

BIR HAKEIM - THE LAST MESSAGE(FROM A FRENCH WAR CORRESPONDENT).Bir Hakeim, Wednesday night. (Delayed).

Now it is hell. A few minutes ago a strange, unreal silence hung over this grim, battle-scarred little plateau - a silence broken only by the groans of the enemy wounded which, under the protection of the white flag, the Germans are removing from the outskirts of the positions held by Koenig's "ghosts" through fifteen days and nights of mounting fury.

But for the last half-hour, artillery and bomber aircraft have been relentlessly, nerve-rackingly pounding our defences. The last attack, which was flung back with severe loss to the enemy (and with some loss to ourselves), surpassed all others in ferocity.

Artillery, Stuka dive-bombers, infantry and tanks - the enemy gave up everything he had. The first wave of tanks blew up on the minefields laid by our engineers at great danger to themselves. The next wave was nailed to the ground by our 75s, which for days on end have been barking death and destruction and which are largely responsible for transforming Bir Hakeim into a cemetery of tanks. I should say some 50 to 100 enemy tanks litter the battlefield, grim hulks which resemble skeletons of prehistoric monsters.

Rommel - who has latterly been personally signing the notes calling on General Koenig to surrender - flung more and more metal into the attack, and though his losses grew proportionately greater, some of the tanks broke through our defences and rolled right up to our guns.

When our guns were overrun, it became a case of man v tank. At one post held by the Foreign Legion a German tank scored a direct hit at twenty yards. The officer commanding the post, a calm young man from Saint-Cyr, burnt his regiment's standard so that it should not be captured, then called on his men to attack. With incendiary grenades in their hands, they flung themselves on the tanks like infuriated hornets.

There are some things I can never forget:

The Legionnaire who, with blood streaming from his face, climbed on to a German tank and emptied his revolver through an aperture, killing all the occupants.

The sergeant-major who destroyed seven tanks.

The gun-crew who, when a shell stuck in the breach of their cannon at the height of battle, gambled their lives by knocking the shell out with a hammer.

In less than two hours Koenig's men destroyed 37 tanks. Somehow, incredibly, the attack was repelled. The Germans and Italians retreated, seemingly appalled by the blind fury of the defenders.

That moment will always live in my mind. The tanks withdrawing, screening the fleeing infantry. On the ground, a ghastly chaos, a mingling of shells, craters, dead and wounded Frenchmen, Germans and Italians. In that moment of victory, no cries of triumph, only the indescribable expression of defiance of the blackened, exhausted French.

Since then, and up to 30 minutes ago, there was that uncanny silence. Now they are pounding us again, and hard. The shelling and bombing are rising to a crescendo. We are straining our eyes to see what they are preparing in the darkness, beyond our lines. There is really a frightful noise. I think something big is going to happen.

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At this point the message breaks off. A few hours after these words were written, General Koenig, on the orders of General Ritchie, evacuated Bir Hakeim.

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