



AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES

HEADQUARTERS
SOUTHERN COMMAND

22-7-53.

Dear Frank,

Herewith
a copy of my "Libyan Diary"
compiled in the weeks
following the campaign.
I fancy Gavin has
asked for it & received a copy
from me.

Yours sincerely

A C Robertson

Lt Col. F. B. Berryman C.B.E. D.S.O.
G.O.C. Western Comd.

4th August

3.

Dear Horace,

Many thanks for your letter dated 22nd July and for the Diary of Events of the 19th Infantry Brigade in the Libyan Campaign.

I have been moving around the last few days so have not been able to reply to your letter. As promised I shall send you a copy of my Battle diary covering Bardia.

Kindest regards,

Yours

Lieut-General,
GOC EASTERN COMMAND.

Lieut-General Sir Horace Robertson,
K.B.E., D.S.O.,
GOC Southern Command,
Albert Park,
MELBOURNE.

checked *P. 4/8*

Battle Diary

19th Australian Infantry Brigade

DIARY of EVENTS

LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

by

Brigadier H.C.H. Robertson D.S.O.

Commanding 19 Aust Inf Bde.

-----oOo-----

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE19 AUST INF BDEDIARY OF EVENTS19 AUST INF BDE LIBYAN CAMPAIGN

A few days before Christmas 1940 the 19 Aust Inf Bde, located at BURG EL ARAB, heard that 6 Aust Div was moving up for an attack on BARDIA. The 16 Aust Inf Bde had already moved forward and was going into line beside the 16 British Bde SOUTH of the defences, while the Armoured Div covered the NORTHERN and WESTERN Sectors. Later it was heard that the 17 Aust Inf Bde was moving up to relieve the 16 British Bde in the SOUTHERN Sector, and 19 Aust Inf Bde less one battalion (which was fully employed on security duties), was ordered to hold itself in readiness to move by sea from ALEXANDRIA to BARDIA immediately the defences were captured. The role of the 19 Aust Inf Bde was to secure the town and port facilities at the earliest possible moment, prevent damage, and work on the development of the port as an advanced base for further operations.

Liaison with the Navy in ALEXANDRIA showed that the latter had few facilities for a sea move and were very fully occupied with sea transport from ALEXANDRIA to SOLLUM. Naval information also favoured concentration on one port, and since considerable commitments had already been entered into for SOLLUM, as well as the fact that there was no certainty that BARDIA would be captured, the prospects for a sea move to BARDIA did not appear very favourable. Naval information also was that BARDIA was not even as sheltered as SOLLUM. Tentative arrangements were made for some transport on H.M. Monitor "TERROR", but as no date of move could be fixed, no definite allotment of other ships could be made, since it was not known what would be available in port.

Just before the end of the year, orders were received for 19 Aust Inf Bde to move up by rail and road, to arrive in the BARDIA area by 7 Jan 41. During the night 29/30 Dec 40, word was received that this was to be altered, and that the Bde would move by road on the 31 Dec to reach BARDIA before the 4 Jan 41. On the 30 Dec a Staff Officer from B. T. E. called at HQ 19 Aust Inf Bde (he had been expected during the morning, but did not arrive until 1600 hrs). He brought details of the M. T. which would be available, and which started arriving in the Bde area about the time that he did, and he explained that the instructions were for a two (2) day move to BARDIA, but that in view of the type of transport available, the condition of the roads, and the difficulty in petrol, water, and ration supply, as well as the long distance, he had arranged it as a three (3) day move.

Orders were issued on that basis for the leading troops to move from BURG EL ARAB at 0700 hrs on the 31 Dec 40, and at about 5 p.m. on the 30th, I left BURG EL ARAB by car for MATRUH, where I stayed the night with HQ Matruh Defences. I resumed on morning 31, and during the afternoon I reached HQ 6 Aust Div near FORT CAPUZZO. There I learned that at least one battalion of my Bde was expected in the area by night 1 Jan, and that it was considered essential for a unit to arrive by then. Orders were subsequently sent back to the BAGUSH-MATRUH area for 19 Aust Inf Bde to continue until dark and to push on as early as possible on morning 1 Jan, which it did. During afternoon 1 Jan the

leading battalion (11th) arrived in the CAPUZZO area, and the next battalion (8th) halted for the night below the scarp about SOLLUM. The third battalion (4th) was about SIDI BARRANI.

During 2 Jan the whole Bde moved into the area about CAPUZZO and prepared to take over the area occupied until then by 16 Aust Inf Bde. Duties in connection with PWC and water points were also taken over by the 19 Aust Inf Bde and the role allotted to the Bde for the BARDIA operations was that of the Divisional Reserve with the proviso that immediately BARDIA was taken, the 19 Aust Inf Bde was to move forward to TOBRUCH area as advanced guard of the Division. During 3 Jan the Bde was fairly heavily employed on duties and in particular in collecting and escorting the large number of prisoners captured by 16 Aust Inf Bde. Late in the afternoon the Bde was asked to make available one battalion to fill a gap in the extensive line held by 16 Aust Inf Bde, and the 8 Bn (which was detailed for this duty) entered the BARDIA perimeter just about dark, and then passed to comd 16 Aust Inf Bde. On morning of 4 Jan, I received a message asking me to call at HQ 6 Aust Div. When I arrived the G.S.O.(I) informed me that the 16 Bde's attack had been very successful and that they were now being directed to exploit Eastward towards the town of BARDIA.

The attack of 17 Aust Inf Bde had not been so successful, and the situation on the front of that Bde had now become so disjointed and confused, that a clear picture could not be obtained of their dispositions. At the final conference on the afternoon of 2 Jan at Divisional HQ, I had a fairly clear picture of the role of 17 Aust Inf Bde, which was to perform phase (2) of the operation after 16 Aust Inf Bde had made the opening in the defences. Phase (2) was intended as an attack Southward along the perimeter. It was to start two (2) hrs after the completion of Phase (1), and was to be carried out under a series of arty concentrations moving from enemy post to enemy post, in front of the advance. It was not known if any of the 'I' Tanks would be available for Phase (2), but the two hrs gap was arranged so that any tanks which might succeed in rallying after Phase (1), could also be available for Phase (2).

I was informed that no tanks were available at time of commencement of Phase (2), but that some were available about one hr later, and that 17 Aust Inf Bde's attack had not been successful at the start, due it was alleged, to the late arrival of the tanks. Eventually however, some tanks had appeared, and had on two occasions during the day penetrated along the enemy perimeter of the objective fixed for Phase (2). The tanks had twice reached this objective, but on neither occasion had the infantry succeeded in accompanying them. Fighting subsequent to that had been very disjointed and there was no clear picture of what enemy posts were held by 17 Aust Inf Bde or of what the detailed dispositions of its battalions were. That situation still existed on the morning of the 4 Jan. The G.S.O. (1) informed me that my Bde would be required to make an attack on the morning of the 5th, in an attempt to clear the SOUTHERN defences. He informed me that the details of the attack would be a matter for my own planning, that he would arrange for as much arty as possible to assist me, and that he hoped to have one or two sections of 'I' Tanks to cooperate. He warned me against getting my Bde mixed up in the confused fighting of the 17 Aust Inf Bde area, and said that it would be necessary for me to select my own objective, start line, and assembly position.

In order to give me some stability on which to plan, he ordered 17 Aust Inf Bde not to operate further NORTH and EAST of a line which he drew on the map, but gave them permission to exploit along the outer defences WEST and SOUTH of that line, should they desire to do so. He arranged that all troops NORTH and EAST of that line at 1700 hrs that day, should pass to my comd in order that I might be able to ensure the safety of my own assembly area and start line. The G.S.O.(I) and I then saw the Divisional Comd who approved of the arrangements made and gave me his own table to work out my plan.

I saw the C.R.A. who undertook to give me a moving barrage to cover my attack, but whose chief concern was that I should not get mixed up in the indefinite area of the 17 Aust Inf Bde, as owing to lack of information, he could not say what areas in that part of the defences, it was safe for his guns to fire at. The line of demarcation selected by the G.S.O.(I) was suitable to the C.R.A., since it gave him a clear definition of where it was safe to fire and where it was not. I then set about getting an outline plan on which the gunners could work, and the only thing of importance not arranged, was where the barrage should start and finish. The C.R.A. arranged to let me know how much ammunition he would be able to use and it was agreed that I should ring him up later in the day after I had seen 17 Aust Inf Bde, and after I had collected further information, to fix the exact start line of the barrage and its finishing point. Just before lunch, I went back to my Bde, gave a warning order and an outline plan, and returned to lunch with the Divisional Comd, after which further details were worked out between the G.S.O.(I), the C.R.A., and myself, and I proceeded then to Comd 17 Aust Inf Bde in an endeavour to ascertain his picture and to arrange co-operation between the two Bdes.

Before I left Divisional HQ, the Comd 16 Aust Inf Bde rang up the G.S.O.(I) and from the portions of conversation I heard, I realised that the 16 Aust Inf Bde were asking permission to use the 8 Bn which had been lent to them the previous day. As far as I could make out the intention was for the 16 Bde to exploit towards BARDIA. During the conversation, I suggested to the G.S.O.(I) that 16 Aust Inf Bde should have full authority to use the 8 Bn should they require it, and he gave that consent over the phone. Before the conversation had finished, I realised that the intention was for the 8 Bn to be used SOUTH of BARDIA in an area which might be of value to me for assembly positions and start line, consequently I asked the G.S.O.(I) not only to give permission for the 8 Bn to be used, but to request that it should be used, as such use could only facilitate my own plan. That message was conveyed to the Comd 16 Aust Inf Bde.

On my arrival at 17 Aust Inf Bde HQ shortly after 1600 hrs, I had a discussion with the Comd and endeavoured to find exactly where his troops were. I informed him of the Divisional order which had gone out, that all troops NORTH and EAST of a certain line would pass under my comd at 1700 hrs, and he informed me that most of the 5 Bn were in my area. He stated however, that he had some plans for a night attack Southward along the outer perimeter in the area allotted to him, and that he proposed to move the 5 Bn after dark to carry out that operation. He stated that he had not received the Divisional order. I informed him that I proposed to obey the Divisional order and that any movement of the 5 Bn after 1700 hrs, would not only uncover the areas in which I might find assembly positions and start lines, but might jeopardise the success of my whole operation. I said that any troops in my area

after 1700 hrs would receive orders from me. He said he would leave one coy of 5 Bn where it was, taking two others away.

The Comd 17 Aust Inf Bde also informed me that his bns had had a very hard time, had suffered many casualties, that any movement brought heavy Arty and M.G. fire from the enemy, and that although he was anxious to continue the attack, he did not think he could get much out of his battalions. He was of the opinion however, that his night attack along the Southern defences might give some results. He further said that even if he left the 5 Bn where they were, I would not be able to get much out of them, since they had had such a hard time.

I then went to HQ 16 Aust Inf Bde and by about 1800 hrs I had obtained a fairly clear picture of the dispositions of that Bde and of the ground over which my attack must pass. I found that the 8 Bn in moving SOUTH of BARDIA had occupied ground of considerable value to me, and that if the 5 Bn were connected up to fill the gap between the 8 Bn and the remainder of the 17 Bde, I would have a satisfactory start for the Bde attack the following morning. There was, however, a considerable gap between the 8 Bn and the 5 Bn, for the 8 Bn were over a mile further SOUTH than were the 5 Bn, and I was unable to discover why the 5 Bn could not move forward into line with the 8 Bn.

I moved to my own HQ which were in a post fairly adjacent to the 16 Aust Inf Bde HQ, and then proceeded to complete my plan. In a telephone conversation with the C.R.A., we jointly agreed upon a start line and objective, up to which the barrage would carry us. The selection of this start line had given me a lot of concern. If I started the arty barrage well to the NORTH in front of where the 5 Bn were, the whole of the ammunition would be expended before my troops had really reached the main enemy positions. Consequently I decided to start the barrage over 1000 yds further SOUTH and to have only arty concentrations on the hostile batteries during the period when my troops moved from their assembly positions to that start line. This gave me a penetration into the main enemy defences of over 1000 yds, and it is interesting to recall that the break in the enemy morale only occurred shortly before the barrage reached the objective, which means that had the barrage been started 1000 yds further NORTH, the attack could not have successfully broken the enemy's resistance.

At about 1900 hrs I heard that the 5 Bn were moving and so uncovering my assembly area and start line area, so I sent a L.O. to bring the Acting Comd Officer to me at my HQ. When questioned he admitted to me that he with two coys had left at 1830 hrs and was already marching round to carry out a night attack on some posts on the outer perimeter. I ordered him back to his area and to take the two coys with him. I further instructed him to make contact with the 8 Bn on his left at the earliest possible moment, and that immediately after first light in the morning, he was to get some troops forward to fill the gap between the 8 Bn and the remainder of 17 Aust Inf Bde on his right, so that I should have a suitable base from which to launch my attack.

I made it quite clear that the orders were to be obeyed. He then raised the question as to whether his battalion were really going to get a fight or not, and were they to sit down on the following day without getting a share in the attack, and see the 19 Aust Inf Bde get the whole of the operation.

I replied that I was advancing with the 11 Bn leading; that behind them the 4 Bn was moving; that the 8 Bn and some of 'A' Sqn 6 Aust Cav on my left would protect my left flank, and that some of his battalion was on my right flank; they could protect the right flank of the 11 Bn as it advanced, and that when the 11 Bn reached the objective, it was my intention to give the 4 Bn some experience by leap-frogging them through the 11 Bn right down to the SE enemy posts. If he desired his battalion to take part, I could arrange for the 5 Bn to go forward at the same time as the 4 Bn, and it could have a similar objective in the main enemy posts just WEST of the 4 Bn's objective.

He expressed pleasure at being given an opportunity, but I said that I could not guarantee he would get it. My final Co-ordination Conference would be at 0730 hrs the following morning, and the attack would start at 0900 hrs. He should be present at the Conference in the morning, and as during the progress of the 11 Bn's attack he would have an opportunity of collecting his battalion on their right rear, he could expect that if he were to take part, the orders to do so would reach him by about 1000 hrs. He then left to return to his area.

Orders were got out during the night for the complete operation and the next morning at 0730 hrs the final details were fixed. The CO of the 5 Bn was however, not present, nor was any reason given for his absence. To watch the attack I moved over into the 8 Bn's area towards the coast, and from there I watched two sections of 'I' Tanks and the 11 Bn move forward past the assembly position toward the start line. I found a position in an elevated OP, formerly occupied by the enemy, so that the attacking left flank passed right by me, during the period in which the arty concentrations were employed only on enemy batteries. During this period also, enemy on the right front of the 11 Bn from a portion of the area where the exact locations of the 17 Bde and enemy were not known, commenced to bring considerable SA fire, but I had employed some of the RNF on that flank and they were able to keep down most of it. To my astonishment I found the Acting CO 5 Bn at this OP. I at once directed him to go to his battalion, to collect it as the 11 Bn passed, and to have his HQ at a road junc which I indicated by 1000 hrs, and I informed him that he would receive orders at that point at that time, if he still desired his battalion to have an opportunity of taking part in the attack. He still expressed a very keen desire to take part in the attack.

The attack proceeded very satisfactorily up to its start line except that the 11 Bn were late in leaving their assembly area and late in reaching the start line. The barrage commenced at the correct time moving at 200 yds every 3 minutes, and that rate enabled the 11 Bn to steadily decrease the gap, and catch up to the barrage. By 1000 hrs the attack had succeeded, and the main enemy forces had commenced to stream in as prisoners, among them being the two Divisional Comds (62 and 63), who informed me that they had moved four (4) battalions from reserve to oppose our attack. I then sent a L.O. to the 4 Bn who were behind the 11 Bn, and to the 5 Bn whose HQ were about 1000 yds further SOUTH of the 4 Bn, directing both of these battalions to exploit through the 11 Bn to the extreme Southern limit of the defences, but I was unable to stop the leading troops of 11 Bn who had already commenced to exploit.

The 4 Bn moving with considerable speed passed on and eventually reached the extreme Southern limit of the defences, thereby gaining the experience I desired, in spite of the fact that they got little or no fighting, and by about 1330 hrs all resistance appeared to have finished. Prisoners numbered over 15000.

At about that time I met the Acting CO 5 Bn who informed me that he had no chance of catching up with the speed of the attack and consequently his battalion had not advanced. I thanked him for his services, and directed him to report back to his own Bde for further orders. Orders were then given to collect the balance of the 19 Bde in areas within the perimeter, preparatory to embussing on the following day, and I left for Divisional HQ to ascertain details of the move to TOBRUCH for which duty the 19 Bde was still required as Advanced Guard.

These orders specified a move on the late afternoon and early moonlight of the 6th, with the intention of reaching TOBRUCH before daylight on the 7th. On the morning of the 6th I left BARDIA by car via TRIGH CAPUZZO to find the HQ of the Armoured Div, and there ascertain the situation at TOBRUCH before the arrival of my troops. During the day I made contact with HQ Armoured Div, HQ 4 Armoured Bde, and finally with 7th Hussars who were in observation of the TOBRUCH defences across the main BARDIA-TOBRUCH Road. I arranged to take over from them in the morning on arrival of my troops. There was considerable delay in arrival of my column, and most of it did not get in until after daylight on the 7th. I was informed later that the transport had not arrived until well into the night, that the column had advanced until the moon set, when, as it was too dark for further travel, they had camped by the roadside, resuming after first light.

In order to give all three battalions some practice in patrols and reconnaissance of the enemy positions, and in general experience of warfare, I deployed all three on fairly wide frontages along the Eastern defences of TOBRUCH and instructed them to move forward to gain contact. The following day I found that they had halted some considerable distance from the enemy defences in order not to bring their battalions under shellfire. As it was essential to have posts sufficiently far forward to cover our Arty positions and our arty OP's and MG posts, I ordered a line of FDL's to be occupied during the night of the 8/9, and this was done. It still left my forward troops 2/3000 yds from the enemy defences and I directed that the forward dispositions should ensure protection for all Arty OP's and medium MG positions.

The Bde continued in these positions until the night of the 16/17 Jan sending patrols constantly forward and gathering information regarding the enemy defences. This period was of special value to the battalions in training their men in actual fighting and patrolling, and junior officers were encouraged to work out exercises to train their troops and harass the enemy. On the night 16/17 Jan the 17 Aust Inf Bde, which had moved up a few days earlier into Divisional reserve, relieved the 19 Bde, using only two battalions, and the 19 Bde moved back during the 17th for a 24-hrs rest on the seashore. During the 18th the Bde moved up from the shore to the high ground, and during the night 18/19 carried out a night march of about 14 miles to the top of the scarp near TRIGH CAPUZZO, where they lay concealed during the 19th. On the night 19/20 the Bde (less its transport) moved Westward along the scarp and down into the depression near the EL ADAM Road SOUTH of the TOBRUCH defences. On the 20th the Bde remained concealed and that evening its 'A' Echelon transport joined it ready for the move the following morning for the attack on TOBRUCH.

The preliminary reconnaissances in the TOBRUCH area showed that the enemy was holding a series of posts entrenched and wired behind an Anti-tank ditch over a front of approx 30 miles. It was believed that a second series of posts some 5 or 6 miles closer to TOBRUCH had been started, but had not been completed. Patrols reported that the ditch, cut chiefly in rock, was from 8 to 12 feet deep, and from 12 to 20 feet wide, except in the SE

Sector where the ditch was not more than about 18 inches, and where an elaborate system of Anti-tank mines and booby traps had been installed to supplement the shallow ditch. The G.S.O.(I) early selected a position where penetration seemed possible, and although patrols visited that area to gain information, the main activities of patrols was directed towards making the enemy nervous at other points.

In the early discussions on a plan for the attack of the place, the decision was taken that 16 Bde, under Arty covering fire, should breach the defences and clear a gap of about 1000 yds, so that 'I' Tanks could enter. It was hoped that 6 or possibly 7 Sections of 'I' Tanks would be available, and the intention was to use 4 of these Sections in Phase (1) carried out by the 16 Bde, one Section to work in each direction along the perimeter, and the other two Sections to attack the battery positions directly behind the perimeter. Phase (2) was to consist of exploitation by 19 Aust Inf Bde who would pass through the gap heading due NORTH in order to gain the first and a scarp which included the inner line of defences about SIDE MAHMOUD. For this phase it was hoped that two or possibly three Sections of 'I' Tanks would be available, and in view of the uncertainty of Phase (2) at BARDIA, it was proposed that these Sections for exploitation in Phase (2) should not be employed during Phase (1).

Chief attention was naturally directed initially towards the 16 Bde plan, and other than giving an objective to the 19 Bde, little was done regarding Phase (2) at this stage. However, while Phase (1) was being prepared, I gave considerable attention to a plan for Phase (2), and I spent much time on a detailed examination of the enemy's defences and his battery positions, with the result that I asked the C.R.A. for particular attention to be devoted to counter battery work, so that I could contemplate an advance at speed. In the meantime the 16 Bde plan took shape. The 3rd Bn were to make the breach and with one section of Tanks would then work Westward along the perimeter towards the ELADAM Road. The 1st Bn would then enter and with one section of Tanks would work Eastwards along the defences towards the BARDIA Road. The 2nd Bn (less one company) would then pass through the gap and with one section of Tanks would operate Eastward along the line of battery positions covering the Sector to be captured by 1st Bn, while one company 2nd Bn and one section of Tanks would work Westward along the battery positions covering the area of operation of 3rd Bn.

At this stage it was discovered that only about 5 sections of Tanks would be available, consequently the sections which were to have operated with 19 Bde had to be given up and one additional section was allotted to work with 2nd Bn along the battery positions to the EAST and to the high ground just SOUTH of the BARDIA Road. Some additional complications then arose, for it was doubtful if the company of 2nd Bn working Westward would be able to give a safe left flank to the 19 Bde in its advance Northwards. Consequently the 1 RNF (less two companies) was also directed to that area, and two troops 6 Aust Div Cav were directed to fill the gap between there, and the 2nd Bn on the high ground SOUTH of the BARDIA Road. These two troops of Cav would be the advanced elements through which the 19 Bde would pass in its movement Northwards.

The Commander 16 Aust Inf Bde seemed very anxious to resume command of his own units and to operate Westward across the EL ADAM Road as soon as possible after the 19 Bde had passed, but as his Bde would be widely scattered, some changes were necessary. It was consequently decided that the 6th Bn from the 17th Bde would pass through the gap before the 19 Bde, and, moving Eastwards along the perimeter and NORTH of the perimeter would pass through between the 1st Bn and 2nd Bn, and, crossing to the NORTH of the BARDIA Road, would contain the large Wadis of which the principal was the WADI ZEIDUN, and so prevent troops in those Wadis from rejoining other enemy forces. Once that had taken place the 1st Bn would be free to move Westward and rejoin its own Bde, and the Eastern Sector NORTH of the BARDIA Road would be the responsibility of the 17th Bde. The remaining troops i.e. 'J' Bty A/T Guns, 2nd Bn, two troops 6 Aust Hvy Cav, the detached company of 2nd Bn and the 1 RNF (less two companies) would pass under command 19 Aust Inf Bde when that Bde passed the perimeter.

At the final conference a proposal from the 17 Bde that the 6th Bn should move into the perimeter near the BARDIA Road, taking the place of the 1st Bn instead of moving further NORTH, was turned down, much to my relief. It appeared to me that the 16 Bde after their successful performance at BARDIA could be relied upon to send their two Bns EAST and WEST along the perimeter and to complete the task to time. Their other battalion working with the Tanks through the Gun line could probably also be relied upon to keep to timetable. The 6th Bn on the other hand was untried in this type of work, unless one could regard its experience at BARDIA as a trial. Further the 6th Bn was required as far NORTH and WEST, Northward of the BARDIA Road as it could be placed, in order to give real security to the right flank of 19 Aust Inf Bde, and any tendency to draw it SOUTH and EAST would reduce the depth to which 19 Bde could penetrate with safety.

In considering the 19 Bde plan I gave considerable attention to what had taken place at BARDIA and it appeared to me that an attempt could be made to avoid the delay of two hours which had been provided at that place. The provision of independent sections of Tanks not to be used in Phase (1) appeared to give an opportunity for eliminating this pause, but when it became known that Tanks would not be available at all for this phase, the only limiting factors were firstly the congestion likely to occur on the gap of 1000 yds through which four battalions, a battery of A/T Guns, two troops of Cavalry, and a M.G. Bn were to pass through before the 19 Bde could enter, and secondly the time which might be required by the Arty for putting into effect the programme for Phase (2). Eventually I decided to attempt penetrating by the 19 Bde without any pause, and to push my troops through the perimeter while Phase (1) was in progress. The limit to which I could hope to go under support from Arty batteries located outside the perimeter, was the scarp NORTH of SIDI MAHMOUD, and in a Wadi on that scarp was located the Eastern Sector HQ of the Tbrush Defences.

Once in possession of that scarp and the Wadi to the NORTH of it, to give cover to my forward troops, I could wait for Arty to enter the perimeter before organising and launching a third phase. The Divisional plan (which many people considered optimistic), legislated for my getting phase (2) more or less completed at the end of the first day, but my attempt to avoid a pause meant that I might complete Phase (2) by the middle of the morning, in which case I was free to launch an exploitation as Phase (3) in the afternoon, if Arty could get forward in time.

As an objective for exploitation I selected the HQ of the whole Tbruch Defences located (as we thought) at FTE SOLARO on the last scarp before reaching the Twn. To protect my left flank while so doing, it was necessary to push a force along the first scarp from SIDI MAHMOUD towards PILASTRINO where the Western Sector HQ were located. Along that scarp appeared to be considerable bodies of enemy troops and defences, and I did not feel that it was wise to go for the deep penetration towards SOLARO unless I cleared up and occupied the scarp towards PILASTRINO. This precaution later proved justified for the main enemy counter attacking reserve with MT for transport was located just WEST of PILASTRINO.

If the 16 Bde were to move Westward along the perimeter WEST of the EL ADAM Road, I contemplated handing over my left battalion to that Bde to use to protect its right flank and my left flank, as I considered my attention would need to be fully concentrated on the effort to get SOLARO, and, as my right flank would also be open, I would have to take special measures to protect myself there.

During training of 19 Aust Inf Bde in PALESTINE, I had concentrated on Mobility and speed. Men had been trained to long marches and operations over long distances. Having taken the decision to rely on speed for this attack, it was essential to ensure that the troops were fit and able to carry out a long advance at a fast pace, consequently the day on the seashore and the marches just prior to the attack were used to harden the men and get them towards their Palestine standard.

I arranged to advance in arrowhead formation, the leading battalion to go straight through to the objective, the one on the right rear to protect my right flank and fill the gap between the 2nd battalion and my leading battalion, and later between the 6th Bn and my leading battalion. The one on the left rear to secure the X Rds at SIDI MAHMOUD and so prevent any danger from Westwards of the EL ADAM Rd. As an area of exploitation for that left battalion at SIDI MAHMOUD, the group of enemy batteries to the WEST and SW was allotted to be cleared up before any advance on SOLARO or PILASTRINO was attempted.

The timings eventually adopted for Phase (2) depended on the most rigid adherence to timetable by the 16 Bde in Phase (1), the most complete counter battery work on enemy batteries, and a barrage moving at 100 yds per minute for the final stages. The opening Arty concentrations for Phase (1) were to commence at 0540 hrs, the Tanks were to enter at 0640 hrs and it was hoped that the gap in the perimeter would be cleared for 19 Aust Inf Bde by 0740 hrs. The whole movement of the Bde from its bivouac area to firstly, the 16 Bde assembly area where a halt of 10 minutes was allowed, then to the 16 Bde start line where a halt of only 5 minutes was allowed, and then to the 19 Bde start line inside the perimeter where a halt of 10 minutes was allowed, thence under a barrage to the objective for Phase (2) entailed a movement of almost 12 miles in 4 hours.

Events have since justified the risks taken to gain speed. The 16 Bde accomplished its tasks to programme and the only hitch occurred when the 6th Bn was 20 minutes late in clearing the 16 Bde start line outside the perimeter. Due to the action of the B.M. 19 Aust Inf Bde in clearing the 6th Bn from the way and personally leading the 4th Bn of 19 Aust Inf Bde towards this start line, the 19 Bde were able to keep to their programme and reached their own start line up to time. From there, under the Arty barrage, they also reached their objective to time, capturing the Eastern Sector HQ during the operation.

The right rear battalion (11th) also reached their allotted position to time and the only serious check was to the left rear battalion (8) who working behind timed Arty concentrations, met stubborn opposition from Anti-tank mines protected by fire from enemy Tanks in emplacements, and from Anti aircraft and Field Batteries. There was some delay before this battalion was able to clear the whole of this opposition, and some heavy fighting took place in this area, but before 1100 hrs the whole of that objective was also in our hands.

By 1130 hrs an Arty Group composed of 'F' Bty RHA, 104 Regt RHA, 2/1 Aust Fd Regt and 27/28 Medium Bty RA came in support of 19 Aust Inf Bde, and the batteries had commenced to move forward. Zero hour for Phase (3) was fixed for 1400 hrs as this was the earliest hour at which the Arty would undertake to give support, and the only type of support possible even then was by F.O.O's observing with the forward infantry. I had planned to leave 4th Bn on their objective and to bring the 11th Bn through between 4th and 8th Bns for the exploitation to SOLARO, thus giving me two secure flanks, and in making preliminary arrangements the CO 11th Bn had confirmed with me that he was not to get his battalion involved but was to keep it ready for such an exploitation. I had further asked him to study an operation for the capture of SOLARO for Phase (3).

At my conference for the issue of orders which I gave verbally at a HQ established SE of SIDI MAHMOUD, the CO of 11th Bn informed me that his leading companies had advanced into the Wadis NORTH of the BARDIA Road, and he could not disengage them in time to start the attack on SOLARO by 1400 hrs. I therefore changed the roles, and directed the 4th Bn on SOLARO with the 11th Bn to advance due NORTH protecting their right flank, while the 8th Bn was to clear the scarp between SIDI MAHMOUD and PILEAS TRONO and if possible to secure PILEAS TRONO.

In conversation by telephone from this same HQ with the G.S.O.(1) at about 1030, he informed me that he would get the 5th Bn sent in along the BARDIA Rd to fill the gap between 6th Bn and my right flank, and that the CO would report to me as soon as possible. That assured my right flank, and I was prepared to advance even before it arrived, as long as I was certain that it was going to arrive.

The exploitation started punctually at 1400 and the 4th Bn, moving with great speed, pressed their forward companies on regardless of fire from a number of enemy batteries, and merely directed their reserve companies to swing away and deal with the hostile batteries, so that there should be no check to the forward movement. The 11th Bn had little opposition and pushed forward on the right flank of 4th Bn to the lower scarp overlooking the town. The G.S.O.(1) had told me that he would try and get one or two sections of 'I' Tanks sent up to me if they could be located in time, and one section did arrive. I directed it to co-operate with 8th Bn in clearing the enemy batteries to the SW and WEST of SIDI MAHMOUD, and then to move in support of the advance on PILEAS TRONO. Some of these tanks had mechanical trouble, but the section was of value for portion of this advance. A second section which came up later, also had mechanical trouble and was too late to take part in the advance.

The 4th Bn had some heavy fighting around SOLARO which was entrenched and wired, but they found the Tobruch HQ about a mile further WEST along the lower scarp, and captured it with little difficulty by about 1800 hrs.

The 8th Bn had heavy fighting almost throughout their advance, including an encounter with 14 enemy tanks, most of which were knocked out by Anti-tank Rifle fire, aided in the latter stages by the 'J' Bty of Anti-tank Guns in support of them. By nightfall the attack had succeeded to an amazing extent, not only had both Sector HQ and the Tobrukh Defences HQ been captured, but the last scarp overlooking the Town was in our hands, and there was nothing between us and the Town.

Mention was made of an order to 5th Bn to come up during the day of 21st and guard the right flank of 19 Aust Inf Bde. At about 1630, when the G.S.O.(1) came to see me regarding the arrangements for the night, the CO 5th Bn arrived and he was given an area agreed upon by the G.S.O.(1) and myself. In explanation of his late arrival, he informed me that he had only just received the orders and had come straight up to see me at my HQ. From the speed at which he moved and with which he set about getting his battalion into position, I am quite certain that his statement was correct, but the result had been that for about 3 hours I had a very large gap on my right flank, and no troops whatever with which to fill it.

The troops had in places covered as much as 20 miles in the day and although there were large bodies of enemy and a number of enemy batteries still active in the Western Sector of the defences, the battle was virtually over. The 8th Bn had suffered most for, as well as the fighting around SIDE MAHMOUD, they had had heavy fighting with tanks and the PILAS IRINO defences late in the afternoon, and just at a vital moment in the heavy fighting, one troop of 'P' Bty REA which had been supporting them, was diverted by some person unknown and without my knowledge or approval, from their targets on to targets in the perimeter WEST of the EL ADAM Rd where the 16 Bde were advancing. At about the same time communication between the F.O.O. and their remaining troop broke down, and the battalion was left without Arty support at all. Fortunately before dark the 2/3 Pd Regt (less one battery) appeared in the 19 Bde area and, seeing the plight of the 8th Bn, came into action to support them. This timely move saved the 8th Bn from heavier casualties and enabled them to complete the capture of PILAS IRINO. Although heavy batteries and AA batteries from about TOBRUCH itself continued firing until late in the evening, it soon became obvious that the enemy realised he had been defeated, for he commenced to set fire to the ammunition dumps in his various battery positions, and in and around TOBRUCH. He also set fire to the Cruiser "SAN GEORGIO" (grounded in the harbour) and throughout most of the night there were blazes of light, and explosions from burning cordite, ammunition and petrol.

The 4th Phase to complete the capture was planned for the morning of the 22nd, and, to give time for some sections of Tanks to arrive and Arty programmes to be worked out, zero hour was fixed for 10 a.m. There were still large forces in the Western Sector to be cleared up, and that role was allotted to 16 Aust Inf Bde - the 19 Bde being given the task of clearing up to the Coast WEST of TOBRUCH, and of occupying the Town. At about 1000 hrs as there was no firing in the vicinity of the town, I decided to investigate it with the two troops of 6 Aust Mv Cav still with me, and we entered the town without opposition.

A Carrier came to inform me that I was required at Naval HQ, I went there where I took the surrender of the Admiral Commanding, his staff, and about 1400 Ratings, and I waited then for the arrival of the leading companies of the 4th Bn which had been directed on the town. I further sent for one company 1 RNF which being mechanised could move faster than infantry.

In the meantime the 8th Bn had been directed to clear the Wadis to the WEST of the town, a task which they completed by about 1400 hrs. The 6th Bn had also been placed under orders of 19 Bde that morning, and I directed them to advance on the Southern flank of 8th Bn to help clear the area allotted to me. The 11th Bn in the meantime were directed Northwards to clear the Wadis and scarp SOUTH of the town, while the 2nd Bn which had moved across from the BARDIA Road to about SIDI MAHMOUD on the evening of the 21st, passed to command of its own Bde.

During the afternoon of the 22nd the 16 Bde completed their clearing up of the whole of the Western defences and the collection of prisoners in the rough country of that area. The 19 Bde moved the 4th Bn into the town to take possession and provide security, the 8th Bn bivouacked in the Wadis to the WEST of the town, and the 11th Bn bivouacked SOUTH of the town and EAST of SIDI MAHMOUD - TOBRUCH Road. Bde HQ opened at the Naval HQ TOBRUCH at about noon.

No accurate count of the prisoners and guns captured by 19 Bde was kept, but they included the Comd of the Tobruch Defences (a Corps Comd and his Staff), the Comd of the Western Sector (G.O.C. 61st Div and his Staff), and the Comd of the Eastern Sector (another Maj General and his Staff), as well as a Rear Admiral and his Staff in TOBRUCH itself.

The primary factor in the amazing success of the whole operation after 16 Bde had completed Phase (1), was the speed with which the attack was made, and the fact that the troops pushed on regardless of their flanks, leaving those coming behind to do the mopping up.

During 23rd Jan, the 19 Bde received a warning order that they should be prepared, with some supporting troops attached, to move to DERRA area on the 24th. As an important bridge across a Wadi a few miles WEST of TOBRUCH had been destroyed by the enemy, it was not expected that a crossing could be ready before 1000 hrs, and movement was arranged to commence after that hour. Move was again to be by MT, supplied by NZ Reserve MT Coy.

I left TOBRUCH on the morning of the 24th and proceeded to MIMI where I directed 'A' Sqn 6 Aust Div Cav and attached troops (known as Force 'A') to push on and make contact with units of the Armoured Div EAST of DERRA. During the afternoon of the 24th, in company with Brig General Staff 15 Corps, I proceeded from MIMI to 7 Armoured Div HQ and on my return late in the afternoon, I met my leading Bn going into bivouac about MIML. The remainder of the column was bivouacked in depth along the road. That evening I went to Advanced HQ 15 Corps which was being established at BOMBA, and I spent the night there to get latest information of any happenings.

I moved forward at dawn the next morning the 25th, and by 0800 hrs had established myself at an advanced HQ on the main road near MARIJUBA where I made contact with my advanced guard, consisting of 'A' Sqn 6 Aust Div Cav and some attached units. The Bde column commenced to arrive shortly after 0900 hrs, and I directed the leading battalion (11th), to move forward and debuss about the WADI EL BGAR on the main TOBRUCH - DERRA Road. It was then to advance astride the road with a view to clearing the enemy who held positions across the road and the top of the heights overlooking DERRA. The battalion was ordered to make as much ground as possible without committing itself to a general action, and by nightfall it had driven in the forward posts and was halted facing some old Turkish forts held by the enemy, and the main DERRA Aerodrome which was swept by enemy fire.

The next battalion, the 4th, I kept in its MP and directed it to turn SOUTH at MARTUBA and then WEST where it was to endeavour to find a crossing on the WADI DERNA about 10 miles SOUTH of DERNA, the remaining battalion - the 8th - I moved to a central position between the other two, and held it in reserve. The 1 Aust Fd Arty Regt was ordered into action to cover the movement of 11th Bn, and one troop was directed to support the 4th Bn if needed. Anti-tank guns were allotted in support of 4th Bn and 11th Bn, and 'A' Sqn 6 Aust Div Cav, - the latter being directed to protect the left flank. During this day and for several succeeding days, enemy aeroplanes bombed and machine-gunned our troops and 3 Aust Sqn RAAF moved up to the MARTUBA Aerodrome for protection against these attacks. On one occasion the 4th Bn succeeded in bringing down a low flying enemy bomber by SA fire and it crashed in flames behind the enemy lines.

On the night of Friday the 25th, I ordered 11th Bn to carry out an operation to secure all the high ground about the Aerodrome and including the edge of the scarp overlooking DERNA. The 4th Bn were ordered to get some troops across the Wadi and endeavour to find a crossing for vehicles. The 8th Bn to endeavour to find crossings over the Wadi between areas occupied by 4th and 11th Bns. On the 26th the 11th Bn made a very good attack across the open ground about the Aerodrome and succeeded in reaching the edge of the scarp at a cost of about 25 casualties. They saw some enemy tanks, one of which was knocked out by our Arty and two others were seen withdrawing. The enemy defences were in depth and two old Turkish forts with Field Guns mounted on the roofs and in the neighbourhood, as well as MG's gave another 2000 yds depth to the enemy position. The area was also heavily strewn with A/T mines. One Company of the 11th Bn moved out to the Eastward and succeeded in getting down to the low ground near the beach, and then advanced Westward towards DERNA where they met defences in the old wall of the town. By nightfall the attack halted, and in answer to a message from CO of 11th Bn expressing the opinion that he was heavily outnumbered in guns and MG's, I sent a message that progress had been satisfactory and that he should consolidate and to continue further movement on the morrow by means of strong fighting patrols with a view to clearing the whole of the scarp down to the seashore EAST of the WADI DERNA.

8th Bn reported that night that they had reached the bank of the WADI DERNA over very difficult country, had found that the enemy held old Turkish forts and entrenchments on the WEST bank and that they had discovered no crossing across the very deep and precipitous Wadi. The Wadi itself at this point appeared to be several hundred yds wide, about 1000 feet deep and its sides were almost perpendicular. In the bottom of the Wadi, springs and running water could be observed, and there were vegetable gardens with people walking about among them.

The 4th Bn reported that they had got two companies across the Wadi which was here (range taken by Barr and Stroud Range Finder), 1500 yds from bank to bank, and the sides sloped at an angle of about 60 degrees. The flat bottom was dry and there were BELOUIN encampments in it. A fit man carrying no weapons or equipment could just manage to cross from bank to bank in 1 1/4 hrs.

The enemy had apparently thought the Wadi was impassable, for no opposition was met by the companies which had got across. During the next few days the Bde had probably the most interesting and valuable training of the whole of its existence to date.

From prisoners captured it was learned that Lt Gen BERGANZOLI who had commanded the Army Corps holding BARIJA, but had escaped from that place and been given command of another Corps, was commanding in person the forces holding the DERNA area, and his efforts to wrest from the 4th Bn, the bridgehead they had secured across the WADI DERNA caused him a lot of casualties. It appeared that he moved the whole of the 86 Regt of three battalions from reserve about GIOVANNI BERTA by MT up to the 4th Bn's area, and made several attempts to dislodge them.

At the first one the 4th Bn held their fire until the enemy were close and then inflicted heavy casualties, over 40 dead being counted in front of their position, while a number of prisoners were taken. The second attack was given a more severe treatment, and a third one made by one company proved a fiasco, for the company appeared to lose itself and the 4th Bn quietly surrounded it and took the whole unit prisoner. A fourth attack on a larger scale was broken up by our Arty fire and did not approach the lines.

About this time also 'A' Sqn 6 Aust Div Cav found that extensive minefields, covered by well concealed Anti-tank guns and MG's stretched for some distance SOUTH from the WADI DERNA and the unit had eight (8) killed one afternoon in an endeavour to find a way through the obstacle.

During this period also a considerable enemy force which had been located at MECHILI broke out and there was always a possibility that the large forces of enemy tanks from there, might come by the MECHILI - DERNA Road and strike in at the 19 Bde open left flank. Owing to the attempt being made by the Armoured Div to keep the large enemy forces contained in MECHILI, and the fact that supplies were being collected to enable troops to move up and attack that place, I had been informed by 13 Corps under whose orders I was working, that no help could be given to me in any operation I carried out, and that I must rely entirely on my own resources, consequently I was not to engage in any large scale operations which I could not handle successfully with the forces at my disposal. I was however given a Bty of 4.5 inch guns for counter battery work. After the enemy had broken out of MECHILI the Commander 13 Corps already planning the move of Arm'd Div to cut off BENGASI, told me he did not want the enemy driven back too far from DERNA until he had collected enough supplies about MECHILI for the dash SOUTH of BENGASI so I was not to go beyond the Wadi unless enemy withdrew.

Conflicting reports of enemy camps being formed near the 19 Bde left flank were received by wireless from patrols of the Arm'd Div operating SOUTH of 19 Bde area, and on one occasion a number of lorries preceded by a BREDA Automatic Gun, came up the MECHILI-DERNA Road and the gun's-crew proceeded to entrench a mile or two SOUTH of our left flank. 'A' Sqn 6 Aust Div Cav attacked and captured this gun and drove the lorries away, but the danger to this flank and to No. 3 Sqn RAAF at MARTABA Aerodrome forced me to use a company of the 8th Bn (my reserve), to guard the two crossings of the WADI EL HISCIA on this flank. The 4th Bn were also compelled to throw a company forward by night between the WADI DERNA and WADI EL HISCIA as a flank protection when the 'A' Sqn 6 Div Cav withdrew each night.

In the meantime the 11th Bn, by means of fighting patrols, were steadily working their way down the scarp, ascertaining the enemy's dispositions, and cutting out his posts. By night of 29th Jan they had captured the main Fort with two batteries of guns and a number of MG's and prisoners, and only one Fort above the zigzag of the road still held.

It was still necessary to get this last Fort before the zigzag of the road could be secured, but that appeared to be only a matter of a few hours more effort. The large number of enemy A/T mines caused much trouble and some casualties.

During this night the 17 Bde commenced to arrive and arrangements were made for the 5th Bn to relieve the 4th Bn on the WADI DERNA, and the 6th Bn to extend the front Southward between the WADI DERNA and the WADI ELHISGIA. HQ 6 Aust Div arranged to arrive on the 30th. On the morning of the 30th it became obvious that the enemy had been forced to evacuate all ground EAST of the WADI DERNA but in leaving he had carried out demolitions on the bends in the steep zigzag road of the lower escarpment, making it impassable for wheeled traffic for the day. The 11th Bn was ordered to push down the scarp, occupy DERNA, and push troops through the town to the line of a Wadi some two to three miles WEST of the town. Rations, ammunition, and weapons had to be carried. The 8th Bn were ordered to concentrate Northwards in the area WEST of the Aerodrome and to endeavour to obtain a crossing at the end of the track running from the Aerodrome along ARGUB BU AMEIR. The 4th Bn, after relief by 5th Bn, were also to concentrate Northward just SOUTH of 8th Bn.

For Friday 31 Jan I ordered the 8th Bn to advance through DERNA and through the 11th Bn, and to take up the lead in a pursuit, since it was obvious that the enemy, having been forced to withdraw from DERNA and give up his magnificent natural Anti-tank ditch, must now retire still further, and I directed 4th Bn to follow 8th Bn and also clean up any forces who might be on the road which led Westward close to the coast. In order to clear the West bank of the WADI DERNA in the high ground, I directed that two companies of the 4th Bn without transport, should find a crossing about 6 to 8 miles SOUTH of DERNA, and then should operate Northward along a road which ran roughly parallel to the Wadi and 1 to 2 miles WEST of it. They should rejoin their battalion on reaching the main road WEST of DERNA.

During the night 30/31 the 8th Pd Coy Engrs assisted by two Coys of 11th Bn and later by two Coys of 8th Bn, had completed temporary repairs to the road to enable the most needed transport to get down, and on morning of 31st, HQ 19 Bde moved into DERNA. Shortly afterwards an overturned truck on the temporary repairs on the scarp seriously hindered traffic and prevented the 8th Bn and 4th Bn from getting very far to the WEST of DERNA for the day. They struck opposition from the enemy on the high ground a few miles WEST of DERNA. On Sat 1 Feb the advance was resumed and late in the afternoon enemy fire from above the scarp where the road climbed up again from the coastal belt appeared to die down under fire from our Arty. As the 8th Bn reached the foot of the scarp the enemy opened fire with Arty and MG's and forced them to halt. The CO decided that he must get the scarp that evening under cover of darkness, and as soon as it was dark enough to conceal movement he pushed his battalion right up the 2 or 3 miles climb to the top of the scarp. It was a valuable move, for although the new tarred road had suffered heavy demolitions, those on the old road were not so severe and the balance of the night was available to the engineers for clearing the large number of Anti-tank mines over which the 8th Bn had advanced, and for repair of the road. Large working parties of infantry had to be employed to assist in repairing the demolitions, and this somewhat hindered the advance on Sun 2 Feb for the road was not open for transport until after noon. On this day however, the whole column was got up on the top of the scarp and the head halted for the night WEST of AIN MARA, where a road bridge had also been demolished by the enemy.

An order received that day from 6 Aust Div had forbidden the 19 Bde from going close to GIOVANNI BERTA as it was intended that the 17 Bde, who were operating SOUTH of the WADI DERNA, should make an attack under Arty plan on GIOVANNI BERTA. The latter part of the advance by 19 Bde on this day saw the last contact with the enemy for the next two days, when one or two heavy tanks which had been covering his withdrawal, vanished along the road, and natives met on the road reported that the enemy had retired right through GIOVANNI BERTA. I regard the advance made by 19 Aust Inf Bde in these four days as a very fine performance for the ground everywhere favoured delaying action and the demolitions on the switch back roads made them impassable to transport until large repairs were completed.

The attack of the 17 Bde on GIOVANNI BERTA did not materialize as there was no opposition, and they occupied the town without opposition during the afternoon and evening. For Monday 3rd Feb 6 Aust Div ordered an advance by both Bdes, the 17th Bde leading and to clear the road crossing WEST of GIOVANNI BERTA by 1000 hrs and thence move along the SLONTA Rd. The 19th Bde to follow and to move via the Northern Rd towards CYRNE. Owing to information received from prisoners of war that a large Anti-tank ditch existed across the road 3 or 4 miles WEST of GIOVANNI BERTA, I ordered a section 8 Fd Coy Engrs to move forward, clear the minefields and prepare a crossing over the ditch to be completed by 0900 hrs, in order that my column should be able to proceed unhindered, and I issued an order for an advance on the assumption that that crossing would be completed, and that 17 Bde would have cleared my route by 1000 hrs. Shortly after 0900 hrs, I went into GIOVANNI BERTA where I saw the Comd 17 Bde. He informed me that the crossing over the Anti-tank ditch would not be completed before 1100 hrs at earliest, that there were extensive minefields, and that his column would not be clear from in front of me before noon. I was not satisfied for, from previous experience, I was fairly certain that the officer in comd of the sec engrs, would have carried out my orders, so I drove forward to look at the Anti-tank ditch, the time being then 0940 hrs. I found the sec Engrs having breakfast and the officer in Comd of it informed me that the crossing had been completed, tank mines disarmed, and the first vehicles had crossed at 0845 hrs. One battalion of the 17 Bde had already pushed on but there was no sign of any movement of any of the rest of the Bde. I enquired where the 17 Bde crossing was, and was informed that they had none, that one sub-section only of Engrs attached to their Bde had arrived rather late, had helped to remove a portion of the mines, but had done no work whatever, on a crossing of the Anti-tank ditch. By this time the roads through GIOVANNI BERTA were becoming choked with troops who were beginning to get on the move and I went back to my Bde and halted it just short of GIOVANNI BERTA. Sometime afterwards the G.S.O.(I) appeared, saw that there was no likelihood of my getting forward until the afternoon, and directed me to halt for the day, with the head of my column EAST of GIOVANNI BERTA, so that if required, I could move in any direction.

I halted my bde and directed it to proceed with maintenance of vehicles and general administration in preparation for a rapid advance in the near future. During the afternoon the Divisional Comd came to see me and I informed him that the enemy's retreat to me now appeared to show every sign of a rout, and that motor transport would be necessary to keep up with, and harry his retreat, if the Armd Div were going to attempt to cut him off SOUTH of BINGASI. The Divisional Comd confirmed my decision to go in for vehicle maintenance, and directed me to keep my Bde concentrated and ready for a move either SOUTH through MECHILI to BINGASI which seemed the likely direction, or WEST towards SLONTA and BARCE.

By 0800 hrs on the morning of Tuesday 4 Feb no further orders had been received from 6 Aust Div; I therefore repeated my instructions to the Bde that the day should be spent in maintenance and general administration so that all would be ready for a move by MT if a pursuit should eventuate. At about 0915 hrs an L.O. arrived from 6 Aust Div, informing me that my Bde was to move, and that I was required early at Divisional HQ to arrange a plan. I gave orders for a warning order and left for Div HQ, arriving there at about 0945 hrs where I was given verbal orders for a bus move of my Bde that day towards BARCE and if possible the following day to BENGASI. I was directed, however, not to enter BENGASI and my column was not to go beyond BENINA until I received further orders from Div. As attached troops, I was given 1 Aust Fd Regt Arty, 8 Fd Coy Engrs, one coy 2 Aust Fd Amb, one bty Light AA Guns, two tps 'A' Sqn 6 Aust Div Cav, and 'J' Bty Anti-Tank Guns (less one troop). For transport I was informed that the C.R.A. 6 Aust Div had generously immobilised the 2/3 Aust Rd Regt and 51 British Fd Regt and was handing over to me their first line transport after dumping all the stores normally carried in them. With some transport which the AASC could make available it was hoped to be able to lift two of my battalions, and the first of the transport might be ready by 1030 hrs.

I at once scribbled on a piece of paper the detail of an advanced guard consisting of two troops 6 Aust Div Cav, 8 Inf Bn, one bty 1 Fd Regt, one sec Lt A/A Guns, one troop Anti-Tank Guns, one sec Engrs, and a mobile detachment Ambulance, and I sent a L.O. off at once to show it to my Bde HQ and give it then to the CO of 8th Bn with instructions that he was to command this Advanced Guard and was to get it on to the road immediately transport arrived. Owing to the difficulty of moving large motorised columns along a road without adequate protection and mobile troops to clear the way, I made a special request for more cavalry. I was informed that no more was available as 'A' Sqn, 6 Aust Cav, less these two troops, had already moved NORTH to the area CYRENE - APPOLO니아 from where they could not be collected in time for my move, and in any case, the 17 Bde which was required to clear that area would need them. I said that the NORTH area could be cleared without Cav but that a motorised column could not possibly make proper pace unless the way was thoroughly cleared for it by Cav in front of it. I was informed that a Sqn of Arm'd Cars of the 11 Hussars was already operating along the road between SLONTA and BARCE and that they might be able to assist.

I had to be content with that degree of protection and it was only later that I discovered that 'A' Sqn, 6 Aust Cav, had taken the best of their vehicles towards APPOLO니아 and had left behind the two troops which were badly in need of maintenance, believing as they naturally did, that no rapid movement by those two troops was likely to be required on that day. Except for the restriction of my advance to BENINA only, I was given a very free hand and the Div Comd personally told me that he was leaving the matter of distances of my advance entirely to my discretion and trusting to me to push on as best I could. He understood that the Arm'd Div were attempting to cut the enemy off SOUTH of BENGASI and therefore a movement by my Bde to the BENGASI area became of the utmost importance.

I went back to my Bde HQ and gave orders for the move of the Advanced Guard and the main body. I also sent a L.O. back to DERNA where a company of the 11th Bn had been left, and I directed it to obtain whatever transport it could and to follow on with the column. I went to see the CO 8th Bn to ensure that he was satisfied with arrangements, and I allotted transport as fast as it arrived.

The transport began to arrive moving past Bde HQ at 1110 hrs heading eastward, and the first group was directed to 8th Bn area. Succeeding groups of transport were directed to 4th Bn who were next to the Eastward, and the balance to the 11th Bn who were furthest EAST, and my column started with the Advanced Guard moving Westwards past Bde HQ just EAST of GIOVANNI BERIA shortly after 1300 hrs. I saw the column pass and to my delight found that we were able to move the whole Bde, and I then drove forward catching up the head of the Advanced Guard at about SEON TA, where a short pause was made for vehicle checking, while some Anti-tank mines and a road block a few miles to the Westward, were cleared. The column then resumed and with checks at two or three places where the enemy had put Anti-tank mines across the road, it made considerable progress until just before 1800 hrs, when, driving forward to the head of the Advanced Guard, I met the Sqn Leader of the 11th Hussars Armd Cars, who had just captured some ITALIAN officers and a lorry which had come forward from BARCE to pick up some wounded beside the road, resulting from attacks from our aeroplanes the previous day.

The Sqn leader Armd Cars informed me that his troops had had a very full day, that his cars needed maintenance, and that he had not intended going further on, but, when I expressed my desire to keep going as long as the light was sufficient, and to endeavour to get to BARCE or at least to the large scarp EAST of BARCE, to prevent extensive demolitions there, he at once volunteered to assist and to push his armoured cars forward to clear the way. The column, preceded by the armoured cars and the carriers of 6 Aust Div Cav, (which were already suffering mechanical defects), pushed on until they struck a minefield across the road about the 20 kilometre peg from BARCE just as it was getting dark. Engineers set to work clearing the minefield and were fully engaged on the task when enemy from an ambush opened fire with MG's and a battery of Field Arty, destroying two (2) Armoured Cars and an Engineer Truck and causing some casualties. The enemy then lengthened their range and began searching the road about TEKNES, where the advanced guard column was halted.

I established a HQ just EAST of TEKNES and sent a L.O. forward to CO 8th Bn to ascertain his intentions and to impress on him the importance of the scarp. The time was about 1915 hrs. On his return the L.O. informed me that CO 8th Bn had already debussed and deployed two (2) companies which were advancing astride the road to clear the enemy posts. At about 2000 hrs as the enemy fire appeared to have ceased, I sent the BM 19 Bde forward to the CO 8th Bn again to impress the urgent need for gaining the scarp that night and so prevent serious demolitions. The task was not an easy one, for the scarp was about 15 kilometres further on, and the light was not good enough to be able to detect the presence of Anti-tank mines. For such a distance mobile troops were needed, but even with them, an advance over the rough country covered with low trees and scrub on either side of the road, would not have been an easy task by night.

The BM returned to me at 2330 hrs and reported that the CO 8th Bn had already passed two (2) companies (fresh) through his two leading ones, that they had passed the 18 kilometre peg, and that he was quite certain that CO 8th Bn intended to have the scarp before morning. By 0200 hrs on Wednesday 5th, I received word from CO 8th Bn that his men were unable to see Anti-tank mines in the fading moonlight, and he was halting until dawn. He did not advise the position reached by his forward troops. After daylight reports indicated that the 8th Bn were again moving forward, but shortly after 0800 hrs I discovered to my astonishment that the 11th Hussars Armd Cars and the 6 Aust Div Carriers all of which were in urgent need of maintenance, had been told they would not be needed before 1000 hrs, but could proceed with maintenance until that time.

I at once directed them to push forward and take up the advance in front of 8th Bn with a view to getting the scarp at the earliest possible moment and I went up to find the dispositions of the 8th Bn. I found that they were continuing their advance on foot and although they were making steady progress towards the scarp, valuable time was being lost and ominous explosions were still coming from the scarp. A number of demolitions were discovered and the engineers and the leading companies of 8th Bn set about repairing them while recesses were pushed forward down the two miles of scarp. By about noon I had discovered that a bridge across a gap near the foot of the scarp had been completely destroyed and it would take until dark to make a very steep deviation which would let me get vehicles down, but which would not be usable by traffic in the opposite direction. I had already directed the Cav to search for alternative routes and by 1330 hrs I received word that there was a track leading to the Southward which appeared as if it went down the scarp on to the BARCE plain. Reconnaissance showed that there was an anti-tank ditch 7 miles along this track and a further one just where the track debouched off the plain. I pushed a party along to make a crossing and, leaving the 8th Bn and its advanced guard group on the main road, I turned the main body headed by the 4th Bn (which was now given the role of Advanced Guard), along this track at about 1430 hrs.

There is a fork on this track just beyond the anti-tank ditch and I directed the leading company commander to ask which road led down to get to EL ABIAR before he passed that fork, and to follow the branch which would get him to EL ABIAR. I then proceeded to see my column on to the track, to order the Fd Amb establish an ADS at the junction of this track and the main road, and to direct my former advanced guard to continue down the scarp towards BARCE when they had a suitable track. They were then to push through BARCE towards the lower scarp above TOCRA, and if that scarp was passable, were to advance down it through TOCRA and on towards BENGASI, halting 10 kilometres short of the city where I hoped to gain contact with them.

I then set out to catch up the column headed by 4th Bn. On reaching the track fork, I found the column had turned left, which to me seemed to be the wrong direction since it appeared to lead along valleys on top of the scarp instead of getting down onto the BARCE plain. So I speeded up to catch the head, and I caught it at a place where the track was just petering out and the CO of the 4th Bn had realised that his unit had taken the wrong turn. He informed me that an Arty officer at the road fork had told his leading coy comd to turn left. It was no time for discussion and I turned my column around and headed back for the fork. By 1700 hrs the head had got on to the right track, passed the second anti-tank ditch and debouched on to the plain, and I directed them to proceed towards EL ABIAR at the best pace and to keep going as long as the light was sufficient. The column halted for the night with its head about 10 miles short of EL ABIAR and during the night, patrols were sent forward to the outskirts of that place where large anti-tank ditches and preparations for elaborate defences were discovered, but no contact was made with the enemy.

That night the weather changed and there were howling gales and rain with the result that the following morning the advance started over a muddy track. Shortly after daylight, when I expected the advance to have been resumed, I was informed that although vehicles had gone back for petrol for the Armcd Cars and the Carriers, they had not returned and nothing was available to protect a further advance until petrol could be obtained. The Carriers (still in urgent need of maintenance) were also having serious trouble with mud in their tracks. Supplies of petrol were collected from any reserves held by other units and by about 0830 hrs the whole column was under way again.

EL ABIAR was occupied without opposition and the advance continued towards BENGASI. ER REGEMA was secured before noon where two (2) large Anti-tank ditches had to be bridged, and demolitions on the scarp leading down to the BENINA plain had to be repaired. While this work was being done 4th Bn pushed two (2) coys on foot down to the foot of the scarp and by about 1400 hrs had pushed them forward to BENINA which was also found unoccupied. Shortly after 1600 hrs it was possible to get some transport down; by 1700 hrs the whole of the balance of the column was able to move down in their vehicles and at that hour I established Bde HQ in the Airforce Buildings at BENINA.

I had seen the Div Comd during the morning of the 5th at the scarp above BARCE and also the G.S.O.(I), but both meetings were before I had discovered the alternative track down the scarp. Since that time I had had no contact with Div except for one L.O. who accompanied my column until we halted for the night 5/6 Feb. He then returned to Div with a report of what I had done and of where I was for the night. He returned early in the morning of 6th but with no Div orders other than to continue my advance, and I agreed that he should accompany me forward until we reached EL ABIAR, since that had been a large military station and it was important to know if we were to be opposed there or could proceed beyond it. Immediately we reached EL ABIAR, he left me to report to Div, but because of the state of the track over which my column had moved, he expressed the intention of trying to go by another track, marked on the map, alongside the railway line. That appeared a sound decision, for we had moved with the Advanced Guard, and to return along the track we had used, would now mean trying to pass many miles of column along the one-way muddy track.

At BENINA, due to a traffic block on the pass near REGINA, some of my Bde HQ vehicles were cut off and did not reach my new HQ until about 1800 hrs, when Signals intercepted a wireless message from Armd Div asking for 6 Aust Div to direct some troops on GHEMINES and SOLUCH. I at once gave orders for 11th Bn with Arty, Engr, and Anti-tank Guns, to move at first light on GHEMINES, covered by the Armd Cars and Carriers, and I proposed to move 4th Bn on the SOLUCH Road. I had still no news of 8th Bn and did not know if they had advanced down the TOCRA scarp or had been compelled to move from BARCE on EL ABIAR, following my main column. A few minutes after I had issued warning orders for this move, the G.S.O.(I) arrived and produced a message from Armd Div asking for assistance through GHEMINES, I informed him of the one I had intercepted and told him of my warning order. He agreed, but said that there was no need to move to SOLUCH as the Armd Div were looking after that themselves, and the main pressure was wanted at GHEMINES. I had ordered a co-ordination conference for 1930 hrs and I informed him that I would move the whole of my column on GHEMINES including the 8th Bn if I could find it, and that I would divert one coy of 4th Bn to take over and guard BENGASI.

I had been specially asked to return the first line transport lent by the Arty as soon as I could spare it and having fulfilled my orders when I reached BENINA, and not knowing that the enemy had already retired a long way SOUTH of BENGASI, I had said the transport which conveyed 4th and 11th Bns could move back to its own units, and I expected that it would leave on the following morning. The 11th Bn had come down the scarp in that transport, but the 4th Bn had been compelled by demolitions to debuss above the scarp and the transport had received orders to park on top of the scarp. When I received the intercepted message from Armd Div, I cancelled the order releasing the transport and directed the Staff Captain to hold both groups for the move on the morrow. At the co-ordination conference at 1930 hrs a L.O. who had been sent by the Staff Captain to

hold the transport used by the 4th Bn, reported that he had been unable to find it, and I was then in the position of having only enough transport to move one battalion. I accordingly ordered 11th Bn with supporting arms to move on GHEMINES. I directed 4th Bn to detail one coy for the occupation of BENGASI and to unload whatever transport they had in order to move forward two (2) coys in support of 11th Bn. I further sent off an officer to endeavour to try and contact 8th Bn on the TOCRA Rd.

While it was still daylight it had become evident to me that BENGASI had been evacuated, that the ARABS had looted and were still looting in BENINA, and it appeared that they were doing the same about BENGASI. I accordingly sent an officer with Carrier escort into BENGASI with a direction that the responsible civil authorities should report to me at BENINA forthwith, to arrange for the maintenance of order and for the taking over of the town on the following day. These representatives reported to me at BENINA while the G.S.O.(I) was present, and I made arrangements for the town to be handed over at 0900 hrs at the Town Hall, for a coy of 4th Bn to be present, and for CO 4th Bn to take charge of the town. In a conversation with the Div Comd before I left GIOVANNI BERTÀ, I suggested to him that he was the proper person to make entry and take over BENGASI, and as the arrangement for taking over BENGASI at 0900 hrs on the 7th was made in the presence of the G.S.O.(I), who knew of my conversation with the Div Comd, I hoped that the Div Comd would be present at that hour.

On the morning of the 7th, I saw the Carriers of 6 Aust Div Cav move off before 0630 hrs, but, due to reports that enemy tanks were operating in the vicinity of BENGASI, there was some delay before the Arm'd Cars and Carriers were able to report all clear and the column really did not get under way until about 0730 hrs. I saw the leading battalion and its supporting arms well on to the road, sent another officer to try and find the 8th Bn, and I went to the Town Hall at 0900 hrs, where I received the surrender of the City, appointed Lt Col DOUGHERTY, CO, 4th Bn as Commandant of the City, and left to catch up my column. GHEMINES was occupied by about 1030 hrs and the column pressed on to MAGRUM BEVIO where it was halted with the leading troops 15 kilometres SOUTH of the town, with its way blocked by the Support Group of the Arm'd Div, who had moved in on to the same road from the direction of SOLUCH, and indications appeared to point to the fact that the ITALIANS had already been defeated, and the whole force captured by the Arm'd Div alone.

During the afternoon my column returned to the neighbourhood of GHEMINES where it bivouacked for the night, in howling gales, rain and cold. The following day it moved NORTH past BENGASI to an area about TOCRA, where it again bivouacked in the open under the same inclement weather. The balance of 4th Bn were however, left at BENGASI, and the whole battalion was employed on general security duties of that City. On the following day 9th Feb, the 11th Bn were got into some form of cover in an old Fort about TOCRA, and the 8th Bn were moved up to the scarp between TOCRA and BARCE and billeted in the houses of the ITALIAN Settlers.

The campaign as far as the 19 Aust Inf Bde were concerned, had been a most amazing one, for in the space of 5½ weeks they had traversed all told nearly 1000 miles of which well over 700 miles was by MT on forced marches. For many of the moves captured vehicles and petrol alone enabled the maintenance of the pace and full strength of units. They had endured every sort of weather (except intense heat) but including cold, rain, hail gales and clouds of dust.

(22)

They had cleared enemy Anti-tank mines, repaired demolitions, lived on bully beef and biscuits with a drink of water, and had reached the final battlefield in time to be of use, had they been needed. They had delivered the final attack in two (2) major battles, BARDIA and TOBRUCH, and had fought and won the battle of DERNA alone (except for the supporting arms), and their keenness and determination to defeat the enemy had remained to the end.

(Signed) H.C.H. Robertson.
Brig.
Comd 19 Aust Inf Bde.

Headquarters,
TOGRA
23 Feb 41