

25 Battalion

The Alamein Line

CHAPTER 6

The Alamein Line

On 28 June 6 Brigade occupied the Kaponga Box (also known as the Qattara Box and Fortress A) at Bab el Qattara, with 24 Battalion on the northern face, 25 Battalion on the western, and 26 Battalion on the southern face. With a frontage of 2300 yards and a depth of 2000 yards, 25 Battalion held the position with three companies forward, A right, B centre, C left, and D Company in reserve behind C Company. The left or western flank of 24 Battalion bordered on the rear or eastern limits of A Company while the right or western flank of 26 Battalion touched the rear or eastern limits of D Company.

Situated 18 miles south-west of Alamein, the Kaponga Box had been partly prepared in September last by 5 Brigade and was designed to hold four battalions. The Box consisted mostly of low sandhills crossed by several wadis and minor depressions, which gave a moderate degree of cover and some observation in this otherwise more or less featureless country.

The defences were in a reasonable state of preparedness, but at this stage the brigade had no transport, no field guns, and no mines, all of which were forward with the rest of the Division. The fortress contained ten tons of water but had no reserves of food or ammunition.

During the day parts of the B Echelons of various units of the Division reported to the brigade, having been detached or scattered in the desperate battle in which the Division had been engaged at Minqar Qaim, 30 miles south of Matruh. Exaggerated stories of disaster and defeat were brought back by some of these parties.

By the evening most of the Division had arrived in the area with Brigadier Inglis in command, General Freyberg having been wounded at Minqar Qaim. The completion of the defences was now a matter of great urgency and the work was pushed on with all speed, the enemy being expected to arrive on the Alamein position within thirty-six hours. Mines were laid in various gaps and approaches and reserves of ammunition, petrol, oil, and food arrived, together with sufficient ammunition for one refill for an armoured division. Water was rationed page 177 to three-quarters of a gallon per man per day (for all purposes) and a reserve of half a gallon per man was held in the areas occupied by the infantry section.

During the night there was heavy enemy bombing not far away and all civilian labour, which had been employed in considerable numbers, departed, naturally enough, the next day. Rumours continued unabated and the waiting defenders faced a tense situation.

In the coastal area to the north 1 South African Division, withdrawn from Sollum, held the Alamein Box covering the road and railway just to the east of the Alamein station. On the southern flank, 15 miles south-west of 25 Battalion, and near the edge of the Qattara Depression, was Fortress B at Naqb Abu Dweis, which was to be defended by 5 Indian Division, consisting at this date of a number of mobile columns of a total strength of about a brigade.

The Qattara Depression, practically a complete obstacle to vehicles of all descriptions, lay to the south, 35 miles from the sea, and consequently the Alamein line could not be outflanked.

The gap between the South Africans at Alamein and the New Zealanders at Fortress A was originally the responsibility of 1 Armoured Division, with 50 Division in support, but as both these divisions had suffered severely in the withdrawal from Cyrenaica, 18 Indian Infantry Brigade, recently arrived from Iraq, was sent to hold the Deir el Shein, a depression eight miles north-east of Fortress A.

Information regarding the approach of the enemy was received from time to time at 25 Battalion headquarters. During the morning of the 29th shellbursts were reported ten miles to the north-north-west, and

at 7 p.m. a German reconnaissance aircraft flew high over the battalion. A few bombs were dropped at night but none fell near.

By 30 June the fortress was more or less secure; 6 Field Regiment and 33 Anti-Tank Battery were in position; and 18 and 9 Indian Infantry Brigades respectively were occupying the defences at Deir el Shein to the north and Fortress B to the south-west but were short of supplies. Sixth Brigade was able to give some assistance by providing 5000 mines for 18 Brigade and water and ammunition for 9 Brigade.

The approaching enemy columns were constantly being attacked from the air and shortly after noon on the 30th the bombing was seen by observers at the battalion's OP. A situation report received in the afternoon stated that at 10 a.m. a page 178 thousand vehicles moving eastwards were bombed south-east of El Daba and that our armoured forces were in contact with the enemy in that vicinity, which was about 14 miles south-west of the battalion. Late in the afternoon battalion observers saw forty vehicles moving eastwards and the battalion was told that the enemy's main armoured forces were about 20 miles to the west. *Twenty-first Panzer Division* had been engaged but no details of the action were available. The main attack was expected during the night.

To complete the perimeter of the fortress the Maori Battalion joined 6 Brigade and occupied the open eastern face while the remainder of the Division stayed outside at Deir el Munassib, nine miles to the east, to provide support by mobile columns operating from an area six miles from the fortress. Other units also came under command of 6 Brigade including, in addition to the normal field regiment and machine-gun company, a detachment of 64 Medium Regiment, a survey troop, and 43 Light AA Battery. The anti-tank defence of 25 Battalion had been much improved: 33 Anti-Tank Battery, under command of 6 Brigade, was being equipped with a far more powerful gun, the six-pounder, and as these arrived its two-pounders were passed over to the battalions. In consequence, on 30 June 25 Battalion received eight two-pounders for its recently formed anti-tank platoon, formerly No. 5 (Pioneer) Platoon.

Many British aircraft passed overhead during the day but none of the enemy was seen. The weather was very hot and, combined with a sandstorm, made conditions most unpleasant. Small unidentified columns observed during the morning of 1 July moving from the west and passing south of the battalion were later identified as part of an Indian motor brigade. At ten that morning at a battalion conference it was forecast that the position would be free from attack for twenty-four hours. Companies were instructed to establish listening posts and to fire two white Very lights as a signal to the artillery if the enemy approached; patrols were to examine the wire in daylight for signs of enemy interference. During the hours of darkness one-third of the battalion was to remain dressed.

Early in the afternoon an enemy force of tanks and lorried infantry attacked the Indian infantry brigade at Deir el Shein during a dust-storm. According to earlier reports the main enemy forces were concentrating against the northern half of the Alamein line on a front of 13 miles, which would bring the enemy southern flank to a point about five miles north of



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page 179 the battalion. Two enemy fighters (Me109) came over the battalion during the afternoon and gave the Bofors AA gunners some practice but no victims.

The night passed without incident. Very early on the 2nd it was learnt that 18 Indian Infantry Brigade at Deir el Shein had been overrun in the attack the previous afternoon and that a withdrawal might be necessary. The Indian brigade holding Fortress B at Naqb Abu Dweis on the southern flank was being withdrawn so that Fortress A became an exposed and dangerous salient. It was decided, therefore, that the fortress would not be held and that the Division would form battle groups whose mobility would give liberty of action to meet varying situations. In the meantime, however, 6 Brigade was to continue to hold its position.

During the morning the artillery under brigade command vigorously shelled enemy vehicles about four miles to the north. This drew retaliatory fire upon 24 Battalion and Brigade Headquarters and a few shells fell in 25 Battalion's position. Two Me 109 fighters again appeared over the battalion, which received some intermittent shelling about midday, apparently from 105- millimetre guns. There were strong enemy forces in close proximity, two panzer divisions the previous night being reported to have passed just to the north, and in the late afternoon an enemy column to the north-east was said to be moving towards Fortress A. The head of the column had been bombed and the British 1 Armoured Division was advancing westwards towards 6 Brigade to engage the enemy.

This advance of 1 Armoured Division was the start of the counter-attack planned by General Auchinleck, and 25 Battalion, together with the rest of the brigade, had a box-seat. The British tanks were to come down from the north, turn west past Fortress A, then north through El Mreir against the enemy's rear. Columns of 7 Armoured Division and 7 Motor Brigade were also taking part. An engagement took place at the eastern end of Ruweisat Ridge, a low ridge which ran ten miles to the east from the vicinity of Deir el Shein. After an indecisive battle the German tanks withdrew to the south-west of the ridge and the British behind Alam Nayil in the direction of 2 NZ Division and about six miles east of Fortress A. A hastily organised force from 10 Indian Division, arriving too late to help the overrun Indian brigade at Deir el Shein, had dug in on the western end of the ridge and had successfully held off the enemy armour until the Germans withdrew.

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The New Zealand Division was co-operating in these operations, a mixed column under Brigadier Weir operating towards the eastern end of Ruweisat Ridge in support of the armoured attack and remaining overnight a little to the north of Alam Nayil ready to support an attack next morning. Late that afternoon as the enemy armour withdrew, 6 Brigade was warned and sent out carriers and anti-tank guns *en portée* to form a screen to guard against attack, but the enemy had halted. There was a good deal of firing from various directions by both sides during the day but for 25 Battalion all was quiet by 9 p.m.

Early the following morning, 3 July, carrier patrols round the battalion's perimeter saw nothing of the enemy. A couple of hours later shelling was observed to the east and north-east where the RAF was bombing enemy concentrations; the artillery activity was probably a concentration of fire by Weir's force from Alam Nayil, which scored a very notable success against the Ariete Division four miles to the north-east. During the morning a hostile battery shelled the battalion until eventually our artillery returned the fire and silenced it.

Meanwhile orders had been received to be prepared to move at an hour's notice. However, no move took place, as in common with so many other orders during this unstable tactical period, the order was cancelled a little later. Brigade Headquarters and 26 Battalion had already left the fortress and were on their way to the vicinity of Himeimat, 14 miles to the south-east; they were directed to carry on while 24 and 25 Battalions remained in their position of 5 Brigade. That brigade, a little before midnight, was moving south from Munassib and then west of the fortress and advancing northwards in an attempt to intercept the remnants of the Ariete Division. The artillery units in the fortress left to join 5 Brigade via a southern exit, thus leaving 24, 25, and 28 Battalions to hold it.

By 2.30 p.m. the 5 Brigade column had moved round the south-west corner of the fortress to the track running north-east towards Alamein. During the afternoon Battalion OPs reported that the Divisional Cavalry was active three miles to the north and that a little shelling was taking place to the west of A Company. Later in the day the 5 Brigade column halted just to the north-west of the fortress and permission was then given for 24 and 25 Battalions to rejoin 6 Brigade at Himeimat.

While vehicles were being loaded for this delayed move some heavy shells arrived in the area occupied by HQ Company page 181 but did no damage. An hour later the battalion moved off to the east, adopting desert formation when clear of the defences and continuing south-east along the Barrel track to the brigade's new area, where the troops bivouacked for the night. It had been a day of orders and counter-orders for the battalion, in common with the other units, a distressing situation to commanders and staffs especially, and all concerned were glad to come to the end of this particular day.

The following day, 4 July, units in 6 Brigade were ordered to send a company back to Maadi Camp as LOBs. D Company was selected. This was most unpopular, both with D Company and the rest of the battalion,

though the value of leaving selected officers and other ranks out of battle in order to have a nucleus on which to rebuild a unit had been strikingly emphasised after the Sidi Rezegh battles. That, however, was very different from the present arrangement, which reduced battalions from four to three rifle companies and so considerably affected the tactical handling of a battalion. Naturally it very much reduced the fighting power of a unit, but on the other hand it eased maintenance problems and reduced to some extent the great mass of vehicles in the field, always so difficult to protect.

The day passed quietly with the battalion making the most of a day of rest and comparative peace, though there were in fact two raids by high-flying aircraft over the brigade area and a few bombs were dropped without effect. 'Still lots of rumours,' wrote Wakeling, '2 hours notice—busy day ducking in and out of trenches as the Hun bombers came over. Listening to the news from Berlin very amusing as they put over a half-hour of Anzac news and calls for prisoners detained in Germany. Very heavy shelling to be heard as we crawled into our holes for the night. [This was an attack by 5 Brigade against the El Mreir position at 9.30 p.m.]

'July 5. Very heavy fog and no sun till 8.30 and welcome for a change as all blankets damp. Read our letters while the gunfire rumbles away in the distance. Went back to Fortress A and were greeted by mortar fire and an air raid close by.'

The battalion's return to the fortress was also greeted with shells from 105-millimetre guns which fortunately caused no damage or casualties. The return was preparatory to a proposed attack by the Division from a start line west of the fortress directed north-west to Sidi Abd el Rahman, 16 miles north-west of Alamein station, and was to be part of a larger operation. Fourth Brigade, joined by the Maori Battalion from the fortress, moved to an assembly position at Qaret el Yidma to the west of 25 Battalion. Fifth Brigade remained in position on the south side of the El Mreir Depression.

The following day (6 July) was without incident except for the appearance of Stuka dive-bombers about dusk, though they dropped no bombs, while a prolonged air raid by the RAF some miles away occupied most of the morning. During the afternoon a patrol of two armoured cars of 12 Lancers, part of the British 7 Motor Brigade which was immediately south of the fortress, made contact with C Company.

Though the battalion was at two hours' notice to move, it was likely that it would remain in its present position for at least another day. That night 4 Brigade advanced at 3 a.m. on Mungar Wahla, on the left or western flank of 5 Brigade's position at El Mreir, and secured its objectives, about four miles north-west of 25 Battalion, without opposition. Ultimately, several hours later, in the afternoon of the 7th, the main attack in the north having been postponed, 4 Brigade withdrew to its former position at Qaret el Yidma, following a warning from Division of a threat of tank attack from the west.

During the morning of 7 July, possibly as a result of 4 Brigade's activities, 105-millimetre guns from the north fired a few shells into C Company's area and some bombs fell on B and C Companies without effect. At four in the afternoon Colonel George was told that twenty to forty enemy tanks had been reported moving east towards the battalion; it was thought that these tanks might take advantage of the blinding effect of the setting sun, but there was no attack. George was also told that 4 and 5 Brigades were withdrawing to the east of the fortress to regroup and that 6 Brigade would move the next day, but not before 7 a.m. Commenting on the day, Wakeling said: 'Artillery hard at it from daylight and old Jerry tossed a few back. Quite a few shake-ups from the air during the day and his airforce seems to be having this part of the skies to themselves. Shaved again to-day and washed my face with the brush....'

A considerable and continuous movement of enemy forces to the south was taking place, and as these included Germans it was likely that an attempt to turn the left or southern flank of the Alamein line would be made. The Eighth Army was shortening its front, and as a result the Division was ordered page 183 to retire behind Fortress A. Except for 6 Brigade, which moved from the fortress on the 8th, the formations and units of the Division commenced the movement on the night of 7–8 July and by dawn on the 9th were to the south-east of the fortress in their allotted positions facing north, about nine miles south of Ruweisat Ridge. Sixth Brigade was to be in reserve and completed the move through Deir Alinda and Deir el Munassib to Himeimat, 14 miles south-east of the fortress, by the afternoon of 8 July.

Twenty-fifth Battalion had been prepared to move at 6 a.m. but this was put back five hours. After detaching a platoon of A Company under Major Hutchens¹ as a rear party to remain in the fortress until relieved by 7 Motor Brigade, the battalion formed up in the brigade area, losing one man killed and three wounded by light shelling of the transport in the process. At noon the journey was continued to the brigade bivouac area a couple of miles north of Himeimat. There it received a report that A Company's platoon in the fortress had been heavily shelled and dive-bombed and had lost one man killed and a sergeant wounded.

The following day the brigade moved back to Amiriya. After considerable difficulty with soft sand along the route, the battalion bivouacked in the afternoon of the 9th near the track south of Burg el Arab and within twenty-four hours was pitching its tents (a luxury which had not been enjoyed for some time) at Amiriya.

Up at the front the enemy occupied Fortress A the day after the battalion had left it. In a comedy of errors and confusion the enemy (according to the Africa Corps Diary of 8–9 July) carried out a full-scale attack against Fortress A. From late in the morning of the 9th and throughout the afternoon, *21 Panzer Division* and *Littorio Armoured Division*, directed by *Africa Corps Headquarters* and supported by Stukas and part of the German heavy artillery, with the usual infantry, tanks, and engineers, attacked the abandoned position, despite a patrol report of the previous evening that it had been vacated. Even Rommel himself personally ordered *21 Division* to attack at 11 a.m. and there was quite a stir (and a 'stir up' too) in the various headquarters concerned.

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The 11th July was spent in erecting and digging-in tents and settling in to the camp. Daily leave for one-third of the men was authorised and for the remainder transport to the beach was provided. In a country such as Egypt sea bathing is a boon which it is impossible to exaggerate.

In the late afternoon of the 11th the remainder of the Division in the forward area was very differently engaged. Fourth and 5th Brigades were moving northwards in readiness for a night attack on Ruweisat Ridge.

On the 13th Brigadier Clifton explained to the battalion that the brigade had not taken an active part in the operations of the past fortnight because of the high proportion of infantry to artillery in the brigade group. He said that 'Rommel was too good a soldier to attack Fortress A when it would have suited our plans' and that the brigade would relieve 4 Brigade in the desert in three or four days' time; 26 Battalion had moved up that day to relieve 28 Battalion and join the divisional reserve group.

Before midnight the following day the Division (less 6 Brigade) commenced the attack on Ruweisat Ridge and by dawn had taken its objectives. Farther to the east attacks by other formations failed or were much delayed and British armoured forces did not reach the New Zealand objectives as planned. The later arrival of some British tanks and Indian units gave some relief but the forward positions of both brigades were under heavy fire and ultimately were overrun by tanks.

During the evening of 15 July and the following morning the survivors were withdrawn to Stuka Valley, three miles north of Alam Nayil. Fourth Brigade with 22 Battalion attached, but without 18 Battalion (which remained in the field covering the northern front of 5 Brigade's position), was sent to the rear and ultimately (on the 20th) to Maadi to refit and reform; and 6 Brigade was ordered to rejoin the Division immediately.

An order for 25 Battalion to be ready to move at 11 a.m. on the 16th was cancelled, with the intimation that the move would not take place before the next morning. Brigade Headquarters, 24 Battalion, and 6 Field Ambulance, however, moved westwards about noon to rejoin the Division in the Alamein line, and early the following morning the battalion followed. Ford trucks of the open cattle-truck type for delivery to 20 Battalion accompanied the column, which reached Rear Headquarters 2 NZ Division, about ten miles east of Alam Nayil, after a journey of 70 miles in a little over eight hours.

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In the afternoon of the following day (18 July) 25 Battalion in desert formation moved up to Alam Nayil and a couple of hours later occupied a position facing west and south on the left or southern flank of the brigade. Battalion Headquarters was 2000 yards north-west of Alam Nayil, close to the boundary with 24 Battalion. A Company was on the right of the battalion sector with its forward localities about 1200 yards west of Battalion Headquarters; B Company was on the left of A Company, extending the line of localities to the south and east; C Company carried on the defences to the east, its headquarters being within 500 yards south-south-east of Battalion Headquarters. (D Company was still LOB at Maadi.) Prior to reaching this position, 25 Battalion under instructions from 6 Brigade had sent forward that morning a section of carriers and four two-pounders to guard 24 Battalion's open southern flank, which was then the southern flank of the Division. By about 7 p.m. 25 Battalion was firmly established in its position, about eight miles to the east of its former position in Fortress A, now occupied by the enemy.

Enemy air activity combined with intermittent shelling had increased on the 18th, damaging two vehicles at 6 Brigade's headquarters, and there was also some heavy shelling from the south-west but with little effect. At this stage the RAF was considerably curtailing enemy air action; the Stuka raids were mostly hit-and-run affairs and the enemy bomber formations required strong fighter protection. This improvement in the air situation provided a distinct ray of sunshine to lighten the gloom of the recent disastrous operations.

A heavy dust-storm on the 19th made conditions unpleasant but there was little enemy activity against the battalion. In the morning enemy aircraft came over, and again in the late afternoon, but dropped no bombs; they were engaged by the Bofors. A little enemy shelling about 8 p.m. caused no casualties.

The capture by 5 Indian Brigade of Point 62 on the Ruweisat Ridge beyond the right flank of the Division allowed a little reorganisation of the New Zealand front. Fifth Brigade shortened its front, 23 Battalion taking over some of 26 Battalion's position. Sixth Brigade then spread its defences farther south and so covered the artillery positions of 5 Field Regiment close to Alam Nayil, this regiment being under command of 6 Brigade. Eighteenth Battalion in 5 Brigade's area was relieved by the Maoris and came into divisional reserve near rear headquarters of the Division.

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Private Hawkins² of the anti-tank platoon gives an interesting description of the conditions:

'Once again we became infantrymen and, originally attached to B Coy, we were soon attached to C Coy with whom we remained till the withdrawal several weeks later. The life here during this period was pretty hellish, somehow a few bright spots kept us from insanity. Jerry sent over hate salvoes at odd times, and at mess times which were just darned annoying. The flies maintained a blitzkreig in overwhelming nos during the hours of daylight. The heat was rather terrific and the desert enough to growl about. Digging our own trenches by day and others by night—command posts, O-Pips, etc—and doing ever-recurring picquet-duty, kept us away from our beauty sleep more than we liked.

'But life had its moments. The early-morning brew-up after stand-to, before the flies got going, was like the evening brew-up, a happy occasion when we were able to yarn and relax altogether with few distractions. It was glorious to lie down after dusk, just in shorts and shirt, on top of the blankets in one's trench and sink straight into much-needed sleep. The odd quota of canned beer, especially if helped by the more-or-less rum ration, occasionally brightened our evenings and brought us all together again.

'From the YM Canteen truck, which did marvellous work in coming right up to us in daylight once a week, we used to buy our whole quota of tobacco and matches, tinned fruit, milk, chocolate, etc. And last but not least, our old friend Saida George, now CO, would often call in for a chat if he happened to be passing by. But for the flies and the spasmodic "hates" which Jerry sent over life in the area would have been moderately tolerable.

'The flies in swarms attacked with democratic impartiality private or brigadier, and simply hurled themselves into uncovered tea or stew. Sleep was impossible if the flies could gain entry to one's slit trench and it taxed our ingenuity to the utmost to make our homes flyproof with blankets, bivvies, and the odd bit of mosquito netting. With our homemade swats we killed thousands which penetrated the defences. Much less disconcerting were Jerry's haphazard shellings.... Often when the salvoes fell near us, there would be one or even two or three duds. Every time one landed with just a dull thud, the page 187 whole platoon would cheer and shout "One for Poland" and old Kot [Corporal Kotlowski,³ section-leader, anti-tank platoon] would feel pretty good about it. One day a salvo came amongst us. The first three shells just thudded into the sand. Then as one man the Platoon gave a loud cheer as the fourth, in proper fashion, made a big bang.'

Active patrolling by all three battalions of 6 Brigade was now the vogue. On 18–19 July a patrol of a platoon from 26 Battalion had brought in two Germans of 382 Regiment which had recently arrived from Crete, an identification which Army Intelligence was pleased to get. For its part 25 Battalion the following night sent a patrol of a platoon of C Company under Lieutenant Paterson⁴ to Fortress A, where it occupied posts with the object of capturing or killing any enemy troops when they came out to occupy these posts a little after midnight, as seemed to be their custom. No enemy appeared, however, but MT was observed moving within the perimeter of the defences; the patrol returned safely before daylight on the 20th. On that same night 24 Battalion scored a fine success when its carriers raided an enemy position in the eastern end of Deir Umm Khawabir, a small depression about 4000 yards west of 25 Battalion's front, and captured forty-two Italian prisoners.

These patrols were in keeping with the policy of active patrolling for which New Zealand troops generally were noted. Provided the objectives were wisely selected and the operations carefully planned, and the patrols themselves suitably trained and directed, active patrolling had many values in maintaining morale, alarming and damaging the enemy, bringing in information and sometimes prisoners for questioning, and as training for night fighting. Some protection was also afforded against enemy enterprises and the confidence of the men holding the forward defences was increased. A man who had been out on patrol soon came to regard the forward posts as havens of safety. For these reasons the greatest benefit is obtained if all men are required to undertake patrol duty, excluding only those unusually clumsy and, temporarily, those suffering from colds.

The 20th July was a day of digging for the battalion as all trenches were to be deepened to 4 ft. 6 in. The measure was page 188 introduced rather appropriately, as Wakeling's diary reveals: 'Rum issue after stand-to. Noisy morning—all slit trenches to be deepened ... so all digging. Fairly quiet afternoon but enemy artillery a little active about 8.15 and men soon went into their holes for the night.'

There was enemy air reconnaissance as usual but no bombs. The New Zealand field guns were in action most of the day, which brought some reply from the enemy artillery. Two patrols from the battalion were out after dark. One, under Lieutenant Bunny,⁵ which included an NCO and two sappers from the engineers, examined a mile of enemy wire entanglements 5000 yards in front of the battalion's position; no minefields were seen. The patrol heard Italians talking and saw what appeared to be a refilling point; it suffered no casualties and returned by 5 a.m. A second patrol, under Lieutenant Paterson, again visited Fortress A to secure prisoners and to penetrate to the enemy vehicle park to destroy vehicles. After working through two lines of wire the patrol was challenged (by a sentry of *Stein Company*, 288 German Special Force) and withdrew under heavy machine-gun fire, losing one man killed. There were also nine men missing, but five of these returned during the next three days, having lost direction. All six battalions on the New Zealand front had patrols out that night.

In the late afternoon the RAF bombers heavily attacked the Deir el Abyad area, three miles to the north of El Mreir, and from 10 p.m. onwards throughout the night were continuously over the enemy positions. The following morning a heavy pall of smoke was reported to be drifting over the New Zealand sector and the troops prepared to meet a possible attack. However, it proved to be a particularly dense sea mist that had come farther inland than usual. It disappeared by 9 a.m. and the rest of the day was calm and hotter than ever, with the flies an increasing and almost intolerable nuisance.

There was light shelling at times during the day, which was devoted principally to preparations for the attack planned to take place after dark. Since its first contact with the enemy opposite the Alamein position three weeks ago, 25 Battalion had fortunately suffered few casualties, though bombed and heavily shelled at times, the losses reported (subject to error in dates) being four killed, fourteen wounded, and two prisoners of war.

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The RAF now dominated the skies, a welcome and thrilling situation with bomber and fighter formations passing overhead every couple of hours or less, engaged in 'softening up' the enemy defences as part of the Eighth Army plan of attack. The Army's general plan was stated by General Auchinleck in his report:

'Having made the enemy extend his front and disperse his reserves to some extent, I thought the time had come to strike hard at the centre of his line with the object of cutting his forces in half. We should thereby have a chance to sever his communications and roll up the northern part of his army. With this end in view I told General Gott to attack the enemy positions about Deir el Abyad and El Mreir.'

The attack of General Gott's 13 Corps in the centre would be supported by subsidiary operations on both flanks of the Alamein line, by 30 Corps with the Australian and South African Divisions in the north and by elements of 13 Corps round the southern flank past Fortress A to harass the enemy's rear, 12 miles to the west of El Mreir. In the event of success 30 Corps would press against the enemy's rear and 13 Corps would swing wide to El Daba, 30 miles, and Fuka, 70 miles, to the west to cut off his retreat.

The RAF was to attack located targets to the west of the front until 7.15 p.m. on the 21st, the day of attack, and then turn three-quarters of its bombing force against Pt 63 (on the western end of Ruweisat Ridge) and the eastern end of the El Mreir Depression, while the remaining quarter was to attack the El Taqa plateau in support of the subsidiary southern outflanking operations. During the night of the attack air-bombing was to be kept to a line between Fortress A and El Mreir, to the west of the area to be reached by the attacking troops.

The first objective of 13 Corps, to be taken by 5 Indian and the New Zealand Divisions, was the ground from Deir el Shein southwards about 1500 yards to Pt 63 'and thence south-west'. During the operation 1 Armoured Division was to protect the southern flank of the infantry and frustrate any armoured counter-attack.

The second objective, extending from Pt 59 (three miles due west of Pt 63) due south to the southern escarpment of El Mreir, was to be gained by 1 Armoured Division, with the two infantry divisions following up to secure the ground as it was won.

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The final objective, three miles of the Alamein-Abu Dweis track astride El Mreir, was to be taken by 1 Armoured Division, supported by the artillery of the two divisions, but the action at this stage was to be dependent upon developments.



el mreir, 22 July 1942

The task of the New Zealand Division was to capture the eastern end of the El Mreir Depression. It was allotted to 6 Brigade, supported by the three field artillery regiments of the Division, the field guns of 2 RHA,⁶ and the medium guns of 64 Medium Battery, RA, all under the direct control of page 191 Brigadier Weir, CRA 2 NZ Division. Fourth Field Regiment was to give direct support to 6 Brigade. Fifth Brigade was to support the attack, from 8.50 to 9.30 p.m., by mortar and machine-gun fire on the eastern lip of the depression. One battalion of that brigade was then to move before daylight to the vicinity of Pt 69 (5000 yards east of El Mreir Depression), the remainder of 5 Brigade forming the divisional reserve.

Endeavours by Brigadiers Kippenberger and Clifton were made without success to arrange that the supporting tanks should move forward during the night, the Armoured Brigade commander stating that the tanks could not fight even in moonlight and were reluctant to move at all at night. The argument that German tanks did so had no effect. A request that an armoured regiment should be under Brigadier Clifton's direct command during the advance was also refused, but assurances were given and repeated that the tanks would be ordered to move up as soon as there was light enough. Tank liaison officers were attached to 6 Brigade.

The direction of the Indians' attack was from east to west and so at right-angles to the enemy front. Sixth Brigade's attack, however, was northwards, with a long approach march of about 3000 yards in no-man's land between and parallel to the New Zealand and enemy defensive fronts, and thus open to counter-attack or enfilade fire against its left flank as it advanced. This risk was accepted in preference to the congestion that would be caused if the attack went through 5 Brigade's position. It was a complicated plan, but it was claimed that it provided easy deployment on the start line and a line of advance at right-angles to the objective.

Eighteenth Battalion was to cover the flank of 6 Brigade with mortars and machine guns during its advance. Accompanied by an anti-tank battery, two anti-aircraft gun troops, and two machine-gun companies, 18 Battalion was then to move out to the left flank in order to cover 5 Field Regiment, which was deploying two miles north-west of Alam Nayil. Patrols of the Divisional Cavalry were to protect 25 Battalion against interference from the south. New Zealand Engineers, in co-operation with 9 Indian Brigade, were to clear and then widen gaps in the enemy minefields in the area of advance.

The attack of 6 Brigade was to be made by 26 Battalion on the right and 24 Battalion on the left. Twenty-fifth Battalion, in reserve, was to advance on the left rear of 24 Battalion. As Brigadier Clifton explained: 'The Battalion (25 Bn) formed page 192 up echeloned to the south-west of 24 Bn and moved off according to orders. The formation was adopted to broaden the front of attack in the initial stage and so ensure not only that the western flank of 24 Bn was covered but also that the anti-tank defence was overrun on a wide front....'

Most of 25 Battalion's records were destroyed in the battle and the battalion's operation orders are therefore not available. The unit diary written up from notes left by the IO, Lieutenant Jackman,⁷ does, however, give most of the details of the plan. The battalion was to advance 6000 yards to a position about 1000 yards past the pipeline, where it would be in reserve 2000 yards south of the first objective. A Company was to be on the right, B Company on the left, Battalion Headquarters 200 yards behind the junction of the two companies, and C Company was to follow 450 yards behind B Company and 250 yards to the left-rear of

Battalion Headquarters. Thus the battalion, while advancing on a two-company front, could rapidly form a similar front facing the left flank. The two-pounder guns of the anti-tank platoon and the carriers were to be in rear, with the six-pounder troop of 32 Anti-Tank Battery following.

With its companies in open order, 25 Battalion about an hour before dark moved due west for a mile to reach its forming-up place on the start line, drawing fire from enemy guns on the way, fortunately with few casualties. Some trouble had been experienced with the start lines of 24 and 25 Battalions, and Private Bates⁸ of the Intelligence Section has explained how it occurred:

‘Somehow that attack seemed destined to failure before it began. With infinite patience the three of us (Lt Jackman, IO, Pte Herbert Carter,⁹ and myself, all of I Sec) built up a row of high cairns (in no man's land as a start line) in a convenient depression, only to find they overlapped the start line marked out by 24 Bn's I Sec, who were working at the same time. Barely had we returned to HQ and gulped down a hasty, half-cold meal, than Jackman was ... demanding if I could be ready to go out again immediately. Skid (I Sec driver Pte Rapley¹⁰) drove us back into no man's land where, in full view of Jerry, page 193 we laid a fresh line further south with old petrol tins (they were flimsies), using an old iron wheel lying on the desert as the central point.... We excited mild interest in the German arty lines. The three shells he lobbed at us were close and as the old war horse (the I Sec PU) came galloping down from the far end of the start line I leapt on the running board. (Note: It was impossible to take a bearing out to the start line. I recall looking back at the hills and trying to memorise the general direction of the start line. But we were zig zagging like fury, so it was all pretty vague. I was given a bearing later.)

‘I had just time to slip back to Bn HQ, swallow a small tot of rum, stuff a pick down behind my haversack and bolt back to A Coy. My orders were fixed in my mind: “Wait at A Coy till B Coy comes round; guide them out on a bearing of 261 degrees to the left flank of the start line. Then the axis of advance will be 351 degrees.”

‘From A Coy HQ I could see figures moving across to the north, about 500 yards out. Shells were spattering around and among them. B Coy? Surely not. It was too early. Major Hutchins (OC A Coy, I think) came up and confirmed their identity and I gave chase. I intercepted the last platoon and learned from Lieut Sharpley,¹¹ the cmmdr, that the OC, Capt Armstrong, was ahead somewhere.

‘Already soaked with sweat, I jogged over the rocky surface, pack, pick, and rifle dragging like a sea anchor. I somehow caught Coy HQ—and still Armstrong was ahead. Already the coy was too far forward. A runner who went on to catch the OC contacted him finally in the original depression, where the two fwd platoons already were. He explained (when he came back) that he had known of the change of start line but one of his pl cmmdrs, unaware of the alteration, had already gone fwd too soon. Armstrong had chased him, leaving me more or less in the air.

‘All seemed chaos. Men, ant-like figures in the gathering dusk, swarmed over the base and up the northern slope of the depression, a gathering concentration that was gradually easing out into battle formation. Shells were dropping among them, each bursting like a splodge of ink flicked on to a dark photograph. Close by were a few open trucks that had brought up MMGs. A jeep whirled past, the occupants' faces set and preoccupied. The sun was a red ball, low over the western ridges.

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‘Somewhere in this glorious mess were two of our platoons.

‘Somehow we reformed. Jerry was no assistance, following us around with his guns as though he had us marked.... I left Capt A to collect his coy and went off with his batman and several others of coy HQ to locate the start line. The sight of men apparently going back gave the mob the idea they had to retire again. I recall turning and bellowing to Jack Bone¹² (Armstrong's batman, I think) to stop them. Almost as I spoke the crowd turned and were streaming in my footsteps. The reason I soon discovered to be the arrival of the Colonel and Bn HQ but another shelling epidemic temporarily annulled my interest.

‘The Col was quite calm and merely nodded his head when I explained what had occurred.

‘(We never did find that start line.)’

On reaching the start line 25 Battalion formed up facing north. The barrage opened at 8.30 p.m. and drew fire from the enemy guns and mortars. With visibility still fair, the leading companies a few minutes later crossed the start line in fairly good order under shell, mortar, and machine-gun fire. During the advance to the objective, which was reached about 11 p.m., the enemy positions encountered gave little trouble and were quickly overrun. The principal hindrance to movement came from machine guns firing across the line of advance from slightly elevated ground to the west, guns which had fired earlier on 24 Battalion's advancing troops. As Colonel George relates: ‘These guns were firing tracer on fixed lines and it was possible to walk

right up to the line of fire, wait for a pause between bursts, and then slip safely across'. 'Overs' fired by the enemy in the north at 24 Battalion were also encountered.

At the objective it was found, about 1 a.m., that touch with two platoons of A Company had been lost, but it was learnt later that they had advanced so rapidly that they had caught up with the left flank of 24 Battalion and had gone on with that unit. Touch had also been lost with C Company, and one of B Company's platoons, losing touch with A Company on its right, hurried on and overran the objective and reached El Mreir. On the objective the hard rock made digging impossible and sangars had to be constructed.

Part of the supporting arms under Captain Birch reached the objective about three hours after the battalion, assisted by page 195 a patrol sent out to find them. It had been arranged that the engineers should clear three 40 ft. lanes in the minefields along the brigade axis, about the centre of 24 Battalion's sector of advance, for the vehicles of Brigade Headquarters and 24 and 25 Battalions. Captain Birch was unable to find a gap in the minefields, which caused the loss of the artillery FOO's armoured OP and one of the eight two-pounder anti-tank guns of 5 Platoon under Captain Wilson, who wrote:

'After considerable difficulty in navigation we arrived at a trig point identified by an artillery officer ... as trig 624 (marked on the map as 74). [Note: Trig 624 or Pt 74 was about 200 yards east of 24 Battalion's right boundary or 800 yards east of the Brigade axis and nearly a mile to the east of 25 Battalion's objective.] Here we encountered a wide minefield and reported by R/T to Adv Bde; as we were then very late in getting up we asked for assistance in locating either Bde or Bn. A patrol was sent out at the same time to try to contact 25 Bn. Before it returned the Brigadier ordered me to try to reach his position, which was obviously quite near, with the convoy. Before starting to do so, however, the patrol returned, having located 25 Bn and we ... gained permission ... to join 25 Bn direct. Cpl Broad¹³ of No. 5 Pl cleared a path of mines and the convoy was shepherded through in single file. The mines were the German "Teller" pattern, sparsely laid over a depth of about 60 yards....'

In a recent letter Corporal Broad explained:

'On the night of the 21st July 1942 about midnight I was with a detachment of Bren carriers and anti tank guns which were steadily moving forward into order of battle for the dawn attack, when the leading Bren carrier ran on a minefield. There was indecision and confusion immediately ... I lifted the minefield singlehanded as described [in his book *Poor People Poor Us*] and as I did so detailed men to lie down to act as some sort of guide to the driver of the leading vehicle. He inched his way across, each man standing up as he came to him and I guided all the vehicles across in the tracks made by the leading Bren carrier.'

Continuing his account, Captain Wilson said:

'After crossing a metal road we met 25 Bn rifle coys at the spot indicated where they were nearly surrounded by enemy inf. Tanks were heard moving to the west of here and the portees page 196 had just moved out into position in rifle coy areas when orders were wirelessly from the Brigadier to move north to a spot indicated by a Verey flare, there to go into a defensive position with 24 Bn. The CO told me that both he and the Brigadier considered our then position untenable and that this was the reason for the move. Great difficulty was experienced in identifying our own flare signals, all signals being given in clear, RT, and to my mind being intercepted by the enemy who put up flares in several directions to mislead us. However the rifle coys then advanced in extended order on the route shown, northwards, followed by the A Ech tpt. No opposition. About 0430 hrs we reached some British or NZ MT and I believe this was at the objective marked on the map.... The rifle coys formed up in column of route and moved off from the MT, presumably towards their defensive areas. I stayed with my portees awaiting orders but received none, for before the infantry got into position the cry came back "Tanks are coming in". I immediately sent four portees fwd to rifle coy areas, three 2-prs and one 6-pr. I omitted to mention that Lieut Betts,¹⁴ 32 Bty, had four 6-prs with us when we started the original approach march but we lost three en route to Trig 624 through their sticking in soft sand and presumably missing the way when trying to catch up. The fourth gun which was minus an officer I took under my command with my own seven 2-prs. Four portees I kept in the transport area to protect the rear of the Bn and form a mobile reserve.

'Shortly after this, heavy fire from MGs and 50mm guns was brought to bear on the A Ech vehicles. Almost immediately one portee was hit and went up in flames, followed by a carrier and a Crusader tank that came into our area. Another portee was disabled by shellfire then and the MG fire became so intense that the two other guns had to move and take hull down positions on our other flank. The Bn now had tanks on three sides of it and was under heavy fire. Vehicles and portees particularly attracted fire. At about 0600 hours I saw a couple of men race back from where the rifle coys were, followed by our inf who fell back, it appeared to me, in two waves towards the east. The enemy machine-gunned each wave and a number of men fell. The tanks, of whom I had a dozen or more under observation on the far side of the wadi since daylight, stood off,

far beyond effective 2-pr range and engaged our positions. page 197 Then they started to close in on the position and fire became very intense. From reports of Lieut Stevens,¹⁵ comd my No. 2 det, I believe three tanks and one other vehicle to have been destroyed by our fire at this stage.

‘Portees had to start falling back from one ridge to another and were fired on from all sides. Between 0625 and 0645 hours I decided the time had come to pull back and believed that the tanks were then engaged in starting to round up prisoners.’

As related by Wilson, the battalion moved forward and reached Brigade Headquarters. ‘It was then getting light,’ said Colonel George in an account written shortly after the end of the war, ‘and considerable machine-gun fire was being brought to bear on the position from the rim of the depression to the west. The Brigadier ordered the CO to dig in where the troops were and this was hastily carried out with only about 15 minutes of semi-darkness left in which to do it.

‘As it got light hell was let loose. Tanks, reported as between 20 and 24 in number, lined the rim of the depression and pinned us to the ground with machine-gun and gun fire. In the dark it had been impossible for the anti-tank gunners to properly site their guns and most were knocked out immediately. One in command of Lieut Campbell knocked out a tank before it in turn was knocked out. Having gained fire superiority the tanks then closed in and the troops in their shallow, hastily dug weapon pits were in a hopeless position. How different it would have been if the original plan had been adhered to and our armour had now attacked. As it was, the majority of 24 and 25 Battalions and Bde Headquarters were made prisoners. Later when our tanks did attack the enemy had recovered from the initial confusion and they suffered heavy losses.

‘A few escaped that morning by clambering on the jeeps and trucks and making a dash for it but those who endeavoured to retire on foot were rounded up by the enemy tanks....

‘From personal observation while being marched back to the rear of the German position, the enemy had received a fright and many anti-tank guns were being pulled back. Apparently these were later brought back into position and dealt our armour a heavy blow.’

Captain Wilson has referred to a report from Lieutenant Stevens regarding the destruction of three tanks and another page 198 vehicle. For his excellent work in this action Stevens was awarded the Military Cross; the citation for the award explains the circumstances:

‘At first light on the 22nd July 1942 during the withdrawal from the vicinity of El Mreir Depression this officer when approaching 21 NZ Bn area (about two miles south-east of the eastern end of the depression) engaged enemy tanks which were following up the 2-pr gun on which he was travelling. At that time the only troops in the vicinity were two 6-prs and Lt Stevens' 2-pr. All three were engaging eight to ten tanks which were advancing, one tank at least being not more than 500 yds from Lt Stevens' gun. Lt Stevens, making excellent use of the ground, sited the portee in defilade and destroyed an enemy tank that appeared to be leading the others, while the other two guns supplied supporting fire. Lt Stevens was previously wounded on a minefield, his spectacles were broken which very much impaired his sight, but he did not wish to be evacuated. His coolness in the face of such odds must have inspired the men under his command and the operation of all three guns plus others which joined them later stopped the advance of the enemy tanks.’

C Company, which was out of touch with the battalion when the first objective was reached, had followed B Company in the advance in accordance with the attack orders and until reaching the minefield kept that company in sight. At that point Colonel George spoke to Captain Wroth, the company commander, and then went on, while the company continued the advance on the bearing laid down, 351 degrees.

‘Shortly we were fired on by automatic weapons at 100 yds on our left flank,’ said Captain Wroth, ‘the fire being of such great intensity that we were forced to go to ground; the situation was made worse by the guns firing sufficient tracer to light up our positions as effectively as a red verrey light. On an order the two fwd pls and Coy Hqs rose and ran fwd, but it is not known whether 13 Pl (Mr Patterson in reserve) moved to the left to rush the guns, or carried on through the fire. Casualties were amazingly light and the coy moved on until reaching the metalled road at 4000 yds—the objective. Enemy trenches in this locality showed signs of hasty and recent evacuations. We moved on forward with the intention of contacting B coy and then turning about and taking up a defensive position. It would appear now that at this position B coy had been told to swing right as the ground was too flat for proper defence, page 199 but as word did not reach us we carried on, on the original bearing, thinking B coy (and the whole Bn) must be moving forward further than originally intended. Another thousand yards or so and 15 Platoon (left fwd pl, Mr. Matthews¹⁶) saw several enemy on his left flank, some of whom called out “Kamerad” but as the left section of this platoon moved left, the enemy opened fire, whereupon the pl commdr immediately swung his pl left and went in with the bayonet, killing 8 or 9 and losing 2. The enemy scattered, 20 – 30 men taking with them some sort of light tracked

vehicle, but leaving an anti-tank weapon which Lieut. Matthews destroyed as far as possible with the butt of a rifle.

‘After moving 4000 yards from the originally intended objective, we called a halt and laid low because of there being so much light from air force flares, taking the opportunity to decide what should be done next.

‘The enemy, however, made the next move when several vehicles on our left forward flank started up and moved, proving by their rattle to be tanks. A staff car leading them completely encircled us but we withdrew before the tanks had moved sufficiently to our rear to cut us off. The enemy had apparently seen us in the light of the flares as there was a good deal of activity to our front prior to the tanks arriving. Moving back down our advance line caused us some worry for the first 1000 yards or so as very lights were constantly being fired by the enemy, the lights never appearing any further to the rear. Nearing the metalled road again (a fair check on distance was maintained the whole time by men detailed for the purpose) we were confronted by a line of vehicles, some MT and some tanks. Too long to outflank, the coy moved towards a truck in the line, threw a 36 grenade underneath causing no uncertain consternation, took four prisoners, and left others wounded. One tank under which a ST grenade exploded, moved off in great haste, and the coy moved through without being fired at, although it was noticeable that all enemy contacted, both there and during the whole night, were completely dressed and wide awake.

‘Reaching the road we swung east to the line of the blue lights marking the Bde Axis line, 0400 hrs, and rested until first light when it was intended to move up the axis and find the Bn. Firing to the north caused us to decide against it, page 200 however, at first light, and we moved slightly north of east with the intention of parking up in whosever lines we happened to contact and moving up to the Bn when the coy commdr could definitely verify its location.

‘The coy was, however, marched back to its original position before the attack and then withdrew with the remainder of the Bn B ech.

‘The exact time or location where 13 Platoon was lost is not known, although it is possible, in addition to the possibility mentioned in the first MG episode, after crossing the metalled road a Bn runner with instructions to turn NE did meet 13 Pl (rear of C Coy HQ) and divert them.

‘On several occasions in addition to those mentioned intermittent enemy fire was opened, but casualties in C Coy HQ, 14 and 15 Pls are not heavy.’

Although C Company during its movements had encountered a good deal of fire and was the only company to meet direct opposition during the advance, its casualties, apart from the loss of 13 Platoon, were not heavy. It was easy to go astray at night in the desert, but the company was guided by its bearing of 351 degrees and by men detailed to check the distances, and on these data reached a point about 500 yards east of the eastern end of the El Mreir Depression before turning back.

The RSM (O’Kane) throws a little light on the loss of touch with C Company. On the arrival of the vehicles at the first objective, O’Kane was instructed by Colonel George to lead the carriers to the various areas to deliver ammunition. He went first to B Company, where he met Lieutenants Sharpley and Cathie with their platoons. Sharpley told him that C Company was on his platoon’s left flank but after going out some 400 yards O’Kane could not find it. On returning to Battalion Headquarters he was told by Colonel George that the battalion was moving forward and there was not time to search further for the company. O’Kane’s account continues:

‘The Bn continued forward in a northerly direction and was met by heavy MMG fire at approx 4.50 a.m. and almost immediately afterwards by mixed MMG and A Tk fire, with occasional mortar fire. At this stage the Bn was very bunched and slightly ahead was other transport, presumed to be English. 20 yds distant on the right (east) was a heavy British tank. The wounded previously picked up in the SAA truck in the minefield and elsewhere were here placed in slit trenches already dug, approx 30–40 yds away from the ammunition truck. 6-pr page 201 A Tk guns attached to the Bn withdrew under intense fire at this stage. Our portees moved into position to engage the enemy. One under Cpl Fraser¹⁷ was stuck in soft sand and though strenuous efforts were made to get it out, it was hit and caught fire. Other vehicles hit and burning were A Coy’s carrier, SAA truck, and the tank. All men took to the ground except the portee crews. Fire continued with some intensity for a half to three-quarters of an hour when light started to break. Troops could then be seen in strength to the north and large numbers to the NW. To the NE rifle coy men could be seen moving towards enemy tanks without being fired on and it was presumed that they had been forced to surrender. Enemy tanks then approached from the NE and moved to encircle the Bn position. Capt Wilson with jeep called on all men around “to make a break for it”. RSM O’Kane, CSM Smith, and a man from the A Tk Pl were able to get clear on the jeep and were subjected to concentrated fire from the tanks. No one was hit.

‘On reaching the minefield O’Kane jumped overboard and salvaged another jeep. Both jeeps crossed the minefield safely and reached Bn HQ through 26 Bn area.’

Others were also lost, as an entry in Wakeling's diary shows:

‘Jul 21.... Bill Small,¹⁸ Bill Morton,¹⁹ two sigs, a section of 12 Pl and myself were lost at 9.30 and wandered round, passing close to two of Jerry's tanks and on running up against his barbed wire we quickly retired east with bullets whistling all around and tank and arty shells making us duck now and then. Dug in in a little wadi and tried to sleep for a time.

‘Jul 22. Up before daylight as the RAF just about lifted us out of our dugouts with their heavy bombs and old Jerry not far away.... about 8.30 started to walk back to our bn lines and were picked up by an armoured car. One of the worst nights we have ever had. Just as we reached Bn a few Stukas came over and to earth we went smartly....’

The return of RSM O’Kane to the Battalion Headquarters area in rear brought the first definite news of the calamity that had overtaken the battalion, and a little later, Captain Wilson brought confirmation of it.

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Unfortunately, the fears of the New Zealand commanders that the supporting tanks would not be on the objective in time had been realised. Headquarters New Zealand Division had heard by midnight that 26 Battalion had reached its objective and had encountered enemy tanks, and was assured by Headquarters 1 Armoured Division that its tanks would be there at first light. About 4 a.m. Brigadier Clifton was in touch with Colonel Gentry (GSO 1 NZ Division) at Divisional Headquarters and asked him to ensure that tank support came up quickly. Clifton also asked one of his three tank liaison officers to call his headquarters and, climbing on that officer's tank, heard him report the situation and ask for tank support at first light. It was a tragedy that it was not so arranged.

A few minutes after 8 a.m. on the 22nd, the Valentine tanks of two regiments of 23 Armoured Brigade advanced westwards along the northern lip of El Mreir, encountering minefields and heavy artillery and anti-tank fire and suffering heavy losses. Several squadrons reached the objective three miles west of the pipeline but at midday, with only seven tanks left, the brigade was withdrawn, having lost eighty tanks. There was no lack of determination and courage in 23 Armoured Brigade.

Efforts were still being made to find out what had happened to 6 Brigade and whether part of it might still be holding out in El Mreir. Second Armoured Brigade attacked late in the afternoon against the south-east corner of El Mreir. Under heavy anti-tank fire, the brigade was soon in a dangerous position from which it was ordered to withdraw, with eight Grant tanks destroyed and ten others disabled. Even as late as 5 p.m. 6 Field Regiment reported that what appeared to be men of 24 and 25 Battalions were close to their objectives and the tanks were asked to investigate. Reports from survivors, however, soon dispelled any hopes in the matter.

It is perhaps futile to surmise what the result of 6 Brigade's attack would have been had the tanks arrived on the objective at or a little before first light, but the great determination and gallantry displayed when the tanks did attack leave little doubt that the operation would have been an outstanding success.

At 3.30 p.m. on 22 July Major Burton once more assumed command of the battalion, the survivors of which were ordered to withdraw to a position about nine miles back, and there re-form. Captain Wroth with C Company (less 13 Platoon) had arrived and the approximate strength of the battalion was 362. The casualties as revealed in the casualty lists were 16 officers page 203 and 195 other ranks. Of these one officer (Captain Birch) and thirteen other ranks were killed and two other ranks died of wounds; two officers (Major Hutchens and Lieutenant R. G. Stevens) and twenty-five other ranks were wounded; twelve officers (Lieutenant-Colonel George, Captain F. N. Armstrong, Lieutenants E. P. Bunny, B. Campbell, C. H. Cathie, F. D. Christensen, J. R. G. Jack, R. H. Jackman, C. R. McColl, A. H. Paterson, P. F. Sharpley, R. B. Robertson) and 139 other ranks were prisoners of war: one officer (Lieutenant J. E. A. Wheeler) and fifteen other ranks were wounded and prisoners of war; one other rank (Private M. A. Chamberlain) was missing but was later classified as killed in action.

The battalion's withdrawal was made gradually so as to simulate a supply column, one half moving at 5.30 p.m. and the other half an hour later. Brigade Headquarters and 24 Battalion also withdrew to the same area, leaving 26 Battalion under command of 5 Brigade.

The 23rd July was a quiet day, the troops enjoying the rest and the extra ration of water that was issued. Most of the day the officers and NCOs were busy preparing rolls of personnel and lists of equipment, arms, ammunition, and vehicles to ascertain the state of the battalion.

During the day several men who had been missing after the attack, and also the five men missing from Paterson's patrol on the night before the attack, returned to the battalion. Private McQuarrie,²⁰ medical

orderly at the RAP, was amongst the former. He had helped to collect the wounded after the battalion had been overrun, his assistants being Brigadier Clifton, who had removed his rank badges, and Captain Pemberton,²¹ a New Zealand sapper officer. McQuarrie also helped several other officers to escape when Clifton and he managed to slip away after the main body of the Germans had left the battlefield. 'During the day excellent work was done by Pte McQuarrie,' wrote Brigadier Clifton. 'He collected and dressed fifteen or sixteen stretcher cases who otherwise would have received no attention. The Germans were prepared to help but their medical resources were practically nil and their own wounded suffered also....' For his gallantry and good work McQuarrie was subsequently awarded the MM.

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On the morning of 24 July Brigadier Clifton, speaking to the battalion, referred to the initial success of 6 Brigade's advance. He said that, after achieving the first objective, the brigade was overwhelmed at first light by an attack by over forty tanks, the supporting armour having failed to appear in time as had been planned. The men showed considerable feeling against the British armoured forces, but the Brigadier paid a tribute to the British crews of the armoured units.

Criticism was, naturally enough, very bitter after the disasters which had overtaken our forces. These disasters were due, in the main, to the British armour not being at hand, as planned, to meet the inevitable counter-attack by enemy armour, delivered at dawn after a successful advance by our troops, and before there was sufficient light to site the anti-tank defence. Feelings were aroused which, in the interests of the successful prosecution of the war, required to be curbed, and in a personal letter to brigadiers for the information of the troops General Gott, commanding 13 Corps, included the well-known and very appropriate lines, 'There is so much bad in the best of us, and so much good in the worst of us, that it ill behoves any of us, to criticize the rest of us'.

The following day, 25 July, a Special Order of the Day was issued by General Auchinleck:

Behind El Alamein 25 July 42

To all ranks Eighth Army from C-in-C.

You have done well. You have turned a retreat into a firm stand and stopped the enemy on the threshold of Egypt. You have done more. You have wrenched the initiative from him by sheer guts and hard fighting and put *him* on the defensive in these last weeks.

He has lost heavily and is short of men, ammunition, petrol, and other things. He is trying desperately to bring these over to Africa but the Navy and the Air Force are after his ships.

You have borne much but I ask you for more. We must not slacken. If we can stick it we will break him.

Stick to it.

C. J. Auchinleck General.

D Company, accompanied by five reinforcement officers, now arrived from Maadi after being three weeks away from the battalion. A, B, and C Companies were then formed into one page 205 company and named C Company, and after dark the two-company battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Burton moved forward to reoccupy the position it had formerly held west of Alam Nayil. D Company was on the right and C Company on the left; 18 Battalion (under command of 6 Brigade) was on the right of D Company in 24 Battalion's former position, the latter battalion having gone to Maadi to reorganise.

The night was quiet and after daybreak the companies dug in. There was a little spasmodic shelling but the principal annoyances were the plague of flies (which appeared to be increasing), the intense heat, and a heavy dust-storm which arrived at midday.

During the night of the 26th several demonstrations to simulate an attack like that against El Mreir on 21–22 July were made along the front of 6 Brigade. The purpose of these was to hold the enemy on the front while the Australian and armoured forces attacked—unsuccessfully, it was learnt later—on the coastal sector. Raids were organised, minefields blown up, artillery and machine-gun concentrations fired, and other measures taken to deceive the enemy. Fifth Brigade took similar action.

There was intermittent shelling all day on the 27th, mainly against D Company, which on that day took up a new position on the battalion's left flank, facing southwards, while 18 Battalion extended its frontage to the south to take over D Company's former front. The arrival of 105 reinforcements from Maadi enabled the battalion to form a third company, B Company, commanded by Captain Weston,²² the other two company commanders were Captain Wroth (C Company) and Captain Macaskill²³ (D Company), Captain Wilson continuing to act as adjutant.

That night a patrol led by Lieutenant Moffett,²⁴ the Bren-carrier officer, moved towards Fortress A, finding fresh marks of MT and tracked vehicles but no sign of enemy troops. The laying of mines along the brigade front was pushed on and by the 29th the front was fairly well protected in this way. A rather unusual

visitation, a plague of mosquitoes, was experienced on that date, giving everyone a bad time and for the moment [page 206](#) superseding the terrible flies as enemy No. 1; a small palliative was the hope and the belief that the Germans and Italians were similarly afflicted. From samples of these mosquitoes sent back for identification, malaria-bearing types were found to be present. A strong breeze from the south during the night had apparently brought the insects up from the [Fayoum](#), 120 miles away to the south-east.

Active patrolling continued each night with little result, though a patrol on the 31st under Second-Lieutenant Budd²⁵ encountered a working party from which it attempted to cut off three of the enemy; unfortunately, because of faulty fusing of three 36-type grenades, which failed to explode, the patrol was forced to retire under fire, eventually returning to the battalion by a circuitous route with the loss of Private [Ballinger](#),²⁶ missing, and later reported to be a prisoner of war.

The enemy was also harassed by fire from 25-pounders, mortars, and machine guns and often responded by laying heavy defensive fire around his positions, a sure sign of nerves and of the need to bolster-up the resolution of his infantry. Towards the end of July 64 Medium Regiment, supporting the brigade, fired on Fortress A in retaliation for the shelling of the brigade front.

August saw continuous patrolling by all battalions. Twenty-fifth Battalion had a standing, reconnaissance, or fighting patrol out on every night of the month, no fewer than twelve officers, including two captains, taking part, each of them on several occasions. A good deal of information about the enemy defences was obtained but there were few encounters with his troops, apart from rather heavy fire at times. The patrols operated to a considerable distance forward of the battalion's front; for example, Pt 104, where strong standing and other patrols of the battalion were almost continuously present each night, was three miles to the west-south-west of the front line.

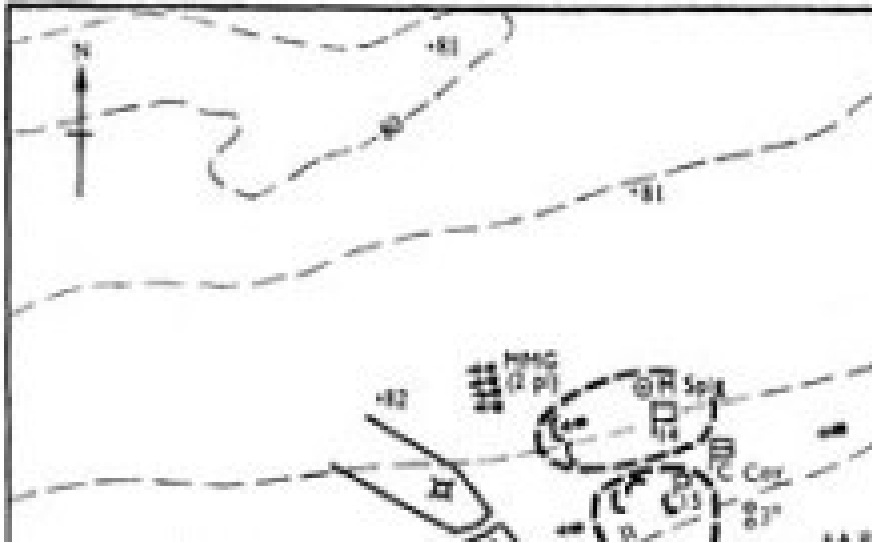
On the night of 9–10 August [Lieutenant Kempthorne's](#)²⁷ patrol encountered a large enemy patrol a mile west of Pt 104 and inflicted and suffered casualties; [Lieutenant Kempthorne](#) and Private [Snell](#)²⁸ were missing, the former being reported [page 207](#) later as died of wounds and the latter as wounded and prisoner of war. Again, eleven nights later, Second-Lieutenant Budd's patrol was fired on from both flanks as it withdrew after inflicting casualties; Budd was killed and one man was wounded and missing. A third brush with the enemy took place at about 1 a.m. on 26 August when Lieutenant Hewitt's²⁹ patrol engaged an enemy patrol of over thirty men; after an exchange of fire the enemy withdrew, losing a parachutist (fighting as infantry), armed with a light machine gun and a machine-carbine, as a prisoner.

Two nights later Moffett's patrol of carriers visited the enemy wire and, after firing on an enemy position, withdrew under fire with one carrier and its crew missing. This occurred near Pt 104, where a fighting patrol of one platoon, two sections of carriers, an anti-tank gun, one section of mortars, and a No. 18 set for R/T communication to Battalion Headquarters, all under Lieutenant Norman,³⁰ was in position; the No. 18 set, as was so often the case, was unsatisfactory.

In the very early hours of the 29th C Company had some excitement when an enemy aircraft, a Ju88, crashed in flames in the vicinity of 14 Platoon and exploded with a terrific bang, the crew of four and the aircraft being totally destroyed, though two 500-pound bombs were found intact. At midday there was a good deal of air fighting and three enemy aircraft were shot down; next day there were frequent enemy air reconnaissances.

The enemy was not inactive in meeting the intense patrolling of the New Zealanders and from early in the month showed much greater alertness. He also thickened up his defences with booby traps and used a tank or armoured car, in combination with searchlights, to cover his nocturnal working parties, thus making surprise attacks by our patrols almost impossible.

An embellishment for the head-dress that might well have formed the subject of a Bairnsfather masterpiece was the vogue at this time. This was a veil of mosquito netting hung from the rim of the steel helmet to protect the eyes, nostrils, and mouth from the persistent attacks of flies. The veil was also most useful to enable men on night duty to sleep in the daytime. The use of the veil emphasises the menace of the fly; no description can be adequate to give anyone who has not [page 208](#)



25 battalion positions, alam nayil, august 1942

page 209 experienced it any real understanding of this fly nuisance. It baffles description as it baffled all efforts to reduce it to reasonable proportions, but it did produce innumerable and effective fly traps (which gave vindictive satisfaction to the owners) and a high standard of hygiene throughout the Division's area. An amusing little incident in Helwan hospital has reference to this matter. On her morning inspection the Matron approached a patient in bed. 'Ha!' she said, 'a patient from the Western Desert, I see.' 'Yes,' the patient replied, 'but you know me.' 'That is so,' said the Matron, 'but I know for another reason. You have a fly cemetery under your bed. Men from the Western Desert kill every fly they can reach. Other patients merely brush them aside.' This story not only illustrates the animosity a severe fly-plague aroused but it also shows that, though the fly population was infinitely lower at Helwan, not even a first-class hospital could keep them out.

August was a most trying month for the Division and diaries and letters frequently referred to the conditions: 'Heat and flies exceedingly trying—Getting dirtier and stickier each day and hope for a wash soon—Breeze a little cooler in the evening —Tea not till 8 because of the flies—This sitting about all day in the heat with the flies just about eating us alive is not so hot—Dirty clothes exchanged for new in the evening—very sticky with perspiration and dust and only a bottle-and-a-half of water a day.'

During the greater part of the day the heat was intense, a blazing sun from a cloudless blue sky creating almost furnace conditions on the stony, shadeless desert. In the afternoon sandstorms were frequent, bringing visibility down almost to zero. Early in the month the men occupied shallow slit trenches and a groundsheet over the top gave some slight protection from the sun, though the occupants found it difficult to believe. Later, as the trenches were deepened, there was some improvement. Diarrhoea and desert sores were common and jaundice even more evident, the rate of sickness being high with 1126 sick from all units admitted to the divisional dressing stations during the month. The nights, however, were a real relief with cooler temperatures, no flies, and some liberty of movement often impossible during daylight because of enemy observation. Moonlight nights in particular were brilliant, but these were bombing nights and the moon was not always as welcome as otherwise it would have been.

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Early in August the rations were changed over from tinned to fresh, a very welcome change though it continued for only two or three weeks. Occasionally a little beer was available, and the daily water ration (a matter of equal importance in such an arid country) was increased in the middle of the month from one gallon to one and a quarter gallons per man for all purposes, i.e., cooking and drinking, and such washing-up by the cooks as was inescapable.

In the matter of health a German medical report of 31 July showed that the troubles were not all on our side: '... with the lull in the fighting the number of wounded has decreased, but the number of sick is increasing; most noticeable are diarrhoea, skin diseases, influenza, throat infection, and exhaustion.'

On 7 August a rearward position at Alam Halfa, a prominent ridge about 440 feet above sea level and 130 to 200 feet above the level of the highest ground for miles, was reconnoitred by senior officers of 6 Brigade, including Colonel Burton, who was accompanied by the IO (Lieutenant Jackman). Fifteen miles to the east of Alam Nayil, this position was regarded as of great tactical importance, and the turn of events might well

require its occupation by New Zealand troops. The day was also notable for domestic reasons as leave to Cairo or Alexandria for 5 per cent of the strength for four clear days, exclusive of travelling time, was resumed. On the same day a very welcome reinforcement of 121 all ranks joined 25 Battalion, its share of 330 which reached the brigade.

On 14 August some general instruction on the defensive system, based on notes from Brigadier Clifton, was given to the battalion. It was explained that the defences on the front, for the greater part, consisted of V- or L-shaped section posts, 4 ft. 6 in. deep, connected by crawl trenches, the spoil being spread to avoid betraying the position of the trenches. As rock was usually found a few inches below the surface, the use of compressors was more or less universal. The forward defences were protected by a minefield of two belts: the one nearer our trenches was the protective field and was thickly sown and continuous; the other or outer field was of varying density and not necessarily continuous. The former field was under the close fire of our forward posts to prevent the mines being destroyed or removed. The mines were camouflaged with sand. Spare mines were left near gaps in the minefield so that the gaps could readily be closed. Wire entanglements were planned as supplies became available. Dannert wire of one row (later page 211 two) was on the outer edge of the protective field and a low wire entanglement, seven yards wide, on the inner edge. The 2-inch mortar was best used in forward section or platoon headquarters posts for firing parachute flares by night and HE and smoke by day. The flares produced an excellent light for a maximum of thirty seconds. The range of the mortar was 350 yards.

The Spigot mortar was stated to be an admirable defensive weapon; it threw a 20-pound bomb, capable of wrecking any tank, a distance of 450 yards, or a 10-pound bomb 900 yards. It was easy to conceal and operate. (The Brigadier's opinion of this mortar was by no means universal, the general view being that it was unsuitable for desert conditions.)

As regards the two-pounder anti-tank gun, the new super-charged ammunition now being issued gave a frontal penetration of the German Mark III tank at 900 yards, which of course was most valuable, especially for an extended front. The defensive fire now provided round the front trenches, on the firing of the SOS signal, was formidable. On the brigade front, it was provided by sixteen Vickers machine guns, twenty-four 25-pounders, eighteen 3-inch mortars, and all the Bren light machine guns, 2-inch mortars, and rifles of the battalions. A main enemy attack would be met by an additional forty-eight 25-pounders (making a total of seventy-two) and twenty-four medium guns. Except for some of the shorter-range weapons, all this fire was brought down when any forward company fired the SOS signal.

Anti-tank guns totalling twenty-four two-pounders and sixteen six-pounders were available in addition and all this was backed up by the Divisional Cavalry and any other armour in the vicinity. Sticky bombs and Hawkins grenades were effective against tanks, especially after the enemy tanks were separated from their infantry.

This general survey of the great defensive power of the Division, especially when reasonably concentrated, was a very encouraging one and was most appropriate at this time after the recent severe reverses, the inflow of large numbers of reinforcements, and the probability of enemy attack.

In the middle of August a very valuable addition was made to the Division. This was A Squadron, 46 Royal Tank Regiment, equipped with thirteen Valentine and two Matilda tanks, which came under command of the Division and went into laager near Divisional Headquarters. It was given two troops page 212 of 34 Anti-Tank Battery and two machine-gun platoons; with two troops of the Divisional Cavalry it formed a mobile reserve inside the divisional position, ready at short notice to move to any spot attacked by the enemy.

On the afternoon of 23 August General Montgomery (who had taken over command of the Eighth Army), accompanied by General Freyberg and Brigadier Clifton, visited the forward defended localities of 25 Battalion. At that time General Montgomery was regarded as just another general, an outlook that was soon to change.

A report that eight parachutists had dropped to the east of the battalion created some interest in the morning of the 25th; patrols could find no trace of them but pamphlets printed in Urdu were found that night. These seemed to be passes for intending deserters and were obviously intended for Indian troops.

A demonstration of the somewhat controversial Spigot mortar was witnessed about this time by two United States Army 'tank destroyers', amongst others. 'Its a grand weapon,' writes Brigadier Clifton. 'Blew a nice hole in a Valentine with second round.... If any tanks come at our front we shall prove its value alright.'

For some time there had been clear signs that the enemy had been building up his strength and every precaution was taken to guard against attack. A code-word indicating the probability of imminent attack was arranged and a permanent SOS signal introduced, while a strict stand-to, fifteen minutes before sunrise, was ordered by the higher command. A conference at Divisional Headquarters on the 24th had discussed the

situation; it was expected that the attack would take place at any time, probably on the following night and to the south of the Division. All leave was cancelled. No attack eventuated.

In the early morning of the 26th there was a spectacular display when at 4 a.m. the whole of the Divisional Artillery supported a raid by two companies of the Maori Battalion on the eastern end of the El Mreir Depression. This started as the moon set and was successful in capturing forty and killing many of the enemy.

The fly plague was of course still receiving attention, and now for the first time formalin was available to the troops and proved a most effective fly poisoner. 'They just die in heaps but more come' was one rather pathetic comment.

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Since the heavy fighting on 22 July there had fortunately been few casualties, despite a good deal of enemy artillery fire and the very numerous patrols sent out by the battalion. By the end of August, however, the constant attrition resulting from occupation of a front-line position had caused the loss of two officers (McCarthy³¹ and Budd) killed and two others (Kempthorne and Williams³²) died of wounds, one other rank killed, two died of wounds, and nine wounded, and eight other ranks (of whom two were wounded) prisoners of war, a loss of four officers and twenty other ranks.

On the evening of 30 August a raid similar to that of the Maoris a few nights earlier was planned by 18 Battalion. The objective was the Khawabir Depression and 25 Battalion was asked to assist by creating a diversion on the south of the raid. The customary standing patrol on Pt 104 was increased to include two platoons of infantry, anti-tank guns, mortars, Vickers guns and carriers, all under the command of Captain Weston of B Company. Setting out after dark, the patrol took up suitable positions around the point and at 9.30 p.m. opened fire according to plan to the west towards the Qattara Box and to the south-west. The Vickers guns expended some 12,000 rounds and the 3-inch mortars over 200 bombs. A similar diversion was carried out by 26 Battalion farther north, and between the two diversions, 18 Battalion's raid caught the enemy unawares and procured a bag of thirty-three prisoners.

As all this activity died down, heavy enemy fire broke out all down Eighth Army's front, drawing counter-battery fire from our own artillery. An hour before midnight there was heavy fire to the north where the Indians on Ruweisat Ridge were attacked by a strong patrol, and there was little surprise when at 1.30 a.m. on 31 August the code-word for impending attack was received at Battalion Headquarters. This was followed by orders to close all gaps in the minefields, which was done by C and D Companies. Enemy infantry reported at 3 a.m. to be occupying Deir el Angar, a mile south-west of the battalion, were heavily engaged by 5 Field Regiment and two platoons of machine guns. Before 9 a.m. there was much enemy air reconnaissance.

The long-expected enemy attack was now under way, one hundred tanks being reported through the first minefield, ten page 214 miles south-south-east of 25 Battalion. Throughout the day there were many reports from all battalions of enemy forces moving eastwards on the southern flank of the Alamein line.

It is now necessary to give some indication of the enemy's general plan of attack and the measures taken by General Montgomery to meet it. Just before midnight on 30–31 August the enemy made feint attacks in the north and the centre of the line. The northern feints were easily repulsed by 9 Australian Division. In the centre, an attack against 5 Indian Division holding Ruweisat Ridge had some success but the enemy retired before a counter-attack could be mounted.

The main attack was the southern one, the enemy forces comprising *15 and 21 Panzer Divisions*, *90 Light Division*, and *20 Italian Corps* consisting of the *Ariete* and the *Littorio Armoured Divisions*. The attack was made between the left flank of the New Zealand Division and Himeimat, 13 miles to the south. By midday enemy armour was through our minefields and had moved eastwards, south of Deir el Ragil. *Ninetieth Light Division* was to the north of the armour in the evening, and after some delay in passing the minefields, reached Deir el Muhafid, four and a half miles south-east of the battalion's left flank.

Mobile troops of the British 7 Armoured Division, who were guarding the southern flank, fell back as planned before the enemy attack and adopted a harassing role against the flanks of the advance. A strong wind in the afternoon which raised the dust prevented the RAF from taking effective action against the enemy columns; towards dusk, however, the conditions improved and our air forces commenced intensive attacks which continued night and day against enemy concentrations, contributing materially to the success of the British defence. Early on 1 September it could be seen that the enemy's line of advance was in the direction of Alam Halfa ridge. Repulsed in that area, he ultimately retired behind our minefields south of the New Zealand Division.

Some knowledge of these events had come to the Division and its lower formations and units, which in the meantime had to be prepared to hold their defensive positions against all-comers.

On the night following the start of the enemy attack, 31 August-1 September, the battalion sent a reconnaissance patrol under Lieutenant Norman to the east end of Deir el Angar. The only evidence of the enemy occupation detected that morn- [page 215](#) ing was the sound of movement. The following morning (2 September) enemy troops occupied the north side of Deir el Angar and a good deal of enemy movement was observed to the south, targets being engaged throughout the day by our artillery.

In the early afternoon 14 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment had a notable success, shooting down two Ju88 aircraft while a third crashed near the enemy lines, much to the delight of the New Zealanders who saw it; one aircraft crashed on a [27 Battalion](#) truck, two of the aircrew being killed and two, suffering from burns, being captured. In the enemy lines the appearance of stretchers after our artillery and machine guns had been active was an encouraging indication of effective fire. Two reconnaissance patrols from the battalion were out that night. One, led by WO I O'Kane and including two officers from the Royal West Kent Regiment, visited an area south-east of Deir el Angar and about 2500 yards south of 25 Battalion's front. No enemy was seen but vehicle pits, formerly used by 2 Rifle Brigade, showed signs of occupation by enemy mortars. The second patrol under Second-Lieutenant [Mowat](#)³³ opened fire, with Brens using tracer, on an enemy working party a hundred yards from the eastern edge of Deir el Angar. This drew fire from enemy machine guns and an anti-tank gun and the working party withdrew into the depression. The patrol was fired on, during its return journey, by mortars and artillery, the severity of the enemy reaction suggesting that the patrol's fire had been very effective.

At noon the following day (3 September) verbal orders for active operations that night were issued by Brigadier Clifton. The New Zealand Division's role now was to harass the enemy's L of C³⁴ and so hamper as much as possible the enemy forces operating to the east.

That night, by 10.45 p.m. 25 Battalion had guided 132 British Brigade and 26 Battalion through gaps it had cleared in its minefields; the British brigade, under command of the Division, was to attack south to the [Deir Alinda](#) depression (about three miles to the south of 25 Battalion), where it was to occupy about 2000 yards of the northern edge with 5 (NZ) Brigade on its left. To guard the right flank of 132 Brigade, 26 Battalion was to seize 1200 yards of the rear line of the [page 216](#) British minefield extending southwards from near the east end of Deir el Angar. As diversions, 18 Battalion was to assault enemy sangars at the western end of the Deir el Angar depression, attacking, with artillery preparations, from north to south, while B Company 25 Battalion was to destroy the enemy along the northern edge of that depression. The assaulting troops of 18 and 25 Battalions were to reach the edge of the depression at 11.30 p.m.

During the afternoon a troop of enemy artillery had shelled the battalion's position on the [Alam Nayil](#) ridge and for about ten minutes a mortar bombarded C Company. All was quiet, however, as the infantry of 132 Brigade passed through the gaps in the minefields, but 26 Battalion had casualties (including its commanding officer) from heavy artillery and mortar fire which disorganised and delayed the vehicles and supporting arms of both forces. D Company, holding the left company sector west of [Alam Nayil](#) trig, was under heavy shellfire for more than an hour.

At 11 p.m. B Company, with two anti-tank guns and two sections of mortars, under Captain Weston, moved through C Company's gap in the minefield, though delayed a few minutes by the heavy shelling. It then formed up and advanced with two platoons forward, following an artillery barrage; when the barrage lifted, 300 yards from the objective, the company assaulted the enemy position. There was little opposition at first and the two leading platoons moved over the edge of the depression, encountering heavy fire from anti-tank guns, machine guns, and rifles from both flanks. Considering the position too strong for his force, Weston fired the signal to retire. The withdrawal was difficult as the enemy had put down a mortar barrage behind the company, a strong indication of his confidence, and his infantry was trying to move round the flanks. Enemy small-arms fire was encountered all the way back to the minefield, where the gap was being heavily mortared. The company had one officer and three men wounded and twenty-eight missing.

From the enemy's action in accurately shelling and mortaring the gaps in the minefield in the darkness there seems no doubt that he had observed the clearing of the gaps in daylight and had drawn the obvious conclusion that an attack was pending.

During the retirement Corporal [Warr](#)³⁵ of B Company, [page 217](#) although suffering from shell-blast, carried a badly wounded man, much heavier than himself, a distance of 1500 yards under heavy fire. Stopping frequently because of fatigue or to shelter from fire, Warr took over two hours to bring the man back to his lines and showed fine courage and a complete disregard for his own safety. For this feat he was awarded the Military Medal.

The attack of 18 Battalion at the western end of Deir el Angar, 1000 yards west of 25 Battalion's objective, had much more success, taking fifty-two prisoners and causing a great deal of damage. Twenty-sixth Battalion, which, it will be recalled, followed 132 Brigade, reached its objective, but one of its companies was surrounded and lost most of its men. Brigadier Clifton, who went forward to 26 Battalion and to 132 Brigade, was missing and was reported later over the German radio as a prisoner. The 132nd Brigade encountered heavy fire and was held up well short of its objective. The next day all the New Zealand troops were withdrawn into the New Zealand Box.

The enemy offensive in the south had failed and with slight variations his forces were withdrawn to his original positions. His losses, especially in tanks, had been heavy.

By 5 September the units of the New Zealand Division were in their former defensive positions, and though there was some expectancy amongst the troops that they would soon be relieved, a few more days were to elapse before that took place.

The enemy was still in the Deir el Angar, a constant target for our artillery. The Muhafid Depression (four and a half miles to the south-east of 25 Battalion) was now clear of the enemy and, generally, the front settled down to its former state. About 9 a.m. on the 5th, Battalion Headquarters was shelled for ten minutes and there was some general shelling of the area a little later. Enemy artillery, estimated to be one troop, was seen during the morning to be taking up a position in the western end of the Deir el Angar. To the south, in the vicinity of Deir el Munassib-Deir Alinda and the high ground beyond, there were signs of movement of enemy vehicles towards the west throughout the entire day.

Two Valentine tanks had been left on the minefield and that night a patrol under Lieutenant Hewitt was placed near Pt 93, about 3000 yards south of the battalion, to cover a salvage party from 46 Royal Tank Regiment. A reconnaissance patrol under Lieutenant Abbott³⁶ was about 1000 yards south-west of page 218 Hewitt's patrol and heard enemy working parties. A third patrol under Sergeant Cliffe Dawson³⁷ visited the eastern end of the Deir el Angar and heard working parties in the depression.

On the morning of the 6th a clash between six Me109s and six Hurricanes at about 2000 feet over the brigade area caused some excitement; two Messerschmitts were destroyed, one pilot being killed and another captured, while two Hurricanes were lost though the pilots were safe. The area held by the battalion was heavily shelled during the morning and again early in the afternoon, and, as always, it was some comfort to see our artillery responding briskly. Throughout the day the enemy was busy in the Deir el Angar.

The new Brigade Commander, Brigadier Gentry, took over command of 6 Brigade the following day, 7 September, a day when the enemy from the vicinity of Deir el Angar elected to shell his headquarters as well as 25 Battalion headquarters and D Company. The enemy there was showing a certain degree of aggressiveness and so was his air force, which in the evening made a dive-bombing attack by nine bombers escorted by twelve Me109Fs, directed against the battalion's position; no damage or casualties resulted. Brigadier Gentry visited the battalion that afternoon.

From intelligence reports it now seemed that the enemy was holding the whole of the Munassib Depression (four miles south of 25 Battalion) and the western end of the Muhafid Depression, a couple of miles farther to the east.

The morning of the 8th was quiet though there was desultory shelling of Brigade Headquarters in the morning and of the battalion at noon. Relief was now in sight. The 132nd Brigade, with a battalion of 151 Brigade, was to relieve 6 Brigade, its Brigadier and Brigade Major visiting 25 Battalion on their way to Brigade Headquarters. The commanders of the relieving battalions also visited the various battalion areas in the afternoon. Our artillery each day was active against observed targets.

Patrols from the battalion had continued their work each night. A reconnaissance patrol under Lieutenant Norman saw enemy troops, covered by two tanks, digging trenches on a line running east and west near Deir Alinda (three miles south of 25 Battalion). Another patrol under Sergeant Cotter³⁸ visited page 219 the eastern end of Deir el Angar; a working party to the south-west was heard and on moving forward the patrol was fired on and withdrew.

The following night two patrols were out but no enemy was encountered. One under Second-Lieutenant Hoy³⁹ went to Deir el Angar and the other under Second-Lieutenant Coldwell⁴⁰ reached the northern edge of Deir el Munassib. The next night (8-9 September) Deir el Angar was visited by Lieutenant Matthews's patrol, which found the eastern end clear of the enemy. Working parties at Deir Alinda were heard by Second-Lieutenant Pitcairn's⁴¹ patrol, which withdrew when fired on. A third patrol that night, under WO I O'Kane, heard a working party and vehicles in the Deir el Angar.

During the morning of the 9th D Company was bombed by nine Stukas, escorted by fighters, and lost two men killed and five wounded; half an hour later Battalion Headquarters area was shelled and this continued throughout the day.

The order for the relief was received that morning and advanced parties from 8 Durham Light Infantry arrived in the late afternoon. The relief was to be completed by 2 a.m. on the 10th, but an hour and a half beforehand the battalion transport was able to move off to the bivouac area, five miles east of Alam Nayil. The majority of the men had to march, and after a three-hour trudge through the dust and soft sand, reached the bivouac area just before dawn.

All that day a dust-storm blew and for once was welcome, effectively concealing in the afternoon the battalion's move to the divisional rest area on the sea coast near Burg el Arab, a rough and dusty three-hour journey in MT. The beach in the new area was a delight after the strain, hard work, and dirt of the last two months, but lifesaving precautions, which included organised bathing parties and pickets with improvised equipment, were necessary. Six days' leave to Alexandria and Cairo was granted, preference being given to those who had been through the summer campaign without a break.

The battalion remained in its pleasant beach camp until 19 September, enjoying the concerts given by the brigade band page 220 and the Kiwi Concert Party though, because of the risk of air attack, it was necessary to restrict gatherings to about 400 and to provide anti-aircraft defence.

On 12 September Lieutenant-Colonel Burton, a popular figure who had commanded the battalion with distinction and under great difficulties at Sidi Rezegh after Colonel McNaught was wounded, went on leave. He had been temporarily in command for the last seven weeks, after the capture of Lieutenant-Colonel George. He was succeeded in command by Lieutenant-Colonel Bonifant.⁴²

¹ Lt-Col R. L. Hutchens, DSO, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Singapore; born Hawera, 26 Nov 1914; civil servant; CO 27 (MG) Bn Feb-May 1944; 26 Bn May-Jun 1944; 24 Bn Jun 1944–May 1945; wounded 21 Jul 1942; Commissioner for New Zealand in Singapore, 1959–.

² Sgt D. O. Hawkins; Hamilton; born Marlton, 17 Mar 1916; school teacher.

³ Cpl T. S. Kotlowski; Christchurch; born Akaroa, 29 Dec 1908; public servant.

⁴ Capt A. H. Paterson; Waipawa; born Gisborne, 12 Feb 1912; labourer; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁵ Capt E. P. Bunny; Havelock North; born Auckland, 8 Mar 1914; station manager; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁶ Royal Horse Artillery.

⁷ Capt R. H. Jackman; Gisborne; born Gisborne, 6 May 1915; industrial chemist; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

⁸ Pte P. W. Bates; Auckland; born New Plymouth, 25 Jun 1920; journalist; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped Italy, to Switzerland, Sep 1943.

⁹ Sgt H. W. Carter; Wellington; born Wellington, 14 Feb 1914; civil servant; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

¹⁰ Pte D. B. Rapley; Auckland; born NZ 3 May 1915; branch manager.

¹¹ Capt P. F. Sharpley; Papakura Camp; born Ireland, 30 May 1914; clerk; p.w. 22 Jul 1942.

¹² Pte J. O. Bone; Hastings; born Napier, 1 Aug 1916; insurance agent.

¹³ Cpl J. E. Broad; Wellington; born NZ 14 Sep 1912; purser; p.w. 22 Jul 1942; escaped, Italy, Sep 1943; safe with Allied Forces Apr 1944.

¹⁴ Capt B. F. Betts; Christchurch; born Christchurch, 1 Apr 1913; warehouseman.

¹⁵ Capt R. G. Stevens, MC; born Hawera, 26 Feb 1914; farmer; wounded 22 Jul 1942; died on active service 8 Jun 1944.

¹⁶ Capt R. H. Matthews, m.i.d.; Waipukurau; born Gisborne, 22 Dec 1913; shipping clerk; wounded 22 Mar 1943.

¹⁷ Pte M. A. Fraser; Rotorua; born NZ 28 Dec 1917; grocer's assistant; twice wounded.

¹⁸ Sgt J. F. Small; Feilding; born Ashhurst, 19 Oct 1915; grocer; wounded 15 Dec 1943.

¹⁹ Capt W. H. Morton; born NZ 13 Apr 1919; timber machinist; wounded 17 Mar 1944.

²⁰ Pte I. M. McQuarrie, MM; Wellington; born Wellington, 31 Mar 1919; radiographer; p.w. 26 Mar 1943.

²¹ Lt-Col R. C. Pemberton, MC and bar, m.i.d.; Auckland; born Christchurch, 23 Mar 1915; engineer; OC 8 Fd Coy Dec 1942–Oct 1943; CRE a NZ Div Jul-Aug 1944; twice wounded.

²² Capt C. Weston, m.i.d.; New Plymouth; born NZ 6 Mar 1914; farmer; wounded 24 Oct 1942.

²³ Capt H. Macaskill, m.i.d.; born England, 16 May 1907; school teacher; wounded 22 Apr 1943.

²⁴ Lt W. S. F. Moffett; Wanganui; born Wanganui, 15 Jun 1912; fat-stock buyer; wounded 25 Apr 1943.

²⁵ Lt B. H. Budd; born NZ 17 Feb 1914; stock agent; killed in action 21 Aug 1942.

²⁶ Pte W. F. Ballinger; born NZ 28 Mar 1916; truck driver; p.w. 1 Aug 1942.

²⁷ Lt E. F. L. Kempthorne; born NZ 8 Jan 1904; farmer; died of wounds 9 Aug 1942.

- ²⁸ Pte K. G. Snell; Kaiangaroa Forest, Rotorua; born Otahuhu, 29 Nov 1921; carpenter; wounded and p.w. 9 Aug 1942.
- ²⁹ Maj S. M. Hewitt, MC; Waipukurau; born Dannevirke, 31 Oct 1916; shepherd.
- ³⁰ Lt-Col E. K. Norman, DSO, MC, m.i.d., Legion of Merit (US); Tauranga; born Napier, 14 Sep 1916; theological student; CO 25 Bn Dec 1943-Feb 1944, Jun 1944-Apr 1945; wounded 23 Apr 1945.
- ³¹ Lt J. J. McCarthy; born NZ 29 Jul 1910; solicitor; killed in action 15 Aug 1942.
- ³² Lt A. E. Williams; born NZ 13 Nov 1901; labourer; died of wounds 30 Aug 1942.
- ³³ Lt R. S. Mowat; Wellington; born Shannon, 8 Feb 1911; newsroom foreman.
- ³⁴ Line of communication.
- ³⁵ Cpl L. A. Warr, MM, m.i.d.; Wellington; born Wellington, 25 Mar 1920; salesman; wounded 3 Sep 1942.
- ³⁶ Capt L. H. Abbott; Auckland; born New Plymouth, 2 Jul 1904; warehouseman; wounded 24 Oct 1942.
- ³⁷ WO II C. H. Dawson, m.i.d.; Te Puna, Tauranga; born Lower Hutt 22 May 1917; clerk; wounded 22 Dec 1944.
- ³⁸ Sgt L. E. Cotter; born England, 27 Jul 1906; shepherd; died on active service 24 Jun 1943.
- ³⁹ Maj K. F. Hoy, m.i.d.; Hamilton; born Wellington, 5 Sep 1911; civil servant.
- ⁴⁰ Lt D. G. Coldwell; Hastings; born Waipukurau, 11 May 1912; dispenser.
- ⁴¹ Capt J. G. Pitcairn; Auckland; born England, 22 Jun 1910; stock and station agent.
- ⁴² Brig I. L. Bonifant, DSO and bar, ED, m.i.d.; Adelaide; born Ashburton, 3 Mar 1912; stock agent; CO 25 Bn Sep 1942-Jan 1943; Div Cav Jan 1943-Apr 1944; comd 6 Bde 3-27 Mar 1944; 5 Bde Jan-May 1945; 6 Bde Jun-Oct 1945; wounded 24 Oct 1942.