

***TOTENSONNTAG***  
***The Sunday of the Dead***



***The Battle of Sidi Rezegh***  
**23 November 1941**



# Totensonntag, 23 November 1941

## The Battle of Sidi Rezegh

### *Last Sunday in November*

\*Text and images taken from 'The Sidi Rezegh Battles 1941' by J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, published by Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957

The entry in General Freyberg's Diary under the date 23 November begins, 'a beautiful day and a full one', and one observer who had been with Eighth Army remembered 'a bright, sunny morning, and [how] the white racing clouds made moving islands of shadow on the desert surface'.<sup>[1]</sup> In the neighbourhood of Sidi Rezegh, however, the clouds got the better of the sun and the Preliminary Narrative recalls that the 23rd was 'ushered in by a cold wind which cut through even the warmest clothing', and the weather became 'showery, with much low cloud throughout the day'. But in spite of showers and the bitter desert wind which whipped up the loose sand and stung the raw skin of exposed hands and faces, contemporary accounts on either side have little to say about the weather.

In 1941, 23 November was the last Sunday of the ecclesiastical year, called officially in England the 'Sunday next before Advent' and known to the more light-hearted occupants of the pews as 'Stir-up Sunday'.<sup>[2]</sup> In Germany it was *Totensonntag*, 'Sunday of the Dead', a kind of Lutheran All Souls' Day, and the battle of 23 November became known in *Panzergruppe* by this forbidding name.

### *On the third escarpment*

The British formations on the third escarpment settled down more or less where they found themselves at nightfall on 22 November, 3rd Transvaal Scottish made some attempt to dig in on their new positions, and succoured their wounded on the battle-field with blankets and hot food, but for the rest the exhausted members of 7th Armoured Division had done little or nothing to adjust themselves to the new situation before morning came. Command and control were at a low ebb, and the diverse formations and units seem to have had little idea of what was to be required of them. 4th S.A. Armoured Cars say of their own role during the early morning of 23 November that, 'The fog of battle was, however, dense, and in consequence the idea of a definitely prescribed line of observation largely lost its significance. There was also a certain amount of overlapping with other Regiments.' The history of the 9th Hussars says: 'Squadrons, and even individual Troops, no longer faced either north, south, east or west: they faced all four, turning to wherever the nearest enemy appeared, and they fought under the orders (or more often in anticipation of them) of any British formation which they found in their vicinity.'<sup>[3]</sup>

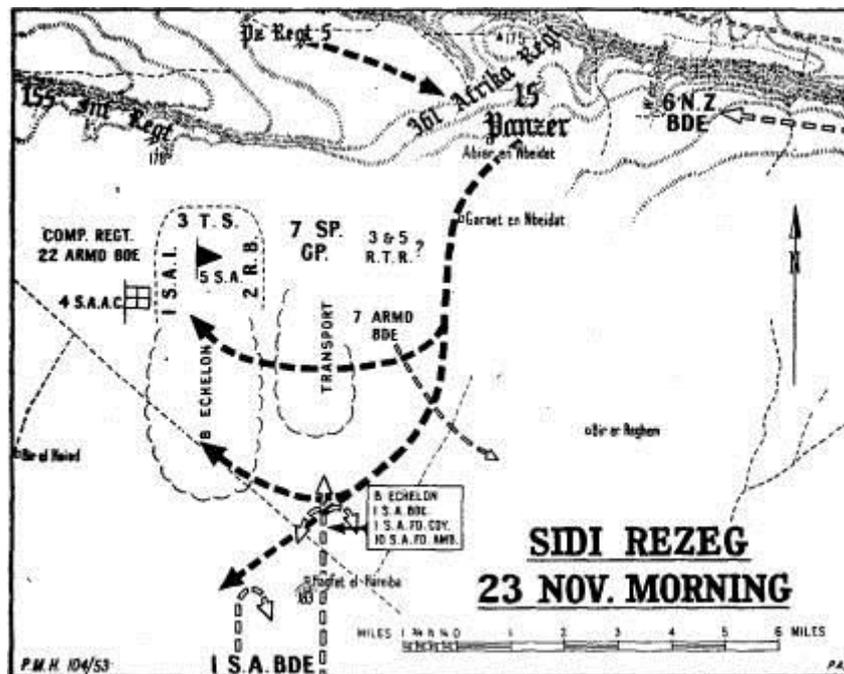
And yet, given the necessary communications and control, the situation of 7th Armoured Division when day broke on 23 November was by no means desperate. In the centre of the divisional position lay 5th S.A. Brigade, from which one battalion had been engaged, and which was well prepared to play its part in operations during the coming day. The Brigade had leaguered as it halted for the attack on Point 178, in the order of its march through the desert. 3rd Transvaal Scottish still faced north on the position to which they had retired after sunset: and Regiment Botha were on the right, looking east, and 1st S.A. Irish on the left, looking west. The B Echelon, a mass of thin-skinned vehicles dispersed a nominal hundred yards apart, trailed out into the desert behind. The evidence shows that the Brigade itself occupied a square of nearly 2 miles width, but it is difficult to say how far the transport spread southward across the desert. All witnesses agree that the area covered by its vehicles seemed enormous.

A mile to the west of the Brigade—the left as it faced the escarpment—lay the composite regiment of some thirty tanks which represented the fighting strength of 22nd Armoured

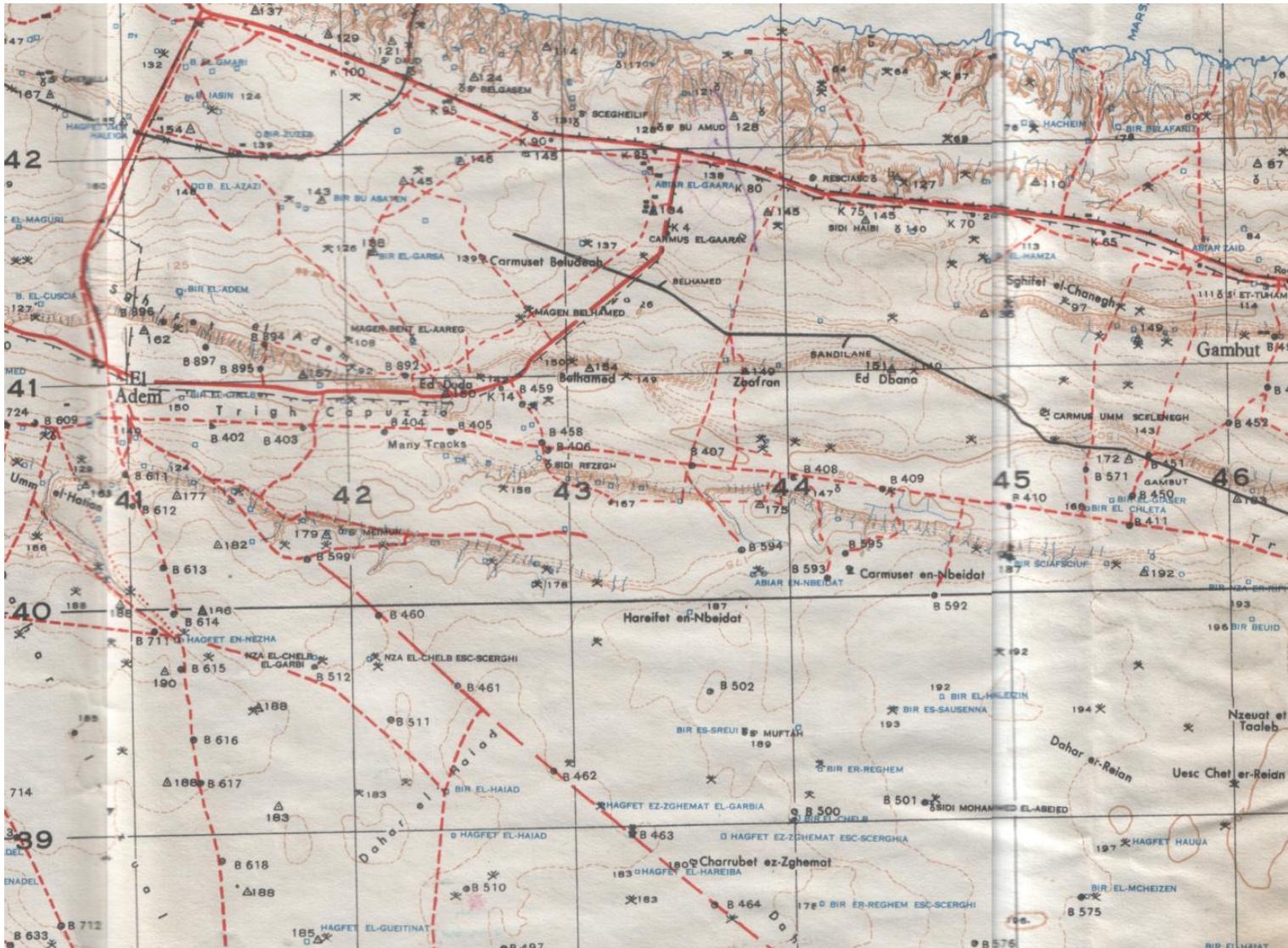
Brigade. On the east lay Support Group, which had borne the weight of the German attack on the airfield, with its own B Echelon also stretching out to the south. The Headquarters of Support Group were 'established on the eastern edge of 5 S.A. Inf Bde Leaguer', with 4th Royal Horse Artillery and 6th Field Regiment. General Gott had ordered up the greater part of the Second Battalion Scots Guards to reinforce them, and Brigadier Davy states that 'Captain Longworth, with a mixed squadron [of 7th Armoured Brigade] was with the Support Group', but he can have had no more than a handful of tanks under command.<sup>[4]</sup>

4th Armoured Brigade had suffered less than the other formations of 7th Armoured Division during the last two days, and General Gott intended that Brigadier Gatehouse should cover the eastern flank of the divisional position, but the surprise attack of 15th Panzer at nightfall on the 22nd neutralized Brigade Headquarters and dissolved the 8th Hussars. Throughout the next day the Brigade as such did not exist, and the principal element in General Gott's armoured strength was unable to play its part. 3rd RTR became confused during the successful charge across the landing-ground at the close of 22 November, though casualties were not heavy, and only five tanks rallied in the night leaguer south of the landing-ground. Isolated groups of the Regiment spent next morning trying to discover where they were and what had become of Brigade and their own Regimental Headquarters. The latter moved at first light to Hareifet en Nbeidat and were ordered at 0745 to join their Brigade at Hagfet ez Zghemat el Garbia, away to the south. 5th RTR, the other surviving regiment of the Brigade, had spent the night in the neighbourhood of Bir er Reghem.

7th Armoured Brigade, now reduced to some ten tanks and a few crocks belonging to 2nd RTR, lay about 2 miles south of 7th Support Group, guarding the 700 prisoners taken on 21 November. They were under orders 'to rally to the south and protect 7 Armd Div's communications', and were now told to make for Bir er Reghem el Garbi.



General Gott was trying to re-form his armour south-east of 5th S.A. Brigade and at the same time to implement his undertaking to Brigadier Armstrong. According to the latter, the General promised to support 5th S.A. Brigade with the whole of 7th Armoured Division, and told him that 'he would put the 22nd Armoured Brigade on my left flank, the 7th Armoured Brigade on my right flank, and the 4th Armoured Brigade which, he said, had been badly knocked about and was very weak, in rear'. Apart from an understandable confusion on Brigadier Armstrong's part of the roles proposed for 4th and 7th Armoured Brigades, this represents



Topographical map of the Sidi Rezegh Battle Field



The 'Mosque' at Sidi Rezegh, the tomb of an Arab saint and his son

very fairly the dispositions taken up by 7th Armoured Division, and though General Gott was undoubtedly right in deciding that the armour was no longer capable of an offensive operation, it retained a great deal of potential strength. There were still over a hundred tanks available, and 1st S.A. Brigade was due on the third escarpment at dawn. 6th New Zealand Brigade with a squadron of infantry tanks was expected to arrive in the neighbourhood of Point 175 not long after, and within a day or two the British preponderance at Sidi Rezegh should be fully restored. All that was needed in the meantime was that the considerable forces available should be directed and handled as a single whole.

### ***At El Adem and Gasr el Arid***

During the night of 22/23 November, the German forces remained on the ground they had seized during the day. The tanks of 21st Panzer Division, which had suffered heavily in their attack of the previous afternoon, leaguered near the airfield of Sidi Rezegh, with Group Knabe along the Sidi Rezegh escarpment from which they had driven the King's Royal Rifle Corps. 15th Panzer, after overrunning the Headquarters of 4th Armoured Brigade and the 8th Hussars, and beating off the counterattack of 5 RTR, settled down somewhere near Abiar en Nbeidat. Infantry Regiment 155 (Group Mickl) remained on the line of the third escarpment west of Point 178, and Regiment 361 on Point 175. The Italian XXI Corps remained in the lines of investment round Tobruk, and claimed to have halted attempts of British armour to break out of the Fortress, while Corps Gambara, which reported the repulse of an attack by 1st S.A. Division during the 22nd, maintained Ariete Division at Bir el Gubi.

The initiative in Cyrenaica, after the fumbling of the first four days, had passed to General Rommel and, once he had grasped the situation, his alert mind and restless energy went rapidly to work. His Daily Report for 22 November stated that 207 British tanks had already been destroyed and that Corps Gambara reported the destruction of fifty-five more, and concluded that 'the enemy has thus lost more than a third of his armour'. At 2230 hours he issued a final order confirming the intention he had expressed during the afternoon:

"On 23 November, *Panzergruppe* will force a decision in the area southeast of Tobruk, by means of a concentric attack by *D.A.K.* and parts of Corps Gambara. With this object, Corps Gambara will advance from El Gubi at 0800 hours with elements of Panzer Division Ariete in the direction of Gambut. At 0700 hours on 23 November, *D.A.K.*, effectively concentrating its forces, will advance in the general direction of El Gubi—with main effort on the left wing, encircle the enemy and destroy them. Recognition signal for German and Italian troops: two white Very lights. Troops must be reminded that Ariete Division is using a number of captured enemy vehicles."

'In other words, Rommel proposed to catch 7th Armoured Division between a frontal assault made by the *Afrikakorps* southward, and an attack delivered by Ariete against its rear. General Gambara was not under Rommel's command, and some vigorous negotiation was needed to secure his consent to the use of Ariete, but this was achieved, and the Italian official history states that Rommel's orders were issued 'after an exchange of opinions with the Commander of the Motorized Corps'.<sup>[5]</sup>

There was a break in communications between *Panzergruppe* and *Afrikakorps* after mid-afternoon of the 22nd and Rommel's orders did not reach Cruewell until 0430 hours next morning. In the meantime the latter took his own decision, on the basis of a summary received from *Panzergruppe* at 1550 on the previous day. But whereas Rommel intended the main blow to be delivered southward, by the whole of *Afrikakorps*, Cruewell proposed to take advantage of the admirable situation on the flank of General Gott's division which 15th Panzer had reached by nightfall. His own orders, issued at 0015 hours, gave the holding role to the infantry component of 21st Panzer, supported by Group Mickl and the Africa Regiment. Meanwhile all the available armour would be concentrated, by pushing south with 15th Panzer Division, supported by Panzer Regiment 5 from 21st Panzer, to cut General Gott's communications and make a junction with Ariete. The whole force would then turn north to strike into the rear of 7th Armoured Division, and overwhelm it. Cruewell ordered the armour

to be ready to move off at 0700, and warned them that he would issue the final orders for the day's battle at 0645, from 15th Panzer's headquarters at Point 175.

Kriebel points out, in support of this plan, that 'Ariete Division was not considered strong enough to carry out an attack from the south on its own account, or even merely to hold an enemy who had been driven south'. In broad outline, therefore, there is much to be said for Cruewell's proposals, and the ragged array of 7th Armoured Division, looking vaguely northward for the next move of its opponents, was in no small danger. Cruewell, however, was splitting his forces, sending half his infantry and artillery, and all his tanks, on a detached mission to the south, and his chances of success depended upon the achievement of a surprise attack before Gott could co-ordinate and reorientate the potential strength of his division. Against any but broken and dispirited troops the manoeuvre could not fail to be extremely costly.

### ***Advance of the Afrikakorps***

The Commander and tactical headquarters of *Afrikakorps* left Bir el Giaser at 0545 and, less than half an hour later, the Corps Headquarters with all their personnel and command machinery were overrun by Brigadier Barrowclough and his 6th New Zealand Brigade. It is not clear whether, when Cruewell left Bir el Giaser, he was in possession of the full text of Rommel's orders, requiring the main attack to be made from north to south, with the whole strength of the Corps. The War Diary suggests that he was, and it merely grumbles at the time wasted between 2230 and 0430 hours—i.e. between the issue and the reception of the orders—a delay which it attributes 'to the message being much too long and dealing with a host of details which were of no importance whatever to *Afrikakorps*'. General Bayerlein, writing presumably from memory, states that 'D.A.K. received a long wireless message for the deciphering of which General Cruewell had not time to wait. He had to act on his own initiative.' The question is not of vast importance—whatever the cause, Rommel's intentions were not in fact carried out—but it is perhaps significant that, throughout the day, Cruewell showed a marked reluctance to depart from his prearranged plans.

Arrived at Point 175 at 0630, Cruewell made final arrangements for the advance. According to Kriebel, 'There was a heavy morning mist at daybreak on 23 November, the day which was to see the fiercest battle of the entire campaign and which will remain imprinted unforgettably in the memory of all Afrikakorps warriors as the "Bloody Sunday of the Dead" '. The mist rose at 0700, but Panzer Regiment 5 was late in coming up from its night leaguer near the landing-ground, and at 0730 15th Panzer moved off alone, with Panzer Regiment 8 leading and 15th Rifle Brigade—containing the infantry component of the Division—echeloned behind to the right. According to 15th Panzer's War Diary, 'the artillery, as usual, would have one *Batterie* between the two waves of tanks, and the rest behind the Panzer Regiment'. Cruewell himself, with Bayerlein and a sketchy operations staff, travelled with the first wave.

The German advance was first observed by Lieut. van Niekerk of 4th S.A. Armoured Cars, who reported the assembly of 100 tanks about 2 miles south of Abiar en Nbeidat, and their advance due south, but the 'higher authority' <sup>[6]</sup> to whom he made his report 'evinced a strong disinclination to accept it, and appeared to be convinced either that the alleged column did not exist at all, or if it did exist, that it was friendly'. The judgement of the armoured cars was corroborated by heavy shell-fire from the tanks which, after travelling 5 or 6 miles, wheeled due west. According to the account of 15th Panzer, what happened was that, after 'fast progress over flat firm going', the tanks ran into 'vast supply columns' interspersed with guns and tanks which were 'completely surprised and fled wildly to the south and south-west'. Kriebel says (he must certainly have been present), 'Panzer Regiment 8 in the van turned west on its own initiative, and proceeded with the destruction of the enemy vehicles which were in extraordinary depth'. The German strategic advance to link up with Ariete had turned into a major offensive operation, and the panzers were now cutting through the rear of 7th Armoured Support Group's transport to plunge into the depths of the B Echelon which trailed behind 5th S.A. Brigade.

Almost at the same moment, 7th Armoured Brigade, which 'consisted only of ten tanks of the 7th Hussars, a few crows of the 2nd RTR and three of Brigade Headquarters', was under orders 'to move to [Bir] er Reghem el Gharbi, 15 miles to the south, taking the prisoners and to remain in reserve'. They had just begun the southward march when '4th South African Armoured Car Regiment reported a strong enemy column including a large number of tanks moving south-west a mile away. Captain de Beer, adjutant of the Armoured Car Regiment, said afterwards that he had been very anxious as he knew the report would sound improbable. Fortunately the prisoners, whose overcrowded lorries could barely crawl along, were clear by about 2 miles. They were all Germans and it would have been a pity to lose them.'<sup>[7]</sup> The British tanks got across for the loss of one cruiser, then halted, and engaged the German column from the flank.

### ***Chaos comes to the echelons***

Meanwhile the 9th Hussars noted the confusion in the Support Group Echelon, where 'the collection of heavy trucks, unwieldy workshop lorries and suchlike began to stream out from the leaguer under heavy fire, and in the course of it many became mixed with the scattering rear echelons of the South Africans'. Brigadier Jock Campbell acted with prompt energy and initiative and with the Brigade Commander's assent collected half a dozen tanks of the 7th Hussars which had been cut off by the westerly movement of the German armour. These he had grouped with part of the Support Group in the lee of positions held by the South Africans, when the wave of German tanks which had hit [9th Hussars] swept round them from behind. In an instant the desert was flooded with scores of unarmoured vehicles from the South African supply echelons fleeing with the tanks hot on their heels. Complete chaos and disaster were very close at hand, when Jock Campbell for the second time in that battle performed one of his prodigious feats.<sup>[8]</sup>

The Hussars go on:

Sitting on top of his A.G.V., waving alternate red and blue flags-made from his scarves—for 'Stop' and 'Go', as one officer describes it, he started to rally every vehicle he could find to turn and face the German tanks. He had 23 people in the A.C.V., all urging the driver to go like hell, while Jock kept shouting down that he was not to go faster than 8 mph and to stop when he was told to. To one Troop of guns he gave the classic order: 'Expect no orders. Stick to me. I shall advance soon!'

The German advance struck deep into the soft 'under-belly' of 7th Armoured Division, which was as unprepared for the attack as incapable of resistance. In 5th S.A. Infantry Brigade a single troop of 18-pounder anti-tank guns mounted guard over the vast mass of vehicles which stretched southwards across the desert.<sup>[9]</sup> The rumour of the approach of the panzers caused 'tremendous confusion' in the B Echelon before ever they arrived, and transport scattered in all directions. Many vehicles fled into the desert, others crowded for protection round Brigade Headquarters away to the north.

'At approximately 0800 hours', as R.Q.M.S. Floquet of 2nd Regiment Botha subsequently reported, the 'B' Echelon was attacked on all sides by enemy tanks and light artillery. I was trying to deepen *my* shell slit when suddenly I heard V.M.G. and Bren fire opening up furiously. A few seconds later a shower of bullets sang over our heads and shells fired from light artillery started bursting on the western and eastern flank every rime I put *my* head out of my shell slit I saw red tracer bullets and armour-piercing bullets thudding into the ground all round me. We all fired furiously back whenever a tank could be discerned on the horizon, but the utter futility of small arms fire against such heavy armoured opposition convinced me that the only way was to try and escape in a truck. My driver and I made a bold dash and we scrambled into the truck. Due west appeared to be the only way out and as we dashed off in that direction shells burst within ten and fifteen yards on our sides and in front.

In the course of their drive into the 5th Brigade Echelon the German tanks overran 10th Platoon of the divisional machine-gun battalion, Regiment President Steyn, who were taken prisoner while trying hopelessly to hold up the attack with their small-arms. They regained

their liberty, however, when the Germans withdrew. British tanks and guns likewise appeared in the Echelon and a staff-sergeant with the Echelon of the Regiment Botha described how

British artillery kept rushing from one side of our lines to the other. Pandemonium appeared to have broken loose. We all fired with our rifles and a tommy-gun on German tanks which we saw not far distant. The firing was passing continually over our heads. One British tank ran right over the shell slit in which our driver was crouching, next to the truck, covering him with earth. A British anti-tank gun took up its position right next to us, firing over our heads. The ground shook with the reverberations of the heavy firing and the falling of shells all around us and we saw German tanks on all sides.

One of the groups of British tanks engaged was a detachment of 3rd RTR under Major 'Bob' Crisp, <sup>[10]</sup> and an observer with 4th South African Armoured Cars said afterwards, 'I shall never forget how they came out of the 5th Brigade Echelon and at a certain distance went into line abreast and charged down upon the German Juggernaut'.

Completely surprised though the British were, they yet put up a resistance which impressed their opponents. 'Again and again', says the War Diary of 15th Panzer, 'strong enemy battle groups with tanks, antitank guns and artillery came out of the desert and tried to take the Division in flank to divert it from its objective.' Major Fenski, commander of the first battalion of Panzer Regiment 8, was killed, and in another clash a *Batterie* of Artillery Regiment 33 was 'overrun by a sudden charge of English tanks and forced to surrender', an incident which tallies exactly with the record of one of Major Crisp's exploits.

Crisp belonged to 3rd RTR from 4th Armoured Brigade, and early that morning he was trying to find his regiment when he stumbled across a leaguer of South Africans (probably 1st S.A. Brigade). After a friendly welcome and entertainment he covered the short intervening distance to reach 5th S.A. Brigade just as the German attack came in. Here he noticed that a force of hostile tanks and lorries had been beaten off, leaving four field-guns (a German *Battens*) in the open, firing over the heads of their own column and apparently into the 1st Brigade leaguer. 'It seemed to me a monstrous bit of cheek', said Crisp, 'and got my back up', and he ordered his driver to charge the mile or so of desert that lay between, knowing well enough that if he were detected the guns would make short work of him.

The Germans spotted him when he was 300 yards off and before long he could see their panic and their alarmed faces. He watched the nearest gun swing round and a puff of black smoke flash from its muzzle. 'I could afford to laugh at this', he related, 'and believe I actually did, as the gun was pointing skyward at a range of about 6000 yards, and there was I not 100 yards away. I knew I had them.' <sup>[11]</sup>

Crisp overran the guns and ordered the personnel to march back to 5th Brigade as prisoners, but could not wait to see the end. The Diary of 15th Panzer maintains, however, that the *Batterie* was recaptured and afterwards brought into action again.

The reaction of the tanks and artillery, fragmentary and uncoordinated, was forceful enough to change the course of the action. General Neumann-Silkow was convinced that the advantage must be pursued to the uttermost, and ordered up 15th Rifle Brigade 'to mop up the vehicles captured by our tanks and collect prisoners'. He was certain that the advance to Bir el Gubi must be abandoned and the day's operations be redesigned to deal with the conditions which had now been revealed. But Cruewell was impressed by the vigour of the counter-attacks which had come in against him, partial and unpremeditated as they were, and was loath to abandon his plans. 'The decision', says his War Diary,

"had to be taken whether to carry on the attack against 1 S.A. Division, or to wait until the junction with Ariete had been effected, and then continue the attack with the combined armoured strength of the two divisions against the enemy's rear. An immediate continuation of the attack seemed most inviting, but the Corps Commander was of the opinion that a swing right round to the north-west would make it possible to attack the enemy from a still more

favourable angle and that the enemy was so superior in numbers that the assistance of Ariete was essential. The Corps Commander accordingly ordered the continuance of the advance towards Bir el Gubi.”

At 0940 Cruewell issued an order to the divisional headquarters below the third escarpment, '21 Pz Div will advance SW to destroy the enemy south of Rezegh, who has already been badly hit'. On the face of it the instruction seems to imply an advance under the divisional command, which still retained the infantry and most of the artillery under control, but Cruewell may possibly have intended no more than a hastener to *Panzer* Regiment 5, which had not yet arrived above the third escarpment had missed the attack on the echelons. No serious attack was made on the South African position from the north.

And so the *Afrikakorps*, having given due notice to the enemy of the gravity of the situation in his rear, withdrew to allow him to improvise what measures he could for his protection. With some difficulty the German panzers extricated themselves and withdrew to the south-west. No attempt had been made to use the infantry to hold the captured ground and, as soon as the panzers had gone, the very considerable remains of the B Echelons shook their ruffled feathers and settled down once more. They do seem, however, to have been rather more concentrated than before and to have reduced the area they occupied.

The German thrust had penetrated deep into the 5th Brigade position and some of their tanks found themselves cut off. Three drove northward, past Brigade Headquarters, with a khaki-clad figure standing in a turret and waving greetings with what looked like a black beret. Men of 2nd Regiment Botha, somewhat startled when the panzers appeared behind them, but reassured and rejoiced by the sight of 'captured' enemy vehicles passing through their lines, acknowledged the gesture and waved cheerfully back. The tanks emerged through the north-east sector of the Brigade perimeter, but were fired on by 4th Royal Horse Artillery in Support Group, and two were knocked out.

Two other panzers emerged on the west, through the South African Irish, and were fired on by a Bofors gun, but without effect. The Report of Panzer Regiment 8 records that 'The Commander, Lieut-Colonel Cramer, penetrated far behind the enemy's lines in his command truck, accompanied only by his escort tank, and found himself in the midst of the enemy gun positions. Despite several hits on his tank by shells and anti-tank fire, he pushed his way through to I Battalion, bringing valuable information.'

## **1 South African Brigade on 23 November**

1st S.A. Infantry Brigade, whose pause the previous evening had been intended to avoid any brush with the enemy, found that the early morning had inspired him to exceptional activity. Those units, including 1st S.A. Field Company, 10th Field Ambulance, and the rest of the B Echelon,<sup>[12]</sup> which missed the order to halt, jogged on during the night at their own pace until first light, when they halted to rest, find out where they were, and have breakfast. By this time they were spread over a wide area: the leading lorries were close to 5th S.A. Brigade, and about to cross the direct route between Abiar en Nbeidat and Bir el Gubi. The War Diary of the Field Company records laconically that they found themselves within a mile of 'a heavy tank battle' and that, 'on advice received from an anti-tank gunner, the company retired 10 miles due south'. The B Echelon, according to the Transvaal Scottish account, had settled down comfortably in the desert when suddenly shells began to burst among the QM vehicles. An officer with shaving lather still on his face ran through the lines shouting, 'Get going. Get to hell out of here—go south.' Men in all stages of undress leapt into their vehicles. Wheels spun up the dust as the Brigade Echelon turned south. Shells burst among the vehicles and followed the erratic target for miles.<sup>[13]</sup>

Much the same experience befell loth Field Ambulance, which found itself in the midst of the Germans and was taken prisoner. Not long after, the Divisional Commander was also endangered by the advance of the *Afrikakorps*. General Nome had ordered 5th S.A. Brigade to revert to divisional command, and he intended that General Brink should relieve General

Gott by taking over the command of all the infantry in the Sidi Rezegh area. With this in mind he arranged to meet Brink at Point 183, just south of Hagfet el Hareiba, and the latter says in his Report:

I reached Pt 183 at approximately 0830 hrs, and hearing gunfire to my right front I left my car to climb on to a slight escarpment [*sic*] in order to get a view of what was happening. As soon as I reached the high ground an officer who proved to be an officer of 10 SA Fd Amb attached to 1 SA Inf Bde dashed up, and in an excited state told me that his amb had got mixed up with a big lot of enemy tks and had been badly shot up. Looking about me I saw a lot of MT about 2000 yds to my left front. This I took to be the Southern flank of 5 Inf Bde. There was firing to my right front and shortly afterwards I noticed what appeared to be from 60 to 80 tks moving in mass formation from East to West across my front. The MO said they were enemy tks. Smoke and dust obstructed my view but shortly afterwards Arty fire broke out and the tks opened fire, firing, it appeared to me, in all directions. I noticed a lot of MT following the tks. As I now came under fire, I left my posn to contact Comd 1 Inf Bde and warn him. I first encountered Lt-Col Senescall, OG DEOR, on the left flank of the Bde and instructed him to bring all Fd and A/Tk arty under his Comd fwd to meet a tk attack. About 20 minutes later I contacted Brig Pienaar, Comd 1 Inf Bde, and instructed him in similar terms, advising him what orders I had given OG DEOR. I also ordered him to patrol actively with a view to contacting 5 Inf Bde and 7 Armd Div. 1 SA Inf Bde immediately made the necessary dispositions to engage the enemy, and arty fire was opened on the coin. Three enemy tks were completely destroyed by our arty and the enemy motorised inf took heavy punishment.

The Brigade Narrative records that, 'During the morning, GOC 1 SA Div joined the Bde HQ and instructed Bde to form a defensive perimeter and ward off any enemy attacks until the situation cleared up in front'. According to the Transvaal Scottish, Brigadier Pienaar's dispositions included a withdrawal from the danger area. Their history states that the head of their column 'ran into heavy shellfire' and 'the Battalion pulled back three miles and dug defensive positions'.<sup>[14]</sup> Brigade Battle Headquarters remained 2 or 3 miles east of Hagfet en Nadura while the artillery engaged enemy forces in the north. General Brink returned to his rendezvous at 0930, hardly expecting, however, to meet the Corps Commander, and his armoured car escort came under fire as soon as they crossed the skyline. 'My LO', says General Brink, who was in the leading car reported that there was still a mass of MT between us and 5 Inf Bde and he thought he could distinguish some 20 to 30 tks in the rear of the MT. A fierce battle was now developing on our front i.e. South of Sidi Rezegh, and appeared to be swinging past the Southern flank of 5 Inf Bde. It was impossible to say if the Bde was involved in the battle.

As there appeared to be no prospect at the moment of contacting Maj Gen Gott, GOC 7 Armd Div, or Brig Armstrong personally, I decided to re-join Brig Pienaar at his HQ when he related the loss of his Fd Amb. (A good portion of this Fd Amb was recovered later.)

Brig Pienaar also reported that a strong force of enemy lorried inf backed by tks was still in posn on his front.<sup>[15]</sup> I again instructed him not to attack but to patrol actively while making dispositions to meet a tk attack.

My Adv Div HQ had halted at 433375 [between 7 and 8 miles south of Hagfet.el Hareiba] and I was completely out of touch at this stage. The situation was obscure and confusing.

However obscure and confusing the situation itself may have been, General Brink's precise account gives an admirably clear impression of what actually happened. In it can be traced the position of the amorphous mass of the transport of 5th Brigade, the advance of Panzer Regiment 8, with 15th Rifle Brigade following behind in their lorries, the penetration of the 5th S.A. Brigade's B Echelon by hostile tanks, and the gradual progress of the battle from east to west. General Brink was only 8½ miles from Point 178, and a little over a mile from the outlying elements of the 5th Brigade B Echelon, and the historian has every reason to be grateful for the presence of so discerning an observer.

## ***The midday lull: Afrikakorps***

After disengaging from its thrust into the administrative area of 5th South African Brigade, Panzer Regiment 8 spent some time in reorganization and replenishment before resuming the advance towards Bir el Gubi at 1130 hours. According to the War Diary of 21st Panzer, 15th Panzer pushed about 20 km. west from Sidi Muftah, which is probably rather an over-estimate. On the way the Regiment ran into 'an impassable swamp', from which, they say, they could extricate themselves only with difficulty. Meanwhile Panzer Regiment 5 (from 21st Panzer) came up at last, too late for the thrust against the South Africans. <sup>[16]</sup> They were somewhat annoyed to find themselves placed on the left, instead of the right, of their junior formation, but took up a position facing south from Sidi Muftah, and engaged 'several thrusts from the east by enemy armour'. One of these, probably delivered by elements of Support Group re-forming in the neighbourhood, also got itself bogged down in the rain-sodden desert and some vehicles were abandoned. A liaison officer of General Brink's staff, who was hunting for the rendezvous with General Norrie near Hagfet el Hareiba, came across a troop of British guns firing methodically into a mass of hostile transport to the north.

At 1235 *Afrikakorps* made contact with 'about two-thirds' of Ariete <sup>[17]</sup> 12 km. north-east of Bir el Gubi, and General Cruewell proceeded to make his dispositions for a decisive attack on the invaders. 'The intention', according to the *D.A.K. War Diary*, 'was to push the enemy south of Sidi Rezegh back to the north on to 21 Pz Div's defence line, <sup>[18]</sup> and then to join forces with Pz Div and destroy him. Attack to begin 1400 hours.' Ariete was assigned to the post on the left of 15th Panzer Division. The general intention was that the three armoured formations, with Panzer Regiment 8 in the middle, Panzer Regiment 5 on the right and Ariete on the left, should sweep down in one long line, with the units of 15th Rifle Brigade a few hundred yards behind, to overwhelm 7th Armoured Division.

The Report of Panzer Regiment 8 states that

"At 1430 hrs the reinforced Panzer Regiment assembled in the Sidi Muftah area, <sup>[19]</sup> facing north, disposed as follows: On the left Panzer Regiment 8 with 120 tanks, on the right Panzer Regiment 5 (under command) with 40 tanks. The first wave of Panzer Regiment 8 consisted of 1/8 Pz Regt with Regt H.Q. and 3/33 A.A. behind, the second wave of 11/8 Pz Regt. Pz Regt 5 was disposed in the same way. According to divisional orders the Rifle Regiment 115 was to follow close behind 11/8 in vehicles. The tanks were to act as a support force and enable the infantry to break into the enemy positions."

The plan for the attack provided that Regiment 115 should follow behind Panzer Regiment 8, and Regiment 200 behind Panzer Regiment 5.

One *Batterie* from Artillery Regiment 33 and a company from Anti-Tank Regiment 33 were attached to each of the infantry regiments, and a heavy anti-aircraft *Batterie* (88s) would travel with Regiment 200. 'The attack will be carried out at all speed,' the commander of 15th Rifle Brigade told his unit commanders, 'using all our armoured strength. The infantry brigade will remain in transport as long as possible and will not debus until it comes under heavy infantry fire. Drive right into the enemy if possible. Push through to the escarpment east of Sidi Rezegh. Co-operate closely with the tanks.'

Colonel Kriebel repeats the statement that these dispositions were made on the orders of 15th Panzer Division and comments that 'Panzer Regiment 5 (with 40 tanks) was placed on the right, where the enemy strength had suffered during the fighting of the morning, and Panzer Regiment 8 (110 [sic] tanks) on the left where the strongest resistance was expected'. Of the rather unconventional proposal, that 'the rifle regiments should follow close on the heels of the panzer regiments and break into the enemy position, still seated in their vehicles', he explains, 'The Division determined on this risky measure because the time required for an infantry attack through the deep enemy positions was certainly lacking'.

Ariete was 'invited' to take part in the attack on the left flank, but Kriebel says, 'It would appear that no detailed co-ordination regarding objectives, boundary lines, mutual artillery support and signal service was arranged'. If this is true—and Colonel Kriebel certainly ought to know—it argues an absence of central control, explained but perhaps not altogether excused, by the fact that Cruewell had only a very small tactical headquarters and left the conduct of the attack to 15th Panzer. In any case, the Italians, who had learned in more than one clash during the last few days what would happen when their M 13s charged a British formation, were entitled to view the proposed action with misgiving.

Rommel played no part in the coming attack, which in fact constituted a major departure from his own instructions. Kriebel states that in accordance with his usual custom the German Commander-in-Chief left his new Battle Headquarters at El Adem early that morning, intending to join the *Afrikakorps*. He did not arrive at Corps Headquarters, and did not intervene in the operations of either of the panzer divisions. 'It is probable', Kriebel surmises, 'that on his way to *D.A.K.* he arrived at the Africa Regiment south of Bir Scieuarat at a moment of crisis and, as was his custom, took a personal hand in the defence. Thus it appears that *Panzergruppe* was informed of the events of the day very late, and even then insufficiently.' There is no trace in official documents of Rommel's movements during that day, but it is indeed extremely likely that on his way to Point 175 he received news of the overrunning of *Afrikakorps* Headquarters at Bir el Giaser, and hurried to deal with what might have become a very grave threat to his flank. In any case the battle of the Sunday of the Dead was directed entirely by *Afrikakorps*.

### ***The midday lull: 5 S.A. Infantry Brigade***

For most of 5th S.A. Infantry Brigade the Sunday morning passed uneventfully. The whole leaguer was subject to a harassing shell-fire, most of which came from the heavy artillery of Group Boettcher on the slopes of Belhamed, though some members of the Brigade wondered privately whether over-enthusiasm on the part of their fellow brigade away to the south might not have something to do with it. Men in the artillery and infantry had some steady digging to take their minds off the disadvantages of their situation, but the rocky soil put any serious entrenching out of the question. 3rd Transvaal Scottish claimed to be 'fairly well dug in', in spite of 'the extremely rocky nature of the ground', but a company commander of the Regiment Botha on their right remembers that 'the men tried to dig in but the desert was too rocky. Only one mortar was properly dug in, the other only a foot or two, while the slit trenches were a matter of inches.' The digging-in of field-guns was no more successful, and most of the 2-pounder anti-tank guns remained on their portees.

After the excitements of the early morning the B Echelon settled down, rather more relieved at the disappearance of the panzers than the situation altogether justified. In spite of their losses, they still formed what the Germans described as 'an enormous concentration of vehicles', and 'towards midday', says the report of 4th S.A. Reserve Motor Transport Company, 'orders were received for B Echelon to close up on Bde H.Q. and spread out on the right flank'. The Scots Guards say that 'the entire B Echelon of 5 S.A. Bde was inside the perimeter of defence', but this means little more than that they were not actually detached from their parent formation, and that some artillery positions lay along the southern front.

The defence of the unprotected south face attracted the attention of General Gott, who had spent the night within the 5th Brigade leaguer and now advised Brigadier Armstrong on the problem of strengthening the position. He ordered the Scots Guards <sup>[20]</sup> to come under command of 5th Brigade, and sited D Battery of 3rd Royal Horse Artillery with its twelve 2-pounders, also from Support Group, in the B Echelon area to meet any further attack from the south. The composite regiment of 22nd Armoured Brigade, with two batteries of 25-pounders from 2nd Royal Horse Artillery, 'took up a hull-down position near the south-west corner of 5 S.A. Bde Gp leaguer'. <sup>[21]</sup> At the same time General Gott withdrew the Headquarters and the remainder of the infantry of 7th Support Group from the flank of 5th Brigade, but left 4th Royal Horse Artillery to cover that side of the position.

The commander of 3rd S.A. Field Regiment, Lt.-Col. I. B. Whyte, stated in his report, 'About 1130 hours I was told by Gen Gott that 16 guns of 4 R.H.A. would cover our north-eastern flank from which a tank attack was expected. I contacted their O.C. Lt Col Gurrie and laid a wire to him.' With this additional support on the flank of the Brigade, Whyte was able to strengthen the southern front, and he describes how he 'moved 7 Fd Bty from our eastern flank to our southern flank and re-sited the A/Tk Troops to give A/Tk protection between the 25-pr btys'. The report of Major Greenwood, one of 'Whyte's battery commanders, describes how E Troop of 9th S.A. Field Battery was moved from the northern flank of S.A. Irish to meet an attack from the south-west and a troop (probably of six guns) from 60th Field Regiment R.A. was brought in to take its place. At the same time most of the guns of 3rd S.A. Anti-Tank Battery were moved to protect the Brigade against an attack from the south. I Troop, which had been with 3rd Transvaal Scottish, was placed on the western flank of the B Echelon, and three guns of K Troop were brought from the sector of and Regiment Botha and disposed on the B Echelon's south-eastern flank. Two guns of J Troop (with the S.A. Irish) were sited to fire from a position between the B Echelon and the Irish.<sup>[22]</sup>

The South African anti-tank guns remained on their portees, and General Gott afterwards remarked, 'Many of our portee anti-tank guns were set alight by enemy fire before the tanks got within range, and that was a contributory cause to the Germans' success. The lesson is to have the guns off the truck and dug-in.'<sup>[23]</sup> Apart, however, from the feasibility of digging in at all, it should be remembered that the situation was extremely fluid. The intentions of the enemy were unknown, and General Gott himself warned the South Africans to be prepared for an attack from the north—whence Rommel had, in fact, intended the main thrust to come. Cruewell's elaborate outflanking movement might turn out to be a mere feint, and the way in which the tanks disengaged during the morning, when all was going well, might be taken as confirmation. That very afternoon, moreover, L Troop of 33rd New Zealand Anti-Tank Battery engaged the Germans from their portees on the flank of the South African Brigade.

After the move to their new positions, the gunners observed a good deal of enemy movement to the south and south-west. Lieutenant Allen, the Gun Position Officer of E Troop of 9th S.A. Field Battery, described how thirty tanks moving off to the south-west were engaged over open sights. They halted about 4000 yards away and we continued to harass them and other targets with observed fire on and off for a couple of hours. I saw only one tank definitely out of action. The tanks then moved out of sight.<sup>[24]</sup> Things remained fairly quiet after that, except for some desultory and not very accurate counter-battery shelling from a northerly direction.

Some time later, about 1130 hours. Major Harris of 7th S.A. Field Battery saw 'an enemy column moving from east to west some 6000 yards South of the Bde'. The column was reported to consist of fifty-two tanks followed by anything between 100 and 500 lorries and was given some 100 rounds of gunfire.<sup>[25]</sup> Enemy artillery replied, and the armoured cars which acted as observation posts for the South African guns were driven in. Major Harris states:

I reported this fact to R.H.Q., giving details of the enemy column (i.e. direction of movement and approx. locality). I was then ordered to hold my fire as reinforcements, including South Africans, were expected from the South. Enemy shelling continued spasmodically. Shortly after this I observed a column coming towards me from the South. I went out in my Armd Gar and established that it comprised a Battalion of the Royal Scots Guards [i.e. 2nd Scots Guards]. As apparently still further reinforcements were expected I was told to continue holding my fire. A portion of the Royal [*sic*] Scots Guards which I estimated to be a company, remained on my positions and started to dig in.

According to the War Diary of 2nd Scots Guards, the Left-flanking Company was ordered to support 3rd Transvaal Scottish, and their Right-flanking Company 'to hold reserve positions'. They must have arrived about 1400 hours, since General Gott had already left Brigade Headquarters, after giving orders that they should come under Armstrong's command. The Guards were left much to their own devices and some of them settled down in the area of the South African Irish, in front of the guns of 9th Field Battery, and had to be persuaded to move away.

After the battle there was a general feeling among survivors of 5th Brigade that insufficient attention had been paid to the concentration of the *Afrikakorps* on the south-west, and too little done to interfere with its replenishment and refuelling.

Critics expressed the belief that any artillery officers in the Brigade, who displayed initiative and wished to fire on the masses of transport within range, were summarily checked by Brigade Headquarters. Furthermore the armoured cars which investigated these concentrations away in the desert had solid reason to judge them 'unfriendly', yet they found Brigade Headquarters apathetic. Both 4th S.A. Armoured Cars and No. 1 Company of 3rd S.A. Reconnaissance Battalion complained that the liaison officers whom they sent in to report were treated at Brigade Headquarters with an indifference which amounted to contempt. 4th S.A. Armoured Cars (which were not under command of the Brigade) sent a liaison officer to report the beginning of the charge of the German tanks, but the officer in question complained that senior officers at Brigade told him they were too busy to listen to his news, and that he must make his report to a sergeant clerk.

On the other hand, the dispositions which General Gott ordered, and his own letter to General Theron, show that he at least was aware of the danger and took what precautions he could with the artillery at his disposal. It is true also that General Brink had signalled 'Ons is na by en ons kom',<sup>[26]</sup> and in consequence 1st S.A. Brigade was expected to arrive at any moment from the south—though it had in fact turned back a matter of 3 miles on its tracks. Further, it was no time for extravagant use of ammunition. 5th S.A. Brigade was now cut off from communication with the south and no one knew when fresh supplies would be available. According to Major Hull, second-in-command of 3rd S.A. Field Regiment, the Regiment then had 150 rounds per gun—by no means an excessive supply. 200 rounds were lent to 4th Royal Horse Artillery, who were "very short", and some other ammunition was given to 60th Field Regiment, and there was every reason why indiscriminate artillery fire should be discouraged.<sup>[26]</sup>

Whether Brigade Headquarters could have displayed more initiative within the instructions given by General Gott, or might perhaps have taken a more definite line themselves, and certainly whether they might not have handled liaison officers more tactfully, are matters of opinion rather than of historical fact. It may be accepted, without any reflection on Brigade, that the armoured cars were aware of the situation on the south-western front, the artillery observers were active, and the gun position officers ready to play their part. At the same time there were good reasons for believing that a large body of reinforcements was coming up from the south, and also for husbanding the ammunition of the guns. Apart from the threatened front of the Brigade, however, unit commanders knew little of what was going on, and the German assault took most people by surprise, but there is evidence that steps had been taken, within the limited resources available, to meet it.

Towards midday. Brigade Headquarters had a welcome reminder that they were not alone in the struggle. Brigadier Barrowclough had arrived at Bir Sciuearat after his night march and, while preparing to assault Point 175, sent off his 26th Battalion to make contact with the South Africans. The Battalion reached its allotted area, south-west of Hareifet en Nbeidat and a mile or two east of 5th S.A. Brigade, at 1225 and, 'After mid-day', says their history,

The CO [Lt.-Col. J. R. Page] left to establish contact with the South Africans. When he reached their headquarters he was informed that a tank-supported attack was expected at any time. Reconnaissance had shown that the enemy was organising a large striking force behind the southern escarpment.<sup>[27]</sup> The supporting arms with the brigade were not strong enough to break up this concentration. Long-range guns had already started several fires in the South African sector and the tempo of enemy shelling was steadily increasing. Somewhat perturbed by this news Lt Col Page returned to his headquarters.<sup>[28]</sup> Beside his bad news, however, he was able to bring back some anti-tank ammunition.

About midday the German guns to the north—the heavy guns of Group Boettcher on Belhamed and those of 21st Panzer Division nearer at hand—began a steady bombardment of the 5th Brigade position. The Transvaal Scottish say:

“The enemy shells were directed against our own arty, which were on either side and just forward of Battalion H.Q. The enemy Arty O.P. must have been very well sighted, as their fire was particularly deadly on any vehicle which dared approach anywhere near the front line. This made the bringing forward of ammunition extremely difficult. Just after 1400 hours, when communications forward had broken down, Major Rosser went forward, leaving Capt Ruddock and Major Berry at B.H.Q. Major Rosser found that in spite of the heavy barrage very few casualties had occurred in our lines and the men were in good spirits and calmly awaiting an expected infantry attack.”

The heavy bombardment certainly seemed to presage an attack from the north, and Brigade Headquarters sent up the Reserve Company of the Regiment President Steyn to cover the northern face, and ordered both the Regiment Botha and the South African Irish to detach a company apiece to prepare a second line of defence about 1,000 yards in rear of the Scottish front line. Two anti-tank guns from I Troop were moved back from the B Echelon to support the Transvaal Scottish.

About 1400 hours General Gott left the South African perimeter. Before he went he warned Brigade Headquarters of the danger from the southwest, and the Brigade Report says that 'Comd 7 Armd Div assured the Bde Comd that with the guns available on that sector our tanks would be able to take care of the enemy'. General Gott had also told Colonel Page that he should site the guns with 26th New Zealand Battalion to cover the north, south, and east faces of their position: on the west, 4th Royal Horse Artillery—who were deployed on a line running between the South African Brigade and the New Zealanders—would be able to give them protection. The General drove first to the headquarters of C Squadron of 4th S.A. Armoured Gars, which lay north-east of the Brigade, and used them as his personal escort for the rest of the day. Here he stayed for some time while matters worked up to a crisis, sitting 'right up on his turret', quite unmoved by the 'overs' and ricochets from the battles to south and east, and the harassing fire from the north, and rallying the squadron commander <sup>[29]</sup> for 'ducking' more than once as he walked across from his armoured car to report. Colonel Larmuth remembers that 'Gott repeatedly would ask about enemy guns and tank positions and spoke endlessly at times into his mike'.

While he was at Larmuth's headquarters, news came through from the South African armoured cars south of the 5th Brigade that the German column had 'formed up almost in line abreast and facing north', and Lannuth says:

I asked Gott about this and he said he knew all about it. He said the enemy force there would be tackled 'later on' if it wasn't too late. He said distinctly to me that 'Your South African Brigade seems stuck down with gum—they won't move and they won't turn their artillery round and they are not dug in—I am sorry for them'. This rather shocked me and Gott said that he could not get them to move round and it was too late to dig. He said he couldn't understand them at all. <sup>[30]</sup>

## ***South of Sidi Muftah***

Even after the losses of the first three days of the campaign, 7th Armoured Division and 1st S.A. Division should together have been strong enough to contain the *Afrikakorps*. But 7th Armoured Division was still not concentrated and the forces ranged south of Point 178 were only a fraction of General Gott's command. Substantial bodies of guns, tanks, and infantry lay to the southward, and the German forces thrusting round 5th S.A. Brigade watched them with not unjustified anxiety. In the middle of the morning 15th Panzer Division detached one battalion of its panzer regiment to deal with menacing tanks and harassing artillery, and when Panzer Regiment 5 came belatedly up to Bir es Sreuil it engaged a force estimated at sixteen tanks with armoured cars, a 'Batterie', and supply vehicles, away to the south. Panzer Regiment 5 claims to have driven these off to the south-west, giving the major credit for the success to the *Batterie* of 88s, and thereafter they faced south and east and 'engaged enemy tanks moving from south to east and north-east at long range'.

German reports did not commonly underrate the opposition, and it is possible that somewhat anxious reports of the threat presented by these forces helped to discourage Cruewell from following up his first success against the transport echelons of 5th S.A. Brigade.

But the forces in the south which disturbed the *Afrikakorps* were not themselves concentrated, and even after a good deal of regrouping still formed three unrelated clusters of odds and ends. These were 1st S.A. Brigade Group, whose front was somewhere just east of Hagfet en Nadura, the remnants of Support Group under Brigadier Campbell, which were concentrating between Bir el Chelb and Bir er Reghem, and the balance, perhaps two-thirds in all, of 4th Armoured Brigade, which Brigadier Davy's tactful phrase describes as 'not fully under control'. Of the units of 4th Armoured Brigade, most of 3rd RTR spent the night south of the airfield and moved at 0530 to Hareifet en Nbeidat in order to cover the eastern flank of the South Africans. At 0745 they were directed to join Brigade Headquarters near Hagfet ez Zghemat el Garbia some 5 miles to the south, and clashed unexpectedly with the forward movement of General Cruewell's armour on the way. According to the Brigade War Diary, the greater part of the Regiment was collected by the Brigadier during the morning and 'instructed to help in the defence of the [Support Group] leaguer and [was] busily employed during the whole day. They had a great opportunity for individual action and undoubtedly caused many casualties to the enemy.'<sup>[31]</sup> Major Crisp and his group are typical of the part played by 3rd RTR in harassing the *Afrikakorps*.

5th RTR moved south from their night leaguer and joined their artillery consorts, part of and Royal Horse Artillery, near Sidi Mohammed el Abied, about 4 miles south-east of Bir er Reghem. At about 1000 hours the commander of the Regiment reported to Brigadier Gatehouse, who was trying to round up the remnants of 8th Hussars in the north near Point 175, that the South African Brigade was being heavily attacked to the northwest, and suggested that he should move to their assistance. The War Diary says that he was warned 'to wait where we were owing to the threat from the south', and later that 'the bn was ordered to the assistance of the South Africans on three occasions, and on each occasion the order was cancelled'. During the afternoon, according to the Brigade War Diary, 'the Bde Comdr set out with a tank of 3 RTR and reached them about 1630 hrs. 4 tanks of 8H commanded by Major P. Sandbach were also found. Brigade leaguered in this area.' 5th RTR were actually on their way towards 5th Brigade at the time, and had travelled some 2 miles, but went no farther. In effect, therefore, only one of the two remaining regiments of 4th Armoured Brigade played any part in the operations of the Sunday of the Dead, and that only in a series of gallant but unrelated individual actions. The Report of Panzer Regiment 5 shows that these activities, although something of a nuisance, did not prevent the *Afrikakorps* from carrying out its intention for 23 November.

Much more concern was caused to the Germans by the miscellaneous group of tanks, armoured cars, and guns, which had been collected so dramatically by Brigadier Campbell during the morning. After the Germans withdrew from the B Echelon and went on to make their junction with Ariete, Brigadier Campbell was ordered to remove what was left of 7th Support Group from its place beside 5th S.A. Brigade and re-form farther south. Round the nucleus formed by the Headquarters of Support Group, what someone called 'the predatory instincts' of the Brigadier had collected a quantity of the flotsam and jetsam of the battle-field, including most of the surviving tanks of 7th Armoured Brigade. The force congregated a little to the south-west of Bir er Reghem, where many of its vehicles promptly became embedded in yet another bog. They were struggling to get free when the group was attacked by a reconnaissance unit of Ariete Division, feeling northwards for contact with the *Afrikakorps*. 'A dozen light tanks appeared from the blue', says Brigadier Davy, 'and drove straight at the regiment. It was a very gallant but fruitless attack, as every one of them was knocked out.' The M 13s in the background retired when they were engaged by the 25-pounders.<sup>[32]</sup> Soon afterwards Brigadier Campbell was joined by the Headquarters of 22nd Armoured Brigade, and the whole group refuelled preparatory to moving north to intervene in the enemy attack on 5th Brigade.

The mere presence of Brigadier Campbell's group in their rear, with the fire of his guns, caused uneasiness to the *Afrikakorps* as they developed their attack on 5th S.A. Brigade, but

the British tanks were powerless to intervene. There was no means of communication with Armstrong's Headquarters, whose wave-length and call-sign were unknown, and any advance on their part would have brought them under the Brigade's defensive fire. But the very presence of the group was alarming, and the fire of its guns caused the Germans a good deal of inconvenience.

About 1630 hours. Brigadier Davy arrived with the Headquarters of 7th Armoured Brigade, to which he had added F Troop of 21st S.A. Field Battery, borrowed from Brigadier Pienaar, and 'a few resuscitated tanks of the and RTR'. Brigadier Davy has written, 'I was halted about 2 miles north of Pienaar's brigade, and did not see the battle, but when I heard noises at about 1430 I decided to go up to see how the remains of 7H were getting on supporting the Support Group. I also decided to winkle some guns out of Dan Pienaar if I could. It took some time to do this, and I was surprised and honoured when I got them! When we got up to 7H, who were in line covering the Support Group (tactically incorrect of course), I told the troop to get into action, and the troop commander and O.C. 7H and myself decided that the mass of vehicles we saw moving east was South African. So the troop did not in fact open fire at all.'

Away to the south-west of Brigadier Campbell's group lay 1st S.A. Infantry Brigade. After the first sight of the enemy advance near Hagfet el Hareiba, the Brigade had fallen back some 2½ miles: observation officers were sent out in front, 'and artillery fire was opened on the enemy column'. The War Diary of 7th S.A. Field Regiment says, 'Batteries engaged enemy columns. Shooting proceeded right through the day.' 27/28th Medium Battery R.A. was also in action and 'ammunition expenditure had been heavy', but the other battery of 7th Medium Regiment— 25/26th—which General Brink sent up during the morning, did not fire. The Brigade Narrative claims 'the complete destruction of 4 enemy tanks and heavy punishment to his motorized infantry'. One German column collided with 1st Transvaal Scottish, whose history has a graphic account of how the enemy infantrymen leaped from the vehicles and took cover, while three tanks charged the South African position. Of these, one is said to have fallen into a mortar pit and surrendered, another to have been knocked out by an anti-tank gun, while the third, 'laden with clinging Germans, ran as far as B Company H.Q. before it was stopped by cooks and clerks'. The report of Colonel de Wet du Toit, artillery commander of 1st S.A. Division, states that two tanks—a Panzer III and a Panzer IV— were knocked out by O Troop of 4th Anti-Tank Battery and two members of the crews were killed: 'The crews were taken prisoner by TS.'

Lieutenant N. S. Stranger, of 1st Transvaal Scottish, was given an immediate award of the Military Cross for the capture of a German tank which he is said to have 'chased in an 8 cwt lorry, brandishing a "sticky bomb" '.

After his second visit to 1st S.A. Brigade, General Brink got back to his Headquarters, 2 miles east of Point 181, at 1215. Here he found a signal, timed 1105, from 5th Brigade: 'Tk battle appears to have taken place around us all day. B Ech involved enemy tks but attack repulsed. Our posn same as reported yesterday.' To this General Brink replied: 'Ons is naby en ons kom. Ander mense kom ook van ander kant. Hou vas. Ons is.' <sup>[33]</sup>

General Brink went on almost at once to General Norrie's Advanced Headquarters, where he arrived at 1315 hours and explained the situation. The Corps Commander told him that a major tank battle was in progress and ordered him to link up with 5th S.A. Brigade, but General Brink on his side 'told him that in the absence of a Bn Gp of 1 Inf Bde at Bir el Gubi and with no tps in Div reserve I did not feel strong enough to do this. Lt-Gen Norrie immediately gave orders for the Bn Gp (1 R.N.G.) at Bir el Gubi to rejoin 1 Inf Bde.' It was not until dusk, however, that the detachment reappeared, and its absence during the critical period of 23 November seriously limited the capacity of 1st S.A. Brigade to intervene. At this stage, General Norrie's Headquarters were somewhat to the east of 1st S.A. Brigade, and during the morning enemy columns had been seen at intervals, passing from east to west just north of their position. A German staff car actually passed within 150 yards of the Headquarters and was chased and shot up by one of the protective armoured cars.

Back again at his own Advanced Headquarters, General Brink was handed a further signal from 5th Brigade, timed 1335:

Situation now clearer. Enemy columns which were South of us moving West attacked our own tks. Thought prisoners escaped during hostile attack B Echelon but still checking. Btys accounted for several tks. Still checking. Number of casualties to-day still unknown. Our rugby friends [New Zealanders] contacted our right flank. Essential Dan 1st S.A. Inf Bde reports posn avoid attack by our own Btys. Hope send off casualties and arrange collect amn, rations and water as soon as Armd C patrol reports clear.

At 1525 General Brink, who had just had a message by radio-telephone from 30th Corps, sent an *emergency operations* signal to both 1st and 5th Brigades: '85 enemy tks 430389 [a mile and a half north-west of Hagfet el Hareiba]. 300 MT 15 tks 423390 [a mile south-west of Bir el Haiad]. Apparently stationary at present. Sqn our own Armd Cs being sent NW 1 Inf Bde to observe until dark.' This signal was immediately picked up and correctly transcribed by the ever-watchful German intercept service.

General Brink was once more on his way to 1st Brigade Headquarters when he met Brigadier Pienaar, who explained 'what his dispositions were, and said that there was still, as far as he could judge, the same enemy force between his Bde and 5 Inf Bde. He thought his right flank was weak and was relieved to learn that the R.N.G. Gp had been ordered to rejoin him.' The sands were, however, running out. The enemy tanks did not remain 'apparently stationary' much longer, nor did the armoured cars have to observe until dark.

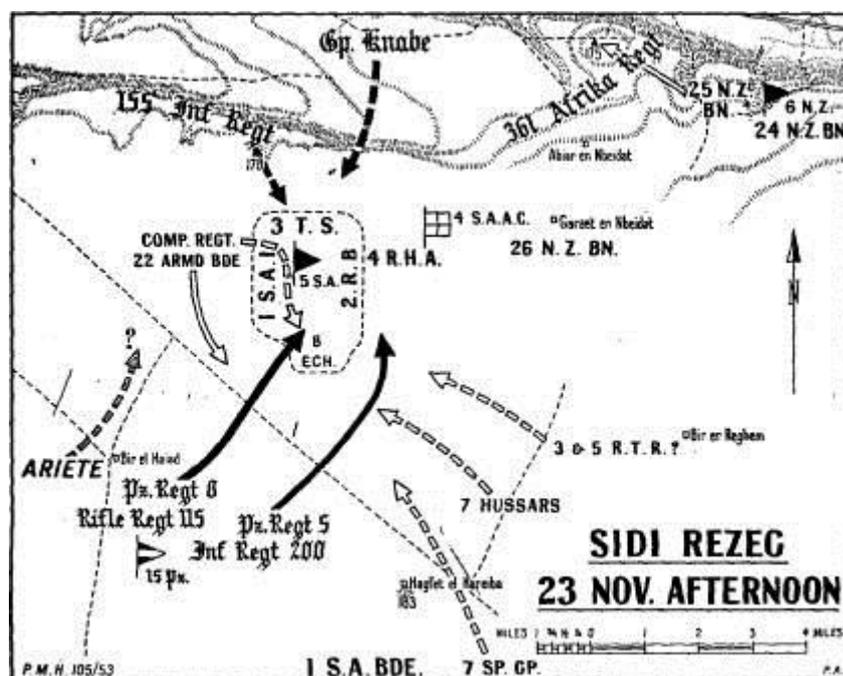
At 1555 Advanced Headquarters of the South African Division were passing a signal to the Brigade Major of 5th S.A. Brigade when the latter suddenly interjected, 'Wait!' It was the Brigade's last word.

### ***The charge of the Afrikakorps***

From midday onwards the forces of the *Afrikakorps* to the south and west of 5th Brigade proceeded to reorganize along a line which stretched southeastward from Bir el Haiad. Meanwhile German infantry in the north, together with 'a few odd tanks', made some movement against the Transvaal Scottish but were kept off by the guns of 8th Field Battery. There was talk, later, of a 'feint' attack from the north, intended to distract the attention of the Brigade from the real assault which was coming from their rear, but the German documents contain no record of any proposed feint, and it was not until 1530, after the main body had been sent off, that Cruewell bethought himself of von Ravenstein's infantry and ordered him to attack. If anything, the 'demonstration' from the north was a serious movement, called off perhaps, because Brigadier Barrowclough's success against Point 175 seemed to put in jeopardy the whole of the rear areas of the *Afrikakorps*.

Away to the south, 15th Panzer complained that their redeployment was hampered by hostile artillery fire, which could not be evaded owing to the marshy character of the area in which they lay. Colonel Kriebel remarks that the assembly was hampered by 'heavy fire from over 100 enemy guns which could not be kept down by our weak artillery', and though his estimate is much exaggerated it serves as a useful corrective to the complaint of many South African survivors that the enemy had been allowed to concentrate with no interference whatever. The twenty-four field-guns and four of the mediums with 1st S.A. Brigade were certainly firing on the Germans from the south, and, in all probability, G Battery of 2nd Royal Horse Artillery with the composite regiment of 22nd Armoured Brigade was also in action on the north. In 5th Brigade, however, Lieut.-Colonel Whyte of 3rd S.A. Field Regiment was chary of firing since he knew that 1st S.A. Brigade was close at hand and on its way up to support them, and 'owing to the mirage positive identification was impossible'.<sup>[34]</sup> Nevertheless, a certain amount of fire was brought down on specific targets. At 1445, when the hostile character of the concentration to the south-west was becoming clear, E Troop of 9th S.A. Field Battery was engaging what seemed to be 'about 150 [tanks] with a number of big vehicles'.

On the other hand 15th Panzer did not lack the power to retaliate, and its artillery did in fact engage the 5th Brigade. 'At about 1400 hours,' reported Captain Cowley, commander of E Troop, 'counter-battery fire was brought to bear on the troop position—we were not firing at the time—but the fire was not very accurate, although we had to keep our heads down.' At the same time harassing fire, which came in part from the heavy batteries to the north, fell steadily throughout the Brigade perimeter, setting vehicles alight and creating a mounting sense of tension. Some time after 1500 hours Regimental Headquarters of 4th S.A. Armoured Cars, which lay just outside the south-west corner of the Brigade perimeter, came under the fire of 'eight 105 mm. howitzers firing off a tractor and drawn by Mercedes gun-towers [i.e. tractors]'. Considerable movement could now be observed in the enemy concentration: lines of tanks and infantry had been formed and were beginning to advance, and 4th Armoured Car Headquarters moved to the opposite side of the Brigade. It was no time for a flank move across the threatened front, and they took a short cut through the Brigade position, but regimental dignity was considerably ruffled when 'an M.P. actually rode up on a motor-cycle in formal "traffic cop" fashion and signalled that they should go slower through the camp area'.



After the long noon-tide delay, the German attack seemed to develop suddenly. By 1500 hours Cruewell had got his long lines of tanks and vehicles marshalled in something like the parade-ground style he had intended, and he gave the order to advance. Once the *Afrikakorps* had set out on its charge, the less time spent in dallying the better, and they moved swiftly. 'At about 1515', says Captain Cowley, 'approx 200 enemy vehicles headed by tanks made an attack from the south-west, and the troop on my orders immediately engaged them over open sights.' The Gun Position Officer, Lieut. K. B. Allen, says,

A large body of transport came over the horizon to the South moving from right to left diagonally towards us. We opened fire over open sights as soon as we distinguished them as enemy vehicles. The transport column was followed by a force of at least 70 tanks which cut in towards us making for the centre of the Irish position. Our guns engaged them continuously, swinging more and more to the left until they were outflanked by the tanks. The tanks kept up A.P. and M.G. fire all the time.

Behind the charging panzers came the infantry, tightly packed in thin-skinned vehicles and forming an admirable target: they suffered severely. Kriebel says;

Heavy fighting broke out at once. A terrific fire front of well over 100 guns concentrated on the two attacking panzer regiments and the two rifle regiments following close behind in their

vehicles. A concentration of anti-tank weapons unusual in this theatre of war, and cleverly hidden among enemy vehicles which had been knocked out during the morning, inflicted heavy losses on the two rifle regiments. The flanking fire was particularly irksome which came from the left [i.e. the area of the S.A. Irish], the sector of Panzer Division Ariete, which had not yet embarked on the attack.

Panzer Regiment 8 reported that as they advanced, covered by the fire of their Artillery Regiment 33, the hostile shell-fire which had hampered their assembly 'increased to a terrific extent'. Lieut.-Colonel Cramer, the regimental commander, drove straight into the enemy before him: 'he personally led the regiment forward, and at every sign of faltering spurred it on by brief exhortations over the air', and by 1530 the first battalion under Captain Kuemmel had broken into the South African position. Behind the tanks came Rifle Regiment 115 which increased its speed under 'the terrific shell and tank fire'. As they came in sight over the rise 'the first aimed fire was opened on the regiment, which suffered casualties to men and vehicles. Lieut.-Colonel Zintel, unperturbed, led the regiment standing upright in his vehicle.' The second battalion of the regiment had come up level with the first, 200 metres from the enemy's lines, when heavy machine-gun and anti-tank fire fell on them from the left flank, and the regimental commander, who had intended to cover the last few paces in his transport, was compelled to debus. 'One of the first to be killed was Lieut.-Colonel Zintel, who was hit by machine-gun fire at the head of the regiment barely 100 metres from the foremost enemy positions. The enemy defensive fire reopened in front. Soon most of the officers and NCOs of the regiment were killed or wounded.'

The War Diary of 15th Panzer Division takes up the tale and describes how

Major von Grolman (I/115) led the armoured company forward to relieve the regiment. He also was killed. The regiment was brought to a standstill. Almost all its vehicles were immobilized and it was under heavy defensive fire. The divisional commander came forward to the front line of Rifle Regiment 115 and ordered the adjutant, Lieut Struckmann, to rally the regiment and continue the attack.

In the confusion the original plan, which had envisaged the infantry following in the path of the tanks, had gone astray, and Rifle Regiment 115 actually found itself charging on the flank of the panzers instead of coming in behind them. At 1600 hours, says the Division, 'After a short reorganization the Panzer Regiment advanced again and pushed deeper into the enemy lines. II/8 turned away to the north-west to relieve the infantry regiment and beat off a counter-attack on the left by 20 tanks.'

On the left wing was disposed the force, amounting to two-thirds of Ariete Division, under General di Nisio, but little information is available concerning its activities<sup>[35]</sup> The Diary of the *Afrikakorps* remarks that 'it was further noticeable that Ariete was hanging back' and at 1600 hours records 'The Corps Commander urged Ariete to increase the speed of its advance, as almost all the defensive fire of 80-100 guns<sup>[36]</sup> and numerous anti-tank guns was falling on 15th Panzer Division'. The 3rd *Batterie* of Anti-Aircraft Regiment 33—88s—went in on the left of the first wave of tanks of Panzer Regiment 8, with Ariete on its own left flank. 'Our tanks advanced too quickly', it reported, 'and there were scattered enemy infantry posts everywhere, and therefore the machine-gun and rifle fire was too heavy for the *Batterie* to keep contact with our tanks. Ariete, however, advanced very slowly, so that the gap between the two divisions grew wider and wider.' What had happened was that the fire of the defending artillery—though only a fifth of the strength which the Germans reckoned—had disorganized the whole left flank of the German attack and some units came to a standstill. The divisional commander himself had to take a hand to get the advance moving.

It was at this moment that Lieut.-Colonel Garr, commanding the composite regiment of 22nd Armoured Brigade, on the extreme right of the British position, decided to intervene. 'Suddenly', reported Anti-Tank Unit 33, 'the enemy opened fire from the left flank, where Ariete should have been, at first with artillery and then with tanks and Bren carriers.' The second *Batterie* of the unit was brought up to deal with the British tanks, and a platoon of the anti-tank troops belonging to the infantry regiment, significantly described as unable 'to go

forward because of the heavy fire and waiting among the supply vehicles of Rifle Regiment 115, was brought up to engage the advancing enemy tanks'. The 'dangerous gap which threatened to open behind the infantry regiment' caused the German commanders considerable alarm, and the anti-tank and anti-aircraft artillery which habitually covered the flanks of the panzer regiment <sup>[37]</sup> were hurried up and thrown in against the British tanks. They claim, 'A violent action took place in which 5 enemy tanks were destroyed. The enemy was forced to abandon his intention of pushing through the gap and retire north. Ariete Division then closed up.'

On the other side, the 22nd Armoured Brigade War Diary describes how, as the German tanks came in sight from the west, 'we were heavily shelled our left flank and the right corner of the S.A. Brigade leaguer being the worst sufferers'. As the enemy tanks approached,

The Sqn under Major Walker, 4 Sharpshooters, went in, out again, then in. The plan was to withdraw to the NE leaving our original position open for the South African gunners to have a good shot at the enemy tanks left front. Owing to the steady advance of the enemy and the continued shelling from his rear, we were never able to break off action with the enemy tanks.

As the panzers pressed on, the tanks of 22nd Armoured Brigade rallied, the composite Sqn 4 Sharpshooters under Major Walker engaged them on the left while Lt Col Garr rushed to the right flank, rallied the Sqn 2 RGH and led them in a glorious charge broadside across the enemy advance, every tank firing its hardest. All the time, C Bty 4 RHA and the SA Arty were firing hard into the enemy's right flank.

On the right wing Panzer Regiments—reduced to forty tanks after the battle of the landing-ground on the previous day—together with Infantry Regiment 200, were making what was virtually an independent assault. The Panzer Regiment's Report states that their orders were to advance 'toward Point 179 (east of Rugbet en Nbeidat)' and their line of march would have taken them past the eastern flank of 5th S.A. Brigade. <sup>[38]</sup> The Report continues, however, 'After moving a few kilometres NNE, No. 1 Battalion came under heavy shell-fire. The direction of the advance was altered. Shortly after that, enemy tanks appeared from the right, and heavy fighting developed.' The panzers then swung left, towards the north-west, into the mass of transport belonging to 5th S.A. Infantry Brigade. <sup>[39]</sup>

On the right of the German line the attack encountered much the same hazards as on the left. Here too the orderly progression of tanks and infantry, with their supporting artillery, which Cruwell had envisaged, gave place to confusion. Infantry Regiment 200, which had been facing south towards 1st S.A. Brigade and the Support Group, complained that they had been given a bare twenty minutes to turn their transport about and face north, and that during the move the motor-cycle battalion told off to lead the attack became badly bogged down in the wet sand. The field *Batterie* also went astray and does not seem to have come up into line at all. By the time the Regiment was ready, 'there was a considerable gap between them and the tanks ahead'.

Here too, the advance came under heavy artillery fire from the north-west: <sup>[40]</sup> 'Some of the leading troops of 15th Motor-Cycle Battalion drew back and threatened to halt the advance. The immediate intervention of the regimental commander prevented this, and after a short interruption the advance was resumed.' The commander of 15th Rifle Brigade appeared with news that the infantry on the left wing could make little headway and ordered Regiment 200 to swing to the east where resistance seemed to be less. <sup>[41]</sup> The westward wheel of Panzer Regiment 5 had deprived the infantry on the right wing of their spearhead of tanks, and the increasing shell and anti-tank fire from north and north-west, and machine-gun and heavy mortar fire from ahead, caused the motor-cycle battalion to falter and fall back. Machine-Gun Battalion 2 was brought up from the rear, but also floundered in the wet sand and, in face of heavy fire, debussed early. Night was falling before they pushed through and, according to their claim, captured 'two batteries and a large number of prisoners' without either tank or artillery support. By that time, however, resistance within the perimeter was at an end.

All this while, the Germans complained, their right flank was menaced by tanks and armoured cars, which were held off by the 88s and the antitank *Batterie*. One 88 mm. was lost in the course of the action.

### ***Penetration and destruction***

To the approaching Germans, the South African Brigade had been the embodiment of active and deadly resistance: to those within the perimeter the advance of the *Afrikakorps* seemed inevitable, inexorable, and undeviating. As the line of German tanks and troop-carriers topped the rise to the south and bore down upon the B Echelon, the mass of defenceless vehicles took to flight once more, spreading alarm and chaos as they went. Some say that they 'began streaming to the south-west': <sup>[42]</sup> the Scots Guards assert that 'this transport with some armoured cars began moving east as soon as the attack began'. The eastward movement seems the more likely, and the hasty departure of the transport units is understandable enough, but the spectacle of a mass of bolting transport cannot have been good for younger members of the Brigade facing their first serious battle, while the resulting confusion hampered the attempts of the artillery to deal with the German armour. Some units retained a sort of cohesion even in flight, and the reports of 4th S.A. Reserve Motor Transport Company and 5th S.A. Brigade Workshops describe how they escaped through the eastern face of the perimeter and across the New Zealand position, before turning to join 1st S.A. Brigade away to the south.

The diagonal approach of the Germans crashed into the 5th Brigade position at its south-west corner, and 7th S.A. Field Battery sited on the south of the B Echelon, and E Troop of 9th S.A. Field Battery, which lay south of the Irish, were soon firing over open sights. The array of antitank guns along the southern face of the position—British and South African—also joined in, and a company of the Scots Guards in this area, together with B Company of and Regiment Botha, met the German infantry with a furious fusillade of mortar, machine-gun and rifle fire.

It was not long before the field-artillery began to run short of ammunition and the gunners called urgently for replenishment. 'Two messages', says Major Harris of 7th S.A. Field Battery, 'were received from my troop commanders asking for ammunition.' But the thrust of the panzers deep into the B Echelon had scattered the battery vehicles.

Captain Millar went back on receipt of the first message and I on the second. I had no idea at this stage that the enemy tanks had broken through the first intimation I had was when I ran into three tanks which put my armoured car out of action with two well-aimed shots. In the terrific movement of MT (both own and enemy) which was taking place around me, I was unable to spot any of my ammunition vehicles and can only presume that they had been removed by the drivers. All ammunition with the guns was fired at the enemy, including smoke.

The artillery commander with the South African Division reports that all this while the gun crews were under 'heavy rifle, mortar and MG fire: some guns received direct hits causing heavy casualties among the detachments'. As the ammunition on the gun positions gave out, the surviving pieces were put out of action, and what was left of their crews got away on the remaining transport.

The two 2-pounders of J Troop <sup>[43]</sup> of 3rd S.A. Anti-Tank Battery formed part of the force of twenty-one 2-pounder and two 18-pounder anti-tank guns which had been disposed in the south to protect the B Echelon, and here, perched up on their portees, they found themselves in the path of the attacking tanks. 'At 1530 hours', says their report, 'massed tanks moved towards the Section from the south-west in two columns: one column towards the B Echelon, the other towards the south corner of the Irish. The tanks were engaged when they came within range.' At that moment the two guns of I Troop arrived from the area of the Transvaal Scottish under T.S.M. du Plessis, <sup>[44]</sup> and the two troops opened fire on the approaching tanks. Almost at once a portee of J Troop was hit on the right front wheel and, after firing for what the gunners thought was something over ten minutes but was probably a good deal

longer, fell back towards Brigade Headquarters, whither the enemy tanks had already penetrated. <sup>[45]</sup> After half an hour both guns of I Troop were out of action: one of the portees of J Troop had been hit and burst into flames: the other, hit once at the beginning of the engagement, had been struck twice again, but remained in action. Enemy tanks were all around, and after a time Sergeant-Major Barclay, the Troop Commander, withdrew his remaining gun to the Headquarter lines, where 'eight or ten' other 2-pounders, belonging to 3rd Royal Horse Artillery, had rallied, and put himself under the orders of their commander. Resistance had collapsed, 'a general withdrawal was then seen to be in progress', and the guns disengaged and withdrew towards the east.

So long as ammunition held out, E Troop of 9th S.A. Field Battery engaged the panzers steadily as they passed across their front, following them with their fire until they were themselves out-flanked. The panzers replied with continuous fire from their 50 mm. and machine-guns. Captain F. H. G. Cochran <sup>[46]</sup> continues the story:

The anti-tank guns on our left fell back, and eventually three of our guns were hit. I told Captain Cowley to pull out his troop, or what was left of them, and fall back on Captain Barren's troop [north of the Irish]. One of our three-tonners, half-full of ammunition, was burning on the position.

The Report of Panzer Regiment 8 would suggest that the German assault was kept well in hand and swept on in orderly precision. But by the end of the day the Regiment was badly confused: Panzer Regiment 5 claims to have absorbed fifteen of their tanks that evening, shepherding them to the Sidi Rezegh airfield: scattered tanks were seen going east by 26th New Zealand Battalion, and four tanks were observed at dusk on the extreme eastern flank of Brigadier Barrowclough's Brigade. Nevertheless, as the defending guns lapsed, one after another, into silence, the tanks pressed on, through the chaos of stampeding vehicles.

'This penetration', says Panzer Regiment 8, 'crippled the enemy. Wherever the tanks were, the enemy surrendered.' Again they say,

At 1600 hrs the tanks were deep in the enemy positions. I/8 Panzer Regiment was attacking north through the enemy's rear defensive area. II/8 had swung slightly north-west to relieve pressure on the infantry, who were behind it, and to crush an attack on the division's left flank by about 20 enemy tanks.

The main body of Panzer Regiment 5 had fallen back in face of heavy defensive fire from the east and only a few tanks got through to Captain Kuemmel. This withdrawal, which was contrary to the orders of Lieut.-Colonel Cramer, threatened to cause the collapse of the whole attack. II/8 Panzer Regiment could not keep up with the speed of I/8, as it had to hold off the enemy tank attack and wait for the infantry to follow, and the enemy's defensive fire increased considerably once more. In spite of all, II/8 worked its way slowly to the north. The rate of progress of the infantry was unbearably slow for the tanks, as the infantry in their soft-skinned vehicles were taking heavy casualties from shell fire, anti-aircraft fire, and anti-tank guns. Some of the infantry vehicles were set alight.

The extemporized group of 22nd Armoured Brigade, repulsed by the German anti-tank *Batterie* (1/33) in its thrust into the flank of Panzer Regiment 8, fell back, tacking in broad sweeps and firing on the panzers as it went. The Germans followed deliberately as the British cruisers continued to give ground before their superior strength, and the course of the battle took the fighting through the lines of the main dressing station of 11th S.A. Field Ambulance. These lay north of the B Echelon and some 400 yards south of the Brigade Headquarters, and the scene was described by Major Melzer, commander of the Field Ambulance, in his report:

I was able to see the entire battle. The rear line of British tanks kept on patrolling from north to south and south to north, commencing about 400 yards west of the M.D.S. As the battle developed they kept on their patrols, but were gradually being pushed back closer and closer

to us. After a while they were about 300 yards away, then 200 yards, then 100 yards, keeping up their north and south movement the whole time. Eventually they reached us, and our tanks actually worked their way between the groups of casualties lying on the ground. The withdrawal continued, and the British tanks were now on the east side of the M.D.S. By this time the German tanks could be seen on the western horizon. At this stage of the battle, the M.D.S. was between the British and the German tanks with the British tanks withdrawing and the German coming nearer. These eventually reached us. My greatest concern was whether they would show the same consideration as the British did and not drive their tanks over the casualties. My fears, however, were quite unfounded, because the German tanks kept clear of the persons lying on the ground, and not one of the casualties or personnel was run over by a tank. Eventually the front line of the German tanks had the M.D.S. behind them, and they kept on the advance until all their tanks had passed us. Soon after, the infantry and recovery vehicles and guns arrived and we were all taken prisoner. During the two hours which the battle lasted, the M.D.S. was in the line of machine-gun and shell fire the whole time, first from German guns, then German and British and finally British guns. In spite of this, casualties among the patients and personnel were remarkably few, only two men being wounded. At no time was there deliberate M.G. fire directed at any person at the M.D.S.

The course of the battle brought the panzers into the area occupied by Brigade Headquarters. News of the German assault had been reported to Brigade, and Brigadier Armstrong had sent Lieut. Nellmapius of the South African Engineers to ask 26th New Zealand Battalion for anti-tank support but, as the Brigade Intelligence Officer, Captain Tasker, wrote a few weeks later,

The first intimation that Brigade Headquarters had of the nearness of the German tanks was when one officer, peering round the wheel of the control vehicle where he was crouched with the telephone, saw the tanks about 300 yards away. Slowly, like monstrous black beetles, they advanced, spouting fire and smoke. The knowledge came as a thunderbolt from the blue. Inconceivable. But there they were, collecting prisoners as they lumbered on. The tanks moved straight through Brigade Headquarters before splitting in two. The Brigade Headquarters staff was captured at about 1615 hours.

Brigadier Armstrong left his armoured car as the tanks approached, and in his scarlet hat and gorget patches was picked up by a German tank, which then plunged on into the battle. The Brigade Major and the Brigade Intelligence Officer and the Signals Officer concealed themselves beneath the command vehicle, but were driven out when it caught alight above them from a stray tracer bullet and blazed merrily. They too were taken.

The northward sweep of the panzers brought them into the area of the infantry battalions holding the perimeter. Organized resistance was at an end, and groups of infantrymen began to make off in their vehicles, but pockets continued to resist. The report of the machine-gun battalion, Regiment President Steyn, describes how Private Swanepoel, whose company was in support of the Transvaal Scottish, fired 2,500 rounds at the approaching infantry and remarked grimly that there was no need to clear the empty cartridge cases away from his gun as the enemy machine-gun fire did that for him. At one time the German infantry wavered in the face of the defensive machine-gun fire and actually seemed to be falling back, but their tanks came up and thrust home the assault. The field and anti-tank artillery in the northern sector continued to resist, and Panzer Regiment 8 still complained of confused fighting and continued hostile fire. 'Very soon', says their Report,

II/8 was again alone in the middle of the enemy, whose fierce, determined resistance still persisted. The shell-fire continued to fall on the tanks without abatement. At this stage the regimental commander personally summoned his last reserves, the regimental engineers, in their troop carriers and what escort tanks were available, to join II/8 and attempt to decide the day without the infantry. This was an epic of courage and soldierly sacrifice. The tanks charged forward ruthlessly: the engineers followed close and dug out of their holes the crews of the field and anti-tank guns which had been overrun by the tanks.

The drive of the German tanks brought them into the rear of the Transvaal Scottish, who had been kept occupied during the afternoon by the 'demonstration' from the third escarpment

ahead. The Scottish do not seem to have known of the *Afrikakorps*' assault from the south, though the exceptional amount of gunfire can hardly have escaped notice, and Major Berry of the artillery had been kept informed.

About 1630 Major Rosser, commanding the Battalion since the previous afternoon, was told 'that B Echelon and Brigade had gone'. He thereupon attempted to concentrate his men for a defensive stand in the north-east of the perimeter,' but the panzers soon followed up from the south and threw the whole Battalion into confusion, 'with vehicles blazing all around'. Major Berry continued to fight his guns until 1730 when, 'supported by tanks from the north and north-east, enemy infantry started infiltrating into the gun positions. The guns were subjected to heavy machine-gun and mortar fire. All communications were cut.' At 1815 Major Berry gave the order to withdraw, but the battery was overrun and all the guns were lost.

On the left of the Scottish, the north-west of the Brigade position was held by the South African Irish and B Company of and Regiment Botha. These were by-passed by the German assault, which was also held off" in some measure by E Troop of 9th Field Battery. Some attempt was made to form a defensive position to the east, but a messenger to Brigade Headquarters found the place deserted and was told by an officer whom he found hiding in a slit trench that the whole staff were prisoners. Major C. McN. Cochran, <sup>[47]</sup> acting as commander of the Battalion since Lieut.-Colonel Dobbs had been wounded in the middle of the morning, conferred with Major Greenwood, commanding the five surviving guns of 9th Field Battery, and they decided to fall back into the Scottish area and attempt an escape to the east. In the northern area of the Brigade, however, they 'found things completely disorganized', and the infantry were scattered by tanks. Only isolated groups got away to the south. Major Greenwood's guns—the four 25-pounders of F Troop, with the single survivor of E Troop, became involved in 'a state of chaos, with vehicles rushing in all directions', but escaped nevertheless to the east. They were the only field-guns from 5th S.A. Brigade to evade capture. With them went some of the crews of five or six British tanks which had come in from the west at 1700 hours and parked near E Troop.

The eastern flank of 5th S.A. Brigade was covered in some measure by 4th Royal Horse Artillery and a number of guns from 60th Field Regiment R.A., spread out in the desert between the South Africans and the New Zealanders. It was largely in order to avoid these guns that Panzer Regiment 5 turned off its prescribed course and broke into the South African Brigade. The panzers moved up the eastern flank of the Brigade position towards and Regiment Botha, which was supported at this stage by a single 2-pounder anti-tank gun. Lieut.-Colonel Mason ordered the Bofors anti-aircraft troop with his Battalion to prepare to hold off a ground attack and, 'At approximately 1530 hours', he says,

I noticed an enemy tank column moving towards me in line ahead. It was evident they proposed to encircle my battalion and dispose of it piecemeal. I waited until the tanks were approximately 800 yards to my south-east and ordered the guns to open fire. 8 tanks were immediately put out of action, and the remainder veered off and made for the east-south-east.

This unexpectedly hot reception accounts for one of the delays recorded in the War Diary of Infantry Regiment 200, but the panzers regrouped and heavy fire was brought down on the Regiment Botha. Lieut.-Colonel Mason was seriously wounded at 1630 hours and removed to the dressing station, where he was later taken prisoner. Meanwhile a flood of vehicles poured into the Battalion's lines from the north and west, driven on by the penetration of Panzer Regiment 8 on the other side. 'By 1700 hours', says the Battalion Report, 'enemy tanks had broken through our lines on all fronts. The 3rd Transvaal Scottish and 1st S.A. Irish were by this time withdrawing through our lines, and control of men and vehicles was impossible. From then on until about 2000 hours <sup>[48]</sup> the Battalion withdrew south between enemy tanks.'

Panzer Regiment 5 made no further attempt to push along its original line of advance. 'Enemy tanks did not come on,' records the War Diary of 4th Royal Horse Artillery, 'but the position was then attacked by infantry [i.e. the motor-cycle battalion and machine-gun battalion of Infantry Regiment 200] and subjected to heavy M.G. and rifle fire.' The Royal Artillery then fell

back, abandoning one troop of guns, whose vehicles had been put out of action, and took up a position for a time on the flank of the New Zealanders farther east.

Against the German tanks, the infantry had no real means of defence, least of all when the panzers had broken into their rear, and once the guns had been subdued resistance could not last long. All three battalions of the Brigade dissolved into disordered groups of which those that retained the most initiative secured a vehicle—any vehicle—and escaped to the south or east. The survivors of 2nd Scots Guards 'withdrew', according to their War Diary, 'in some confusion', but the last remnant of the 22nd Armoured Brigade broke out with a dash which was a worthy reminder of the spirit in which they had entered the battle five days before. 'The remains of the [composite] regiment', says their War Diary, were rallied on the S.W. corner of the S.A. leaguer and all charged through, rallying any tank that was met, against the German right flank, which appeared to be in disorder. All this time the main body of the S.A. Bde seemed to be getting away, only the gunners remained firing their last rounds the final charge on the left flank turned the attack and allowed the main part of the S.A. force to get away. The final rush through the camp and German tanks was thrilling: Lt. Col. Carr was at the head. Towards the end his tank was set on fire, but he and Major Kidston got on to other tanks and went on. Major Kidston's tank again became knocked out and he had to spend the night in the enemy lines, eventually creeping out next morning on-Lieut Melville's tank.

Major Melzer, taken prisoner when 11 th Field Ambulance was overrun, watched a break-out which must have been that described in the War Diary of 22nd Armoured Brigade. The prisoners had been marched to a concentration area and at 1700 hours their captors were out of their vehicles, standing around in groups, chatting, when there was a sudden excitement: the Germans embussed hastily and the trucks moved away.

British tanks were coming at full speed towards us from the N.W. As they approached us, the men waved and cheered as it looked as if the British were making a counter-attack. It turned out, however, that they numbered only five and they appeared to be stragglers trying to break through. The Germans opened fire on them and made a direct hit on one tank which burst into flames. The crew of the tank jumped out of it unharmed and boarded the one behind it which had stopped to pick them up. <sup>[49]</sup>

Meanwhile the German tanks pushed through and made contact with the infantry of 21st Panzer Division, on what some of them recorded as Point 175 and some as the Sidi Rezegh escarpment, but which was, pretty certainly, the 'third escarpment' of Point 178. The early winter's night descended rapidly, and all that was left of 5th S.A. Brigade on the field of battle consisted of little groups of bewildered and disconsolate prisoners who huddled together neglected, while German staff officers wrestled to discover what had happened, and dispatch riders bounced backwards and forwards among the wreckage, guided by frequent flares and the light of trucks of burning ammunition.



**German tanks destroyed at Sidi Rezegh on 23 November**



**South African dead after Sidi Rezegh**

- [1] Alexander Clifford: *Three Against Rommel*, p. 142.
- [2] From the opening words of the Collect of the Day, 'Stir up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, the wills of Thy faithful people'
- [3] Clarke: *The Eleventh at War*, p. 200.
- [4] Davy: op. cit., p. 167. Those with access to gridded maps may be interested to know that the Preliminary Narrative gives the location of 5 S.A. Brigade as 428399 and of 22 Armoured Brigade as 426399.
- [5] *Seconda Offensiva*, p. 55. Rommel, however, was also intriguing in Rome for the permanent control which Mussolini granted next day.
- [6] The vagueness of this term is puzzling— perhaps significant. It should be remembered, however, that 6 New Zealand Brigade was expected from this direction and the Germans were not, and any 'higher authority' had some justification in identifying the newcomers with the New Zealanders.
- [7] Davy: p. 167.
- [8] Clarke: *The Eleventh at War*, pp. 200-2. In fairness to Brigadier Armstrong it should be noted that General Brink remarked in a letter of 15 Nov. 1953: 'The disposition of Pienaar's MT at Taieb el Esem differed in no way from that of Armstrong's at Sidi Rezegh.'
- [9] The remaining three troops of 3 S.A. Anti-Tank Battery, armed with a-pounders, were with the three infantry battalions—3 Transvaal Scottish, 2 Regiment Botha, and 1 S.A. Irish—as were the three batteries of 3 S.A. Field Regiment.
- [10] A former South African Test cricketer and cannon-ball bowler.
- [11] Louis Duffus: *Beyond the Laager*, p. 35. The range at which these guns were apparently firing throws some light upon the distance which separated the two South African brigades.
- [12] In other words, the whole of the rear half of the Brigade formations as shown in the diagram circulated to units.
- [13] *Saga of the Transvaal Scottish*, p. 340.
- [14] *Saga of the Transvaal Scottish*, p. 340. The War Diary states that two other ranks were wounded.
- [15] Panzer Regiment 8, most probably.
- [16] Their arrival at 1100 hours was duly noted by 3 Recce Bn, which observed with praiseworthy accuracy throughout the day. (Report of Captain Torr-.)
- [17] According to *Seconda Offensiva*, p. 55.
- [18] 21 Panzer Division, less Panzer Regiment 5: in other words, the infantry and divisional artillery which remained in the north under General von Ravenstein.
- [19] No firm deduction can be drawn from the use of the name Sidi Muftah in the German formation and unit records. The use of geographical terms in these documents is often extremely vague and sometimes inaccurate. Rifle Regiment 115 submits a spirited sketch-map showing its attack across an escarpment against an enemy on Point 175 (complete with contours) with a hostile counter-attack coming in from the direction of Zaafran. Panzer Regiment 8, on the other hand, shows an advance from Sidi Muftah, straight across the escarpment, to overrun the 'South African Division' just south of the landing-ground. 15 Panzer's map shows a straight course northwards (with a shade of west) from a concentration area 6 miles (or 10 km.) NNE. of Bir el Gubi, which it left at 1500 hours for an advance straight to Sidi Rezegh. 3 Batterie of 33 A/A Regt. again, seems to think that 5 S.A. Brigade was 20 km. SE. of El Adem.
- Fortunately, various observers in 5 S.A. Infantry Brigade, in addition to those in 4 S.A. Armoured Car Regiment and No. 1 Company of 3 S.A. Reconnaissance Battalion, were all watching the German movements, with personal as well as professional interest, and were in a position to 'place' them fairly accurately. The Germans had no 'grid' system for pin-pointing positions, and in their documents 'Sidi Muftah' often means little more than vaguely 'south of 5 S.A. Brigade'.
- [20] They were attached to 4 Armoured Brigade, and at this stage were somewhere to the south.
- [21] Preliminary Narrative, p. 106.

[22] After this regrouping the perimeter of 5 S.A. Brigade was protected as follows:

*Northern Sector* (3 T.S.)

8 25-prs. of 8 S.A. Fd. Bty. *Western Sector* (1 S.A. Irish)

4 25-prs. of 9 S.A. Fd. Bty.

6 (perhaps 4) 25-prs. of 60 Fd. Regt. R.A.

2 2-prs. of J Tp. 3 S.A.A/Tk. Bty. *Eastern Sector* (2 Regt. Botha)

16 25-prs. of 4 R.H.A. (with perhaps some 25-prs. of 60 Fd. Regt. R.A.)— outside the perimeter.

1 2-pr. of K Tp. 3 S.A.A/Tk. Bty. *Southern Sector* (B Echelon)

8 25-pra. of 7 S.A. Fd. Bty.

4 25-prs. of 9 S.A. Fd. Bty.

2 18-prs. of L Tp. 3 S.A.A/Tk. Bty.

(2 L Tp. guns had been knocked out in the attack that morning.)

12 2-prs. of D Bty. 3 R.H.A.

9 2-prs. of I, J and K Tps. 3 S.A.A/Tk. Bty.

(In addition, the Composite Regt. of 22 Armd. Bde, with C Battery 2 R.H.A.

in support, was lying to the south-west of 5 S.A. Bde.)

[23] In a letter to General Theron: 5 January 1942.

[24] Was this one of the battalions of Panzer Regiment 8 ?

[25] This was probably the arrival of Panzer Regiment 5.

[26] Battle Report: 5 S.A. Infantry Brigade.

[27] It was not an escarpment but a fold in the ground 2 miles south of the Brigade which concealed the German concentration.

[28] Norton: *a6 Battalion*, p. 87.

[29] Major (later Lt.-Col.) V. Larmuth.

[30] Quoted from Lt.-Col. V. Larmuth's letter of 1 May 1953. General Gott could hardly have expected 5 S.A. Brigade to pull out from its position in the line on 23 November, and it is possible that two separate grumbles have been telescoped—one of the slowness of 5 S.A. Brigade (and indeed of 1 S.A. Brigade) in arriving at the place where they were wanted, and another of inertia on the spot.

[31] One of General Gott's misfortunes was that it did not prove possible to co-ordinate the activities of 3 RTR in the same way as those of the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade on the other side of the South African leaguer.

[32] The incident may be traced in *Seconda Offensiva Britannica*, p. 55, and Davy: p. 170.

[33] 'We are close at hand and are coming. Others are also coming from the other side. Hold on. We are.' The two-word phrase at the end of the message is an elliptical sentence which was used as a sort of unofficial motto in Divisional Headquarters. The missing word (unprintable but 'understood') may be paraphrased as 'tough fellows'.

[34] Report of Capt. W. P. Millar, 7 S.A. Field Battery.

[35] The official Italian history (*Seconda Offensiva Britannica*, pp. 55-6) describes the junction of the force with the *Afrikakorps*, *Cruewell's* orders, and the fact that 'the enemy forces were being surrounded by a circle which became ever narrower', but has nothing to say about the further movements of Ariete.

[36] There were not more than 16 field-guns along the whole south and west of the Brigade, and another 8 with 22 Armoured Brigade.

[37] Reports of this action survive from Anti-Tank Unit 33 and the 3rd *Battens* of Anti-Aircraft Unit 33.

[38] The sketch-map attached to the Report makes it clear that Point 175 was intended —the change may be the error of a later copyist. The compass bearing on which they marched suggests that the Regiment must have been some distance west of *Sidi Muftah* when they set out.

[39] The German accounts of the eastern flank of the fighting have a good deal to say about tanks and artillery to the north and west and apparently rated their threat a good deal higher than their strength deserved. It is not easy to determine which units actually opposed the assault, but the following were in the area of the advance of Panzer Regiment 5. Directly ahead, to the north, lay the 25-pounders of 4 Royal Horse Artillery, with a battery of 60 Field Regiment *R.A.*: to the north-east were 26 New Zealand Infantry Battalion, with 30 *N.Z.* Field Battery and *L* Troop of 33 *N.Z.* Anti-Tank Battery: to the east lay the Headquarters of Support Group under Brigadier *Campbell*, with odd tanks and artillery, which were joined during the afternoon by the Headquarters of 7 and 22 Armoured Brigades (Brigadiers *Davy* and *Scott-Cockburn*) with a certain amount of artillery, including a troop of *a i* S.A. Field Battery and a miscellaneous collection of tanks including, probably, 3 RTR. There was no field-artillery on the east flank of 5 S.A. Brigade, and 2 Regiment *Botha* had in their area only one *a-pounder* and a troop of *Bofors* anti-aircraft guns.

[40] Probably from 4 *R.H.A.* with some support from 30 *N.Z. Fd. Bty.*

[41] In effect, between 5 S.A. Brigade and 26 New Zealand Battalion.

[42] Report of Captain *Torr* of 3 S.A. Reconnaissance Battalion.

[43] *J* Troop had been responsible for the destruction of the six tanks which *took part* in *Ariete's* attack on 21 November, and for putting out of action one tank (which they afterwards destroyed) of those which attacked the B Echelon during the morning of the 23rd.

[44] These guns had already done a good deal of travelling during the day, and had been sent to the Scottish area only an hour or so before to deal with the threatened attack from the north.

[45] The War Diary of 15 Panzer describes how, between 1620 and 1655, 'The English *SP/A/Tk* guns appeared again from behind the trucks and caused heavy casualties to the Division, particularly the *Pz Regt.*'

[46] Subsequently Lieut.-Colonel and *O.B.E.*

[47] Later Lieut.-Colonel and *D.S.O., M.C.*, not to be confused with the gunner officer of the same name.

[48] This time seems very late, but *specifically* refers to the last isolated pocket of resistance. Colonel Mason was recaptured, with the South African Field Ambulance, by the New Zealanders on 24 November.

[49] *Lt.-Col. I. B. Whyte* of 3 S.A. Field Regiment also records this incident. It seems most probable that these tanks were the half-dozen which had parked in the area of 9 Field Battery, and that the personnel whom officers of that battery describe as coming out on their transport were spare crews or headquarters personnel.

## **CHAPTER 10**

### ***Sunday of the Dead***

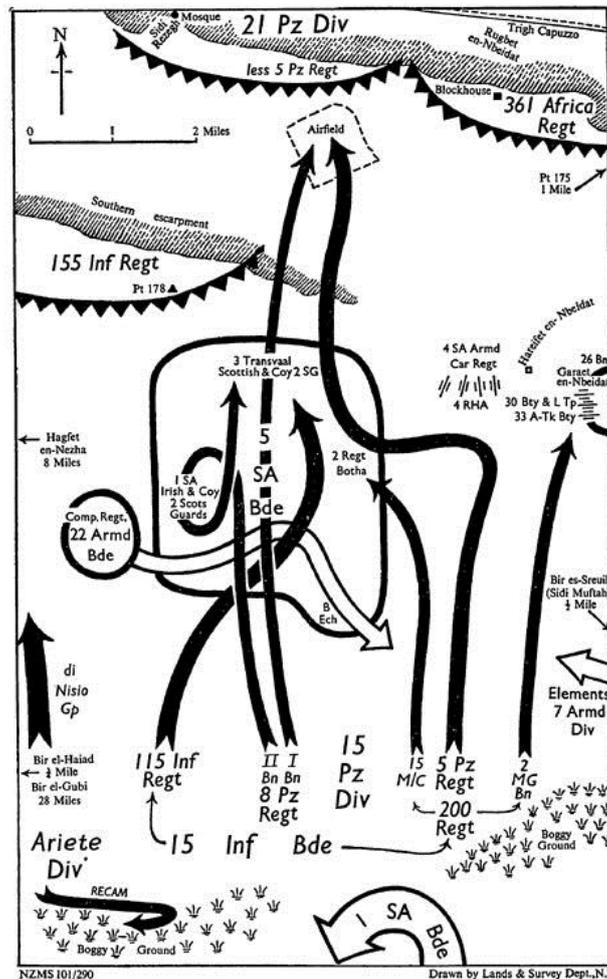
#### **i**

If they counted tanks as trumps, by the morning of 23 November Cunningham and Norrie could have read doom in the bald figures of the 'tank states' then supplied, but for the swollen estimates of enemy tank losses. Even these could not make the situation less than gloomy and Cunningham was profoundly concerned, as he had every reason to be. The figures he had were even worse than Norrie's and the situation in 30 Corps was described as 'still very confused'.<sup>1</sup> Only 30 tanks remained in 22 Armoured Brigade and none at all in 7 Armoured Brigade, so far as Cunningham knew, whereas at Norrie's headquarters the 22nd was credited with 45 tanks and the 7th with 10, while 4 Armoured Brigade with 75 tanks was regarded as 'temporarily useless as a fighting entity'.<sup>2</sup> Norrie could do nothing more than try to build up a strong infantry position around 5 South African Brigade and hope that the remaining British armour would be able to hold off attacks by enemy armour, which was reported to be greatly depleted in strength. To this end he urged Barrowclough on and pressed General Brink to get 1 South African Brigade forward. He had discussed with Cunningham the previous afternoon the difficulties of commanding the New Zealand brigade which was on its way to him, and suggested that either Freyberg or Godwin-Austen should continue to command it. In the meantime, if the two South African brigades joined up he wanted General Brink to assume command of 'all infantry in the SIDI REZEGH area, in order to free General Gott.'<sup>3</sup>

Daylight revealed, however, that the field company and ambulance and most of the B Echelons of 1 South African Brigade had gone on by mistake in the night and ended up some miles ahead of the main body. Hampered thus by masses of transport in front of his fighting units, Brigadier Pienaar made slow progress and there were still a few miles between the two brigades when the enemy intervened and multiplied the confusion. The history of 7 Medium Regiment, RA (a valuable unit so far unused in the battle), says that when its 27/28 Battery drove forward 'pandemonium broke out in the Brigade column as a large German force was identified ahead moving East<sup>1</sup> across the Brigade's path'.<sup>2</sup> Norrie and Brink were helpless spectators some distance to Pienaar's right rear and General Gott, in the thick of things as usual, could make no more than minor readjustments to meet the emergency. Pienaar moved 1 South African Brigade back three miles to wait until the situation cleared.

Brigadier Armstrong's 5 South African Brigade had stayed where its abortive attack of the previous afternoon had left it and was now at the head of the Corps. The 3rd Transvaal Scottish faced across a thousand yards of arid plateau (too thin a slice on which to deploy any armour available in face of German anti-tank guns) to where elements of 155 Infantry Regiment still clung to the southern escarpment. The Scottish had brought back their wounded and consolidated their positions as best they could in the dark. To their right rear 2 Regiment Botha faced east and to their left rear 1 South African Irish looked westwards across empty miles of thin scrub towards Hagfet en-Nezha, the area to which Norrie had hoped the South African position might be extended. The best that could be done for the moment in this direction was to station what was left of 22 Armoured Brigade (30 tanks by one account, 45 by another, organised in a composite regiment) on this flank, while the remnants of the Support Group lay east of 2 Botha. A handful of 7 Armoured Brigade with a few tanks, all to some degree crippled, made a brave show of supporting this flank, but was ordered south to reform. Gott hoped to get 4 Armoured Brigade to cover this flank; but most of the fragments of this brigade spent the day edging southwards in a vain effort to regain cohesion. The B Echelons of the South African brigade and the Support Group stretched across a huge tract of desert southwards almost to Pienaar's advance guards, cluttering the scene and creating an impartial confusion which for a time thwarted attempts both friendly and hostile to make sense of what was happening. The most useful increment to Armstrong's strength came from the field guns of the Support Group, which Gott ordered to 'hold by fire'<sup>3</sup> the escarpment north of 3 Transvaal Scottish; but this was not, as it happened, where danger really threatened. Gott later ordered up 2 Scots Guards, and this unit made its way

northwards but arrived too late to fit properly into the defensive scheme before the enemy struck his main blow.



THE ATTACK ON 5 SOUTH AFRICAN BRIGADE, 3-6 P.M., 23 NOVEMBER

## ii

The first blow was not as heavy as Rommel intended, because the Africa Corps Commander either ignored his orders or failed to get them in time. The Panzer Group operation order had been in course of preparation since about noon on the 22nd and was issued at 10.30 p.m., but it did not reach Bir el Chleta until 4.30 a.m. on the 23rd. The Corps diarist noted testily that it was 'much too long' and dealt with 'a host of details absolutely unimportant to Africa Corps'; but these comments may have been prompted more by the lingering labours of the cipher clerks when Cruewell was wanting to get away than by the actual text of the message. Yet ten minutes later Neumann-Silkow signalled to Ariete that he would be attacking south-westwards at 7 a.m. and he wanted to know when and where he might expect to meet the Italians: had the order not been deciphered and the gist of it passed on to him he could scarcely have known Ariete was joining in. What seems most likely is that Cruewell got Rommel's orders at a time when his own very different plans were so far advanced he felt it too late to change them.

Both Rommel and Cruewell meant to force a decision this day in the Sidi Rezegh battle, but by opposite routes. Rommel wanted to strike with both panzer divisions from Sidi Rezegh towards Bir to el-Gubi, while the bulk of Ariete pushed north-eastwards towards Gambut. All three divisions would thus take part in a 'concentric attack' to encircle and destroy the British force believed to be in the area and so end all danger of a link-up with the Tobruk garrison.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Italian Corps would meanwhile maintain the siege, the two German reconnaissance units would 'reconnoitre in force' along the Via Balbia and Trigh Capuzzo, and 155 Infantry and 361 Africa Regiments would remain in their present positions in Army Reserve. Ariete was not under Rommel's command and its part in the scheme had to be settled by agreement with General Gambaro, which no doubt accounted for some of the delay.

Cruewell doubted if the Italians could even hold their ground against the British if the latter were forced back towards them, and therefore planned to send 15 Panzer Division with the tank regiment of 21 Panzer round the eastern flank to link up with Ariete and drive northwards towards Sidi Rezegh. The guns and infantry of 21 Panzer and Africa Divisions would be the anvil on which the panzer forces would smash the British remnants. This meant a sweep of some 20 miles in the morning to form up with Ariete south of the British force, and then in the afternoon the Axis armour would strike a sledgehammer blow northwards.

Only the first part of this, the morning advance, was disclosed in the Corps order which reached Neumann-Silkow at 12.10 a.m. and he passed this on with normal elaborations. Later he added an intention of his own: 15 Panzer was to 'destroy everything that opposed it during the day, even if it meant veering a little from its axis and direction.'<sup>1</sup> But there was no danger of departing too far from Cruewell's wishes, because the Corps Commander elected to travel (with a small battle headquarters) with the leading wave of tanks. He set off with his party at 5.45 a.m., escaping the clutches of 6 New Zealand Brigade at Bir el Chleta by a very few minutes, and took up his station in the vanguard at 6.30 a.m. Whether Neumann-Silkow, who commanded the whole of the attacking force—15 Panzer with 5 Panzer Regiment added—was inspired or embarrassed by having his Corps Commander so far forward is not recorded. Cruewell also commanded by wireless the rest of 21 Panzer, which he wrongly thought to be directly facing the remnants of the British armour. This misconception hampered his grasp of von Ravenstein's situation and supplied an unreal background to the operations of the panzer forces, which was not entirely rectified even when (reversing the Panzer Group order) 155 Infantry and 361 Africa Regiments (according to 21 Panzer) were put under Ravenstein's command.

The Africa Corps diary describes Cruewell's intention at this stage as to 'push south to bottle up the enemy, join forces with Ariete Pz Div, and then take part in an attack against the rest of the enemy force.' 'This attack', the diary adds, 'would be made in one long wave of tanks of 5 and 8 Pz Regts and the armoured regiment of Ariete Div, and was intended to destroy the enemy.' Cruewell evidently thought his route would take him south of all but supply elements of 30 Corps and he had no idea that he was actually driving towards the narrow gap between Brink's two brigades.

The advance was held up for half an hour by the non-arrival of 5 Panzer Regiment, which actually topped the escarpment just as 15 Panzer moved off and was led forward on the left of that formation and not on the right as ordered (and disappeared over the horizon not long before 6 New Zealand Brigade appeared on the scene). A mist covering the ground at dawn had lifted and the advance to the south-west from Point 175 over 'flat, firm ground'<sup>2</sup> made fast progress. In a very few minutes the leading troops came upon enormous concentrations of British transport and destroyed them, or so the Corps diary says. Some twenty British tanks counterattacked but were repulsed and another fourteen caught refuelling 'fled wildly south and SW', according to the diary of 15 Panzer. The scene quickly became one of the utmost confusion, gradually clarifying as the transport fled in all directions so that 15 Panzer emerged as a target for British and South African guns to the north, west and south. The opposition was nevertheless so disorganised that Cruewell seriously thought of abandoning his plan and plunging right into the British positions in an orgy of destruction, and in this he may have been supported by Neumann-Silkow. 'An immediate continuation of the attack looked very inviting', says the Corps diary. But many minor engagements were still in progress, among them one to rescue a troop of 33 Artillery Regiment captured by British tanks,<sup>1</sup> duly accomplished by an anti-tank platoon of 15 Panzer which knocked out four British tanks in the course of it. The CO of I Battalion, 8 Panzer Regiment, was killed while trying to break through a column, several other German tanks were knocked out, and the regimental commander, Colonel Cramer, came very close to capture. There is much mention in German accounts of opposition from

tanks and guns, and though this was localised and spasmodic it helped to disorganise the panzer forces, which were in any case confused by the enormous area covered by the British forces. To add weight to the onslaught Cruewell ordered 21 Panzer to attack southwards; but nothing came of this and he decided in the end to break away towards Bir el-Gubi to link up with Ariete2 as planned and regroup before starting the main attack.

Cruewell thought he had practically all the remnants of 30 Corps trapped in this vast pocket; but 5 Panzer Regiment, which reached Sidi Muftah on the left of the advance by 9.15 a.m., had to face south and east and use its '88s' at long range against tanks moving across this front, outside the area roped off by 15 Panzer. The rest of the division pushed on and at 12.35 p.m. met Ariete eight miles north-east of El Gubi. In so doing 8 Panzer Regiment was further disorganised by swampy ground and shellfire from several directions. Halting just in time to miss getting bogged down, 15 Infantry Brigade used its artillery to subdue the fire from the south; but the fire from the north kept increasing and because of the swamp the troops could not assemble beyond the range of the guns. It was vital for Cruewell's purposes to attack at the earliest possible moment and 2 p.m. was set for the start; but these handicaps imposed delay, extending in the end to a full hour, every minute of which was invaluable to the defence in strengthening the threatened southern and south-western flanks.

A new principle was embodied in the 'long wave of tanks' scheme and Cruewell evidently considered that the great size of the British force and the small time available for overrunning it called for a novel approach. But what Cruewell and Neumann-Silkow agreed upon was a radical departure not only from accepted panzer tactics but from the fundamentals of their trade. Facing as they were an extremely deep position, they needed depth rather than breadth in their attack; but in general they chose the latter. They lined up all three armoured formations on a frontage of 8–10 miles, 5 Panzer Regiment on the right, 8 Panzer Regiment in the centre, and 132 Tank Regiment on the left. In the absence of the rest of 21 Panzer the guns and infantry of 15 Panzer had to be spread over two panzer regiments instead of one, so that Colonel Menny of 15 Infantry Brigade covered twice his normal front: 200 Regiment was to follow 5 Panzer Regiment, 115 Infantry Regiment to follow 8 Panzer Regiment, and the infantry of Di Nisio Group would co-operate with 132 Tank Regiment. The 33rd Artillery Regiment was to be thinly disposed over the whole front of 15 Panzer, though the Abteilung which was supposed to support 200 Regiment did not in the event arrive until after dark. So far as possible the infantry were to remain in their vehicles and follow close behind the tanks.

This scheme was weakened by ignorance of the nature and extent of the opposition, and it is not surprising that in the event only the central segment of the long line was aimed at the main centre of resistance (5 South African Brigade) and the two wings tended to skim past the flanks. This was to be partly rectified when 5 Panzer Regiment later swung westwards and Di Nisio made vaguely threatening moves against the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade to the west of 1 South African Irish. But the main weight of the attack was not concentrated to good effect and by far the greater burden was borne by 8 Panzer Regiment and 115 Infantry Regiment. Cruewell could see well enough the magnificence of the opportunity offering, but he was too impatient to take full advantage of it and at the same time conserve his strength for further fighting. He was staking all on a knockout blow to decide the campaign.

### iii

The menace of these movements to the south and south-west was plain and Gott and Brigadier Armstrong strengthened the southern flank of 5 South African Brigade with field and anti-tank guns. In the brigade area there were at least 44 25-pounders and 24 2-pounders, together with two anti-tank 18-pounders, while the remaining guns of 2 RHA supported the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade in 'a hull-down position near the south-western corner'.<sup>1</sup> The anti-tank guns were mostly moved to cover the southern sector, leaving only two in the west and one in the east, the north being covered if need be by 4 RHA in an anti-tank role. At least sixteen of the 25-pounders within the laager were also brought to bear to the south. More help was on the way from the guns with 26 New Zealand Battalion, though Gott did not yet know this, and much more could have come from the strong artillery of

Pienaar's brigade; but the command and communications were not adequate for the task of getting this forward.<sup>2</sup> The remaining tanks of 7 Armoured Brigade, all in some way crippled, and the remnants of the infantry of the Support Group could do little and they were sent to the south-east to be out of the way. The 2nd Scots Guards when they arrived were hastily allotted positions, one company in the area of the Transvaal Scottish and at least some elements in that of the South African Irish.

This went on to the accompaniment from noon onwards of a steadily increasing bombardment by the many guns of 21 Panzer and the enemy Army Artillery in the Belhamed area and by the guns of 15 Panzer, and the Transvaal Scottish on their rocky ground, reinforced by an MMG company, calmly awaited an attack from the north. The gunners in the South African laager were badly placed to counter the fire from the north and were not well off for ammunition; but the German accounts testify to the accuracy of their fire on 15 Panzer Division.

Headquarters of 6 Brigade knew nothing of all this when 26 Battalion was sent south-westwards, and when Lieutenant-Colonel Page set out from Esc-Sciomar at 11.45 a.m. his mission was to take up a position on the right of the South Africans facing north. The four portées of L Troop led the way and reached Garaet en-Nbeidat, a mile or more east of 2 Regiment Botha, at about 12.25, though the great size of the laager in front made it seem closer. From a slight rise in the scrub-covered desert, littered with the derelicts of battle, the men could see occasional shelling ahead to which the South African guns replied; but there seemed no cause for alarm and Page signalled back to 6 Brigade that he had reached his destination without meeting enemy, was in touch with the South Africans, and would try to link up with 25 Battalion at Point 175. Page then went forward to report to whoever was in command and before reaching the South African laager met General Gott.

Page had only the vaguest idea of what was expected of him and looked to Gott for detailed instructions. He learned that Gott was expecting an attack 'supported' by tanks and gained the impression that this would be from the north. Gott gave no indication that he was at all worried about the situation and seemed convinced that the German armour was in full retreat; if he had a few more AFVs, he told Page, he would launch a pursuit at once. In the meantime he approved the present position of 26 Battalion and told Page to co-ordinate the anti-tank defence with the CO of 4 Royal Horse Artillery, who was nearby. This Page did; but he was not as hopeful as Gott about the situation as a whole. The South African perimeter nearest to him seemed cluttered with lorries and in poor anti-tank shape. The rate of fire, moreover, of the German guns was increasing and Page, a gunner by training, realised that the 25-pounders had no answer to the long-range shelling by medium and heavy guns from the north.

With some misgivings Page returned to his unit and disposed it with A Company facing south-west, B north-west, C south-east and D north-east. E Troop of 30 Field Battery he put behind the northern perimeter of this all-round position and F Troop behind the southern, and all four 2-pounder crews were told to dig in for ground action facing east, while the carrier platoon was to patrol northwards and get in touch with 25 Battalion. The 16 25-pounders of 4 RHA went into action along a line between the northern end of the Botha position and the northern perimeter of 26 Battalion. The ground was too rocky for any but shallow trenches or sangars and the gun pits gave little protection. But the shellfire to the west seemed strangely unreal and for the first hour or more nothing came near Garaet en-Nbeidat.

A section of infantry in a lorry accompanied the carriers on their mission to 25 Battalion, and after a mile or two this party passed through the wreckage of a tank battle. Less than a thousand yards past this the carriers, which went on ahead, came upon elements of both 24 and 25 Battalions. The infantry section, waiting among the derelicts, were much moved to see other men of their brigade as distant figures advancing through fire against the defenders of Point 175. Soon the carriers came back with word that losses were heavy and both battalions were now committed to the attack. The small detachment itself came under shellfire and made its way back to Garaet en-Nbeidat, its task accomplished.

The battalion had meanwhile been watching with some concern as shellfire thickened on the South African positions, and by 2 p.m. gained a more personal interest when a few light shells landed in the 26 Battalion area. Soon after this tanks could be seen in the far distance, evidently hostile, and it seemed at least to the unit diarist that the western flank was 'not sufficiently protected'. Dust and smoke clouded the scene to the west, lit here and there by flashes of guns and bursting shells, and it was hard to tell what was happening. Soon after 3 p.m. the ominous sound of heavy small-arms fire joined the noise of the guns and it was obvious that an action of great violence was taking place, though 26 Battalion could only guess the details.

#### iv

What was in fact taking place was one of the heaviest tank attacks of the desert war, always to be associated by the Germans with the formidable title this day bore in the Lutheran calendar, Totensonntag—Sunday of the Dead. In keeping with this aweinspiring name some 110 tanks of 8 Panzer Regiment bore down on the South African B Echelon area, now bristling with anti-tank guns, and on the southern part of the Irish, closely followed by the two battalions of 115 Infantry Regiment in their vulnerable lorries, while on the right more than fifty tanks of 5 Panzer Regiment skirted the eastern flank and then dashed in among the South Africans, losing touch in the process with the tardy 200 Regiment. As the tanks broke from their assembly area and raced across the open ground towards the South Africans they were met by fierce fire over open sights from some twenty-four field guns and by fire from all 2-pounders within range. Many of the latter, lurking among the lorries, did not disclose their positions until faced by a target it was impossible to miss, the 'long wave of tanks' at point-blank range.

Some of the tanks which survived this deadly fusillade were soon among the vehicles, with Lieutenant-Colonel Cramer of 8 Panzer Regiment personally leading them at the head of II Battalion on the left, and there they struck further trouble as isolated tanks or small detachments were picked off by guns farther back among the mass of transport. Much of this transport began to move to escape the fire and thereby caused more confusion on both sides, to which the black smoke of blazing tanks and transport, the grey veils of gun smoke, and the churning turbulence of dust all added their share in a pandemonium of violence. Cramer had firmly resolved to keep straight ahead into the heart of the British position, 'paying no attention to flank threats', and by 3.30 p.m. I Battalion (under Captain Kuemmel) thought it had 'crippled the enemy'. The regimental report says at this stage that 'Wherever the tanks were the enemy surrendered'; but the surviving South African and British gunners continued to fight savagely and the many pockets of resistance left behind opposed the German infantry with deadly effect, so that Kuemmel had to signal back 'for infantry to be sent up urgently to mop up the battlefield and take over the prisoners'. Both tank battalions paused for a short time to give 115 Regiment a chance to catch up; but the defence seemed quickly to recover its vigour and Cramer realised that he had no choice but to push on with or without supporting arms. I Battalion therefore fought its way slowly northwards through heavy defensive fire and Cramer led II Battalion round to the north-west, to ease the task of the following infantry by meeting another and dangerous threat in the form of a tank counter-attack by the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade.

The following infantry were all part of 15 Infantry Brigade under Colonel Menny, whose headquarters followed 200 Regiment. But it was 115 Regiment on the left which had the harder task. Advancing on a broad front, this regiment meant to keep to its lorries as long as possible; but when Lieutenant-Colonel Zincke led them past the tanks and on towards the South African lines, the fire which swept through the vehicles was more than flesh and blood could stand. Bullets, mortar bombs and anti-tank shot came from the front and left flank, where the regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade was stationed, and 25-pounders burst among the lorries with vicious fragmentation. Still 200 yards short of their opponents the two battalions faltered, their commander, Zincke, and the CO of I Battalion, Major von Grolmann, were killed and Major Goettman of II Battalion was gravely wounded while dismounting. The infantry tumbled out of their lorries and were for a short time pinned to slit trenches or any other cover they could find,<sup>1</sup> and Neumann-Silkow was faced with a crisis. But he was close at hand and

went forward at once to get 115 Regiment under way again. The adjutant, Lieutenant Struckmann, had meanwhile assumed command and drove forward in a light AFV to pick out a point of entry. The attached anti-tank and MMG sections held off the regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade and helped to open up a passage ahead. The resistance remained unbroken, however, and the regiment extended eastwards to resume the attack where the opposition looked weaker. This in turn had repercussions in 200 Regiment, which had likewise been daunted by the defensive fire and which Menny now ordered to swing to the right to conform with 115 Regiment, thereby taking the motor-cyclists and machine-gunners right out of the main arena and involving them in an action of their own against 26 New Zealand Battalion, as well as depriving both panzer regiments of effective infantry support.

This was a matter which greatly concerned Cramer of 8 Panzer Regiment, and at 4.20 p.m. he made a remarkable decision to let I Battalion carry on unaided its difficult passage into the heart of the defences while he took II Battalion round by the left to the south to disengage and bring the infantry forward at all costs. After a massive and expensive effort, however, the scheme fell through and Cramer found himself pushing northwards once more still without infantry support, and as a last resort called forward the panzer engineer battalion in some armoured troop-carriers, the rest of the sappers travelling on the outsides of tanks. The opposition of cruiser tanks of 22 Armoured Brigade among the mass of transport was with difficulty overcome, and the regiment pushed forward in what the regimental and divisional reports both call 'an epic of bravery and soldierly self-sacrifice'. Behind it were solemn batches of prisoners in the care of the sappers and infantry and a waste of flame and smoke speckled with wrecked tanks and lorries, with here and there a gun destroyed at close quarters, its crew killed or wounded.

Cramer also had 5 Panzer Regiment under his command for this attack and the regimental report makes some scornful references to the lack of help from this quarter. But Lieutenant-Colonel Stephan had been directed too far east and plunged into the lines of 2 Regiment Botha in a right hook, with hot encouragement from the guns with 26 Battalion. Stephan also came under fire from various elements of 7 Armoured Division which thrust from the south-east, and which drove off with heavy loss a straying detachment of RECAM. But the weak oddments of British armour were too ill-informed about the situation at large to intervene to good effect.

Only the composite regiment of 22 Armoured Brigade could do much to help the South Africans and its dwindling band of tanks fought a solid and skilful action, falling back by degrees through the huge laager, at one stage passing right through the main MDS, to be followed, with equal solicitude for the wounded, by the German tanks. Then came Brigade Headquarters, which had heard very little of what was happening after the attack started and first learned of the progress of the panzer units when a staff officer recognised German tanks only 300 yards away. Armstrong and most of his staff were captured and the tanks carried on northwards, still meeting strong opposition from the guns guarding the northern perimeter, though the Transvaal Scottish, taken from the rear, could do little and were soon badly disorganised. Lorries swarmed towards the eastern flank to escape the enemy and drove wildly towards and past 26 Battalion on their way to safety, carrying with them various non-fighting detachments and also many of the Scottish and the South African Irish who sensibly preferred flight to capture. Major Cochran, who was then acting CO of the Irish, took with him a sizable body of men and four 25-pounders were also driven through the maelstrom and got away eastwards. Lieutenant-Colonel Mason of the Botha got his Bofors troop to drive off encircling German tanks at a late stage of the fighting and saw eight tanks disabled. Mason was then wounded and taken to the MDS, already partly in enemy hands. The various groups of Scots Guards which evaded the tanks made off however they could, and the remnants of 22 Armoured Brigade rallied by a determined effort in the southwestern corner and drove boldly through the enemy, clashing in several sharp skirmishes with tanks and doing much to distract attention from the escaping lorries.

**V**

Brigadier Armstrong had sent an engineer officer, Lieutenant Nellmapius, to ask Colonel Page for anti-tank support, and he must have arrived at about 3.30 p.m. Page promptly signalled 6 Brigade for permission to send a 25-pounder troop, and while awaiting a reply concluded that he had better send both troops of 30 Battery. He still knew very little of what was going on and had suddenly to reorientate his whole position to face westwards. When he ordered up the 2-pounders of L Troop, the two which had been put in ground action were quickly winched back on to their portées, and all four drove to the western side of the position. At the same time 30 Battery was told to drive over to help the South Africans and the eight 25-pounders were hooked on and driven westwards through the battalion.

No sooner did the field guns reach the 26 Battalion FDLs in a line north of L Troop when vehicles burst out of the laager ahead and raced towards them, small-arms fire began to come through the area, and vehicles flooded through at high speed with South Africans clinging to them—the first indication to most of the 26th that they faced a South African brigade. Captain Tolerton<sup>1</sup> had already been startled to see through his field glasses the steady progress of German tanks through the laager and bands of South Africans being rounded up and taken prisoner. Some of the 25-pounders of 4 Royal Horse Artillery also came back towards 26 Battalion either now or a little later and went into action somewhere north of 30 Battery. The New Zealand field guns promptly halted, dropped trails, and began to engage the enemy. It was still very hard to sort out friend from foe, however, and several observers thought they saw British tanks on the fringe of the South African position.

After a pause of uncertain duration, what was thought to be a disabled Valentine tank on the right flank suddenly opened fire and put one of the portées out of action; the solid shot came to rest on the deck of the portée and was found to be of 50-millimetre calibre, which identified the tank as a Pzkw III. This was quickly finished off by the other three guns and they turned their attention to more tanks which now appeared, apparently from the South African lines. The range was still too great for effective 2-pounder fire, but the 25-pounders carried on by indirect fire and later over open sights. A second 2-pounder, after firing three or four rounds, was disabled and the driver mortally wounded. This left two 2-pounders and these found a profusion of targets, which they engaged as fast as the crews could load, aim and fire, while any spare gunners manned Bren guns and rifles on the ground. More 2-pounder shot was soon called for and used up—from the two disabled portées, from the troop reserve, and more still provided from somewhere or other by the troop commander, Lieutenant Pepper<sup>1</sup>—and the paint was soon blistering off the gun barrels. A good deal of fire of various kinds came back at L Troop and 30 Battery: light shells and mortar bombs, AP shot and much small-arms fire. Page ordered all unessential vehicles back to 6 Brigade to save needless loss and gain clearer fields of fire for the guns.

At the end of about an hour the two anti-tank guns had fired more than 300 rounds each, a phenomenal rate of fire for such equipment, at ranges between 600 and 2000 yards and mostly in the upper brackets. At such ranges the following summer the 2-pounder would not have been effective against the Pzkw III and IV; but at the time of crusader not many of the German tanks had strengthened or reinforced armour plate and they were on that account much more vulnerable. L Troop claimed a high score in tanks in this energetic action, and one careful estimate was that twenty-four were knocked out and 'only those going on fire were counted'.<sup>2</sup> This was a remarkable tally for two guns and the troop certainly deserved every praise. But it is nevertheless hard to reconcile any such total with the German accounts and, indeed, hard to place this action in detail in the reports of the two formations on the right, 5 Panzer Regiment and 200 Regiment.

The report of 5 Panzer Regiment admits the loss this day of twenty tanks all told (including two 'technically' damaged) and it is most unlikely that all these were lost to 26 Battalion. But this report testifies that Page's group gave Stephan much trouble. The regiment 'came under heavy shell fire, particularly the right flank and II Bn' at 3.15 p.m. and soon after this was harassed by British tanks on the right. Then the regiment 'was opposed by very heavy A Tk fire from the MT columns, shell fire from a large number of batteries, the enemy tanks, and SP guns on the right flank,<sup>1</sup> and fought its way very slowly forward.' This points to 26 Battalion as providing the opposition from the right, and the report adds, 'The heavy fire from

tanks and A Tk guns on the right flank hampered our movement very seriously.' Then I Battalion became entangled in the great mass of South African vehicles and fought its way forward 'under fire from both flanks, destroying enemy tanks, guns and batteries', until it linked up with 'about 15 tanks' of 8 Panzer Regiment south of the airfield of Sidi Rezegh. German battle reports tend to over-estimate opposition and are often uncharitable towards neighbouring formations whether German or Italian; and it is therefore hard to know what weight to attach to this account. But 26 Battalion certainly did not knock out twenty-four tanks of this regiment, and if its score in tanks approached this number elements of 8 Panzer Regiment must somehow have become involved, which is not altogether implausible in view of the disorder into which Cramer's regiment was thrown by the fierce resistance in the South African laager.

What might reasonably be supposed in this connection is that 5 Panzer Regiment headed at first towards 26 Battalion rather than 5 South African Brigade and was encouraged to correct this error by the fire of 30 Battery, 4 RHA, and L Troop of 33 Anti-Tank Battery. But it is also likely that some of the 'tanks' claimed by L Troop were actually half-tracked carriers of 200 Regiment (as Briel's LAA carriers on the Via Balbia had been mistaken for tanks). Most of the fighting of 26 Battalion was against this regiment after it swung eastwards to conform with the change of direction of 115 Regiment. After this Lieutenant-Colonel Geissler brought up 2 MG Battalion on the right of 15 Motor Cycle Battalion and the two advanced on a broad front and in depth without tank or field artillery support.

Their attack progressed slowly, hampered at first by soft ground, and though they met less fire than 115 Regiment had faced, the men soon dismounted and continued on foot, covered by their mortars and their many MMGs.<sup>1</sup> Soon after 5 p.m. both units were held up by defensive fire and between then and dusk they gained very little ground, so that the left wing was still short of the South Africans and the right faced 26 Battalion. Just before this they were assailed from both sides, the machine-gun battalion by elements of 7 Armoured Division from the south-east and the motor-cycle battalion by the few tanks of 22 Armoured Brigade which burst out of the South African laager to rally for the night. Neither unit showed much of the dash and self-sacrifice which took 115 Regiment into the heart of the South African defences and it was not until after dark that they made any substantial progress at all.

As night was falling 115 Regiment pushed two companies through to the southern escarpment and the rest of the regiment came to rest just north of the positions originally held by the Transvaal Scottish, guarded by anti-tank guns and '88s' and holding the impressive total of 1600 prisoners. To its right rear 15 Motor Cycle Battalion advanced quickly as opposition dissolved into the night and 'small rearguards gave themselves up to the attacking troops as they exploited'.<sup>2</sup> But 2 MG Battalion, according to the regimental report, 'was again forced to ground by very heavy mortar fire about 200 metres short of the enemy defences'.

This was unquestionably 26 Battalion, which blazed away furiously at dusk and for some time after at what looked in the deceptive half-light (to a sergeant of L Troop) like 'the whole German Army'. Some of the 'mortar fire' came from 30 Battery, which fired into the oncoming vehicles and infantry at a very rapid rate until some guns ran out of ammunition and had to withdraw in search of more. A Company was hotly engaged and an NCO of the mortar platoon says the enemy 'came in droves with fixed bayonets ... until their faces were quite recognisable'. Even the reserve mortars were soon firing at maximum elevation<sup>3</sup> which gave a range of about 150 yards, and their fire at that distance was devastating, driving the enemy back. The second-in-command, Major Mathewson,<sup>4</sup> stood firing from the shoulder at the retreating infantry, outlined from time to time against blazing vehicles, until his rifle was unbearably hot. As one or two of the field guns, useless without ammunition and needlessly exposed in the FDLs, withdrew a short distance some of the infantry followed, thinking a general withdrawal was taking place; but Page quickly redirected them back to their positions and a corporal of the carrier platoon saw them 'turn and walk back ... into the whole force of heavy fire'.<sup>1</sup> There followed a pause and then at 7 p.m. the enemy tried again, covered by tremendous fire from the massed MMGs of the machine-gun battalion. Brigadier Barrowclough had meanwhile ordered Page to fall back to Brigade Headquarters, in view of information gained from 30 Corps at 7.10 p.m. warning him to be ready to 'repel tank attack

tomorrow morning' and to 'consolidate with that in view'; the fresh attack put Page's plan in jeopardy and he ordered Captain Wesley<sup>2</sup> to stage a bayonet counter-attack with B Company while A Company stood its ground and the rest of the battalion group withdrew under Mathewson.

The night had darkened, the enemy sounded very close and Wesley soon disappeared into the blackness at the head of his men. But the sounds proved deceptive and B Company charged a long way without making contact, though it ran into fire which killed Wesley and six others and wounded three more before the company was called to a halt. Lieutenant Rutherford<sup>3</sup> of 10 Platoon searched with a small party until he found Wesley's body and two wounded men whom he brought back. Sadly 10 and 11 Platoons came back, tricked out of their prey by the night and robbed of their zest, and 12 Platoon (which did not get the order to fall back) was unwittingly left to wander in a state of high tension between the many islands of enemy with their nervous profusion of flares in search of a way back, a journey which took two days. A Company and the guns had pulled out and gone back a short distance to await B Company. 'L Troop remained', according to the troop subaltern,<sup>4</sup> 'until the last movable truck had gone and then moved away from the area under a canopy of flares, the enemy by this time being only a matter of 100 yards away'. B Company had stirred up a hornets' nest and the air was thick with tracer bullets, so that drivers had no wish to linger. Pepper followed the two L Troop portées in his pick-up truck, bringing with him a German he had captured, Page brought up the rear of the group with the carriers, and all made a fast journey back to Brigade Headquarters at Esc-Sciomar. The action had cost no more than 12 killed and about 20 wounded altogether in the battalion group, whereas 200 Regiment had 10 killed, 46 wounded and 61 missing, a considerable number of them due to 26 Battalion. These losses, however, were dwarfed by those of 5 South African Brigade, which at 'Sidi Rezegh' had 224 killed, 379 wounded, and about 2800 captured.

END

