

Battle Analysis

Operation Crusader: Auchinleck's and Rommel's Great Gamble

Part 2 of 2

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In November 1941, Britain and her Commonwealth launched Operation Crusader with the intent of lifting the siege of the key North African port of Tobruk. In the first part of this article (published in the Winter 2020 edition of *ARMOR*), the interaction between disjointed British offensive execution and swift, massed response by Afrika Corps allowed Axis forces to partition the superior numerical strength of their opponent into a series of freeform and intense actions, defeating them each in turn. Historically, tank losses were reported as 530 for the British and 100 for the Germans. The imbalance in armor strength was readdressed, giving GEN Erwin Rommel one of his most important decisions of the campaign.

On the morning of Nov. 24, GENs Rommel and Ludwig Crüwell met to discuss the outcome of the action in and around Sidi Rezegh. Crüwell stressed that the enemy had been smashed but that enough force remained for Afrika Corps to stay in the area and destroy the survivors. Intelligence was reporting that the New Zealand Division was moving west from Bardia, posing a potential threat to the Tobruk area if left uncovered. The remnants of XXX Corps were regrouping southeast of Afrika Corps, and their intentions were unclear at this point.¹

As Rommel was taking in this information, he was balancing it against a plan of his own. Rommel had cast his eyes east with the intent to strike a decisive blow against Eighth Army. He felt that by attacking across XXX Corps' line of communication, he could inflict enough fear in the British of being surrounded and could strike at their command structure's cohesion. In short, by exploiting maneuver as a defeat mechanism, he could unbalance Eighth Army and throw them from the field.² We can read his intent in his remarks to GEN Johann von Ravenstein, commander of 21st Panzer Division, when he told him: "You have the chance of ending this campaign tonight."³

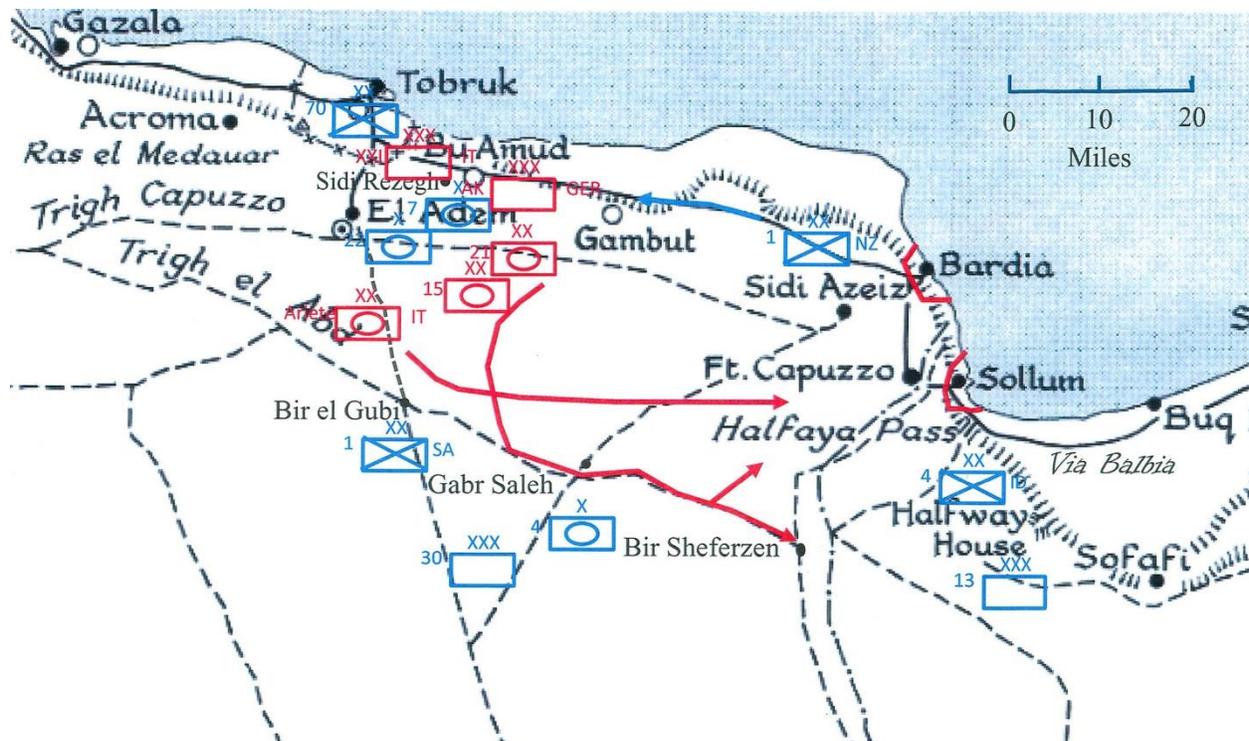


Figure 1. Disposition of units during Operation Crusader Nov. 24-26, 1941. (Map by author)

Status of forces

At this point in the battle, the balance of tank strength within Afrika Corps – coupled with vehicles from the Italian Ariete Division – would have placed enough combat power on the field to challenge any likely combination the British could muster along the Libyan-Egyptian frontier. With the British 70th Division bottled up in Tobruk and the New Zealand Division advancing piecemeal toward the Germans from Bardia, Rommel had to develop a decisive scheme of maneuver to turn the tide. His approach would be to personally lead the combined strength of 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions southeast to the Trigh El Abd track and then head for Bir Sheferzen to develop the situation. The Ariete Division would parallel this move on the north flank to prevent interference from British threats from that direction.

For their part, the British forces were licking their wounds and attempting to continue the attack toward Tobruk. XXX Corps was centered south of the Trigh El Abd track, working to reconstitute its tank strength. It was supported from two large supply dumps 15 miles south of Bir El Gubi, and another southeast of Gabr Saleh.⁴ The New Zealand Division was moving down the Trigh Capuzzo roadway toward the former German assembly area of Gambut. The 7th Indian Brigade was holding along the frontier and keeping Halfaya Pass open for reinforcements and supplies.

Despite initial setbacks on contact with the enemy, Operation Crusader was grinding forward.⁵ With both sides now executing offensive operations, the stage was set for a direct contest of opposing wills to see who would “blink” first and transition from the attack to the defense.

Rommel’s rush

By mid-morning Nov. 24, Rommel would begin his “dash to the wire,” leading 21st Panzer Division from the front in a bid to turn the tide. The effect within the XXX Corps’ command structure was almost immediate. Field reports, with a tone of panic, placed Afrika Corps squarely across their lines of communication. The 7th Armoured Division and 1st South Africa Division were evading this maneuver by fleeing in multiple directions.

The confused nature of the situation had infused doubt in GEN Sir Alan Cunningham, commander of the British Eighth Army. As he looked to recover the battle, he contacted Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, commander-in-chief Middle East, and recommended that Eighth Army retire to Egypt immediately. This request was to receive a blunt and forceful rebuff from the theater commander, who directed that the offense continue. Auchinleck’s determination in the face of uncertainty tempered the impact of the confused battlefield state and negated much of the influence of maneuver as a defeat mechanism.⁶



Figure 2. GEN Sir Claude Auchinleck, commander-in-chief, Middle East, and MG John "Jock" Campbell, commander of 7th Support Group, confer in the Western Desert. (United Kingdom government photograph by CPT G. Keating, No. 1 Army Film and Photographic Unit; public domain)

Rommel's rush down the Trigh El Abd track missed the British supply dumps to the south. By ordering commanders to advance without troubling about what was on their flanks, it should come as no surprise that these static installations were bypassed.⁷ As the lead armor elements were reaching the wire, Afrika Corps was spread over 60 miles of desert. What Rommel had envisioned as a final pursuit had landed as a blow against open air.⁸

By that evening, Rommel had reached the frontier and issued orders for the following day. The 15th Panzer, supported by the Ariete Division, would turn north and attack through Sidi Azeiz in the general direction of Bardia. The 21st Panzer Division would swing across the frontier and attack through Halfaya Pass toward Sollum.⁹

Execution of these orders were hampered by fuel shortages and strong resistance. Allied air forces were beginning to influence the action and complicate movement plans, especially for those units on the Egyptian side of the frontier. More disquieting was that the British supply services were recovering "knocked-out" tanks, repairing them and returning them to the battle. By the end of the day, 70 such vehicles had been re-crewed and were ready for action.¹⁰ The impact of leaving the field of battle to the British was beginning to come home.

Tobruk garrison

Nov. 26 was to witness two key events in the battle. The first was the relief of Cunningham from command of Eighth Army and the appointment of GEN Sir Neil Ritchie. Ritchie's more aggressive spirit was in line with Auchinleck's expectations and would carry forward with the rest of the battle. The second event was the renewed efforts of 70th Division to break out of the Tobruk encirclement. This effort was to link up with the New Zealand Division at El Duda.¹¹

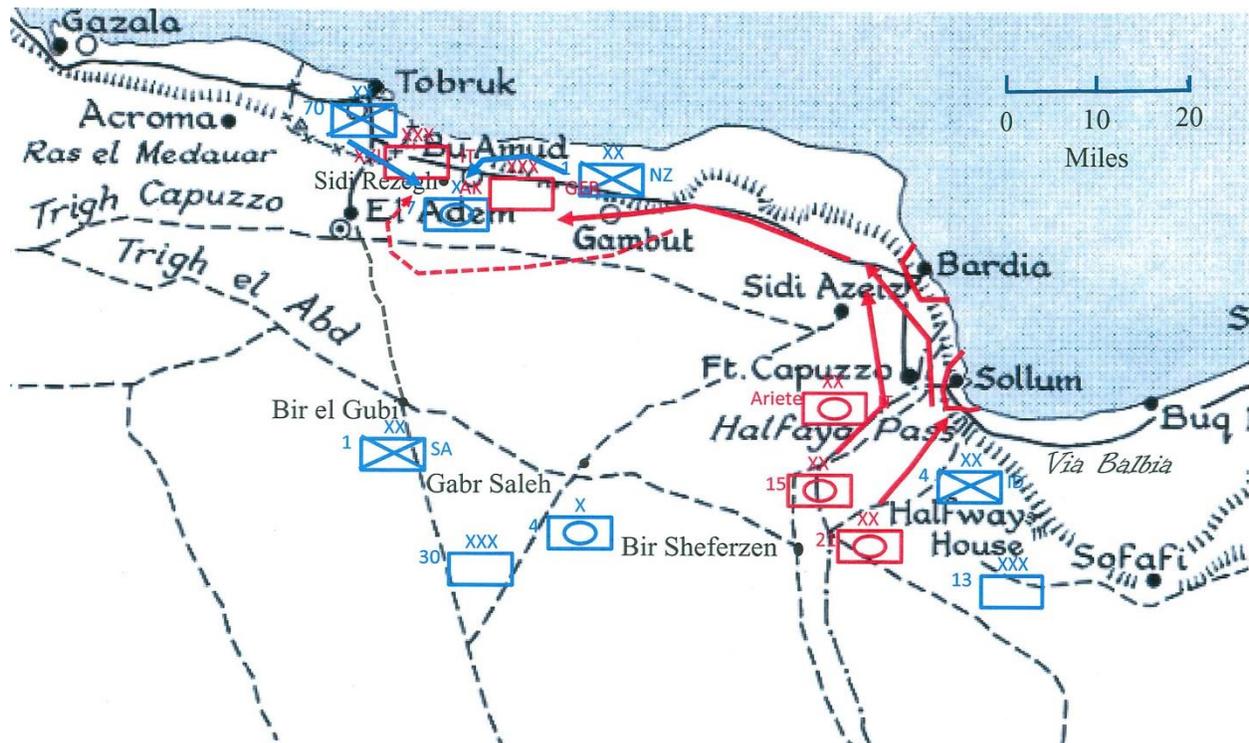


Figure 3. Disposition of units during Operation Crusader Nov. 27-28, 1941. (Map by author)

By Nov. 28, despite some success the previous day against 5th New Zealand Brigade, it was becoming clear to Rommel that his attempt to force the British to give up the attack had failed. It was at this point that he decided to break contact on the Sollum front and turn both panzer divisions west along the Trigh Capuzzo to readdress the balance in and around Tobruk. In one of those odd twists in military history, this move would bring the battle back

full circle as the stage was set for a rematch around the airfield at Sidi Rezegh. Rommel was to override the recommendation of his staff as he looked to engineer a counterattack that would disrupt and prevent the complete link-up and reinforcement between the advancing New Zealand Division and the garrison at Tobruk.¹²



Figure 4. A British Crusader tank passes a burning German Panzer IV tank during Operation Crusader in North Africa Nov. 27, 1941. (United Kingdom government photograph by LT L.B. Davies, No. 1 Army Film and Photographic Unit; public domain)

The action that was to follow in and around Tobruk would see each side gain and lose tactical advantage as their material strength was ground down to bare bones. The New Zealand Division would establish a link-up with the embattled garrison, only to have the siege of Tobruk re-established by a determined 15th Panzer Division counterattack from the south of El Duda.¹³ Rommel was able to finally drive the New Zealand Division from the field, but the cost in doing so would preclude him from holding his position in Cyenaica.



Figure 5. The crew of a Mk VIB light tank look for any movement of the enemy near Tobruk, Nov. 28, 1941. (United Kingdom photograph by CPT G. Keating, No. 1 Army Film and Photographic Unit; public domain)

On Dec. 7 the siege of Tobruk was lifted, and Rommel decided to withdraw to the positions prepared at Gazala.¹⁴ Of course, events half a world away somewhat overshadowed Eighth Army's accomplishment as they pursued Afrika Corps east along a familiar track.

Attrition vs. maneuver

In analyzing the outcome of this second phase of Crusader, the focus turns to what was intended against what was accomplished. In departing for the "wire," Rommel had hoped to cut across XXX Corps' supply line and in so doing force its commander to give up his effort to relieve the siege at Tobruk. This was intended as a direct engagement of the British chain of command to break their will to continue the struggle.

Using maneuver as a defeat mechanism was a close-run thing. Clearly Cunningham had been influenced to abandon the struggle, and his recommendation to fall back in Egypt provides clear evidence as to the state of his mind at the end of the battle's first phase. However, Auchinleck was not a beaten opponent, and his orders to continue the offensive demonstrate the resolution of a leader uninfluenced by the confusion and chaos generated by the rapid movement and shifting fronts of Afrika Corps' armor strength.

The materiel ramifications of the "dash to the wire" provide a clear indication of the cost of engagement. Rommel spent his final fuel reserves to execute this movement, which reduced his tactical options as the continuing campaign unfolded. On Dec. 5, the Italian *Comando Supremo* made it clear the supply situation would not improve until the end of the month, when airlift efforts could be initiated from bases in Sicily. In the week that followed Rommel's decision to pull back from the Tobruk front, Afrika Corps was down to eight operational tanks and the Italian Ariete Division could muster 30.¹⁵ This stands in sharp contrast to XXX Corps, who retained their presence on the battlefield and through aggressive recovery efforts were able to return more than 70 tanks to the battle. The balance in armor strength that had been skillfully won in the first phase of Crusader by Axis forces was spent with interest during this follow-on effort.



Figure 6. A Matilda tank crew overhauls their vehicle in preparation for the next phase of battle near Tobruk Dec. 1, 1941. (United Kingdom government photograph by CPT G. Keating, No. 1 Army Film and Photographic Unit; public domain)

Operation Crusader, and the German response to it, is unique in that it allows the military analyst to compare side-by-side two styles of warfare. Crüwell, in reacting to the wide-ranging British advance, looked to mass his armor, partition the enemy through movement and engage each part of his opponent in turn. Rommel, on the other hand, looked to exploit maneuver and disrupt Eighth Army's entire command structure. This would allow him to

force his opponent away from offensive operations directed toward Tobruk and place him back along the frontier wire. Given Rommel's past operational success, he had solid reason to believe this was completely achievable with the means at hand. The wild card became Auchinleck's resolution to stay the course in the face of a confusing and chaotic situation.

Military literature is full of discussions regarding the merits of attrition vs. maneuver as appropriate battlefield defeat mechanisms. This article does not suggest that one is dominant over the other, but rather each are operational realities that must be addressed by the prudent commander. Your opponent's will to fight potentially drives the selection of a defeat mechanism during the planning process. As Rommel was to discover, you don't always get to fight the French of 1940 fame.

Historical examples of not comprehending your opponent's resolve include the Japanese in the Pacific Island campaign and the more recent Battle of Fallujah. In the Pacific, the Marines found it necessary to systematically reduce the enemy in a series of small-unit duels. While combined-arms tactics, such as the "corkscrew" to destroy fortifications on Iwo Jima,¹⁶ were used in these battles; the result remained a difficult battle of attrition. The Battle of Fallujah would show that this level of resistance is not relegated solely to the realm of distant history. In discussing this battle with a Marine Corps armor veteran, he was struck at the fanaticism of the Arab fighters. In this urban setting, he saw no quit in the opposition, as they were completely willing to "fight to the death."¹⁷

Understanding your enemy, their operational tendencies and their resolution remains a solid guidepost for campaign planning today as it did when it was advanced by Sun Tzu. The armored task force is uniquely suited to adapt to a wide range of enemy threats, operational terrain and varying missions.

Mounted combined-arms forces, built around a solid armor core, remain capable of executing a wide array of operational schemes to ensure the successful implementing a number of defeat mechanisms. Given their all-weather mobility, these combat formations are able to disperse, mass and recombine to present their opponent an ever-changing array of tactical threats. These are the very operational characteristics that ensure mounted combined-arms teams remain a dominant formation in open combat. When gaps are identified on the battlefield, as with the advance of the British 7th Armoured Division during Operation Crusader, mounted forces are able to maneuver while retaining the advantage offered by this unfolding alignment and implement partitioning as a defeat mechanism. Also, they have the inherent combat power to create gaps and negate the continuity of the enemy's defense.

Partitioning the enemy in terms of physical space has its roots in his weapons-employment ranges, the influence of terrain and his current dispositions. The dimension of time provides the next method for partitioning an enemy. The ability of your opponent to reinforce each other from dispersed locations is dependent on its ability to recognize and react to our maneuver. This is influenced by its command-and-control system, the mobility and speed of its units, and the movement potential of intervening terrain.

Finally, the inability of the opposing force to field combined-arms teams may present the opportunity to partition the enemy based on capability. Suppression or lack of air defense will allow aircraft to influence action by both limiting the response of enemy assets and the systematic reduction of their combat potential. A gap in their indirect-fire capability will support suppression of their frontline forces by our artillery, enhancing the freedom of maneuver for our formations. The true strength of the combined-arms team is its inherent ability to tailor combat power to exploit any one of these opposing capability gaps across a number of warfare domains.

In closing, this review of Operation Crusader has allowed the reader to explore a number of related battlefield dynamics. The use of partitioning as a defeat mechanism was reviewed, and the role of mounted combined-arms teams to implement such an approach was developed based on both combat modeling and this historical example. Rommel's "dash to the wire" provided keen insights into the strength and weaknesses of maneuver as a defeat mechanism. It developed the linkage between the level of fanaticism within your opponent and their susceptibility to being unhinged by such an operational approach. Understanding the strength and relevance of these styles of warfare will enhance the ability of any future commander or staff to develop and analyze courses of action and chart a clearer path ahead.

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Notes

¹ LTG Sir Geoffrey Evans, *History of the Second World War* (Part 24), BPC Publishing Ltd., Marshall Cavendish, USA, 1973.

² Ibid.

³ David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox*, New York, NY: Thomas Congdon Books, 1977.

⁴ David Fraser, *Knight's Cross*, New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1994.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ MG F.W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1956.

⁷ Fraser.

⁸ Irving.

⁹ Evans.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mellenthin.

¹⁴ Evans.

¹⁵ Referenced at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/operation_crusader.

¹⁶ The corkscrew tactic used smoke and suppressive fire to blind the pillbox, followed by tank or man-packed flamethrowers to burn the defenders and concluded with a demolition team to collapse the structure. The mantra of "blind 'em, burn 'em and blast 'em" was well known throughout the close of the Pacific Campaign.

¹⁷ MSG Michael Chouinard interview Jan. 19, 2014, at the Amphibious Vehicle Test Branch, Camp Pendleton, CA.