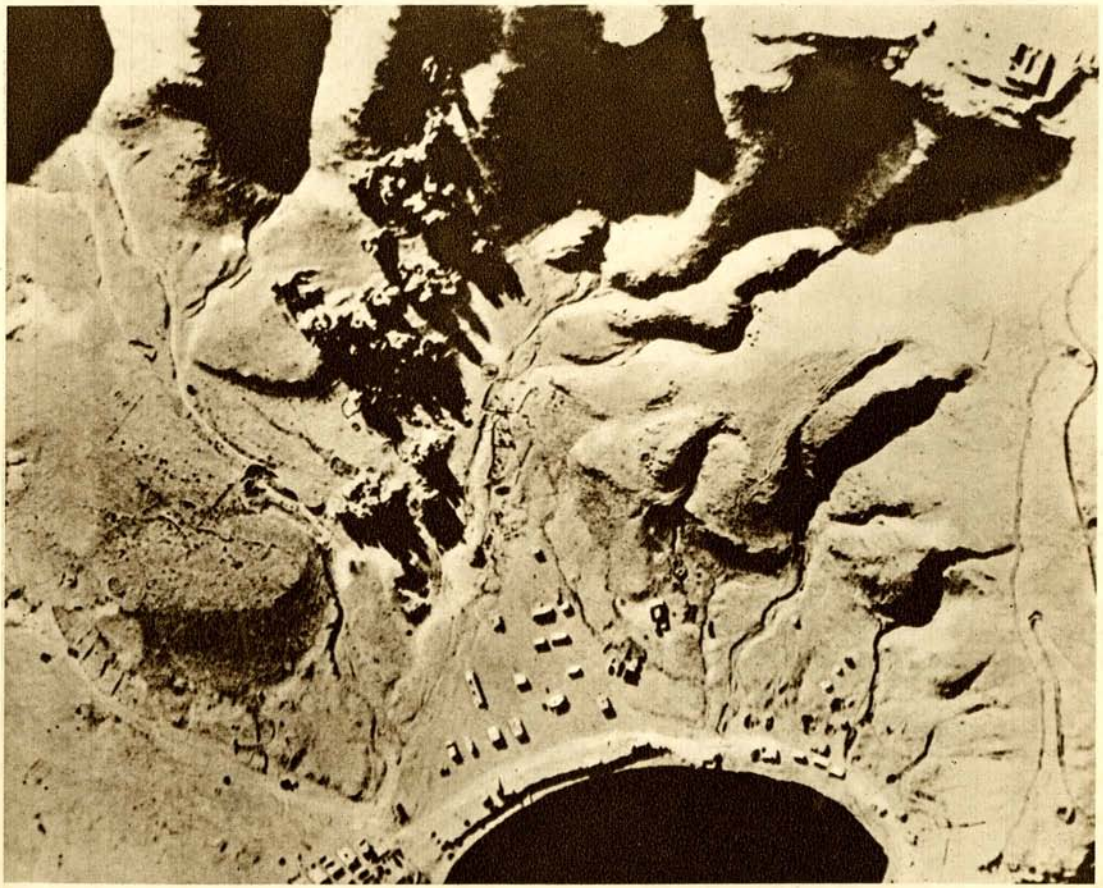
English forces in Egypt."

" Italy's troops are now 100 miles into Egypt from the Libyan frontier. Mr. Eden has come to Egypt to organise the last attempt at defence. We remain quite calm and know that we shall free Egypt from the British troops. Mr. Eden's visit will not prevent the Axis powers' reorganisation of Europe and Egypt."

" The visit of Mr. Eden is only to prevent people thinking of the imminent collapse of the British Empire."

Up till the end of October the Italian Press and Radio were still talking of their " forthcoming advance into Egypt," although excuses were creeping in—for example, that in our retreat we had destroyed the fourteen wells at Sidi Barrani, and that the Italian engineers had to repair this damage before the advance could continue.

" The attack cannot be made at a stroke, for the front is wide and Italy must carefully choose her points of attack. When these operations are once started they are intended to bring the campaign to its definite and successful conclusion. The day chosen for starting such operations is very near."



ITALIAN PRIZE. Sollum, the frontier objective for the advancing Italians. The barracks are on the escarpment, which, empty of our troops, was heavily bombarded. Capuzzo is beyond, to the south.

Alas, for the Rome radio! Days turned into weeks, and still there was no sign of a move by Graziani. His opportunity was slipping through his fingers like the sand of the desert, and our troops, of whom the Italians had spoken so disparagingly, were quietly getting ready to spring.

5

The Attack that Never Came

THREE MONTHS passed between the Italian arrival at Sidi Barrani and the British attack.

We were not inactive. While, openly, small mobile British columns continued to engage and harass the enemy as they had been doing since the outbreak of the war, secretly and stealthily we were preparing for our counter-attack.

The Italians occupied the time by digging themselves in at Sidi Barrani and the surrounding area. They had placed their troops in a number of strongly defended camps with all-round barbed-wire perimeters, dotted about from Maktila in the east, to the coast 10 to 15 miles west of Sidi Barrani, and to Sofafi on the escarpment to the south-west; they also strengthened the post at Jarabub Oasis.

A fortnight after the occupation of Sidi Barrani there was no sign of any further movement by the Italians, except to bring up supplies. They were establishing petrol and water dumps; tank wagons and lorries loaded with barrels daily lumbered up the dusty track from the frontier. The lack of a proper road from Sollum to Sidi Barrani was a handicap to Graziani and a constant threat to his communications; besides, the rainy season was approaching and the track might be washed away. The Italians, then, who have always excelled in this type of engineering, began feverishly to make a road from Sidi Barrani to the Italian frontier, although their work was hampered by the Royal Air Force.

The meeting between Hitler and Mussolini on the Brenner Pass on 4th October presaged a possible development in the Western Desert, for it was thought that if Hitler made a Balkan move, Graziani would resume his advance on the Nile. Two days later there seemed to be confirmation for the view that something was about to happen, for there were signs of renewed activity on the part of the Italians. The garrison of the camp at Guba, 20 miles south of Sidi Barrani, was moved forward complete with baggage, the infantry being carried in lorries as usual and the column supported by tanks. We offered no resistance, but kept a careful watch. The Italians advanced cautiously for 15 miles, and then stopped. What was going to happen, we asked. Nothing happened. The Italians turned round and went back to their camp, and we could only assume that this move had been a ponderous and ineffective reconnaissance.

The skirmishes between our mobile patrols and the enemy were in the nature of " tip and run " warfare, and our patrols, consisting of two or three cars which scoured large areas of the desert and reported Italian movements by radio, became affectionately known as " the desert rats."

This warfare, too, produced its drama. The British soldier takes his work, no matter how dangerous and exciting it may be, stolidly as a matter of course, and many tales of heroism and enterprise have been dismissed in casual conversation in a dug-out at the base, and lost to history in the winds of the desert. But many stories remain to illustrate the stout and valuable work done by the " desert rats," not only in gathering information about the enemy's movements, but in keeping him on the jump.

Here is one example of a more than usually exciting adventure. A sergeant of the 11th

"A GREAT SECRET had been amazingly well kept." The Army moves forward for the counter-stroke.

Hussars—Sergeant Lamb, D.C.M., M.M.—was patrolling the borders of the desert near the Libyan frontier in an armoured car when two enemy fighters appeared overhead, dived low and opened up with their machine-guns. The sergeant at once replied with his Bren gun, but twelve more planes appeared, machine-gunning the car and dropping bombs. One fell near the car, which was brought to a standstill, but the sergeant kept on firing the Bren gun in the midst of the inferno, and he and his men were rewarded by the sight of a Breda crashing. This was enough for the other Italian planes, and they made off. There was silence in the desert. Only a broken-down British armoured car and the wreckage of a Breda plane gave evidence of a remarkable engagement.

An action at the end of October against an Italian post at Maktila was even more spectacular. This outpost with 300 vehicles was reported to our Advanced Headquarters by a patrol, and a force consisting of artillery and men from the 2nd Camerons was sent to "mop it up." The British column moved up under cover of darkness to within 800 yards of the outpost. They hid themselves there, and all next day they lay flat and still in the parched desert under the blazing sun, not daring to make a move in case they should betray their presence to the enemy. Night fell without the enemy's suspicions having been roused. Then at a quarter to six at night the British guns let fly, while R.A.F. bombers appeared overhead to add to the work of destruction. The Italians were taken completely by surprise and were too late in getting into action. When our forces withdrew a huge column of smoke from the camp was a sign of the damage that had been effected.

So the weeks passed, and people both in Italy and in Egypt were asking, "What is going to happen next?" Would Graziani resume the offensive, or would the British start a counter-attack? There was not the slightest

indication of what was in the wind. In Cairo, city of rumours, there was not a breath of suspicion. In General Headquarters, Middle East, there was not an outward ripple to suggest what was about to happen. A great secret had been amazingly well kept.

Then on the morning of the 9th of December the newspaper correspondents were told that the Commander-in-Chief would like to see them. They hastened to General Headquarters and were received by General Wavell himself.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have asked you here to tell you that our forces began to carry out an engagement against Italian arms in the Western Desert at dawn this morning."

The offensive had begun.

6

Wavell Strikes

AN INSPIRING SPECIAL ORDER of the day by the Commander-in-Chief on the eve of the attack was the first notification to our men that a major offensive was about to begin. Surprise had been effected. The enemy had no knowledge even of the scope of the operations to be undertaken against them.

To their mind, and to the mind of many military "experts" in other parts of the world, it was unthinkable that we would have the temerity to launch an attack on such a scale as we did, and with such ambitious objectives. The difficulty of communications, the lack of water, the climate, the sand—all combined to make an advance against previously prepared positions exceedingly hazardous. In fact, on the very day our advance began, the Military Correspondent of a leading German newspaper wrote: "Neither of the parties can carry out a surprise attack in the Egyptian Western Desert because of the natural obstacles in the desert, and because the preparation of mechanised

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

N

MENASTIR

TOBRUK

GAMBUT

5TH JAN.

SIDI AZEIZ

6TH JAN.

16TH DEC.

FORT CAPUZZO

BARDIA

GULF OF SOLLUM

SOLLUM

GIRBA

SIDI REZEGH

EL ADEM

15TH DEC.

HALFAYA PASS

MUSAID

JEBEL AKABA

LIBYA

GABR SALEH

BARBED WIRE FENCE ALL ALONG THIS FRONTIER

SIDI OMAR

EDDEFEA

BIR EL GOBI

TO JARABUB

FORT MADDALENA

BUQ BUQ

11TH DEC.

NAVAL BOMBARDMENT 8TH/9TH DEC.

SIDI BARRANI

SHETTA

TO MERSA MATRUH

MAKTILA

10TH DEC.

ALAM HAMID

AZZAZIYA

FI TUMMAR E.

FI TUMMAR W.

ALAM NIBEIWA

DIRECT ATTACK ON FORTS.

GUBA

POSITION REACHED OVERNIGHT DEC 9TH.

HALFWAY HO. 11TH DEC.

DRIVE TO CUT OFF S. BARRANI

BIR RABIA

BIR SOFAFI

COVERED BY ARMOURED TROOPS

BIR AUJERIN

EGYPT

BIR EL CHAMSA

BIR DIGNAISH

TO SIWA

THE FRONTIER BATTLES

BRITISH ATTACK
ITALIAN RETREAT
ROADS TRACKS
SCALE IN MILES.
0 10 20 30

AIR BOMBARDMENT. The R.A.F. attacks an enemy troop concentration in the open desert.

forces for a big offensive on a large scale cannot be concealed." While the German readers were studying that comforting piece of information at their breakfast tables, the British attack was beginning.

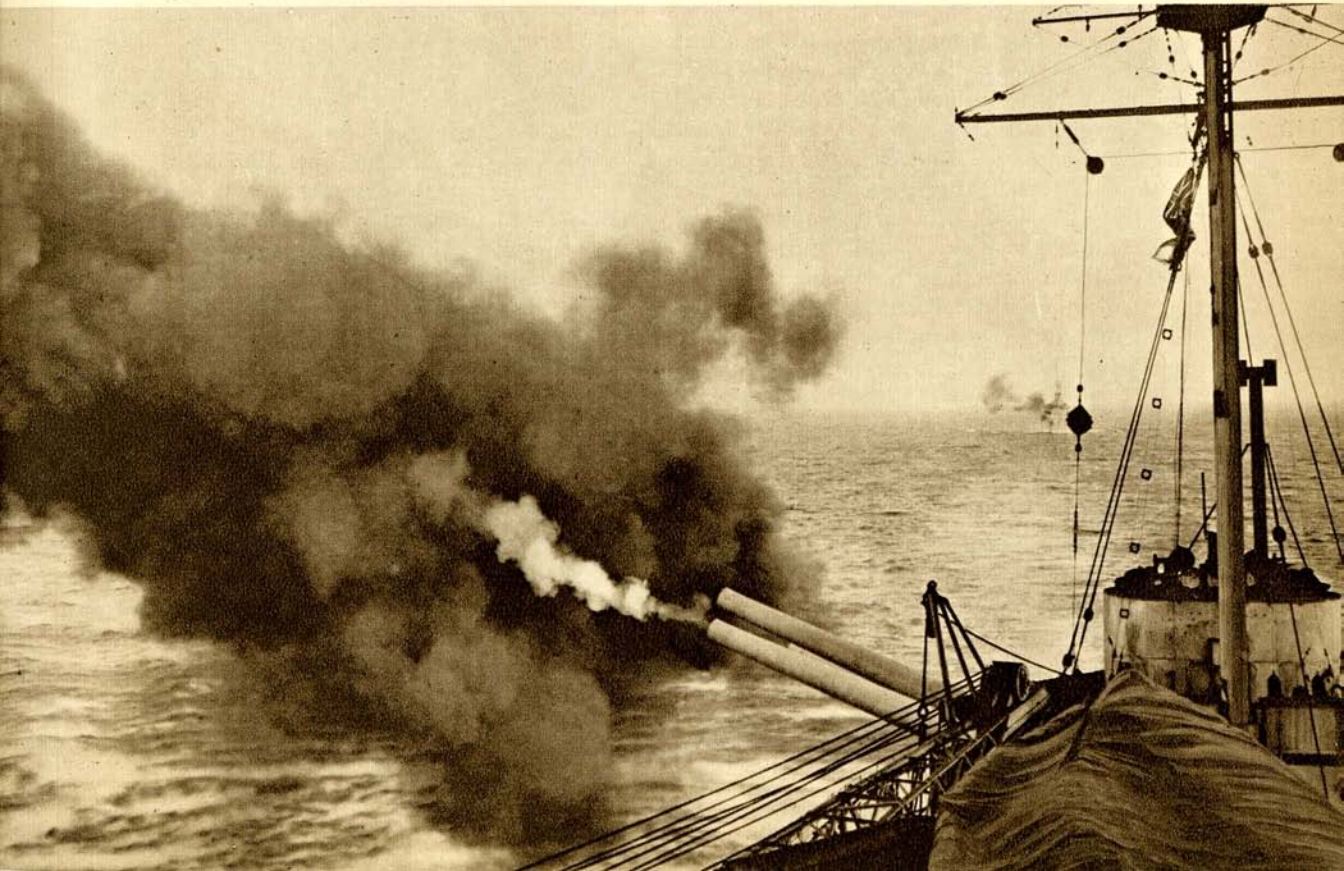
Briefly, the plan of operations was this :

The object of the attack was to capture Sidi Barrani by means of exploiting the gap in the Italian defences between Rabia and Nibeiwa camps, which our patrols had kept open despite Italian efforts to close it ; and then, according to the success achieved, to continue the advance towards Buq Buq and thence to Sollum. The attack on Nibeiwa, the Tummar camps and Sidi Barrani was to be carried out by tanks supported by infantry. Maktila was to be contained by a small force from Mersa Matruh, to prevent reinforcements being sent from there ; the Sofafi area was to be covered, with a similar object in view, by armoured troops, while other armoured troops went through the gap towards the Aziziya area to destroy the Italian tank group believed to be there, and to block the retreat of Italian forces from Barrani.

The Navy was to co-operate by bombarding Maktila and Sidi Barrani, and then other targets as they presented themselves or when requested, while the R.A.F. were to launch continual heavy attacks on Italian aerodromes and bases, the primary object being to keep the Italian air force on the ground.

The prelude to the operations, which not only swept the Italians off Egyptian soil but paved the way for our advance into Libya, was carried out by the Navy and Royal Air Force as arranged. On the night of 8th/9th December the Navy shelled Maktila and Sidi Barrani. Such was the effect of the pounding by 15-inch shells that the enemy evacuated Maktila and

SEA BOMBARDMENT. Ships of the Mediterranean Fleet shelling Capuzzo.



withdrew, partly on Sidi Barrani. The R.A.F. bombed Binina aerodrome and Sidi Barrani, causing several explosions and starting fires.

As dawn was breaking on the morning of Monday the 9th a detachment of the 7th armoured division advanced on Nibeiwa camp. The movement had begun on Saturday night, when the British troops pushed forward over the greater part of the 80-mile belt between Mersa Matruh and Sidi Barrani. During Sunday they had lain up in the open desert, every gun and vehicle camouflaged, the troops huddled among patches of scrub; and so stealthily was the attack begun that infantry consisting of the 1st Royal Fusiliers, the 3/1 Punjab Regiment and the 4/6 Rajputana Rifles, with the Central Indian Horse, succeeded in surrounding the camp while the main assault was launched by mechanised units.

Nibeiwa camp covers a bare plateau with a shallow valley in front. The position was surrounded by a double stone wall with shelters every 50 yards for the Libyan troops who held the perimeter. To the east and the south the fortification was strengthened by anti-tank obstacles, barbed wire and land mines; the armament inside included field-guns, anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, some on the ground and some on lorries, and every sort of vehicle from tanks to staff cars.

Inside this well-protected camp General Maletti and his officers were sitting down to breakfast unaware that throughout the night the British forces had been closing in on them. Suddenly there was a muffled roar and, to the amazement of the Italians, tanks of the 7th R.T.R. charged into the camp, followed by infantry with bayonets fixed. So swift was the attack that the Italians had not time to man tanks in the camp; but some of the gunners got their field-guns into action, while General Maletti himself seized a machine-gun. As the British tanks charged into the camp some of the mines exploded, the field-guns barked furiously, machine-guns spluttered, and the scene was for a short spell "the nearest thing to hell I ever saw," as an Italian doctor afterwards described it.

The defence crumpled when General Maletti was shot dead with a bullet through the lung as he bravely fired his machine-gun into our advancing forces. The defenders of the camp saw that resistance was useless, and surrendered. Altogether between 2,000 and 2,500 prisoners were taken, including Maletti's second in command. So large was the number of lorries and guns, so great the quantities of material, that the camp looked like a big London store.

Meanwhile, other troops were carrying out allotted tasks. In the south an armoured formation was watching the enemy in the Bir Sofafi - Bir Rabia area, where preparations for evacuation were evident; while nearer the scene of action an armoured brigade, with artillery, was moving north to the west of Alam Nibeiwa towards the track joining Sidi Barrani with Buq Buq. By the evening this force, though it had failed to engage enemy tanks, on its way to Sidi Barrani had captured 400 prisoners and 60 motor vehicles, while other troops from the United Kingdom and India had taken the two camps known as Tummar East and Tummar West. The troops engaged in this operation were: 1st R.F., 3/1 Punjab Regiment, 4/6 Rajputana Rifles, 2nd Cameron Highlanders, 1/6 Rajputana Rifles, 4/7 Punjab Regiment.

During the night, strong fighting patrols were despatched to take up positions surrounding Sidi Barrani and its forward defended localities on both flanks and to the front. The Navy again bombarded Sidi Barrani, and on the morning of the 10th the army was ready for the next stage of the attack. At dawn it had to face a heavy artillery barrage from the Italians, who had the advantage of having their guns on the heights to the south of Sidi Barrani. Some of our own field artillery was brought up, and there began a fierce artillery duel at very short range.

During this duel a detachment of the

armoured division pierced the perimeter and moved towards Sidi Barrani itself. It was followed by three battalions of infantry—the 2nd Queen's on the left, the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in the centre, and the 2nd Leicesters on the right. The two flank battalions closed in first, and the commanding officer of the Highland battalion ordered his men to rush the position at the point of the bayonet. The whole action lasted nearly a day, but by five o'clock Sidi Barrani was in our hands with a vast number of prisoners and war material of all kinds.

Among the prisoners was General Gallini, and before he was taken away he asked to be allowed to address his men. As they stood there in serried lines, guarded by British soldiers, he said to them in a voice charged with emotion, "I thank you for fighting as Fascists." While very many of the defenders of Sidi Barrani had obviously not had their heart in the war, some of the Blackshirt Division, and the gunners, had fought bravely, and they were worthy of their general's tribute.

Our advance continued. Maktila was entered the same day, and found unoccupied, although large quantities of war material were taken, but on the 11th a large force was encountered west of Buq Buq. It was successfully engaged —how successfully can be judged from the fact

BROKEN AND DESERTED. An Italian gun-post overwhelmed by our advance.

armoured division pierced the perimeter and moved towards Sidi Barrani itself. It was followed by three battalions of infantry—the 2nd Queen's on the left, the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in the centre, and the 2nd Leicesters on the right. The two flank battalions closed in first, and the commanding officer of the Highland battalion ordered his men to rush the position at the point of the bayonet. The whole action lasted nearly a day, but by five o'clock Sidi Barrani was in our hands with a vast number of prisoners and war material of all kinds.

Among the prisoners was General Gallini, and before he was taken away he asked to be allowed to address his men. As they stood there in serried lines, guarded by British soldiers, he said to them in a voice charged with emotion, "I thank you for fighting as Fascists." While very many of the defenders of Sidi Barrani had obviously not had their heart in the war, some of the Blackshirt Division, and the gunners, had fought bravely, and they were worthy of their general's tribute.

Our advance continued. Maktila was entered the same day, and found unoccupied, although large quantities of war material were taken, but on the 11th a large force was encountered west of Buq Buq. It was successfully engaged —how successfully can be judged from the fact

BROKEN AND DESERTED. An Italian gun-post overwhelmed by our advance.

that 14,000 prisoners were taken : and during the course of this day the enemy evacuated the Sofafi area, retiring in disorder on Halfway House, pursued by elements of an armoured division, and continually attacked from the air.

No stand of any importance was made until our forces reached the escarpment running south-east from Sollum. There, although considerable enemy forces were retiring from Maddalena and Bardia, the enemy resisted strongly ; moreover, during the whole of our attack on the Sollum-Capuzzo-Halfaya area, the enemy air force became active, and bombed our forward positions. But its effect was small, for the R.A.F.'s plan of attacking Italian air bases to keep the enemy air force in check had been successful, and apart from these occasional bombing raids it played little part in the battle.

On Sunday the 15th there was evidence that the enemy was preparing to evacuate the Sollum-Capuzzo area. They withdrew from Halfaya during the day, and also from Lower Sollum, whence they blew up the road at the last bend before they retired. On Monday Sollum fell, and almost simultaneously our forces occupied Fort Capuzzo, from which the enemy had fled so precipitately that they had not time to disable their aircraft and other fighting material, which fell intact into our hands.

So, on the 16th of December, ended the Italian occupation of Egypt. An occupation which had been consolidated for three months was wiped out in one week—a week in which the Italians lost nearly 40,000 prisoners together with vast quantities of lorries, tanks, ammunition and stores. In gaining this victory our forces sustained casualties of fewer than 1,000—the majority being wounded—and negligible losses in equipment.

Colonel Giusfreda, one of General Maletti's staff officers who was captured, paid a tribute to our success. " Your attack was brilliantly planned," he said, " and even more brilliantly carried out."

7

The Blow Driven Home: Bardia

BARDIA, the first important post inside Italian territory, was the next objective of our advancing forces. Although it is less than 20 miles from the Egyptian frontier, we took longer to cover this distance than we had taken to advance on Sidi Barrani and Sollum. That is easily explained. Not only is Bardia a natural fortress, but the Italians had been fortifying it for the past three years, had claimed it as " impregnable," and declared that when the British came up against it they would " be sorry they had ever set foot in Libya." Bardia was, in fact, a hard nut to crack, and its capture required careful planning by all three services, together with much enterprise and daring on the part of the attackers. But the earlier victories had been so cheaply won that our reserves were absolutely intact. These reserves included the Australians ; and though our army was small as armies go, the fact that these fine troops were still completely fresh allowed General Wavell to contemplate the continuance of his offensive with confidence.

From Sollum the road winds in hair-pin bends up the escarpment, from the top of which there is a magnificent vista to the east of the desert-fringed sea ; to the south the escarpment fades away into the distance, and to the west lies the flat, featureless, barren plateau. A few miles on to the left of the road stood the tattered, tessellated outline of Fort Capuzzo, like a derelict set from a Hollywood studio.

Bardia is perched on the cliffs of the western shore of the Gulf of Sollum, 350 feet above sea level. It is a trim little town of white houses in the Italian colonial style, and as pretty a place as one could find anywhere on

the North African coast. The area is cut by a deep ravine, the Wadi el Gafrah, leading into the natural harbour which permits anchorage of ships up to 4,000 tons. It is rather like a Cornish cove, with its bay, the sheer high cliffs, and the little town at the top.

A track, suitable for wheeled vehicles, goes to Jarabub, 160 miles away, and a steep, indifferent road leads away from the harbour, forking at the summit to Tobruk and Fort Capuzzo. There is a landing ground for aircraft, and seaplanes can alight in the harbour.

This area, which can be described as the key to Libya, was protected by a heavy barbed-wire perimeter, with strong defended posts, mines and anti-tank trenches. The outer wire, about 3 yards deep mounted on wooden stakes, was of a type often found in French defences. The defended posts, placed at short intervals around the perimeter, usually held two or three machine-guns, one anti-tank gun, and occasionally other weapons such as flame-throwers and Breda guns. Immediately behind each gun position was the entrance to the dug-out, generally made of concrete. A low stone breastwork protected the small circular fire positions; and behind these ran a concrete gallery with recesses in it for ammunition, leading to a bigger chamber connected with the other fire positions.

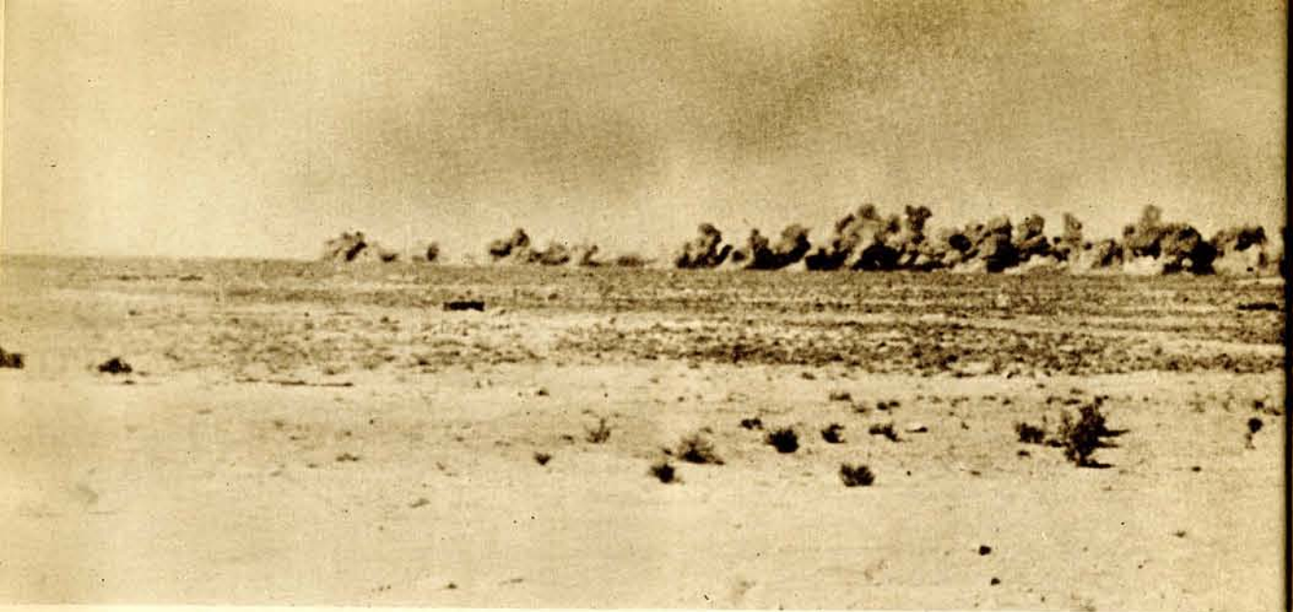
These strong points were surrounded by tank-traps consisting of a trench 9 feet wide within hand-bombing range of the fire positions. These trenches, stone-faced on one side and with concrete "lips," were camouflaged with thin lath planking, $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch thick, covered with dust and sand. This camouflaged covering could support a man, but would collapse if it had to bear a heavy weight. These defences were held by troops totalling over 40,000 men supported by substantial artillery; thus the capture of Bardia presented many difficulties for the British Command.

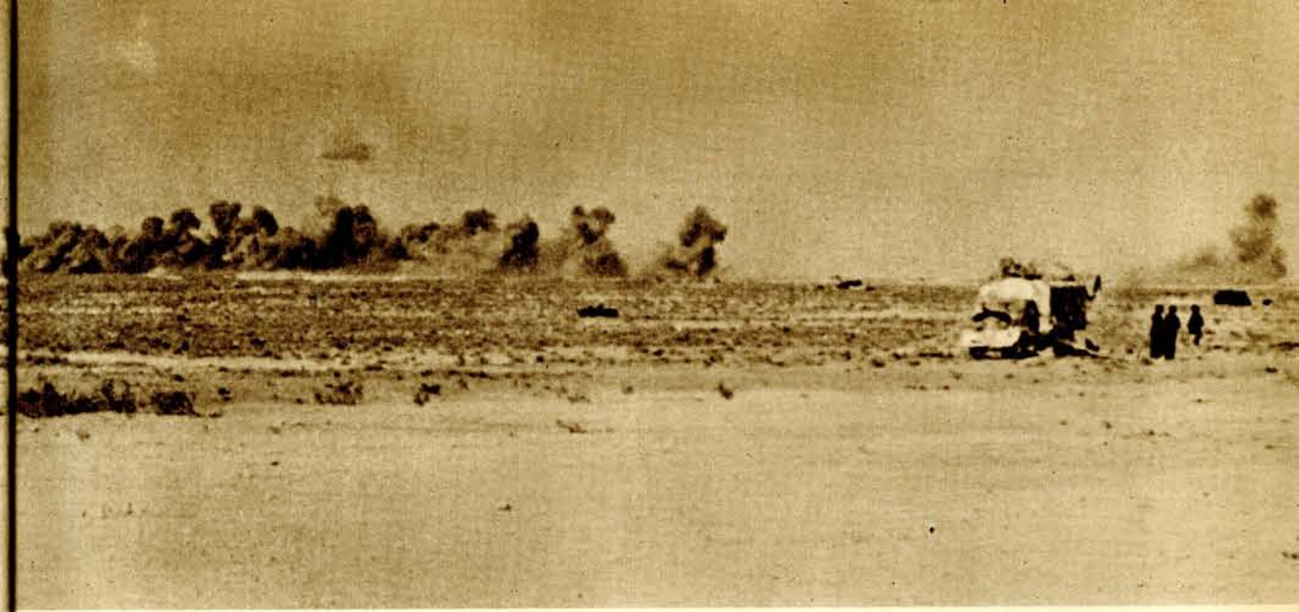
If the Commander-in-Chief had wanted a quick victory and had been prepared to achieve

BEFORE BARDIA. A British howitzer opens the attack on the "bastion of Fascism."

it without regard to loss of men and materials, he could have thrown his army straight against Bardia as it advanced from Sollum. But there was no need for a quick and spectacular victory; and it was General Wavell's policy, notably successful throughout the Western Desert campaign, to secure his victories with the minimum loss of men. Cunning and strategy had to be matched against the iron ring of Bardia.

By the 18th December, two days after the fall of Sollum, Bardia was being subjected to the fire of our advanced mechanised units; and the next day R.A.F. reconnaissance reported that no Italian troops were leaving the town. The enemy's artillery was very active, but lorry after lorry carrying Australian infantry came on the scene, as the ring round Bardia closed and thickened. All through the next day fresh contingents continued to arrive through a raging gale that whipped the gritty sand into the faces of our troops. Their arrival cheered the men of the advanced mechanised units, who, though in fine fettle, had been fighting for ten days almost without rest, snatching a few hours' sleep under their vehicles whenever they could, living on hard





POUNDED BY SHELLS AND BOMBS, from land, sea and air, Bardia suffers the longest and most intensive bombardment of the campaign.

rations of bully beef and biscuits.

There was little opposition from the Italian air force, as they had withdrawn to bases farther back to avoid R.A.F. attack. Reports came in that the enemy were bringing up reinforcements to harass our advanced troops, but the only movement discernible was that of staff cars leaving Bardia by the coast road to Tobruk. These were machine-gunned by our fighters: one turned a couple of somersaults; another stopped suddenly so that the car behind ran into it and telescoped. The Italians shelled Sollum to try to prevent our landing supplies; and our Navy bombarded the Italian dumps, the R.A.F. reporting that as a result a heavy pall of smoke lay over them.

Throughout the twenty days of preparation and battle the Italians had to endure an increasing bombardment from air, sea and land. Day after day the troops gradually massed for the attack of the beleaguered town, many of the lorries bringing up the Australians being adorned with the typical slogan "Look out, Musso, here we come!" North-west of the town our mechanised units continued to mop up odd pockets of Italian resistance, and patrols were active in the Bardia-Tobruk road area to prevent Graziani sending up reinforcements. The weather was cold, bitterly so at night, and one night heavy rain fell; but still the relentless process went on, the British strengthening their posts round the perimeter.

As the month drew to its end artillery fire increased on both sides; and on the 27th the concentrating British forces were bombed by diving Italian aircraft, but few casualties were caused. The next day our heavy guns arrived to add to the weight of the bombardment, which was on the following days added to by the R.A.F. and units of the Royal Navy. The Italians replied by frequently shelling us with a heavy gun, which our men nicknamed "Bardia Bill," established on the southern sector of the town's defences. The Italians were believed to be getting short of water and supplies, and on the last two days of the month we captured numbers of prisoners, one of whom spoke of the strain of sitting in Bardia under the rain of shells.

On the 1st January the attack began. It was based on close co-operation and planning between the Navy, the Army and the R.A.F., and it can be emphasised here that the success of the whole operation in Libya was due to the co-ordination of the three services. Before the assault on Bardia, as in other engagements, a careful time-table was worked out in which each service was allotted special tasks.

In the same way each unit of the Army Corps taking part in the land attack had definite functions to perform and a time-table to follow. It was remarkable, considering the exigencies and unforeseen happenings of a battle, how closely these plans were followed in practice, largely because of the personal leadership of the Corps Commander, General O'Connor, who throughout every engagement kept closely in touch with the commanders of the lower formations. The general went from one part of the battlefield to another by car or aircraft, and had therefore at all times personal control over the scattered forces under his command.

The attack on Bardia began with a heavy attack by R.A.F. bombers which came over in waves for seven or eight hours. The violent bombardment by land, sea and air continued throughout the day of January 2nd. R.A.F. heavy bombers dropped tons of high explosives on the defences to flatten them out and pave the way for the land attack, our artillery poured shells into the garrison, and units of the Navy—five gunboats, including one monitor mounting heavy guns—joined in the bombardment. This terrific preparation was the heaviest since the war in the Western Desert began.

Next day the land attack began shortly before dawn in the pale light of the moon. The plan of the attack was to send cruiser tanks ahead from the west with the object of cutting the entrenched camp in two, so that each half could be dealt with separately by the infantry. The tanks had been assembling round the perimeter all night, and at zero hour Australian infantry went forward to cut gaps in the barbed wire, while Australian sappers worked with pick and shovel within short range of the Italians' defence posts to break down what the R.A.F. had left of the anti-tank trench. The tanks crashed through the perimeter followed by the Australian infantry with fixed bayonets. Strong point after strong point was attacked with the bayonet, and the Italian defenders were gradually overpowered. By the evening of the first day our forces had penetrated to a depth of 2 miles on a 9-mile front, and about 10,000 prisoners had been rounded up.

When they had penetrated into the heart of the fortress and made a bridgehead, our forces swept onwards and took the defenders

of the northern sector in the rear. The Italian defenders in the central and northern sectors put up a fairly stout resistance, detachments of artillery and machine-gun crews continuing to fire until faced by tanks or artillery at close quarters.

The Italian gunners who came over to our lines expressed professional interest in our guns, and while the battle was still in progress they gathered round and watched our gunners in action. One Italian artillery officer expressed his appreciation at the rapidity with which our guns moved to new positions, and the accuracy of the fire. So keen was the Italian interest, that an incident occurred which would have been impossible in most wars. As the prisoners surrendered we had no time to round them all up, and they had to wait patiently till we could deal with them. A group of them, including an officer, watched our gunners hastily digging a new forward gun emplacement. The officer said something in Italian which our battery commander did not understand, but he pointed to a stretcher and then to the Italian position he had just left. Thinking that he wanted to bring in some Italian wounded, our gunnery officer, engrossed with his job, nodded assent. The Italian officer ran to his own former position, with two soldiers carrying the stretcher. In a few minutes they were back with the stretcher ; it did not contain a body, but a set of picks and shovels which the Italian officer offered to our battery commander.

By Saturday afternoon (4th January) most of Bardia's defences were in our hands. There was still some opposition from the south-east sector, but British patrols pushed into Bardia, and at 1.30 on the afternoon of Sunday the 5th all opposition ceased. As our forces entered the town masses of Italians poured out of dug-outs and caves, their hands up. From one cave alone 2,000 came out. Some of the men had white rags tied to their wrists in token of surrender, and in the caves large stocks of white flags were found. These had obviously been prepared in advance.

The Storming of Bardia

MOVING UP TO THE ATTACK.

READY FOR THE FINAL ASSAULT.

INTO THE HEART OF THE DEFENCE.

CAPTURED. Some of the 40,000—a human corral of Italian prisoners.

DESTROYED. A C.R.42, nose down.

ABANDONED. Light anti-tank guns taken at Bardia.

Altogether about 40,000 prisoners were taken, but one was missing—General Bergonzoli, the commander of Bardia. Not so long before he had delivered this stirring message to his troops :

" From the cliffs of Halfaya I scan the mists to the east. I see the roads which mark the way to victory. You have covered the first steps of the march to Alexandria. Emblems of the army which tried to bar your way have been trampled underfoot. Further and more important objectives await you."

And as recently as 30th December the Italian radio had said of him :

" The General commanding our brave troops is known as ' Electric Beard ' because he has a wiry beard beneath flashing eyes. He is one of the bravest of the brave. He is never happy unless he is up in the front line with his men in the thick of the fighting. Therefore he is beloved of all. He was wounded in the Great War, in Abyssinia and in Spain. As a Spanish general said, ' His example and inspiration was worth a whole army corps ! ' "

Alas, our troops did not have the pleasure of including " the Electric Beard " in their prizes, for the general had escaped from the camp. Bergonzoli was one of the most courageous of the Italian generals, and his escape on foot through our lines was in itself a feat.

But when we considered our trophies in the month between the beginning of our advance and the fall of Bardia, we could afford not to sigh for one general. In that month we had advanced 160 miles and destroyed eight divisions and one armoured group. We had captured more than 80,000 prisoners, including nine generals and 3,250 officers, besides inflicting on the enemy many losses in killed. The captured material included more than 200 tanks, some 800 guns and 1,300 machine-guns, besides large quantities of ammunition, stores, vehicles and other war material of all kinds. All this had been accomplished with a total loss to our forces in battle casualties of fewer than 1,500.

8

Pursuit : The Fall of Tobruk

AS WE WENT FORWARD, problems for the staff increased. One of the most pressing was to get up supplies of food, water and petrol. When a big operation was in progress, vast quantities of petrol were required—the tanks alone in one action needed between 20,000 and 25,000 gallons a day. Tanks and other armoured vehicles need frequent overhauls, and although there were mobile workshops of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps with the army, these very often fell behind, and sometimes had to make up for the delay caused by distance from the front by speeding up their service.

The work done by the Royal Army Service Corps was also striking, if not always spectacular. Many of their vehicles had to be withdrawn for troop carrying—for example, taking the Indian troops up to the battle of Sidi Barrani—which added to the difficulties of an already hard-pressed service : but somehow, in spite of the handicaps, depots with supplies of food, petrol and ammunition, for five days, usually came into existence according to plan. The railway ended at Matruh, which meant that, in the earlier stages of the campaign, all supplies had to be conveyed by roads which wear and tear had severely damaged. After we had taken Sollum, we were able to ship supplies there—including water, the nearest water point from Sollum being many miles away : unloading, however, was a hazardous operation because of bad weather and Italian bombing, though the latter was not very accurate.

During the attack on Tobruk water had to be brought forward from Bardia, and even the capture of Tobruk did not ease this situation, for the water supply there is scanty. The

Italians had been getting their supply by sea from Italy.

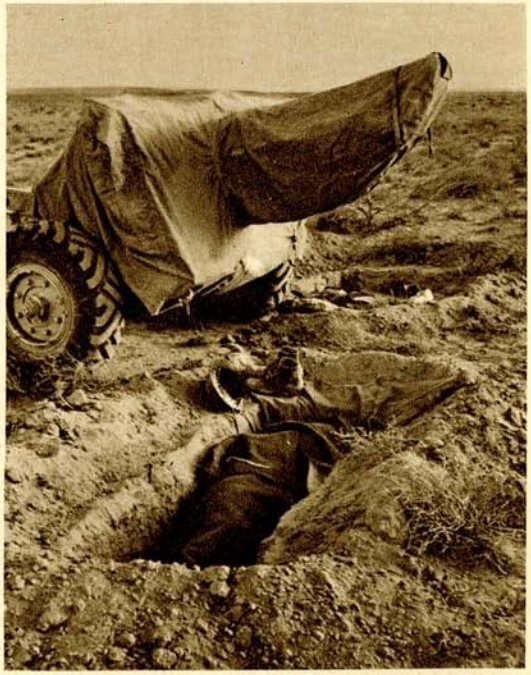
It was a great achievement of the R.A.S.C. and the directorate of Supplies and Transport that never at any time was there any serious shortage of essential supplies (although, as General Creagh remarked, one's idea of what is and what is not essential changes during a campaign). The drivers of R.A.S.C. vehicles worked against great difficulties of time and space ; and these men, hardy, tough and enterprising, deserve to share in the triumph of the campaign as much as the men who drove more spectacular vehicles.

The task of the Engineers in all offensive operations can be summarised as the removal of obstacles to the advance of the force, the provision of water, and the maintenance of road communications. Realising that these tasks would in all probability involve immense difficulties, the accumulation of huge quantities of stores had been started months before the advance. For example, an order had been placed for several hundred miles of large diameter water pipe. In addition, large quantities of stone and bitumen were needed for repairing roads. But every lorry was in use to bring up other supplies. Such problems crop up regularly in a campaign—problems that appear insoluble and are always solved. The difficulty of getting up the road materials was overcome by the use of captured lorries driven by Cypriots, who were hurriedly diverted from other units. Roads were thus licked into some sort of shape in time for each successive advance.

After the fall of Bardia our forces pushed on, and by 6th January the outer perimeter of Tobruk was surrounded. Tobruk, a considerable town with a good harbour, was protected by two lines of defences. The inner line was some 19 miles and the outer line 30 miles in length, covering the town and bay of Tobruk from shore to shore. Tobruk too, like Bardia, was a naturally strong defensive position, and it was thought the morale of the garrison would be fairly high since its troops had not yet been fully engaged.

An R.A.F. Army Co-operation Squadron carried out extremely valuable tactical reconnaissance before the attack at Tobruk, as elsewhere. These squadrons come into the limelight less than other branches of the R.A.F., but their work entails great daring and endurance, since, in making a close reconnaissance or taking photographs of defences, they have to fly at a low altitude over a set course, usually in the face of the heaviest anti-aircraft fire the enemy can bring to bear.

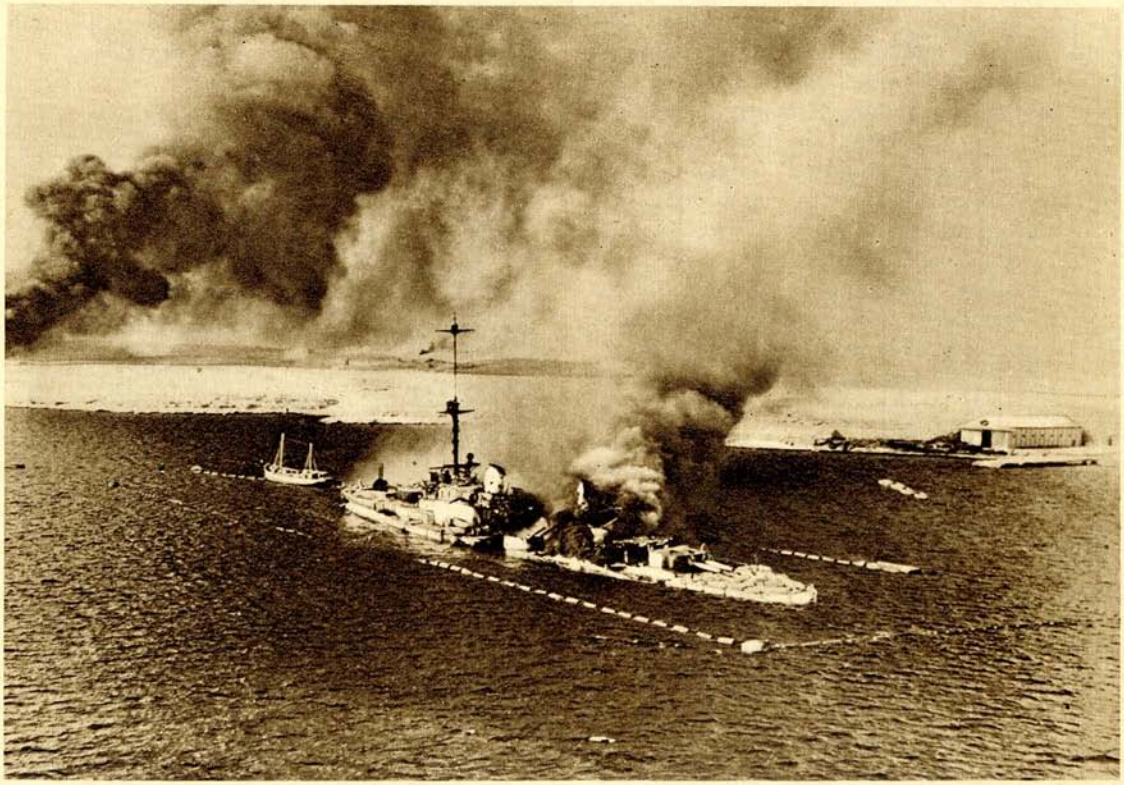
The preparations before Tobruk illustrate both the closeness of co-operation between the different services, and the lesser-known excitements of war. Photographs of the defences of Tobruk had to be taken before the advance, so that we could mark on our maps the position of anti-tank mines and other obstacles. For



BEFORE TOBRUK. Gun and gun-crew rest in the desert, sheltered from dust and cold.

various reasons, it was not possible for the Co-operation Squadron to take the photographs until less than two days before the attack. The aircraft concerned had to fly very low right round the defences in the face of a heavy barrage, but it got back safely. The films were developed, the maps roughed out and flown to Cairo, where they were printed, and then flown back to Corps H.Q. just in time to get them into the hands of the commanders concerned. The marking of the mine-fields on the maps was accurate, and thus heavy losses in men and vehicles were avoided. Concise orders were finally issued, allotting specific tasks to each of the three fighting services. It was at first light on 21st January that the attack against Tobruk began, in a violent dust storm which made matters extremely uncomfortable for the troops. By the evening the British forces had penetrated to a depth of 8 miles in the southern and south-eastern sectors, but the central and western sectors of the defences still held out. Before noon on the following day the Australian infantry had succeeded in entering the town itself; there was still fighting in the western sector, but by the evening the capture of the whole of the defended area and the town was complete.

Over 15,000 prisoners were taken, including a Corps Commander, a Divisional Commander, two other generals, an admiral, and a number of senior army and naval officers. About 200



TOBRUK BOMBARDED. The " San Giorgio " after an attack by R.A.F. bombers. Smoke from blazing petrol dumps rises on the left of the picture.

guns of all calibres were captured, together with quantities of other military material, and in the harbour lay the battered hulk of the cruiser "San Giorgio" which had been a victim of our air attacks. Our casualties had been under 500.

We moved on, leaving behind us an amazing mass of captured material, while along the roads leading to Egypt moved an almost endless column of Italian troops—the prisoners of war. At Tobruk we found many in a pitiable state, for the water supply had broken down. Some of them lay on the ground, gnawing the edges of their coats, others staggered about muttering "*Acqua, acqua.*" As fast as we could we brought up supplies of water, and once they had slaked their thirsts the men became docile, obeying without question the orders given to them. Later, when they had had a meal and discovered that they were going to be well treated, they accepted their situation calmly.

It was impossible to erect wire cages for so many of them, but those who were left in the open or on the beach showed no disposition to escape and—fortunately, since there was such a heavy demand on our own man power—very few guards were needed. One long column of prisoners was seen swinging along a road under the leadership of a British private. He seemed to be on excellent terms with his charges, and one of them was carrying his rifle for him!

As soon as we had occupied Tobruk our mechanised units forged on ahead, and two days after its fall had advanced 40 miles and occupied the aerodrome of Gazala, previously visited by our patrols. From time to time R.A.F. communiqués in describing raids had announced that enemy aircraft had been destroyed on the ground. As we advanced deep into Italian territory, we saw the battered wrecks of Italian aircraft—fighters and bombers—lying strewn around the aerodromes, which looked something like an elephants' graveyard.

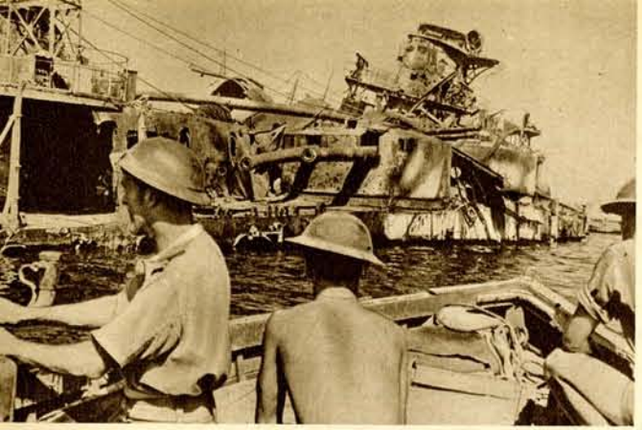
From Tobruk onwards the advance was swift. By 30th January, after three days' fighting, Derna was in our hands. There the Italians offered more resistance than at any other place during the operations of the previous two months. The country around Derna favoured the defenders to a marked degree. The town, a small seaside resort of trim white villas in tree-lined avenues, lies at the foot of a steep escarpment cleft by the deep Wadi Derna, which offers great advantages as a natural point of defence, and is in itself an anti-tank obstacle.

At the same time as our forces were crossing the Wadi Derna, another detachment went to the south. The heights of the Wadi nearest Derna were scaled and taken at the point of the bayonet by men of the 19th Australian Infantry Brigade; a violent counter-attack launched by the enemy was repulsed with heavy loss to the Italians.

Realising that their position was hopeless, the Italians began to evacuate the town, after blowing up the hair-pin road which twists down the side of the escarpment. Our patrols managed to get into the town by devious routes and take possession of it, while Australian sappers repaired the breaches in the road for us to get our supply vehicles into the town. The Australian sappers, many of them road-workers in civilian life, did a fine job; in thirty-six hours our heavy vehicles were able to enter the town. The Italians had also blown up the hair-pin road at the other end of the escarpment leading out of the town, and here again the sappers did good emergency repair work to enable us to continue our advance.

The battle for Derna was no set-piece, but a series of minor actions during each one of which our forces gradually moved forward. The Italian artillery, which had always offered more opposition than any other Italian arm during the whole campaign, resisted fiercely; but one by one the Italian guns were silenced by our counter-fire.

The Italians did all they could to delay our advance along the roads which are so fine an



SCRAP-IRON CRUISER : THE " SAN GIORGIO."

GRAVEYARD OF SHATTERED AIRCRAFT : EL ADEM.

MARCH TO CAPTIVITY : ITALIAN NAVAL PRISONERS.

Tobruk Taken

THE CAPTURED TOWN. ENEMY MOTOR-TRANSPORT IS PARKED IN THE FORE-GROUND. BURNING PETROL-DUMPS THROW A CLOUD OF SMOKE OVER THE TOWN.

example of their engineering skill. Outside Barce, for example, a bridge across a steep ravine was so successfully demolished that it took our Sappers four days and nights of steady slogging work to get an emergency route into use. But often their work was hasty and incomplete: in defacing the milestones and signposts, for instance, they had left one out every here and there, so that the whole scheme was nullified.

Though opposition was offered to our advancing forces at Cyrene, it fell to us on 3rd February. Still there was no pause in our advance and we pushed on rapidly towards Benghazi. The plan was to maintain pressure with the Australian division on the town itself while the armoured division went south across the desert and cut off a possible enemy retreat. The clash came at Beda Fomm.

9

Coup de Grâce: The Battle of Beda Fomm

IN THE VARIOUS major operations in the Western Desert, the main rôle of the armoured force was to swing round to the rear of the enemy and so prevent or harass his retreat.

The armoured force performed all their tasks with conspicuous success. But the last of their operations, the battle of Beda Fomm, 60 miles south of Benghazi, is probably the most noteworthy, because it was carried out by this force

ON TO BENGHAZI. A machine-gun crew in action before Derna.

almost unsupported and constituted the decisive action in this phase of the war.

The most interesting point of this battle is its complete strategic unorthodoxy. When on 9th February Mr. Winston Churchill spoke of Beda Fomm, he said the campaign would long be studied as an example of the military art. Neither General O'Connor, the Corps Commander who directed and inspired the advance from Barrani to Benghazi, nor General Creagh, commander of the armoured force, thought of the battle in that light, for it had broken every text-book rule, and violated every staff college precept. Its rules had been dictated by the exigencies of the moment : to the purist it may not have been a perfect battle ; to the less well informed observer it was an inspiring example of the triumph of resource, audacity, staying power, and above all individual courage. It was another example of the brilliant leadership of General O'Connor, which had been a marked feature of the work of his Corps throughout the campaign.

Originally it was thought that the Italians would make a stand in Benghazi, and General O'Connor planned to send the Australians towards the town along the northern route to make a frontal attack, while the armoured force fulfilled its usual rôle of skirting round the enemy's rear and cutting off his retreat. About the same time as Derna was falling to the Australians, the armoured force had advanced to Mekili, causing the withdrawal of General Babini's armoured force. From there it was planned to make a comparatively leisurely—leisurely for the armoured force, that is—advance 150 miles to the south of Benghazi to cut off a possible Italian retreat. Some days for the journey were considered necessary, partly because the going was reputed to be atrocious, and partly because the Services had to be allowed time to establish supply depots. It was hoped that ten days would be available to build up reserves at Mekili ; lines of communication had been growing longer and longer, and the task of feeding and supplying a large force of men and vehicles in the centre of a desert with almost no definable route was formidable.

The scheme of a slow and orderly advance from Mekili to the Benghazi road was rudely shattered. News came that the Italians were abandoning Benghazi and retreating to the south. General O'Connor at once ordered the armoured force to proceed south with all speed " to prevent the enemy escaping and destroy him as opportunity offers."

It is about 150 miles from Mekili to the Benghazi-Tripoli road ; the going is frightful, and a dust storm was developing. The Italians were already beginning to filter out of Benghazi. It became rather like a scene in an old serial film thriller : the villains of the piece were hitting the trail south as hard as they could go, and the hero and his men were dashing across the desert on their fiery steeds to cut them off at the cross-roads. If we had been watching the film we should have held our breath, even while knowing at the back of our minds that the hero would make it. We certainly held our breaths at Mekili as the columns moved off, and we had not the certain knowledge that they were going to succeed.

The day before, a part of the division had gone forward and returned to report that the country ahead was impossible. We erased the word " impossible " from our dictionary : the order had been given and it was going to be carried out. As much space as possible in the vehicles had to be given to the essentials of war, and indeed General Creagh said in a characteristic phrase, " Give us enough petrol and ammunition, and I and my men will starve if necessary."

A more mobile column was formed, consisting of the 11th Hussars, the 2nd Rifle Brigade, and the 4th and 106th R.H.A. Pushing ahead as the vanguard of the advance, it left at first light in the morning.

The main force moved off about mid-day on Tuesday, 4th February, and all reports about the going were found to be true. For mile

after mile the vehicles had to plunge over and plough through a desert surface covered with rough boulders and slabs of rock, lurching and bumping over the billowy ground at about 4 miles an hour.

An added difficulty was the lack of accurate maps of the country from Mekili onwards. Parties of supply lorries disappeared into the curtain of dust, and lost contact with the main column ; hours later they would be seen looming out of the gloom again. One group of supply vehicles found itself alone, and becoming faintly anxious, the drivers pushed ahead. Fate was with them, for they stumbled on to a short cut, and to their astonishment when they made contact with the column again they found themselves at the head of it. So for a brief minute of well-deserved glory the supply lorries led the advance on Beda Fomm.

At five o'clock that afternoon the forward mobile column reached Fort Msus and captured it. They then continued their journey to the road.

At one o'clock in the morning the main column reached Msus, and a brief halt was ordered. It had been a most trying day, but when the order to halt was given, those concerned could look back on it with a good deal of satisfaction. There had been surprisingly few casualties among the vehicles. In the headquarters group, for example, only one car had failed to arrive, and in other sections the same encouraging story could be told.

Fortunately the rain, which had grimly threatened, had held off, and there had been a moon to guide the column along the last miles. At earliest dawn the mobile column—Hussars and Riflemen—lumbering through the desert like some fantastic circus, moved off again.

At 12.40 p.m. great news came by radio from the advanced column. They had reached the Benghazi road. It was almost too good to be true. As in our film serial, the heroes had got there first. They sent information that there was traffic in both directions on the road—which meant that the Italian forces hadn't arrived. How far back along the road they were could only be guessed, for we had refrained from sending out reconnaissance aircraft in case we should reveal our knowledge of their retreat. The Italians had to be allowed to come on in blissful ignorance of the fact that we were waiting for them. It was a complete surprise, as startling as any we had sprung on them during this war, for they had not thought it possible that we could make the trip across the desert from Mekili in time to cut them off.

We had not done it with much time to spare, for it was exactly one hour and forty minutes after our first armoured cars reached the road near Beda Fomm that the head of the Italian column appeared over the horizon.

The flying column met the enemy head-on ; and meanwhile a further group was preparing to handle the rearguard, and another column to harass the enemy on his flanks.

The battle began by an attack on the first lorry that came bowling down the road. As the guns fired the lorry stopped, swayed uneasily, and then came to a halt broadside across the road while the occupants leapt out to see what on earth had hit them. This at once held up the whole column of tanks, lorries, armoured cars, Breda carriers, motorcycles and civilian buses requisitioned for the occasion, which coiled along the road for about 10 miles.

There it was, then, this column 10 miles long, complacent in the thought that it had escaped from Benghazi in time, suddenly confronted with the horrible fact that our forces had done the apparently impossible and made the southern sweep across the desert.

Even then the situation, although exasperating, should not have seemed hopeless to the Italian commanders. Our forces were considerably outnumbered—particularly at the beginning of the battle when only the mobile column had reached the scene. The Italians were amply equipped with guns and fighting vehicles, and we had no advantage in terrain.

The battle lasted for thirty-six hours. There

THE RACE TO BEDA FOMM : Route of the armoured division, south across the desert.

were times when the British situation did not look too good. For example, at about five o'clock in the afternoon a wireless message was sent out to one brigade, " Go to the assistance of the flying column," which at the time was fighting almost single handed against a force many times stronger. Fifty minutes later the message came by radio from this particular brigade, " Advancing to attack," and about an hour later another welcome message was flashed across, " Attacking enemy on flank."

There is little doubt that the mobility and energy of our fighting vehicles gave the Italians the impression they were up against much greater forces. That assumption, combined with the fact that General Tallera, the commander, was killed on the first day, may account for the Italians' failure to make a more determined effort to break through. Even had a frontal push been considered impossible, the flat country surrounding the battle-field was admirably suited to a detour. They did make some effort to escape down a route that led close to the shore, but this way was stoutly defended by the 2nd Rifle Brigade, spread out over an area of $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles—" the thin green line " as someone at Divisional Headquarters called it. Only one or two tanks succeeded in breaking through and making their escape. " The thin green line," like every other unit or formation on our side in the battle, fought furiously, and there were more examples of individual and co-operative heroism and daring initiative than can be recounted or are, in fact, known.

One of them can be mentioned to indicate the inspired impudence of our forces. During the night a sergeant—P. S. M. Jarvis—and a

Rifleman were guarding 400 or 500 prisoners, and watching the track. The sergeant heard something. He looked up and saw two big enemy tanks heading for him. At once he and the rifleman sprang up and rushed at the tanks. As they did so the prisoners, seeing a chance of delivery, also rushed forward and began swarming over the tanks.

Wondering what was happening, the officer of the leading tank opened the turret hatch and looked out. At once the sergeant swung his rifle and clubbed him on the head, then poked his rifle in through the visor and fired. That was enough for the crew: they climbed out and surrendered. At the same time the rifleman had been acting in a similar fashion with the other tank, so now the batch of prisoners had increased by eight, and there were two tanks to guard as well. When congratulated by a senior officer on this excellent piece of work, the sergeant said, "Yes, it was all right, sir, for the rifleman and me had a nice warm place to spend the rest of the night."

All next day the battle raged up and down the road, and as one section or another of the Italian force was battered into submission, prisoners streamed into our lines. When the battle was raging at its height, some men of a Lancashire yeomanry regiment drove up and down the Italian columns in lorries, firing their Bren guns, under the impression, as an observer put it, that they were tanks. During the afternoon an exciting message was flashed by radio from the commander of one force to his senior officer, "Bergonzoli's in the bag. What do I do?" "Good work," came the reply; "now get Graziani."

By nightfall on the second day the battle was almost over, but the Italians made a last desperate attack with tanks at daybreak the following morning. The previous day our

PROUD LEGION. Propaganda parade at Benghazi before the Italian attack.

tank detachment had been hard pressed and had dispersed ; but they were up to strength again to meet this early morning attack. The last Italian effort to break through did not last long : by nine o'clock the Divisional Intelligence Officers were able to write happily in their war diary, " The enemy has been completely liquidated."

The battlefield presented an extraordinary spectacle. For 10 miles along the road lay a strange assortment of wreckage—lorries upended, battered tanks, guns, the bodies of men, and a staggering amount of what can only be called litter : papers, tattered scraps of uniform, small arms and hand grenades, rations, first-aid outfits, flags, heaven knows what else. It was a scavenger's nightmare. And among this vast acreage of the bitter souvenirs left by some of Mussolini's " eight million crusaders " roamed a dejected, weary host of blue-grey figures waiting patiently for their enemy to organise transport to get them to the prisoners-of-war camps.

Figures mean little now, but it is perhaps worth recording that at the battle of Beda Fomm we took over 20,000 prisoners, accounted for 216 guns of all descriptions, 112 tanks, 1,500 lorries and an almost countless quantity of small arms and ammunition, with very small loss to ourselves. The total number of Italian prisoners taken in the Western Desert between 9th December, 1940, and 8th February, 1941—a period of sixty-two days—amounted to 133,295. During the same period we captured some 1,300 guns.

One newspaper article speculated on " the riddle of the Italian rout." The riddle can be answered. The Italians were superior in number and equipment, but we were superior in the things that in the end always decide the issue—leadership and, above all, the individual courage of the men.

BROKEN COLUMN. Prisoners streaming east in endless line, unattended and unguarded.

10

Through the Great Sand Sea: The Long Range Desert Group

WHILE THE MAIN CAMPAIGN was being fought out within easy reach of the Mediterranean, subsidiary operations on a smaller scale, but ranging over a very wide area of country, were going on in the remoteness of the inner desert.

At the outbreak of the war the Italian control over inner Libya was centred in what was known as the Southern Territories Command, which had its headquarters at Hon, in the group of oases known as the Giofra, the westernmost of the so-called "oases of the 29th parallel"—Hon, Marada, Augila, Jalo and Jarabub. In the east the Italians held a chain of oases and wells stretching south-eastwards from Benghazi for 800 miles into the interior. Only another 900 miles of Sudan desert separated them from their further possessions in East Africa. Therefore at the time of their entry into the war, they not only had the means of reinforcing their aircraft in East Africa by flights from Kufra and Oweinat, but, if they had so wished, they could have used Oweinat and Sarra as jumping-off places for raids by mechanised forces or by air on the Aswan Dam, our river port at Wadi Halfa, into Darfur or into the French possessions in the south-west. It was even possible that enterprising enemy parties might manage, as did the Senussi in the last war, to get across the barrier of sand dunes and occupy the Egyptian oases of Dakhla and Bahariya.

It was thus very important to find out what was going on in the inner desert 600 miles west of the Nile, behind the huge protective arc of the Sand Sea, and to be in a position to give warning of, and to delay, any enemy thrust from Kufra. The difficulties were great. The whole country is entirely uninhabited and waterless. Much of it lies beneath range upon range of difficult dunes in the crossing of which our army had no experience. Moreover, the few long-range aircraft then at our disposal were all wanted for other purposes, and in any case would have been of little avail for patrolling such an enormous area without an elaborate system of landing grounds and petrol supplies, neither of which existed.

What was needed was a number of small but extremely mobile motor columns, each capable of travelling entirely self-contained in petrol for 2,000 miles or more, and carrying enough food and water to last for many weeks at a stretch; capable also of getting across the greatest dune-fields in the world; of navigating their own way over unmapped country for hundreds of miles inside the enemy's territory, where no help could come for casualties to men or vehicles.

Fortunately Major R. A Bagnold had been doing just this kind of thing in this very country for years before the war. He soon gathered together others with similar experience. Within six weeks the peculiar organisation of the Long Range Desert Group was in being, and patrols composed of picked men from the New Zealand forces were equipped and trained.

In the heat of August, 1940, Captain P. A. Clayton, with five New Zealanders and two light cars, reached the Italian "shore" of the Great Sand Sea by a route known only to himself. He then struck out across entirely unknown desert westward into Libya, towards the main enemy route that led from Benghazi to Kufra, 200 miles beyond the frontier. On the way he was forced to struggle over a second, hitherto unrecorded, belt of continuous high dunes 100 miles in width. He then remained on the track for four days in the open, quietly studying the wheel marks of all the traffic that had passed,

THOUSAND-MILE RECONNAISSANCE. The Long Range Patrols spent weeks at a stretch in a wilderness almost empty of life.

while enemy aircraft, intent on other things, flew overhead along the route.

Just as the Bedouin can tell, from their footmarks in the desert, the age, breed and condition of every camel in a caravan which has passed by, so can a European with years of experience extract a wealth of information from the marks of motor traffic. For, except over the moving dunes, car tracks persist for many years. In places in the Egyptian deserts the old tracks of the car patrols of 1916 can still be plainly seen. This persistence of telltale tracks has been one of the chief difficulties which the patrols of the L.R.D.G. have had to face in their journeyings through enemy territory. Once they are spotted from the air, the tracks of a motor column can be followed up until the column itself is found and bombed. Twice our patrols were caught in the open shelterless desert deep in the interior, and

bombed for over an hour by three aircraft. On neither occasion, however, thanks mainly to skilful manœuvring on the part of the individual crews, was any damage done to men or vehicles.

Shortly after Clayton's early venture, the " impassable " barrier of the Great Sand Sea was crossed for the first time by a military force. Piloted by Major Bagnold and Lieut. W. B. Kennedy Shaw along a more direct route, three columns of larger and fully loaded trucks stood on firm ground once more after crawling for 200 miles over an endless succession of parallel sand ridges, sometimes 400 feet in height, which run like giant breakers for a score of miles without interruption. Much of the surface of this terrible sand country is so soft that a car sinks axle-deep, and an inexperienced driver may cover only a few miles in a day. But it is possible in time, from faint indications of colour, curvature and ripple-mark, to pick out a narrow winding course over firm sand and so to drive fast and surely over seemingly impossible dunes.

At this time of year the personnel of the patrols suffered much from the weather. During the summer months a hot wind, the like of which is not known in Egypt, is liable to blow over the Libyan dunes. For three days the column was muffled in a blanket of blinding sand. The temperature rose to such a height that more than one man became delirious from heat-stroke. In the shade of every rock or stone were found dead or dying migrant birds.

Having crossed the dunes, the patrols separated. Each set off on a thousand mile reconnaissance of its own into different parts of enemy territory. One patrol under Captain E. C. Mitford examined all the northern roads leading to Kufra, and penetrated more than 350 miles into Libya. Sailing down one road in broad daylight, the party held up a column of lorries in the style of highwaymen. The haul included the official mail for Kufra, which was found to contain enough information to give us all the enemy's dispositions in the inner desert area. The lorries and their crews disappeared without trace from the enemy's ken. Clayton's own patrol, crossing over to the south-west of Kufra, travelled along the ancient caravan route past Sarra Well until contact was made with the Free French outpost at Tekro in Equatoria. A third party, under Captain Steele, visited the lonely mountain of Oweinat, where they found and destroyed a large dump of petrol and bombs, and burned an enemy bomber which had been left unguarded on the landing ground.

Other expeditions followed throughout the autumn of 1940. Various ruses had to be adopted from time to time to get information. On one occasion, in order to gain access to an area which was unsuitable for motor transport, a camel was " folded " into a light truck, carried for 500 miles to the area in question, used for several days for a special reconnaissance, and carried back again, without appearing to suffer any ill effects.

It had soon become clear, however, that the Italians had no offensive designs towards the south ; and thereafter the Long Range Patrols grew more aggressive. Clayton, returning from a mine-laying expedition along the road between Jalo and Agedabia, appeared suddenly before the gate of the fort in Augila oasis. The sentry outside was seized before he had completed his salute. Three shells at close range into the mud walls of the fort drove the astonished garrison out by the back door, and enabled the whole armament to be removed at leisure. The raiders disappeared into the desert. They were searched for by enemy aircraft but never found. On the same day, 600 miles farther south, Mitford attacked the Italian post at Oweinat, where the garrison were living like troglodytes among the giant boulders at the mountain's foot. They were driven up the hillside, leaving behind a dozen killed and wounded.

The effects of these activities were considerable. As we now know from prisoners' statements, all normal traffic along the desert routes

was stopped after the first raid. No movement was allowed from one oasis to another except in convoys escorted by guns and aircraft. All the garrisons in the interior of Libya were heavily reinforced in men and weapons, and a system of daily air patrols over a vast area was inaugurated.

The prolonged uncertainty seems to have got on the nerves of the isolated enemy garrisons. We have been told that out in the desert mysterious noises—possibly imagined, but possibly the very real vibrant hooting which the dunes sometimes emit from natural causes—began to be reported on all sides as indicating the passage of a British patrol. We can picture the commander poring anxiously

DESERT RAIDER. The patrols consisted of small but extremely mobile motor columns, capable of travelling, entirely self-contained, with no help for casualties to men or machines, for 2,000 miles or more.

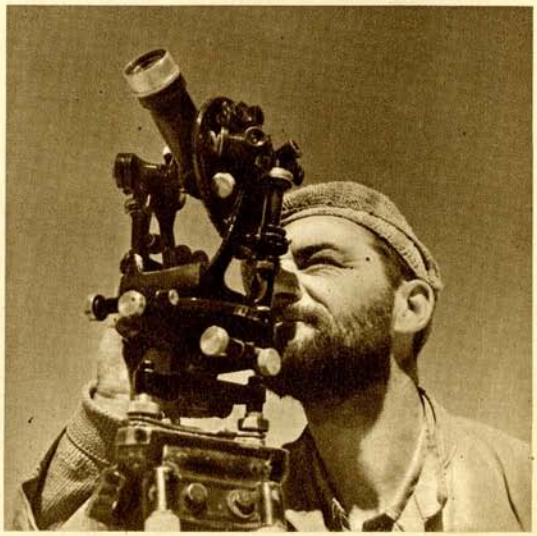
KEEPING TOUCH. The radio operator links the heart of the desert with G.H.Q. and the outside world.

over his inaccurate map (as most of the Italian maps of the interior have proved to be) and wondering out of which sand sea or over which "*barriere di dune insuperabile*" one of our ubiquitous little columns would next appear.

By December the main purpose of the L.R.D.G. in eastern Libya had been achieved. The attention of the enemy had been appreciably distracted from the decisive battle area in the north. It was therefore decided to stir up the sleepy garrisons in the Fezzan, far away in south-western Libya, where, since the armistice with the French in West Africa, the enemy felt themselves undoubtedly secure.

On Christmas Eve, 1940, Clayton set out from Cairo with one New Zealand patrol, and another composed of officers and men selected from the Brigade of Guards. His objective was Murzuk, the chief town in the Fezzan, 1,200 miles from Cairo in a direct line across Libya. To make such a journey in secret it was necessary to avoid all wells, and to navigate a route through unexplored country all the way. By a run of 1,100 miles, through the Sand Sea, leaving Kufra to the south, he reached the northern slopes of the 10,000-foot mountains of Tibesti on 7th January. Here, by an arrangement made some time before by Bagnold at a meeting with the Free French commander on the edge of Lake Chad a thousand miles away to the south, Clayton was joined by Colonel D'Ornano and a French detachment which had come up by camel through the mountains.

Reinforced by the French, the raiding party went north across desert country once more, and making a big detour to avoid detection, arrived at the gates of the great stone fort at Murzuk before the enemy had any suspicion of their presence. The few Italian soldiers passed on the outskirts raised their hands in the Fascist salute: at the gate a group of troops waiting to parade was called to attention by the N.C.O. in charge. These being quickly disposed of, the fort was investigated by the Guards patrol, who soon managed with a mortar shell to set the interior on fire. While the fort was blazing, the New Zealanders and French attacked and occupied the aerodrome,



KEEPING DIRECTION. The patrols travel by the sun and stars over vast areas of unmapped territory.

destroying the hangar with all the aircraft and stores found there, and taking 30 prisoners. It was here that Colonel D'Ornano was killed, rifle in hand, in an attempt to silence a machine-gun at 20 yards range.

On the following day the force moved on to the town of Traghen, whose inhabitants marched out *en masse* to surrender. Two more oases were attacked, and casualties inflicted on the enemy, before the force turned southwards towards Tibesti.

Some idea of the enormous distances and the difficulties which this operation involved can be gained from the fact that a Guardsman who was badly wounded at Murzuk had to be carried across country for 700 miles in a truck to the nearest French post in Tibesti, before he could be picked up by aeroplane. From there he was flown 3,000 miles to hospital in Cairo. Again, a damaged truck was towed for more than a thousand miles to the nearest point where repairs could be effected.

On their return journey the two British patrols joined the Free French column under Colonel Leclerc which was advancing north-eastwards from Faya via Tekro and Sarra to attack the Italian garrison in Kufra. On 31st January Clayton's own patrol, which was acting as advanced guard to the French expedition, was attacked near Bishara Well by a combined force of enemy cars, guns and aircraft. After he had successfully extricated his party, Clayton's car was put out of action and he himself fell into the enemy's hands.

Four soldiers, two of whom were wounded, managed to escape from the enemy into the desert. They were Pte. Moore of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles, Guardsmen Winchester and Easton, and Pte. Tighe, R.A.O.C. With nothing but one tin of jam and one 2-gallon tin of water between them, they walked for 10 days over waterless sand and covered no less than 210 miles before rejoining the French Forces.

The French force of 200 men remained in the vicinity of Kufra throughout the month of February, 500 miles from their base at Faya. This force, the enemy having destroyed the deep wells at Sarra and Bishara, was 350 miles from the nearest water. But they so harried the Italians that they were able step by step to reduce their outposts, till finally the whole oasis area was in their hands, and the enemy garrison of some hundreds of troops was besieged in the fort itself, which surrendered to Colonel Leclerc on 1st March. With its fall, almost the last vestige of Italian resistance in Cyrenaica was removed.

11

A Roof Over Their Heads

AFTER THE BATTLE of Beda Fomm the armoured divisions went into billets with a roof over their heads. For so many months they had lived and slept in the open, with the starry sky for a counterpane and the sand of the desert for a pillow, that it took them a little while to accustom themselves to the strange surroundings.

They had taken for their billets a group of buildings—almost all the habitable buildings—in a small fortress in the middle of a flat and featureless desert, its once white walls now a dingy mud colour, its half-Arabic, half-Italian buildings decrepit and forlorn. Men clumped through houses, up and down stairs, watched the cooks at work at last in a real kitchen, studied with awe the baths which might soon be filled with hot water, and gazed out of the windows at the dusty stunted trees, which were giant oaks and elms to men who had seen nothing grander than the desert scrub for months past. They were glowing with health. Life in the desert had taught them many things, including a new philosophy of living, and it

had also made them fit. They wondered jokingly if life under a roof would cause them to crack.

The force had had to endure what are conventionally described as " hardships." Since, in June 1940, it had left its base headquarters and taken to roaming some thousands of square miles of almost waterless desert, the men had had to sacrifice many of the things sometimes considered necessary for ordinary living.

The most common shortage was water. Natural sources of supply were few and far between, and for most of the time the water had to be brought long distances in difficult conditions. Supply depots that were miracles of speedy organisation were set up by the R.A.S.C. at various key points, but the force was constantly on the move and always getting out of range of these depots, so that supplies of essential commodities, of which water and petrol were the most precious, had to be carried with them.

The amount of water available varied according to the distance from a supply point, but it was never plentiful. Baths were impossible, and there were many times when a man would have to ask himself in the morning, " What's it going to be to-day—a cup of tea or a shave ? "

The food problem was in a way easier to solve, for it tended to be much the same always—How would you like your bully to-day ? Bully is not merely a fading joke from the last war, but the staple desert diet of this war—and an acceptable one at that.

Cooking methods had to be of the simplest. At night the fighting vehicles of all kinds—armoured cars, tanks and their supporting lorries and cars—would stop and make camp. Out would come primus stoves and mess tins, tea would be brewed, tins opened, and a meal that was good and substantial if not exactly exciting was ready.

The sand was the curse of the caterer. It was one of the worst winters for sand storms for many years, and although the British can adapt themselves to climate, and defy the unpleasant elements, there's very little remedy against sand when it is whipped into a blinding fury by the screaming winds of the desert.

A sand storm has been described as looking like a London " pea-souper " fog. So it does. But it is a fog that you can touch. You can see only a yard or two ahead, peering into the thick brown curtain that has descended on the desert, and you can feel it everywhere. The sand gets into your mouth, your hair, your nose ; it clings to your clothes till you look like a baker who has just come off the night-shift at a bread oven ; it creeps through the smallest crevice, and in its wilder moods it lashes face and hands like an emery-paper flail.

When their meal was over, the officers and men bedded-down in the desert. Some erected " bivvies "—little canvas tents—against the sides of their vehicles, others bedded in the open. In the summer nights it was intensely hot, and the insects of the desert, virulent and enterprising, needed no intelligence reports to guide them in unerring swarms to our encampments. In winter it was cold—a cold that was dangerous because the temperature dropped violently after dark—while a piercing wind whistled through the sand and scrub. Fortunately it seldom rains in North Africa—fortunately at any rate from the point of view of men who sleep out of doors.

These men of the armoured force had to endure other " hardships." They were out of touch with news and newspapers, books and magazines ; mail from home—by far the greatest want in the life of the soldier overseas—was naturally slow and sporadic in arriving ; there was no feminine society ; no alleviating comforts, no entertainments, no cinemas.

Certainly these are hardships, especially for the many men who had spent their civilian life behind office desks or shop counters : and yet the men throve on them. Not only were they physically fit, but their spirits were high, as they must be among men sharing a great

successful adventure.

They were not in the least bowed down by the turn of adversity in September when the Italians were advancing to Sidi Barrani, nor were they over-elated when the time came for them to help turn the tide. But success had unquestionably a lot to do with the cheerfulness that marked them as they marched into the new wonders of their billets. It was success which they could feel they had honestly deserved.

General Wavell has paid full tribute to the men who served under him and made the successes of the Western Desert possible. In a lecture he delivered at Cambridge in 1939, he said :

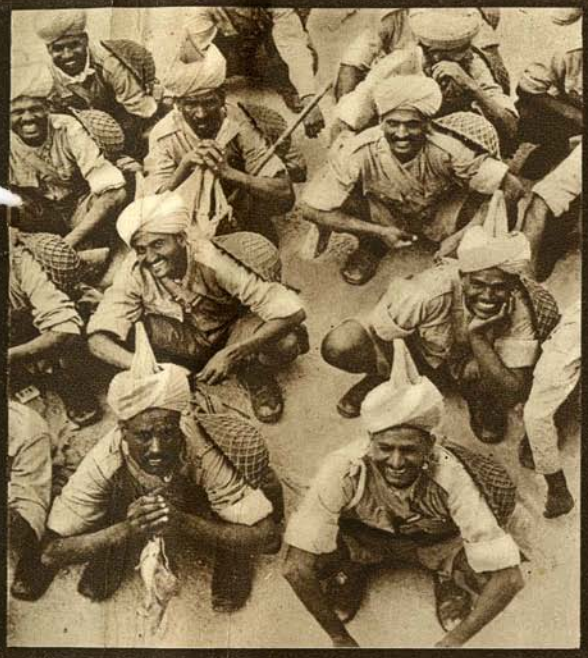
" The pious Greek, when he had set up altars to all the great gods by name, added one more altar, ' To the unknown God.' So whenever we speak and think of the great captains and set up our military altars to Hannibal and Napoleon and Marlborough and such-like, let us add one more altar, ' To the Unknown Leader,' that is, to the good company, platoon, or section leader who carries forward his men or holds his post, and often falls unknown. It is these who in the end do most to win wars."

The fortunes of war, however, did not permit these men to hold the ground they had won. Higher strategy made it necessary for the bulk of them to be transferred to the northern coast of the Mediterranean, where they made their gallant attempt to succour our indomitable Greek allies. Cyrenaica therefore was thinly held, and the Germans, seizing the opportunity, launched General Rommel's armoured divisions against what were virtually no more than outposts. Except for Tobruk, the garrison of which has remained for so long a thorn in the side of the enemy, all the ground gained was lost. Wars, however, are won, not by occupying ground, but by destroying armies, and the Army of the Nile had put an end to the existence of Graziani's proud legions. Keeping this essential principle in mind, we can look with satisfaction and gratitude upon the result of the first part of the Libyan campaign.

Australia . . .

New Zealand . . .

Free France . .



India . . .

Britain . . .

Long Range Patrol

Sevenpence net