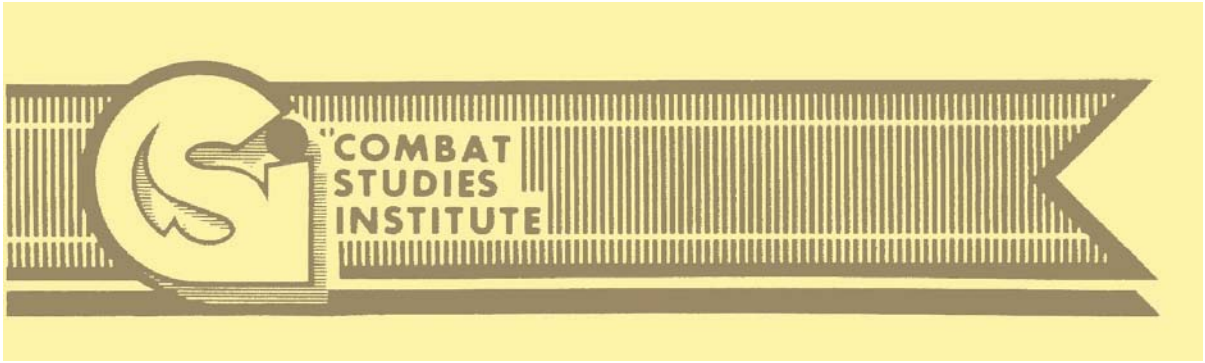
The 9th Australian Division Versus the Africa Corps:

An Infantry Division Against Tanks--Tobruk, Lybia, 1941

by
Colonel Ward A. Miller
August 1986



FOREWORD

In April and May 1941, the previously successful blitzkrieg tactics of the German Army met defeat by the outnumbered Australian forces of the 9th Division at Tobruk. The Australian infantry achieved victory through a successful all-around defense against tank attacks in force. By employing all available assets in a combined arms effort, well-supported light infantry forces defeated a heavier armored force.

The 9th Australian Division Versus the Africa Corps: An Infantry Division Against Tanks-Tobruk, Libya, 1941 provides the reader with a valuable historical context for evaluating how light infantry forces can confront armored attacks. This CSI special study also reveals how light infantry forces operated and were supported and sustained in a desert environment-a message that has continuing relevance for today's Army.

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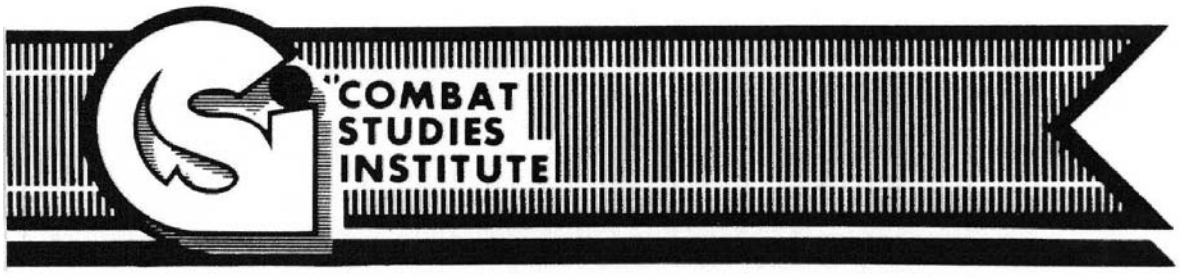

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I. TOBRUK: THE CONTEXT OF THE BATTLE

Introduction

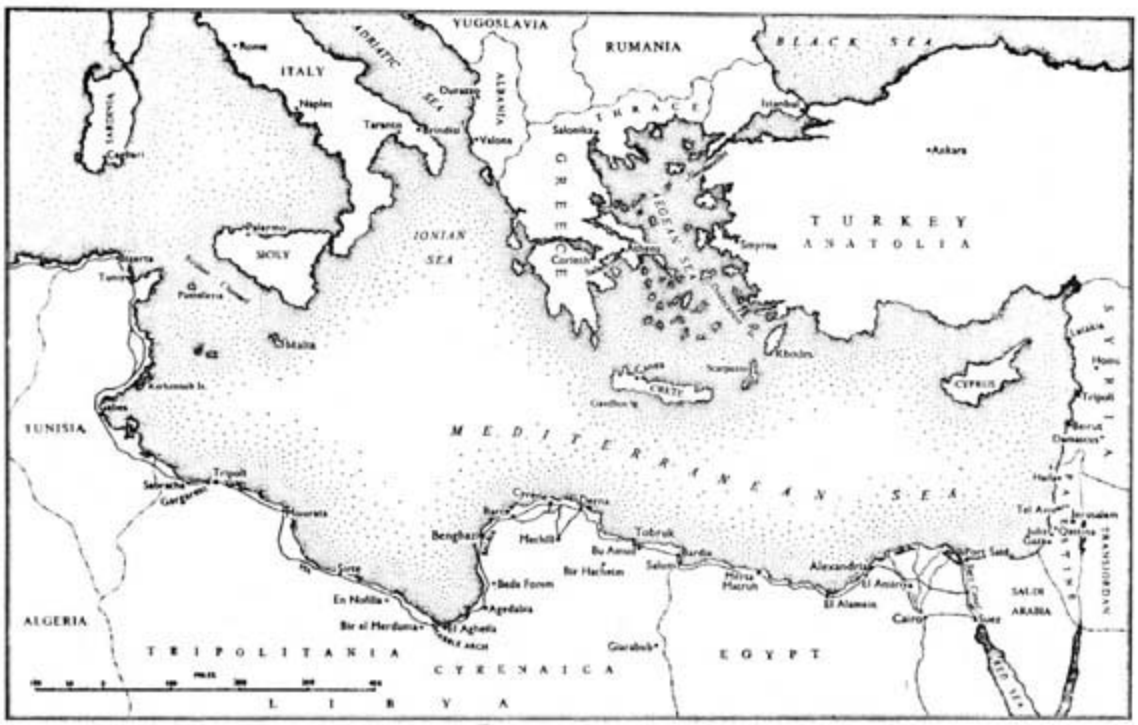
The North African theater during the early stages of World War II provided British and American forces with valuable battlefield experience and training in the tactical employment of units and weapon systems. The desert war was also a deadly proving ground for the development of new weapons and techniques and demonstrated the need, as well as the methods, for ensuring close coordination between ground, air, and naval forces. In addition, the infantryman in North Africa learned to fight against tanks in a desert environment.

During 10-14 April 1941 and from 30 April to 4 May 1941, the newly formed 9th Australian Division repelled two major German Africa Corps tank assaults against their defensive posi tions around the strategic fortress at Tobruk, Libya. The 9th Division, although relatively untried, rushed from Palestine to North Africa in order to help delay the German attack on Egypt (see map 1).

During both engagements, the Australians fought from a static defense in depth. Australian infantrymen occupying the first line of defense allowed the German tanks to pass through their initial perimeter into extensive minefields. British and Australian artillery and antitank gunners, deployed well to the rear of the infantry and supported by British tanks, then engaged the German tanks with devastating direct fire. As the German infantrymen, artillerymen, and machine gunners following the tanks passed through the perimeter, the Australian infantry, lying in wait on the flanks, moved in behind them with rifle fire and bayonets. At the same time, British fighter planes overhead, supported by antiaircraft artillery, attempted to fight off the attacking German dive-bombers and fighter aircraft.

At the conclusion of the Easter Battle, known German and Italian losses were 150 killed in action (KIA), 250 prisoners of war (POWs), 29 tanks destroyed out of 112 available,[1] and 17 aircraft destroyed.[2] The Tobruk garrison losses were twenty-six KIA, twenty-four wounded in action (WIA), four tanks destroyed, one aircraft destroyed, and one artillery gun disabled.[3]

In the second action, the Battle of the Salient, known German and Italian losses were 167 KIA, 574 WIA, and 213 missing in action (MIA). Out of eighty-one tanks available, twelve tanks were destroyed and thirty-two were damaged but recovered. The garrison had 59 KIA, 355 WIA, and 383 MIA.[4]



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 5.)

Map 1. The eastern Mediteranean

In both battles, the German's combined arms attack featured tanks, infantry, engineers, artillery, and close air support. Their armaments were superior to Australian weapons in all categories except artillery, where the Australians possessed a marked advantage. Because of their edge in arms, the Germans were stunned by their defeat at the hands of the Australians. The Germans had rarely failed before, never encountered such defensive tactics, nor faced such a determined opponent. The accuracy and efficiency of the British artillery and antitank gunners and the discipline of the Australian infantry-who held their ground and fire until the German infantry and gunners advanced into a killing zone-had defeated the German blitzkrieg tactics.

A captured veteran of the early European campaigns stated: "I cannot understand you Australians. In Poland, France, and Belgium, once the tanks got through the soldiers took it for granted that they were beaten. But you are like demons. The tanks break through and your infantry still keep fighting."[5]

A German battalion commander wrote:

The Australians, who are the men our troops have had opposite them so far, are extraordinarily tough fighters. The German is more active in the attack but the enemy stakes his life in the defense and fights to the last with extreme cunning. Our men, usually easy going and unsuspecting, fall easily into his traps especially as a result of their experiences in the closing stages of the Western [European] Campaign.

The Australian is unquestionably superior to the German soldier:

1. in the use of individual weapons, especially as snipers

2. in the use of ground camouflage

3. in his gift of observation, and the drawing of the correct conclusions from his observation

4. in every means of taking us by surprise. . . .[6]

Lt. Gen. Erwin Rommel was also impressed by the Australians. He said:

Shortly afterwards a batch of some fifty or sixty Australian prisoners were marched off close behind us-immensely big and powerful men, who without question represented an elite formation of the British Empire, a fact that was also evident in battle. Enemy resistance was as stubborn as ever and violent actions were being fought at many points.[7]

After the Battle of the Salient, Rommel reflected on the difference between mobile and positional warfare in the desert. He stated:

In this assault we lost more than 1,200 men killed, wounded and missing. This shows how sharply the curve of casualties rises when one reverts from mobile to position warfare. In a mobile action, what counts is material, as the essential complement to the soldier. The finest fighting man has no value in mobile warfare without tanks, guns, and vehicles. Thus a mobile force can be rendered unfit for action by destruction of its tanks, without having suffered any serious casualties in manpower. This is not the case with position warfare, where the infantryman with rifle and hand grenade has lost little of his value, provided, of course, he is protected by antitank guns or obstacles against the enemy's armour. For him enemy number one is the attacking infantrymen. Hence, position warfare is always a struggle for the destruction of men-in contrast to mobile warfare, where everything turns on the destruction of enemy material.[8]

The Australians held out for almost eight months against the German siege at Tobruk. The siege was abandoned by the Germans after 242 days, when on 7 December 1941, Rommel made the decision to fall back to Gazala. However, on 21 June of the next year, Rommel began a second offensive that finally captured the fortress.

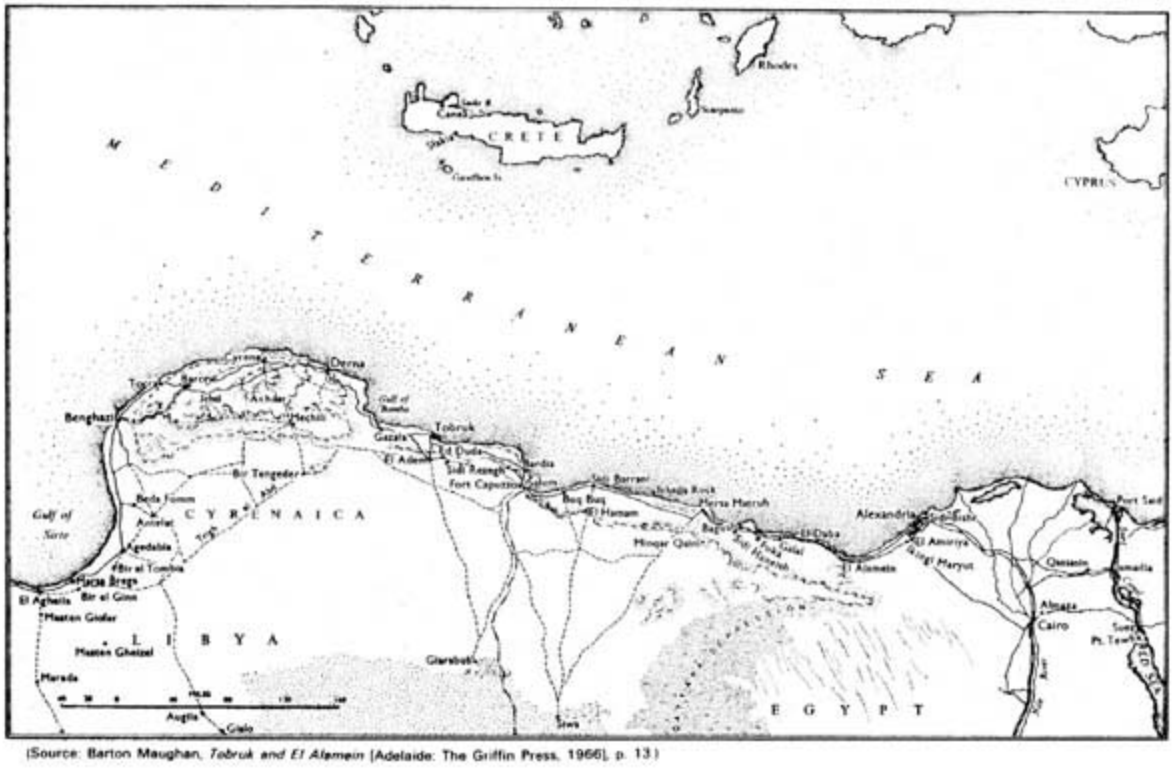
At the time, the Australians' epic stand at Tobruk had a major impact on the war because the Germans suffered a serious and unexpected reversal. The Tobruk garrison demonstrated that the hitherto successful German blitzkrieg tactics could be defeated by resolute men who displayed courage and had the tactical and technical ability to coordinate and maximize the capabilities of their weapons and equipment in the defense.

This historical battle study can serve to illustrate the capabilities of a World War II infantry division in combating a heavier armored force. When compared to present-day scenarios, both the 9th Australian Division and the German Africa Corps could be classified as World War II rapid deployment contingency forces, and the battle at Tobruk should be studied in this context. In providing an in-depth description of the techniques

and tactics used by the 9th Australian Division in battle, only the Easter Battle will be discussed.

Background

By 10 February 1941, British forces in the western desert had swept the Italian Army from North Africa to beyond Benghazi (see map 2). However, prior to reaching Tripoli and the final eradication of Axis forces in North Africa, British efforts were shifted to meet Hitler's invasion of Greece. With British troops diverted to Greece, the newly formed 9th Australian Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. L. J. Morshead, moved on 8 March from Palestine to take over the task of holding the Cyrenaica frontier in Libya. Simultaneously, the German Africa Corps, under the command of Lieutenant General Rommel, arrived in Tripoli, Libya. On 31 March 1941, Rommel began an offensive to drive the supply- and equipment-constrained British forces-already overextended and with their armored vehicles badly in need of overhaul-eastward across the desert past Derna and Tobruk and eventually to the Egyptian frontier (see map 3). Rommel's objective was to seize the Suez Canal, but by the time he reached the port of Tobruk, he had overextended his lines of communication, being 900 miles from his base at Tripoli. The Germans, therefore, desperately needed an intermediate supply base. Additionally, Tobruk blocked the only highspeed avenue of approach to the Egyptian frontier. The desert sands south of the coastal road through Tobruk were extremely difficult to traverse. Thus, it became critical for the Germans to capture the port of Tobruk in order to replenish their forces and to sustain the offensive. On 6 April, the Australian 9th Division was ordered to pull back from Derna along the coast to Tobruk.



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 13)

Map 2. The western desert

General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief of the Middle East and North Africa, decided that Tobruk must be held for at least two months to allow time for British reinforcements to be brought in to augment the defense of Egypt. Wavell's concept was to establish a strongpoint at Tobruk, while employing a mobile armored force to harass the enemy in the desert outside the perimeter.

After the Germans captured General Neame, British commander in chief in Cyrenaica, on 6 April, General Wavell appointed Major General Lavarack, commander of the 7th Aus tralian Division, to replace him, at the same time giving Lavarack the mission to hold the enemy's advance at Tobruk. General Lavarack divided his available forces into three groups. The first group, under Major General Morshead, comprised mainly of the 9th Australian Division and four British artillery regiments, was to defend Tobruk fortress. The second group, a mobile force under Brigadier Gott, was composed of reconnaissance vehicles, artillery, and antitank guns. It was to operate outside the perimeter to harass the enemy south of the main coast road that ran through Tobruk. The third group, which would constitute the Cyrenaica command's force reserve, was Lavarack's own 18th Brigade, with a battery of antitank guns and all available tanks.

Map not available

Map 3. Rommel's first offensive

The perimeter on which Lavarack and Morshead agreed to base their forward defense ran in a wide arc, twenty-eight miles in length. The width of the perimeter at the

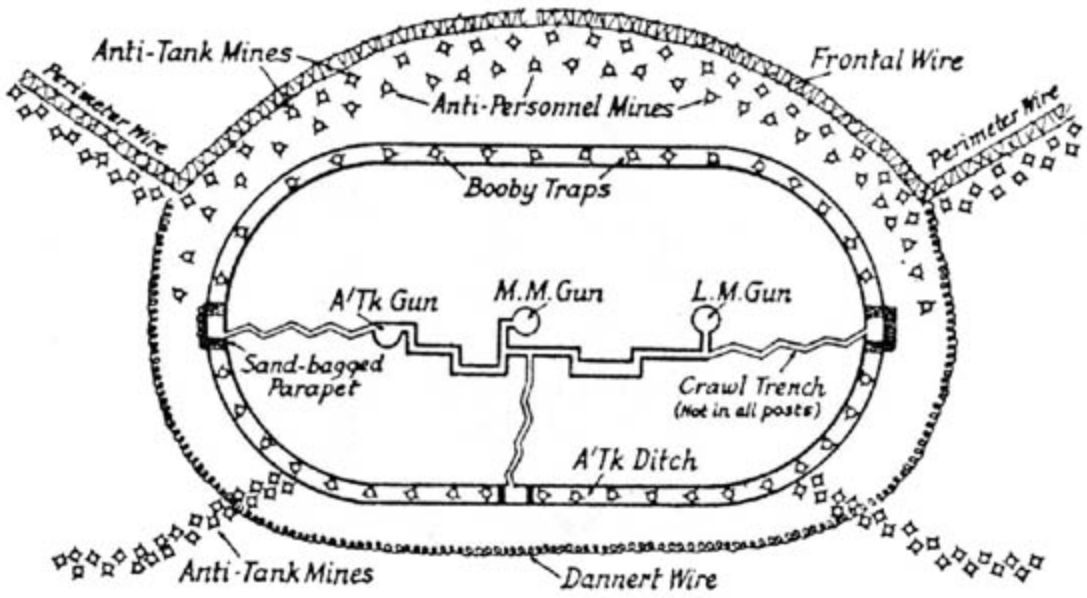
intersection of the coast road was about seventeen miles. The average distance of the perimeter from Tobruk was nine miles (see map 4). The bay provided a deep natural harbor. The coast, except near the harbor, was broken by a succession of narrow inlets. A plain about three miles wide west of the town was bordered on the south by an escarpment at the top of which was a ledge of land leading to a second escarpment. South from the second escarpment, the terrain flattened out toward the perimeter, except in the southwest where the Pilastrino ridge extended toward the most dominant feature in the area of Ras el Medauuar. In the east, the two escarpments came together on the coast short of the perimeter boundary.

Except at the perimeter's extreme eastern and western flanks, where the wire descended the escarpments to the coast, the perimeter defenses spread across a plateau some 400 to 500 feet above sea level. Beyond this, the terrain ran in ridges to the west and southwest but was almost flat to the south and southeast. The arid desert ground was bare except for chance occurrences of dwarf camel thorn shrubs and a few fig trees located near desert wells. From the coast road to the sea, on both extremes of the perimeter, the terrain was generally an effective obstacle to tanks. However, south of the coast road, the flat terrain neither hindered frontal assault nor provided cover and concealment.

During their earlier occupation of Tobruk, the Italians had surrounded most of the perimeter with a box wire obstacle or concertina wire.[9] In some places forward of the perimeter, there was an antitank ditch that was incomplete and varied in depth from two to twelve feet. The antitank ditch was partly covered with light boards and a thin layer of sand and stones, so that its outline could not be distinguished even at close range.[10] Forward of the ditch was more concertina wire. Also, a thin line of antitank and antipersonnel mines had been laid in front of the perimeter wire.

Map not available
Map 4. Fortress Tobruk

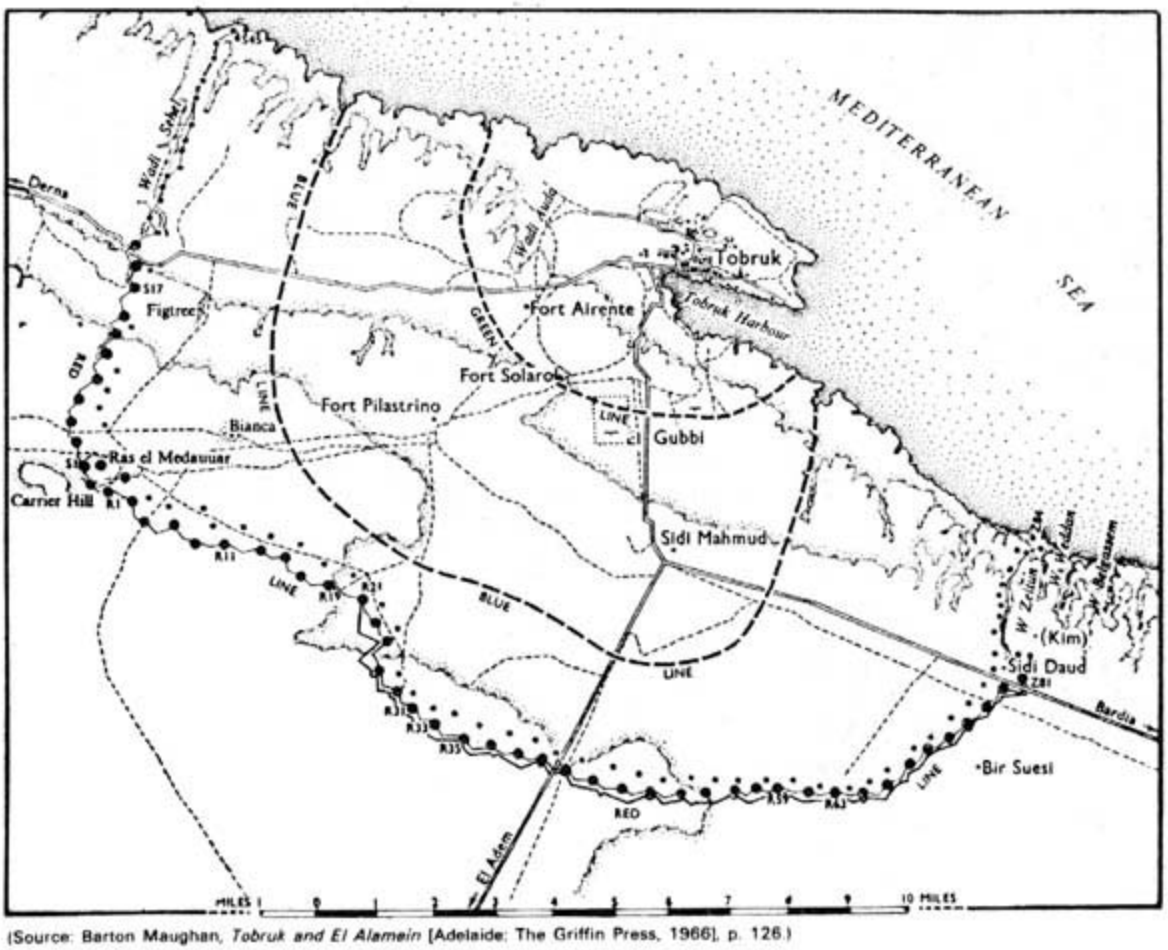
The 150 individual strong points along the perimeter had been placed in a zigzag pattern, with the posts one forward and one in the rear, with intervals of about 750 yards between forward posts. The effect was of two parallel rows of posts, the second row 500 yards behind the first and filling in the gaps between the forward posts. The posts were numbered consecutively, the odd-numbered posts being on the perimeter, the even posts behind them. A typical post was eighty meters long and contained three circular concrete weapons pits emplaced flush with the ground and connected by a concrete communications trench.[11] This trench was about 2 1/2 meters deep and covered over with boards and a thin layer of earth. Around the post was an antitank ditch. Observation from the posts was excellent, the fields of fire good, and the perimeter wire well placed. A forward post, in most cases, could enfilade both arms of perimeter wire leading out from it, the fire forming a beaten zone forward of the next post (see figure 1).[12]



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 131.)

Figure 1. Tobruk Strongpoint

Behind the first line of defense, called the Red Line, antitank mines were placed in depth to prevent deep penetrations. Two miles behind the Red Line was the Blue Line, occupied by the three reserve battalions. General Morshead's instructions were that if the enemy penetrated the Red Line, the forward posts were to hold at all costs, while the Blue Line absorbed the attack. If the enemy penetrated the Blue Line and the Cyrenaica command's mobile reserve was unable to stop them, then every support element left would make a last effort at the Green Line (see map 5).



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 126.)

Map 5. Tobruk defense lines

Combat Organization of Friendly Forces

The 9th Australian Division had been formed on 23 September 1940. When Major General Morshead took command on 5 February 1941, little did he realize that his division would be heavily engaged in two months. The 20th Brigade, formed in May 1940, had been in Palestine three months; the 26th, formed in July 1940, had been there one month. None of the brigades had received a full issue of weapons, yet each had fired automatic weapons in range practice. Individual training was well advanced, and there had been some subunit training. However, battalions and regiments had not conducted unit exercises, and the training of brigades as battle groups had not begun. In short, the individual soldiers had been trained to fight, but the officers and staffs had not yet been trained in the complex techniques of battlefield management and the integration of combined arms formations.

Brigades in the 2d Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) contained three battalions, each recruited chiefly on a regional basis. For the sake of tradition, battalions took the numbers of their counterparts in the World War I 1st AIF, with the prefix 2- preceding the new unit designations. In addition to its headquarters and support companies, the

battalion consisted of four rifle companies, each composed of three 30-man platoons. The strength of an Australian infantry battalion varied, but in the Middle East it contained 32 officers and 750 to 770 men. The total strength for an infantry division was about 14,000, to include its headquarters, three brigades, an antitank regiment, field artillery regiment, engineers, and signal.[13]

By 10 April 1941, the garrison at Tobruk consisted of the 9th Australian Division with its three brigades of infantry-the 20th, 24th, and 26th-together with the 18th Brigade of the 7th Australian Division and several thousand British and Indian troops. Altogether, 14,270 Australian troops; 9,000 British troops; about 5,700 troops of mixed Australian, British, and Indian origin; and 3,000 Libyan laborers defended Tobruk.[14]

General Morshead's concept of defense was based on four principles: no ground should be given up; garrisons should dominate no-man's-land by extensive nightly deep patrolling; no effort should be spared in improving the defensive positions and obstacles; and the defense should be organized in depth, with a large mobile reserve.[15]

The twenty-eight miles of perimeter were occupied by the division's three brigades. From west to east, they were the 26th, 20th, and 24th Brigades, respectively. Part of the garrison's reserve, the 18th Brigade, was located in Wadi Auda, near the sea west of town, and the 3d Armored Brigade had the responsibility for covering the approaches to Pilastrino extending to the El Adem-Bardia road junctions. Six battalions manned the forward perimeter, and one battalion in each brigade sector was positioned to the rear, as brigade reserve. Each battalion on line occupied an average of five miles, with more than two companies plus maintained as a reserve dug in one-half mile to the rear. Ten to fifteen infantrymen occupied each post.

The 2-24th Battalion with one company of the 2-23d Battalion occupied the right-hand sector from the coast to the escarpment, a distance of six miles. On their left, covering the highest point on the perimeter, Ras el Medauuar (Hill 204), was the 248th Battalion. Farther on the left was the 2-17th Battalion, which covered the southern approaches to Fort Pilastrino, where the division headquarters was located. Next was the 2-13th Battalion astride the El Adem road, then the 2-28th Battalion. On the 2-28th's left, covering from the main east-west road to the coast, was the 2-43d Battalion. With field artillery and antitank artillery being the garrison's main defense against an armored attack, all guns were sited in an antitank role. Gun pits were made large and shallow to enable rapid traverse and to assure clear fields of fire in all directions.

The forty-eight 25-pounders of the three Royal horse artillery (RHA) regiments and the twelve 18-pounders and twelve 4.5-inch howitzers of the 51st Field Regiment were organized into three groups to cover the three infantry brigades on line.[16] The 51st Field Regiment was in direct support of the 26th Brigade in the west; the 104th RHA was in support of the 24th Brigade in the east. In the central (southern) sector held by the 20th Brigade, the 1st and 107th RHA were formed into a tactical group of thirty-two guns. The guns were mainly employed at the escarpment below Pilastrino and near Sidi Mahmud.

With the exception of the 8th Battery of the 3d Light Antiaircraft (AA) Regiment, which was Australian, all the antiaircraft guns were manned by British troops. The 4th AA Brigade consisted of the 153d and 235th Heavy AA Batteries from the 51st Heavy AA Regiment; the 14th Light AA Regiment; and the 39th, 40th, and 57th Light AA Batteries from the 13th Light AA Regiment.[17] At the beginning of the siege, the anti-aircraft artillery in Tobruk consisted of sixteen mobile 7-inch guns (heavy) in action and eight unmounted guns not yet brought into action; five mobile and twelve static 40-mm Bofors (of which six static guns were not in action); and forty-two captured 20-mm Italian Bredos. As soon as four of the static 3.7-inch guns were brought into action, four heavy mobile guns were released for perimeter defense to deter enemy dive-bombers and observation aircraft. However, whenever Allied ships were unloading in the port, the mobile guns were returned to the harbor area.[18]

Additionally, captured Italian 75-, 100-, and 149-mm guns were employed by the so-called Australian "bush artillery" (infantrymen without gunner training who manned and fired guns from their battalion positions). By 9 April, all remaining armored units were organized into the 3d Armored Brigade. These included the 1st Kings Dragoon Guards, with thirty armed Mormon-Harrington scout cars; the 3d Hussars; and the 5th Royal Tanks, forming a composite unit of four cruisers and eighteen light tanks.[19] The Ist Royal Tank Regiment was composed of nineteen cruisers and fifteen light tanks; and the 4th Royal 'Tank Regiment was comprised of a troop of four Mark II Matilda (infantry) tanks.[20] In all, about sixty tanks were operational with another twenty-six undergoing repairs.

Australian troops dug in, North Africa
The source of all photos in this work is Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Pictorial History of Australia at War 1939-45, vol. (Canberra: [S.N.]), 1959.

There were only 113 antitank guns in the garrison, half of which were captured Italian Bredo 47- and 32-mm gunsweapons that could penetrate 30 millimeters of steel plate at 1,000 yards but had a traverse of only 60 degrees.[21] Antitank units were the Australian 2-3d Antitank Regiment with four of its six batteries-the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th; the three brigade antitank companies; and the British 3d RHA Antitank Regiment, with its M and J Batteries but minus D Battery. Antitank regiments were normally organized with three battalions, each having two 8-gun batteries. Each battery had two 4-gun troops, and each troop had two sections of two guns. The principal British antitank gun at the time was the British 2-pounder. However, British antitank guns suffered badly in comparison with German guns because, in most cases, they did not have the weight, penetrating power, or range that the German 50-, 57-, 75-, and 88-mm weapons possessed. The 2-pounder was outranged and nearly ineffectual, as it could not penetrate the Mark III and IV beyond 500 meters.[22] As a result, the 25pounders, with a direct-fire range of 1,000 yards, bore the brunt of the antitank defense. The total number

of 2-pounders at Tobruk is not known, but there was a critical shortage of such weapons.

All Royal Air Force (RAF) units in the desert were under No. 204 Group. Reconnaissance, close air support, and air interdiction were provided by a forward command post of the No. 204 Group along with the No. 73 Squadron (Hurricane) and the No. 6 Squadron (Hurricane and Lysinder), which were under the fortress commander. Bomber support was provided by Blenheim IV bombers of Nos. 45 and 55 Squadrons, which could rearm at the Tobruk airfields. Fourteen Hurricanes were kept at Tobruk during daylight hours for immediate response.[23]

Combat Organization of Enemy Forces

The German 5th Light Division faced the Australians at Tobruk. The 5th was a light armored division, somewhat weaker in force structure than the usual German armored division. The German High Command was preoccupied with equipping its forces for the coming invasion of the USSR, so Rommel's initial mission was defensive rather than offensive. The 5th Division, consequently, had only three-quarters of its allocated motor transport and was short some 50 tanks of the 200 authorized to it. However, it was far stronger than the battle-depleted 2d Armored Division that it initially opposed. The German 5th Light Division consisted initially of a headquarters; the strong and partly armored 3d Reconnaissance Unit with its company of about twenty-five armored cars; the 5th Armored Regiment with its 1st and 2d Battalions containing a total of seventy light Mark II tanks and eighty medium Mark IIIs (with 50-mm guns) and Mark IVs (with 75-mm guns);[24] a fully motorized machine-gun regiment with the 2d and 8th Battalions; the 175th Artillery Regiment with a twelve-gun field artillery battery; and the 605th Antitank Regiment, with the 33d and 39th Antitank Battalions (thirty-three 37- and 50-mm antitank guns in each, plus several 88-mm antiaircraft guns in the 33d).[25] Though these units had no desert training, most had operational experience in the campaigns in Poland and France. Additionally, in the German's favor, the Mark III could penetrate the armor of British tanks at 1,000 yards due to its superior ammunition and optics.[26] The Mark IVs could shell the British armor and antitank guns at 3,000 yards with impunity.[27]

Rommel's German Air Force support came from Fliegerkorps X, commanded by General Frohlich. Fighter and dive-bomber units worked in conjunction with Rommel but were not under his control. The total strength of Fliegerkorps X varied between 400 and 450 aircraft, of which only about 250 were serviceable at any one time. This included thirty single-engined fighters, thirty twin-engined fighters, approximately eighty dive-bombers, and fifty to sixty long-range bombers.[28]

Rommel continually task organized the German and Italian forces to fit the mission. New groupings and new commands were set up almost daily, with the major units, the 5th Light Division and the Italian Ariete and Brescia Divisions, constantly shifting units.

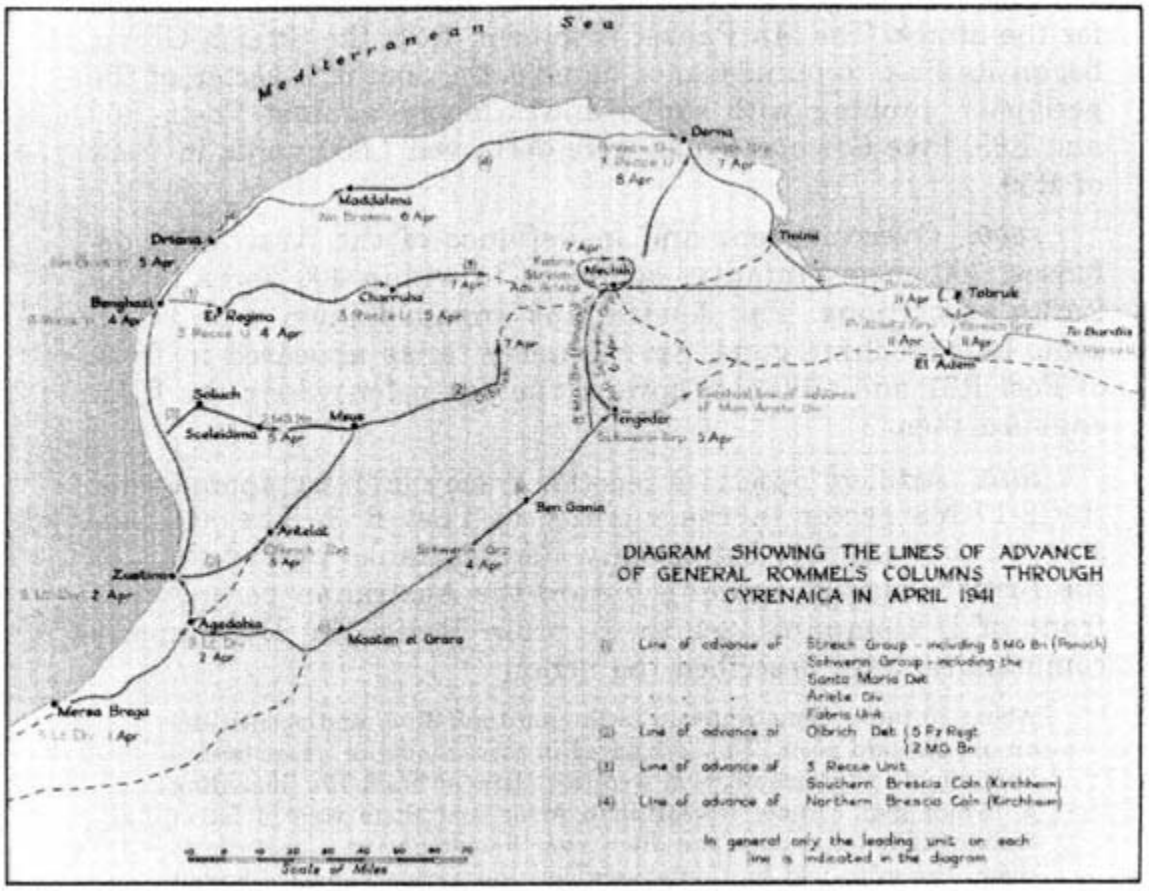
The Italian forces, operating with their German allies, consisted of elements of three divisions: the 27th (Brescia) Division, the 102d (Trento) Motorized Division, and the Armored 132d (Ariete) Division. The two infantry divisions mustered slightly more than six infantry battalions each. The armored division had some eighty tanks, mainly of the M-13 variety, but possessed few antitank guns.[29] The combined German-Italian forces consisted of around 25,000 combat, combat support, and combat service support troops (although these figures are not fully documented).

II. THE BATTLE

The Easter Battle Chronology*

10 April

In less than 3 weeks, the Africa Corps had fought and marched over 600 miles through sandstorms and over mountains and difficult trails, pushing the British ahead of them. At last Tobruk was to be cut off (see sketch map 6). Rommel announced that his next objective was the Suez Canal and that the British must not be allowed to break out of Tobruk. Meanwhile, General Prittwitz was killed by antitank fire as his group probed the Australian perimeter along the Derna road, and Lieutenant Colonel Schwerin replaced him.



(Source: I. S. O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East* [London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956], p. 25.)

Map 6. Rommel's line of advance-1941

*Except where noted, the following is a summary of Barton Maughan's narration of the battle in his book, *Tobruk and El Alamein: Australia in the War of 1939-1945.*

11 April (Good Friday)

The Tobruk fortress was surrounded, but the Germans were widely scattered after a two-day sandstorm. Streich Group was too far to the east; Prittwitz Group, now the Schwerin Group, moved in from the south; and the Brescia Division was to the west.

*1200 to 1300 (hours).*The Germans shifted to get into position for the attack. The 5th Panzer Regiment, from the Streich Group, began its first reconnaissance against the southern sector of the perimeter, probing with tanks and infantry against Posts R59 and R63. Five German tanks were destroyed 1,000 yards in front of R59.

1500. Overconfident and in defiance of the Australian defenses, 700 enemy infantry advanced to within 400 yards of the 2-13th's positions. The Australians engaged them with small arms and machine guns. Seven enemy tanks appeared in front of Post R31 and advanced toward the perimeter, where the RHA engaged them.

1615. Artillery observers reported enemy infantry approaching the 2-17th's sector in the vicinity of Post R33. The artillery stopped the infantry, but seventy German tanks passed through the British barrage heading toward the Australian perimeter in front of D Company, 2-17th. Captain Balfe, the D Company commander, later described the action:

About 70 tanks came right up to the antitank ditch and opened fire on our forward posts. They advanced in three waves of about twenty and one of ten. Some of them were big German Mark IVs, mounting a 75-mm gun. Others were Italian M13s and there were a lot of Italian light tanks too. The ditch here wasn't any real obstacle to them, the minefield had only been hastily rearmed and we hadn't one antitank gun forward. We fired on them with antitank rifles, Brens, and rifles and they didn't attempt to come through, but blazed away at us and then sheered off east towards the 2/13th's front.[30]

The German infantry came forward again, 700 of them en masse, shoulder to shoulder through the gunfire.

When the infantry were about 500 yards out (Balfe said later) we opened up, but in the posts that could reach them we had only two Brens, two antitank rifles and a couple of dozen ordinary rifles. The Jerries went to ground at first, but gradually moved forward in bounds under cover of their machine guns. It was nearly dusk by this time, and they managed to reach the antitank ditch. From there they mortared near-by posts heavily. We hadn't any mortars with which to reply, and our artillery couldn't shell the ditch without risk of hitting our own posts.[31]

At the same time, the 1st Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) with its eleven cruiser tanks moved up in the direction of the El Adem roadblock. After skirting the 2-17th's front, the enemy tanks moved along the 2-13th's perimeter, firing to suppress the forward posts as they passed. Along the El Adem road, gunners of the 2-13th's mortar platoon, manning two Italian 47-mm antitank guns, knocked out one Italian medium tank and hit several others. Another Italian light tank, disabled by small-arms fire, was knocked out by one of the antitank guns and its crew was captured.

At the El Adem road, enemy tanks halted before a minefield and turned away just as the 1st Royal Tank Regiment arrived. Both sides engaged at long range. Three light tanks and one medium Italian tank were knocked out by British tanks, and one German medium tank was destroyed by antitank fire. Two British medium tanks were lost. The enemy withdrew to the south, having lost seven tanks.

In the late afternoon, combat patrols from the 2-17th's reserve company found the enemy had withdrawn from the antitank ditch in front of D Company. That night, more tanks probed along the ditch in front of the 2-13th looking for a crossing. They were followed by pioneers with demolitions and bangalore torpedoes, whose mission it was to break the wire and bridge the antitank ditch. The breaching party was driven off by the Australians, however, and abandoned their demolition equipment.

General Morshead issued orders for vigorous day and night patrolling to be conducted in all sectors. Engineers with the three forward brigades spent the night improving the perimeter defenses. Overnight, the 2-3d Field Company layed more than 5,000 mines, covering the entire 24th Brigade sector.

After the probing attacks, aerial reconnaissance reported road movement from the southwest, an attempted breach at the antitank ditch, and continued movement outside the perimeter in the southeastern sector. All indications were that the enemy would attack at first light on the 12th, near the boundary of the 20th and 24th Brigades.

2300. General Lavarack ordered the 18th Brigade to move from its reserve position at Wadi Auda, to the junction of the El Adem and Bardia roads.


Patrolloing along the antitank ditch at Tobruk

12 April

Throughout the day, the Germans continued their reconnaissance, but no attack developed as their tank and motor transport concentrations were bombed by the RAF and heavily shelled by artillery. The Germans also sent dive-bombers against the harbor, only to have them repelled by the RAF's Hurricanes and heavy antiaircraft fire. In addition, British gunners shot down four Stukas.

Fully presuming the garrison to be worn down and in the process of evacuating by sea, the Germans expected to take the defenders without a fight. They were shocked and taken aback, however, by the violent

response against their reconnaissance units, the British artillery's pounding of their panzer troops, and their first encounter with Australian bayonets.

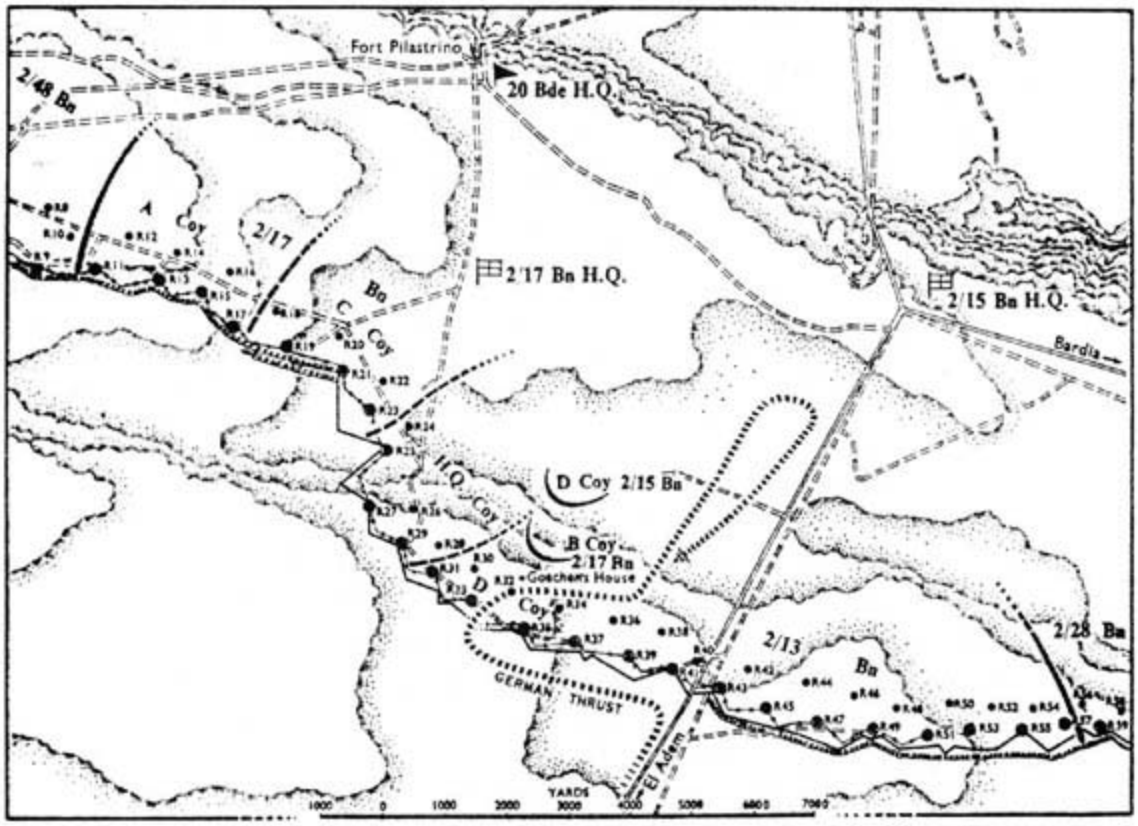
13 April (Easter Sunday)

Axis forces were now in position to attack. The Schwerin Group was in the eastern zone, opposite the 24th Brigade sector. Streich's 5th Light Division, the main assault force, was in the south on both sides of the El Adem road opposite the 20th Brigade. On its left was the Italian Ariete Division and farther to the left, a regiment of the Trento Division around Carrier Hill, west of Ras el Medauuar. The Brescia unit sat astride the Derna road to the west, opposite the 26th Brigade's sector.

The original German plan called for the 5th Light Division to break the Australian perimeter defenses on the evening of the 13th at the El Adem road and then to penetrate five miles to the junction of the El Adem and Bardia roads, while the Brescia Division conducted a demonstration to the west (see map 7). The initial breach, to be conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Ponath's 8th Machine Gun Battalion, was to be supported by artillery at 1700. The vanguard of the attack was to be the 5th Panzer Regiment, whose mission was to push through the gap with two battalions in column, continue two miles north, then split off, with the lead battalion pushing on to the crossroads, while the trailing battalion drove northwest toward Fort Pilastrino. Early on the 14th, the attack was to be continued toward Tobruk (city), with the 5th Panzer Regiment leading, the Italian Ariete Division following, and elements of the 8th Machine Gun Battalion securing the penetration area.

Australian alertness and an aggressive defense, however, denied the enemy a thorough reconnaissance of the perimeter. In addition, the Italian maps used by the Germans were outdated and inaccurate. Furthermore, there were no photographs or aerial reconnaissance reports available from the *Luftwaffe*.[32]

As a result, the German engineers chose to make the crossing just south of R33. This was some two and one-half miles west of the planned crossing site on the El Adem road. This would cause delay and confusion later. At the point chosen, the antitank ditch was continuous and for the most part twelve feet deep. Unknown to the Germans, the ditch was not continuous throughout the sector. There was no ditch from posts R11 to R21, which would have given direct access to the vital Pilastrino ridge. Additionally, just north of R33, between R27 and R29, the ditch was only two and one-half feet deep, with a solid rock bottom.



(Source: Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein* [Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966], p. 131.)

Map 7. German attack, 13-14 April

On the afternoon of the 13th, men of the 2-17th saw motorcycles and a staff car in front of their sector. Soon after, a Heinkel reconnaissance aircraft made a low-level pass over this part of the perimeter. Later, other enemy aircraft scattered leaflets over the garrison that read:

The general officer commanding the German forces in Libya hereby requests that the British troops occupying Tobruk surrender their arms. Single soldiers waving white handkerchiefs are not fired on. Strong German forces have already surrounded Tobruk, and it is useless to try and escape. Remember Mekili. Our dive-bombers and Stukas are awaiting your ships which are lying in Tobruk.[33]

"Remember Mekili" referred to the British surrender there the week before on 8 April, when the Germans took some 3,000 prisoners, including 102 Australians. As for the white handkerchiefs, there were no such luxuries at Tobruk with the dust and shortage of water.

Doubtless, the enemy was giving special attention to the 2-17th's sector. Later in the afternoon, enemy aircraft again flew over the perimeter, and armored cars began probing the southern perimeter. Enemy troops in trucks assembled 4,000 yards from the perimeter. They dismounted but made no move to disperse until brought under artillery fire. Trucks carried small detachments of German machine gunners forward within

1,500 yards of the defenses, where they engaged any Australian movement along the perimeter.

1600. Lieutenant Colonel Crawford, the 2-17th's battalion commander, moved his reserve, B Company, up behind D Company, which was occupying Posts R30 through R35.


Watching a tank battle on the perimeter, Tobruk

1700. The Germans fired heavy artillery concentrations on D Company but did not follow up with an attack.

1730. The Australians saw enemy infantry and several tanks about 500 yards from the wire. They were advancing under cover of heavy small-arms and machine-gun fire. The 1st and 107th RHA engaged and stopped the advance.

RAF evening reconnaissance indicated the buildup for a major attack with a report that 300 vehicles were concentrated along the El Adem road.

After dark, three enemy tanks cruised singly along the antitank ditch, possibly looking for any opening in the obstacle.

2300. Before blowing the gap in the antitank ditch, the Germans attempted to storm R33. Thirty German infantrymen with 2 small field guns, a mortar, and 8 machine guns broke through the wire, dug themselves in 100 yards east of the post and engaged the defenders. The post returned fire, and when that failed to drive off the Germans, Lieutenant Colonel Mackell, the post commander, and six of his men counterattacked with grenades and bayonets. Twelve Germans were killed, one was captured, and the remainder fled. One of the Australian infantrymen, Cpl. Jack Edmondson, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the first such medal to be awarded to an Australian in the war of 1939-45.

On the night of 13 April, the Australians conducted deep patrolling around their perimeter. Lieutenant Colonel Crawford sent out two patrols to locate the enemy positions taken up during the afternoon near Post R33. Both patrols brought back a prisoner from the German 8th Machine Gun Battalion and also reported enemy movement in front of D Company. Crawford alerted his reserve, B Company, to be ready to make a strong counterattack at dawn from behind Post R32, which was 500 yards inside the perimeter wire.

14 April

0030. A German tank approached the still unbreached ditch, stopped as if to check the area, then withdrew. Mines taken out by the Germans were neatly stacked on both sides of the intended gap.

0230. Some 200 German infantry came through the wire near R33 and then spread out for several hundred yards inside the perimeter. Captain Balfe signaled with his Very pistol for artil lery support. The 1st and 107th RHA responded, along with small-arms fire from the infantry. The Germans suffered casualties but did not withdraw. D Company, 2-15th, from the brigade reserve battalion, was moved into position in the rear of D Company, 2-17th.

0400. Enemy tanks were seen by moonlight assembling close to the wire near the El Adem road and were brought under artillery
fire.

Members of C Company, 2-13th Battalion, on daylight patrol at outer perimeter, tobruk

0445. The same tanks approached the perimeter at R41 near the El Adem road. Col. Ernst Bolbrinker, operations officer for the 5th Panzer Regiment, stated the attack was to start at 040C with a thirty-minute artillery preparation that would shift forward at 0430. The night was dark and bitterly cold. Terrain orientation was nearly impossible because of inaccurate maps and because a compass direction had not been provided. As a result, engineer officers had to guide the units to the tank ditch. Under blackout driving conditions and radio silence, the regimental staff following the combat columns got mixed in with some logistical vehicles and lost contact with the tanks. The regimental commander halted the column and broke radio silence to reassemble the units. With all the commotion, the British started to fire in the direction of the noise. Next, the engineer guides became disoriented and led the attacking columns across the front of the British positions. By the time the attacking force reached the opening in the tank ditch, their artillery fires had been shifted. Because the breaches allowed passage of only one vehicle at a time, only the early morning fog prevented a disaster. Nevertheless, the mounted infantry had already incurred great losses.[34]

0450. Forty German tanks were reported moving west from R41 along the perimeter just outside the wire. The 1st RHA engaged them. Enemy 88-mm guns began to fire on the Australian defensive positions.


An effective observation post, Tobruk

0520. The lead German tanks turned and entered the perimeter through the gap just south of post R33. As planned, the Australian infantry made no attempt to stop them but lay in wait for the German infantry. The Germans headed straight toward the D Company command post at R32. The first fifteen tanks were seen towing antiaircraft and antitank guns. Groups of fifteen to twenty men riding on or following the tanks dropped behind them once they were inside the perimeter.

0545. Thirty-eight tanks of the 5th Panzer Regiment's 2d Battalion were formed up for the attack nearly a mile inside the perimeter wire. At the same time, the 1st Battalion's tanks were moving up behind the infantry, field guns, and antitank guns. British artillery fires were shifted from in front of the wire to R32 and with excellent results. The German machinegun crews who had been riding on the tanks were mostly killed or wounded, and the tanks moved on without them. The infantry scattered and, under small-arms fire from the Australians, moved back toward the wire. The German tanks continued to move but back to the east, inside the perimeter, until they were within a mile of the El Adem road. They then turned northeast, moved for a short time parallel to the road, and then stopped about a mile and one-half from the British artillery. The thirty-two 25pounders of the 1st and 107th RHA and the antitank guns of the 2-3d Australian Antitank Regiment were directly ahead along the Blue Line. The mobile antitank guns of M Battery, 3d RHA, were to the Germans' left, and the 1st RHA was dug in and hull down on the east side of the El Adem road, on the German right flank (see map 8).

Map not available
Map 8. Friendly unit dispositions, 14 April

Taking fire from all sides, the German tanks began to move forward by bounds. As they closed within 600 yards, the British artillerymen, using open sights, fired their 25-pounders with deadly accuracy. Even without armor-piercing shells, their fire was effective. Five tanks caught fire and the turret was blown off of one 22-ton Mark IV. Two German tanks attempted to outflank the guns to the right but were engaged and stopped by antitank guns of the 2-3d Australian Antitank Regiment positioned to their right flank. The 2d Battalion, 5th Panzer Regiment, which had been leading the advance, then halted, turned its tanks around, and began to withdraw, only to run straight into the following element, its regiment's 1st Battalion.

The Germans had reached their high-water mark and were now engaged from all sides. At the same time, back to the south along the perimeter, the forward posts were covering the perimeter gap with fire, thus blocking the German follow-on forces. The second line of posts was covering the open ground between the perimeter and the tanks and was preventing the enemy tanks and their infantry from rejoining. As dawn approached, the firelight intensified near R32. Three German antitank guns and a small fieldpiece were brought into action, firing behind R32. Though under return fire, the D Company post killed the German crew members with sniper fire. Next, the Germans brought up a 75-mm field gun and several long-barreled 88-mm guns to the gap. Again, the Australian infantry dealt the crews a deadly blow. As dawn broke, enemy machine-gun positions were spotted and one by one suppressed.

With General Lavarack's permission, General Morshead ordered the two cruiser squadrons of the 1st RTR to counterattack the enemy tanks at first light. As the British cruiser tanks moved west across the El Adem road in the early morning light, they saw the enemy tanks grouped in front of them, one and one-half miles south of the 1st and 107th RHA. The British artillery fires had caused the enemy tanks to scatter, and they began moving forward in groups toward the gaps in the artillery positions. The Mark IIIs fired their guns as they moved, with the heavier Mark IVs stopping to fire their 75-mms. At the same time, one five-gun troop of M Battery, 3d RHA, with its antitank guns mounted on trucks (Portee), worked its way around to the rear of the German tanks, coming up on their right flank and engaging them with hit-and-run tactics.

For forty-five minutes, the British artillerymen met the enemy's advance, standing by their guns and proving themselves more determined than their enemy. They lost one gun, ten men killed in action, and four wounded in action.

0700. The German tanks again turned to the east but again ran into antitank fire from the 2-3d and the 25-pounders of the RHA. The antitank guns enfiladed them, and the RHA fired from the front. The tanks passed and the smoke and dust cleared to reveal four immobilized tanks in front of the 2-3d. Three antitank guns were also destroyed. The 1st Royal Tanks now engaged the German tanks at one mile and began to close with them. Smoke and dust were everywhere. Farther back, near the perimeter, B Company of the 2-17th was counterattacking against 100 Germans holed up near the ruins called Goschen's house, north of R32. D Company of the 2-15th established a blocking position just to the north to assist in containing the Germans. Attacking with grenades and bayonets, the Australians killed eighteen Germans and captured eighteen. Overhead, Tobruk's RAF Hurricanes were fighting a battle with German and Italian fighters, while antiaircraft guns fired at the weaving and turning aircraft. The Hurricanes brought down four enemy planes and lost one of their own.

Under fire from all sides, the German tanks finally withdrew, turning to the south and heading for the gap. Tank after tank was being knocked out as they ran the gauntlet. The British cruisers and two infantry tanks which had joined them gave chase.

On the perimeter, the German infantry, who had failed to widen the gap and secure the flanks of the penetration, were scattered everywhere. Enemy pockets near the gap were being suppressed by the Australians, but groups who had penetrated deeper to the rear of the perimeter posts continued to cause trouble. There was great confusion as the German tanks and infantry pushed together out through the gap. Captain Balfe, the D Company commander, described the scene:

The crossing was badly churned up and the tanks raised clouds of dust as they went. In addition, there was the smoke of two tanks blazing just outside the wire. Into this cloud of dust and smoke we fired anti-tank weapons, Brens, rifles, and mortars, and the gunners sent hundreds of shells. We shot up a lot of infantry as they tried to get past, and many, who took refuge in the anti-tank ditch, were later captured. It was all I could do to stop the troops following them outside the wire. The Germans were a rabble, but the crews of three tanks did keep their heads. They stopped at the anti-tank ditch and hitched on behind them the big guns, whose crews had been killed. They dragged these about one thousand yards, but by then we had directed our artillery on to them. They unhitched the guns and went for their lives.[35]

0730. The Germans were in full retreat. Forty German divebombers appeared above the harbor to bomb the town in an attack meant to be coordinated with the lead German tank battalion. Four Stukas were shot down by British antiaircraft gunners and two by Hurricane fighters. Seventy-five Germans were captured at Goschen's house.


Troops in a dust storm, Tobruk

0830. Except for sporadic fighting, the battle was over. By noon, the last of the enemy was rounded up. Rommel gave the order to attack again at 1800, but the order was canceled when sufficient forces could not be mustered. Two days later, on 16 April, Rommel, thinking the 8th Machine Gun Battalion was still within the perimeter, personally directed a new attack from the west against the Ras el Medauuar sector with six medium and twelve light tanks of the Ariete Division, plus the 62d Infantry Regiment of the Trento Division. When counterattacked by the 2-48th Australian Infantry, 26 German officers and 777 men surrendered**.**

Continuing the attack the next day with ten tanks, the Italians reached their forward posts, but when the infantry failed to follow, they withdrew losing five tanks.[36] During the next ten days, the Australians gave the Germans and Italians little rest, conducting aggressive patrolling and bringing in approximately 1,700 prisoners. The Germans didn't attack again until their second abortive attempt on 30 April.

Critical Events

The clearly recognizable turning point of the battle was when the 5th Panzer regimental commander, Colonel Olbrich, ordered his forces to withdraw.[37] A mile and one-half inside the Australian perimeter, having reached a slight rise across their front, the panzers suddenly faced a line of British 25-pounders, antitank guns, and tanks

on their flanks. The British fire was devastating, and seventeen panzers were destroyed. As soon as the lead panzer battalion turned to avoid the British fire, it ran into the trailing panzer battalion. With this reverse in direction came confusion and an immediate shift of momentum to the defenders. This key event was further magnified by the actions of the German 8th Machine Gun Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Ponath, the battalion commander, had tried unsuccessfully to prevent Colonel Olbrich from withdrawing.[38] Without tank support, the 8th Machine Gun Battalion's men were lying on the ground, with no cover, under heavy fire, and their ammunition was running short. Colonel Ponath decided to pull the battalion back, and as they made the first rush to withdraw, he was killed, a bullet through his heart. The next senior officer ordered the men to cease fire, and many then surrendered.[39] With this event, the Australian infantry was able to restore the perimeter, except for minor pockets of German resistance. Other key events were B Company of the 2-17th's counterattack to eliminate the German resistance around Goschen's house, thereby relieving the pressure on D Company and Post R33, which was covering the gap; there was also the failure of the German engineers to lead the attacking columns directly to the perimeter opening, causing a delay in the attack time and a loss of the effects of preparatory fires; the numerous probes and the abortive attack on 11 April against the 2-17th's sector also alerted the Australians to the imminence of an attack. Forewarned, General Morshead concentrated his artillery, antitank guns, tanks, and infantry reserves to meet the German assault. All of these major occurrences favored the Australians and certainly helped effect a decisive victory.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of German and Australian Capabilities

To analyze why the Australians won such a clear tactical victory, it is illuminating to match both opponents against a set of capabilities.

Force Structure

Although the Australians employed 32,000 combat troops in the Tobruk defenses, with about 24,000 being combat troops, there were still insufficient infantry battalions to properly secure the 28-mile perimeter in depth. Each battalion was thinly spread over a five-mile front, with two companies up and one back. The Germans, on the other hand, had sufficient men to operate and maintain vehicles and equipment but lacked enough infantry units to share the load of the 8th Machine Gun Battalion. Hindered by losses it suffered before the final 14 April attack, the 8th Machine Gun Battalion did not have enough infantry to secure the flanks of the penetration as well as to support the panzers in the attack.

Organization and Tactics

The 9th Australian Division's success at Tobruk was predicated on the expert application of all available assets in a combined arms effort. This included aerial, mobile, and foot reconnaissance to determine the enemy's location and movements; aggressive, deep, and continuous combat patrolling to keep the enemy off-balance as well as to deny him ground reconnaissance of friendly positions; air interdiction to prevent him from concentrating his forces outside artillery range; air-to-air interdiction and antiaircraft artillery support to protect the port facilities and naval ships; close air support, artillery, and combat patrolling to keep the enemy from concentrating his forces within range of the main defensive area; a strong system of defense in depth with mutually supporting positions reinforced by mines and obstacles to deny the enemy access to the perimeter; and aggressive, courageous infantrymen supported in depth by well trained artillerymen, antitank gunners, and an armored counterattack force. These assets combined to defeat the enemy's blitzkrieg tactics. The Germans, on the other hand, were unable to muster sufficient forces at the point of penetration, as they had piecemealed their forces in order to surround the Australian garrison. The units that remained for the attack had 112 light and medium tanks; some small sapper units; 8 field guns (virtually out of ammunition); a few light and heavy antiaircraft guns; and 1 infantry battalion-the tired and depleted 8th Machine Gun Battalion.

Weapons and Equipment

The British and Bush artillery completely outgunned the Germans' few fieldpieces and Mark IV tanks mounting the 75-mm gun. The British had forty-eight 25-pounders, twelve 18-pounders, and twelve 4.5-inch howitzers.

The Germans, however, had the edge in available air power with their ability to mass thirty to forty dive-bombers with fighter escorts against the fourteen British Hurricanes and handful of Blenheim bombers.

The German Mark III and IV tanks and 50-mm antitank guns also outranged the British 2-pound tank and antitank gun, but they suffered greatly from the 25-pound guns.

A Bren gun post defending against dive-bombers

Intelligence

The Germans used aerial reconnaissance, ground reconnaissance, and probing attacks in an attempt to determine the strength and location of the Tobruk defenses. But they had no accurate maps and only received two from the Italians just before the attack on 12 April. The Germans were not sure where the antitank ditch was located, and they fully believed the British forces in the garrison were preparing to evacuate by sea and thus would be completely demoralized and unwilling to fight. The Australians, on the other hand, conducted extensive aerial and ground reconnaissance in maintaining contact with the enemy. Their continuous deep patrolling not only supplied information but denied the Germans close observation of the garrison positions. Lack of cover and concealment forward of the defenses and artillery fire and antiaircraft fire also helped curtail the German reconnaissance efforts. Because of the Germans' lack of information, they conducted numerous probes that revealed to the Australians the intended location of the German attack.

Command and Control

Rommel was noted for leading from well forward in his armored command car. Before the Easter Battle, he had moved rapidly about the battlefield west of Tobruk by air and ground, urging his units on into their final positions around the perimeter. Though he had radio communication, his rapid movement caused him to outdistance the range of his radio, and as a result, he was out of touch with his corps headquarters as well as his subordinate units. Certain subordinate commanders thought this method of command and control also meant Rommel often did not know the true ground situation. General Toppe, in *Desert Warfare: German Experiences in World War II*, felt that higher level commanders should not change locations too frequently but rather remain with their command post at a fixed point, even if the situation was unclear.[40] But Rommel thought

differently. His philosophy was to see things for himself, to get a better grasp of the battlefield in order to make the right decisions.[41] At dawn on 14 April, Rommel, having personally gone after the Ariete Division to get them to move up to reinforce the attack, went to within 100 yards of the gap in the antitank ditch, lost his communications, and was out of contact until 0900, when he returned to his headquarters.[42] Like their commander, Rommel's subordinate leaders also moved well forward. General Streich was to move with the 5th Panzer Regiment but got lost en route to their attack position. Colonel Olbrich, commander of the panzer regiment, led the tank attack, and Lieutenant Colonel Ponath, the 8th Machine Gun Battalion commander, led his battalion personally in the reconnaissance probes, in the breaching operation, and the main attack. The serious drawback, however, was that the German chain of command could not communicate with each other without physically moving to the rear, to the corps headquarters. Rommel also used a trusted representative, Lieutenant Schmidt, who moved along with General Streich to observe the action as it unfolded.

General Morshead also had problems, though communicating from a fixed position was not as difficult as trying to maintain contact in a fluid battlefield situation. For the Australians, radio communication was not yet available for the infantry. A wire telephone network, following the normal lines of command, was laid from the fortress headquarters to the perimeter. Battalion headquarters had strung lines to the companies and from the companies to some of the posts, usually those where the platoon leaders were located. The exposed wire, however, was vulnerable to artillery fire. The most dependable means of communication were the separate artillery cable and wireless network. General Morshead and his commanders throughout the chain also habitually went forward to assess and supervise the preparations for the defense. It is important to note that during the battle, commanders and forward observers moved about whenever necessary to influence the battle as well as to personally lead their men.

Training

While neither opponent had received desert training, the British artillerymen were exceptionally well trained and disciplined in general, as shown by their stand against the German tanks. Though German subordinate units were equally well trained, they certainly had difficulty with night movement and navigation. As for Australian individual training, it was well advanced, the men having experienced some subunit training, but battalions and regiments had not been exercised as units. In particular, German soldiers were well instructed in the use of mortars, dummy positions, and camouflage discipline. The Australians, on their part, were noted for their use of snipers, the bayonet, ground camouflage, target detection, and the use of surprise.

Senior Leadership

The two principal commanders were Rommel and Morshead. Rommel, on his part, was constantly at odds with his higher command, his Italian allies, and his immediate subordinate commander. His conflict with his higher headquarters resulted because he wanted support for an all-out offensive, while his superiors wanted him to conduct

strategic defensive operations. (At the time, North Africa had a secondary role in the German grand strategy, behind the invasion of the USSR.) Rommel was also disconcerted by the Italians and their commander, General Gariboldi, for he felt that they were not equal to carrying out their share of the war, and their failures frequently had a critical effect on German operations. General Streich, the 5th Light Division commander, also posed problems for Rommel, for Streich continually criticized orders and had previously clashed with Rommel in Europe, where Rommel's division had taken credit for successes achieved by Streich's regiment.

Streich was also reluctant to continue the assault on Tobruk and on Easter Sunday had an altercation with Rommel over the feasibility of continuing the attack. But though abrupt and impatient with his senior officers, Rommel was kind and understanding with the younger soldiers; he often shared their hardships, and he had earned their respect.


A British artillery unit, Tobruk

General Morshead, on his part, had executed a well-controlled withdrawal ahead of Rommel, fighting a series of effective rearguard actions. He was respected for his judgment and experience and known for his high standards and extreme attention to detail. While he was a hard taskmaster, his thoroughness gave his men a feeling of security. Morshead, tough and competent, was supported by a capable group of devoted officers, who possessed all the technical and tactical skills needed to execute successful operations.

Cohesion and Morale

Both the Germans and the Australians were exhausted by 14 April. The Australians, however, were close-knit, aggressive, devil-may-care types with a strong will to fight, yet with a con tempt for heroics. Ironically, until the probing attack against the 2-17th's positions on 11 April, the Germans had believed Australian morale was low. Consequently, they were both surprised and shaken by the Australians' stiff defense, including the weight of their artillery and their use of the bayonet. Though still well disciplined and confident, this experience caused the Germans to lose some of their arrogance.

Battlefield Experience

Many of the German units had fought as part of the 3d Panzer Division during the campaigns in western Europe and had been driving the British forces in front of them for three weeks. Up to the time of the battle, the Australians had been untried, but now they had fought an exhausting, yet successful, delaying action at Tobruk.

Logistical Support

Throughout the siege, the Australians, thanks to their navy, had sufficient food, water, and ammunition. Their rations were good and well balanced. In the forward posts, the meals were similar to C rations, except at night, when hot meals were brought forward. Their most critical shortages were tanks and antitank guns. These two items had a higher priority elsewhere at the time.

The Germans, on the other hand, had serious problems. They were in desperate need of a port close to the front. Benghazi and Tripoli were 300 and 1,000 miles away, respectively. They needed 50,000 tons of supplies a month or 350 tons a day to support one division. Additionally, the Italians required 20,000 tons per month. The Africa Corps was living from hand to mouth. Though capable of handling 50,000 tons monthly, Benghazi was reduced to 15,000 tons a month due to RAF bomber interdiction and a shortage of coastal shipping. The capacity at Tripoli was 45,000 tons per month,[43] but once the offensive began, Rommel did not have the trucks to move materiel to the front. As a result, supplies piled up on the Tripoli docks, while shortages were felt at the front. Though one of the major reasons Rommel wanted Tobruk was its port facility, in retrospect, it is doubtful its capture would have helped much. Theoretically capable of unloading 1,500 tons a day, in practice it rarely exceeded 600.[44]

Terrain and Weather

Australian troops baking bread, tobruk

Terrain and weather had an adverse effect on both German and fortress personnel alike. However, by virtue of being on the defense, in prepared positions, and tied to a support base, the elements and topography favored the Australians. The Germans operating in the open south of the 2-17th's positions found it impossible to dig in because of the desert's underlying limestone layer. Consequently, to avoid detection, they had to lie motionless in the scorching sun with black flies swarming over their bodies. Night brought them bitter cold, and often the day blackened with raging sandstorms and hurricane-force winds.

Good Fortune

Everything seemed to go well for the Australians, while nothing seemed to go right for the Germans. The two-day sandstorm before the attack impeded the Germans' preparations but gave the Australians more time to enhance their positions. Getting lost en route to their objective cost the Germans their fire support, and as bad luck would have it, a defective spotlight on one of their lead vehicles blinked on and off revealing their position. Had the Germans received the more accurate Italian maps earlier, they might have picked a more suitable point to breach the Australian perimeter.

Final Assessment

The prime causes for the German failure at Tobruk were piecemealing of forces, a poor assessment of the garrison's defensive strength, and overconfidence. These factors affected the ability of the assault forces to retain the initiative and to hold, reinforce, and expand their penetration.

In reviewing the Tobruk operations from the point of view of the principles of war, the German attack appeared doomed from the start. In their overconfidence and in their under estimation of the Australians' defensive strength, the Germans failed to adhere to the basic principles of war. Rommel's objective was not attainable. He did not possess the tanks, infantry, nor artillery necessary to encircle Tobruk and to penetrate to the city while at the same time maintaining his capability to continue an offensive to the Egyptian frontier. His objective had been clearly defined, and he was most decisive about its execution, but when it came time to go on the offensive at Tobruk, he could not retain the initiative or exploit it. Moreover, Rommel was unable to mass his forces to concentrate their combat power at the point of penetration. In a maneuver to encircle the fortress, he had piecemealed his forces in economy of force efforts, attacking, defending, delaying, and conducting deceptive operations, but failing to allocate enough forces to support the main attack with infantry and a mobile reserve.

Rommel also had serious problems with unity of command, because the 5th Light Division commander strongly objected to his plan. At a critical point, Rommel had taken control from him and then given it back. The Germans also lost the element of surprise, because they could not avoid Australian observation and detection, which interfered with German movements. And finally, the German plan lacked simplicity, because it called for a night attack against a fortified position without sufficient intelligence or reconnaissance.

Morshead, on the other hand, limited his objective to holding Tobruk at all costs. He was successful because he took the initiative away from the Germans, going on the offensive with a defense based on a program of deep patrolling, air and artillery interdiction, and aerial reconnaissance. Though spread thin in an economy of force effort to cover the 28-mile perimeter, he was able to mass his combat power at the critical time by establishing his defense in depth. This defense included a mobile reserve placed in position to maneuver on short notice to relieve pressure on the defense or, if possible, to take the initiative and exploit a successful defense.

As for unity of command, even though General Lavarack had overall command of the area, General Morshead was responsible for the defense of the garrison. Nonetheless, there was total cooperation between the two, and they shared a common objective.

The Germans never acquired an advantage over the Australians because they were unable to penetrate their security. Again, by aggressive patrolling, air and artillery interdiction, use of snipers, and excellent camouflage, the Australians denied the Germans the opportunity to gain information and kept them continuously off balance.

Furthermore, the Australians achieved surprise at several critical times during the five days of action. For instance, the Germans were thrown completely off guard by the Australians' aggressive use of snipers, bayonets, artillery, and rapid counterattack. The Germans were also surprised when their tanks were ambushed by the 25-pounders and when the Australian infantry allowed German tanks to pass through the initial defenses before engaging the dismounted troops that followed. The simplicity of the Australian plan influenced its almost flawless execution. In its implementation, fires were well coordinated, positions were mutually supporting, and counterattack forces were properly rehearsed.

The battle for Tobruk is a set piece for light infantry supported by artillery, armor, and antitank weapons in the defense against a heavier armored force. At Tobruk, Rommel had been denied a critical objective, and his blitzkrieg tactics had failed. Psychologically, it was a shocking blow to German morale, cohesion, and momentum. For the British and their allies, it provided a long-needed boost in morale.

A captured panzer officer called Tobruk "a witches cauldron."[45] German prisoners were to refer to it later as "the hell of Tobruk," admitting that nothing like it had ever happened to them before.[46] Allied forces had made a lasting impression on the German and Italian forces in North Africa.

Lessons Learned

Many lessons were learned from the experiences at Tobruk, both by the Germans and the Allies, concerning tactics, weapons, equipment, logistics, and training. The following are some of these lessons, some arrived at from the German perspective, others from the Australian and British view of things.

. Well-balanced, closely coordinated teams of armored forces-infantry, field artillery, engineers, antiaircraft, and air forces were the organizations that achieved the best results in desert fighting. However, infantry units, if well balanced, were able to defend themselves against tank attacks from various directions when supported by artillery.

. Infantry battalions, with a proportionate allotment of supporting weapons on the present scale of provision, were not strong enough to provide themselves with all-around defense against an attack in force by tanks. Moreover, there was not enough room inside a battalion sector for a portion of the artillery to be placed to carry out a normal artillery role, which is essential to the defensive plan. Battalion-defended positions must therefore be placed in groups sufficiently close to each other to ensure that the ground between them can be effectively covered by antitank, small-arms, and mortar fire. In addition, each group must be arranged so that the artillery is protected from direct attack from any direction.

. Brigade defensive areas must be established so that from whatever direction attacks may come, each area can be supported by the artillery fire of adjacent areas. If brigades have to be placed in isolated positions, the general plan of defense must provide for

their withdrawal in the event an enemy obtains freedom of action in the area in which they are positioned. Otherwise, the enemy will be able to concentrate its attack against such brigades and destroy them in detail.

. Artillery and antitank guns must form the nucleus of all defended positions and sectors. Therefore, organization and establishment of defenses is primarily an artillery and antitank problem and must be treated as such. No defended area can hope to stop a tank attack if the antitank defense is not in depth. The 25-pounder troops should not constitute the depth but only add to it. As far as resources permit, there must be depth in the disposition of antitank guns in front of the 25-pounder troop positions.[47]

. When the enemy is attacking, he must be brought to a halt by the fire of antitank guns, while the artillery concentrates upon the unarmored portion of his force. A plan must then be made to attack him in the flank or rear, using the largest number of tanks possible, supported by all available weapons. Artillery will be used either to provide concentrations of fire against the enemy's supporting weapons or to blind them by using smoke. All available machine guns and small arms must be used to neutralize enemy antitank guns, to force enemy tanks to remain buttoned up, and to prevent any movement of dismounted troops with the tanks.

. Not only must antitank guns hold their fire until tanks are well within their effective range, but they must wait until tanks are within range of other guns of the defensive sector. If guns open fire individually, they reduce the effect of surprise and run the risk of having the whole of the attacker's fire concentrated on each, in turn. It is, however, dangerous for a gun to remain silent when it has obviously been located by the enemy tanks or supporting weapons.[48] The Bren gun (or similar weapon) with each antitank gun must be used to force the enemy tanks to button up.

. Antitank guns must always be dug in, even if a position is only to be occupied temporarily.

. Usually 2-pounder antitank batteries were directed not to use direct lay against tanks until tanks were within 800 yards of their positions. For 25-pounders, direct fire was held until the enemy vehicles were within 1,000 yards. Opening fire at 600 yards was found to be too short a distance because the enemy machine guns were then within effective range. At 800 yards, the antitank gun was nearly as accurate as at 600 yards, whereas the machine gun had lost considerable accuracy and was unlikely to penetrate gun shields.[49]

. All artillery covering an area of a division or brigade must be under the command of one artillery officer so that the maximum concentration of fire can be brought to bear in support of any one area.

. A 25-pounder battery position should be organized for all-around defense with small-arms weapons used against the possibility of attack by infantry at night, in smoke, or in duststorms.

. The artillery must know the infantry, machine-gun, mortar, and antitank fire plan.

. Every defended position or sector must be prepared to defend against attack from any direction. All-around defense is essential.

. To deny enemy aircraft from penetrating through the harbor unobserved, antiaircraft gun defenses and observation posts at Tobruk were established on the escarpment overlooking the harbor.

. When enemy dive-bombers attacked antiaircraft gun positions, the safest course of action was to engage them, rather than take cover.

. Gun towers were also used by the artillery to gain height for observing fire. These observation post (OP) ladders were used both as dummies to draw fire and for observation. They were mounted on trucks or could be removed quickly and set up. The British observation towers were generally about twenty-five feet high. The Germans had a two-piece telescoping tube mounted on the side of their armored OP, which could be cranked up into observing position. To employ these gun towers effectively, numbers of them-at least one to each four guns-should be used. These, like tanks and the slight rises in the ground, aid in overcoming the flatness of the desert.[50]

. All infantry sections and platoons and all antitank-gun, machine-gun, and mortar subunits must know the areas they are to cover, the ranges at which they are to open fire, and the types of targets they are to engage. They must also know where, for how long, and in what circumstances artillery defensive fire will be brought down and how it is proposed to make use of smoke. Distances to tactical features must be paced off, not guessed. Range marks must be put up. The maximum ranges at which fire is to be opened by each different type of weapon must also be paced off and marked on the ground with rocks, tins, or some other means.[51]

. Troops must be made to dig in at once upon taking up a position, however tired they may be. This applies to machinegun, mortar, antitank gun, and field artillery units, as well as to infantry platoons.

.Positions must be kept concealed. Trucks must not be allowed to drive around stopping to deliver rations except during mirage hours or in darkness. The enemy will spend hours watching for such clues as to the location of positions.

. The existence of minefields must never be allowed to induce a false sense of security. Commanders must take frequent action to make certain this does not happen. The deeper the minefield, the greater the need for forward patrolling. Minefields can be used to economize in antitank weapons employed, but not in infantry.

. The principle of concentration at the decisive point of attack applies to the allotment of mines and laying of minefields as much as to other aspects of war. Small dispersed minefields are useless.

. There must be enough access lanes to enable troops to move in and out of minefields without undue difficulty. One foot exit on each company front and one vehicle exit on each battalion front was the minimum.[52]

. Dummy minefields can be used to deceive the enemy. Also, dummy lanes are deceptive and excellent for ambushes.

. When the Germans used tanks to cover the breaching of minefields by their engineers, the British used well-directed smallarms fire and machine guns to engage them from the flanks as well as snipers to drive them off.

. In the desert, every gun was dug into a pit, if time permitted, and covered with a net; every tent was set in a pit and camouflaged; and even each tank had a canvas top placed over it to make it look like a truck. All vehicles were painted with non-glare, sand-colored paint, and all glass was smeared with oil or a glycerine solution, and then dirt was thrown on these surfaces. Only a narrow un-smeared slit on the windshield was left to obtain vision. Wheel tracks were everywhere but could not be disguised or obliterated.

A liberal application of dull yellow paint-the color of the sand-was found to be the best method of rendering both artillery pieces and trucks less visible in the desert. The outlines of pieces were broken by the use of scrub and sand mats. The barrel and cradle were sometimes painted a dull sandy color, except for a one-foot diagonal stripe of light brown or green to break up the pattern of the gun. Motor vehicles carried camouflage nets, which were stretched taut from a central position on the roof of the vehicle at an angle of not more than 45 degrees and then pegged to the ground and covered with threaded screen and bleached canvas or with pieces of sandbags, 50 to 70 percent of which were painted a dull yellowish white. The vehicles themselves were painted cream white, broken by irregular patches of light brown or green. The object was to neutralize dark shadows by an equivalent amount of dull white. The Germans and British adopted this sand color as camouflage. During operations, German tanks were painted black, evidently to aid their antitank gunners in quick daytime identifications while also serving as night camouflage.[53]

. As a security measure and to prevent unauthorized persons gaining information regarding the identification of units and movement of troops, the practice of marking vehicles with unit designations was discontinued by the British. A code system employing colors and combinations of colors with numbers (to indicate various tactical organizations) was adopted.[54]

. All defended localities and areas must be covered by mobile outposts to give warning of approach, to deny close observation of the position to the enemy, and to harass and delay his advance.

. All motorcycles, including half-track motorcycles, proved unsatisfactory for the Germans and were replaced eventually by Volkswagens.

. Movement of units or replacements to the desert in the summer resulted in more metabolic disorders than during the rest of the year,

. A period of acclimatization is not absolutely essential before engagement of troops, as efficiency is not greatly affected upon arrival.

. After one year in the hot desert climate, troops should be rotated to a different theater, as their efficiency and health declines rapidly. Units carried more supplies than was contemplated by peacetime training; seven days' supply was advocated by many units, and the Germans were said to carry fourteen. Each unit sent into the desert needed to be as self-sustaining as possible.[55]

. The British relied on supply dumps to a greater extent than the Germans, who used supply trains. The artillery played an important role in the defense of both dumps and columns.

. German maintenance and recovery units went into battle with their tanks. The British did not have this capability and suffered accordingly.

. The Germans gave much attention to the effect of the tropical sun on their munitions and weapons. All ammunition other than small-arms ammunition was especially packed for the tropics. All munition cases were so marked. Normal charges for tropical use were calculated at an average temperature of 77° Fahrenheit.[56]

. Flashless powder was highly desirable, especially for medium and heavy artillery, which were the favorite targets of dive-bombers, strafing fire, and enemy batteries. Weapons were difficult to detect at a distance when this type of propellant was used. The use of separate-loading ammunition placed any weapon at a disadvantage during action against armored vehicles.[57]

. Extensive use on both sides was made of captured machine guns, antiaircraft weapons, artillery, tanks, and motor vehicles.

. In regard to tank and antitank technology, the Germans felt that all tank and antitank systems should have the longest possible range since the enemy could be seen at great distances, and it was critical to engage him before he engaged you. Because there was little cover and only a few reverse slope positions in the desert, they said it was desirable to have only vehicles and weapon systems with a low silouette. They determined it was especially important to have tanks that were fast, maneuverable, and equipped with long-range guns.[58]

. Shortage of tank crews was a greater problem than the shortage of tanks.

.German units that were transferred to Africa during the course of the campaign there received no specialized training owing to the fact that the orders for their transfer came so unexpectedly that there was no time for this purpose. However, in a suggestion

submitted to the army High Command by the army in Africa, the following training subjects were considered important:

- Exercises of all types in marching and combat in open, sandy terrain.

- Cover and camouflage in open terrain.

- Aiming and firing of all weapons in open terrain and at extremely long ranges.

- Recognition and designation of targets without instruments. Aiming and firing exercises were to be carried out by daylight, at night, in the glaring sun, during twilight, facing the sun, with the back to the sun, with the sun shining from one side, by moonlight, and with artificial lighting.

- Exercises during extreme heat.

- Exercises of long duration with no billeting accommodations.

- The construction of shelters in sandy terrain.

- Practice in night driving and in driving over sandy terrain.

- Marching at night in level terrain.

- Orientation by compass or by the stars. - Driving by compass.

- Recovery of tanks and other vehicles in sandy terrain. - Laying and removing mines in sandy terrain.

- Exercises in mobile warfare.[59]

APPENDIX A*

Tobruk Fortress
Order of Battle, 14 April 1941

*Source: AIF (Middle East). Military History and Information Section. *Active Service: With Australia in the Middle East* (Canberra: The Book of Management of the Australian War Memorial, 1941).

HQ 9th Aust Div & Tobruk Fortress
- 9th Aust Div Intelligence Sec

HQ 3d Armored Bde (60 x tanks working; another 26 tanks in repair)
- 3d Hussars/5 the Royal Tanks (Det 4 x light tanks and 18 x cruisers)
- 1st Royal Tank Regt (Det 15 x light tanks and 19 x cruisers)
- 1st Kings Dragoon Guards (30 x armored cars)
- 4th Royal Tank Regt (Troop of 4 x infantry tanks)

18th Cavalry Regt (Indian)

HQ Royal Horse Artillery
- 1st RHA Regt (16 x 25-pounders)
- 3d RHA (minus one btry) (16 x 2-pounder antitank guns)
- 104th RHA Regt (16 x 25-pounders)
- 107th RHA Regt (16 x 25-pounders)
- 51st Field Regt (12 x 18-pounders and 12 x 4.5 inch how)
- 2-3d Aust Antitank Regt (Unk no., type, Bofors (minus one btry) 37-mm; Breda 47/32-mm; 2-pounders)

HQ Royal Australian Engineers
- 2-3d Aust Field Company
- 2-7th Aust Field Company
- 2-13th Aust Field Company
- 2-4th Aust Field Company
- 2-4th Aust Field Park Company
- 2-1st Aust Pioneer Battalion

Signals 9th Aust Div

HQ 18th Aust Inf Bde

- Sig Sec
- 16th Aust Antitank Company
- 2-9th Aust Inf Bn
- 2-10th Aust Inf Bn
- 2-12th Aust Inf Bn

HQ 20th Aust Inf Bde

- Sig Sec
- 20th Aust Antitank Company
- 2-13th Aust Inf Bn
- 2-15th Aust Inf Bn
- 2-17th Aust Inf Bn

HQ 24th Aust Inf Bde (-) (2-25th Inf Bn still in Australia)

- Sig Sec
- 24th Aust Antitank Co
- 2-28th Aust Inf Bn
- 2-43d Aust Inf Bn

HQ 26th Aust Inf Bde

- Sig Sec
- 26th Aust Antitank Co
- 2-23d Aust Inf Bn
- 2-24th Aust Inf Bn
- 2-48th Aust Inf Bn

1 Royal Northumberland Fusiliers (Machine Gun Bn)

HQ Aust Army Service Corps (AASC)

- 9th Aust Div Supply Column
- 9th Aust Div Ammunition Co
- 9th Aust Div Petroleum Co
- Composite Co AASC
- 7th Aust Div Supply Column
- 2-3d Aust Field Ambulance Co
- 2-8th Aust Field Ambulance Co
- 2-11th Aust Field Ambulance Co

2-5th Aust Field Ambulance Co
2-4th Field Hygiene Co
9th Aust Div Provost Co
9th Aust Div Protection Platoon
9th Aust Div Empl Platoon
9th Aust Div Postal Unit
9th Aust Salvage Unit

Fortress Troops

Royal Artillery

HQ 4th Antiaircraft (AA) Bde

13th Light AA Regt
14th Light AA Regt
51st Heavy AA Regt
3d Aust Light AA Regt

Notts Yeomanry (coast defense)

Royal Engineers (under chief royal engineer, 9th Aust Div)

295th Field Co Royal Engineers
551st Tps Co Royal Engineers
4th Field Sqd Royal Engineers
143d Field Park Troops

Signals (under Cdr Signals, 9th Aust Div)

K Base Section
27th Line Maintenance Section

Royal Army Service Corps (RASC)

309th Reserve Motor Co
345th Reserve Motor Co
550th Co
RASC 4th Lt AA Bde
RASC Sec 13th Lt AA Regt
No. 1 Water Tank Co

Medical

16th MAC

Ordnance (Royal Army Ordnance Corps [RAOC])

2d Armored Div Workshops RAOC
Y Army Tank Receiving Section, RAOC 2d Spt Gp Ord Field Park Sec, RAOC
A Sec Ord Field Park AAOC
2-1st AFW AAOC
Det 2-2d AFW AAOC

Tobruk Subarea

HQ Tobruk Subarea

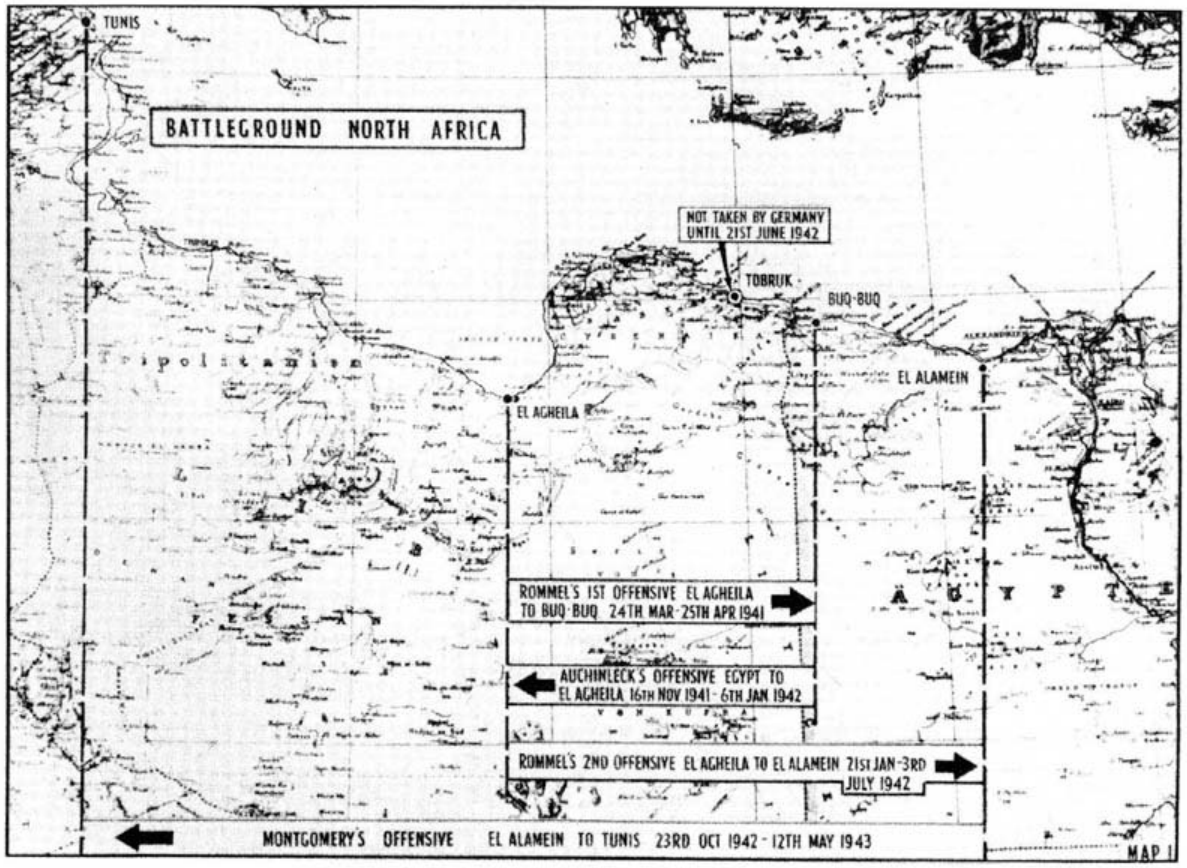
1st Libyan Refugee Bn
2d Libyan Refugee Bn
4th Libyan Refugee Bn
HQ 45th Group
1205th Indian Pioneer Co
1206th Indian Pioneer Co
1207th Indian Pioneer Co
Libyan Work Bn
Army Post Office
H Adv Stationary Depot
Transit Camp

Misc Detachments:
Greek Civilians
POW Cage

APPENDIX B*

The North African Campaigns

Source: George Forty, *Afrika Korps at War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 9.



APPENDIX C*

*Source: U.S. War Department, Military Intelligence Service, *Artillery in the Desert* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 25 November 1942), 54-59.

German Offensive Tactics

... A German tank battalion in tactical formation moves in short rushes, taking advantage of the terrain. Frequently the whole regiment advanced in mass formation with lines of tanks at regular intervals of about 50 yards, advancing in waves. The relatively close formation is more readily controlled than a widely dispersed one. Field artillery and antitank weapons are kept up close, although their location is not apparent until they go into action, usually on the flanks of the tank column. The Germans have in the past been able to bring effective artillery and antitank fire to bear on the British before the British could effectively fire upon them. In addition, RAF planes, because of the pilots' inability to distinguish between their own and German tanks, have not attacked German tank formations in the forward areas.

d. *Offensive Tactics*

In the desert frontal attacks have not often been used, an effort being made more often to attack from one or both flanks. German tanks usually open fire at 1,500 to 2,000 yards, which is beyond the effective range of the hostile weapons that they have thus far encountered. When contact is made, the speed of advance is slowed down unless the movement is a quick thrust to force the withdrawal of weaker hostile forces. The 75-mm and 50-mm guns are used to keep hostile tanks out of range.

(1) *Usual German objectives*.-The object of the Germans is to knock out quickly as many of the antitank guns and foremost field guns as may be visible. When the German tank commander has decided to attack a position, his first objective has often been the British 25-pounders. By reconnaissance in tanks he first locates the British battery positions and makes his plans. This plan in principle always appears to be the same. He decides which battery to attack and he arranges to attack it from enfilade. His attack is made with 105-mm guns, the 88mm dual-purpose guns, and both Mark III and IV tanks. The 105-mm guns fire from covered positions; their observation posts are in tanks. The 88-mm dual-purpose guns are towed. These guns use direct fire from their trailers after attaining defiladed positions at ranges varying from 2,000 to 2,500 yards. The Mark IV tanks assume positions in defilade and fire over open sights at ranges varying from 2,000 to 2,500 yards. The high velocity 75-mm gun in the Mark IV tank and the 88-mm dual-purpose gun have far higher muzzle velocities than any artillery that the British have had in the desert.

(2) *German Mark III tanks*.-The Mark III tank is used as the main striking force in attack. It has the dominant role in tank-versus-tank combat. Its heavy armor and powerful 50-mm gun give it a decided advantage over all types of tanks which it has thus far

encountered in the desert. The 75-mm gun in the Mark IV tank is not an antitank gun but a close-support weapon. Its maximum range is 7,000 yards. Frequently these tanks use direct laying from a defiladed position in which, owing to the location of the gun in the turret, they offer a very small target. At other times the fire is massed, with indirect laying, and is adjusted by forward or flank observers in tanks. Tanks rarely fire while moving, although in at least one instance they were used to fire a rolling barrage at from 3,000 to 4,000 yards while advancing slowly. This forced the opposing tanks to close up doors and turrets.

The first wave of Mark III tanks overrun the gun positions. The second wave of Mark III tanks is closely followed by the motorized infantry, which detrucks only when forced to and cleans up the position with small-arms fire, assisted by tanks which accompany it. After the artillery has neutralized the tanks, the support infantry is attacked. Such attacks have nearly always neutralized the artillery, either by destroying it when the attack was driven home, or by forcing it to withdraw before the tank attack was launched. A successful defense against such attacks has been made only when a tank force was available to launch a counterattack from concealed positions against the flank of the German tank attack.

(3) *The German Mark IV tanks used as artillery*.-In the attack the Germans maneuver to some position where their Mark IV tanks can take up a position in defilade. The Germans meanwhile make a reconnaissance, probing the enemy from all directions to test his strength, and to induce the defenders to disclose their positions by opening fire. During this period, observation posts keep close watch, and any guns which disclose their positions are marked down for destruction when the main attack begins. Then, from their defiladed positions, the Mark IV's attack by fire all antitank guns or light artillery which are visible and within range. Light artillery, antitank guns, and machine guns with the same mission are pushed forward among and to the flanks of the tanks. Observers and occasionally infantry are pushed further forward.

Each German tank battalion has one company of 10 Mark IV tanks, which are employed in 2 principal roles: as highly mobile artillery, and as a component of a fast-moving column. Often field artillery cannot be immediately available in armored engagements; the Mark IV tank with its 75-mm gun together with the artillery of the armored division provides German armored formations with the necessary heavy firepower for a breakthrough.

The maximum range of the 75-mm gun is reported to be 9,000 yards. This relatively long range dictates to troops equipped with light antitank guns the time and place of a battle. In addition, the speed of the Mark IV tank is sufficient to enable it to take part in a rapid advance with the Mark III tanks. The Germans have used these tanks as sniper guns, as artillery against forward British columns, and as heavy concealed weapons in the ambushes into which German armored cars have tried to draw the British cars. In a defensive situation the Mark IV is able to engage British troops from outside the range of the antitank guns, avoiding at the same time, by their mobility, the British artillery fire.

(4) *Field artillery support*.-The 105-mm mobile batteries and the 75-mm guns of the Mark IV tank furnish the principal artillery support for the German Mark III tank, which is the main attacking tank. Sometimes the 88-mm dual-purpose gun is used in conjunction with the Mark III tank.

Some reports indicate that the direction of this supporting fire is carried out by a system of air bursts, since air bursts have been immediately followed by HE concentrations. The fire of 75-mm and 105-mm guns using HE shells has not been reported to be extremely effective. Casualties caused to personnel and tanks by these weapons have been reported to be the result of a new flare-a 75-mm shell which envelopes the tank in flames regardless of what portion of the tank is hit. One whole tank regiment was reported destroyed by this type of projectile. Although the casualties caused from these weapons may be slight, all reports agree that they have a high nuisance value to tanks because of the blinding effect of the smoke and dust. The 88-mm is effective; tanks hit squarely by this gun are destroyed ....

e. *German Methods of Forcing Gaps through Mine fields*

A heavy artillery concentration is placed on the point to be forced and upon the defending troops in the vicinity. After the defenders' resistance is lowered by the concentration, a comparatively small number of foot troops advance to the gap under cover of smoke or of dust raised by the concentration; they locate the mines by prodding the ground with bayonets or with mine detectors; the mines are then removed. Casualties are replaced from a reserve unit that is held immediately in the rear. This method was used in forcing a gap through the mine field that was part of the defenses of Tobruk; the preliminary concentration lasted for two hours. After a gap is forced and marked, infantry followed by tanks or tanks followed by infantry attack through the gap. Infantry preceded the tanks in the battle of Tobruk.

APPENDIX D*

*Source: U.S. War Department, Military Intelligence Service, *Artillery in the Desert* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 25 November 1942). 73-86.

British Antitank Operations

a. *Organization*

Since the number of guns in use in Cyrenaica has been inadequate, all available are used or emplaced before the close of each operation. The antitank weapons, which are considered artillery by the British, are under the command of the division artillery commander in the British forces, and he is responsible for so placing his artillery and antitank guns that they will be mutually supporting. For any action the artillery commander issues the necessary orders alloting the antitank weapons to both artillery and infantry units.

Antitank artillery regiments of 2-pounders consist of 3 battalions of 2 batteries of 8 guns each, totaling 48 guns. They are organized exactly in the same manner as the artillery units except for the number of personnel assigned. A few 6-pounder and 18-pounder batteries are being used. The 6-pounder guns are mounted portee, and the 18-pounders are truck-drawn. These units are also organized in the same fashion as the artillery batteries. The trucks used for the 2-pounders and 6-pounders portee are in general of the 1 1/2-ton type.

The minimum amount of antitank guns required with units necessarily depends on the type of country; the more open the country, the larger the number of guns needed. In the desert where there are no natural tank obstacles an attack may come from any direction. Headquarters and rear echelons must be protected. The large frontages covered and the wide dispersion necessary to minimize the efforts of air attack make this problem of protecting rear elements a difficult one.

In the western desert there have been in use no antitank warning systems, but the British make use of armored car patrols to prevent any surprises, and, as a rule, when one weapon fires, all prepare for action. OP's [observation posts] to the front and flank warn by visual signals of the approach of the enemy armor.

b. *Positions*

In some cases one battery of twelve 2-pounder antitank guns is detailed to protect each infantry regiment. Each attached supporting battery of artillery is often given one troop of four anti tank 2-pounder guns. Organic artillery has the support of one antitank troop per artillery battery. These 2-pounder antitank units are not usually grouped or held in reserve at any point but are actually placed in positions from 100 to 300 yards from the unit protected.

British artillery regiments are armed with 25-pounders which, although not so designed, have formed the basis of the antitank defense. This has been necessary, because the 2 pounder antitank gun has not proved effective. The 25-pounders are sited to give protection in depth, and, where the terrain permits, to give all-around protection to the position.

Antitank guns are placed to cover the 25-pounders in front, in intervals, and on the flanks. A proportion of them may be kept on wheels to counter a threat from an unexpected direction. The fewer the total number of antitank guns, the larger will be the proportion kept in mobile reserve. But positions which guns may have to occupy will in most cases be reconnoitered and prepared beforehand.

Despite the fact that the British have usually operated with one and sometimes two 48-gun antitank regiments to the division, they have still found the number to be too small, and consequently have had their choice of positions affected by the necessity of choosing terrain which could allow them the maximum use of their inadequate number of antitank guns. Unless otherwise dictated by the terrain, it is considered better to place the few antitank guns in comparatively small localities for all-around defense rather than to attempt a complete defense in depth over a wide area. The batteries of 25-pounders are used to provide depth to the defense. Antitank weapons are often placed from 100 to 300 yards on the flank of a battalion in action. For all-around defense of an organization, they are placed from 500 to 1,000 yards in front or on the flank of a battalion with instructions to move close to the battalion position when tanks approach within 1,000 yards of their positions....

. . . Harassing and bombardment tasks are carried out by the 25-pounder guns that are situated in covered positions.

The efforts to avoid observation are directed toward concealment and protection. Scrub ground, or other rough ground, is chosen wherever possible, and digging is done with great care. Movement of all personnel is rigidly controlled.

Guns are placed so as to give effect to the principle of concentration of fire. This is necessary, as the German tanks usually attack in a mass, which cannot be engaged effectively by single guns.

NOTES

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2. AIF (Middle East), the Military History and Information Section, *Active Service: With Australia in the Middle East*, (Canberra: The Book of Management of the Australian War Memorial, 1941), 35.
3. Ian Stanley Ord Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East*, Vol. 2, *The Germans Come to the Help of Their Ally (1941)* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956), 38.
4. Barton Maughan, *Tobruk and El Alamein: Australia in the War of 1939-1945* (Adelaide: The Griffin Press, 1966), 225.
5. Peter Firkins, *The Australians in Nine Wars: Waikato to Longtan* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 232.
6. Maughan, *Tobruk*, 267.
7. Ibid., 210.
8. John Strawson, *The Battle for North Africa* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 57.
9. Maughan, *Tobruk*, 125.
10. Generalmajor Alfred Toppe, et al, "Desert Warfare: German Experiences in World War II." Extracted from Foreign Military Studies No. MS P-129 (Mimeographed. Historical Division, U.S. Army Europe, 1952), 66.
11. Ibid., 66.
12. Maughan, *Tobruk*, 131.
13. John Robertson, *Australia at War, 1939-1945* (Victoria: Brown Prior Anderson Pty Ltd., 1981), 16.
14. Maughan, *Tobruk*, 159.
15. Ibid., 159.
16. Ibid., 169.
17. Anthony Heckstall-Smith, *Tobruk: The Story of a Siege* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 121.
18. Maughan, *Tobruk*, 410.
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20. John Cumpston, *The Rats Remain: Tobruk Siege 1941* (Melbourne: Grayflower Productions, 1966), 208.
21. Ibid., 76.
22. George Forty, *Afrika Korps at War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 48.
23. Playfair, *Mediterranean*, 35.
24. Ibid., 13.
25. Ibid., 13, 342.
26. G. B. Jarrett, *West of Alamein* (Northridge, CA: Sentry Books, 1971), 64.
27. Playfair, *Mediterranean*, 341.
28. Ibid., 299.
29. Maughan, *Tobruk*, 19.
30. Chester [R.W.W.] Wilmot, *Tobruk, 1941: Capture, Siege, Relief* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1944), quoted in Maughan, Tobruk, 133.
31. Ibid.
32. Bolbrinker, "5th Panzer Regiment," 2.
33. Maughan, *Tobruk*, 145.
34. Bolbrinker, "5th Panzer Regiment."
35. Chester [R.W.W] Wilmot, *Tobruk*, *1941*, quoted in Maughan, *Tobruk*, 133.
36. Playfair, *Mediterranean*, 38.
37. Wolf Heckmann, *Rommel's War in Africa* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 82.
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42. Ibid., 125.
43. Martin Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 184.
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49. U.S. War Department, Military Intelligence Service, *Artillery in the Desert* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 25 November 1942). 78.
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51. CGSC, DTAC, Main Lessons, 2-38.
52. Ibid., 2-41.
53. U.S. War Department, *Artillery in the Desert*, 45.
54. Ibid., 47.
55. Ibid., 1.
56. Ibid., 37.
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59. Ibid., 10.

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