The enemy tanks continued to advance, destroying our field artillery in their defensive positions gun by gun. At about two o'clock King's Cross was taken, and the enemy overran the rearmost artillery position in the eastern sector. At the same time the headquarters of the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade ceased to function. The German thrust then divided. One portion continued along the top of the escarpment, causing the Coldstream Guards a number of casualties and overrunning the Sherwood Foresters and, with them, the headquarters of the 201st Guards Brigade. The other column of German tanks proceeded down the road to the town. The harbour came under fire at five o'clock in the afternoon and by six o'clock was cut off from the rest of the fortress.

About noon this day General Ritchie ordered the 30th Corps to use the 7th Armoured Division to advance on Tobruk. The Division reached an area some 20 miles south of the perimeter just before dark. About an hour later General Klopper reported by wireless to General Ritchie's B.G.S. telling him what had befallen and asking to be allowed to fight his way out. He was authorised to do so and was told that an endeavour would be made to hold open a gap between El Adem and Knightsbridge. About an hour later General Klopper again communicated with the Eighth Army to say that as the greater part of his transport had been cut off in the harbour area, it was impossible to get it to the troops on the perimeter, who had practically no vehicles.

During the night, the headquarters of the Army were intermittently in touch with General Klopper, and early on the 21st June learned from him that all water and petrol had been destroyed. He also informed the Eighth Army that the whole of his transport had been captured and on that account he had been unable to break out. An order was circulated to all units in the garrison that a capitulation had taken place and that all vehicles, equipment and arms were to be destroyed.

Certain detachments, which were in possession of transport, then elected to break out and some succeeded in rejoining the Eighth Army. Other British, Indian, and South African units continued to fight on throughout the 21st and there is evidence that more than one unit was still fighting on the 22nd June.

The Retreat from Cyrenaica.

When he knew that Tobruk was about to fall, General Ritchie telegraphed to enquire whether he should continue to try to hold the frontier positions or withdraw to Matruh. He had been relying on Tobruk to contain part of the enemy's armour and to impose at least some delay on his advance; not only would the enemy now be free to employ all his forces in the advance, but the stocks and transport he had captured would greatly simplify his supply problem. The defence of the frontier depended entirely on the backing of an adequate armoured force, which was no longer available; and General Ritchie wished to retire to Matruh, in order to gain time to recruit his armoured strength.

There were serious strategical disadvantages in abandoning the frontier and I did so with the greatest reluctance. The argument that an armoured reserve was essential to the successful defence of the frontier positions, applied with equal force to the Matruh position, which, owing to the configuration of the coast, could easily be isolated by a movement past its southern flank. The matter, however, was one of general policy which could only be decided in consultation with the other two Commanders-in-Chief. In the meanwhile, since General Ritchie alone was in a position to know whether the immediate situation made it imperative to withdraw, I was obliged to leave him to take the decision. But I warned him that I did not consider Matruh to be more easily defensible.

In order to gain time to build up an armoured force, which he believed could be done very rapidly, General Ritchie decided to fall back on Matruh. His decision was subsequently endorsed by the Middle East Defence Committee, and he was instructed to prepare to fight a decisive action round Matruh and to delay the enemy as far west as possible with a covering force. General Ritchie told the 13th Corps to delay the enemy, and sent back the headquarters of the 30th Corps to organise the Matruh position for defence, until Lieutenant-General W. G. Holmes and the 10th Corps Headquarters should arrive from Syria. The headquarters of the 30th Corps were then to go back and control the completion and occupation of the El Alamein position a hundred and twenty miles further east.

The 13th Corps was organised into two elements: a striking force and a holding force. The former was to operate under the headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division, the command of which Major-General J. M. L. Renton had taken over from Major-General Messervy. It comprised the 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigade Groups, with seventy and twenty-two tanks respectively; the 7th Motor Brigade Group, of four battalions; and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade Group, which had been reorganised, but was below strength. The holding force consisted of the 50th Division, the 10th Indian Division and the 1st South African Division.

There were few troops immediately available to occupy Matruh. The troops allotted to its defence in the first place were the New Zealand Division, which was just arriving from Syria; the 5th Indian Division with one brigade group only; and the 151st Infantry Brigade of the 50th Division when it should be released by the 13th Corps.

The enemy spent the two days following the capture of Tobruk in reorganising for a further advance. But he lost little time, and, whereas on the 22nd June only light forces appeared on the northern flank of the frontier positions and occupied Bardia, on the 23rd his divisions were manifestly gathering for a thrust round the south of Sidi Omar. The 7th Armoured Division, however, succeeded in preventing all but a very few from passing the frontier wire up to the evening of the 23rd June.

General Ritchie had authorised the retirement to begin the previous night. The 10th Indian Division and the 151st Infantry Brigade began to thin out from Sollum on the 22nd June, and the same evening the 2nd South African Brigade also began to retire from the eastern end of the escarpment. On the 23rd June, fearing that they might be cut off, General Ritchie gave General Gott permission to withdraw the remainder of the 10th Indian Division from Sollum and the 3rd South African Brigade from the western end of the escarpment. As there was then no longer any danger of the holding