

Chapter 3

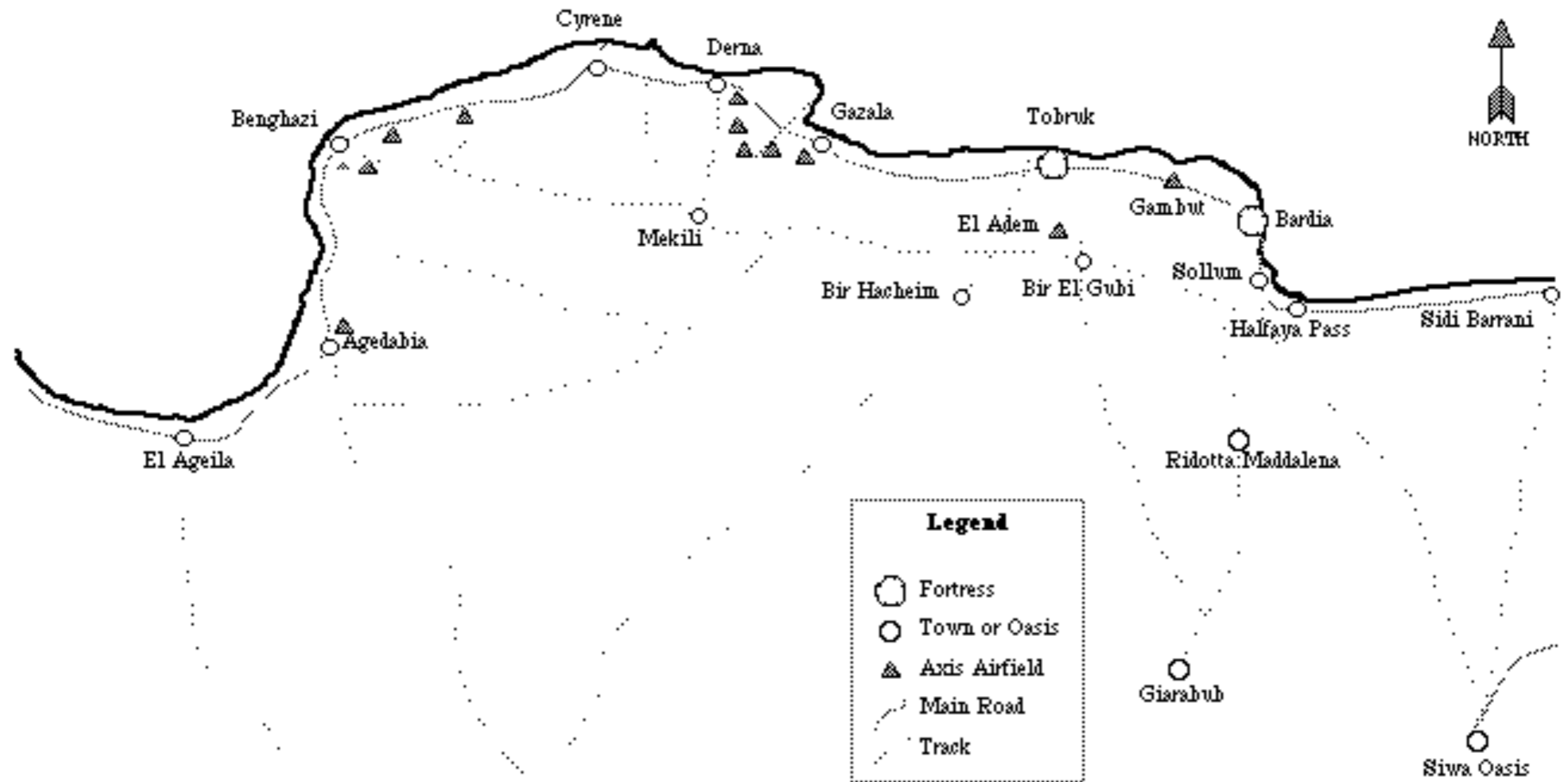
THE FRONT

The war in North Africa has been a see-saw affair, a contest in which an advance of several hundred miles might be followed by a retreat of similar length. It began in earnest on 9 September 1940, when an Italian field army based in Libya invaded Egypt. On 9 December 1940, the British Empire forces in Egypt counterattacked, capturing all that had been lost in the past three months, as well as a significant portion of the long Libyan coastline.

In February of 1941, Germany came to the aid of its ally, sending a small expeditionary force to Libya. After fulfilling its original mission of stopping the British advance into Italian territory, this formation went on the offensive. By 15 April 1941, the German and Italian forces in North Africa had retaken most of the territory that had been lost to British Empire forces just a few months before. In May and June of 1941, they successfully defended this ground against two British offensives. Since then, the front line in North Africa, which runs, more or less, along the border between Libya and Egypt, has been both stable and, notwithstanding raids and reconnaissance patrols, remarkably quiet.



The North African Theater of Operations 1941-1942



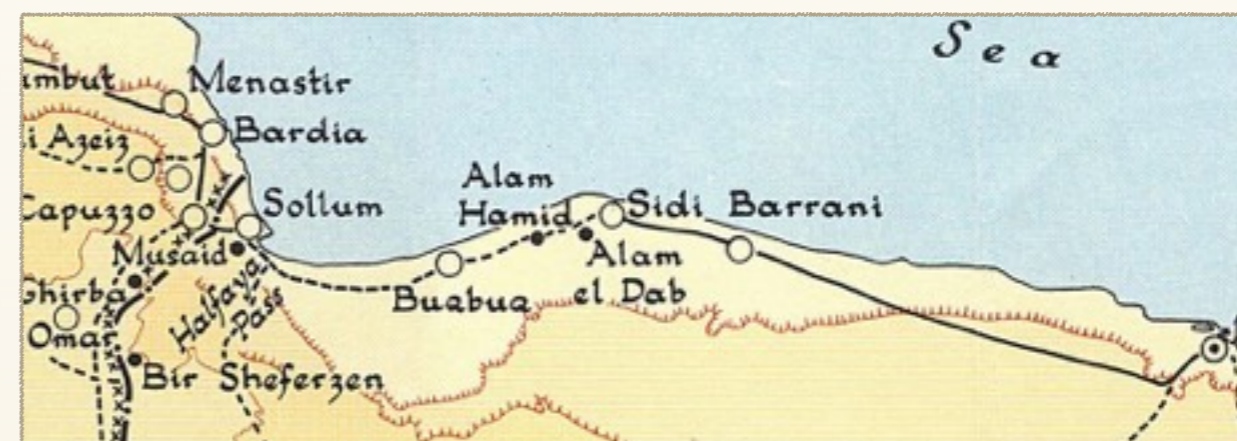
Terrain and Situation

Before the campaign in North Africa began German and Italian authorities were of the opinion that during the summer months large-scale operations with European troops would be impossible for climactic reasons. *Comando Supremo* [the Italian High Command in Rome] and the Italian Commander-in-Chief in North Africa, as well as the German Army High Command (*O.K.H.*), thought it advisable to withdraw the German troops to [the coastal province of] Cyrenaica, where the climate in summer was more favorable than in the desert. This idea was not unlike the practice of earlier centuries when at the beginning of winter armies used to go into winter quarters.

With the siege of Tobruk continuing and in spite of the victorious defensive operations during June when the enemy offensive had been smashed, this policy of withdrawing to areas with more favorable climactic conditions could not be adopted. General Rommel had always been skeptical regarding this break in operations during the summer heat. Having gained much experience in the meantime, Rommel was now absolutely convinced that operations could be carried out in North Africa even during the summer, and that the enemy would certainly not shrink from an offensive for nothing more than climactic reasons.

The attitude of the enemy gave reason to doubt whether he had suffered a defeat crushing enough to enforce a longer spell of inactivity on him. As early as the beginning of July enemy reconnaissance activity became quite intensive again. During the middle of July quite large group movements were observed in the area of Sidi Barani and in the desert to the south thereof. It was difficult to see whether the enemy's aim was to discover any preparation for a possible German offensive, whether he wished to strengthen his own forces for the defensive, or whether he was even preparing a new offensive.

The *15th Panzer Division*, which at the time was responsible for the Sollum front, regarded a British offensive as quite possible in the near future, as the enemy would have enough forces available after the conclusion of the campaign in Syria. Rommel himself did not think that the enemy would launch a new offensive in the next few months. He thought that this time the enemy would play safe and would not attack until thorough preparations had been made and forces very much stronger than those available in June should be at his disposal.

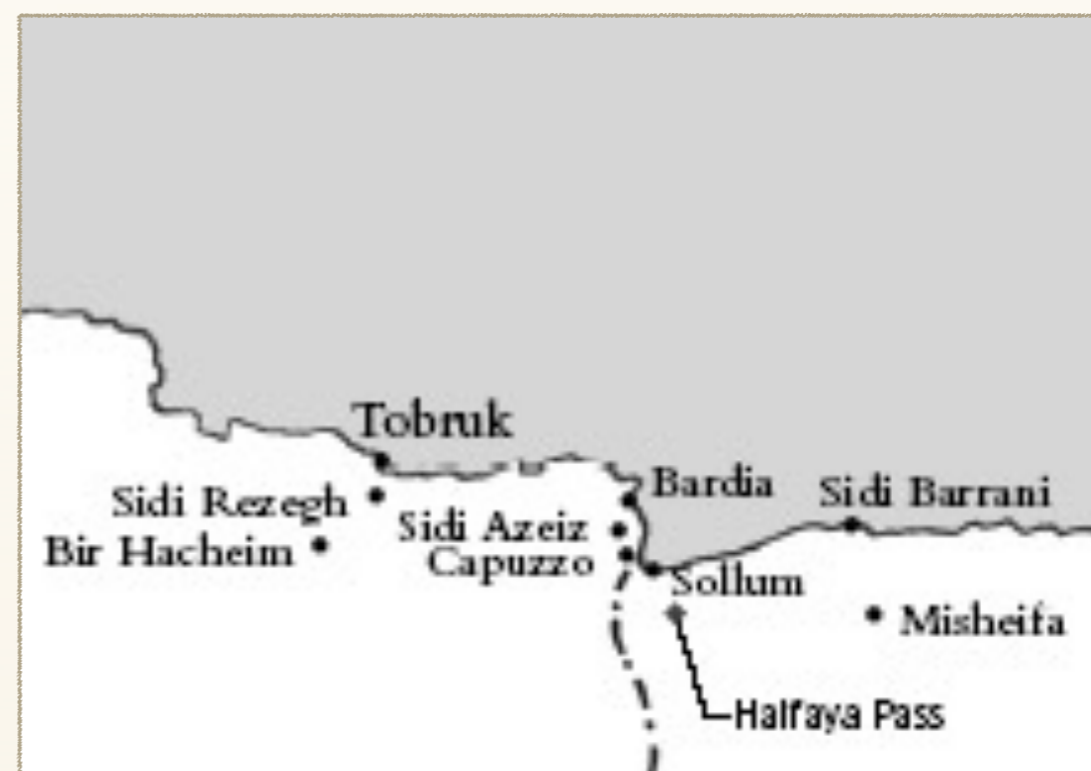


Yet Rommel did not waste time and at once began preparations to deal with an early attack. He made good use of his experience and the lessons he had learnt during the Sollum battle.

Rommel was guided by the following principles. The system of strongpoints had proved effective on the Sollum front. The system was therefore to be strengthened and gaps were to be closed. In order to compel the enemy to being far out into the desert and away from his supply route at the coast, the Sollum position was to be extended south of Sidi Omar, the whole line being more than 40 kilometers long. The German and the Italian armored and motorized units were not to be committed to a rigid defense but were to be assembled behind the front and on the one free wing in readiness for mobile operations. The positions themselves were to be held mainly by non-motorized Italian forces, whose power of resistance was to be backed and strengthened by a few high-grade [German] infantry units and by anti-aircraft units which were to serve in an anti-tank role.

After *Comando Supremo* had decided in May on the continuation of the siege of Tobruk, as Rommel had suggested, it was quite clear that before an offensive against Egypt was considered, the recapture of Tobruk must be the first objective. For this reason Rommel urged the *O.K.H.* to send the forces and supplies needed for this attack on Tobruk.

In the second half of July the Chief of the General Staff of the *Comando Supremo*, Colonel General Count Cavallero, accompanied by General von Rintalen, saw General Rommel in the latter's battle headquarters in Bardia. His main purpose was to convince Rommel that in no circumstances might an attack on Egypt take place until Tobruk had been taken. It soon became evident that the opinion of Cavallero did not differ in any way from the opinion of General Rommel. Cavallero promised energetic support for the attack on Tobruk. This support was not to be limited to assistance in the German transport of troops and supplies but was to include a strengthening of Italian troops by sending the *Motorized Infantry Division Trieste* to Africa, by bringing *Armored Division Ariete* up to full strength and by moving further Italian artillery into the battle area.



The Defensive Battle on the Egyptian Frontier

After the victorious conclusion of the fighting in connection with the British June offensive, The *21st Panzer Division* issued instructions regarding the defence of the Sollum position. But on 27 June an order by General Rommel put the defence on the Egyptian frontier on an entirely new basis. He was not satisfied with giving instructions regarding the construction of a new position, laying down the general line the position was to take, but making use of the experience which had been gained during the battles around Tobruk and during the Sollum battle, he took a hand in numerous practical details. With the great energy for which he was so well known Rommel saw to it that the German and Italian units understood his ideas in the shortest possible time.

Unlike the Sollum position then existing, which protected no more than the area around Capuzzo and Bardia and showed a more or less local character, the new position was to be an operational one, which was to run uninterruptedly from the Halfaya Pass to Sidi Omar and the west, stretching into the desert for more than 40 kilometers. A continuous, broad minebelt was to protect the area in front of the line in its entire length. A few gaps were to be left open for our own armor, but were to be covered by fire from the positions.

Construction of the Strongpoints

The position proper was to consist of four large battalion strongpoints, which were to be set up at an interval of 10 kilometers between one another. The names of these strongpoints were: Sidi Omar, de Cova (Got el Adhidiba), Quabir el Quaba, and Halfaya Pass. Each of these battalion strongpoints was to be prepared for all-round defence. Each was to have an all-round barbed wire entanglement. The intervals between each of the defensive positions of a strongpoint were blocked by further minefields. The hard core of each battalion strongpoint was formed by an 88 mm anti-aircraft battery which was to form the backbone of any defence against armor and which was to have an all-round field of fire. Each battalion strongpoint consisted of nine platoon strongpoints, each strengthened by anti-tank guns and wired in all round. Each platoon strongpoint was sub-divided into several section strongpoints with anti-tank guns, which were an imitation of the posts to be found in the Tobruk defences. Each section strongpoint had three open emplacements (for one anti-tank gun and two machine guns) interconnected by trenches and with bunkers for the crews. In addition, there were emplacements in each battalion strongpoint for several light or medium batteries. Two battalions together formed a *Section Command West* and a *Section Command East*.

The garrison of the strongpoint consisted of one reinforced Italian infantry battalion for each strongpoint with one Italian artillery detachment under command. Each infantry battalion was stiffened by a German oasis company. These oasis companies consisted of German volunteers. It is true they were not motorized but they were given numerous heavy weapons and their own supply installations, which made them into independent battle groups. In addition, each of these Italian battalions had one German or Italian heavy anti-aircraft battery under command.

At the beginning of July, General Rommel became convinced that the gaps between the strongpoints were too broad to allow an effective guarding of the mine-belt. For this reason, a new battalion strongpoint called Frongia was erected between the strongpoints Sidi Omar and de Cova. In the eastern sector two new company strongpoints called Cirorer and Faltenbacher were set up. (These strongpoints were named after Italian and German officers killed in action who had distinguished themselves during the fighting in the spring.)

The construction of positions was entrusted to the troops which were to man them. The mine belt, however, was to be laid out by the engineer battalions of the German *Panzer* Divisions. Its construction suffered such delay owing to supply difficulties, as it was very difficult to obtain the large number of German mines needed for the purpose. Instead of the German mines, which were unobtainable, the less suitable Italian

mines were used and several fatal accidents occurred. The work was made extremely difficult by the fearful heat of the summer months. On the whole, the construction of the positions was completed by August. However, it proved necessary to work continuously to bring this system of positions to near perfection. Even as late as November the positions still lacked rearward mine protection.

From the end of June, 1941, the positions were gradually taken over by the Italian *Infantry Division Savona*. Only in the Halfaya Pass, which was regarded as particularly important, did a German infantry battalion remain. This was *I./Schützen Regiment 104* under Major (Reserve) [Wilhelm] Bach, who had distinguished himself during the Sollum battle. In the middle of June the divisional staff of Savona was entrusted with the command of the western sector, and by the end of August it was made responsible for the entire system of defense.

The Sidi Omar-Sollum position was capable of comparatively large effect with a minimum of troops. Its strength rested chiefly in the excellent use which had been made of the terrain and in its well organized anti-tank defenses. It is true that these defences could not, and were not expected to, hold out for a long period against a breakthrough attack carried out by strong, thoroughly equipped formations. For this purpose they were too thinly manned and stiffened with too few German troops. But even aso the positions promised to

keep considerable enemy forces busy for some time, thus blocking the coast road and affording the German armored formations time and opportunity for mobile operations.

After the Sollum battle, activity in front of our positions remained negligible for a long time. The two German reconnaissance units were the only units that remained actively operational. *Reconnaissance Battalion 33* [of the *15th Panzer Division*] reconnoitering in front of our positions, and *Reconnaissance Battalion 3* [of the *21st Panzer Division*] reconnoitering on our open flank. Stationary reconnaissance units were pushed forward to a distance of about 10 kilometers in front of our positions, forming a covering screen. Soon, however, it became evident that the enemy reconnaissance forces on our front and in particular to the south of our positions had been considerably strengthened. As early as July our two reconnaissance units began to find difficulty in breaking through the dense screen of enemy armored cars. It then became the main task of the two reconnaissance units to protect the units manning the positions, and with them the *Afrika Korps* and the *Panzergruppe*, against surprise.

At the end of August the *Panzergruppe* recalled the armored car reconnaissance patrols of the two reconnaissance units in order to avoid too many casualties. The *Panzergruppe* counted on air reconnaissance and on wireless intelligence to give a timely warning of a possible attack.

The Enemy Situation

Early in July it became evident that the enemy was receiving considerable reinforcements. The *4th Indian Division* was certainly still on our front pushing infantry outposts up to 10 kilometers from our positions on the Halfaya Pass. It could also be taken as certain that the *7th Armored Division* was still somewhere near the front. In addition to these formations there were, moreover, indications that further forces were being concentrated in the area of Marsa Matruk. The German command suspected as far back as September that at least one South African and one New Zealand division were in that area. The enemy in Giarabub and Siwa had also been considerably strengthened. But it was not yet clear whether moderately strong fighting troops had not joined the reconnaissance detachments identified at these two oases. More formations were presumed to be in the Nile Delta. Of course, it was quite possible that they were meant for other theaters, as Lower Egypt always served as the giant marshaling yard for the entire British Empire.

Since July, enemy motor traffic in the area Sidi Barani-Marsa Matruk and in the desert to the south had been steadily increasing. This led the German high command to believe that the enemy was building up supplies for an imminent renewal of the offensive. In order to clarify the situation before the attack on Tobruk was launched, and in order to capture British orders which might give information on the enemy order

of battle, General Rommel decided on a vigorous reconnaissance thrust during September in the area south of Sidi Barani. This operation was entrusted to *21st Panzer Division*.

The operation which had been given the code name "Midsummer Night's Dream" (*Sommernachtstraum*), began during the night of 13 to 14 September. The operation proved to be a failure because the leadership and fuel supply organization of *21st Panzer Division* collapsed. The tanks of *21st Panzer Division* remained immobilized on the battlefield for several hours, giving the enemy time and opportunity to move up reinforcements and to throw his air force repeatedly into the contest. The latter was responsible for the considerable losses suffered by the German forces. For the first time the German forces experienced carpet bombing of great density, frequently repeated. No British orders were captured which contained any intelligence.

Thus the German command remained in the dark, even after this reconnaissance and nothing was known of enemy intentions, although it had become clear that the enemy air force had received considerable reinforcements. On the other hand, there was no evidence that the enemy was building up particularly strong supply depots in the frontier area. There was thus no reason to assume that the enemy would start his offensive for the next few weeks.

During October and the first half of November enemy reconnaissance became increasingly active. In the coastal area enemy infantry carried out reconnaissance operations which were repulsed by the Halfaya Pass garrison. The main effort of enemy reconnaissance activity was made farther to the south in the area around Ridotta Maddalena and Giara-bub. In the Maddalena area one or two South African reconnaissance units pushed far ahead. From there and from Giara-bub enemy reconnaissance units penetrated into the area to the south and even west of Tobruk. (Wireless reconnaissance pointed to more units being moved into the area of Marsa Matruk.) Thereupon in October *Reconnaissance Battalion 3* was again entrusted with the covering of the south-west flank of our Sidi Omar-Sollum position. No reconnaissance operation in force was however arranged to clarify the situation in the Maddalena area. *Reconnaissance Battalion 3* alone would not have been strong enough for such an operation.

At the beginning of November it had to be assumed that the British offensive was indeed imminent. The continued strengthening of enemy forces and the ever-increasing enemy reconnaissance activity left no doubt. It seemed possible that the main thrust would not be made in the coastal region but farther to the south in the desert.

from Tripoli and Benghazi. Rommel's most immediate care was the creation of the conditions which would make the early capture of Tobruk possible.

In order to make good use of the time before the arrival of the troops and supplies needed for the assault, local attacks were launched from the beginning of August which progressively tightened the ring around the fortress. They were retaken by us during August and September, and isolated posts were captured in other sectors in well-prepared local attacks. These attacks were made by German troops, and the newly won territory was then taken over by the Italians with German troops remaining in support for a few days. Some of these positions were lost by the Italians later after the German troops had been withdrawn. From September onwards the besieging forces worked their way nearer to the fortifications in all sectors.

The intention was to launch the attack against a spot on the south-east front of Tobruk south of the Via Balbia, because there the terrain was suitable for armored operations and because it was essential to open up the Via Balbia as early as possible. [The Via Balbia was a two-lane blacktop highway that ran along the entirety of the coast of Libya, from the border with Tunisia in the west to the Egyptian frontier in the east.]

During the summer and autumn troops were being relieved with a view to reorganizing the siege front for the attack. The infantry of the division *z.b.V. Afrika* was now arriving. These troops relieved the reinforced *Schützen Regiment 115* of *15. Panzer Division* on the southwest front of Tobruk. The bulk of the relieving troops was assembled in the rear of the east front of Tobruk. *Infantry Division Bologna* took over the sector of *Motorized Infantry Division Trento* on the east front. *Trento* took over the sector of *Infantry Division Pavia* to the west of el Aden and also the positions of the last elements of *Armored Division Ariete* on the south-west and west front of Tobruk. *Pavia* took over the positions formerly held by *Bologna* on the south-east front of Tobruk.

In Rommel's opinion the primary condition for the assault was the arrival of reinforcements of German infantry and artillery as well as the accumulation of the necessary supplies. This however was a slow process owing to the deterioration of the convoy position.

At the beginning of October the infantry of the *Division z.b.V. Afrika* [“Special Purpose Division Africa”] had arrived at full strength. But their heavy weapons, transport vehicles and supply vehicles had not, as they were being shipped in ordinary convoys. Thus the division was not up to full fighting strength and its usefulness was limited.