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OPERATIONS IN LIBYA
9 DECEMBER 1940 TO 12 APRIL 1941

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OPERATIONS IN LIBYA

9 DECEMBER 1940 to 12 APRIL 1941

INTRODUCTION

The prize of the Middle East is the Suez Canal. West of the Suez and the productive Nile Valley is the largest desert area in the world - the Sahara. (see Map A) A paradox of the ages, the desert is hot, dry, waterless, unproductive and worthless; and yet, many of History's most important battles have been fought over its sandy immensity. The chief characteristic of the desert is its unending sand, which rises in great clouds as men and vehicles move across the trackless wastes. There are, however, many rock formations to be found, such as, the escarpment, or cliff, which runs east along the coast from the low and rugged Green Mountains to the Libyan-Egyptian border where it breaks away from the coastline to run southeast into the heart of the desert. (see Map B) This escarpment is several hundred feet high, and since it cannot be negotiated by vehicles, except at a few of the existing passes, it constitutes a considerable obstacle. (1) The battlegrounds of the operations about to be described are a part of this desert and include the western part of Egypt (known to the British as the "Western Desert") and the eastern part of Libya, a province called Cyrenaica.

Prior to World War II, the Italians had conquered and colonized Libya, and though not at war with Great Britain in the early summer of 1940, a large Italian Army faced the British at the Libyan-Egyptian border. Having observed that the British were slowly sinking in Europe, the sympathies of the Italians for Germany finally reached a climax when, on 10 June 1940, the Italian government declared war on Great Britain. The Italian threat aimed at the priceless Suez was immediate and alarming. (2)

(1) A, pgs. 28-34; B, pgs. 126, 127; (2) A, p. 27

shortly after the declaration of war, General Archibald Wavell, who commanded the British forces of the Middle East, caused limited offensives to be launched against the Italians across the Libyan border. These limited offensives took the form of strong combat patrols which served to deceive the Italians as to the true location, strength and disposition of the British forces.(3) Nevertheless, the Italians, gaining confidence, launched an offensive from Libya into Egypt in the fall of 1940, when a large Italian Army moved across the border and advanced 56 miles in three days.(4) Halting at Sidi Barrani (see Map C) on 16 September 1940, the Italians made one further advance of about 20 miles to place an outpost at Maktilla.(5) The purpose of the halt is not clearly evident but presumably it was intended to allow the consolidation of supply lines and to bring up a water pipeline. While halted, the Italians built a string of fortified camps extending generally south and southwest from Sidi Barrani. The fortifications consisted of stone walls surrounding each camp. In some cases anti-tank obstacles and wire entanglements were used on the outer perimeter of the stone walls.(6)

TROOP DISPOSITION

five Italian divisions were disposed among the desert forts (see Map C) with the 4th Blackshirt Division at Sidi Barrani,(7) the 1st Libyan Division at Maktilla,(8) the 2d Libyan Division at East Tummar and West Tummar (the Libyan divisions were composed of native Libyan troops, trained and armed by the Italians) (9), the Maletti group (a force approximately equal to an armored division) at Nibeiwa (10) and the 63d Infantry Division at Sofafi and Rabia.(11) These divisions in Egypt were a part of the Italian XXIII Corps commanded by General Gallina, with headquarters in Bardia.(12) Other divisions in the XXIII Corps were the 62d

(3) A, p. 36; (4) C, p. 10; D, p. 25; (5) B, p. 130; E, p. 3; (6) B, p. 126; (7) B, p. 130; E, p. 3; (8) B, pgs. 130, 135; E, p. 3; (9) B, p. 130; E, p. 3; (10) B, p. 130; L, p. 251; (12) B, p. 130

and 64th Infantry Divisions, and the 1st and 2d Blackshirt Divisions, all disposed in a group of forts in the vicinity of Sollum and Fort Cappuzo.

(13)(14)

On the other hand, the British Western Desert Force, a part of General Wavell's Middle East Command under the direct field command of General Richard O'Connor, consisted of the 7th Armored Division, the 4th Indian Infantry Division, the 7th Royal Tank Regiment (15)(16) and the 16th Infantry Brigade.(17) This force was based at Mersa Matruh, a Mediterranean resort town about 200 miles west of General Wavell's headquarters in Cairo.(18) (see Map C)

THE BRITISH PLAN OF ATTACK

In the face of a vastly outnumbering Italian force, General Wavell decided to attack. From his reconnaissance reports, he had discovered three encouraging facts: first, that there was a large gap between Nibeiwa and Rabia (see Map C) and that therefore these camps were incapable of mutual support; second, that the anti-tank obstacles and wire entanglements of Nibeiwa appeared on the south and east of the camp, but that the north and west were bare of such obstacles; and third, that the Italians patrolled little, if any, between Nibeiwa and Rabia. Based on these discoveries, Wavell planned to make a surprise attack in the gap between Rabia and Nibeiwa, continuing north to knock out the line of forts facing the British

(13) Italian Divisions were frequently referred to by names rather than numbers. Ref. J, pages 113, 114, and 115 lists the following names of Italian Infantry Divisions involved in this action: 62d "Marmarica", 63d "Cirene" and the 64th "Catanzaro".

(14) F, p. 836; B, p. 147;

(15) The British brigade and regiment are equal in troop strength to the American regiment and battalion respectively. In order to give a more accurate picture of the troops involved, the symbols on the maps in this monograph have been selected to reflect the equivalent American strength.

(16) The several references indicated definitely refer to the 7th Royal Tank Regiment ("battalion" in American terminology) as a separate unit. Since this unit later disappears from the action without explanation, it is felt that the 7th Armored Division absorbed the tanks and equipment and that the 7th R.T.R. ceased to exist as a separate unit. Ref. H, page 3424 tends to verify this belief.

(17) D, p. 36; C, p. 13; I, p. 3; (18) A, p. 28.

from the east and leaving a force to forestall interference from the Italians at Rabia and Sofafi. The plan included detailed cooperation from the R.A.F. and the Royal Navy. Due to the disparity of numbers, general Wavell's plan was extremely flexible and provided that further advances into Libya would be made should the opportunity present itself.(19)

THE ATTACK ON THE ITALIAN FORTS IN EGYPT

The British plan, as outlined, required extreme secrecy in the initial phases. Only a half dozen officers of Wavell's command knew of the true purpose of "Training Exercise Number 1", which was a practice run in the desert, south of Mersa Matruh.(20) On the night of 7 December 1940, a force including the 7th Armored Division, the 4th Indian Infantry Division and 7th Royal Tank Regiment, struck out through the desert in the execution of "Training Exercise Number 2", and it was not until the force was well on its way that the troops were informed of the impending attack on the Italians.(21) Moving southwest in a great arc through the desert, general O'Connor's Western Desert Force halted during the day of 8 December, carefully camouflaging their tanks and vehicles and indulging in as little movement as possible in order to prevent detection by Italian air reconnaissance. On the night of 8 December, the advance continued to a pre-selected point between Rabia and Nibeiwa, where, a few hours before the dawn of 9 December, the force was divided into two contingents. The 4th Indian Infantry Division, together with the 7th Royal Tank Regiment, continued northward towards Nibeiwa, while the 7th Armored Division was dispatched to the southwest with the mission of preventing the dispatch of reinforcements to Nibeiwa from the Sofafi-Rabia area.(22)

At dawn, the Indian Division and the Royal Tank Regiment attacked the vulnerable northwest side of Nibeiwa. The Italians were at breakfast and

(19) L, p. 288; A, p. 101; C, p. 12; B, p. 131; C, p. 14 (20) A, p. 104; G, p. 286; C, p. 13 (21) E, p. 13 (22) D, p. 36; C, p. 14; A, p. 100.

were caught completely by surprise: their tanks were unmanned and their guns were unmanned. The British tanks had breached the stone walls and entered the perimeter defenses followed closely by Indian Infantrymen before the Italians fully realized what was taking place. After a fierce two-hour battle, the Maletti Group was subdued and forced to surrender.(23)

General O'Connor immediately ordered his troops northward to attack East and West Tummar and by evening of the same day, the 2d Libyan Division, their fortifications pierced and attacked from within and their troops defeated, surrendered to the British. At this phase, the men of the 4th Indian Division and the 7th Royal Tank Regiment might well have expected a rest, but general O'Connor ordered strong combat patrols to probe the defenses of Sidi Barrani during the night in an effort to determine the weak points in the defenses of that city.(24)

In the meantime, the 2d Libyan Division at Maktila, (see Map C) held from the east by a small detachment of British, designated as the "Arthur Force", (25) and pounded from the Mediterranean by naval gun fire and by R.A.F. bombardment, had been forced to retire along the coast to within the confines of the Sidi Barrani fortifications.(26) To the south, the 7th Armored Division had successfully carried out its mission against the 63d Italian Division at Sofafi and Rabia. The 63d had withdrawn in the direction of the Fort Cappuzo - Sollum area, and, in its flight, had been heavily strafed by the R.A.F. which caused many casualties in men and vehicles. A part of the 7th Armored Division had pushed northward towards Buqbuq to hold back any reinforcements from Libya to the Sidi Barrani area. (27)

On 10 December, the British began their attack on Sidi Barrani. The Italians opened with a strong artillery barrage which was promptly answered by British artillery and naval gun fire from ships in the Mediterranean. During this artillery duel, a great sandstorm came up from the desert and

(23) C, p. 14; A, p. 111; G, p. 286; (24) C, p. 15; D, p. 36; (25) C, p. 15; I, p. 2; (26) B, p. 135; A, p. 121; (27) C, p. 14; A, p. 127; D, p. 136.

so obscured the observation of the Italians that the British tanks were able to make a rapid penetration, followed closely by the Indian Infantry. The Fascist troops fought well for the entire day, but with the British within their outer defenses, it soon became evident that the city was lost. By evening, the 4th Blackshirt and the 1st Libyan Divisions were stricken from the Italian Order of Battle with the surrender of Sidi Barrani.(28)

At this juncture, General Wavell saw fit to withdraw the 4th Indian Division from the fighting in the Western Desert and dispatch them to Ethiopia to fight the East African Italian Armies. Since no division was immediately available to replace the 4th Indian, the 16th Infantry Brigade was brought forward from the reserve as a temporary substitute.(29)

The following day, 11 December, the 16th Brigade and the Royal Tankers continued to advance towards Sollum. West of this advancing column, the 7th Armored Division encountered the 64th Italian Division. The meeting took place near Buqbuq and caught the 64th, strung out in march formation, moving up for a rotation relief of the 4th Blackshirt Division (which had surrendered the previous day but was to have returned to Sollum for a rest period). The Italian column, extended along the road and totally unprepared for action, was no match for an armored attack. With little fighting, the 64th Division surrendered in formation to the British armored unit.(30)

THE CAPTURE OF SOLLUM AND BARDIA

As the British soldiers continued their advance toward Sollum, they could recall with pride the action of the past three days for the number of Italian prisoners now in the hands of the British totaled 40,000. The presence of so many prisoners was, in itself, a tremendous problem in food, water and transportation requirements, and the British were already low on supplies, particularly water. General O'Connor had opened the operation with a calculated five-day supply of water, and unless the Western Desert Force could reach Sollum soon, water supply by land transport would be required.

(28) A, p. 121; C, p. 15; B, p. 135; D, pgs. 36, 37; (29) C, p. 15; I, p. 3; K, p. 5; (30) G, p. 298; A, p. 126; B, p. 136; D, pgs. 36, 38.

Sollum was a port that would allow the entry of Royal Navy transports with the much needed water and other supplies. Fortunately for the British, the Italians withdrew from the Sollum - Fort Cappuzo area and concentrated their forces within the heavy perimeter fortifications of the coastal city of Bardia, about 20 miles north of Sollum. A strong delaying action was offered by the Italians, but by 16 December, the 1st and 2d Blackshirt Divisions, the 62d Infantry Division, and remnants of the 63d Division were retreating towards Bardia.(31) (see Map D)

Now the British took a much needed rest, and, in the interim, brought the needed supplies into the port of Sollum: food, water, ammunition, and spare parts for the rehabilitation of their tanks and other vehicles.(32) It was during this period that the 6th Australian Division was brought up to replace the 4th Indian Division, earlier relieved.(33) Preparation for the attack on Bardia soon began with the dispatch of a small force of tanks to cut the road leading from Bardia along the coast to Tobruk.(34) Heavy air and naval bombardments were directed upon the fortifications of Bardia and extensive air and ground reconnaissance undertaken.(35) The fortifications of Bardia were made up of strong, carefully planned, mutually supporting gun positions laid out in concentric rings with such obstacles as tank ditches, wire entanglements and minefields.(36) Having spent four years in the construction of this "impregnable" fort, the Italians were determined to make this stand as the bastion of fascism with no thought of surrender.(37) Reconnaissance reports indicated that the Italians expected an attack from either north or south of the city, but that they least expected an attack from the west.(38) There existed, west of the city, a deep gulch, or wadi, difficult to negotiate and an unlikely approach.(See Map D) The British planned to make a feint from south of the city and then to make their main effort with tanks and infantry through the wadi, thus splitting the Italian defenses into two sectors which could be defeated separately.(39) The

(31) D, p. 38; G, p. 298; C, pgs. 15, 16; L, p. 255; (32) A, p. 129
(33) C, p. 17; A, p. 136; (34) L, p. 257; G, p. 302; D, p. 39; (35) D, p. 39; L, p. 260; (36) L, p. 258; G, p. 302; (37) A, p. 137; L, p. 258; L, p. 261; (39) L, p. 261; G, p. 309.

softening up began on 1 January 1941 with heavy aerial and naval bombardments. On 2 January, the feint attack was launched from the south, and while the attention of the Italian defenders was drawn to this attack, the British sappers breached the obstacles in the wadi. soon afterwards, tanks and Australian infantrymen poured into the wadi and forced through the perimeter fortifications. The fighting continued for four days, but by 5 January, the Italians had seen enough, all organized resistance ceased, and the four defending divisions yielded 40,000 prisoners to the British.(40)

THE ATTACK ON TOBRUK

With the fall of Bardia, General O'Connor immediately pressed westward towards Tobruk, a coastal town with an excellent port. Situated about 75 miles west of Bardia, (see Map E) Tobruk was defended by the 61st Italian Infantry Division (41) and a detachment of sailors who manned the aged San Giorgio, an obsolete cruiser anchored in the harbor as a battery of heavy artillery.(42) The defenses of Tobruk, though similar to the semicircular system of forts and obstacles at Bardia, were not as tough because the garrison was smaller and the perimeter longer.(43)

Approaching Tobruk, a part of the 7th Armored Division captured a group of airfields which the Italians had scraped from the desert floor at El Adem, about 20 miles south of Tobruk. shortly afterward, the Australian Infantrymen had surrounded Tobruk and again engaged in extensive preparations for an attack with aerial and naval bombardments, and detailed reconnaissance to determine the weak points of the defenses.(44) Having selected the point for proposed main attack and armor penetration, the British planned to launch diverting attacks around the entire perimeter. The plan was put into effect on the morning of 21 January, and the penetration was made as had been planned. tanks were followed by Australian

(40) G, p. 308; D, pgs. 40, 42; L, p. 261; (41) also known as the "Sirte" Division, I, p. 112; (42) E, p. 2; (43) L, p. 267; I, p. 4; (44) L, p. 264; M, pgs. 43, 44; A, pgs. 145, 148.

infantrymen, who fanned out rapidly once within the defenses.(45) The defense offered was vigorous, but as had been noted by the British in previous cases, the Italians based their defense upon a plan which provided for little or no flexibility. The following day, 22 January, the Italians were brought to their knees and forced to surrender. The count of prisoners for operations from 9 December 1940 to date (22 January 1941) was now nearly 100,000.(46)

THE ATTACK ON DERNA

Following the capture of Tobruk, the 7th Armored Division advanced rapidly along the superb coastal highway. Gazala, a large airfield, already neutralized by the R.A.F., was taken after slight resistance from the remaining ground troops. (See Map E) The 6th Australian Division continued the pursuit along the coast while the 7th Armored was ordered to the desert post at Mekili to effect much needed tank repairs, and to protect the Australians' flank.(47) Reaching the outskirts of Derna, (See Map E) a coastal city about 100 miles northwest of Tobruk, the Australians were surprised to find that the Italians were making a strong stand, despite the fact that Derna had no prepared modern fortifications as had been found at the previously conquered coastal cities. The terrain in the vicinity of Derna was, however, particularly well suited to the defense. A deep wadi which cut down to the sea from the Green Mountains afforded the Italians excellent positions on its western lip. Numerous frontal attacks of the Australians were repulsed. For the first time in the campaign, the British experienced a counterattack. Then, to the utter surprise of the Australians, the defense was abruptly terminated and 30 January when the Italians unexpectedly withdrew, allowing the capture of Derna with no further fighting.(48)

(45) L, p. 267; A, p. 150;

(46) D, p. 46; L, pgs. 266, 269; G, p. 309;

(47) D, pgs. 47, 49; C, p. 18

(48) D, p. 47; L, p. 282; N, p. 59.

THE BRITISH ATTACK AT BEDA FOMM

It now became evident to general O'Connor that the Italians were in full flight and would make good their escape from complete annihilation unless cut off south of Benghazi. The only solution under the circumstances was to dispatch the armored division into the desert with the mission of intercepting the retreating Italian column at some point between Benghazi and Agedabia.(49) Such a feat had never before been attempted, nor even considered possible.(50) Nevertheless, this bold step was decided upon and on 4 February, six days before the scheduled completion of tank repairs, the 7th Armored Division departed Mekili (51) with its destination 150 miles away, across the uncharted sea of sand and rock. By noon of the following day, the armored division reached the coastal road in the vicinity of Beda Fomm, a village about 60 miles south of Benghazi. (see Map E) Just one hour and 40 minutes later, the head of the surprised Italian column appeared. Numbering about 20,000, the fleeing Italians were commanded by General Tellera and included the 60th Infantry Division (52) and 112 tanks. The British plan was to attack frontally in order to halt and fix the column and at the same time to strike at the eastern flank. (see Map E) The British were outnumbered at least two to one, but in the end their advantage of surprise and mobility was to spell defeat for the Italians (who failed to use their mobility) after an exhausting 36-hour battle.(53)

THE BRITISH HALT AT EL AGHEILA

Following the battle at Beda Fomm, the last battle of a campaign which was later to be labeled "Wavell's First Advance", the 7th Armored Division continued on to El Agheila to outpost the conquered province of Cyrenaica. Meanwhile, the 6th Australian Division had entered Benghazi unopposed on 6 February.(54) In two months time, an Italian army of eleven divisions

(49) C, p. 18; (50) K, p. 6; (51) C, p. 18;

(52) Also known as the "Sabrota" division, Ref. J, p. 111

(53) C, p. 18; M, pgs. 52, 56; N, pgs. 69-71; D, pgs. 50, 54

(54) L, p. 284-286

had been destroyed by a British force, which at no time had boasted more than two and a half divisions. The Italian prisoners of war numbered over 133,000, while the British total casualties were in the neighborhood of 2000.(55)

General Wavell was now directed to discontinue his advance in North Africa and to divert all possible troops to fight the German forces in Greece and the Italians in East Africa. A minimum holding force was to be left in Western Cyrenaica.(56) Wavell considered the German forces, known to have been recently landed in Tripoli, to be incapable of serious offensive before May at the earliest.(57) Furthermore, the terrain west of Agedabia was so thoroughly scarred with steep rock formations as to prohibit inland advance into Cyrenaica. The coastal approach was therefore a definite defile.(58) With these facts in mind, the 6th Australian Division was withdrawn and dispatched to fight the Germans in Greece. The 7th Armored Division was also withdrawn to Cairo for extensive repairs to their tanks. The replacement units brought up were the 9th Australian Division, a green and practically untrained division, and a brigade of the 2d Armored Division, equally green. Two brigades of the Australian 9th were garrisoned at Benghazi, while the remaining brigade, together with the 3d Indian Motorized Brigade, garrisoned Tobruk. The brigade of the 2d Armored Division was placed at El Agheila for outpost duty.(59) General Neame relieved General O'Connor in command of the British forces thus disposed in Cyrenica.(60)

THE GERMAN ATTACK

Suddenly, on 24 February 1941, German tanks on reconnaissance were encountered by British tanks west of El Agheila. On 24 March the Germans appeared in strength to march into El Agheila.(61) (See Map F) The British

(55) D, p. 55; K, p. 7; (56) H, p. 3423; (57) H, p. 3425; (58) C, p. 7; (59) H, pgs. 3424, 3425, 3429; (60) H, p. 3428; C, p. 19; (61) Q, p. 1

began their withdrawal and announced in a communique that their forces were being withdrawn to seek positions more suitable for the defense.(62)

The immediate objective of the German attack was to prevent diversion of troops from Cyrenaica to Greece while German troop strength and supplies were being built up in western Libya for a drive to the Suez.(63)

As General Erwin Rommel, who commanded the German forces, advanced toward Benghazi against the delaying actions of the British 2d Armored, he came to the realization that the British were rapidly retreating and that a reversal of O'Connor's tactics in crossing the desert would cut off the Australian division before it could reach Tobruk.(64) Rommel had in his command the 15th Panzer Division, the 5th Motorized Division, and several Italian units which had remained in western Libya during the British advance into Cyrenaica.(65) Splitting his forces, Rommel struck boldly into the desert in the direction of Mekili, while the remainder of his command continued northward to pursue the 9th Australian Division.(66) (See Map F)

Entering Benghazi on 4 April, the pursuing Germans found that the British had departed, blowing up, or otherwise destroying, vast quantities of military stores which they were forced to leave behind.(67) Beyond Benghazi, the Australians showed signs of panic. Traffic on the roads became congested and caused delay and more confusion. The Germans captured General O'Connor (who had been rushed out from Cairo to assist in the withdrawal) and part of his staff as they detoured off the main road to avoid a traffic jam.(68)

In the desert, the Panzers continued against the delaying action of the British armored brigade, but at Msus the confusing reports of withdrawal had caused the guards of the British fuel dump to destroy the petrol before the return of their tanks and soon the German tanks were able to advance unopposed through the desert.(69) At Mekili, however, the Germans

(62) O, p. 63; (63) O, p. 65; (64) C, p. 20; A, p. 237; (65) R, p. 18;
(66) E, p. 20; (67) A, p. 237; (68) A, pgs. 237, 238; H, p. 3429;
(69) A, p. 237; H, p. 3429

encountered stiff resistance from the 3d Indian Motorized Brigade which had been sent to Mekili to protect the flank of Tobruk.(70) Attacking strongly on 7 April, the Germans demanded a surrender, but the Indians refused. Again the Germans attacked, and again they demanded surrender, only to be refused a second time. On 8 April, a group of Indians made a wild attack on the Panzers and managed to create enough confusion to allow the escape of part of the brigade while the remainder were captured. (71) Had it not been for the delay brought about by the valiant defense of the Indian Brigade, Rommel might have succeeded in cutting off the 9th Australian Division before it reached Tobruk. The Australians closed into Tobruk on 9 April.(72)

Rather than attack Tobruk immediately, Rommel chose to bypass the contained British garrison for the time and continue his advance to the Egyptian border. The Australians however, stood on the flank of the German supply lines as a permanent threat. Rommel was obliged to return a part of his force to attempt a removal of the "thorn in his side". Launching a coordinated tank-infantry attack on 12 April, the Germans succeeded in piercing the British defenses of Tobruk. Though the German penetration was deep, the British were more adept at the business of defending a perimeter than had been the Italians. Rushing anti-tank guns and other field pieces to the area of penetration, the defenders knocked out all but five of the participating German tanks, thus preventing further enlargement of the salient.(73) The Tobruk defenders held and were to hold for seven months to come.(74)

On the same day (12 April 1941) that the Germans attacked Tobruk, the remainder of their forces passed through Bardia and continued on toward Sollum, where Rommel was to meet a determined British defense which stopped the German advance for some months to come.(75)

(70) H, p. 3429; (71) H, p. 3429; O, p. 65; (72) C, p. 20; (73) O, p. 67; (74) C, p. 20; (75) C, p. 20

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

At the opening of the campaign, the British attacked a numerically superior Italian Army by surprise and achieved a success that was so demoralizing to the remainder of the defenders that they were unable to make a firm stand for the rest of the campaign. The Italians had placed their dependence upon a series of perimeter forts to repel all attacks. On the other hand, when the British were forced to retire to the protection of the perimeter defenses of Tobruk, they organized a mobile defense which permitted the concentration of men and equipment from other sectors not engaged.

The desert forts which the Italians constructed in Egypt were strong and well built, but extended to the British an invitation to concentrate their striking power on one fort at a time. The British, though outnumbered on a grand scale, were permitted to isolate and defeat the forts individually.

The Italians frequently lacked security. They failed to patrol the gaps between their forts; they failed to use proper security measures while moving units (as at Buqbuq and Beda Fomm); and their forts were not properly outposted.

At Sollum, the Italians held two great advantages: first, the advantage of the commanding heights of the escarpment and its attending defiled approaches; second, the British had less than two divisions of strength, and their troops were reduced in efficiency after five days of desert combat. Three divisions of fresh troops (the 63d, and the 1st and 2d Blackshirt divisions) were available to the Italians to defend the escarpment. Ignoring these advantages, the Italians withdrew to the fortified city of Bardia which offered no barrier to the advance of the British into Libya.

The action at Bardia constitutes an excellent example of faulty estimate of the situation on the part of the Italians. With strong defenses astride the obvious approaches, the defenders failed to consider

the capabilities of the enemy with respect to the most difficult, yet possible, approach. The British had but to confirm the expectations of the Italians with a feint and then to exploit the unlikely approach.

Turning to defend at Derna, the Italians were well situated with respect to terrain but had not prepared for the defense. This action further confirms the dependence of the Italians upon strong perimeter defenses.

At Beda Fomm, the British again indulged in the unexpected action to completely surprise the Italians. Advancing south along the road toward Agedabia, the Italians failed to consider the enemy's capability of traversing the desert with armor, and therefore had no security elements to their front. The British took full advantage of the mobility of tanks in this action, whereas the Italians did not and failed.

On behalf of the British, it must be said that at the time of the German attack, the Middle Eastern British Command was engaged in a losing war. Busily involved on two other fronts (Greece and East Africa), General Wavell was forced to withdraw troops from the less active front of Libya to support his other fronts. The untrained troops used to replace those withdrawn from Cyrenaica were unable to sustain the onslaught of German panzers. The confusion in the withdrawal of the British apparently resulted from lack of planning.

The Germans exercised great initiative in pursuing the British until stopped, even though the Germans had not intended to push into Cyrenaica at this time.

After a thorough study of desert operations, it becomes evident that there exists a nearly perfect analogy between desert warfare and sea warfare. Tanks must navigate in the desert much as do ships at sea, for the uncharted desert terrain offers few landmarks other than those on its fringes. Tanks in desert operations are as essential as ships in naval operations. In general, desert flanks are as wide open as are naval flanks. The possession of convenient ports is an advantage in supply operations. Terrain is as valueless as are waves in the ocean, and the clear-cut objective in desert operations is the destruction of enemy forces.

LESSONS

1. No matter how great an advantage you hold in numbers and position, security against surprise must always be considered.
2. When defending a series of strong points, the intervening gaps must be covered, either by fire, by mobile striking forces, by reconnaissance or by a combination of these methods.
3. A perimeter fortification must be defended with flexibility. The perimeter obstacles cannot be considered as complete barriers.
4. Desert operations require careful and complete planning of supply details.
5. Naval gunfire, when within range, can be used to great advantage in a land operation.
6. Unexpected gains must be immediately exploited if the initiative is to be retained.
7. Reconnaissance reports must be carefully studied in order to determine capabilities and weak points of the enemy.
8. Surprise can outweigh many seemingly prohibitive disadvantages.
9. Immobile tanks are little more than pill boxes. Tanks must utilize their mobility.
10. Pursuit operations must be vigorously pressed to the limit of men and equipment.
11. Retrograde movements must be planned in detail.
12. Terrain objectives are valueless unless they contribute to the destruction of enemy armed forces.