

**THE INDIAN ARMY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN
THEATRE: A TACTICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL
ANALYSIS (1940-1944)**

**Thesis submitted to Jadavpur University for the award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in Arts**

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The Indian Army in the Mediterranean Theatre: A Tactical and Technological Analysis (1940-1944), submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University, is based upon my work carried out under the supervision of **Professor Kaushik Roy, Guru Nanak Chair Professor, Department of History, Jadavpur University**. Neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Priyanjana Gupta

List of Abbreviations

BIA – British-Indian Army

ULIA – Unattached List of Indian-Army Officers

WWI – World War I

AFV – Armoured Fighting Vehicles

RAF – Royal Air Force

TEWT – Tactical Exercises Without Troops

FSR – Field Service Regulations

WWII – World War II

MTD – Military Training Directorate

MTP – Military Training Pamphlets

WDF – Western Desert Force

OKW – Wehrmacht High Command/ Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/ High Command of the Armed Forces

OKH – High Command of the Army

OKL – High Command of the *Luftwaffe*

DAK – *Deutsches Afrikakorps*

AT – Anti-Tank

SIGINT – Signal Intelligence of the Allies

LRDG – Long Range Desert Group

SAS – Special Air Service

RECAM - Italian *Raggruppamento Esplorante*

ANZAC - Australian and New Zealand Army Corps

IIB – Indian Infantry Brigade

RA – Royal Artillery

RIASC – Divisional Transport Company

SAMCED - Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean Theatre

MAAF - Mediterranean Allied Air Forces

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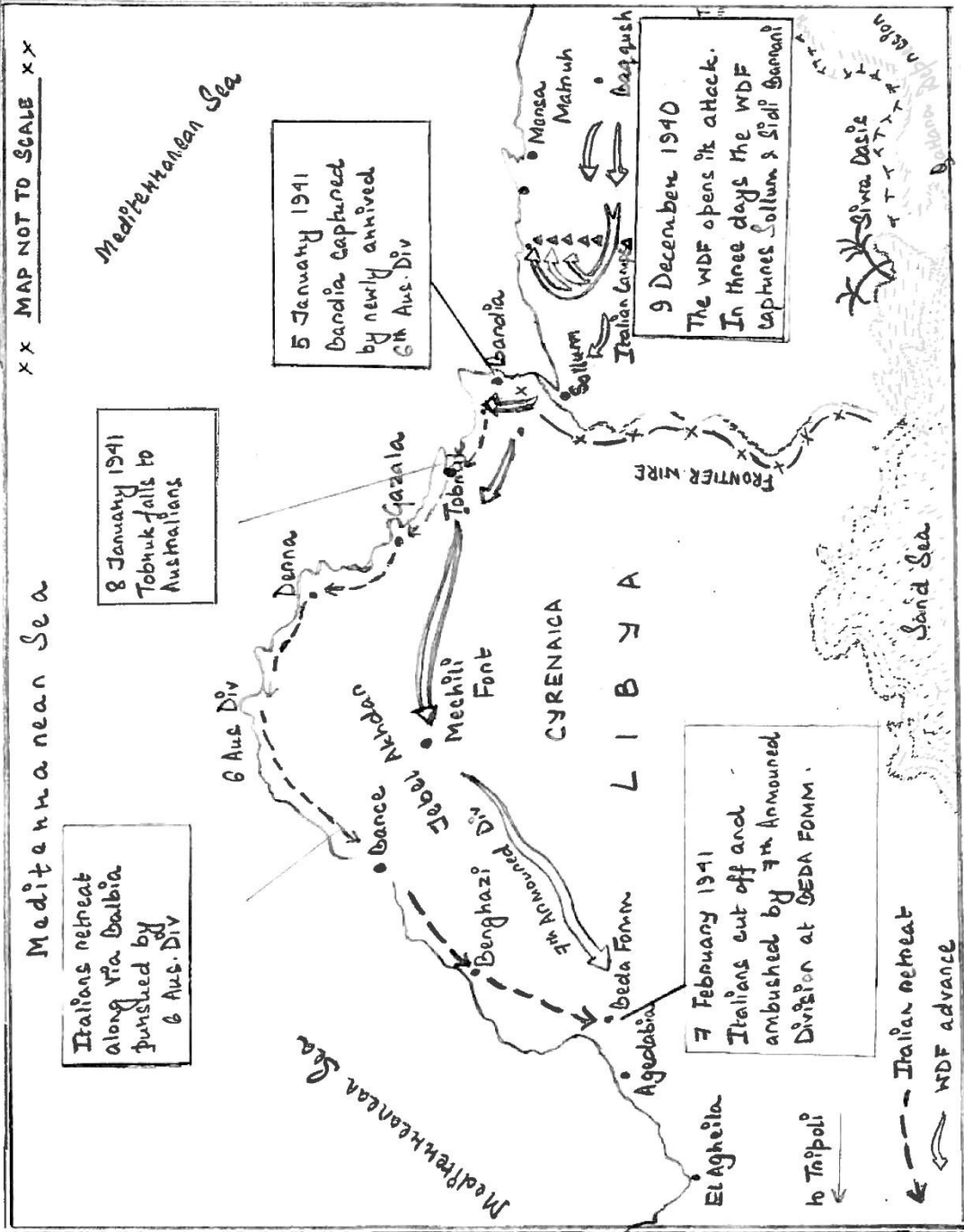
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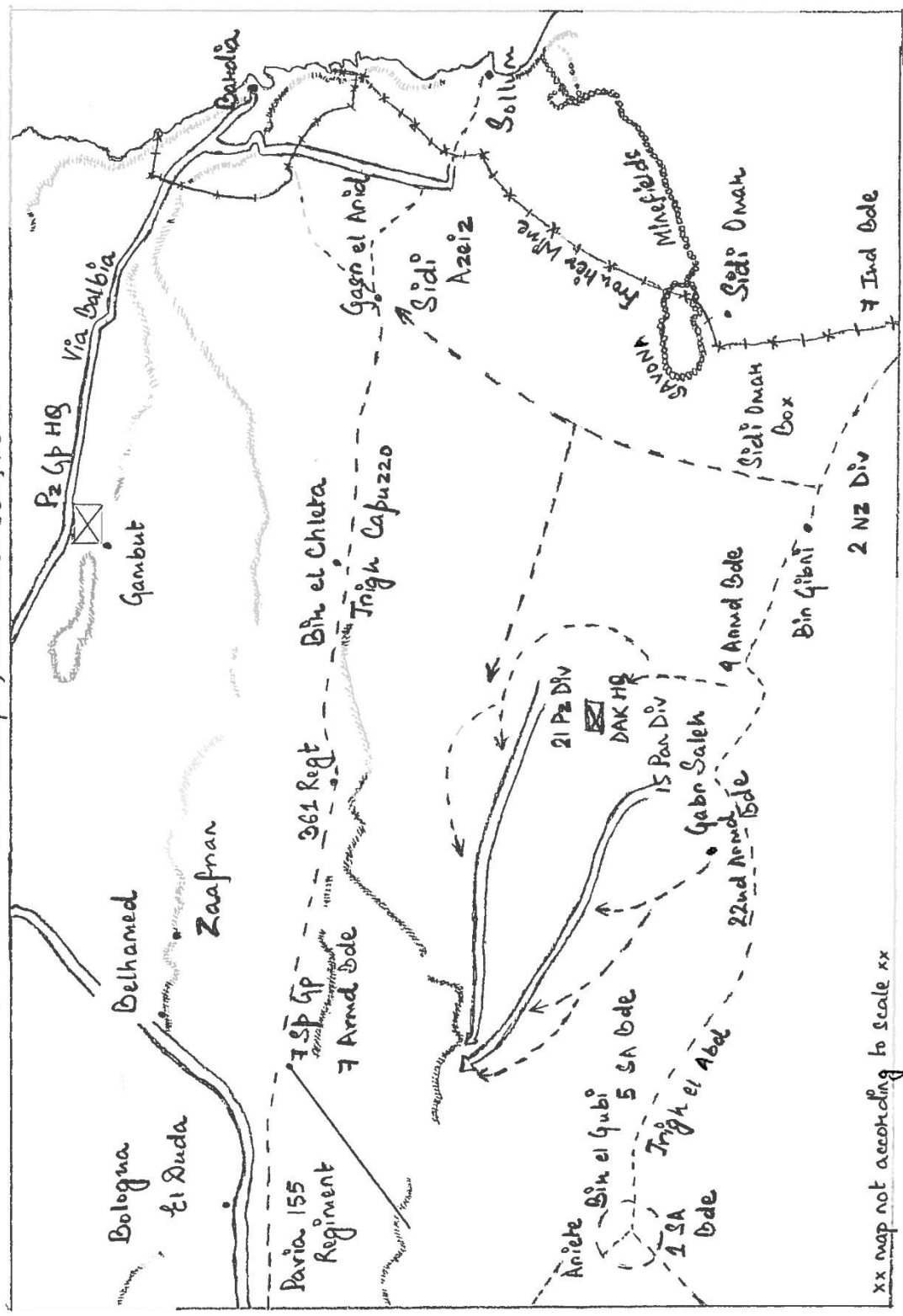
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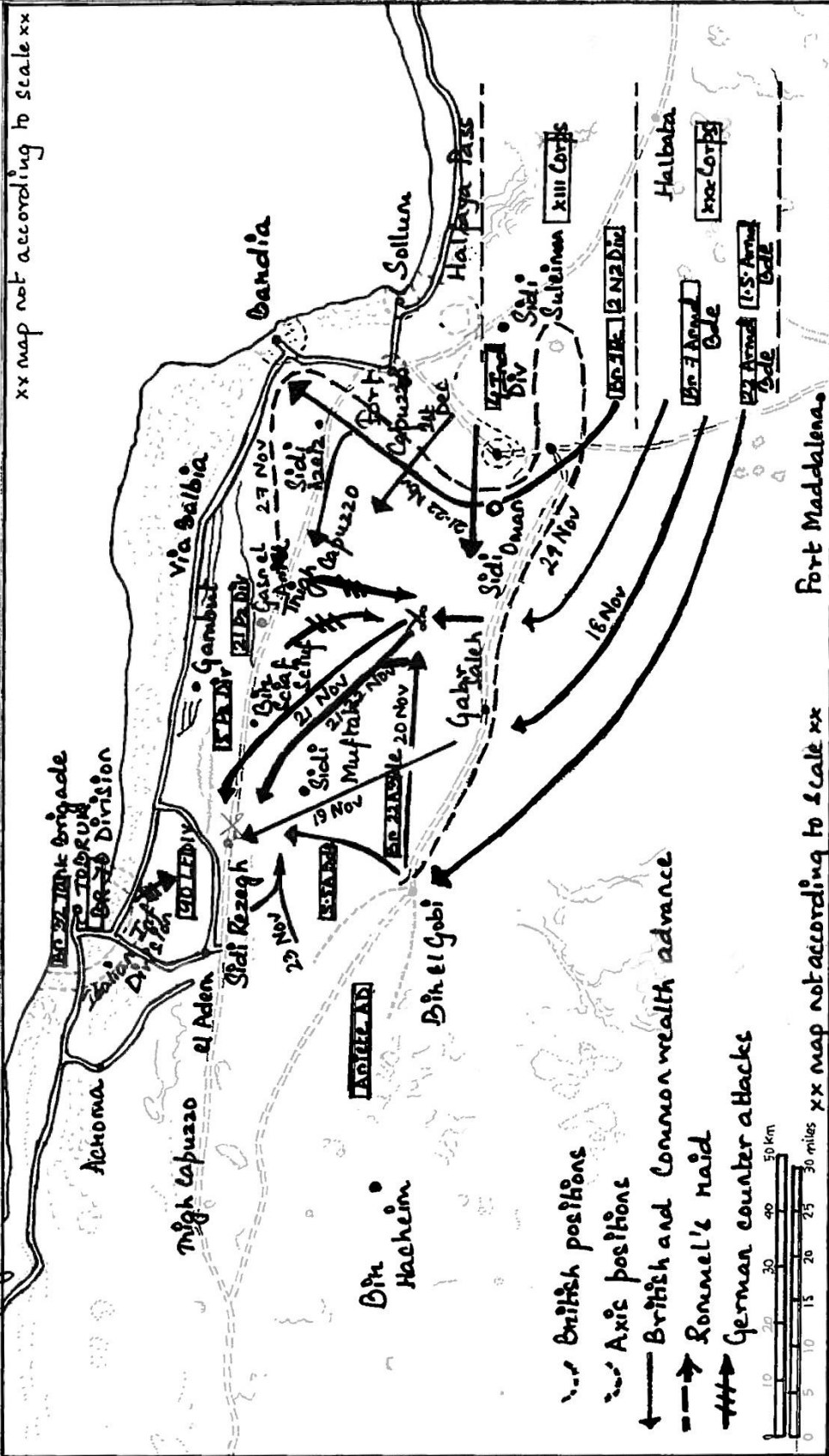
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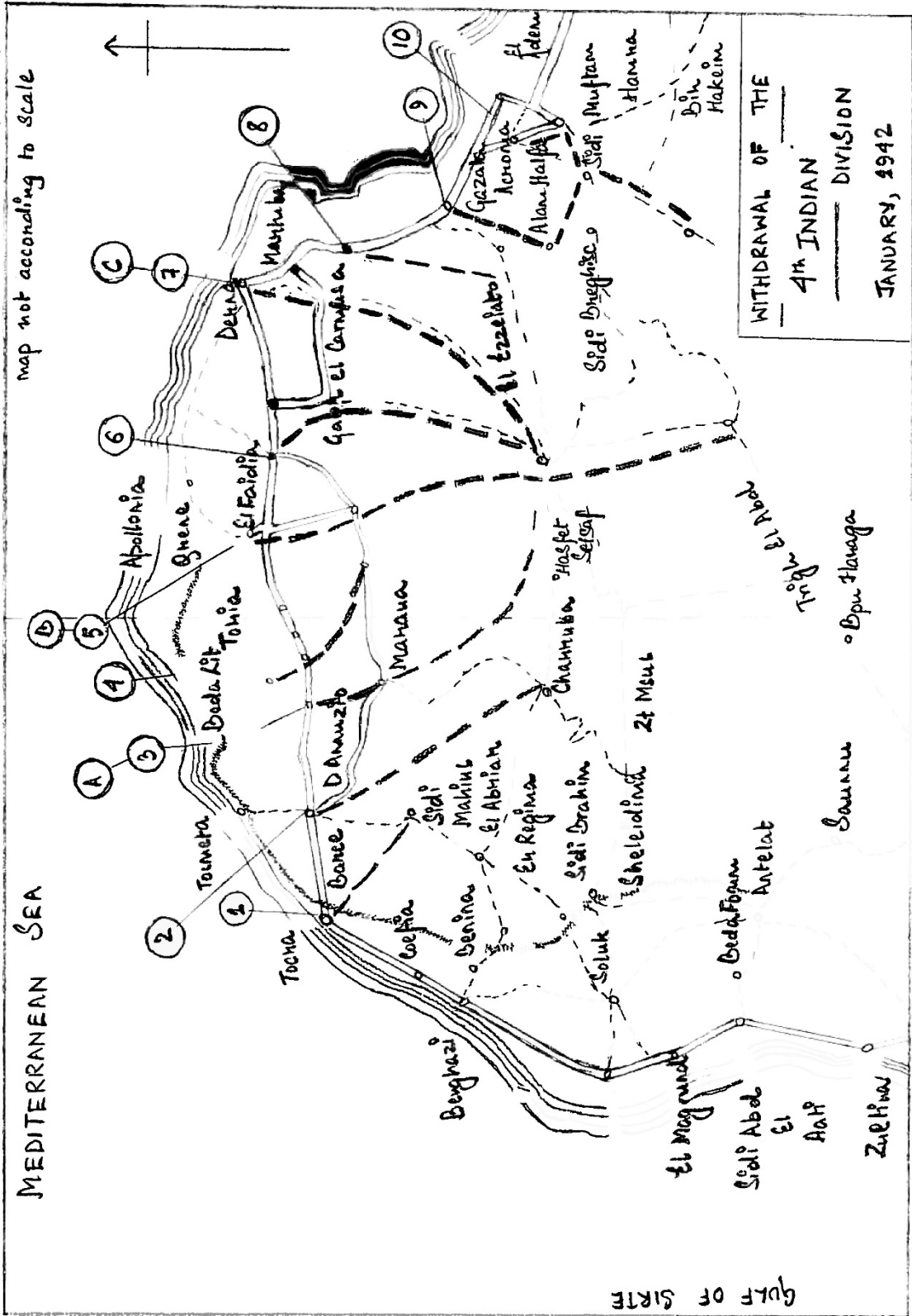
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OPERATION CRUSADER, NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1941

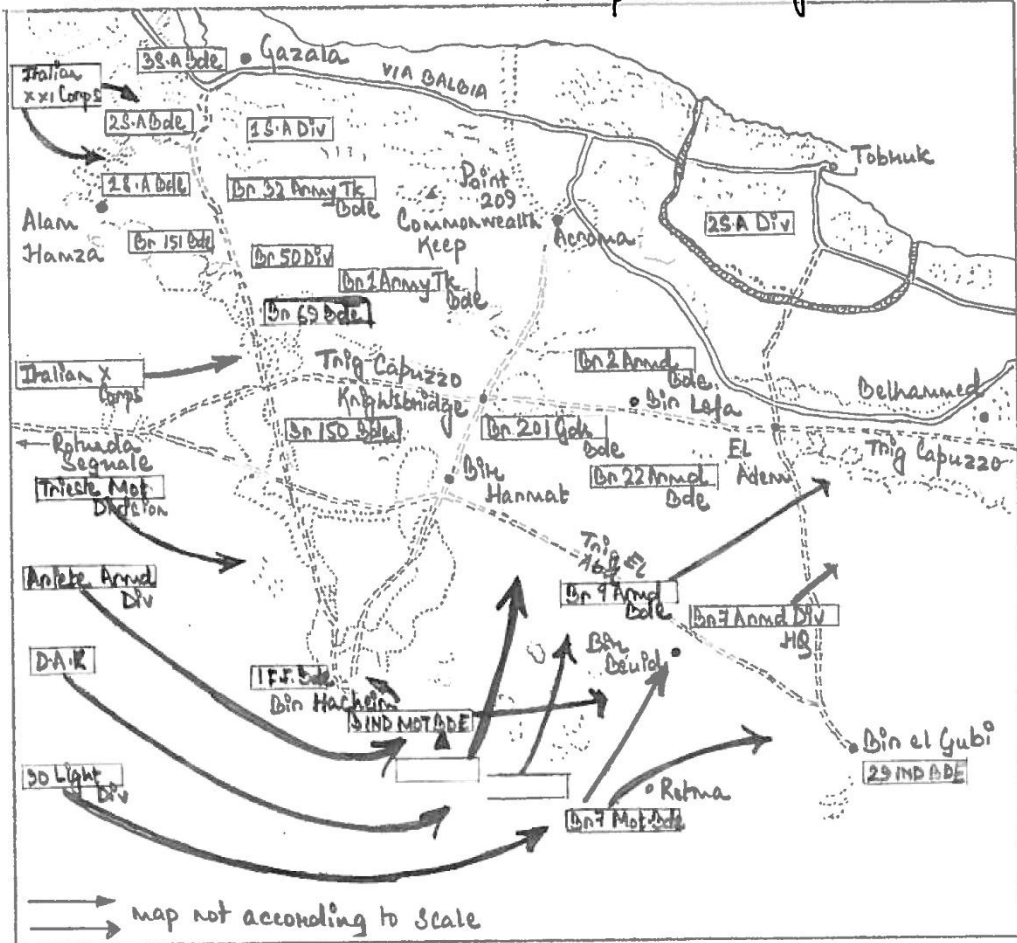
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MAP-6

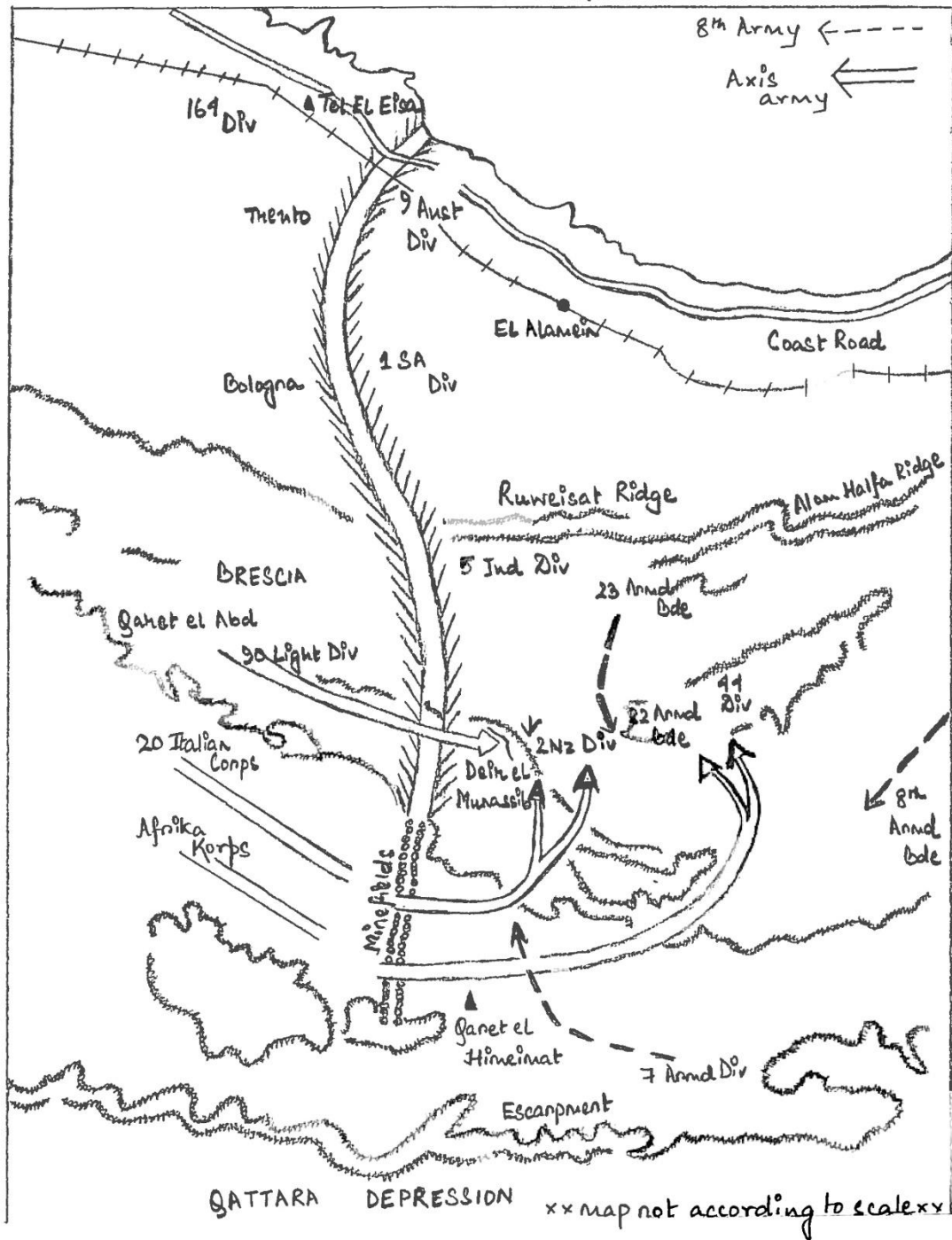
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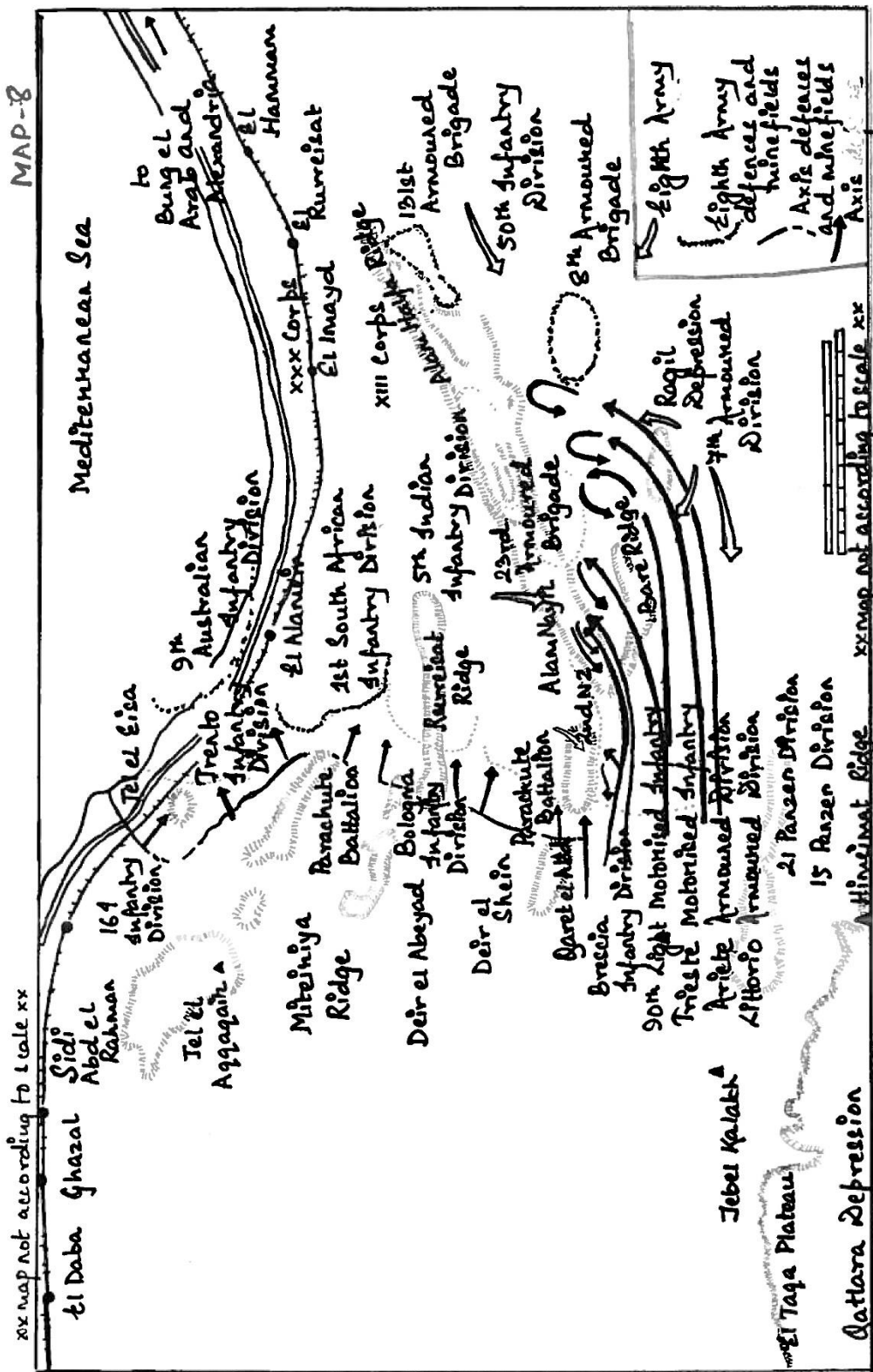


BATTLE OF GAZALA, 26-27 May, 1942

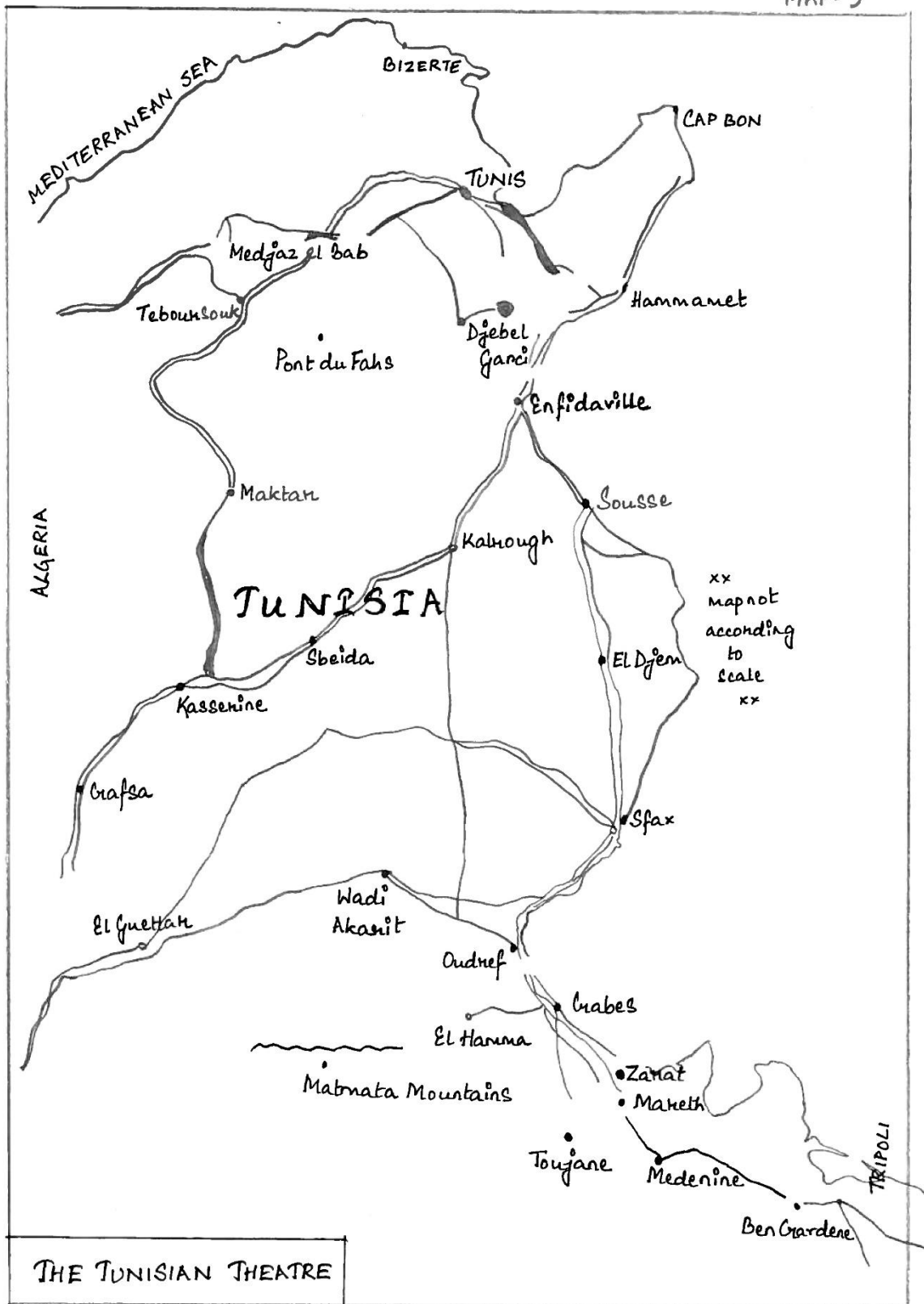
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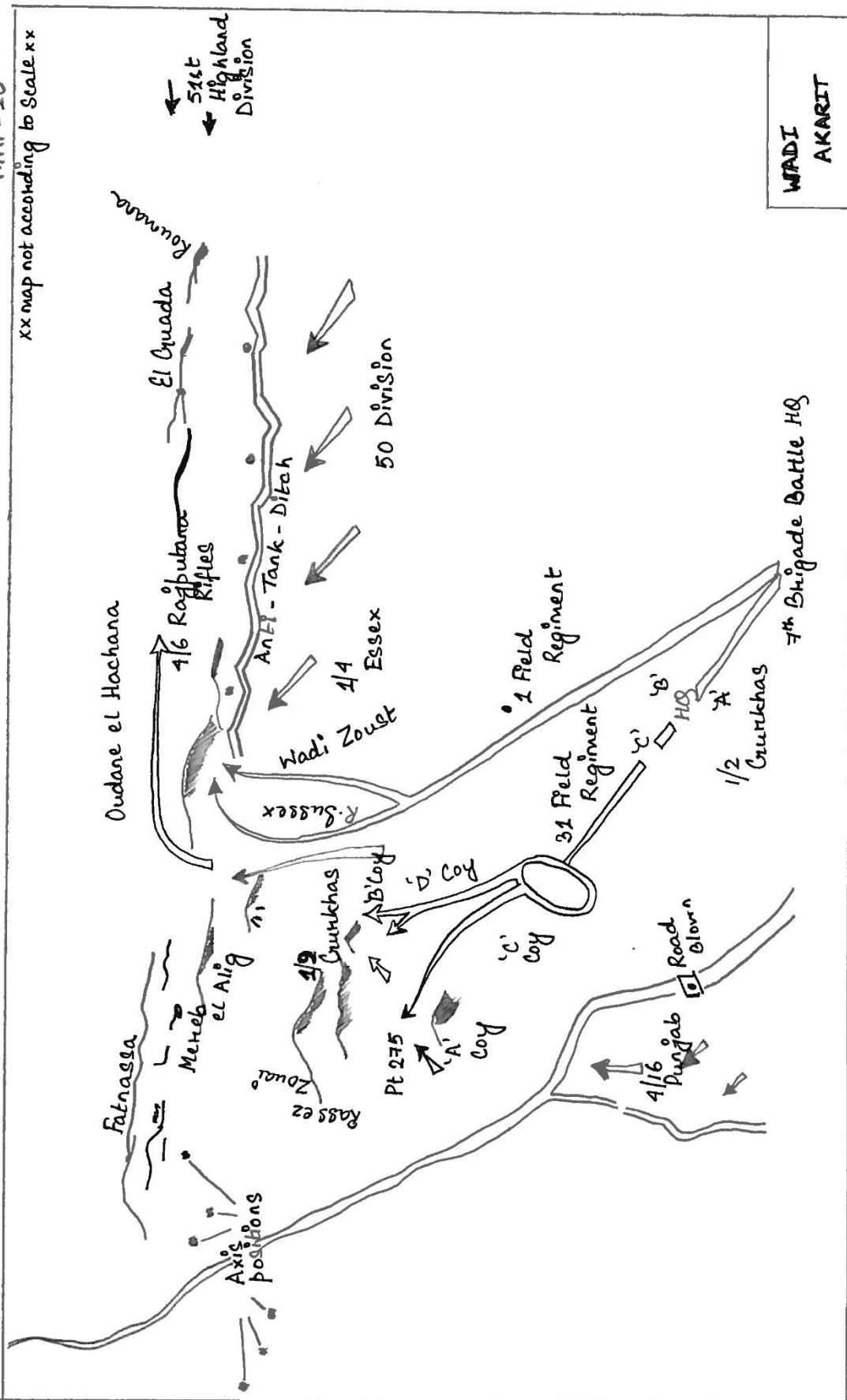


THE BATTLE OF ALAM HALFA, 30 AUGUST - 5 SEPTEMBER, 1942



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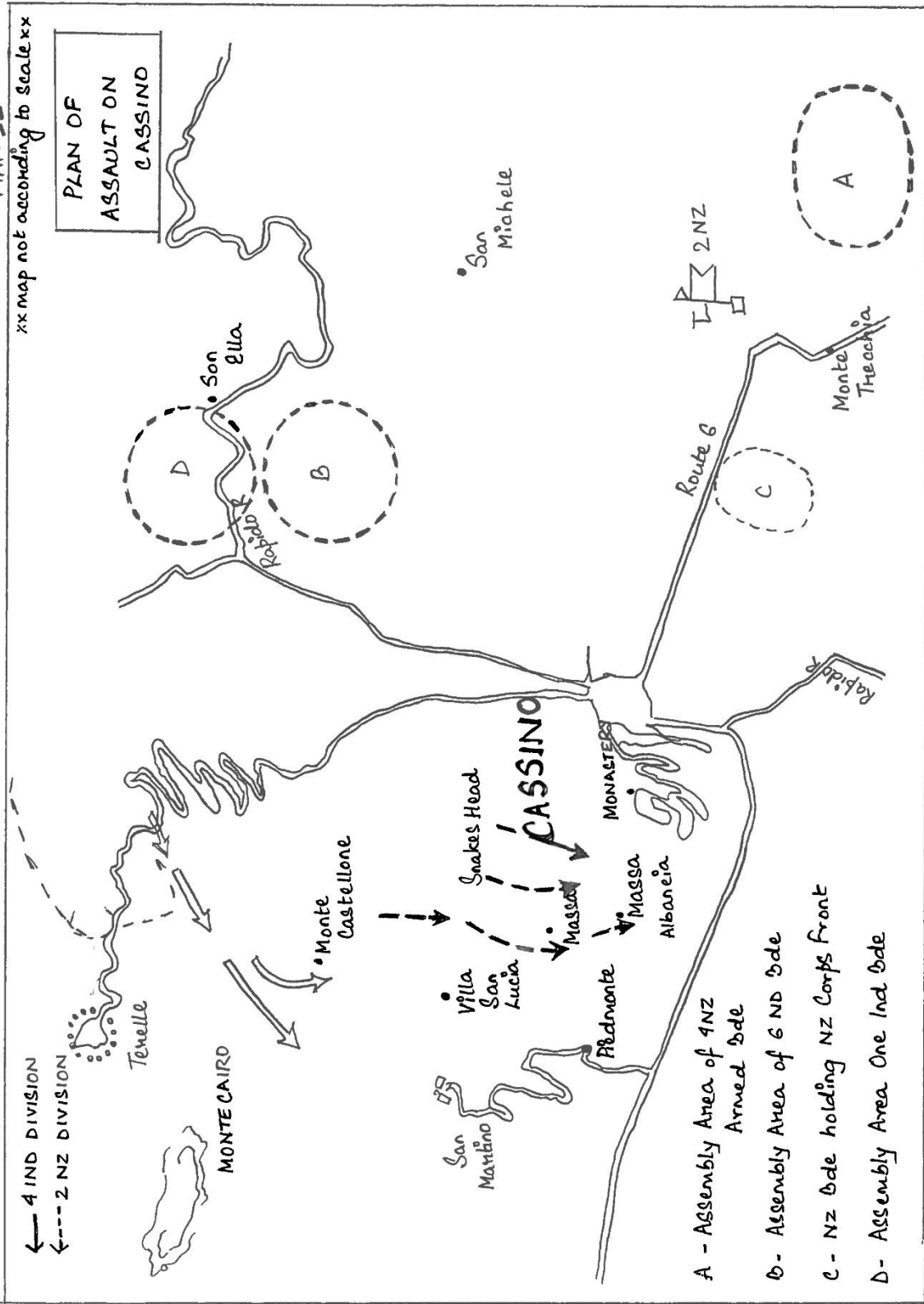


WADI
AKARIT

MAP-11

xx map not according to scale xx

PLAN OF ASSAULT ON CASSINO



← 4 IND DIVISION
 ←--- 2 NZ DIVISION

MONTE CAIRO
 Tenelle

Monte Castellone

Villa San Lucia
 Snakes Head
 Massa
 Predmonte
 MONASTERY
 Massa Albaneia

San Martino

San Michele

Route 6
 2 NZ

A

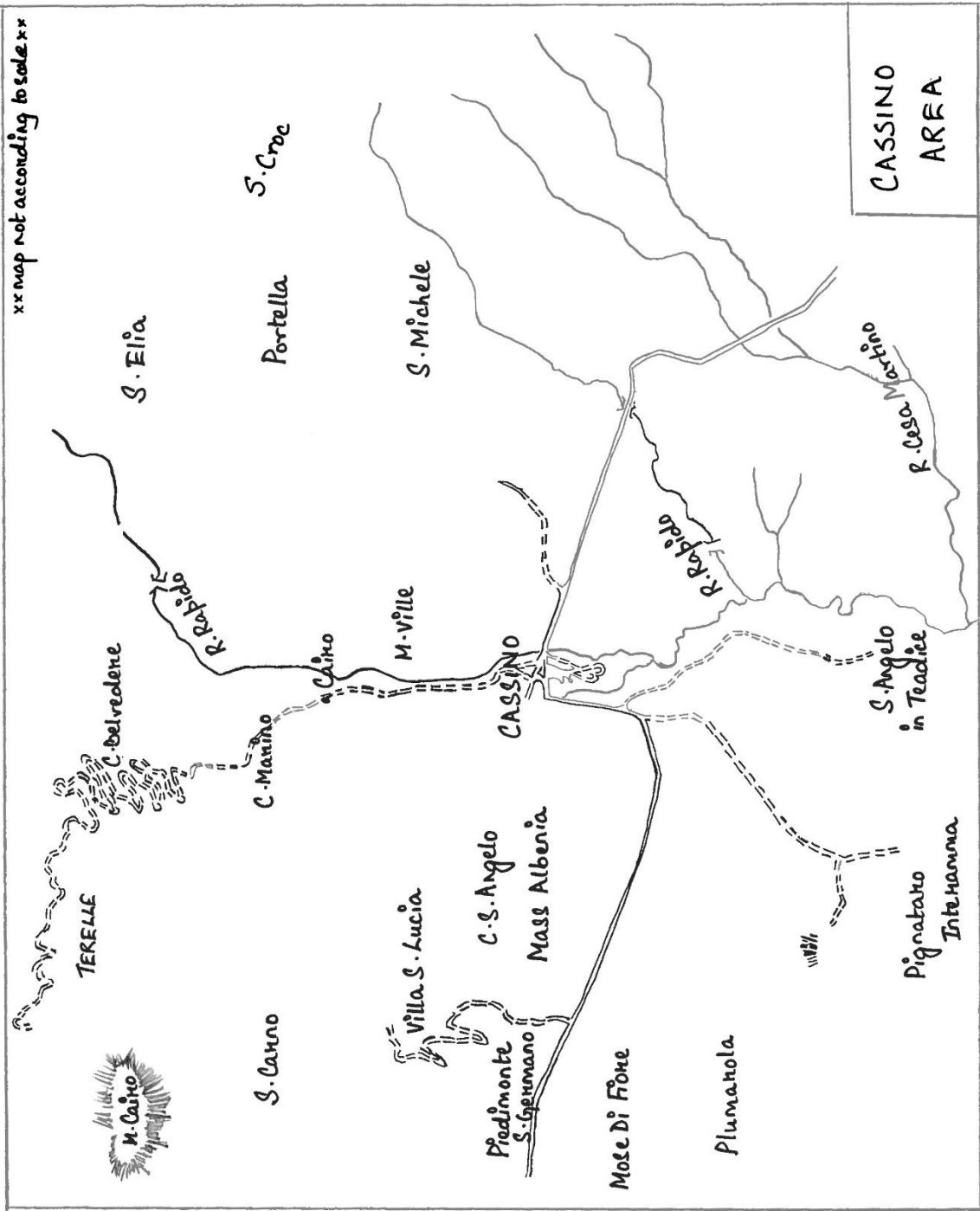
B
 D

C

- A - Assembly Area of 4th NZ Armed Bde
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xx map not according to scale xx



Introduction

The focal point of this thesis is the British-Indian Army's role in the North African Campaign during the Second World War. My thesis argues that the British-Indian Army played a pivotal role in the Allied victory in the Mediterranean theatre. It will emphasise the performances of several Indian divisions, specifically the Fourth Indian Division, that formed the bulk of the Western Desert Force, which fought against the Italian Tenth Army and the *Afrikakorps*. The thesis intends to show how the British-Indian Army won the campaign due to innovation in battle tactics and by using technology and reinforcements properly. This thesis has attempted to expand on comparing training methods used by both armies. No book till now has covered these aspects of the North African Campaign in detail from its beginning to its end. My thesis attempts to fill this historiographical gap. My research focuses on the period between 1939 and 1944. It begins with studying the interwar period and the lessons imbibed from it, which helped the British- Indian Army prepare itself for the Mediterranean front. It ended with the Battle of Monte Cassino, where the Eighth Army emerged victorious. It has attempted to show how the North African Front emerged as the first theatre that gave rise to the phenomena of 'desert warfare' and study the political, strategic, operational, and tactical levels of combat. History from the top is the approach used in my thesis.

When reviewing the secondary literature of the Second World War theatre, many works have covered the different aspects of this theatre of war. This thesis will provide a brief review of the literature of the works. In his monograph, *The Second World War*, J.F.C Fuller, the polymath, focuses on the strategy and tactics of the entire war in terms of different theatres and fronts. He believes that war is nothing more than a lethal argument. The object of war is not slaughter and devastation but to persuade the enemy to change his mind. He believed that strategic bombing was not morally wrong but militarily wrong and politically suicidal. The ideological wars were meaningless, not because ideas are impervious to bullets, but the holier the cause, the devilish the end. He argues that generalship demands audacity and imagination, not merely the weight of metal and the superiority of numbers. He argues that British strategy should be based on sea power, not land power because Britain's geographical position demands it.

Author Richard Hammond, in his work *Strangling the Axis, the Fight for Control of the Mediterranean during the Second World War*, has accentuated the importance of the

Mediterranean to the British Empire as it is a vital means of communication between the Eastern and Western worlds. He argues that the Mediterranean was a significant factor in initiating a global war, given its changing position in British strategic policy from the construction of the Suez Canal to the Italian declaration of war in 1940. The British foreign policies in the late inter-war period included numerous efforts to keep Italy neutral, allowing the Mediterranean to be denuded of military assets in favour of their deployment against threats elsewhere. Like the British, the Italians held some high hopes to control the Mediterranean as a waterway to safeguard their sea communications and strangle those of their enemies. The entire book covers the campaign chronologically, highlighting the factors that lead to the reasons behind the campaign.

In his *Fighting Rommel*, author Kaushik Roy focuses on the 8th Army. He showed in his monograph that the Indian formations, in particular, experienced innovations, both in the aftermath of defeat and flushed with victory. He has demonstrated the dialectical relationship between command structure and combat operations on the basis of the after-action memoranda and intelligence reports. He attempts to show how defeats on the battlefield influenced the training period and how an innovative training period proved its worth during the actual confrontations. He argues that the victory in battle required training manuals to be updated regularly. The conception and implementation of subtle and sophisticated tactics raised the combat effectiveness of specific units in the 8th Army. He has narrated his argument at four levels – army, corps, division, and battalion. He shows that combined arms tactics between armour, artillery, infantry, and air force were essential in the desert, and especially in the mountainous regions, infantry-field-artillery-close air support combination played a crucial role.

The 8th Army was in the process of updating its learning techniques. Kaushik Roy argues that the Allied commanders' rigid linear defence in the open desert proved inadequate against the fluid mobile battle waged by the *Afrikakorps*. He mentions that innovations were regional and enemy-specific. Numerical and material superiority backed up positional warfare tactics for the 8th Army. The battles of Alamein needed its geography to be won over by the tactics of mobile warfare. The coming of General Bernard Law Montgomery brought innovations in artillery tactics, utilization of aerial photos, and patrolling reconnaissance. His tight command system and the conservative attitude of some divisional commanders also obstructed innovations in doctrines and tactics. In Tunisia, the Indian infantry, in comparison to the British

infantry, excelled in mountain warfare. In Mareth, Akarit, and Enfidaville, the 4th Indian Division proved superior to the 50th and 51st British Divisions. They were excellent at conducting nocturnal warfare against the technically backward Pathans and Italians, though it was tough to defeat the *PanzerarmeeAfrika*. Fighting Rommel has dealt with these aspects of the North African Campaign at length.

In his exceptional work, *Rommel's Desert War*, Author Martin Kitchen argues that Hitler's decision to send troops to North Africa was made with considerable reluctance, and his motives behind helping this front were more political than military. He was convinced that an alliance with Italy was the cornerstone of German foreign policy. He made Major-General Erwin Rommel, a highly ambitious soldier and the commander of the *Afrikakorps*, when he was highly ambitious about driving the British out of the Mediterranean. Kitchen argues that. When the British launched their offensive in North Africa with Operation Compass, Adolf Hitler's Mediterranean strategy began to unravel. Hitler, concentrating on preparations for Barbarossa, claimed to be as interested in North Africa as the British. The Panzer was the key weapon the Germans had learned to master at the operational level in the interwar years. They developed the Panzer division, in which the Panzer was integrated with infantry, artillery, signals, and reconnaissance, supported by supply columns and specialized engineers, with all units mechanized to move at the same pace as the Panzer. Kitchen argues that the British-Indian units had nothing to stop the Panzer division with its versatility and daunting speed. Further, he argues that the British were helpless against the operational brilliance of the *Afrikakorps*. Kitchen also contends that they learned slowly, which is narrated differently in this thesis. He advocates that Rommel's exceptional position was not due to his forceful personality and military accomplishments but even more due to his unique support from the Fuhrer. He achieved most of what he did due to the support of several outstanding staff officers.

Author Neal Dando, in his monograph, *From Tobruk to Tunis: The Impact of Terrain on British Operations and Doctrine in North Africa, 1940-1943*, has focused on the crucial impact of the physical terrain on the British victories throughout the campaign in North Africa. He argues that terrain heavily influenced planning, command decisions, and tactics in operations. Terrain influenced three layers of military operation, from the importance of strategic ports through areas of operational importance to the tactically essential features, including high-end ground and depressions, which remained vital unit objectives. Commanders often base their operational and tactical decisions not only on unit strengths and remaining armor or guns but

also on whether the critical ground has been gained or lost, influencing the viability of continuing the action or exploiting any success.

He further argues that British forces improvised on specific tactics, which became more standardized and widespread as the campaign continued. The nature of the dispersal of troops throughout the landscape also heavily influenced a degree of improvisation in British tactical doctrine. Terrain heavily influenced planning, command decisions, and the tactics used. Units made continuous operational moves to capture and hold high ground or other features to gain an advantage over the enemy. The commanders made tactical decisions based on the success or failure of gaining these features and targeting the destruction of the enemy units. They planned subsequent moves based on their unit's ability to hold key ground while considering regular military factors of remaining unit strength, morale, cohesion, and supply of their formation.

Daniel Allen Butler, in his monograph *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel*, is a biography depicting the qualities of Erwin Rommel as a leader and soldier. He argues that Rommel was a complex man who proved himself to be a master of armored warfare, running rings around a succession of Allied generals who never got his measure and could only resort to overwhelming numbers to bring about his defeat. *The Desert Generals* by Corelli Barnett is a brilliant work that argues for the struggle of the individual will against circumstances in the desert. He analyses the style of five commanders, all modifying their fighting tactics according to the needs of the desert. There was a condensed action of nobility, frailty, resolution, loyalty, vanity, fear, simplicity, selfishness, greatness, and littleness. The author argues that this Desert Campaign constitutes the last act of the British Empire as a great, independent, and united power.

This Desert Campaign reveals the methods of thinking, organizing, and fighting of each side and foreshadows their industrial and commercial processes. The Desert Campaign of 1940-1943 is an addition to great epics. It was a battle fought in the wasteland, how soldiers of different battalions strove for victory amid the mechanical tumult of a kind of battle never seen before. Barrie Pitt, in his two-volume work, *The Crucible of War; Western Desert 1941*, and *The Year of Alamein 1942*, has massively worked on the two most crucial years of the campaign, which saw the significant operations, Battleaxe, Crusader, and the Alamein battles. Though written in more of a quasi-popular approach, the author has attempted to provide more essential details about the British Indian Army fighting the Italians in Operation Compass,

something that has not been extensively worked upon to date. He has thoroughly spoken of the generalship of General Archibald Wavell and General Claude J. Auchinleck and how they formulated their command to fight the Italian Tenth Army and, after that, the *Afrikakorps* of the Desert Fox, General Erwin Rommel.

Stephen Brooks edited *Montgomery and the Eighth Army*, a brilliant account highlighting General Bernard Law Montgomery's, hereafter Monty's, experience as a commander in the crucial months after arriving in the Western Desert. The author argues that Monty had a free hand to put his ideas on leadership and the conduct of war to the test. His encounters with the problems of coalition warfare brought an unwelcome loss of independence and growing frustration. However, Monty enjoyed massive success in battling with the Germans and his side over how operations should be conducted. He is one of the few commanders who has provided insights into the campaign's events with his pen. Monty knew he had to take hold of enormous operations of contemporary and historical significance. The author contends that the victory of the 8th Army under Monty's command was based on the pains he took to teach his generals. Their success in the battles of Alam Halfa and the last battle of Alamein was due to the training he provided after he arrived in the desert. Before his command, there was no training of Commanders by their superiors and no firm doctrine of war on which to base training. Only after this training was established could new techniques for modifying the tactics evolve. Practical training in the desert was of utmost importance to Monty, which helped to learn how best to apply ideas in changing conditions under which the Eighth Army was operating.

Authors Jack Greene and Alessandro Massigani, in their monograph *Rommel's North African Campaign, September 1940-November 1942*, have attempted to portray a narrative of the North African Campaign and analyse its elements, highlighting General Erwin Rommel's impact. However, they argue that they have tried to uplift the role of the Italian counterpart in terms of soldiers, weapons, and tanks, which has been highly neglected by the other authors who have focused mainly on British or German sources. The successful use of the German-built 88mm anti-tank gun by the Italians, as well as the 90mm anti-tank guns, is one mentioned by the authors. This monograph is a detailed account of the campaign from an Italian-German perspective.

An edited volume by Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose, *The Indian Army, 1939-1947, Experience and Development*, has several articles that discuss the different aspects that influenced the Indian Army's role during the World War years. It studies the evolution of the imperial military

formations, the command culture of the Indian Army along the North-West Frontier during the interwar period, and Winston Churchill's influence in forming the composition of the Italian Army. It is an exceptional piece of writing by author Alan Jeffreys, highlighting the rigorous and tactical training evolution of the Indian Army soldiers during the North African Campaign. In his work *India's War, the Making of Modern South Asia 1939-1945*, author Srinath Raghavan looked into the war from a political perspective by studying the strategic dimension of war, with India being an appendage to the British Empire. His work also studies the international dimension of war, domestic politics, and the social and economic dimensions of the war. It has also touched upon the war front by looking into the wide-ranging mobilisations and ensuing transformations at home. He found the transformation of the Indian Army painful, but he put forward the fact that the Indian Army was an adaptable fighting force. His work has highlighted that India was acknowledged as an emerging global power. According to him, this book accounts for a desperately poor country mobilized to an astonishing degree that simultaneously fought for its freedom and that of the world.

In his excellent *Fighting the People's War*, author Jonathan Fennel provided a chronological structure for the Second World War, highlighting structures, patterns, contingencies, and meaningful events. The author has tried to assess the military and political context in which the British Commonwealth and its armies entered the Second World War. It depended on evaluating the Empire's preparedness in terms of its politics, public morale, and military tools during the interwar period. The balance between structure and contingency drove understanding of the army's composition. The British-Indian Army, he argues, bore the overwhelming burden of the fighting during the initial years of the war. There was a highly contested political context of mobilisation, the extent to which the citizens mobilised voluntarily for war, and the social backgrounds and occupations of those who fought. Understanding the men who fought in the British and Commonwealth armies helps us understand their behavior as soldiers. Recruitment and the scale of commitment to the war were, in many ways, dependent on levels of collective and internal political and social cohesion. This monograph contains analytical narratives of the North African Campaign and the Middle East. It also touches upon the morale crisis faced by the citizen soldier and the state. There were complex and often contradictory imperatives at the political, military, strategic, operational, and tactical levels combined to drive adaptation and innovation in the armies. The High Command and the field commanders had to discover ways to win, surpassing insuperable structural problems. These reforms needed changes to personnel selection, man-management,

welfare education, and a dramatic reorientation of fighting techniques. General Montgomery understood that by controlling operations tightly, instead of relying to a considerable extent on initiative, it was possible to get more out of the forces available. The author also argues that the brutal fighting developed in the Mediterranean led to morale problems in Italy. Problems regarding morale affected combat performance on the battlefield. It was only by replacing formations that victory was seen at Cassino. The campaign of North Africa has no doubt played a massive role in the evolution of the Allied operations, as this contributed significantly to the military defeat of the Axis powers.

Now, I will discuss the sources starting with the but printed primary sources. *The Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939-1945*, has one particular volume on the North African Campaign that has a chronologically narrated series of the battles and the operations of the North African Campaign from 1940-1943. The author, Major P.C. Bharucha, a narrator at the Historical Section, Ministry of Defence of India, has covered the desert operations for the two Indian Divisions involved in the fighting in Africa over the territories expanding from Egypt to Tunis. It was an active front for four years, and this book focuses on the Divisional War Diaries preserved with the Historical Section of the Ministry of Defence of India. So, it seems like a narrative account of these diaries' details. Another primary printed source of global importance is *The Rommel Papers*, edited by B.H. Liddell Hart is a collection of letters and notes exchanged by the Desert Fox's General Erwin Rommel, who narrates the events in the North African Campaign ever since his deployment there as a commander of the *Afrikakorps*. These two works are probably the nearest depiction of records in words available in the literature of this particular theatre.

Similarly, Lieutenant-Colonel G.R. Stevens Obe, in his spectacular work *Fourth Indian Division*, has attempted to write a narrative account of the Fourth Indian Division's role as one of the most incredible fighting formations in military history. This division fought nine campaigns in five years, traveled over 15,000 miles, and captured over 150,000 prisoners. It fought in exceptional battles like the Battle of Sidi Barrani, which destroyed the Italian-Tenth Army, stormed the natural fortress of Keren, and cleared the Italians from their colony of Eritrea; they made a fabulous fighting retreat from Benghazi. They had a fair share in the victories of El Alamein, a decisive role in capturing the Mareth Line, and the final triumph in Tunisia. They were incredible in their assault at Cassino, which was a problematic front to handle compared to Keren and Mareth; they were also successful in breaching the Gothic Line.

The author has uplifted extensively the staunchness of the division in fighting these battles through the bravery and smartness of the soldiers of these divisions portrayed on the battlefield. This monograph highlights the reputation of the Fourth Indian Division on the battlefield as an amalgamation of one of the finest warrior race forces ever created. This was a division that constituted the oldest British and Indian units. The artillery of this Division was British. The British and Indian soldiers had a true spirit of camaraderie, mutual trust, and concord. This book has tried to uplift the North African Campaign through the prism of the Fourth Indian Division.

Many scholarly works have further investigated the different aspects of the Mediterranean theatre of the Second World War. Historians worldwide have worked extensively on the Second World War and focused on the various campaigns. Some of these works have focused on the Mediterranean theatre of the Second World War. Therefore, this thesis attempts to cover the North African Campaign of the Second World War, which started in 1940 and ended in 1943. This campaign is widely believed to be the epitome of Desert Warfare, where an entire campaign was fought in the desert sands with the soldiers bearing the unbearable heat and cold of the contrasting temperatures. To defeat the Axis powers and win this campaign, the Allied forces narrowed down to the British Army or the 8th Army, with an influx of Indian soldiers in their composition, adapted to different terrain, and were brilliant at developing their tactics according to the needs of every progressing operation. This campaign was unique, with miles of sand extending before the eyes, making the eyes of the soldiers burn with the glaring heat, yet going on with an undaunted spirit. This thesis attempts to understand the campaign from an operational perspective with a chronological narrative of daily battles and operations. While doing so, it has made a humble try to highlight the tactical changes made with every victory and defeat. This thesis covers the entire campaign, from the beginning to the end. It begins with the British-Indian Army being deployed to North Africa under General Archibald Wavell to fight the Italian Tenth Army under the leadership of Marshal Rodolfo Graziani in 1940. It continues to deal with the operational events that have progressed over the years, where *Afrikakorps* was called in to begin parallel warfare with Italy under the command of the Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel. This thesis comprises six chapters, each of which chronologically deals with the events of the North African Campaign.

This thesis begins with the Introduction, after that progresses with Chapter 1: The British-Indian Army before 1939, Chapter 2: The British-Indian Army versus the Italians, 1939-1940,

Chapter 3: The British-Indian Army against Rommel's *Afrika Korps*, 1941–1942, Chapter 4: Stalemate and Victory, 1942, Chapter 5: Triumph in Tunisia, 1943, Chapter 6: Fighting at High Altitudes, 1943-1944, and ends with the Conclusion. It contains several maps that highlight the positions of the Indian Army's during crucial operations.

The introduction has attempted to bring forward the central argument of the thesis, review existing literature on the North African campaign, and elaborate on how this thesis differs from previous works. Several scholars have studied the North African campaign from different perspectives. However, most of them generally focus on specific operations over five years. None have covered the role played by the Indian Army in the entire campaign. This thesis will analyze the campaign through the prism of technology and tactics and reveal how the Allies responded to the challenges that cropped up during the campaign. It will focus on the role of the Indian troops that formed the Western Desert Force and, later, the 8th Army.

Chapter 1 deals with the training of the British-Indian Army during the inter-war period. The First World War forced the Indian troops to cope with the rigors of mass industrialized warfare and trench warfare. In the inter-war period, the British-Indian Army was deployed in different areas which involved various modes of combat, such as jungle and mountain warfare. This collective experience played a critical role in shaping the character of the British-Indian army. This chapter has focused on the army's training after the First World War. In doing so, this chapter has highlighted the lessons learned by the British-Indian military and how it helped the Indian troops perform better in the harsh deserts of North Africa.

Chapter 2 has focused majorly on Operation Compass and elaborated on the tactics used by the Fourth Indian division under the command of General Sir Archibald P. Wavell, such as the usage of specific roads called barrel routes where barrels were used as landmarks, driving the vehicles in the desert formation, etc. The chapter has highlighted logistics, discipline, and communication. Arrangements had to be made to repair and tow the damaged vehicles. The establishment of workshops, communications, strict march discipline, and judicious expenditure on petrol and drinking water are some aspects that the chapter has elaborated on. This chapter discusses the Battle of Sidi Barrani (1940) and shows that the British-Indian troops' administrative coordination and tactical developments led to their victory in Operation Compass. It will focus on the role of the 7th Royal Tank Regiment and the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade. Heavy artillery bombardment and 'I' tanks surprised the Italians equipped with M.II tanks. The Italian Tenth Army had no substantial armour or anti-tank guns capable of piercing

the British tanks. Coordinated attacks on the Nebeiwa and Tummar camps and advances on Bardia, Tobruk, Mekili, Beda Fomm, and Benghazi made the 4th Indian Division victorious in their first major offensive in North Africa. The Italians suffered a setback from which they never recovered. In essence, this chapter provides an analysis of how the British-Indian Army defeated the Italians, who then turned to the German High Command for support.

Chapter 3 finds the British-Indian Army shifting focus on a new adversary. It underlines the various operations conducted against the *Afrikakorps*, including the detachment of the army deployed in the Mediterranean. Field Marshal Johannes Erwin Eugen Rommel, the commander of the *Afrika Korps* and a veteran in tank warfare, introduced a new set of desert war tactics and powerful tools of war against the British. The entire campaign underwent a drastic change due to his highly trained personnel, the strength of his armour, tactical air support, superior mobility, and new tactics. This chapter compares the training methods adopted by the two forces. The third chapter focuses on crucial operations like Operation Brevity, Operation Battleaxe, and, most notably, Operation Crusader. During Operation Battleaxe, the Western Desert Force underestimated the strength of General Rommel's armored divisions. This brought a change in the leadership of the Allied forces in the Middle East. General Sir Archibald P. Wavell was replaced by General Sir Claude J. Auchinleck as the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied forces in the Middle East. The Allied fighting forces in the western desert were renamed the 8th Army. The success of Operation Crusader forced Rommel back to Western Cyrenaica. This chapter examines how the 8th Army innovated in the spheres of tactics and logistics that made this victory possible.

Chapter 4 focuses on the three Battles of Alamein. The Battle of Gazala saw the Axis powers gaining possession of the ridges of Maabus es Rigel and Hagiag er Rami and the British-Indian Army being forced off the battlefield. The British-Indian forces lost most of their tanks, while the Germans were left with double the strength of their opponent. The 8th Army was still capable of defending Tobruk but suffered significant losses among the armoured brigades. The 8th Army's armoured force was strengthened by adding several new formations. The chapter argues that timely reinforcements changed the course of the battle. This chapter discusses the 8th Army's retreat to Matruh to delay the Axis advance. It emphasizes that surplus infantry without field artillery support and armoured fighting vehicles is useless. It became a hindrance to decreasing the troops' mobility in battle. The consolidation of the Alamein Line laid the foundation for the ultimate victory of the 8th Army in North Africa. The Battle of Alam el Halfa

was of great significance, and the 8th Army's first significant action caused Rommel's second major reverse since his arrival in Africa. It was a model defensive engagement where tanks dominated the battlefield. The chapter also highlights the importance of command. There was again a shift in command of the 8th Army with the appointment of Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery, better known as 'Monty.' He deployed the available forces in a defensive position supported by much artillery and in the Battle of Alam el Halfa, the 8th Army fought a positional firepower heavy artillery battle. The chapter narrates how this battle, though a stalemate, ultimately prepared the way for the subsequent historic victory in the Third Battle of El Alamein.

This chapter elaborates on the Third Battle of El Alamein, which saw the 8th Army constructing a deception scheme that misled the Axis commanders about their attack's actual date and direction. This required a high degree of camouflage and constant maintenance of vehicles and artillery throughout the entire operation zone. Special care was taken to preserve the density of troops in the rear areas and prevent any hostile forces. When units and formations moved out from the rear, dummies instantly filled the gaps to deceive the German planes reconnoitering the Allied position. This chapter compares the tactics used by the two armies and highlights what made the Allied gain supremacy over the *Afrikakorps*. This chapter will explore the eleven days of war that led to the victory of the 8th Army at the Battle of Alamein. The Axis suffered a severe blow: eight divisions were destroyed, the strength of their army was diminished by two-thirds, and they lost a large number of guns, tanks, and stores. Allied casualties were fewer, and it became evident that the German Army would no longer be able to hold their defenses in North Africa for long if they did not receive reinforcements on time. Therefore, the Axis forces started to retreat.

The fifth chapter focuses on the Tunisian campaign on the pursuit of control maintained by the 8th Army in North Africa, where the Axis forces suffered from a breakdown of overseas logistics after being left with little more than one composite division. After a long fight involving administrative and tactical innovations, Monty was confident of capturing or destroying the remaining Axis forces. The 8th Army planned to reach Benghazi and then move to El Agheila and Tripoli. With the Battle of Medenine and Operation Supercharge, the Axis powers fell in Tunisia with mass surrenders from the German Army Group. In April and May 1943, the Tunisian campaign saw the Indian troops emerge victorious, for which they won many awards for gallantry and courage. In the final telegram to the British Prime Minister,

Winston Churchill, the 8th Army reported they were the ‘Masters of the North African shores.’ This chapter will summarize the Tunisian campaign, highlighting the tactical advancement of the 8th Army.

The sixth and last chapter will highlight the shifting of the British-Indian Army from the desert to the mountains. They will merge with the 5th Army and gain control over the high altitudes of the Sicilian and Italian mountains. This required the army and its respective commanders to shift their training and tactical methods from one to a different form of terrain warfare. This thesis, though not in expertise but in some modest attempt, tries to trace a change in the trajectory of fighting from the desert to the mountains for soldiers who had already exhausted their spirits after a four-year campaign.

The conclusion will summarize the key differences between the Allied forces, especially the Indian units, and the Axis forces regarding tactics, supplies, reinforcements, and technical innovations. Undoubtedly, the *Afrika Korps* walked into the North African Campaign with better armour, and a general who later became a pioneer in desert warfare. Yet, elements like regular supplies, repairing and replacing vehicles, tanks, and armaments, systematic communication between the field commanders and Army Headquarters, and the ability to shift to better and innovative tactics whenever required made the 8th Army victorious.

CHAPTER 1

The Indian Army before 1939

Introduction

It is essential to know the background of any war to judge its combat effectiveness. The present chapter examines Britain and its Commonwealth armies during and after the Second World War. Preparations for the future war were made based on the belief that the British-Indian Army (BIA) could draw lines between preparing the army's structure and providing for its contingency. Britain provided much funding for its armies and equipment during the inter-war period. The United Kingdom provided 90 per cent of the funds for the BIA in 1940. In terms of power, Britain was a powerful combination of military and economic strength.¹ Britain, a fully industrialised and urban society, controlled a quarter of the world's land mass. Its primary deficiency was the vulnerability of quickly training new forces into an effective army. This was somewhat balanced by appointing brilliant commanders during the Second World War. The leadership of the BIA was, by all standards, modern and professional. The men who went on to the front were typically young and confident after their training. Most of them had gained recent knowledge of front-line service and possessed what Napoleon Bonaparte called 'the greatest attribute a general required' during a battle.²

In the early 1920s, the British Army had 70,000 troops, reduced to 40,000 by the eve of the Second World War. The BIA was led by British commissioned officers and manned by Indian soldiers under the joint administrative control of the Indian Government. During the inter-war period, the Indian Army maintained approximately 200,000 men, roughly a three-to-one ratio of Indian to British soldiers.³ The Indian Army had a threefold role during the inter-war period: to ensure the Raj's security against internal rebellions, police the various Indian frontiers, and provide expeditionary troops for the British Empire. In theory, internal security and frontier defence tasks were split equally between British and Indian formations. In practice, the British Army provided most of the garrison troops for internal security duties, while the Indian Army performed most of the frontier tasks. In the 1930s, the British Army units either languished in

¹ Bishweshwar Prasad, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–1945: India and the War* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), pp. 21–23.

² Lieutenant-Colonel G.R. Stevens Obe, *Fourth Indian Division* (East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, n.d.), p. 5.

³ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (reprint, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 18–19.

the garrisons of central India for an extended period or often went on miserable years of tour duty. In stark contrast, the officers and soldiers of the Indian units were engaged in frontier service, which formed the core of their military activity and experience. The best-ranked British officers joined the Indian Army as commanders.⁴

At the beginning of the twentieth century, India was split into four administrative-military districts: Bombay, Madras, Bengal, and Punjab—each under the command of a Lieutenant-General. However, divisional commanders were given such extensive administrative duties after the First World War that they lacked time to train and exercise their formations. Like their British Army counterparts, Indian Army battalions contained roughly 800 men and 30 officers, commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel and centrally administered by a parent regiment with no command authority. Unlike the regiments, brigade groups only served a command function, and their commanders did not have non-operational administrative control over the units in charge.⁵ Post World War I (WWI), the recruitment of British officers into the Indian Army improved steadily throughout the 1920s. Many British Army officers also applied for a transfer to the Indian Army with its promise of a more active career. Such transfers remained possible throughout the inter-war period. However, these were difficult to obtain and subject to conditions of rank, age, and satisfactory service records. On arrival in India, all newly commissioned British officers spent one year serving with a British infantry regiment regardless of whether they would be posted in the infantry.⁶ They were named the Unattached List Indian Army officers or ULIA's led rifle platoons. In theory, it was the responsibility of the British regiment to teach them the methods of practical soldiering. They oversaw companies of three or four rifle platoons or squadrons of four cavalry troops and more than 120 Indian soldiers. This shaped a command culture in which experience and rank mattered less than the practical ability to cope with the pressures of multiple or more senior commands. New officers were often flung into the deep end of faraway conflict. Under this system, all officers,

⁴ Jonathan Fennel, *Fighting the People's War: The British and the Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 28.

⁵ Alan Jeffreys and Patrick Rose, ed., *The Indian Army, 1939–1947: Experience and Development* (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 69–73.

⁶ Toker Papers, The Preparation of Infantry for the Battle, Personal War Records, War Fronts, 71.21.1.6, IWM, London.

especially young ones, gained experience and confidence by holding responsibility appointments.⁷

Training the Infantry

Major-General Francis Toker (1894–1967), a BIA officer who served in both World Wars, was appointed the commander of the 4th Indian Division, particularly during the North African and Italian campaigns. A highly respected and innovative commander, he emphasised the importance of speed, surprise, adaptability, mobility, and combined arms warfare. He was known for his unconventional tactics, use of armoured cars, airborne troops, and combined arms teams. In his training pamphlets, he mentioned that a trained infantry was the most critical arm on the battlefield. Preparing the infantry for battle was more significant than training any other arm. He believed victory on the battlefield depended more on the approach to battle than what was done on the battlefield itself. This approach to the battle involved planning along with the task of training the soldiers for the campaigns that lay ahead of them. The experience of World War I showed that the BIA infantry was insufficiently trained. The infantryman had to be imbued with a fighting spirit from a soldier's knowledge and absolute confidence in his skill at arms.⁸

The foundation of an army lies in the weapon training of its infantrymen. The infantry had to do most of the killing. This, the infantry soldiers had to be deadly, quick, and accurate with their arms. Parade ground drills have been described as the best form of foundation training. It taught a soldier precision and ease of handling weapons. The battle drill was important among the small infantry units for perfecting spontaneous actions taken during emergencies in a battle.⁹ Desert battle drills for the mobile infantry brigade and divisions were examples of the training required before any campaign. The time required to follow orders and organise the pattern of fighting is saved during a campaign due to these battle drills, as time is of the essence in war. All of this comprised the moral side of battle training. What follows later is the tactical

⁷ Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: The Making of Modern South Asia, 1939–1945* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 39–41.

⁸ Toker Papers, The Training of Infantry, The Preparation of Infantry for the Battle, Personal War Records, War Fronts, 71.21.1.6, IWM, London.

⁹ Toker Papers, The Training of Infantry, The Preparation of Infantry for the Battle, Personal War Records, War Fronts, 71.21.1.6, IWM, London.

aspect. If a soldier could follow the moral side, tactical excellence would follow logically and efficiently.¹⁰

As a priority, a soldier joining the Indian Army had to undergo educational training. It enabled him to become stronger by developing his mental and moral abilities. This had to be coordinated with other types of training to prepare him for war. An Indian soldier had to understand the danger to which India was exposed via sea and land. He was taught to draw a simple map before understanding a war map. Some parts of military training started with mathematics—reading the numerals on his rifle, using a compass, and studying maps. Confidence on the battleground was brought via discipline in the drill ground—individual training to produce a self-reliant and formidable fighting spirit.¹¹ He was trained to be skilled in using the ground, confident, and an expert in using arms and weapons. He was trained always to be alert and seek any opportunity to strike his opponents by watching his movements. He had to be highly proficient with the pick and the shovel, erect wire and obstacles, and protect himself against gas. He had to willingly and unhesitatingly obey his superiors. His efforts had to be coordinated with the others in his unit.¹²

Weapon training and route marching were combined with field-raft training. Studying the terrain, perfectly holding rifles with a firm grip in both hands, with the left hand pulling the rifle into shoulders, and adapting fire positions for cover were included in the training. So were military vocabulary, camouflaging, judging distances during field firings, indication and recognition of easy targets, snapshotting and rapid firing, observation of night, fire control orders, selections of lines of advance, cover from fire, and use of cover in advance. After completing these stages, they were introduced to grenade training, digging drills, recognising routes, aiming for movements, introducing light machine guns, digging weapon pits, and introducing tanks. A soldier had to be taught from the very outset of the war that he had to conceal himself and his actions, adapt his movements and shooting positions to available ground, and find cover. He should also be able to shoot calmly and accurately in extreme discomfort despite the nuisance caused by the enemy. Effective use of ground and cover had to be instinctive. Soldiers had to eliminate their fear of Armoured Fighting Vehicles (AFVs) and learn about tank-proof localities in the area where they were dispatched for war. They also

¹⁰ Churchill, *The Second World War*, p. 23.

¹¹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 45–46.

¹² Taker Papers, Military Evolution during the War, Modern Formations Exercise, 1939, 71/21/2, Imperial War Museum, London.

had to learn about anti-tank weapons, tank recognition and range practices to shoot the enemy at first sight.¹³

The Indian Armoured Division has been described as lightly armoured, fast, possessing excellent cross-country mobility and a wide range of action. Its armament enabled it to destroy other armoured vehicles within the penetrative range and troops unprotected by armour and fixed defences. Armoured units were always limited in number and depended on mobility, firepower, and ability to perform close-quarter actions. Armoured regiments and infantry carried out reconnaissance and acted as protection units.¹⁴ They were organised for armoured combat and provided the division's main striking and offensive power. This kind of combat could delay actions while allowing the armies to manoeuvre. Motor infantry and artillery assisted the armoured troops with dismounted action in combined arms operations. The Royal Air Force's (RAF) cooperation with the armoured divisions varied according to the scope of its operations. It included using all types of aircraft for land warfare. Without the assistance of the RAF, armoured troops were handicapped. The association of air and armoured forces opened a wide range of possibilities. Mutual understanding of previous training and liaison was also critical.¹⁵

Sappers and miners assisted in mobility and water supplies. The Armoured Car Regiment carried out reconnaissance on a broad front and at a considerable depth. It had enormous defensive and delaying powers. The presence of mobile arms of armoured troops enabled the latter to obtain a wide tactical and administrative range by providing secure bases. These bases could be moved to overcome physical obstacles, get rest, and protect harbours. It could also control time for maintenance, consolidate gains, and prolong delaying operations.¹⁶ The role of armoured troops was like that of traditional cavalry. Securing and maintaining AFV's mastery in the theatre of operations, taking offensive action against enemy mobile forces, and hastily preparing defenses were vital responsibilities. But bold action should not be foolhardy, reckless, or initiated at the last moment.¹⁷ During operations, commanders had to be prepared

¹³ Military Training Pamphlet no. 19, Notes on the Training of Infantry Recruit 1941, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/226, Asia Pacific and Africa Collection (APAC), British Library (BL), London.

¹⁴ Prasad, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 35–36.

¹⁵ Flexibility and Range, Army/Air Operations, General Principles and Organisation, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2242, APAC, BL, London.

¹⁶ Object of Recruit Training, Notes on the Training of the Infantry Recruit, Military Training Pamphlet no. 19, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2261, APAC, BL, London.

¹⁷ Jeffreys and Rose, *The Indian Army, 1939–1947*, pp. 72–73.

with plans, or they would be lost in the fog of war. The control could only exercise the command dependent on excellent and constant teamwork. This was possible only when a commander thoroughly grasped a force's tactical and administrative scope. A skillful commander was a master of surprise, which he implemented in many ways and repeated by deliberate planning ahead. No commander, however skillful, could achieve surprise in modern war unless his troops could move and fight at night and were proficient in fieldcraft with tactical sense.¹⁸

In terms of training, the role of an Indian Infantry Training Battalion is to provide trained men for the active battalions of the regiment. During peace, there would be standard training for the recruits ready to join. During times of war, more specialised training was required. These battalions also needed reinforcements and an adequate proportion of trained signallers, and machine gunners. The training battalion acted as the nursery of the regiment, its efficiency and *esprit de corps* being the driving factors. British and Indian soldiers transferred for various periods from all active battalions of the regiments and were responsible for their efficiency and quality. The keynote of success in the Indian Army has always been its active cooperation between all regiment battalions.¹⁹

A training battalion consisted of battalion headquarters and training companies. Personnel in a training battalion were divided into permanent establishment, semi-permanent establishment, reinforcements, and recruits.²⁰ The standard training course for infantry recruits was eight months and ten months for pioneer recruits. Backward recruits were retained for extra months at the discretion of the commander. At the time of final mobilisation, all recruits had to be physically fit and prepared for war. Recruiting officers were somewhat responsible for the recruitment of all classes. This was done after consultation with commanders of active battalions. Indian units had many characteristics in common with British units. Indian races noted for their physique, martial image, and political reliability, like the Dogras, Garhwalis, Marathas, Sikhs, Jats, Rajputs, Pathans, Gurkhas, and Punjabi Muslims, were recruited from rural and mountainous areas. For instance, the term 'Punjabi Musalman' of Punjab could refer to all except for Khattaks and Musalman Rajputs of the Ambala Civil Division. The term

¹⁸ Infantry Recruit Training Syllabus, Notes on the Training of the Infantry Recruit, Military Training Pamphlet No. 19, IOR/ L/MIL/17/5/2261, APAC, BL, London.

¹⁹ Role of a Training Battalion, Military Training Pamphlet, Training Battalion Manual, L/MIL/17/5/2216-1, IOR, BL.

²⁰ Training Battalion Manual 1931, L/MIL/17/5/2216, IOR, BL.

‘Sikhs’ included Jat, Saini, Khatri, Lobana, and Brahmin, all except Mazbi and Ramsadia Sikhs, as they could be enlisted for the Corps. The term ‘Dogra’ referred to Rajputs, Thakurs, Rathis, Brahmans and Jats. But the Dogra recruitment was restricted to Rajputs. In rural communities, military service was an honourable profession and an essential supplement to a family’s agricultural income. Men who enlisted were subject to strict physical standards and were often from the same families, villages, and districts as existing soldiers. Most battalions comprised a mix of different Indian races and religions, each organised into a separate community to safeguard against mutiny. The Gurkhas were the principal exception to this arrangement.²¹

Movement and Mobility

Security of the base of operations permits an army's most freedom and boldness of action. The base had to be moveable to ensure the whole range of operations coverage. The closer it can be moved into the area of operations, the greater the freedom of action was assured. It provided a tactical pivot to manoeuvre, safeguarded the vital communications line, secured administrative services and replenishment, and maintained speedy cooperation with the Air Force.²² Mobility depended on administrative freedom and a wide circuit of action, the excellence of vehicles and equipment, the ability of commanders, and the efficient means of intercommunication. Room for maneuver was essential for the full utilization of the mobility of armored forces. The lighter the formation, the more significant the space required for manoeuvring. To destroy an enemy, particularly a mobile one, it was necessary to pin and isolate him. Retaining tactical means could largely compensate for the loss of the strategic initiative. It depends on the morale, foresight, flexible control, and initiative of the commanders and their army. Ground values for armoured troops were assessed mainly by their effect on movement. Where movement was effortless, manoeuvring had complete freedom. The ground, which had great tactical value in the past, would have become useless if it could have been isolated by manoeuvre. Consequently, tank obstacles and anti-tank areas largely determined the tactical bounds during advance and withdrawal. They significantly influenced the commander’s choice of ground for battle and played a prominent part in it. The freedom of action allowed maximum use of mobility, giving an outstanding tactical advantage and the ability to detach or concentrate at

²¹ Alen Warren, *Waziristan, the Fakir of IPI, and the Indian Army: The North-West Frontier Revolt of 1936–1937* (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 108–109.

²² Classes to be Enrolled, Training Battalion Manual 1931 IOR/ L/MIL/17/5/2216-1, APAC, BL, London.

speed as required. Fighting efficiently day and night, stationary or on the move, and good maintenance were the most critical technical aids to tactical success.²³

In his training manuals, Toker emphasised that these drills constantly needed to change according to the needs of the war. The pattern of these drills could not remain static. With significant or multiple command responsibilities, Indian Army officers lacked time to focus on the ‘spit and polish’ minutiae of soldiering, a much-criticized feature of contemporary British Army practice. Developing initiatives in the Indian Army was not confined to the commissioned ranks but permeated the entire structure of the unit.²⁴

Education and Tactical Training

The core of higher professional military education in the Indian Army between the two World Wars was the Indian Staff College in Quetta, which ran two-year courses identical to the ones at the British Army Staff College in Camberley. In the late 1920s, it became increasingly important for officers of the Indian Army to pass staff college to increase their prospects of promotion above battalion command. In the first year of study, the Staff College syllabus considered doctrinal principles and command and staff duties at the brigade and divisional levels, including artillery and air support. The second year concentrated on the same subjects but applied to the corps and the cavalry divisions.²⁵ Practical command training included Tactical Exercises Without Troops or TEWT. Along with this, various map-based exercises and wargames were also taught. These exercises typically required students to examine a scenario and undertake multiple tasks, enemy situations, resources, and ground, producing a viable plan of action and corresponding orders within a set timeframe. More extensive exercises conducted as ‘telephone battles’ attempted to replicate the accurate pressures of command in war. One student observed that without the inherent delays imposed during live field manoeuvres by troops, marching or conducting actions could be unremitting and far beyond the level expected or previously experienced in combat. Communication was another critical aspect of infantry training, either by word of mouth or semaphore.²⁶

²³ Organisation of an Army Group, Army/Air Operations, General Principles and Organisation, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2242, APAC, BL, London.

²⁴ Prasad, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 55–57.

²⁵ Military Training Pamphlet no. 1, Armoured Units in the Field, Characteristics, Roles and Handling of Armoured Divisions, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2244, BL, London.

²⁶ Toker Papers, The Preparation for Infantry for a Battle, 71/21/1, IWM, London.

In many aspects, the Indian Army was highly professional by this time. The demands and distractions of active soldiering in India created a body of British officers who prided themselves on being real, practical soldiers devoted to regimental soldiering instead of staff duties. Unit and formation command training similarly employed TEWT as a primary means to develop the professional skills and mental abilities required for command in active operations.²⁷ TEWTs in India were often specifically integrated into unit preparations for frontier deployments. With no substitute for practical experience, such techniques held considerable value in illustrating the proper use and function of the chain of command, testing planning ability, and developing tactical thought. These skills were built upon tactical manoeuvres in India during the colder winter months. The enormous-scale inter-war maneuvers were conducted by four regional commands involving forces up to infantry division size, supported by cavalry, artillery, engineers, and a whole supply echelon. A typical manoeuvre involved two such forces operating against each other in simulated combat for up to three days.²⁸

The British and Indian Army elements of the Army in India adopted training and doctrinal publications, including capstone volumes of Field Service Regulations or FSR. The FSR Volume III: Operations, Higher Formations, designed for brigade commanders and above, contains descriptions of such commands.²⁹ The lack of uniform understanding of what command meant and how responsibilities were to be discharged opened the way for significant individual variation in the approach to higher command. During the 1930s, a lack of finance and shortages of British officers within the Indian Army reduced higher formation training to a level considerably below that of the better-led commands in the Home British Army. At the regimental level, the lower numbers and cost involved enabled more frequent collective training opportunities where commanding officers often exercised their companies against each other. They rarely conducted informally arranged manoeuvres against other battalions from different garrisons. Facing reality on the battlefield was a different challenge altogether, and while making tactical innovations, a commander might have to dissociate from the fundamentals of warfare.³⁰

²⁷ Organisation of Educational Training, Educational Training, Indian Army 1939, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2272, APAC, BL, London.

²⁸ General Instructions, Educational Training, Indian Army 1939, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2272, APAC, BL, London.

²⁹ Tuger Papers, Training by Instructions, General Instructions, File 71/21/5/1, IWM, London.

³⁰ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 45–46.

Lessons from Mountain Warfare

The Indian Army was well versed in mountain warfare due to its fighting experience on the North-West Frontier. The Battle of Keren fought between 3 February and 27 March 1941, too was an instance where the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions fought mainly in the mountains. In a month-long lull between the battles, individual brigades at Tessani and Agordat undertook training in mountain warfare. These specialised battles highlighted the importance of the pre-war training of the Indian Army, especially in mountain warfare and night attacks. This helped them defeat a numerically superior force even when it was equipped as a mechanised force in mountain warfare. It revealed that a company within each battalion had to act as carriers of the training they received.³¹

High mountain terrain is often inaccessible, uninhabitable, and of no apparent value, yet people and states fight to possess it. Long and bloody wars have been fought over mountainlands between 10,000 and 23,000 feet. In 1962, China and India battled in the Himalayan mountains bordering Bhutan and Tibet. India and Pakistan have continually battled for the possession of the Siachen Glacier since April 1984 and sporadically fight over disputed Kashmir. The environment of a mountain decides the pattern of military action. High altitudes are characterised by extreme cold, strong winds, thin air, intense solar and ultraviolet radiation, deep snow, raging thunderstorms and blizzards, heavy fog, and rapidly changing weather, including severe storms which can cut off outside contact for a week or longer. Avalanches and rockslides are not uncommon. Although jungles and forests may hug the mountain base, trees do not grow past 10,000 to 11,500 feet, depending on the latitude. Things were, however, different in the mountains of Abyssinia. Physical conditions at high altitudes were often more dangerous than enemy fire. Superficial bullets and shrapnel wounds could quickly turn fatal at high altitudes. Movement in the high mountains usually resulted in broken bones, severe lacerations, contusions, and internal injuries caused by falls and falling rocks.³²

Frostbite and hypothermia were a constant danger. Acute mountain sickness, high-altitude pulmonary edema, and cerebral edema were frequent fatal consequences. Mental ability decreased as well, leading to personality disorders and abrupt weight loss. Along with this, there is sunburn and snow blindness. Equipment does not function or function partially at high

³¹ Jeffreys and Rose, *The Indian Army, 1939–1947*, p. 81.

³² Taker Papers, Preparation of Infantry for the Battle, 71/21/1/6, IWM, London.

altitudes. Vehicles lose 20 to 25 percent of their carrying capacity and use twice to thrice the amount of fuel. Military diesel generators lose efficiency at 10,000 feet and sometimes stop functioning altogether because of insufficient oxygen. Lubricant freeze, altitude, weather limit helicopters, and additional animal- or gasoline-fueled overland transport add to the logistical difficulties of this environment.³³

Survival at such high altitudes was a challenge. Soldiers selected for such postings were screened for their ability to survive and function in this environment. Short and wiry soldiers were preferred more than tall and muscular ones. Soldiers with above-average intelligence readily adapted to this trying terrain. All army personnel had to undergo an acclimatization program to accustom themselves to their new environment and improve their respiratory and cardiovascular systems. It took three weeks for a physically fit soldier to adapt to the cold. The body became accustomed to it and started accumulating additional red blood cells, which helped transport more oxygen. The Indian Army still has a rule of acclimatising over a fourteen-day schedule with increases in altitude at a proportion of 6:4:4 days. They conduct an acclimatisation program by making the battalion hike from its roadhead to the staging area. Armies worldwide have acknowledged that high-altitude acclimatisation cannot be achieved in less than ten days.³⁴

Nothing is quick at such altitudes. Logistical support is the key, and the location of logistical dumps decides the course of operational planning. The distance between the road head and the forward posts determines what proportion of troops can man the forward post. It takes three to fourteen days of foot marches to reach the forward post from the road heading to it. The farther the forward post, the greater the number of troops required to support it. Supplies and men travel forward from the base camps through intermittent staging posts to the forward post. Helicopters, mules, and porters move supplies from the roadhead. Mules have always been the most efficient option for moving materials in high mountains; however, they require care, attention, and training. Armies that are involved in high-altitude war maintain trained mules and muleteers. When it becomes difficult for mules to reach higher elevations, porters are tasked with hauling the supplies forward.³⁵

³³ Jeffreys and Rose, *The Indian Army, 1939–1947*, p. 83

³⁴ Jeffreys and Rose, ed., *The Indian Army, 1939-1947*, pp. 85–88.

³⁵ Lester W. Grau and Charles K. Bartles, ed., *Mountain Warfare and Other Lofty Problems: Foreign Perspectives on High Altitude Problems* (England: Helion & Company Limited, 2016), pp. 5–16.

Moving in mountains can be perilous. Weather can change rapidly; columns can become lost in blizzards and fog. Trail markers can quickly disappear under falling snow. Snow bridges can collapse and swallow climbers, turning into deep crevasses. Line-of-sight communication is excellent in the mountains but challenging to achieve because of the high peaks. Therefore, communications are carefully conducted and often depend on the critical terrain. Very high-frequency radios with automatic frequency hopping, encryption, and burnt transmission capabilities work best. Regular batteries quickly lose power in the cold, so lithium batteries are used. In high-altitude war, the first enemy is the environment. The second enemy is the human foe. At high altitudes, key terrain is related to mobility through passes, main supply routes, road heads, and intermittent staging posts. Light infantry and artillery are the primary combat forces. Offensive actions in the mountains include infiltration, ambush, raids, patrolling, shelling, limited air assaults, and limited offensives. Pursuit is seldom possible. Envelopment is the most common manoeuvre, and frontal attacks are the least desired option. Defensive actions include counter-infiltration, ambush, patrolling, and positional defense. Relief in place is a routine small-unit action.³⁶

Manoeuvring of an army is dictated by the terrain and the reserve committed early since movement is slow and mutual support is very difficult to achieve. The strength of a maneuvering force can range from one or two men to an entire battalion if weather and the enemy situation permit. Mountains also restrict effective bombing and strafing by jet aircraft. It becomes challenging to pick out camouflaged targets concealed by natural cover. Weather, deep shadows, and the environment often cloud the pilot's vision. There are very few approach routes; most are through valleys, which are covered by air defense and infantry forces using massed fire. Climate and terrain restrict jet aircraft from diving freely or flying low enough to engage targets efficiently. Still, camouflage discipline, controlled movement, and layered air defense are essential to prevent the savage, high-performing aircraft of the enemy. Though artillery maintains a round-the-clock fire support system, it is often constrained during high-altitude combat. Sharp bends, high gradients, and the general condition of mountain roads restrict the movement of artillery, mainly towed guns. There are limited gun positions, so artillery batteries are seldom deployed in contact. Guns must also be moved at night for protection against enemy aircraft and artillery. Artillery positions should be constructed so that gun crews can defend them against ground tracks. Artillery plays a significant role in logistics

³⁶ Grau & Bartles ed. *Mountain Warfare and Other Lofty Problems: Foreign Perspectives on High Altitude Problems*, pp. 18–21.

interdiction, counterbattery, and shelling front-line units. Mortars are frequently more effective than guns or howitzers. They are easier to shift around, can better engage reverse slopes, and can be moved closer to the forward posts.³⁷

High-altitude logistics are essential since the terrain and unique environment hamper delivery to the forward troops. Logistics have always driven battles, especially in high-altitude combat. Without good highways or railroads, dump sites cannot be readily moved. It takes an inordinate amount of time to shift troops from one sector to another, and logistics demands were considerably higher than in other types of light infantry combat. Trucks, mechanical mules, and snowmobiles are essential to mountain logistics, but logistics efforts that are above 13,000 feet shift to the backs of mules and porters. Fighting in the high mountains requires knowledge of counter-technology. Mules are an excellent option for high-altitude logistics. They use narrow trails, carry more than a human porter, and tire less over long distances. However, the maximum carrying capacity for mules drops at extremely high altitudes. Mules were a part of the US Army during World War II (WWII) in Burma and Italy. They remain a part of the structure of many contemporary forces with high-altitude mountain troops. Other armies contract mule transport through local teamsters. Yet, mules have their limitations. If the snow is too deep, they refuse to move. Like humans, mules require time to acclimatise to the altitude. Muleteers and mules require a month's training to prepare them to work above 3,000 meters. Like humans, mules tire quickly above 4,000 meters and must rest frequently. Mules must also be trained not to fear the noise of firearms and explosives so they do not run off during a march. Mules are also susceptible to colic, heat exhaustion, injuries, and wounds. Most injuries resulted from poorly adjusted saddles, pack frames, and harnesses. Stones, rocks, and debris on the trail can also wound a mule's hoof.³⁸

During WWII, the German Army raised an entire corps of elite mountain troops called *gebirgs jaeger* (mountain troops). Although not all these troops were used in the mountains, they demonstrated superior abilities in almost all theatres in the hills where they were used. The German 5th Mountain Division marched more than 248 miles, crossed mountain passes above 6,500 feet, and secured well-entrenched defenses on the Mestkas Line. Other *gebirgs jaeger* captured most of the Caucasus Mountain region in the summer of 1942. The US Army 10th

³⁷ General Conditions, Extensive Warfare, Notes on Warfare in Mountainous Country between Modern Forces in Eastern Theatres, Military Training Pamphlet, June 1941, IOR/ L/MIL/17/5/2248, APAC, BL, London.

³⁸ Grau and Battles, *Mountain Warfare and Other Lofty Problems*, pp. 25–26.

Mountain Division trained in the mountain of Colorado during World War II and captured Riva Ridge in northern Italy.³⁹

The techniques developed during these campaigns were called 'Frontier Warfare' vis-à-vis Mountain Warfare. There is no parallel to the armies of the British Commonwealth when it comes to this warfare, especially the Indian Army, which had many troops, especially the Gurkhas, who were excellent natural mountaineers. However, most of them had to be trained for tactical operations at high altitudes in snow and ice. Specialised training by foreign countries was necessary for forces operating at high altitudes of foreign countries. There were several theatres where these Indian troops participated in conducting the training they received in mountain warfare. These theatres included the Western Frontier, Hindu Kush, Kurdistan, Caucasus, Elburz Mountains, the Balkans, and Italian East Africa. In frontier warfare, when troops faced a modern opponent, they did it with higher mobility. This was achieved by decreasing the enemy's mobility and increasing their own. With their wide, unwatched spaces, covers, dead grounds, and lack of communications, mountains become terrains where troops must be hardy and self-reliant. The intelligence system must be friendly with the local inhabitants, enabling them to anticipate the enemy's movements and be thoroughly organised. The Indian Army started by getting acquainted with the conditions of the mountains for tactical and administrative measures.⁴⁰

The unique conditions of mountain warfare between modern armies were connected mainly with armaments, so mobility had to improve to increase firepower. Air support remained an essential factor in defense, from directing artillery fire on hostile concentrations and harassing enemy road movements to engaging in attacking infantry with bombs and machine guns. During an attack, the air force was the only supporting arm within reach for the infantry. The Germans had always used aircraft in offensive fighting, with dive-bombers used in large numbers. Any tactical failure in these operations could lead to heavy defeat and harm the national cause. More level areas, like plateaus, low hills, and broad valleys, became the main areas of the battlefield. It was necessary to have all available heavier weapons, like medium and heavy tanks, medium artillery, and medium machine guns. The approach to a battle mattered in these situations. The Indian Army took many routes while advancing in a

³⁹ Special Conditions, Extensive Warfare, Notes on Warfare in Mountainous Country between Modern Forces in Eastern Theatres, Military Training Pamphlet, June 1941, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2248, APAC, BL, London.

⁴⁰ Grau and Battles, *Mountain Warfare and Other Lofty Problems*, pp. 41–44.

mountainous terrain against the enemy's strong points to confuse the enemy and make as few targets as possible for the enemy aircraft.⁴¹

In terms of defense, mountains offer a more significant number of difficulties than they offer facilities. Movement uphill is slower, so AFVs are difficult to employ for rushing. Observation from high ground is more accessible in daylight, and firing at enemies from a long range is also easier. There are tunneled positions, caves, concealed communication trenches, and wire, making it possible to construct strong defensive positions within a reasonable time. Also, immediate lines of withdrawal, reinforcement, and approach for counterattack are easy to find. However, owing to the nature of the ground, it is difficult to lock in with fire all localities of the position, from flank to flank and from rear to front. Enemy observation is relatively easy, and the layout of defenses is difficult to conceal. Depth is difficult to obtain, and defense in wooded areas restricts the line of fire.⁴²

When it comes to offense, a very high standard of infantry training is necessary to deliver successful attacks, especially at night. A night approach towards the enemy position followed by a dawn attack is desirable and prevents confusion in the dark. The enemy might also be more prepared during a dawn attack with its artillery. It might move up the hill in full force like any ordinary daylight attack. Light was another essential factor for a counterattack, and it distinguished a friend from a foe before the enemy could see his sights. Any delay would give the enemy time to reorganise. When the enemy was tired and confused, on the ground, and didn't have the time to send out patrols, it was time for a quick and determined counterattack, preferably from an unexpected direction. Withdrawal became difficult in mountainous regions due to the scarcity of roads. The chief danger was always from enemy air action. In addition to anti-aircraft defense, sufficient mobile reserves, AFVs, and armoured lorry-borne infantry were needed to defeat the enemy's attack attempt. The value of demolitions in mountainous countries was crucial as any road slip could hold up the enemy for long periods, enabling its troops to withdraw.⁴³

⁴¹ Mobility, Extensive Warfare, Notes on Warfare in Mountainous Country between Modern Forces in Eastern Theatres, Military Training Pamphlet, June 1941, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2248, APAC, BL, London.

⁴² The Defence and the Attack, Extensive Warfare, Notes on Warfare in Mountainous Country between Modern Forces in Eastern Theatres, Military Training Pamphlet, June 1941, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2248, APAC, BL, London.

⁴³ The Approach, Extensive Warfare, Notes on Warfare in Mountainous Country between Modern Forces in Eastern Theatres, Military Training Pamphlet, June 1941, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2248, APAC, BL, London.

Lessons from Jungle Warfare

The Indian Army lacked the experience of fighting in the jungles of South-East Asia, and this was primarily responsible for its disastrous defeats in Malaya, Burma, and the First Arakan War in the Far Eastern Theatre between early 1941 and 1943. The Infantry Committee, set up in June 1943 by General Archibald Wavell, proposed a solution of thorough basic training of recruits followed by a period of 'jungle warfare' training. All Indian and British reinforcements would undergo two months of jungle training under designated training divisions. The Infantry Committee had highlighted the need for a comprehensive jungle warfare doctrine. This resulted in publishing the fourth edition of the *Military Training Pamphlet*, also known as the 'Jungle Book,' in 1943. Its purpose was to help the respective commanding officers train their units in the specialised fighting methods needed to beat the enemy in the jungle. It gave examples of the importance of jungle craft, physical fitness, good marksmanship, and decentralised control as necessary attributes that needed addressing in jungle warfare training. This manual was utilised throughout the Second World War.⁴⁴

There was nothing new to jungle warfare, but the jungle environment was new to the Indian troops. Special training was required to accustom them to these surroundings and learn the jungle warfare method. This included woodcraft, silent movement, concealment, deception, keen eyesight, and hearing. Above all, good marksmanship and superb physical fitness were the requisites of jungle fighting. In jungle warfare, the command had to be decentralised to empower junior commanders to make decisions and act without delay. Jungle warfare had much in common with night warfare unit training, for one automatically gained mastery over the other. Jungles vary from forests to mountains and are found in coastal and cultivated areas. Features standard to all jungle areas are scarcity of tracks, limited movement of ground and air forces, and difficulties with cross-country vehicle movement. There are three types of jungle: primary, secondary, and coastal. The primary jungle is natural vegetation that has never been touched. Visibility is limited, valleys are dense, streams are blocked, and tracks can never be deciphered on maps. These tracks are challenging for the infantry. These must be navigated by cutting the undergrowth using a *dah*, *kukri*, or machete to create new tracks. Only a small army group can pass through such tracks. The secondary jungle is where the primary jungle has been cut and allowed to grow again. In coastal areas, jungles are more open and easily tracked. Jungles also means significant humidity and rainfall, streams, and swamps, with added

⁴⁴ Warren, *Waziristan, the Fakir of IPI, and the Indian Army*, pp. 185–186.

discomforts such as leeches, mosquitoes, and chills. The object must consistently exploit the critical features to the army's advantage by developing tactics suited to the conditions, through training and knowledge of jungle craft.⁴⁵

Jungle craft implies the ability of a soldier to live and fight in the jungle and move from point to point. He must be fit to fight and use the ground and vegetation to his advantage. He must be able to 'melt' in the jungle by freezing or camouflaging. He must recognise and be able to use native foods and erect tents or temporary shelters rapidly. A jungle soldier should be sufficiently well-versed in jungle lore to identify the cries or calls of disturbed birds instantly. His ears should be tuned to normal jungle noises so that he can detect foreign or man-made sounds. He must learn to rely on his observation of broken twigs and branches, trampled undergrowth, or disturbed mould to detect the presence or proximity of humans. He must use his sense of smell and readily recognise the danger of tracks converging at either watering places or gardens and approach such places with caution. He must learn to retrace his steps. In short, the jungle is his home; the sooner he feels at home, the better for him and his fighting skills.⁴⁶

Of all the basic tactics used in jungle warfare, pace control is always emphasised, with the consequent addition or reduction in distances and intervals. Night operations are to be undertaken to surprise the enemy by using poor visibility. Jungles should be regarded as friendly cloaks, which enable the infantry to close in on the enemy unobserved and kill him quickly. The jungle always prefers the attacker, so passive defense in the jungle brings doom and disaster. When a jungle is dense, rapid movement is necessarily confined to jungle trails, game tracks, and dry water courses as they exist. When there is a need for speed during an advance to forestall the enemy by seizing a tactical measure, troops move along these tracks as it gets denser. In all jungle operations, the tactics learned have an oppressive influence on the actions. To achieve tactical mobility and maintain tactical superiority over the enemy, provision must be made for considerable air support and air supplies. Owing to the difficulties of the terrain and the dissimilarities to other theatres, thorough training is required—not only by ground formations and units but also by air squadrons and pilots. The close cooperation

⁴⁵ Topography, *The Jungle Book*, Training Manual, Military Training Pamphlet, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2250, APAC, BL, London.

⁴⁶ Jungle Craft, *The Jungle Book*, Training Manual, Military Training Pamphlet, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2250, APAC, BL, London.

between the two is necessary for the air effort to be applied economically and to one's best advantage.⁴⁷

General Claude Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief of India, ensured that jungle warfare formed the focus of all training carried out by units, formations, and training establishments throughout India. The 14th and the 39th Indian divisions were withdrawn from the frontline and reorganised as training divisions at Chhindwara. Jungles surrounded the area, and the climate was comparatively mild, meaning training continued all year round. Not only infantry but all groups underwent jungle training, which was an alien environment for all soldiers. The infantry focused on individual and section training, whereas the other arms concentrated on weapon training. Training for specific terrains and types of warfare was continued as a practice in the Indian Army.⁴⁸

After two months of training, the recruits were sent to the reinforcement camps, where training continued until they could join the battalions. The reinforcement camps were organised in the Middle East and designed to hold and train 3,000 troops. These formations also underwent jungle training. The 5th Indian Division trained in Bihar and Ranchi, where it was reorganised as a combined animal and motor transport division and retrained for fighting in the jungles of Burma. The division under the command of Major-General Harold Briggs was already battle-hardened after its experiences in the Middle East. Still, it now had to adapt to jungle warfare conditions. The 'Jungle Book' was the bible of such jungle tactics. For the Indian Command, the training divisions and the new doctrine of jungle warfare provided a basis for uniformly jungle-trained troops. They were ready to defeat the enemy, as well as the terrain, the climate, and diseases. This heralded the turning point of the Burma Campaign of the Second World War.⁴⁹

Into the Second World War

In the inter-war period, the Indian Army Modernisation Committee report maintained that the Indian Army was most likely to fight an Asiatic war and was ready for five roles of frontier defense. This included coastal defense, external defense, internal security, and a reserve force.

⁴⁷ General Tactics, *The Jungle Book*, Training Manual, Military Training Pamphlet, IOR /L /MIL/17/5/2250, APAC, BL, London.

⁴⁸ Warren, *Waziristan, the Fakir of IPI, and the Indian Army*, pp. 201–202.

⁴⁹ Intercommunication, Army/Air Operations, General Principles and Organisation, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2242, APAC, BL, London.

However, it was unprepared to fight an army with up-to-date weapons. The British Army units going to India were retrained with obsolete weapons and outdated tactics. The pre-Second World War training structure consisted of four training centres. One for Artillery, three for the Engineers, two for the Signals and the Veterinary Corps, and one for the Royal Indian Army Service Corps and the Indian Army Ordnance Corps. As per the recommendations of the 1920 Esher Committee, infantry training was carried out by the 10th Battalion of each regiment from 1922 onwards. The battalion's primary role was training recruits to reinforce the active battalions in the regiment. The syllabus of this training consisted mainly of physical education, drills, handling weapons, and general education.⁵⁰

The training was divided into two aspects: collective and individual. Collective training started from the company up to the brigade level with exercises in the plains and columns on the frontier. This took place in the cold weather, where all battalion officers were meant to be present. There were a series of training memorandums produced by the Army Headquarters during the 1930s. Two were issued yearly, one for individual and one for collective training. The manual for the individual training period had sections on officer training, historical campaigns to study, staff college entrance examinations, various arms of the cavalry, artillery, tanks, signals, internal duties, weapon training, anti-gas, field works, physical training, educational, language study, cooperation with RAF, riding instructions, Indian Army officers attending demonstrations in Britain, available manuals, vocational and reservist training. The manual for the collective training period during 1930–31 concentrated on tactical matters such as internal security, mountain warfare, and cooperation with the RAF. With this, the army in India could face an enemy with more up-to-date weapons, assuming that enemies would be using aircraft, artillery, and machine guns.⁵¹

Indian Army officers needed to understand the organisation, equipment, armaments, and tactics of the British Army at home and in other European countries. Infantry training in India followed the War Office Pamphlet of Infantry Training 1937, except for equipment such as mortars, machine guns, and other supporting arms and weapons. The Indian Army had to develop its firepower and tactics in day and night operations to compensate for the lack of this equipment. Lessons from the Waziristan Campaign taught them that fighting in thick scrub and jungle was as unfavourable to the enemy as it was to their troops. The dense cover enabled the troops to

⁵⁰ Regimental Training, Educational Training, Indian Army, 1939, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2272, APAC, BL, London.

⁵¹ Alan Jeffreys, ed., *The Indian Army in the First World War* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2019), pp. 178–180.

enter close quarters with the enemy, envelop the flanks, and threaten the withdrawal lines. Despite all this, Alen Warren has stated that there was never a dearth of volunteers for the Indian Army. The prestige of the Indian Army was very high during this period, and most British officer cadets for the Indian Army attended the Royal Military College at Sandhurst for eighteen months. The competition was fierce, and only sixty officers who had passed out of Sandhurst could apply for the Indian Army.⁵²

During the late 1930s, some Indian Army officers took training very seriously; for instance, Lieutenant Colonel Francis Toker and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Corbett, a BIA officer during the World Wars and a training officer during the inter-war period. Toker took over the command of the 1st Battalion, 2nd Gurkha Rifles, and immediately instituted a new training regime. This constituted a replacement of offensive thinking with defensive thinking. Toker issued training circulars, orders, and instructions within the battalion, and the 1st Battalion trained for night work, patrolling, and forest fighting. Corbett similarly issued training memoranda in which he advocated for raising the standards of junior leadership and made sure his regiment trained for night operations. Corbett advocated mechanisation and believed that the issue with training remained that the troops lacked inspiration and that modernisation of the Indian Army would be accelerated by first-class training based on manuals developed by the new generation of officers.⁵³

With the WWII outbreak, there was a massive expansion program to meet the demand for increased manpower. In eighteen months, the Indian Army doubled in size, although it was still short of equipment. This rapid expansion meant that many new Indian troops had little basic training. In October 1940, Toker was appointed Director of Military Training with twelve officers at the beginning of the war. The Military Training Directorate (MTD) was divided into three sections. MTD1 was for military training schools and establishments, MTD2 dealt with higher training and publications, and MTD3 looked after individual training and exercised executive control for training schools. The Military Training Pamphlets (MTPs) issued during these periods were not meant to be the final word and were revised considering further experience. Toker advocated the importance of all arms cooperation, believing that the Indian Army units were ahead in tactical doctrine and training. Officers returning from the North

⁵² Alan Jeffreys, *Approach to Battle: Training the Indian Army during the Second World War* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2019), pp. 41–45.

⁵³ Jeffreys, *Approach to Battle: Training the Indian Army during the Second World War*, pp. 34–35.

African Campaign taught desert warfare to the newly formed divisions. Tucker himself conducted a tour of the Middle East in 1941, learned some valuable lessons, and understood how useful the material produced by the directorate had proved in the theatre.⁵⁴

Tucker regarded the Indian troops as well-trained. But he also emphasised that training was the main thing that won battles, as it made soldiers out of ordinary citizens. The Indian infantry was believed to have some of the best soldiers of the British Empire as they trained under the instructions of the military training pamphlets. Tucker promised to send out more training pamphlets across the Mediterranean Theatre. These MTPs emphasised the importance of patrolling and infiltration as a lesson applicable to all theatres during the WWII. This also revealed the causes behind training being a strenuous exercise, as most officers were inexperienced at the beginning of the war. There was also the problem of reorganisation, mechanisation, and change of tactical methods with the added problem of further expansion within the Indian Army.⁵⁵

One of the first Indian divisions that produced such training directives and instructions was the 5th Indian Division when it was training for desert warfare. Like mountain warfare, training for desert warfare was a specialist job. This job could, at least, be quickly learned, if not mastered, by well-trained troops if the training was practical and intense. The 4th Indian Division issued such training instructions when Tucker took command in December 1941. These instructions were based on his experience with sections on mountain warfare, infantry-tank cooperation, and night training, all subjects he had studied since the 1930s. The 4th Indian Division produced over forty training instructions in North Africa and Italy. This was followed by continuously learning and integrating new lessons into their training.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Not only was the BIA's preparation level (from a material and manpower perspective) more multi-faceted than is often recognised, so was the army's intellectual preparation from the doctrines for war. The BIA identified the war's critical philosophical and doctrinal aspects before 1939. One of the main developments in the army was its refusal to continue the elements of attrition-based siege warfare that dominated the campaigns on the Western front.

⁵⁴ Stephen Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 33–39.

⁵⁵ Tucker Papers, Military Evolution during the War, Modern Formations Exercise, 1939, 71/21/2, IWM, London.

⁵⁶ Tucker Papers, Note by Major General Francis M. Tucker, 21 July 1934, 71/21/2, IWM, London.

It now focuses on ensuring speed, mobility, and surprise in its battlefield behaviour by embracing modern technology, using tanks, trucks, or air power.⁵⁷

The number of horses and mules reduced from 28,244 in 1913 to 6,544 in 1937. The Royal Artillery was in the process of converting to motorised gun tractors. Many soldiers were being transported by road as more and more infantry platoons were issued with lorries. The FSR emphasised the necessity for all arms to cooperate intimately in battles. The infantry would be hopelessly vulnerable without artillery and anti-tank support. Artillery could not conquer the territory on its own, and tanks were needed for infantry and artillery to overcome hostile anti-tank weapons, open passages through defiles, and consolidate ground gained. The emphasis on cooperation between the army and the air force was amplified, but there were no specific regulations in the FSR regarding this. In the inter-war period, there was an ongoing dispute between the General Staff and Air Staff over who should control the air-land surface. The services asserted that the closest cooperation between air and land forces was essential.⁵⁸

The Indian Army was unprepared for a high-intensity conventional war under British rule. This was starkly clear from the results of the First World War. As a military establishment, it also made honest efforts to learn from its drawbacks and develop itself by training in newer and better tactical and strategic methods. These methods could be applied in several theatres, where they would have to perform in case there came another war-like situation. There were specified theatres where they had to gain tactical mastery—in mountains, frontiers, jungles, and deserts. This chapter has covered only mountain and jungle warfare in some detail. Desert warfare is a phenomenon that the following chapters deal with, to analyse the biggest desert war ever fought in the Mediterranean theatre of the Second World War—the North African Campaign.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Reinforcements to Active Battalions, Educational Training, Indian Army, 1939, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2272, APAC, BL, London.

⁵⁸ Recruit Training, Educational Training, Indian Army, 1939, IOR/L/MIL/17/5/2272, APAC, BL, London.

⁵⁹ Kaushik Roy, *The Army in British India: From Colonial Warfare to Total War, 1857–1947* (Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 122.

CHAPTER 2

The Campaign Begins -

The Indian Army against the Italians: 1940–1941

Introduction

The North African Campaign was started by Italy, carried on by Germany, and led to its conclusion by the Allies. This region was strategically important for all the powers involved. It was essential to the British Empire because it was a highly industrialised area, according to its geographical location. For trade, it could only access other countries via sea. Britain possessed an abundance of minerals like coal and iron but not enough raw materials and agricultural products. To overcome this shortage, she needed to carry on overseas trade.⁶⁰ It depended on the Middle East for petrol and oil to support its industries and services. It relied on other countries for more than 95 percent of its requirements. It even lacked certain metals and ores required for its heavy industries and the production of armaments. This led to establishing trading ports in different parts of the world linked to the British Isles, which helped them import various resources based on their needs. These trading ports and sea routes had to be protected with the help of armed forces, which led to the establishment of defensive positions at vital strategic points along sea routes and trading terminals. This led to wars overseas, with their inevitable sequels of conquests of territories, treaties, alliances, territorial possessions, and more defensive positions to protect them. During World War II (WWII), western Europe and its liberation was almost like a triptych: North Africa, Italy, and the invasion of Normandy. Among these three, North Africa was a pivotal point where the Allies emerged victorious as a great power—militarily, diplomatically, tactically, and strategically.⁶¹

In June 1939, with the beginning of WWII, France suffered a defeat at the hands of Germany and Italy, and North Africa came under the latter's control. This disturbed the global political equilibrium. Italy had three frontiers to guard in North Africa: two were against France, in the

⁶⁰ Major P.C. Bharucha, *The North African Campaign, 1940–1943*, Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–1945, ed. Bisheshwar Prasad (Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), pp. 1–2.

⁶¹ Rick Atkinson, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942–1943* (New York: Picador Books, 2002), p. 3.

west and south, and one against Britain in the east. The Italian Armistice Commission took over the French military resources in Africa and Syria. As a result, the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini ordered the commencement of the war in Africa on 10 June 1940. As the battle of France raged in north-west Europe, the Italian Duce perceived an opportunity to further Italian interests in the Mediterranean. When Italy declared war on Britain, it directly impacted the British position in North Africa and the Middle East. The empire was now massively exposed; a hostile Italy threatened the security of Egypt and the Suez Canal. The Italian naval presence in the Mediterranean shut off the most direct route to India, adding many weeks and thousands of miles to every passage. Any Italian success would deny the British access to oil and expose the Western approaches to the Raj.⁶²

In August 1939, the troops of the 4th Indian Division came under the Middle East Command. General Archibald P. Wavell was the General Officer Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East. The son of a major general and one of the most intellectual members of the British Army, Wavell was an officer blessed with originality and a mind unfettered by convention. He graduated from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in 1900 with an 'A,' one of the only two awarded that year. He lost an eye fighting in World War I (WWI) as a Brigadier-General. In the inter-war years, he rewrote the Field Service Regulations (FSR) and set up the new command in the Middle East in 1939. He commanded all the British land forces in Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Transjordan, Cyprus, British Somaliland, Aden, Iraq, and the shores of the Persian Gulf. The area where he had accepted military responsibility measured some 1,800 miles, including nine different countries on two continents. He had to secure operations from the respective governments and governmental authorities constantly. He also had to work closely with the Commanders of the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean and the Air Force Officers in the Middle East. All these preparations began in Wavell's experienced hands. With his years of experience on the battlefield, the new Commander-in-Chief of the Middle East was aware of the value of each trained soldier and the shortage of trained soldiers, sailors, and airmen, due to which Britain faced perhaps the most extraordinary trials in her long and arduous history.⁶³ As stores arrived in bulk, there was minimal storage space to house and protect them. When transport arrived, they invariably had to be modified in the desert. Tank tracks had to be designed, and lorry radiators had to be filled with water to bear the high temperatures. Water

⁶² Jonathan Fennel, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 117.

⁶³ Barrie Pitt, *The Crucible of War: Western Desert of 1941* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), p. 4.

from the Nile had to be purified for even washing purposes, let alone drinking. As a result, water purification plants had to be set up. It was famously said during this time, ‘The desert was the tactician’s paradise, but the quartermaster’s hell.’⁶⁴

Strategic Importance of the Mediterranean and the Western Desert

The Mediterranean Sea had a vital role to both the Allied and Axis powers due to its geographical location and as it provided the shortest route to North Africa and the Middle East. The importance of the Mediterranean increased with the opening of the Suez Canal and the discovery of oil in the Middle East. It was also valuable to Great Britain due to its shorter route to India. It meant that the economy of time and shipping tonnage was a benefit that could never be taken lightly during a war. Another critical factor was the presence of oil, already mentioned before, which was essential to the British Navy. Oilfields were scattered across the Arab countries—Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Thus, it can be understood that the strategic value of the Mediterranean was primarily due to the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, which formed a land bridge between Europe and Asia.⁶⁵

North Africa, which constituted the southern shores of the Mediterranean, provided the shortest and easiest route from every shore of Europe to the Black Sea and via the Suez Canal. To control the Mediterranean Sea route was to dominate global strategy, for which it was essential to hold specific points on the North African coast. Any power wishing to do this had to occupy the entirety of North Africa, leading several European powers to participate in the North African Campaign during WWII. While the reasons for Britain trying to gain control over the region have already been stated before, it is also necessary to know the reason for the interests of Italy and France.⁶⁶ Italy had several reasons, the first of which was its direct stake in Libya, with which she could only communicate through the Mediterranean. She could not allow African shores to be controlled by unfriendly powers. She needed to possess all of North Africa from Tunis to Port Said. On the other hand, France was interested in the oil pipeline passing through Syria and Lebanon in the eastern Mediterranean. Also, this was the only route that gave her easy access to the dependencies of Tunisia and Algeria. She had a stake in the Suez Canal, which she was not ready to lose by seeing Egypt dominated by a hostile power. The countries bordering the Mediterranean in south-east Europe provided a convenient avenue for the Axis

⁶⁴ Bharucha, *The North African Campaign*, pp. 34–36.

⁶⁵ Document no. 174/Q, HQ 11 Indian Infantry Brigade, 4 April 1941, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁶⁶ Instructions for 4 Ind Div. T.E.W.T no. 1, 15 November 1939, 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

powers to circumvent the British blockade in north-west Europe. This region provided for half of Germany's cereals and livestock requirements. From a British perspective, if the oilfields of Romania and Hungary and the railways that carried ores and agricultural products were out of Germany's control, the German ability to prosecute the war would be seriously compromised. Turkey occupied a geographical position of great importance and commanded the third gateway to the Mediterranean. The Dardanelles, too, provided a route of enormous significance to Italy as her raw materials came via the Black Sea. Very little of what was to be known as the Western Desert relates much to the romantic view of the desert. The Egyptian Desert, west of the Nile, extended 150 miles west as far as Gazala and comprised dunes. The more significant part of the area was a plateau standing an average of 500 feet above sea level, strewn with rubble and boulders, and dark brown.⁶⁷

The Western Desert of Egypt rose gradually from the Qattara Depression. The first significant rise formed an escarpment varying in height from 100 to 300 feet, running from the south of El Alamein, extending itself as far as west as Tmimi in Cyrenaica. The distances of these escarpments from the coast varied from the cliffs overhanging the sea, as at Sollum and Bardia, located inside the Egyptian and Italian frontiers, respectively. Maps had to be collected on arrival under the orders of the headquarters.⁶⁸ A military force with thorough knowledge of such conditions possessed a significant advantage over an adversary new to the country. The British-Indian Army (BIA) divisions spent two days traveling over the country to the south, making them acquainted with the desert conditions, including navigation and location finding. The region was fascinating, with open spaces devoid of outstanding landmarks, the only features being low, flat-topped ridges so strikingly similar that every small object, such as a cairn of stones or an empty tar barrel, assumed great importance in navigation.⁶⁹

Routes and Roads

When the BIA commenced its movement in the desert, it was carried out in three groups. One group went through the desert, another by road, and the third by rail. The first group comprised desert-worthy vehicles that could endure the strain of a cross-desert journey. The road group contained the second-best vehicles; the remaining transport and motorcycles formed the rail

⁶⁷ Pitt, *Crucible of War*, pp. 39–40.

⁶⁸ Administrative Divisional Instructions, 5 Ind Div, 22 September 1941, 602/225/WD/Pt 1, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁶⁹ Toker Papers, Draft Broadcast by Major General Francis S. Toker, 7/21/2/10, Imperial War Museum, London.

group. Here, we must understand the concept of barrel routes, which were formed to make journeys in the desert easier in the absence of recognizable landmarks. A route was marked out by placing empty tar barrels at intervals to prevent vehicles and convoys from going astray. Noteworthy among them was the Old Barrel Route, starting at kilometer 42 from Mena-Alexandria, proceeding west, northwest, and ending at Fuka. Another was the New Tar Barrel Route, starting at kilometer 3 and ending near Garawla. It lay south of the Old Barrel Route and ran roughly parallel. The total cross-desert distance involved a march of 290 miles. One thousand vehicles traversed that distance within two and a half days, with an average speed of 14.5 miles per hour.⁷⁰

Official reports of BIA's movements state that the march conditions demanded a high standard of driving. Certain places had earth too hard for heavy vehicles or artillery without tractors. Other areas had soft patches of ground concealed by hard surface crusts, which broke under the weight of the cars and caused them to sink into the sand. The desert route was unsuitable for hefty vehicles such as six-wheelers or even light vehicles that had not been made fully desert-worthy. The Desert War of 1940–43 is unique in history; it was fought like a polo game in an empty arena. With one exception, there were no roads apart from a few along the coast, and there were neither towns nor villages to provide shelter or obstacles. There was almost no civilian population to get in the way of the battle. The desert campaign was, therefore, war in its 'purest' form. Yet, it is equally true that there was, in this dusty arena, no food and little water—all of this had to be imported. Supply was a significant limit to mobility.⁷¹

Field artillery could only be taken if good tractors greatly reduced speeds. The average pace was 4 miles an hour over large stretches of soft sand or thin surface crusts with soft sand underneath. For most of the way, movement in desert formation was possible. The column was liable to be detected easily from the air as dust thrown up by the vehicles was visible for miles. However, this was balanced because a convoy in desert formation offered poor targets to hostile aircraft because of its wide dispersal. The Royal Air Force (RAF) aircraft offered overhead protection to the column during the move. Also, due to the ground's ruggedness, frequent light repairs to vehicles were necessary on the way, for which Light Aid Detachment arrangements were needed. They were also helpful in towing the cars that broke down completely and in

⁷⁰ Indian Liaison Letter, Serial 5, of 1 April 1941, Pt. A7, War Diary of the HQ 4 Indian Division, GS Branch.

⁷¹ Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 21.

assisting the convoy in keeping breakdowns to a minimum. Requisite arrangements were also made to destroy vehicles that had to be abandoned.⁷²

Communication between the head and the tail of the convoy was always a slow affair. This could only be done by vehicles carrying messages that overtook other cars. Strict march discipline was found to be essential in the desert to prevent vehicles from wandering away from the column and getting lost. Opting for shortcuts and inattention to rules of driving and maintenance would lead to heavy casualties in men and vehicles. The drivers' lack of training and military discipline caused considerable delay and anxiety within the column. The petrol consumption rate was heavy owing to the greater use of low gear on the way. The 4th Indian Division's truck consumed 35 percent more than an average metaled road. Water consumption for radiators was very high whenever a hot wind followed the convoy. Water for radiators and drinking had to be carried as none was coming. There were some wells west of Fuka; however, a report of the quantity available and its fitness for drinking was lacking.⁷³

Night journeys were not undertaken to avoid lights being detected after dark. Dispersion and anti-craft defense played a unique role in such moves. British patrolling was done in small groups, sometimes in a single vehicle, and nearly always at night. A lieutenant and a dozen men would drive far into the darkness, camouflage their vehicles with nets and bush before dawn, and lie motionless on the floor of the desert throughout the day. Italian aircraft would often fail to spot them. On the other hand, the Italian custom was to patrol with heavily armed parties in which a great cloud of dust toured the forward area. There were specific challenges that the Western Desert Force (WDF) excelled in. Some of these included getting two divisions and artillery up to the front in the open desert without the enemy reconnaissance planes seeing them, getting ships out of Alexandria and up the coast unobserved, and getting extra foodstuffs, transport, medical supplies, and ambulances forward.⁷⁴

Command and Organisation

The British Army in India had to be always ready with previously chalked-out plans for dispatching troops abroad. In July 1939, due to the increasing hostility of Italy, two schemes were prepared under which troops were to be sent out of India: Force Heron and Force K4. As

⁷² Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, p. 47.

⁷³ Kaushik Roy, *India and World War II: War, Armed Forces, and Society, 1939–1945* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 32–33.

⁷⁴ Bharucha, *The North African Campaign*, pp. 30–31.

a security precaution, the obvious and transparent Scheme A for Aden, incorporated into Scheme E for Egypt, was renamed Hawk. Heron was the new name for Scheme E. As August arrived, India accelerated her pace of preparations. After disembarkment, on 5 October 1939, Heron and K4 were reorganised to come under one headquarters. Heron and Hawk were put into operation on 1 October 1939 but halted on 3 December 1939. However, the attempted implementation of Heron and Hawk proved to be a good rehearsal, in which several defects were discovered and rectified. Thus, the 4th Indian Division was born in the surroundings of the pyramids of Egypt. This stage consisted of the 11th and the 5th Indian Infantry Brigades. More forces were due to join them in the coming months.⁷⁵

Wavell was responsible for overseeing an enormous area that included Egypt, Palestine, Aden, Sudan, and British East African possessions—an area of great strategic importance to Britain. The troops at his disposal were not sufficient compared to the Italian disposition. Buoyed by this massive numerical superiority, Mussolini envisaged expanding the Italian empire in Africa. Marshal Rodolfo Graziani's Italian 10th Army advanced 60 miles beyond the Libyan or Egyptian border, halted, and began constructing several bases to consolidate gains and prepare for further operations.⁷⁶

Wavell's headquarters was in Cairo, and his principal task was to review and coordinate war plans in consultation with the local air and naval commanders. With the outbreak of hostilities, he was responsible for coordinating the activities of all land forces under various Allied commanders. At the commencement of the war in Egypt, the Allied troops included the 7th Armoured Division (also known as the Desert Rats), the 4th Indian Division, the Royal Artillery groups, and eight British Infantry battalions. The troops in the Middle East Command had no complete formations and were acutely short of artillery. There were 26 infantry battalions, with only 64 field guns, 48 anti-tank guns, and 12 anti-aircraft guns. There were also forces from the Egyptian army, and they were better equipped than most British units. However, they were to support only passive defense and internal security matters. Within his command, General Wavell established several training centres. He also brought about close coordination between the operational and administrative sides of the command. At that time, the respective strengths of the Commonwealth and Italian troops stood at 85,000 to 4,15,000 men. The Allied preparations at this stage were not very satisfactory. Not a single unit or

⁷⁵ Notes on Brigade Commanding Training Conference, 16 May 1941, A6, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁷⁶ Notes on Brigade Commanding Training Conference, 16 May 1941, A6, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

formation was fully equipped due to very little equipment being received in the Middle East. There was a severe shortage of anti-aircraft, anti-tank guns, and artillery.⁷⁷

In the air, the Italians enjoyed a considerable numerical advantage over the combined strength of the RAF, although Wavell believed that the British machines and pilots were superior qualitatively. Along with that, his defensive strategy on land was to permit the Italians to advance on the defenses of Matruh by a gradual and orderly withdrawal before meeting them in any strength. His idea was to draw the Italians as far away as possible from their supply base, conserving his fighting strength until the last moment. His force guarding the frontier kept harassing the Italian border posts from the date of the declaration of war. The Middle East forces also had to establish closer relations with neighbouring military commanders regarding training, equipping, receiving reinforcements, and building supplies. They had to plan and prepare defences against a possible attack by Italy. On 12 December 1939, the War Office designated that the left mudguard of vehicles of the 4th Indian Division would carry a 'red eagle' symbol painted on a black background. This was a symbol that became famous around the world. With spring coming up and the war gaining momentum in all zones, Africa, too, was aflame.⁷⁸

To further Italian interests in the Mediterranean, Mussolini seized every opportunity that came his way. His activities directly impacted the British position in North Africa and the Middle East as their empire was massively exposed. Their routes through Egypt and the Suez Canal and their access to oil from the Middle East would be threatened. In this potentially critical situation, Italian forces numbered 91,203 personnel and 5,000 aircraft in the Mediterranean. Mussolini instructed units from the Italian garrison in Ethiopia to occupy frontier towns. On 15 July 1940, the Italian forces launched an incursion and occupied the whole of British Somaliland. This was followed by the invasion of Egypt on 13 September. After this, Marshal Graziani's Italian 10th Army advanced beyond the Libyan border and began constructing several bases to consolidate gains and prepare for further operations.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 118.

⁷⁸ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, pp. 63–72.

⁷⁹ Notes on Brigade Commanding Training Conference, 16 May 1941, A6, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

Training, Manoeuvres, and Logistics

The Committee of Imperial Defense, in alliance with the Government of India, planned its responsibilities in the event of an emergency for designating brigade groups for overseas service. Routing for the movement of Indian troops to Egypt under Scheme Heron and Scheme Emu was devised by ship to Basra, rail to Baghdad, and lorries across the Arabian deserts. On the evening of 28 September 1938, Scheme Heron' evolved into 'R PLAN.' The garrison force for the Middle East was increased to two brigades and a divisional headquarters. When the 4th Indian Division landed on the soft, burning sands of the Sahara, it was welcomed by vast stretches of hard sand and stony ground riddled with black basaltic slabs. Bony ridges, ribbed escarpments, deep depressions, and flat pans held water after the rains. The endless undulating sand and gravel dunes had crests marching in rhythm, like waves in the sea. The desert was void of landmarks, so desert-worthy soldiers used only their compasses for navigation. They were steered by the *birs* (the local wells), the *alems*, (the cairns), the *gabirs* (the tombs), the *ghots* (the circular potholes), and the *mengers* (the mounds). The desert had harsh characters and habitation, which the soldiers never forgot. The days of burning heat and its intolerable glare gave way to mirages that blocked the horizon with their Braille-like formations. The nights were cool and dark, but the day was accompanied by choking sandstorms, marrow-sucking *khamsins* (sandstorms), and intolerable swarms of flies, all of which made the desert soldier put into use his assertive nature. Skins were burnt, lips were cracked, eyeballs were sore, throats were parched, but nothing could dampen the spirit of these vigorous fighters.⁸⁰

Khamsins blew almost constantly, and the weather transcended all considerations. The physical strain that the weather imposed was beyond expectation. Men were becoming frightened of their continual thirst under the piercing heat. The *khamsins* blew almost daily until the armoured cars became too hot to touch. The exhausted crew lay sweating underneath them; one patrol alone was using more water than the daily allowance of a whole troop. Bully beef and biscuits were the only fare. General Sir Richard Nugent O'Connor, commander of the Western Desert Force, was neither discouraged nor depressed by this situation. He was

confident that launching out of the desert was a force strong enough to cut through Mersa

⁸⁰ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 134.

Matruh and isolate the main enemy force. Meanwhile, he continued his intensive training and strengthened his force qualitatively, hoping to get help from Britain quantitatively.⁸¹

Before the beginning of the World War II, Italy had sent an army of 3,27,000 men to Libya and supplied it with great stores of material, but the bitter fact remained that this army fell short of the standard required by modern warfare. This army was mainly designed for a colonial war against insurgent tribesmen, not against a motorised army. Its tanks and armored vehicles were too light, and its engines were underpowered. Their action radius was short, and most of their guns had a short range. The army had too few anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns; its rifles were of obsolete pattern or unsuitable for modern warfare. The worst feature of the Italian Army was that a great part of it comprised non-motorised infantry. In the desert warfare of the North African Campaign, non-motorised troops were of no practical value against a motorised enemy. The enemy had the chance to make the action fluid by turning its movements around the south, in almost every position. This remained the decisive disadvantage of the Italian 10th Army vis-à-vis the BIA.⁸²

Settling in the Defences: British-Indian Army vs Italian Tenth Army

On arrival at Naghamish, all vehicles, except those required forward, went into the 'wagon line' or vehicle parks. They were kept well to the rear of the defensive position to give way to the defensive layout. The Divisional Commander directed the Commander of Royal Engineers to start working on establishing pillboxes and *sangars* in the forward area. Arrangements were made for water storage to 640 tanks per day, with some tanks having a 200-gallon capacity. The pillboxes were designed in consultation with the infantry brigades to resist artillery shell fire. Several other units arrived to make the division stronger: the 7th Medium Regiment RA, Headquarters 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, 2 Camerons, 1 Rajputana Rifles, 4 Rajput Regiment, 1 Northumberland Fusiliers, and Headquarters Royal Engineers. Simultaneously, defensive preparations were accelerated. Anti-tank mines were ordered to be drawn as rapidly as possible, and 20,000 mines were demanded by the British troops in Egypt. The 7th Armoured Brigade's main task was to patrol the frontier and harass the Italians by attacking their outposts, convoys, and patrols. The new infantry tanks were the I-tanks. It was felt that a campaign in

⁸¹ Lieutenant-Colonel G.R. Stevens Obe, *Fourth Indian Division* (Uckfield: The Naval & Military Press, n.d.), p. 3.

⁸² Pitt, *Crucible of War*, pp. 46–47.

the Western Desert was the most potent way to remind the people of Britain that they were not alone. They had forces fighting for them throughout Africa and Europe.⁸³

The Italian forces were growing in numbers, and their artillery was more active than before. They were busy constructing defenses at Capuzzo, Bardia, and Gabr Saleh in anticipation of an Allied attack. The Italians deployed Savoia's aircraft, which were reportedly exceedingly large bomber transports capable of carrying up to fifty lightly equipped men. In the air, they couldn't offer much support. The Italian medium tanks were believed to be ineffective. The heavy tanks were quite blind as the nature of their construction greatly restricted the crew's vision. Clumsy in movement, the tanks had no wireless aerials and were more heavily armored in the front than at the sides, constantly obliged to turn to present the front to any gun that opened fire on them. Their front armour was not sufficiently thick and could be penetrated by British anti-tank guns and Bofors from about 400 yards. The Italian light tanks also had trouble firing on the move and had to halt to aim, thus becoming easy targets. On the other hand, they also created the impression of being dead, luring an unwary opponent onto their firing range.⁸⁴

Stones over 9 inches in diameter constituted a partial obstacle for any Italian tank. If large boulders were scattered at intervals of 6 feet, the tanks automatically slowed down to avoid the challenges. Artificial fields of stones were found very useful for slowing down the Italian armoured vehicles and tanks. The Italians were using a particular kind of missile shot from tanks called 'flaming onions.' They were luminous, spherical objects in red, green, and white colours. They travelled at a slow speed but caused no damage. They had limited effects and were soon regarded as harmless once their mechanism was deciphered. The Italian aircraft kept track of the 4th Indian Division and conducted night attacks with Thermos and High Explosive Bombs. These included incendiary bombs and were thus named because they resembled a thermos flask. These bombs were small and of delayed action type, designed to not explode on impact but would go off if moved. They would lie scattered after a raid until they moved or touched, blowing up with fatal results. Their blast range was not more than a hundred yards but had considerable nuisance value. They could be destroyed from a distance by rifle fire or by dragging an improvised rake out of strings and stones over them. However, they, too, ceased to cause worry after their nature and method of destruction were fully understood.⁸⁵

⁸³ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 8.

⁸⁴ Movements-Road-Ruling, 20 September 1941, Pt. 1, 601/225/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁸⁵ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 11.

The BIA had Matilda I and II infantry tanks with thick armour and 47 mm and 40 mm guns. They also had the Crusader tank, a cruiser tank with moderate armour and a 57 mm gun. There was also the Valentine tank, with a 40 mm gun. The Italians had the Fiat L3/33 and Fiat L3/35 with thin armour and 20 mm guns. They also had M11/39 and M13/40, which were medium tanks with moderate armor and 47 mm guns. The British tanks had thicker armour, making them more resistant to the Italian anti-tank guns. They also had more accurate and powerful guns and superior mechanical reliability and maintenance. With tactical coordination, it was convenient for them to exploit Italian weaknesses. The number of Italian tanks was incredible; they were familiar with the desert terrain. They possessed initial air superiority but later failed to capitalize on that. They were also lightly armoured and poorly coordinated. In contrast, the British Matildas proved almost invulnerable to anti-tank fire.⁸⁶

In terms of the desert environment, the Italian camps were lavish affairs. The general design was a convenient rise of half a mile or mile square surrounded by a stone wall. Inside, the Italians established messes, hospitals, and sleeping quarters by scooping holes and surmounting the tops with pieces of camouflaged canvas. Minefields were embedded in the eastern, northern, and southern approaches. Rough, incredibly dusty tracks linked one camp with another. Sidi Barrani, in addition to its ring of outlying camps, possessed two lines of fortifications where they had dug anti-tank traps and furnished niches for machine guns, anti-tank guns, and artillery. In guns of all classes and all kinds of transport and tanks, Graziani's forces enjoyed a numerical superiority of probably not less than three to one. In the air, the Italians certainly had a three-to-one numerical advantage. Strong garrisons comprising more than one division were centred at such vital points as Tobruk, Derna, and Benghazi. In addition, there were strong pockets of supporting infantry in desert posts like Mekili, south of Derna. Graziani disposed of some quarter million troops against Wavell's hundred thousand based around the Nile and the Suez Canal.⁸⁷

Defects in Cracking Intelligence Reports

The Allies' intelligence service failed to forecast the Italian advance. They had to read day-to-day intelligence reports, which were carefully compiled summaries of facts relating to Italian

⁸⁶ Major-General J.F.C. Fuller, *The Second World War, 1939–1945* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), pp. 36–37.

⁸⁷ Alan Moorehead, *Desert War: The North African Campaign, 1940–1943* (USA: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 50–51.

positions, movements, and other activities, as observed by forward troops or gathered from aerial and ground reconnaissance. The facts acquired were accurate, but the Allies failed to interpret them correctly. This was a massive setback on the part of the 8th Army. One clue most sought after by the intelligence experts was the movement of large masses of mechanical transport as a signal indicating that the invasion of Egypt had commenced. They overlooked the possibility that Italian formations might not be fully motorised. There were always too few vehicles, which gave the impression of small units or columns.⁸⁸ When the Italians were making a significant move towards Sidi Barrani, the Allied intelligence reports persisted believing that those were small, local movements. Only when the Italians crossed the borders of Egypt and settled down in Sidi Barrani did it become apparent to Allied observers that the Italians were advancing in considerable strength. Their vehicle strength was no proper indication of the size of their force. Thus, divisional intelligence reports were full of speculations, with day-to-day figures of quantities of transport observed and directions in which they were found heading. These records provided a good picture of the activities and possible intentions of the Italians. Italian intelligence grew naturally out of the national weakness for exaggeration. Most Italian generals had a passion and talent for bombast and display. When Graziani destroyed a dozen vehicles, he claimed he destroyed 2,000.⁸⁹

The Italian Tenth Army and its Advance

The Italian Tenth Army was initially composed of the HQ XXI Corps, a Metropolitan Corps comprising the 62nd and 63rd Metropolitan Divisions, all white and motorised. The composition of a Metropolitan Division included a headquarters with signals, two infantry regiments of three battalions each, a medium-machine gun battalion, a light tank battalion, a mechanical transport company, an anti-tank company, and some minor units. The establishment of each division totaled about 13,000 personnel. Further, it also had the Blackshirts Divisions, which were organised on the same lines as the Metropolitan Divisions but did not have a light divisional battalion. They were somewhat inferior in equipment and training compared to the regular formations. Each Blackshirt Division had an establishment of about 8,000 men, all white personnel, and its artillery regiment had thirty-six guns. Then there were the Libyan Divisions, each composed of two infantry regiments of three battalions, artillery, engineer, and

⁸⁸ Bisheshwar Prasad, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War: India and the War* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), pp. 95–96.

⁸⁹ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, p. 48.

other supporting units. The battalions were organised based on the headquarters platoon with three heavy machine guns and a strength of forty-three other ranks, and three companies of four platoons each. One was a patrolling unit with two light machine guns, and the other were rifle units with one non-commissioned officer and sixteen other ranks. Each battalion had between 700 and 800 men. The Maletti Mobile Group was a mobile column consisting of tanks and artillery named by Blackshirts and Libyans.⁹⁰

With the advance of the Italian Tenth Army, mutual air attacks gradually stepped up. The Italian air force intensified its bombing of the Allied rail terminus at Matruh, while the Royal Air Force struck harder at the Italian aerodromes and their seaplane bases. Each side aimed to attack the opponent's bases and communications. September 1940 saw Allied air activity directed towards bombing Italian aerodromes at Tmimi, Tobruk, and Derna. At the seaplane bases at Bomba and Gazala, the raids were carried out by squadrons of the RAF. Strategic reconnaissance flights were undertaken to monitor Italian troops' and vehicles' concentrations and movements. On 17 September, the Italian force reached and occupied Sidi Barrani. Their speed of advance had increased considerably during the closing stages of the move. The troops were well equipped with light and medium tanks, making liberal use of artillery. The transport columns, whether on the move or stationary, were protected by small field and anti-tank guns.⁹¹

The Italian advance had their style of moving in a formation and defending their convoys, which also had advantages and weaknesses. The Italian troops made their lorries move in groups of fifty each. Each group comprised ten rows of five vehicles abreast, led by a staff car 300 yards ahead. Screens of similar armed vehicles provided flank protection up to 400 yards on each side. Often, the groups became separated during the march, so at intervals, a group that had moved too far ahead had to wait for the following one to join up before moving on again. This process was repeated throughout the column, reducing the speed to at least 600 yards an hour. The weakness of this formation was that it presented an easy target for machine guns and artillery fire. Thus, during the move to Sidi Barrani, more than 10 percent of the advancing vehicles were put out of action by Allied gunners. Unlike the British practice, the Italians did not use their armoured cars away from the columns, preferring to use them as close escorts. All vehicles in their convoys appeared desert-worthy. During the night halts, these were protected

⁹⁰ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 18–19.

⁹¹ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 14.

by being kept in a close league, with tanks along the perimeter. Efficient vehicle evacuation was one of the strong points of the Italian leaguers.⁹²

All manoeuvres were planned from a base. Tripoli was Graziani's chief supply port, from where ships were loaded and unloaded undisturbed by air raids. His lines of communication stretched east to Benghazi and far south into the Libyan desert oasis at Kufra. From Benghazi, his most vital base, the lines fanned out again to Barce, Cirene, Derna, and Tobruk north on the coast and south to the border desert post at Jarabub. Every section hinged on a pivot, mainly Bardia, Tobruk, Benghazi, and Tripoli. Each sector fitted into the one behind it so that the successive termini of each pivot's northern arms were Sidi Barrani, Bardia, Tobruk, and Benghazi. One had to mass main forces on the coast, with good roads, ships, and airfields, yet it was also necessary to guard the desert flank against sudden encircling inland raids. However, Graziani failed to uphold this principle.⁹³

The 8th Army Defences

The 8th Army's work of constructing defenses at Baqqush commenced immediately upon the completion of the move. The New Zealand Brigade Group and the 16th British Infantry Brigade joined the 4th Indian Division. Even then, the division lacked trained anti-tank personnel, but the New Zealand troops gave an impressive tank-hunting demonstration to the Division. Two Indian anti-tank companies, probably the first Indian manned anti-tank units of the war, came into being, one for the 5th and the other for the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade. The Italians continued to push towards Matruh and beyond. On reaching Sidi Barrani, Marshal Graziani decided to make a long halt, and he busied himself by constructing defense fortifications as if working on a plan to consolidate the conquered territory. The Allies, too, had to take a firm stand between Sidi Barrani and Alexandria. General Wavell wished his forward troops to fall back, delaying action until the advancing force was drawn to an area favourable for an attack. It was then to be engaged in battle and destroyed or defeated on the spot. Thus, what might have been a battle of Naghamish or Baqqush ultimately became the Battle of Sidi Barrani.⁹⁴

During this move, the 4th Indian Division witnessed its first clash in the air. On 31 October 1941, fifteen Italian aircraft bombed the divisional area of Naghamish, on the way to Matruh.

⁹² Bharucha, *The North African Campaign*, pp. 52–54.

⁹³ Raymond Callahan, *Churchill and His Generals* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), pp. 31–33.

⁹⁴ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 22.

They were at once engaged by RAF fighters. In the first aerial combat over the divisional headquarters, many aircraft were lost, the count being nine to four for the Italians versus the RAF. On the move further, instructions were issued to conceal oneself from the Italian air reconnaissance; thus, a distance of 400 yards was to be maintained between the vehicles during the move. The first unit to move was the divisional cavalry, the Central India Horse, accompanied by the 4th Battalion Rajputana Rifles, which consisted of one battery of Royal Horse Artillery and one section of 18 Field Company Sappers and Miners. There were many duties; the dumping force had to provide labour for the formation of the dumps and protect them from the ground and air action of the Italians. Petrol, ammunition, and food supplies were to be drawn from points.⁹⁵

Water, which was rationed at half a gallon per man and one gallon per vehicle per day, was to be drawn from Mersa Matruh. There were also rapid rotations of duties, and these reliefs were presumably designed to give practice to the units. While General Wavell intended to catch the Italian forces in prepared positions at Matruh, Marshal Graziani had his plans. Instead of rushing headlong at the Allied troops, he halted 15 miles east of Sidi Barrani, refusing to move forward. This frustrated General Wavell's carefully laid-out plan. However, the plan for attacking the Italians at Sidi Barrani was tentatively decided to occur between 8 and 10 December 1941. A succession of clear, moonlit nights was necessary to conduct the move in absolute secrecy. The brigades had to be situated within the bombing distance of a potential army, and the battle might have to commence with an air attack. It was, therefore, necessary to take specific precautionary measures as soon as the situation indicated the possibility of an attack outbreak. At the precautionary stage, the code word was 'Umbrella', at the emergency stage, it was 'Scram'.⁹⁵ The plan of attack that finally emerged relied on its precise timing and good training. A test trial was carried out to rehearse, with a facsimile of Italian camps and defenses marked out on the ground with live ammunition. This exercise also brought to the surface some of the defects of the plan, and tactical alterations were made for improvement.⁹⁶

Prelude to Operation Compass

Italy entered the war on 10 June 1940 at 2000 hours. The 4th Indian Division, then at Mena, began a flurry of activities, taking precautions against instantaneous attacks from air, sea, or

⁹⁵ War Plans-Precautionary and Emergency Stages, 23 August 1939, Part A, 601/301/ED/PEA, HQ 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁹⁶ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 62.

land. Under Major-General Neame, they continued to train, reinforce, and equip themselves. The Central India Horse cavalry regiment arrived at Mena on 6 August 1940. The arrival of the cavalry regiment strengthened the division and made it fit to enter the forward area and begin the long record of its fighting experiences. A cavalry regiment generally consisted of a headquarters, a signal troop, one machine gun squadron, and four sabre squadrons (*Aswaran*). A machine gun squadron consisted of Squadron Headquarters and two machine gun troops (*Dastoh*). Each of the two sections had two machine guns (BRNO). A sabre squadron consisted of Squadron Headquarters, signals, etc. The squadron was divided into four troops of three sections, No. 1 and 2 sections being sabre and No. 3 a light automatic section. Both sabre and light automatic sections consisted of a leader and six other ranks. The average strength of a regiment was 720 in all ranks. Its armament consisted of eight machine guns and sixteen light automatics.⁹⁷

However, Marshal Graziani's Italian Army reached Sidi Barrani from the Egyptian frontiers at Sollum and halted to fortify its territory, settle and assemble stores and reinforcements, and organise water supplies. This is where he fell short of the ideals of a good commander. If civilians and quartermasters take over the organisation of supplies, everything is bound to slow down the man carrying on his plans with speed and drive. A commander must accustom his staff to a high tempo from the outset and continually keep them up to it. This kind of army is bound to be taught a lesson by its fast-moving enemy. The BIA possessed a good combination of brains and initiative. They brought modern, mechanised troops with numerous tanks into Egypt. Their tanks were far superior in quality to the Italians. They possessed a far better and more modern air force, faster and more up-to-date tanks, long-range artillery, and its striking columns were fully motorised. The British fleet dominated the western Mediterranean, and they possessed a railway along the coast as far as Mersa Matruh. They had connections through the Egyptian railway system, through which material could be brought in, and Egypt could be turned into an arsenal for war materials of all kinds.⁹⁸

Within a fortnight of the outbreak of the war, Major-General P.G. Scarlett, the commander-designate of the 4th Indian Division, was already in Egypt with his staff. This included Brigadier N.M.P. Beresford-Peirse, Colonel W.L. Lloyd, Colonel D.F. Murphy, Lieutenant-

⁹⁷ Report on Organisation of a Cavalry Regiment, 22 August 1941, HQ 10th Indian Division, Part I, 601/233/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁹⁸ Copy of a Letter from Headquarters British Troops in Egypt, August 1939, HQ 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

Colonel R.V. Cutler, Lieutenant-Colonel C.M.F. White, Colonel H.F.C. McSwiney, and several other noteworthy officers. Simultaneously, substantial adjustments were being made to meet the needs of desert warfare. The changes were mostly for patience and ingenuity. Experienced personnel were busy instructing the newcomers about the methods of carrying messages. Specialist weapons—mortars and anti-tank rifles, specialist services such as water points, recovery sections, blood banks, and pick-up vans—were all extraordinary and new to the Indians.⁹⁹ However, Indian troops' basic training was sufficiently flexible to afford easy comprehension of new devices and quick mastery of technique. Thus, the 4th Indian Division mustered under the shadow of the pyramids, coalesced as a striking force, and was well-found and well-armed. As they were still uncommitted, the British-Indian Divisions had time to train and organise. New concepts of distances and speed movements became inevitable. The Indian brigades could develop new routines without undue delay or dislocation.¹⁰⁰

The difficulties of the supply and transport services are worth mentioning when one discusses the achievements of the BIA. The sepoy drivers were dropped into a completely new and strange land with a new hand at the wheel, where they were compelled to drive on what was to them, the wrong side of the road. They also had to drive where there were no roads, only soft sand, hard sand, quicksand, scabbly ridges, and naked rocks. They had to steer by almost imperceptible landmarks, to keep formation and direction by feel, to be miserly with liquids both for themselves and the vehicles, to devise safe and easy ways of leaguering and of taking cover, to learn the tricks of air-spotting and evasion under air attack. They had to extricate themselves from every manner of mischance with the aid of their wits. Moreover, they had to work for endless hours at various tasks, a vastly different routine from the easy division of labor to which they had been accustomed. The infantry and the other combatants required fewer radical adjustments. In all these principles, the officers and men of the 4th Indian Division had been drilled and disciplined to a high efficiency standard. When exercises began in the desert, the sepoys and their officers proved equally versatile and adaptable. With toughened bodies came minds capable of coping with the tensions and variations of modern warfare. The keenness and adaptability of all ranks were so marked that in a remarkably short time, the 4th Indian Division was in shape to take the field as a mechanised formation.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Prasad, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 98–99.

¹⁰⁰ Callahan, *Churchill and His Generals*, p. 35.

¹⁰¹ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, pp. 84–5.

The troops, too, never complained of any qualms. They were professionals used to soldiering roughly. A large proportion of them were accustomed to the whine of the sniper's bullet above their heads, the explosion of a landmine or bomb. They were pretty good at finding their way around the desert; this was an art that, in those days, was developed by very few. In the training exercises, officers and men learned to dispense with the faintly marked tracks, finding their way across the featureless wastes by stars, sun, and compass. A combination of keen observation and good memory made up a crucial part of what was known as the 'desert sense.' They learned to live in the desert. They learned to find cover for men and guns in the lightest undulations, they learned that the scrub patches provided concealment for a machine gun or observation points, and they learned to judge what constituted reality and what was more likely to be a mirage.¹⁰²

Much of their training was devoted to movement, and desert driving techniques were paramount. 'Going' was a word that acquired supreme importance for the years to come. Traps were challenging to identify for the inexperienced or unwary with a burning sun overhead. In a sudden movement, the vehicles would drop at the cost of broken springs, sharp rocks would rip tyres, and a boulder seen too late would buckle a wheel. With these hurdles, the tracked vehicles strained their springs and ruined their tracks; for the wheeled vehicles, there was the constant hazard of deep and soft sand in which the wheels quickly became embedded in the axles. This demanded hours of unsticking with spades and sand mats, often unloading the stores and equipment carried and reloading them when the vehicle was clear. The necessity of maintaining direction, navigating a unit, learning to watch for small indications, and using one's eyes despite mirages made wide intervals necessary.¹⁰³ Along with this, the squadrons had to conserve water, food, and petrol as they needed everything for their mere existence. The desert supplied nothing but an arena. Halting and looking around vehicles were yet to become intuitive for crews and commanders. This would become necessary to check for oil leaks and loose bolts, which needed immediate remedy. Such lessons had to be learned by every unit as it arrived in the desert as, for the first time, mechanised artillery, a mechanised infantry brigade, an armoured car regiment, and a tank brigade were brought together by the BIA to fight in the deserts. Gradually, the infantry brigade learned to form a wide screen in front and along the flanks to provide reconnaissance and delay an attacking enemy. The tank group learned to

¹⁰² War Plans—Precautionary and Emergency Stage, 23 August 1939, HQ 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, Pt. A, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹⁰³ Fuller, *The Second World War*, p. 40.

manoeuvre for attack or counterthrust. The artillery swung into action to break up a possible attack before it developed. The infantry dug weapon pits to hold ground won and to guard the brains and nerve centers. If there was ever an acute shortage of everything from supply transport and ammunition to radio sets, there was now growing stability to improvise and rapidly developing integral spirit. The Italian commanders on the other side of the frontier now had a good cause for concern.¹⁰⁴

On 9 December 1940, Wavell suddenly launched a surprise attack on the Italians. Every British aircraft that was present, from the oldest to the newest, took to the air. They dropped bombs on all the Italian positions. Simultaneously, the guns of British warships thundered from the sea and covered Sidi Barrani and the coast road with their heaviest shells. After a short fight, the Italians were overrun, and 4,000 of them were taken prisoner. The British now divided their motorised columns; one part went for the Sidi Barrani area to the north, and the other, the 7th Armoured Division (which moved independently), moved west to the rear of the Italians. Infantry tanks accompanied the British infantry in coordination with the outflanking columns attacking from the rear. The British naval guns' thunder mingled with the battle's fury. It swept the Italian infantry divisions like a storm. On 16 December, Wavell reached the Libyan frontier and defeated Graziani's troops at Capuzzo with the light Italian tanks splitting apart under British fire. 30,000 Italians were taken prisoner, with the Italian Tenth Army virtually ceasing to exist. Henceforth, the Italians withdrew to their strongholds at Bardia and Tobruk. The total Italian losses stood at 38,000 prisoners, 400 guns, and 50 tanks. The British casualties were barely 500.¹⁰⁵

The British screens were the first to make the move, probe, and pinprick on the Libyan frontier. This circumstance concerned the Italian commanders and established a psychological advantage for their assailants that eventually influenced the nature of the campaign. The 5th Indian Brigade, in its scattered encampments along the coastal dunes, was the first to experience the alarms of the war. Major-General Beresford-Pierse led the campaign in its first battles, and the army was fortunate in securing such an outstanding officer as its first commander. He established the tradition of thoroughness and attention to detail, which meant so much in the years to come. Intensely human with a sympathetic personality, Beresford-Pierse inspired a feeling of family among the troops under his command.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the

¹⁰⁴ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, pp. 12–20.

¹⁰⁵ B.H. Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), pp. 91–93.

stage was now set to move forward, and the divisional convoys navigated across the desert for the first time in an open formation.⁴⁷ They had wary eyes on the sky, a fleet of vehicles plodding all day across flat, stony wastes intersected by abrupt ridges strewn with tilted rocky slabs. With such a promising performance, the Red Eagles took the field. This was when the Divisional Officers drew their attention to the position of El Alamein and discussed the importance of this area with profound results in years to come. At Naghamish they settled in by digging a deep *nullah* that was transformed into an anti-tank ditch and a fortified 'box'. This was designed to cover the coastal road and provided a 'keep' position or bastion upon which the mobile forces would pivot in a battle of manoeuvre. From here, the troops would besiege Mersa Matruh.¹⁰⁶

British strength grew in the desert and the skies. Gladiators engaged with the Italian Airforce, with a spectacular dogfight ensuing and the troops going mad with excitement. Two British planes, in the heat of manoeuvre, rammed into each other, the pilots parachuting to safety. Nine Italian machines were shot down for the loss of two Gladiators. Early in November, while preparing for the attack on Sidi Barrani, the BIA advanced 100 miles; secrecy and deception remained the key to their march. With months of tough training in the desert, the BIA units were confident in dealing with enemy forces in battle. The enemy relied upon the *Regia Aeronautica* for intelligence and reconnaissance, and they were disappointed. British intelligence was comprehensive, with all credit for this going to the ubiquitous Desert Rats. General Wavell mustered a force of 31,000 men, 120 guns, and 225 tanks, including fifty heavily armoured infantry assault tanks. The months of isolation in the desert had bred a kinship between the British officers, the Indian sepoy, and the British soldiers, who dedicated their utmost strength to the common task. With high hearts and unshakeable confidence, they waited for the zero hour.¹⁰⁷

By the winter of 1940, British forces in North Africa were outnumbered and surrounded by the Italian army and navy in the Mediterranean. The Italian troops had the initiative, but they waited and pondered on what to do next for the next three months instead of building more defenses. This gave Wavell and O'Connor, now the commander of the (WDF), the time to stabilise their position and consider options for a counterstroke in Africa. O'Connor had a delicate head with a calm and logical brain, which seemed to the heart of a problem with such

¹⁰⁶ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, pp. 34–38.

¹⁰⁷ Toker Papers, Infantry Training 1934, 71/21/2, Imperial War Museum, London.

certainty and quickness that he could make other sound soldiers seem slow-witted. As reinforcements arrived in the Middle East, the probability of conducting such an offensive increased. Between August to December 1940, 69,500 troops, three tank regiments which included fifty-two cruisers and fifty infantry tanks, forty-eight two pounder anti-tank guns, twenty Bofors light anti-aircraft guns, forty-eight 25-pounder field guns, 500 Bren guns, 250 anti-tank rifles, and 50,000 anti-tank mines were transported from Britain to Egypt. 28,000 Australians, 7,300 New Zealanders, 11,400 Indians, and 2,000 British troops arrived from India and other parts of the empire. With this growing strength, Wavell was confident of launching an attack in the Western Desert in December. He wanted the operation to be limited in its ambitions and was waiting to see how well they could adapt to the circumstances as they arose. This was indicative of Wavell's style of command and his command-and-control arrangements.¹⁰⁸

While the British and Indian troops trained earnestly, intelligence officers sifted through the prodigious chaff of Rome Radio in search of grains of solid fact. Transport units pushed forward across the waterless wastes beyond Mersa Matruh for training with forward troops along the Libyan frontier. Simultaneously, Italian bombers strewed the Baqqush and Naghmish areas with thermos flasks and shaving stick anti-personnel bombs. An unwary officer and four other ranks were killed while picking up these missiles. Rough harrows towed by carriers were devised to deal with them, but natural curiosity took its toll for some time. The BIA discovered that its immediate and first responsibility was the defense of Egypt, which called for training in mobile defense and constructing fortifications. They would sally in an offensive-defensive operation designed to intercept and destroy the invaders in the Mersa-Matruh area. The Italians would stand fast along the Libyan frontier, and the BIA would advance to the attack. However, the British reconnaissance forces reported that the enemy was fortifying their positions instead of preparing to push on.¹⁰⁹

On 19 December 1940, Wavell's forces appeared before Bardia to lay siege to the fortress. With cover from the RAF and bombs and shells being dropped by the Royal Navy, the British-Australian infantry stormed into the fortress and forced the Italians to surrender. The assault was carried by Matilda tanks, which took 45,000 prisoners and 462 guns. Then, the British

¹⁰⁸ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Individual Training Instruction no. 1, 20 August 1939, HQ 11th Indian Infantry Brigade, Pt. A, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

continued their advance to the west and enveloped Tobruk on 8 January 1941. The Italian defense at Tobruk was comparatively more robust, with a garrison of 25,000 men and powerful artillery formations. Even with a plentiful supply of stores, it managed to hold the attack for only a fortnight. It collapsed in an attack mainly conducted by infantry tanks. They had no means of defense against the heavily armoured British vehicles. Nearly 30,000 prisoners were taken, along with 236 guns. After the fall of Tobruk, the British moved into Cyrenaica and fought short actions at Derna and Mechili. Benghazi, too, was in British hands by 7 February, while, at the same time, an influential British armoured column pushed forward through Msus. The action fought on either side of Via Balbia ended with the destruction of over 100 Italian fighting vehicles, and 10,000 Italian troops marched into British prison camps. Further, at Beda Fomm, the total captures were 20,000 men, 216 guns, and 120 tanks.¹¹⁰

The battleground swarmed with busy workers, erecting entanglements, digging trenches and dugouts, emplacing guns, and constructing vehicle shelters. All the camps were well-stocked with ammunition, water, and food; their perimeters bristled with defensive obstacles. Their security depended upon mutual support, communications, and the ability to rapidly reinforce any camp that might be assailed. Hence, General Wavell began planning an offensive early in October against the enemy. To him, it had always been a cardinal principle that territory should never be given up without a fight. Wavell thus wanted to send to the Middle East a convoy bearing a Cruiser Tank Battalion and a Light Tank Battalion, both comprising fifty-two tanks, an Infantry Tank Battalion of fifty tanks, forty-eight anti-tank guns, twenty Bofor light anti-aircraft guns, forty-eight 25-pounder field guns, 500 Brens, 250 anti-tank rifles and an ample supply of ammunition.¹¹¹ To delay Wavell's army advancing further, the Italians mined the road between El Agheila and Sirte and destroyed several bridges across the wadis. These demolitions offered little obstruction to the enemy as they could be quickly passed by. However, Wavell made the BIA stop its advance, probably thinking that Tripoli would soon fall into their hands like a rich plum. He wanted time to assemble stores and organise supplies before going on. This, unfortunately, gave the Axis powers the chance to prepare for a comeback. The BIA advance was also halted because an expeditionary force had to be immediately dispatched to Greece to fight the Germans in the Balkans. The British government

¹¹⁰ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, p. 103.

¹¹¹ Bharucha, *The North African Campaign*, pp. 56–57.

had ordered Wavell to stop the advance in North Africa, leaving a minimal force to hold Cyrenaica and sending the most significant force to the Balkans.¹¹²

Operation Compass Unleashed

On 6 December 1940, the 4th Indian Division moved out of its defensive positions in diamond formations and reached the south-west of Mersa Matruh, where their advance remained undetected. On 7 December 1940, the junior officers learned that the rehearsals were over, and the curtain was about to rise. General O'Connor even received particular messages of encouragement and good wishes from the prime minister. The RAF was pinning down enemy flights. The 5 and 16 Brigades settled down to wait.¹¹³ The 7th Armoured Division arrived to lead the infantry of the 11 Brigade, the four artillery regiments, and the 7 Royal Tank Regiment tanks to their battle positions. The 4/7 Rajputs were detached to demonstrate a feint attack against the eastern perimeter of Nebeiwa. The artillery regiments were dropped to move up and align in their gun positions. With rapidity, the columns were redeployed in battle order. The camp they laid was roughly rectangular and covered an area of 2,400 x 1,800 yards. The defense perimeter was complete, except for a small gap in the northwest corner.¹¹⁴

The absence of loose rocks accounted for the shortage of 'Dragon's Teeth,' a term used to explain a situation where concrete obstacles point upwards from the ground in rows to stop the smooth journey of tanks around the camp. Anti-tank minefields were laid all around. There were no wire obstacles. Machine guns and anti-tank emplacements were built every 25 yards of the perimeter, twice what any other camp possessed. The British armour then moved forward with a battery of 25 Field Regiment under command, to snipe or cast smoke shells as required. As the BIA armour moved forward to do this, the Italian defenses came to life, rushing to man their weapons. Rank on rank of tanks came rolling out of the desert, with Bren carriers riding on their flanks and their machine guns uptilted in a high-angle fire. The heavily armoured British tanks burst upon the Italian light and medium tanks in leagues outside the perimeter while warming up their engines. Within minutes, the British guns smashed them to scrap metal, with billows of black smoke arising. The tanks thrust into the camps like iron rods, probing a wasp's nest. With each yard of advance, there were swarms of enemies erupting from their

¹¹² 4 Ind Div Operation Instruction no. 15, 10 November 1940, Pt. A3, War Diary of the HQ of 4th Indian Division, G Branch, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹¹³ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 79.

¹¹⁴ Prasad, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 102–103.

tents and slit trenches to leap forward bravely into battle, hurling grenades or blazing machine guns in futile desperation, some surrendering helplessly. Their artillerymen fought until return fire from the British tanks stretched them dead or wounded around their limbers.¹¹⁵

Fifteen minutes post this, with the cry of ‘Cameron’s Go!’, the Highlanders carrier platoon shot ahead, with troops carrying lorries wheeling their dust and leaving behind a trail. The infantry tumbled out with a noise of battle that shrilled across the desert. There was an indescribable scene of confusion. Hundreds of demoralised Italians threw up their hands at the first flicker of the bayonets. Within an hour, the resistance was over, with hundreds of dead and wounded lying among the debris and litter and with more than 4,000 prisoners, which included eighty officers. British and Indian casualties were trivial. General Beresford-Pierse called for the next assault at 1100 hours, engulfing Nebeiwa. The Italian air force had arrived by then but had already lost several machines in rash dive-bombing attacks. The rising wind had thickened the air with sand, which blinded the Italians and reacted unfavourably to the attacking forces. All reconnaissance groups had difficulty locating their objectives. It became difficult to differentiate between Tummar West, Tummar East, and Point 90. Meanwhile, ‘I’ tanks arrived laden with stores from Nebeiwa, with chalked notices in Italian, inviting them to surrender. By 1330 hours, all British tanks crashed on Tummar West, and the Italian artillerymen fought with extreme valour, dying around their guns. A great victory was in the air within forty minutes, and on 4/16 Rajputana Rifles headed to Tummar East with the remaining ‘I’ tanks.¹¹⁶

In a conference with Major-General Beresford-Pierse, the Corps Commander, O’Connor concluded that blocking the roads westwards from Sidi Barrani was the key to a decisive victory. The 16 Brigade and 1 and 31 Field Regiments moved up to 5 miles of Sidi Barrani. The 11 Brigade, the 7 Medium Regiment, and the Central India Horse moved into the Divisional Reserve. At 1015 hours, with the British guns in full blast, the 16 Brigade struck into the Sidi Barrani defenses. A formidable body of men emerged from their trenches and moved forward in a mass attack. 2,000 Blackshirts had had enough, but Major-General Beresford-Pierse decided to complete the capture of Sidi Barrani that night.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Srinath Raghavan, *India’s War* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 88–92.

¹¹⁶ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 259–261.

¹¹⁷ Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War: A Complete History* (London: Phoenix Paperback, 2009), pp. 154–155.

At 1615 hours, with the divisional reserve, the 7th Armoured Division, 2 Royal Tank Regiment, two squadrons of 11 Hussars, and a handful of remaining 'I' tanks, the attack at Sidi Barrani from the west began. The Italians, already staggering under the assault, were in no condition to cope with a drive from another direction. Thus, thirty-six hours after the battle had opened, Tummar East fell without resistance. By dawn on 11 December, all enemy forces in the coastal area were pinned against the Mediterranean in an enclosure less than 10 miles long and 5 miles deep. Only at Point 90 did the 2nd Libyan Division maintain cohesion and defiance; elsewhere, Italian formations dissolved into isolated masses of bewildered men shifting aimlessly, ready to lift their hands at the first challenge. With thousands of captives, one of the principal concerns of the day was not to take more prisoners but to think of how to get rid of them. Orders were issued to maintain pressure but avoid battle wherever possible. Major-General Beresford-Pierse shifted his forces for the next stroke. The news of this operation had electrified the world.¹¹⁸

A devastating defeat halted the Axis powers. At a cost of under 700 casualties, the 4th Indian Division had destroyed four Italian Divisions and taken 20,000 prisoners. The Desert Rats fought a battle in three days with the smoothness of a tactical exercise. This operation was little more than an introduction to a new syllabus of military science. But the ease of this victory bred no false confidence. Instead, the Allies dwelt on the need for more and newer equipment and tools with more outstanding training in their uses. This training was required for more elaborate security precautions and the problems of inter-communication and administration on fluid desert battlefields. This attitude of the BIA to improve its performance was destined to characterise the upcoming campaigns.¹¹⁹

Wavell planned his December offensive as a major raid, simple in arrangement and complex at the edges. They would pursue the enemy as far as Sollum. First, the Air Force and then the Navy would start the action. Air Commodore Collishaw, the RAF commander in the desert, would send over continuous raids on the airfields of Libya for the first forty-eight hours, with high-level dive-bombing and ground strafing. The objective was to keep the Italian air force on the ground until the British troops took up position and accomplished at least the first leg of their advance. The navy, meanwhile, would make a dawn shelling of Maktila. Two divisions were to be employed: the 7th Armoured Division under Major-General O'More Creagh and the

¹¹⁸ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 119–120.

¹¹⁹ Callahan, *Churchill and His Generals*, pp. 44–45.

4th Indian Division under Major-General Beresford-Pierse.¹²⁰ These two had gone through the gap between Nibeiwa and Sofafi. Creagh would attack one by one with all-important infantry tanks in the Italian camps at Nibeiwa, Tummar West, Tummar East, and Point 90.¹²¹

Giving importance to the Italian defenses, Major-General Beresford-Pierse noted that their small, light hand grenades were tremendously influential in preventing troops from getting to close quarters on these hills. They had many boldly and skillfully used heavy mortars that outranged BIA's 3-inch mortar. They could get their packed guns and their mules onto the mountain. Possessing animal transport on such terrain was a decisive advantage to the Italians. Bearing loads on their backs and storming mountains was galling to the Indian troops, who had left the best mule transport in the world at home. Their 25-pounders were forced to remain on the motorable ground in the valleys below. The 5th Indian Division had to complete a refresher course of training in mountain warfare, and improvisations had to be devised to provide a better tactical balance to the battlefield. The Divisional Sappers and Miners had a list of tasks that included the construction of water points, boring water holes, cleaning deep wells, surveying, marking, constructing mountain tracks, and building defilade walls under fire to protect the infantry on mountainsides. They were also involved in the reconstruction and operation of sabotaged steam engines, electricity, water, and ice plants; removal of burning and wrecked vehicles from blocked roads under shell fire; repair and operation of captured machinery and equipment; recruitment and control of local labour. The British-Indian sappers also transferred themselves to railway construction and railway operating companies. Within six weeks, lines were open, and regular supplies were being delivered to the area. A signal system was also devised.¹²²

O'Connor was confident of the upcoming offensive, even though he felt outnumbered. Operation Compass was the only campaign of the Second World War where the inter-war regular army fought alone, without the presence of substantial numbers of territorial, conscript, or volunteer troops. Most of the battles later required an army with volunteer recruits as well. The 7th Armoured Division, under Major-General Sir Percy Hobart, was aptly trained with utmost energy for living, moving, communicating, and fighting in the harsh and challenging conditions of the desert. Additionally, O'Connor subjected his troops to an additional intense

¹²⁰ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 435–437.

¹²¹ Prasad, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 105–106.

¹²² Moorehead, *Desert War*, pp. 58–67.

period of training and preparation, and, as professionals, the soldiers yearned for the opportunity to put this training into practice. O'Connor described the WDF as having a 'perfect heart and prepared for the battle.'¹²³

On 12 December 1940, a minor frontal attack had been made upon Nibeiwa. Rising from their hidden positions, British forces began to pour through the gap with new infantry tanks. But the tanks, carrying heavier armour than before in the desert, swept through the barrage. It was all over in half an hour. Thus, began Operation Compass; everything the Italians had built in three months collapsed in bewilderment and chaos. There were broken, burnt-out lorries and Bren gun carriers on the surface of the desert with surrounding cartridge cases and overturned machine guns. Italian trucks carrying supplies and reliefs to their outposts lay smashed by artillery fire beside the tracks or were abandoned. Minefields were still sprayed over large areas of the desert. It seemed that the Italians could not accept the hardship of desert war. They had less heart for it and even less training. The Italian equipment was inferior in all essential matters—guns, tanks, lorries, and ammunition. Their vast numbers did not make up for their qualitative deficiency. The Lancias ran on diesel like most Italian vehicles, but they had solid tyres, which shook the vehicles to pieces after a short time among the boulders in the deserts. Their 10-ton lorries carried huge supplies and were held up whenever they broke down. The BIA vehicles, on the other hand, ran on petrol, with 5-tonners or light machines. If one car broke down, at least 5 tons of supplies were delayed. Also, repacking onto a sound vehicle was easier.¹²⁴

After Nibeiwa, one section of the armoured division branched off on the lonely desert route toward Sofafi. Another struck for the coast between Buq Buq and Sidi Barrani, and the other made straight towards Sidi Barrani, mopping up forts as it went. For miles on either side of the track, the undulating surface of the desert was honey-combed with ammunition dumps. Each dump was about 10 feet x 8 feet high and spaced a hundred yards apart. The BIA flung themselves on the defenses of Sidi Barrani itself. Unwilling to delay their advantage until more artillery caught up with them, tanks and infantry went in together against the first line. This was a series of zigzag trenches on the rise buttressed from other positions among the dunes. Fine sand whirled in monstrous yellow clouds, reducing visibility to 50 yards. Groups of

¹²³ Training Notes by the Commander to the 11th Infantry Brigade on Concealment, Camouflage, and Dispersion, Pt. A, 601/301/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹²⁴ Churchill, *The Second World War*, p. 440.

Italians began bobbing up from their trenches, waving white handkerchiefs, towels, and shirts, shouting '*Ci rendiamo,*' which meant 'We surrender.' When this first stage of the operation ended, some 30,000 prisoners, including five generals, hundreds of guns, lorries, tanks, and aircraft were captured. Equipment worth millions of pounds was won. Allied casualties stood at seventy-two killed and 738 wounded. Wavell used secrecy and surprise to hit hard and quickly and establish strong lines of communication, all sound military practices. He also used his signature ingredient—a touch of daring.¹²⁵

Gradually, the Italians were back at their fortified bases at Bardia and Tobruk, surrounded by double solid perimeters. The desert bases—Jarabub, Mekili, and Kufra—were remote. The British were on long lines of communication with problems regarding water and petrol supply. But all of Graziani's plans miscarried, and Wavell put his brilliant tactics into play. He put forward the theory that no matter how weak one's forces were, every enemy stronghold had to be surrounded and cut away from its supplies until they were weakened and unable to make a frontal attack. Wavell regrouped his forces with a rare psychological insight. He used only two divisions throughout the campaign in the operational area. One already-fought division was replaced by an untried division that thirsted for action. These men, known as shock troops, were to have their chance while their health was at its peak, their morale at the highest, and their aggressive qualities most eager. The divisions now moved to Bardia, a much stronger position than Sidi Barrani.¹²⁶

With the morale of the Italian soldiers at its lowest, on 2 January 1941, the RAF and the navy raked the town and its surroundings with the heaviest bombardment the Middle East had ever seen. The Australian Division attacked with the sappers running forward under machine-gun fire to bridge the anti-tank trench by blowing up its sides. The infantry tanks and the infantry were soon across, pressing nearer to the heart of the enemy defenses. The battle started along a 10-mile front around the Italian chain of forts. The effect of the British assault was as though one had tightly gripped an orange and, simultaneously, was piercing it with a fork. On 4 January 1941, after continuous shelling, Capuzzo saw Italian soldiers yet again, ready to surrender. Rifles and machine guns were lying unmanned along parapets; their dead and wounded were mingled together in ditches. The final assault started after 1500 hours, with British heavy tanks

¹²⁵ O'Connor Papers, Letter to General O'Connor from Lt. General H.M. Wilson, Headquarters Western Desert Force, 20 June 1940, LHCMA, Kings College, London.

¹²⁶ Keegan, *The Second World War*, pp. 265–257.

moving through a belt of machine-gun and even anti-tank gunfire right up to the gates of Bardia. In an hour, Italians came out of their caves to surrender. Prisoners swarmed in every direction, but the majority were captured unhurt. The Italian machine-gunners had continued firing only so long as the Australians were out of range. When the Australians began retaliating, they surrendered with white towels and handkerchiefs. After the battle was won over Bardia, a deathly quietness reigned in the area. More than anything, this was a war of nerves for the defenders of Bardia, and now the Italian nerve had been destroyed.¹²⁷

As Bardia fell and Tobruk was being surrounded, the 7th Armoured Division arrived at El Adem, one of the Italians' three main aircraft bases, just south of Tobruk. The machinery they captured here was the first real booty for the RAF and was destined to become valuable air ammunition for the British forces. The topographical problem of Tobruk differed in detail from that of Bardia. The town had a long straight harbour that was a valuable port between Alexandria and Benghazi. White cliffs formed the seaward flank of the harbour where Italian naval forces were established, and several naval guns were brought ashore. They also brought down Italian artillery, one department of Italian arms that survived the campaign with honour. At Sidi Barrani, Sollum, Bardia, Tobruk, and Derna, the enemy artillery had stuck to the end, often long after the infantry had fled.¹²⁸ The Italians used old guns which had shells that were duds. Their precision instruments were far from precise. But, when they fired upon fixed targets, they showed skill and endurance beyond the level of the rest of the Italian Army. After Tobruk, the Italian air force dwindled and disappeared altogether from the sky. When Tobruk fell, the Italian air force was utterly defeated and never regained its air superiority. Sir Arthur Murray Longmore, the Commander-in-Chief of the RAF in the Western Desert, succeeded brilliantly in his policy of defeating *Regia Aeronautica*. He concentrated on damaging enemy aircraft on the ground with low-level machine-gun attacks. This put the enemy machines out of action long enough to enable the troops to come up and seize the airfields. Italy only received vacuous promises and encouragement from Mussolini. The Duce had no warships available to risk an encounter with Cunningham in the Mediterranean. The Italians, too, now firmly believed that they were outnumbered.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 83.

¹²⁸ B.H. Liddell-Hart, *A History of the Second World War* (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd., 2014), pp. 119–120.

¹²⁹ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, pp. 176–178.

On 20 January 1941, a sandstorm blew up the telegraph poles, trucks were overturned, and troops were huddled to the ground, wrapping their blankets over their heads. At dawn, the Australians attacked, broke the perimeter, and applied the general squeeze. The attack continued under massive artillery fire all through the night. Tobruk fell by noon on the following day. Valuable water sources, petrol, foodstuffs, and ammunition were discovered on the dockside. The British destroyers carried all the stores to the army, which were much more than the ones received at Bardia, and the British occupation of Tobruk emerged as one of the vital phases of the war. After the capture of Tobruk, the character of the campaign changed; it was fluid once again. The next objective was Derna, 100 miles to the west by road. It fell on 30 January 1941, Cirene on 3 February 1941, Barce on 7 February 1941, and Benghazi on 9 February 1941. It was a war between engineers and artillery. The fall of Derna was the most galling moment of the whole campaign. Barce erupted with a series of heavy explosions. Communication had always been Italy's weakness, and it broke down altogether. Often, the entire brigade staff fell into British hands before they expected. Transport was the only thing that held the British back. The roads were good, but there were many detours to avoid mined bridges, and trucks were overloaded. Most of the lorries were in poor condition, and breakdowns constantly delayed the advance of the whole army. In the end, the brigade, 30 miles in length, struggled through the mud with a collection of every type of vehicle in North Africa. Others were being towed into groups of twos and threes, with good parts of several cars joined together in conglomerations.¹³⁰

The BIA troops moved kilometer by kilometer and yard by yard. This 40-mile-long column of vehicles crashed over tank traps and plunged headlong into valleys and across, ruining the railway line's gaps. The Italians could not hold them for more than an hour or two. On failing, they offered the complete submission of the capital, the naval base, and all military establishments. This contained the Italian, Arab, and Greek populations of all surrounding countries and anything the British considered theirs. The following day, the BIA left for their next destination, Benghazi. A manoeuvre by the BIA armoured forces was destined to alter the entire character of desert fighting and put an effective end to the operation. Wavell and O'Connor had foreseen that the mere occupation of Benghazi would not mean the destruction of the remaining strong forces Graziani had under his command. They would escape to Tripoli, so they had to be cut off. This would require a march of 200 miles across an open desert that

¹³⁰ Roy, *India and World War II*, pp. 194–195.

was primarily unmapped. The camel tracks led nowhere; the surface of the desert was extremely rough; the vehicles were strained. Therefore, it was necessary to steer by compass, carry all supplies without hopes of replenishment, and leave the rest to luck.¹³¹

A squadron of British tanks unexpectedly came upon a large force of Italian tanks and mechanised infantry and a battle occurred. Some twenty Italian tanks were destroyed in the running engagement that followed, but the main body of the Italian army slipped away before it could be encircled. On 4 February 1941, two columns were ordered to move out on the long march from Mekili—one to Benghazi, the other to Beda Fomm. This was the worst march men had known, even after a year in the desert bump. It was over a 2-foot boulder, down into a ditch, and up over an anthill into another boulder. Doing more than 6 or 7 miles an hour was impossible in places. Yet, they did it in thirty hours. On 6 February 1941, the road from Benghazi was packed with enemy vehicles. It was the last of Graziani's forces, escaping with all his senior generals, 130 tanks, 300 guns of all calibres, more than 20,000 men, and many hundreds of lorries and trucks. The British were outnumbered five to one in tanks, five to one in men, and three to one in guns. They were against a fresh and desperate enemy. Despite this, the British opened the battle at midday. The tanks swept forward, and all three columns were engaged. Artillery deployed and opened fire. The Italians fought fiercely out of desperation for the last time, in a way they had never done since the war began.¹³²

The British commanders, meeting shellfire, hastily made their plans while daylight remained. They had to cut the enemy's retreat in the south and smash him to the centre. Thirteen British cruisers chased the main body of Italian tanks and destroyed forty-six. Mines were laid for the rest of the enemy formations. By nightfall, burnt-out tanks, trucks, and guns were lying everywhere with smoking steel carcasses on the sand. In the darkness, the British regrouped for the final crushing blow where the Italians counterattacked. Their infantry was confused, undirected, inactive, and embussed. Their artillery spoke out violently, but Bofors and 25-pounders raked the ground from one end to another. Everywhere, the Italian attack was fought to a standstill and broken up. British machine-gunners and light units went to support the tanks. They picked off targets one after another until white handkerchiefs began appearing as the Italians in thousands came out of hiding.¹³³

¹³¹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 49.

¹³² Moorehead, *Desert War*, pp. 123–124.

¹³³ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 95–96.

On 8 February 1941, the leading units of the British-Indian Army occupied El Agheila and stood on the frontier between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. Graziani's Italian Army virtually ceased to exist. They realised their arms were of no avail against the British and the latter had cast fear into their army. They had lost 1,20,000 men in prisoners alone, not counting the dead and wounded. The gravest loss of the Italians was their morale. They developed a severe inferiority complex that remained with them throughout the war. Everywhere, there were signs of hasty evacuation: books and documents were left lying about, while clothing, ammunition, and arms were all left behind.¹³⁴ By the next morning day, it was all over. The British were sweeping in to occupy Agedaiba and Agheila. They also captured Beda Fomm and Cyrenaica. There were seven generals and their staff, 20,000 prisoners, 216 guns, 101 tanks, and vehicles in the hundreds. The British casualties in the entire operation were not more than 3,000 dead, wounded, and missing. It was a complete victory, and Graziani's army was destroyed forever. Two-thirds of his equipment in ships, aircraft, and land weapons were killed or captured. An area as large as England and France was lost to Italy. The Suez Canal was removed from the war zone. The morale of every Italian soldier was broken. Wavell and his men had risen to a place of immense prestige at home. All this was achieved with Operation Compass, which spanned two months. Operation Compass had vastly exceeded the highest hopes of the BIA.¹³⁵

Conclusion

The BIA won their first significant success in the war. Made up of 36,000 troops, they overcame an army of 2,00,000 Italians. Around 1,30,000 prisoners, 180 medium and more than 200 light tanks, and 845 guns were captured. So great was the victory that the British prisoners of war cages were inadequate for the influx of Italian soldiers. This victory over the Italian Tenth Army culminated in British inter-war doctrinal development. Even if not the best equipped, a regular force of seasoned troops were perhaps Britain's finest trained, as they decisively defeated a much larger opponent by implementing field regulations.¹³⁶ Operation Compass was the evidence of a 'decentralised, initiative-led command in practice'. The brigade commanders of the 4th Indian Division were involved in operational planning from the earliest stages and were well-versed in their superiors' intentions. Whenever coordination was required at the corps or army level, O'Connor provided by observing events, wielding absolute control over the

¹³⁴ Gilbert, *The Second World War*, p. 160.

¹³⁵ Pitt, *The Crucible of War*, p. 234.

¹³⁶ Raghavan, *India's War*, pp. 95–96.

offensive, and ensuring energy fulfillment of the manoeuvre. Thus, the war in the desert needed proper implementation of plans by well-trained, well-equipped, and highly motivated troops. Moreover, this success illustrated the Italians' folly and the British Empire's latent strength. Operation Compass was a triumphant success. The Desert Rats, armed with a mass of intelligence material gathered from all grades of operational traffic, gained absolute mastery of the Mediterranean. This made it imperative for the Italians to seek help from Germany.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Liddell-Hart, *A History of the Second World War*, p. 140.

CHAPTER 3

The Indian Army Begins Fighting Rommel: 1941–1942

A commander must accustom his staff to a high tempo from the outset and keep them up to it. If he allows himself to be satisfied with norms or anything less than an all-out effort, he gives up the race from the starting post and will sooner or later be taught a bitter lesson by his faster-moving enemy and be forced to jettison all his fixed ideas.

—Erwin Rommel,

*The Rommel Papers*¹³⁸

Introduction

The British-Indian Army's (BIA) victory in Operation Compass had a devastating psychological effect on Italy. The situation of the Italian forces in North Africa was now critical, and it became imperative for them to seek help from the Germans. Adolf Hitler, Germany's Führer, was also worried about the Italians being thrown out of North Africa, which would disturb the balance of the Axis powers in the world and make the British military assets accessible for deployment elsewhere, more precisely in the Soviet Union. Germany entered the war in Africa to keep Italy in the war, protect her southern European flank, and secure the Romanian oilfields. Hitler was worried that if Italy lost Tripoli (the last outpost of her African Empire), her heart would be out of the war, and Mussolini and fascism would fall. Hitler sent a *Sperrverband* or a 'blocking formation' so that the war in Africa would remain Italy's. Still, Germany would supply enough troops and equipment to block the Commonwealth's advance in Africa. Italy recognised it was time for the 'parallel war' to end for them.¹³⁹

According to Hitler's calculations, the campaign in the Soviet Union would be swiftly concluded, and the *Wehrmacht* would then sweep down on the Middle East from the Caucasus, forcing the British to throw in the towel.¹⁴⁰ On 19 January 1941, a humiliated Mussolini arrived at Hitler's mountaintop residence at Berchtesgaden, determined to abandon 'parallel warfare', and requested Germany's support. It was decided that Italy would, from then on, follow German guidelines for future operations. Meanwhile, the British advance in North Africa

¹³⁸ B.H. Liddell-Hart, ed, *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), p. 92.

¹³⁹ Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign: September 1940–November 1942* (USA: Da Capo Press, 1999), pp. 43–44.

¹⁴⁰ Alan Moorehead, *Desert War: The North African Campaign, 1940–1943* (USA: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 50–51.

continued when British General Richard O'Connor seized Tobruk, a top priority.¹⁴¹ The German General Enno von Rintelen felt the Italian Tenth Army was not strong enough to fight the BIA and that at least one Panzer division was needed to avert a catastrophe. Italian leadership lacked nerve and morals. The Italians in the hills of Derna were in danger of being cut off, resulting in Cyrenaica's loss. They had only four divisions in Tripolitania. They were trying to build a defensive line around Tripoli but did not possess adequate artillery. They could not defend Tripolitania further west because of the danger of bombardment from the sea and the likelihood of the flank being turned to the south by motorised units.¹⁴²

Hitler ordered the *Luftwaffe* to examine what it could do to knock out British armoured units in North Africa and their convoys in the Mediterranean. On 3 February 1941, he ordered a meeting of the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW), High Command of the Army (OKH), and the High Command of the *Luftwaffe* (OKL), where he announced that a Panzer division was to be allotted to 'Marita'. The 10 Air Corps was to ensure the safety of the convoys in close cooperation with the Italian Air Force. The *Luftwaffe* was to stop the Royal Air Force (RAF) attacks on Malta and counterattack the British forces south of Djebel-el-Akhdar and British coastal shipping. Hitler also ordered that the German troops in North Africa would not be only under the tactical control of a local Italian commander but also under the command of a German officer. The German contingent was to act as one group and would not be allowed to be spread out in various positions along the front.¹⁴³

Before Crusader

On 6 February 1941, Benghazi was in British hands. Hitler was already worried about the fascist regime toppling with Tripoli's fall. So, the very same day, Lieutenant-General Erwin Rommel was given command over the German forces in North Africa. Personally chosen by Hitler to be sent to Africa, Rommel was Hitler's protégé. Never commanding from the rear, he was upfront and in the thick of the fighting, often under artillery fire, directing operations quickly and decisively. He had the uncanny ability not to be shot or captured, an ability that

¹⁴¹ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Letter from Ritchie to Messervy, 28 November 1941, Part II-A, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part II-A, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹⁴² Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2009), pp. 40–46.

¹⁴³ Charles Messenger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 67.

surfaced time and again during the campaign. Thus, North Africa was the theatre where Rommel would prove himself to be a world-class combat commander.¹⁴⁴

Hitler described him to Mussolini as ‘the most exceptional tank general in the German army’. Rommel was commanded by a force that included the 5th Light Division, consisting of a Panzer regiment and an artillery unit. Lieutenant-Colonel Klaus Kreuzwendedich von dem Borne was appointed his Chief-of-Staff.¹⁴⁵ Rommel was thus ‘Commander of the German Troops in Libya’, directly subordinate to Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, the Italian Chief of Staff, and through him directly to Mussolini. Otherwise, he was under the Commander-in-Chief of the *Wehrmacht* in personnel, discipline, and logistics, thus only answerable to Hitler. Rommel would make frequent use of this to its advantage. Despite these arrangements, there was frequent friction between the Axis partners. Rommel treated the Italians with disguised contempt. He believed that non-motorised infantry was the worst feature of the Italian Army. In the North African desert, non-motorised troops were of no value against a motorised enemy since the enemy had the advantage in almost every position, turning around the southern flanks of the immobile units. In mobile warfare, the advantage lies with the side subject to the least tactical restraint. The decisive disadvantage of the Italian Army vis-à-vis the British was that the more significant part of it was non-motorised.¹⁴⁶

Hitler appreciated Rommel’s guile and dash; in fact, the latter did not hesitate to use his close relationship with Hitler to make himself a virtually independent commander. However, as later studied by several historians, Rommel's generalship was not perfect. His greatest possible weakness was never following orders from higher commanders. His actions became a drain on Germany over the following two years, surprisingly making him a national war hero in Germany. He did not understand the full use of combined land, sea, and air elements in combat. It was not in his tendency to concentrate on his forces. Several times during campaigns, he spread his units over great distances, and this inability to focus on his strength led him away from victory. Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring, commander of the Mediterranean Theatre for the Germans, felt that Rommel was too short-tempered and never learned to work well with his Italian allies. Summing up, he was a brilliant tactician and an inspiration to the

¹⁴⁴ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, pp. 45–46.

¹⁴⁵ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 48–49.

¹⁴⁶ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 93.

troops but lacked strategic vision. Further, he never received the support he wanted or needed in this vital theatre of war.¹⁴⁷

The OKW had become pessimistic with the fall of Benghazi. Meanwhile, Italy could do nothing to stop Wavell from marching with his army into Tripolitania, and the German troops could not be in full force in North Africa until April 1941. O'Connor's men had advanced 1,000 kilometres, capturing 130,000 prisoners, 400 tanks and 845 guns. However, on 12 February, a message from Churchill ordered the formation of a strategic reserve for the ongoing campaign in Greece. The 13th Corps was withdrawn from Cyrenaica, the 7th Armoured Division was sent back to Egypt for replenishment, the battle-hardened 6th Indian Division was designated for service in Greece, and some Australian units were left at Gazala and Tobruk. Thus, the British positions in Cyrenaica were stripped bare, leaving the Egyptian border dangerously exposed.¹⁴⁸ Rommel knew that the British were far from being done with him. Unless he could take Tobruk and defeat the BIA along the Egyptian frontier, the *Afrikakorps* and the Italians would remain vulnerable. The most pressing question was whether Rommel would have the strength to accomplish all this.¹⁴⁹

Rommel now decided to use his varied war tools at hand. The primary weapon was the 9,300-man 5th Light Panzer Division under General Johannes Streich with twenty-seven armoured cars, some motorcycle troops in a reconnaissance battalion, two Panzer Jaeger (tank hunting) battalions armed with 37 mm and 50 mm AT guns, a field artillery battalion, an anti-aircraft battalion with the deadly dual-purpose 88 mm gun, and two machine gun battalions, all of which were motorised. The 3rd Company of the Intelligence Unit 56 was to arrive on 24 April 1941 and play a key role in supplying Rommel with important tactical information on the British plans and strengths. It was his most reliable intelligence source until its capture by the British tanks in 1942. In terms of tanks, he called for two battalions of seventy light and eighty medium tanks. The light tanks included Panzer I and Panzer II. The Panzer III and Panzer IV were medium, but they became the main tank battles for Rommel throughout the campaign. The Panzer IIIs received an extra 30 mm face-hardened plates to protect the vulnerable points on their hulls and part of their turrets. They were armed with a short 50 mm anti-tank (AT) gun

¹⁴⁷ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, pp. 48–49.

¹⁴⁸ Major P.C. Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–1945: The North African Campaign* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), p. 211.

¹⁴⁹ Daniel Allen Butler, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel* (USA and Great Britain: Casemate Publishers, 2015), p. 281.

that could penetrate 60 mm armour at 400 yards. The Panzer IV was armed with a short 75 mm gun. When used against enemy infantry and AT guns, they could damage a tank at 3,000 yards and penetrate about 45 mm of armour at 600 yards. By the time of Operation Battleaxe, Rommel had thirteen 88 mm AT guns out of 155 German AT guns total. The German AT shell had an armour-piercing shell, which was later capped for improved penetration. The 50 mm with *Panzergranate 40*, a tungsten-core shot, could penetrate a British Matilda at 500 yards, while an 88 mm could do the same at 2,000 yards.¹⁵⁰

The Germans had created a composite tank unit of weapons and crew that acted together, led from the front by their divisional commander, following the concepts pioneered by the legendary Heinz Guderian and emulated by Rommel. All of this illustrated the use of combined arms and mutual support. *Blitzkrieg* tactics derived from the First World War's infiltration tactics of moving forward, bypassing solid points, and creating complete disruption in the enemy's rear. The Germans also formed the *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* (African Air Command), which brought the Stuka and the Me-110 to Africa and the Me-109, which gave the Axis an edge in the air.¹⁵¹ As planning began, Rommel suggested bombing Benghazi and the British concentrations to the southwest of the town. Within hours, German bombers were disrupting the British supply lines considerably. The British offensive in North Africa halted because of the movement of troops to Greece. German troops began to arrive in Tripoli while the X Air Corps stepped up its bombing campaign. The *Regia Aeronautica* deployed the 5th Squadron in North Africa. Compared to the German and British aircraft, the Italian aircraft were undergunned but manoeuvrable and fast.¹⁵² Rommel applied his tactic of bluffing, where he calculated that if the Axis powers were shown to be preparing to fight, the British would pause to regroup and bring up supplies, giving him time to build up a viable force. Rommel ordered Volkswagens to be camouflaged as dummy tanks to make it look more appealing. Flying on a Heinkel III fitted as an observer aircraft, Rommel decided to keep his armour in reserve.¹⁵³

Rommel ordered the advance to continue in four columns. One column that pushed along the coast road comprised the reconnaissance battalion of the 5th Light Panzer and a battalion from each of

¹⁵⁰ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, pp. 48–49.

¹⁵¹ Taker Papers, Letter from Field Marshal Earl Wavell to Francis Taker, 11 October 1949, 71/21/1/7, IWM, London.

¹⁵² Kaushik Roy, *Fighting Rommel: The British Imperial Army in North Africa during the Second World War, 1941–1943* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 13.

¹⁵³ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 50–55.

the Bologna and Brescia infantry divisions, with some artillery from Brescia. Meanwhile, elements of the 5th Light Panzer and the Ariete divisions pushed across the bulge towards El Mechili and ultimately to Tobruk. Two columns were bound for El Mechili, while a new fourth column, spinning off from the advance on Mechili, was expected to achieve new success.¹⁵⁴ Rommel flew from unit to unit in the desert, forcing the pace to get his men to El Mechili and victory. In the desert, there were small mixed Axis units everywhere. At this point, Rommel was presented with one of his three captured command vehicles—his ‘*Mammut*’ or mammoth, which was described by a German war reporter as ‘an armoured box as big as a bus, on a giant balloon tyre as big and fat as the undercarriage wheels of a Junker plane. The walls are windowless and painted in blue-grey camouflage tints. Only the driver and her co-driver have windshields protected behind armoured visors.’ This vehicle would soon become a common sight on the front.¹⁵⁵

The *Luftwaffe* was the only available weapon Rommel had that could hold Wavell’s army. The only port he could use was Tripoli, but carrying more than two ships at a time was impossible. Land in the 5th Light Panzer Division was estimated to take at least forty-two days. On 21 February 1941, Rommel’s force was officially named the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* (*DAK*). The Germans were new to desert warfare, but they had ample experience with all-arms Panzer divisions that proved ideally suited for an unfamiliar environment.¹⁵⁶ The *Afrikakorps* did not waste time acclimatising to the desert to combat the BIA. After Operation Compass, the 7th Armoured Division was withdrawn to rest, re-equipped and recuperated. In its place came the untried 2nd Armoured Division, newly arrived from Britain, and the equipped 9th Australian Division.¹⁵⁷

In more ways than one, the makeup of the desert army in North Africa fundamentally changed. It became a mixture of regular, territorial, volunteer, and conscript soldiers. The British position in the Middle East, which had appeared so strong in January and February, was fast unravelling, and Wavell spent the summer of 1941 doing all he could do to ‘put out fires’ in all parts of his vast command. The problem of the *Afrikakorps* only intensified on Wavell’s western flank.

¹⁵⁴ Ralf Georg Reuth, *Rommel: The End of a Legend* (London: Haus Publishing Limited, University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 95.

¹⁵⁵ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 91.

¹⁵⁶ Heinz Werner Schmidt Aide-de-Camp, *With Rommel in the Desert* (USA: The Noonday Press, 1991), p. 101.

¹⁵⁷ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, General Order of the Day, 24 December 1941, Part AII, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part IIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1941, British and Australian troops besieged Tobruk and repeatedly repelled Axis advances on the fortress. The doughty defence of Tobruk caused Rommel immense difficulties as his forces could not advance into Egypt with a British fortress to his rear and without the port capacity that Tobruk would provide. Rommel pushed his men to the limit to take the town, but they failed repeatedly in the face of determined British, Australian, and Indian resistance.¹⁵⁸

A Panzer division comprised a Panzer regiment of two battalions, an infantry regiment of three battalions, an artillery regiment, and a reconnaissance unit. They were all provided with first-class radio communications, which, combined with a carefully cultivated *esprit de corps*, ensured close cooperation between the different arms and the other units. This enabled the highest possible degree of command and control, which, along with a concentration of effort, made the German armoured divisions outstandingly effective. The Axis now made a compelling defence of Tripolitania, but the port was of limited capacity and under frequent attack from the RAF. The British dominated the Mediterranean, but a survey revealed that the British position in Cyrenaica was weak and consisted of an Australian infantry division, a raw British armoured division and four squadrons of the RAF. Based on the 'Enigma' decryptions of Luftwaffe traffic, the British assumed the Germans were in no position to attack. O'Connor was now suffering from a stomach ulcer and had to be replaced by Lt. General Philip Neame, a courageous soldier but someone who lacked experience in desert warfare and was certainly not capable enough of facing Rommel. Rommel intended to attack El Agheila, capture Cyrenaica, and move into northern Egypt and the Suez Canal. By 17 March 1941, 15 Panzer Division attacked with 120 Panzers, sixty of which were medium Panzer IIIs and IVs. The Panzer IV was a severe weapon feared by the British because of its short-barrelled 'cigar butt' 75 mm gun.¹⁵⁹

It was far more effective in using high explosives against infantry in a close support role. However, the success of the *Afrikakorps* was primarily due to the superiority of their anti-tank weapons, the 88 mm anti-aircraft gun 'Flak', which was effective against all tanks and far superior to the British 2-pounder. The '88 mm' could fire a 10-kilogram shell at the speed of 1,200 metres per second that could penetrate 150 mm of armour at a range of 2 kilometres. No

¹⁵⁸ Moorehead, *Desert War*, pp. 119–121.

¹⁵⁹ Panzer Army Afrika, German-Italian Forces in Africa, Extracts from the Panzer War Diary Africa, February 1942, GMDS File 22924/1, Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.

British tank in North Africa had such armour. Only the massive ‘King Tiger’ with its 185 mm of armour was a match for such a powerful weapon. The British 2-pounder shell weighed 0.91 kilograms and could only penetrate 56 mm of armour at 500 metres. The British never took up the idea of using their 3.7 pounders in anti-aircraft guns against tanks. If used, they could have been the most effective. The close cooperation between armour, infantry, and artillery, as well as their exceptional tactical and operational skills, gave the *Afrikakorps* an advantage over the British, who used the anti-tank gun in a purely defensive role. The BIA failed to use their field artillery to knock out the *Afrikakorps*. They lacked the Germans’ flexibility and ability to concentrate forces at a decisive point to overcome their overall numerical weakness.¹⁶⁰

Supply lines for the *Afrikakorps* from Tripoli were extremely long, and even the Italians could not provide adequate food. Most of their supplies were inappropriate for a desert climate, and the fuel they were given was unusable for *Luftwaffe* aircraft. The German air filters could not deal with desert sand, reducing the life span of the motor engines. The *Afrikakorps* were also undernourished and plagued with diseases.¹⁶¹

Rommel was a tactician who had learnt his trade in the thick of the battle and thought drawing up detailed plans was pointless. For him, everything depended on swift reactions to unforeseeable contingencies. He believed he drew the best plans only at the need of the hour. In an operation named ‘Tactical Reconnaissance’, the 5th Light Panzer Division took El Agheila on 24 March 1941. On hearing that the British were moving troops up to Agedabia, Rommel decided to act. With his partially equipped strength, the *Afrikakorps* took Mersa el Brega on 31 March 1941. It was a tough fight, but it showed the weakness of the British flank. Nevertheless, the German advance was painfully slow along the old caravan route known as the Trigh el Abd, which went north-west diagonally across the desert to Bir Hacheim, south of Tobruk and onto the Egyptian border. Advancing along this track was suicidal. Conditions were worsened by a powerful sandstorm known as *khamsin*. Hitler, however, asked Rommel to continue his advance to Benghazi. Rommel, who regarded himself as an independent commander, ordered his men to press forward. No German general enjoyed such independence during the war.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Kitchen, *Rommel’s Desert War*, pp. 56–63.

¹⁶¹ Terry Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel: Masters of War, A Story of the Three Greatest Generals of the Greatest War* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), p. 98.

¹⁶² Martin Blumenson, ‘Rommel’, in *Hitler’s General*, ed. Cornelli Barnett (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 305.

Benghazi was in German hands by 4 April 1941. Afterwards, they continued their advance to Derna, a charming town with ample water supply known as ‘the pearl of Cyrenaica’, and Mechili. The British forces in Cyrenaica were drastically reduced to meet the commitment to Greece; it now consisted of two armoured divisions equipped with obsolete and lightly armed tanks. It was provided with the 2nd Armoured Division, a seriously weakened unit. The 9th Australian Division had to be left behind in Tobruk because of a lack of transport. All of this resulted in not having enough men to defend the Mersa el Brega Line. At the end of March, they had the 3rd Indian motorised brigade sent to Cyrenaica.¹⁶³ Even then, they had inferior weapons, inadequate communication networks and poor aerial reconnaissance. They failed to exploit the possibilities offered by the desert for a war of movement. Rommel’s campaign was fraught with even more severe problems, particularly fuel shortage and lengthy delays for refuelling and repairs. Units got lost during long night-time marches through the desert. Then, there was the greater-than-usual confusion of coalition warfare, which called for the participation of multinational forces. Still, Churchill’s decision to send substantial support to Greece drastically reduced the number of divisions in the Middle East, thereby turning the situation in North Africa in Germany’s favour.¹⁶⁴

The *Afrikakorps* were greatly strengthened and encouraged with the arrival of the first units of its 15th Panzer Division at the front. They were full of confidence. While the British were heavily engaged in East Africa, in North Africa, the defence of Tobruk was entrusted to the unruly but trusted Australians. Night combat, an expertise of the Australians, was among the few combat norms the Germans were unskilled at. The German battle in North Africa was primarily influenced by Colonel General Heinz Guderian’s concept of armoured warfare. The Panzer division moved forward in a series of boxes different from the brigade box-oriented static defence practised by the 8th Army.¹⁶⁵

Rommel, too, acknowledged that the BIA’s training was far superior to that of the Germans. They were unquestionably superior to the Germans in the use of individual weapons, especially snipers. They were better at using camouflage, observation, and taking the Germans by surprise. Men with nerves of steel, tireless, taking punishment with obstinacy, and remarkable in defence, the Australians were extraordinarily tough fighters, as Lieutenant Schorm of the

¹⁶³ Lieutenant-Colonel G.R. Stevens Obe, *Fourth Indian Division* (East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, ND), p. 97.

¹⁶⁴ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Order of the Day, 7 February 1942, Part IIA, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part IIA.

¹⁶⁵ Roy, *Fighting Rommel*, p. 15.

*DAK mentioned.*¹⁶⁶ The BIA now had a good reason to be optimistic about the upcoming operations. The stand at Tobruk in April 1941 was crucial in saving the Middle East for the Allies. For the Axis, too, Tobruk was essential for future supply. The dash across the desert had lifted Axis spirits, and Rommel had become a star. If Tobruk fell, he would push onto Mersa Matruh. The BIA had four brigades: the 18th of the 7th Australian division and the 20th, 24th and 26th of the 9th Australian division. Also present was the 18th Indian Cavalry, formerly of the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade.¹⁶⁷ There were two British 25-pounder artillery regiments, one with twelve 18-pounders and twelve 4.5-inch howitzers, two AT regiments, rounded with an AA (anti-aircraft) brigade around the harbour consisting of sixteen heavy and fifty-nine light AA guns. Many captured Italian field guns were formed into 'bush' artillery and deployed along the front. A 3rd Armoured Brigade consisted of a regiment of armoured cars, twenty-six cruiser tanks, fifteen light tanks and four Matilda tanks.¹⁶⁸

Tobruk was, however, far from an ideal defensive position. The land route to the east was lengthy and wide open to attack. The perimeter defences were far too expensive to be adequately manned by limited forces. The 2nd Armoured Division was severely mauled, and there were no longer enough tanks to take on Rommel out in the desert. The fortress was also short of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns. Lieutenant General Sir Leslie James Morshead, appointed in defence of Tobruk, had decided to place three brigades in the perimeter defences, keeping his fourth brigade with new tanks in reserve. Reinforcements were brought in by sea, unhampered by the *Luftwaffe*, including an armoured battalion, an artillery regiment and assorted anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns. A mobile force under Brigadier William Gott, comprising units from the 11th Hussars, the 3rd Indian Motorised Brigade and the 2nd Armoured Division, along with an artillery regiment and an anti-tank unit, was ordered to move to a position south of Tobruk to guard the flank.¹⁶⁹

Rommel was unaware of all these movements and imagined that the British were about to abandon Tobruk. They were uncomfortably surprised when they came under heavy fire from the Australians. Transport and fuel were not available for the Axis immediately to meet an extra attack. There was also insufficient air support in the area for primary offensive operations.

¹⁶⁶ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, pp. 61–63.

¹⁶⁷ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 224.

¹⁶⁸ War Diary of 4th Indian Division. Divisional Operation No. 22, 16 January 1941, Part A4, Vol. 601,221, WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹⁶⁹ Tucker Papers, Notes on Arrival of Divisions, 17 August 1941, Ref No. 71.21.2.6, IWM, London.

Moreover, the closer Rommel got to Egypt, the more determined the British resistance would be.¹⁷⁰ Rommel pressed on regardless, imagining he could easily take a town held by 24,000 men. The *Afrikakorps* were well-equipped and provisioned and had adequate artillery support, but they did not have accurate information about the layout of the defences. Meanwhile, the Australians blew up the bridge to the west of Tobruk and forced the Germans back with heavy machine-gun fire from emplacements built in the steep slopes of the Wadi.¹⁷¹

The first significant attack launched on Good Friday, 11 April 1941, came as a rude awakening. The Germans were beaten back at the first line of defence, suffering considerable losses. The operation resulted in a disaster, with the Axis supply line now stretched to 1,600 kilometres, forcing them to live hand-to-mouth. A record number of supplies had been shipped to Benghazi and Tripoli, but bringing them up to the front would now take a round trip of 3,200 kilometres in appalling road conditions. With constant attacks from the air and armoured cars, this demanded that most of the movement be done by night. On the other hand, Rommel was yet to realise and accept the minimality of his sources. Nevertheless, he insisted that the British were too weak to stop him from marching forward. He even threatened court-martial for the cowardice of any officer who urged caution. His failure to adequately survey the outlying defences was the primary reason behind this. He greatly underestimated the strength and determination of the British garrison. This was Rommel displaying his worst judgement.¹⁷²

Despite heavy artillery fire from the fortress, Rommel had ordered his battle group to move around the perimeter defences and take up position across the coastal road to the east of Tobruk. The British mobile force, too, was on the high ground at El Adem, and with this, the siege of Tobruk began. The British started advancing to the Egyptian border, along the old caravan route to Fort Capuzzo, and partly along the coastal road to Bardia. The attack began at 1600 hours, and within 2 kilometres, the Germans came under heavy artillery fire. The Panzers pushed on regardless, but a 2-metre-deep anti-tank ditch stopped them. While moving further, they landed in a dense minefield laid during the night. To avoid this, they retired south and faced eleven Cruisers. They continued to withdraw and came under the Australian machine gunners. They

¹⁷⁰ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 115.

¹⁷¹ Messenger, *Rommel*, pp. 73–74.

¹⁷² Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 80–85.

took what cover they could in the stony ground, suffering forty-four dead and wounded in the open desert.¹⁷³

The following day saw a heavy *khamzin*, and the attack had to be called off. The *Afrikakorps* began feeling the strain, and the men were exhausted after ten days of intense activity. The heat was oppressive, food and water supplies were inadequate, the vehicles needed repair, and reinforcements came in haltingly. Nevertheless, the fight continued till 2300 hours, and there was ferocious hand-to-hand fighting throughout the night. The Germans suffered heavy losses, and their supply units were unable to find the bridgehead in the dark or were forced back by intense artillery fire.¹⁷⁴

The 5th Panzer Regiment faced difficulty in command and control. Rommel's headquarters were too far in the rear, which left him out of touch with events in the front. The machine gunners and Panzers operated separately, with both commanders unaware of the other's intentions. They faced an artillery regiment initially; the machine gunners took cover in unfinished bunkers, using 8.76 howitzers, became suicidal, and Panzer IVs were destroyed. They ran into anti-tank emplacements and a counterattack by Cruisers, losing four more Panzers. This loss was excessive, and the commanders ordered a withdrawal. This resulted in further anti-tank fire from self-propelled guns, destroying another eight Panzers.¹⁷⁵

With reinforcements arriving in April 1941, Rommel wrote to his wife with complete confidence that he would take possession of Tobruk. He refused to listen to those officers who were brave enough to argue that he did not have enough men for the task. Two-thirds of his infantry were engaged elsewhere, heavy artillery was lacking, and the number of Panzers was insufficient. Rommel blamed these repeated failures on the Italian forces' wretched equipment and inadequate training. He conveniently forgot that the German troops, whose training and equipment were far superior, had fared no better. He had thrown the Ariete Division against an artillery strongpoint despite their clear demonstrations of incompetence. He decided to wait for reinforcements under the delusion that the Australians were about to abandon Tobruk.¹⁷⁶ He believed there were 32,000 Germans in North Africa, almost twice the figure. He assumed the

¹⁷³ Toker Papers, Tour Notes to Brigadier Toker for 5th Indian Infantry Brigade, 5 September 1941, Ref No. 71.21.2.6, IWM, London.

¹⁷⁴ Panzer Army Afrika, German-Italian Forces in Africa, Panzer Group Afrika Daily Intelligence Reports, 23 August–6 September 1942, Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.

¹⁷⁵ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 86–87.

¹⁷⁶ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 75.

15th Panzer Division would arrive in full force, with two regiments and 400 Panzers. What was on the way was only one regiment with 160 Panzers, about a third of which were light tanks. Many British ships docked off Tobruk, which led Rommel to believe that this was the beginning of an evacuation when, in fact, they were bringing in supplies to strengthen their defences.¹⁷⁷

The fight had already negatively impacted the troop's morale, accompanied by sandstorms and a nagging thirst. When a new unit arrived at the front, it was thrown into the attack against a vastly superior force. Junior officers could not understand Rommel's orders, resulting in widespread dissatisfaction.¹⁷⁸ The *OKW* was bombarded with complaints, and it seemed that the inferior commanders heartily disliked Rommel. The *Afrikakorps* military courts handed out relatively mild punishments compared with other units in the *Wehrmacht*. Some soldiers stole a vehicle from another unit to replace one they had lost. When they feared it had been spotted, they took it to the desert and blew it up. They were given an eighteen-month prison sentence for destroying army property. Foot soldiers who fell asleep while on guard duty at the front were sentenced to four years imprisonment and declared unworthy to serve in the armed forces. Sergeant R. stole petrol and some tinned food from a supply ship. He was given a death sentence and was condemned as an 'enemy of the people' or *Volksschadling*.¹⁷⁹

Since reinforcements took time, Hitler ordered Rommel to concentrate on strengthening the Sollum Line. He realised he should not contemplate anything other than a few raids across the Egyptian border. The Italians lacked the transport needed to supply the two additional divisions that Rommel requested, and his forces were hard-pressed. Rommel ordered his units to adopt a more aggressive attitude, but because of the uncertainty of the overall situation, the German units in the desert decided to withdraw. The parallel victory at Greece gave more confidence to the Germans in North Africa by prompting the Staff Officer of the 4th Air Fleet, Colonel Gunther Korten, to envision an island-hopping operation to Crete, Rhodes, and Cyprus, then on to Alexandria, Beirut, Haifa, and Jaffa. This would give Germany command over the eastern Mediterranean, opening the way for the German Army to advance in North Africa and strike at

¹⁷⁷ Toker Papers, Letter to the Commander-in-Chief of 4th Indian Division, 5 February 1942, Ref No. 71.21.2.9, IWM, London.

¹⁷⁸ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 223.

¹⁷⁹ Panzer Army Afrika, German-Italian Forces in Africa, Extracts from War Diary of Panzer Army Afrika, February 1942, National Archives of New Zealand, Wellington.

the heart of the British Empire in India. The bombing of Malta has now become a viable option.¹⁸⁰

To confine operations to the western and central Mediterranean, possession of Malta was of utmost importance to both the British and German armies. Malta, a group of five islands belonging to the British since 1800, was situated only 100 kilometres south of Sicily, 330 kilometres north of Tripoli and 660 kilometres from Benghazi and the Gulf of Sirte. To capture it, aerial and naval domination was of vital strategic importance. The OKH was highly alarmed by Rommel's piecemeal and hand-to-mouth tactics, with his troops spread everywhere with no overall operational concept. This was when Hitler intervened to lend his favourite general a helping hand by ordering air transport to move from Greece to southern Italy and fly an additional 800 men to North Africa. Rommel was now preparing for a further attack on Tobruk; he knew the British were bringing reinforcements. The Royal Navy had command of the Mediterranean, playing a vigorous role in the land war. The Royal Air Force was causing havoc to the airfields and supply lines of the Germans.¹⁸¹

The condition of the German soldiers and vehicles was poor. Unaccustomed to the desert's climatic conditions and after marching for miles, the units were exhausted and not confident enough to offer any serious resistance or launch any new attack. BMW motorcycles with sidecars were unsuitable for desert warfare and were in a wretched state of repair. The British landed a force near Bardia on 20 April to encircle the town, while the Tobruk garrison was strengthened to the core. The British moved up to Fort Capuzzo from the south and southwest on 22 April by launching a tank attack. Rommel was determined not to sit back; his new plan for Tobruk was straightforward: punching a hole through the perimeter defences and sending in Italian and German troops the following day to take Tobruk.¹⁸²

His Quartermaster's staff objected to Rommel's plan, as supplies were insufficient for a significant operation. Units of the 15 Panzer Division were still in Italy, and bringing them all up to Tobruk in time was impossible. They pleaded for a postponement until 2 May to await the arrival of the 115 Infantry Regiment. Attacking at night on unfamiliar ground, shorthanded, and with inadequate logistical support was not a desirable prospect. But Rommel argued that

¹⁸⁰ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 90–93.

¹⁸¹ War Diaries of the 8th Indian Division, Divisional Orders by Major-General Slim, 18 August 1941, Part I, File No. 601/232/WD/I, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹⁸² Messenger, *Rommel*, pp. 82–84.

time was of the essence, and the longer they waited, the more the British would strengthen Tobruk.¹⁸³ He hoped that speed and surprise would do the trick. Major-General Heinrich Georg Kirchheim was now in charge of the next attack on Tobruk. However, he was extremely outspoken in his criticism of Rommel. For him, Rommel was in no way up to his command duties. All he did was race through his widely scattered forces, ordering raids and dissipating his troops. Many officers in the *Afrikakorps* greatly resented Rommel's constant interference at the tactical level, his countermanding of orders and his abusive behaviour. This was against the tradition of the German army, where commanders issued broad mission statements, leaving tactical decisions to the men at the front, who reacted to the situation as it developed.¹⁸⁴

Friedrich Paulus, one of Hitler's most trusted staff officers, reached Rommel's headquarters on 27 April and consented to the offensive two days later when he felt that supplies were adequate—the new plan called for a mass attack on a narrow front. Ammunition was now sufficient, and the *Luftwaffe* support was strengthened by a fighter group at Ain el-Gazala. Paulus was impressed with the Italian corps artillery commander, and the German divisional commanders were confident that the attack would succeed. The attack began at 1815 hours on 30 April with Stukas bombing and assault groups from the 15th Panzer Division breaking through the British defences; however, they could not dislodge the troops. Instead, they suffered heavy casualties, mainly because they were inexperienced troops thrown into the battle as soon as they landed, without being adequately briefed and without knowledge of the terrain. Rommel had to halt Kirchheim's advance towards Tobruk. They managed to clear out several bunkers on the perimeter defences despite a series of tank attacks, but by the morning, they were exhausted.¹⁸⁵ Paulus (still at the front, keeping an eye on Rommel) quickly realised that he had been misguided in his assessment of the situation. There were virtually no reserves, and almost half the men were suffering from dysentery. They decided to wash their trousers with what was left of the morning coffee and hang them out to dry. So miserable was the situation.¹⁸⁶

Rommel hoped they could stay put for three to four weeks, bring in supplies and reserves, and improve the transportation network before continuing with the attack. The Germans could wait for the unlikely event of the British withdrawing their troops. Supplies were running short

¹⁸³ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, pp. 119–123.

¹⁸⁴ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 95–101.

¹⁸⁵ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, 4 Ind Div Newsletter, 5 March 1941, Part A6, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹⁸⁶ Moorehead, *Desert War*, pp. 143–144.

because sea routes to Tripoli and Benghazi were insecure. Tripoli was coming under heavy fire because of Allied superiority in the air and at sea. The coastal path from Tripoli to Benghazi was also under heavy attack. The Sollum front was so weak that it might as well collapse, leaving the *Afrikakorps* in an exceedingly dangerous situation. Rommel now had to hang onto Cyrenaica with or without Tobruk. Paulus was, nevertheless, impressed by the performance of the *Afrikakorps*. They had managed with relatively weak forces to break through the most vital position in the defences. The operation could have been successful had there been sufficient reserves. If Malta remained in British hands, the Mediterranean would be under their control.¹⁸⁷

Requirement of Troops

The German forces required 40,000–50,000 tons of supplies per month. In addition, Italians needed 100,000 tons. This colossal requirement was far beyond the capacity of Libyan ports. Neither Tripoli nor Benghazi could handle the load. Benghazi did not possess anti-aircraft guns or coastal defences, and the harbour was defenceless. Another major problem was that Libya had no industrial base, so everything had to be imported. The Italian workforce was unreliable and undisciplined, panicking at the first sign of an attack.¹⁸⁸ Rommel refused to address these problems and persisted in demanding the impossible. An assignment of bombs for the *Luftwaffe* went off while they were being unloaded in Tripoli, resulting in the loss of two freighters, damaging two others and the docks. Later, the Royal Navy attacked Benghazi and caused considerable damage, sinking two more freighters. Paulus's report was sharply critical of Rommel's leadership style and argued that the general had seriously misjudged the situation in North Africa. He found Rommel's publicity hunting, his counting of war correspondents and cameramen, distinctly distasteful and unsoldierly. He insisted that a renewed attack on Tobruk was out of the question. These chronic logistical problems caused a severe crisis.¹⁸⁹

To avoid this, it was necessary to shorten the lines of communication to the front. With an average fuel consumption of 25 litres per 100 kilometres for each truck, at least 75 litres were needed to cover 242 kilometres. This made the monthly requirement for the fleet of 3,667 trucks, 8,250,760 litres or 5,776 tons. This was all part of the 'rubber band effect' that bedevilled both sides in the Desert War. Given the strength of the British defences at Tobruk

¹⁸⁷ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 99–104.

¹⁸⁸ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, 4 Ind Div Intelligence Summary No. 128, 12 March 1941, Part 6, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

¹⁸⁹ Reuth, *Rommel*, pp. 101–103.

and the blistering heat, Rommel should have pulled back his troops to a defensive line at Gazala, where they could be refreshed and replenished. The situation was also problematic for the British. The habitually calm Wavell was also beginning to feel the strain. His forces were well entrenched in Tobruk, their artillery enhanced by guns captured from the Italians during the attacks. But even they feared facing serious difficulties if Rommel decided to fight in the desert. The bridgehead through the perimeter defences was a permanent problem, and there was fierce fighting to besiege the besiegers for weeks to come. Wavell virtually had no tanks under his command and what he had were obsolete primarily models needing extensive repair. Wavell had reports that there were 400 Panzers on the way. Thus, Churchill reacted immediately. He gave orders for Operation Tiger: a convoy carrying 295 tanks and fifty-three Hurricanes, which was to sail through the Mediterranean rather than around the Cape, saving forty days. The Italian Navy, tending to its previous wounds, had no stomach for an attack. This left the Stukas of the 10th Air Corps to do their best. Most of the Axis troops suffered from acute diarrhoea. Infectious openings in the body were another severe problem, and this, combined with filthy clothing, caused serious lesions known as desert sores. The sand under the foreskin was extremely painful, causing extreme infections. The British were heartened to decipher Paulus's report to OKH on the situation in North Africa. Churchill's orders to Wavell were to go on an offensive as soon as the 'Tiger' convoy arrived.¹⁹⁰

Wavell saw the wisdom of attacking before the Panzer Division was in full strength; Gott, now Lieutenant-General, was ordered to go on the offensive with his force at Sollum, supported by Lieutenant-General Beresford-Pierson's WDF, in Operation Brevity. Even before the new tanks could be brought up to the front, Churchill, delighted with this plan, hoped that this would improve Britain's position in the entire Middle East. For Gott, this was a challenging task. His tools were sparse, and his equipment was obsolete. On the high ground, to the south-west, he had twenty-nine Cruiser tanks; to the right, twenty-two Guards Brigade Group had twenty-four support tanks; and there was a coastal group, consisting of an infantry brigade and an artillery regiment, positioned on the low ground by the sea. The opposing forces consisted merely of a company of motorcycle infantry, an anti-tank company, a motorised reconnaissance group, an anti-aircraft battery and a battalion of Italians, all under the command of Colonel Max von Herff. The German field intelligence had intercepted British signals and knew an attack was

¹⁹⁰ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 105–109.

pending. The attack began on 15 May 1941, with a skilful disguised movement of the troops to the front.¹⁹¹

The attack was initially a success with the 7th Armoured Brigade reaching Sidi Azeiz, beyond Fort Capuzzo. The coastal group moved up to the entrance of the Halfaya Pass. Herff's team was forced back with heavy casualties and his attempt to regain Halfaya Pass failed. The British were still able to hang on to the pass, but they had to wait until the new tanks, Churchill's 'tiger cubs', were ready for service and new divisions had arrived. The Germans were extremely efficient in their use of 88 mm anti-aircraft weapons known as 'Flak', with their high muzzle velocity that was as effective as the anti-tank guns named 'Pak'. However, they were fully cognisant of their weaknesses. With the arrival of further reinforcements from Tobruk to the Sollum front, including units from the 15th Panzer Division, the Germans took back Halfaya Pass.¹⁹²

For 240 days, between April and December 1941, the garrison held out. Based on well-conceived defences built by Italians, Tobruk hardened into a rock-solid enclave. The Australian Divisions earned themselves a reputation for dogged and determined fighting supported by the mass firepower of the British artillery. Tobruk demonstrated that inexperienced and imperfectly trained troops could fight the Germans and Italians to a standstill. Instead of surrendering when attacked or penetrated by enemy Panzers, the defenders of Tobruk stayed where they were and destroyed the German infantry and artillery crew trying to follow up. Tobruk was defended in an aggressive rather than passive manner.¹⁹³ Morale in the garrison was as high as anywhere in the Middle East. The port at Tobruk was highly operational, and the BIA men were well supplied with food, cigarettes, and basic welfare amenities. Sickness rates were now low and there was a mood of grim determination which comes to men who are ordered to maintain a siege by their commanders. By May, it was clear that the Germans could not compel the garrison to capitulate. Through ULTRA it was evident that Rommel's attack had shot its bolt. Churchill pressurised Wavell to go forward with the offensive, relieved Tobruk and secure the canal zone for once and all.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹ Toker Papers, Draft Broadcast by Major-General Francis Toker, Ref No. 71.21.2.10, IWM, London.

¹⁹² Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 155.

¹⁹³ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 334.

¹⁹⁴ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Operation No. 28, 11 February 1941, Part A5, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

Operation Brevity and Battleaxe

In Operation Brevity, the 22nd Guards Brigade was supported by 24 Matilda tanks of the 4th Royal Tank Regiment, which aimed to attack along the top of the escarpment, capture Halfaya and Capuzzo, and move northwards. Below the escarpment, one battalion of the 7th Armoured Brigade with 29 Cruiser tanks and three columns from the Support Group was to conduct a comprehensive, flanking movement to Sidi Aziz, 12 miles behind Capuzzo. The RAF focused on ground-strafting sorties against the Axis supply columns. They developed 'Jock Columns', which did not prove to be of much use against the German force. The British decided to use a combination of Jock Columns, dispersed armour, artillery, and infantry in groups instead of providing concentrated support for the main assaults against the enemy forces. The Jock Columns had earlier been successful against the Italians, but they failed miserably against the Germans.¹⁹⁵

Three attacks were made in mid-April to break the siege of Tobruk. When the first assault was made, Rommel thought that the BIA was evacuating. This proved to be a costly affair. The second assault happened with the 5th Light Panzer penetrating the Australian line on 13 April. The Australians were prepared for this, and their artillery delivered concentrated fire, over the sights and ranges as close to 600 yards. They quietly waited for the German infantry to follow and slammed them as they came forward. The BIA followed up with a tank counterattack on the German tanks, which, combined with the artillery fire, was too much for the *Afrikakorps*. They were surprised and were no match for this style of fighting. They suffered 75 per cent losses of tanks and men, and the 8th Army saw a change in command. Lieutenant General Noel Beresford-Pierse was given the command of the WDF, including the garrison at Tobruk. The next assault was made on 16 April 1941 when the Australians mauled the Trento and Ariete Divisions. They also scattered the Italian battalions, shifted fire onto the Italian rear, and kept them from retreating. The German troops arrived when the Italians were retreating and launched a coordinated assault. Rommel blamed the confusion on the Italian forces' poor training and useless equipment.¹⁹⁶

Ultimately, both the Axis partners lost, as the Italians were not as well equipped or well trained as the Germans. The Australians, in their prepared defensive position, were tough to break. The

¹⁹⁵ Jonathan Fennel, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 144.

¹⁹⁶ Roy, *Fighting Rommel*, p.19.

Afrikakorps had suffered their first defeat in Africa. Paulus, the Quartermaster General of the German Army, observed the situation and concluded that logistics were the key to this theatre. He believed the Axis were in a dangerous position, lying between a fortress and an increasingly mobile British force. The final attack happened between 30 April and 4 May 1941, and the Axis was partly defeated due to the defences' increased strength. The BIA made excellent use of their reserves and tanks. The German and Italian divisions made a stand, and the Australian Divisions counterattacked. Neither of them could force them out nor break in further. Losses for the Germans were 125 dead, 402 wounded and 131 missing. For the Italians, 155 were dead, 347 were wounded, and 238 were missing. The BIA had 59 dead, 355 injured and 383 missing. General Johannes von Ravenstein took over the command of the 21st Panzer Division on 31 May 1941.¹⁹⁷

Rommel wanted to establish a defensive line at Gazala to the west of Tobruk to meet the British at the Sollum defences. But it was difficult to do so without further weakening the overstretched defences at Tobruk and Sollum. The situation was challenging for the British as well. Wavell was beginning to feel the strain; all his forces were entrenched in Tobruk, and the bridgehead through the perimeter defences was a huge problem. With virtually no tanks under his command and those needing serious repair, Operation Tiger was supposed to bring a convoy of 295 tanks and 53 Hurricanes to rescue the BIA. They were to be used in 'Operation Brevity' as soon as they landed. Meanwhile, life for the troops was sheer misery; the defensive positions were mostly petite, more than shallow troughs scraped in the screen that offered little protection during a bombardment. Temperatures were extreme, rising to 40 degrees in the afternoon and dipping to 10 degrees in the evening. Most men suffered from acute diarrhoea due to terrible sanitation conditions. The desert sand contributed to every medical problem and sanitation-based disease.¹⁹⁸

During the rest of the summer and the fall, the Axis forces dominated the air and ground with continuous skirmishing, patrolling and losses around the perimeter of Tobruk. But the BIA kept tight control. The 3rd Armoured Brigade was converted into the new 32nd Army Tank Brigade, strengthened with Matildas, I' tanks and cruisers. The main garrisons were at Sollum, Halfaya, Musaid, Fort Capuzzo, and Points 206 and 208. After that, the decision to launch Operation Brevity was influenced by intelligence from ULTRA. It was primarily of value in deciphering

¹⁹⁷ Barnett, *Hitler's General*, pp. 307–308.

¹⁹⁸ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, p. 108.

messages and reports in determining the Axis order of battle. Wavell saw the wisdom in attacking before the 15th Panzer Division was at full strength. Churchill was delighted with this plan, hoping it would significantly improve Britain's position in the Middle East. The British were still learning the capability of the German equipment, and it was after Operation Brevity that they realised that the Germans were using an 88 mm AA gun as an AT gun. Meanwhile, the BIA received a supply of forty-three Hurricane fighters, 135 Matildas, eighty-two Cruisers, and twenty-one Mark VI tanks, all for deployment at the next operation.¹⁹⁹

During Operation Brevity, the British advanced with three small groups. Troops were sparse, and equipment was obsolete, so allotting them in the right direction was complicated. On the high ground to the southwest, there was the 7th Armoured Brigade Group with twenty-nine Cruiser tanks, which was to press on to Sidi Azeiz under Brigadier W.H.E. Gott and advance west, destroying the enemy forces they encountered. General Beresford-Pierse was to hold overall command. One group that went to the coast formed an infantry primarily to block the Axis forces and capture the lower portion of Halfaya Pass and Sollum. The second group comprised twenty-four Matildas and the motorised 22nd Guards Group; it was to take Fort Capuzzo and seize the top of Halfaya Pass. The third group was a coastal group consisting of an infantry brigade and an artillery regiment positioned on the low ground by the sea, which was to push through the Halfaya Pass and move up to Sollum. The opposing force consisted of a motorcycle infantry company, an anti-tank company, a motorised reconnaissance group, an anti-aircraft battery, and a battalion of Italians under the capable command of Colonel Max von Herff. The German field reconnaissance had also intercepted that a British attack was pending.²⁰⁰

The operation started on 15 May, and the British successfully captured Halfaya Pass and Fort Capuzzo. The 7th Armoured Brigade reached Sidi Azeiz, well beyond Fort Capuzzo. The coastal group moved up to the entrance of the pass. Herff launched a vigorous counterattack against the Guards Armoured Brigade at Fort Capuzzo, but he was forced back, and his attempt to win back Halfaya Pass failed. Although the BIA could hold onto Halfaya Pass, Operation Brevity failed. It was decided to wait for Churchill's Tiger tanks before attacking again. The effective use of the 88 mm anti-aircraft weapon, Flak, by the Germans, with its high muzzle

¹⁹⁹ War Diaries of the 8th Indian Division, 10th Divisional Administration Order, 27 August 1941, Part A, Vol. 601/232/I, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁰⁰ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 253.

velocity, was as effective as anti-tank guns. But now, the *DAK* was fully conscious of their weaknesses.²⁰¹ The Axis realised that their Anti-Tank (AT) guns were worthless against the Matilda's hull and shifted targets to the Matilda's tracks and undercarriages. This helped them knock out seven tanks; thus, tactical improvisation helped save the day. The BIA retreated to realise their forces were weak, only holding on to Halfaya. This confidence of the Axis forces came from their recent victories, the German tanks, and superior officers of the German High Command.²⁰²

Rommel sent further units from Tobruk to the Sollum front, and on 27 May 1941, Halfaya Pass was again in the German hands with 'Operation Skorpion'. Meanwhile, Rommel was building solid defensive positions around the Halfaya Pass with the bulk of the 15th Panzer Division at full strength. Rommel was a master of armoured warfare, not only in the offensive (sword) but also in the defensive (shield); however, he faced significant logistical issues. Signal Intelligence of the Allies, called SIGINT, provided details about Rommel's supply difficulties to the BIA. The intelligence also mentioned that he was stocking up on siege artillery in Tunisia, which suggested he was not ready for another attack on Tobruk. The BIA, therefore, assumed that Rommel would not go on the offensive until the end of October. With a reconstituted 'K' Force of cruisers *Aurora* and *Penelope*, they wrought havoc on Axis shipping in the ensuing weeks, further disrupting Rommel's plans.²⁰³

The RAF's Photographic Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) provided more helpful intelligence than ULTRA. Between 18 October and 18 December 1941, not a single Axis ship reached North Africa. Rommel could only carry on because adequate fuel, ammunition and provisions had been gathered before the attack on Tobruk began. The tanks delivered by 'Operation Tiger' were not ready for action. They were mostly the new models of Crusader tanks that were unlike the Desert Rats. Churchill had sent Britain's best and most modern tanks to the Middle East, but still, they were of no use against the Panzer IVs. Matilda had heavy armour, which made it extremely difficult to bring into action because of being painfully slow from its weight. It had a short range and lacked high-explosive shells to use against infantry. The Crusader was faster but more lightly armoured, under-gunned and plagued by mechanical failure. Preparations for

²⁰¹ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, p. 111.

²⁰² Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, pp. 69–71.

²⁰³ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from Secretary of India to Auchinleck, 4 April 1941, File N.S 133-150, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

‘Operation Battleaxe’ were thus conceived hastily and with insufficient force. Rommel somehow gained this information with his excellent field intelligence.²⁰⁴

In Operation Battleaxe, the WDF comprised the 4th Indian Division with the 11th and the 22nd Guards Brigade, supported by the 4th Armoured Brigade. Lieutenant-General Sir Noel Beresford-Pierce’s plan for Battleaxe was little more than a warmed-up version of Brevity but on a much larger scale.⁶⁹ The plan was: the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade with armoured support was to move up the Halfaya Pass, while the 4th Armoured Brigade and the 22nd Guards Brigade would seize Fort Capuzzo and Point 206. To their left, the 7th Armoured Brigade was to overrun Point 208, known to the British as Hafid Ridge.²⁰⁵ The heavy tanks of the 4th Armoured Brigade were first to attack the German forces south of Bardia and then move onto the left flank to join the 7th Armoured Division at Sidi Azeiz, pressing onto Tobruk. The British used the same codeword they had used for Brevity— ‘Peter’. The BIA achieved initial success in the centre by taking Point 206 but soon encountered severe difficulties. The coastal group lost fifteen out of eighteen tanks at the Halfaya Pass. At Point 208, they were left with only forty-eight out of ninety tanks. However, Beresford-Pierce ordered the 4th Indian Division to seize the Halfaya Pass and take Bardia the following day, while the 4th Armoured Division, supported by the 4th and 7th Armoured Brigade, was to take Point 208.²⁰⁶

On 15 June 1941, the 4th Indian Division, backed by Matildas, decided to move forward and seize the Halfaya Pass, while the 7th Armoured Division (now called the ‘Desert Rats’) would fight the remaining armour battle. This battle was so bitter that it could easily be renamed the Hellfire Pass. The Matilda tanks could not stand up to the German 88 mm AT guns and underwent heavy losses. The Axis took back Halfaya Pass, and due to the loss of their position, the British were at a severe disadvantage, so Rommel began establishing solid defensive positions around the Halfaya Pass.²⁰⁷ The 15th Panzer Division was at full strength, brought up from the frontier and placed in reserve between Bardia and Fort Capuzzo. The major problem still lies with supplies. Benghazi had to be protected, the coast secured, and the British had to be stopped from reinforcing Tobruk. Using the VAA transmitter, German intelligence officers had to analyse British radio traffic, including news reports. They even dropped two

²⁰⁴ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 108.

²⁰⁵ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Intelligence Summary No. 158, 1 July 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁰⁶ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 110–111.

²⁰⁷ Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel*, pp. 112–114.

radio operators, Hans Eppler' and 'Hans Gred Sandstone', known as *Sandy*, but these missions were disasters. The British military intelligence believed that Rommel would not launch another offensive until the end of October 1941. A constituted 'K Force', including the cruisers *Aurora* and *Penelope* and two destroyers, began operations from Malta. Armed with excellent intelligence, they wrought havoc on the Axis shipping in the upcoming weeks, further disrupting Rommel's plans.²⁰⁸

The PRU stripped-down Spitfires prevented a single ship from reaching North Africa. Wavell, however, kept the training in full swing, and Convoys arrived, mainly the new model of the Crusader tank. The tank crew of Desert Rats in the 7th Armoured Division had to familiarise themselves with it before the offensive. The British had about a hundred support tanks and ninety Crusaders, while the *Afrikakorps* only had fifty panzers at the front, with sixty-seven in reserve at Tobruk. The British also had air superiority with 203 machines against 101 German ones. Major-General Sir Frank Messervy, commanding the 4th Indian Division, frustrated Rommel's attempt to cut them off with these reserves.²⁰⁹ The determined efforts of British armour held up the *Afrikakorps*' flanking movement and covered the withdrawal. Shortage of fuel and ammunition made further pursuit impossible. The 15th Panzer Division and the 5 Light Division were relatively inexperienced in desert warfare and were partly to blame for allowing the British to overpower them. The divisions were yet to master the art of marching through the desert, day and night, ready for offence and defence. They needed to replace their anti-tank gun models, strengthen their artillery, improve their signals, and establish communications with the Luftwaffe.²¹⁰

The British Army, too, suffered heavy losses. Ninety-one tanks were destroyed, while the *Afrikakorps* lost only twelve. The loss of aircraft was disproportionate, with thirty-six to ten. However, the Axis suffered 586 dead and 691 wounded, and the British 381 dead and 585 wounded. Temperatures on the battlefield reached 55 degrees daily, adding to the soldiers' misery on both sides. The hot desert air at ground level reduced the visibility of everything in size, making it seem like one was looking through the wrong end of a telescope. General Wavell reported the failure of Operation Battleaxe to Churchill, who fired him by sending him off to

²⁰⁸ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 143.

²⁰⁹ Auchinleck Papers, Letter to Auchinleck from J.G. William, 21 May 1941, Manchester United Library, 212–230, England, United Kingdom.

²¹⁰ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Appendix related to 'Booby Traps,' Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

India as Commander-in-Chief. He was unfairly blamed for abandoning Greece and ‘losing’ Battleaxe. It was pretty ironic as Rommel, too, held Wavell in high regard and was full of praise for his ‘strategic courage’. His failure can be attributed to the slow speed of his heavy infantry tanks, which could not react quickly to the faster-moving Panzers.²¹¹

The British planning was somewhat weak due to incomplete knowledge of the terrain and the absence of a detailed survey before the battle. One limitation of the BIA’s plan was to focus on symmetry moving forward, aiming to destroy the Axis tanks at the corps, divisional, and brigade levels. They could not establish cooperation between the infantry, artillery, and armoured divisions.²¹² The Germans took control of the battlefield at the end of the battle. They utilised the opportunity to recover their damaged tanks. Air Marshal Tedder lost thirty-six British planes in the air and learned that the air and land forces needed better cooperation for victory. Ultimately, ULTRA, combined with the advantages of aircraft, ships, and submarines operating from Malta, along with the technical advantages of the radar, was successful in hurting the supply lines between Europe and North Africa, resulting in large-scale Axis losses. Meanwhile, General Garibaldi was replaced by General Ettore Bastico, who commanded the *Commando Superiore Africa Settentrionale* or the Superior North African Command. Hitler promoted Rommel for his victories at Battleaxe and Brevity and became the commander of a full *PanzerGruppe*. On 22 June 1941, Wavell was informed that he would swap places with General Sir Claude Auchinleck as the Commander-in-Chief of India. On 5 July 1941, Auchinleck was given four and a half months, i.e. until November 1941, to make the 8th Army strong enough to move to Tobruk.²¹³ Transferred to the Middle East Command, Auchinleck immediately began to prepare for a decisive blow against the Axis in Africa. He received South African units in North Africa, and these new troops helped develop the 8th Army. Auchinleck believed that Brevity and Battleaxe in May and June 1941 were ill-considered and ill-prepared operations, so they were unsuccessful.²¹⁴

If quartermasters and civilian officials are left to take their time organising supplies, everything is bound to be very slow. Quartermasters tend to work by theory and base all their calculations on precedent. This can lead to frightful disasters when a man on the other side carries out his

²¹¹ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 86.

²¹² Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 135.

²¹³ Roy, *Fighting Rommel*, p. 22.

²¹⁴ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from Viceroy to the Secretary of State in India, 25 May 1941, Manchester United Library, 231–248, England, United Kingdom.

plans with superb drive and speed. In such a situation, a commander must be ruthless in demanding an all-out effort. A commander must accustom his staff to a high tempo and keep them motivated.²¹⁵ Moving ahead, the BIA began speculating on Germany's next move. The Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee argued that after November, the Germans would attack the Middle East via Turkey and Syria rather than through the Caucasus. Auchinleck, strangely, was more concerned about strengthening his positions in Syria, Cyprus, and Iraq than he was about Rommel. He also took complete charge of the 8th Army.²¹⁶ The situation at Bardia and Sollum was tense, and even after the British were beaten off, it was likely that they would renew the attack with overwhelming forces within a few weeks. Battleaxe was a very close shave for the Germans. OKW was unlikely to help Rommel, and he was asked to present details of his plans. Rommel took no heed of OKW's gloomy assessment and firmly believed that he had given the British a devastating blow in Battleaxe and they would take a long time to regain the initiative. Therefore, he announced that he would first take Tobruk and Giarahub Oasis, then destroy the British positions west of Mersa Matruh. He intended to advance to the coastal strip between the Qattara Depression and the sea.²¹⁷

Rommel also had unrealistic expectations about destroying the enemy fleet, cutting off British supplies to the Middle East, protecting convoys to North Africa, blocking the Suez Canal with mines and sunken vessels, and eradicating the RAF in the Middle East. The *Luftwaffe* was to provide paratroopers to help seize the Nile bridges. The convoys were no longer to be sent to Tripoli, which was now far away from the front. However, they were to move up along the coast, advancing to Benghazi, Derna, Ain-el-Gazala, Bardia, Sollum, Mersa Matruh, the Gulf of Kennayis, and finally Alexandria. Since large freighters were challenging to handle, Rommel argued that smaller, swifter ships, such as motor torpedo boats, should be used to bring in supplies. He continually bombarded Hitler and OKH with requests for more supplies and overall command of transport to North Africa. He only received U-boats and motor torpedo boats in the Mediterranean to guard convoys to North Africa. However, 50% of these vessels were sunk or seriously damaged.²¹⁸

Major-General von Mellenthin had remarked that Rommel was not an easy man to serve. As a fighting soldier who liked to lead from the front, he had a low opinion of staff officers. Rommel

²¹⁵ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 145.

²¹⁶ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 92.

²¹⁷ Cornelli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), p. 56.

²¹⁸ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 247.

expected his Chief of Staff to come up to the front. This took them away from their command post and put heavy responsibilities on the Chief of Operations. Although Rommel was optimistic and open with the men, he was outspoken and abusive with his staff officers. He was audacious, quick to react to new situations, courageous and resourceful.²¹⁹ The *Afrikakorps* were ready to follow him wherever he led them, fully aware that he shared all their hardships. He insisted that he and his staff share the same rations as the men, which consisted mainly of sandwiches and tinned food, primarily sardines. The Germans had long been without coffee and had to make do with a concoction delightfully named ‘Muckefuck’. The troops claimed it was made from acorns, and the British forces were amazed to learn that the Germans treated bully beef as a much-treasured delicacy. The lack of fresh food, fruit, and vegetables, resulted in Rommel’s staff suffering from frequent bouts of what the British called ‘gyppy tummy’, often in the form of amoebic dysentery. As a result, many officers were hospitalised.²²⁰

Reports of heavy losses in the German Navy created a desperate situation. Between 27 January and 20 August 1941, 150 ships were sunk en route from Italy to North Africa and from Tripoli to Benghazi. Italian shipyards were incapable of building sufficient replacements. Simultaneously, the British were constantly strengthening their supplies. By July, aircraft carriers *Victorious* and *Ark Royal* brought sixty-four fighters to Malta. Bombers were flown directly from Britain, and 40,000 tons of supplies were delivered in ‘Style’, ‘Substance’, and ‘Railway’ operations. The *Afrikakorps* had concluded that it could not take Mersa Matruh by a *coup de main* (surprise attack). They knew that since they could not mount a severe attack on the British, it was highly likely that they would soon come under a massive attack. Even after making potential plans, Rommel, too, realised that he did not have sufficient forces to attack Egypt and that the Panzer Group would only have enough strength for such an attack by early 1942.²²¹

Operation Crusader Approaches

With the approach of ‘Crusader’, Rommel knew he did not have sufficient airpower. One-third of his artillery had not arrived, and his communications network was substandard. The British, who cracked the Italian naval code, were fully aware of the upcoming German convoys. By

²¹⁹ Auchinleck Papers, Personal and Confidential Letter, From Auchinleck to C.G.I.S, 27 August 1940, Manchester United Library, 84–100.

²²⁰ Reuth, *Rommel*, pp. 123–124.

²²¹ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 90.

skillfully using radar, they destroyed the German convoys the following night.²²² The BIA's aim for Crusader was thus precise: the destruction of Rommel's forces, taking back Cyrenaica, and the relief of Tobruk. For Crusader, Auchinleck possessed 600 tanks, 100,000 men, and 5,000 soft-skinned vehicles. The XIII Corps had the 4th Indian Division, the New Zealand Division, and the 1st Army Tank Brigade. The XXX Corps had the 7th Armoured Division, 1st South African Division and the 201st Guards Brigade Group. The 2nd South African Division and the 29th Infantry Brigade Group were in reserve.²²³

Rommel was obsessed with capturing Tobruk. He ignored the intelligence, suggesting that the BIA was preparing for a counterattack. His troops practised various trench and bunker complexes with 210 mm and 150 mm howitzers. All his ground forces were supported by the *Luftwaffe*, who gave ground support. Rommel also reinforced the Sollum front, a decision that influenced the forthcoming battle. ULTRA kept providing the BIA with solid information about the enemy's order of battle. However, they lacked an understanding of the effectiveness of the German equipment, especially the 88 mm AT gun against their tanks. The BIA thought that the Germans would set up an anti-tank line while they got their anti-tank guns along with them and operated directly with their tanks. Finally, 20 November 1941 was decided as the date the BIA attacked Tobruk. Rommel ignored this piece of information and refused to believe it.²²⁴

BIA was unaware of the Axis tank strength, which on 18 November 1941, stood at 70 Panzer IIs, 130 Panzer IIIs, 35 Panzer IVs along with thirty-five 88 mm guns, one 50 mm AT gun, two 75 mm and thirty-three 37 mm AT guns. The BIA believed that the German 37 mm and 50 mm AT guns could penetrate their tanks at medium ranges of about 440 yards. However, they were oblivious to the fact that the range of the 88 mm gun was close to 2,000 yards. They were also unaware that German tanks had extra armour added to their hulls. The Axis had defences around Tobruk, with the XXI Corps from the west to east and Brescia, Trento, and Bologna divisions on the reserve.²²⁵

²²² War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Intelligence Summary No. 159, 4 July 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part I, MODHS, New Delhi.

²²³ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Report by the Commander of the 4th Indian Division on Operations in the Western Desert, 15–18 June 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part I, MODHS, New Delhi.

²²⁴ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Points of Interest, 15 July 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part I, MODHS, New Delhi.

²²⁵ Philip Warner, *Auchinleck: The Lonely Soldier* (1981, reprint; London: Cassell, 2001), p. 81.

As mentioned before, Rommel had excellent field intelligence. By August 1941, the *DAK* had cracked the War Office cypher that carried much traffic to the 8th Army, right down to the divisional level. Their interception of low-grade traffic was vastly superior to that of the British. They realised that ‘monkey orange’ was the medical officer, while ‘mess tins’ were Bren gun carriers. It was not until July 1942 that the BIA discovered the extent to which Rommel listened to their radio traffic down to the battalion level and beyond, allowing him to plan his tactics.²²⁶ The pause in the fighting allowed the *DAK* to concentrate on training. Weapons that proved less than satisfactory were replaced. These included anti-tank rifles, 5 cm mortars and 3.7 cm anti-tank guns. Auchinleck also aimed to build an impressive force under his command. The 8th Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Cunningham, consisted of Lieutenant-General A.R. Godwin Austen’s Western Desert Force, which included the New Zealand Division, 4th Indian Division and 1st Armoured Brigade. The bulk of the armour was given to the newly formed XXX Corps under Major-General Willoughby Norrie, comprising the 7th Armoured Division, 4th Armoured Brigade Group, 1st South African Division and 22nd Guards Brigade. The 2nd South African Division was held in reserve. Tobruk was under the command of Major-General Scobie with the 70th Division, 32nd Armoured Brigade and a Polish infantry brigade.²²⁷

The British also had an overwhelming superiority in weapons. By the end of October 1941, Auchinleck had assembled 300 Cruiser assault tanks, 300 American Stuart light tanks, 170 support tanks (most of which were the latest models of Valentines), 34,000 trucks, 600 pieces of field artillery, 80 heavy and 160 light anti-aircraft guns, 200 anti-tank guns and 900 mortars. The British also worked hard to ensure adequate supplies for the offensive. A pipeline was built to bring water from Alexandria as far as Mersa Matruh. Supply dumps, known as field maintenance centres, were established.²²⁸ Auchinleck’s preparations were so skilfully conducted and carefully concealed that Rommel’s staff thought it was all for an attempt to relieve Tobruk. At the operational level, Auchinleck (like most British generals) assumed that the armoured formations constituted the leading force in the desert. The infantry played a defensive role, while the armour constituted the striking force. After all, cooperation of all arms at the tactical level was essential for armour, infantry, mobile field artillery, and air support as a team. This was called combined arms tactics. For Auchinleck, achieving this was the most

²²⁶ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel’s North Africa Campaign*, pp. 91–92.

²²⁷ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 275.

²²⁸ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 99.

significant challenge. The British also kept absolute radio silence so that the march and deployment were undetected. Most of the movement was made during the night. This concealed it from air surveillance. During the daytime, these positions were camouflaged. The British achieved complete tactical control due to such careful planning.²²⁹

The BIA improved its tank situation in three ways: First, it increased its overall numbers and capacity to repair damaged tanks. Second, they received the first American-built tank in the Middle East—the Stuart—more reliable than the British-built tanks. Its 37 mm gun carried an explosive shell that fired a solid shot. However, it required frequent refuelling due to its small fuel tanks. Finally, the BIA received the new Crusader tank in substantial numbers. With 40 mm frontal armour, they were better than the old Cruiser tanks, but most of them tended to burn quickly. The total tank strength under General Cunningham was the Desert Rats, or the 7th Armoured Division, which had 355 Crusaders and 165 Stuart tanks. Most of the Stuarts were concentrated in the 4th Armoured Brigade. The 1st and the 32nd Army tank brigades had 213 I-tanks (Matildas and Valentines), two Crusaders, thirty-three older Cruisers, and twenty-five light tanks. With this strength, the plan for the Crusaders was very straightforward. But nothing went according to plan. The battle lasted longer than planned, leaving both sides exhausted, forcing the Axis to retreat, and leaving the battleground in control of the BIA with Tobruk relieved. Auchinleck was not in a rush to begin the operation since he wanted to protect the Nile valley and the remainder of the Middle East. But Churchill wanted to throw the Axis out of North Africa as quickly as possible. Hence, Auchinleck sent the 8th Army into intensive training, and the concentrated BIA forces completed it by 17 November 1941.²³⁰

Rommel had informed the OKH on 4 October 1941 that he intended to attack Tobruk in early November. However, the Panzer Group required 60,000 tons of supplies in October. By the end of the month, only 8,093 tons had arrived in Benghazi. Rommel had sufficient ammunition for seven and a half days by 15 November 1941 and fuel for eight days. Food was in short supply, but his troops were already used to reduce rations. So, this was not a significant problem.²³¹

²²⁹ War Diary of 4th Indian Division, Points of Interest, Points of Interest, 15 July 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part I, MODHS, New Delhi.

²³⁰ Roy, *Fighting Rommel*, p. 51.

²³¹ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 149–151.

Operation Crusader

Auchinleck's plan for Crusader was very straightforward. His command ensured the security of the British and the Commonwealth Army when he started planning Crusader. During the seven months from January to July 1941, vast quantities of men and stores arrived. The 1st South African Division and the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions disembarked, hardened from their victories in East Africa. The 144,000 men that landed from the UK included the 50th Northumbrian Division (which had fought in France), the 2nd Armoured Division, the rest of the 2nd New Zealand and 7th Australian Divisions, and the HQ of X Corps. In addition, 60,000 men from Australia and New Zealand, 23,000 men from India and 12,000 from South Africa had arrived. Over a million tons of military stores, ammunition, weapons, aircraft, and vehicles were unloaded during the same period. More equipment would be required if Auchinleck was to challenge Rommel in the desert successfully. But with these new forces at the disposal of the newly formed and newly named 8th Army, Auchinleck immediately felt under the kind of pressure that Wavell had experienced before him. Auchinleck was conscious of the profound difficulties he faced in the desert. He needed to train his much-expanded citizen army. So, he played for more time. He ensured that the New Zealanders undertook three brigade exercises under the full support of artillery and divisional rehearsals.²³²

The XXX Corps tanks were to outflank the Sollum Line to the south, push forward in a north-westerly direction, destroy the Panzer and open the way to Tobruk. The XIII Corps was to engage the German forces on the borders of Egypt, with the New Zealand Division working its way around and behind the Sollum Line, cutting it off from the rest of the Panzer Group. However, there were several severe deficiencies in this plan. The BIA had yet to realise that their tanks were useless against the Panzers, which could neither be destroyed by artillery nor tanks dug in hull down. The 7th Armoured Brigade was an experienced unit, but many inexperienced men were in the 22nd Armoured Brigade. However, Churchill was becoming impatient, and Auchinleck was not given enough time to train these men adequately. The 4th Armoured Brigade was equipped with Stuarts, which were excellent weapons. But these were light tanks, suitable only as a fast and reliable reconnaissance vehicle with their 37 mm guns.

²³² Alan Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 160.

The BIA had been ingeniously deceptive as the weather also helped conceal British intentions.²³³

In July 1941, an inter-service committee was formed to conduct joint practical manoeuvres to improve air and land cooperation. These efforts resulted in the Middle East Army and RAF Directive on Direct Air Support, which spelt out new procedures for collaboration between the two services. It introduced an innovative joint command structure. Air Support Control was given the charge of managing air-land operations. With these vital improvements, Auchinleck handed over most of the Crusader's decisions to Alan Cunningham. The latter planned to meet the Panzer forces in a climatic armoured engagement that would decide the fate of the desert war. Much like Compass, Crusader was scheduled around the prescriptions and understandings of inter-war doctrine. It was deliberately made flexible to make the best use of the army's apparent strengths, as well as the ability of the commanders at all levels to adapt to the unforeseen circumstances presented by the war.²³⁴ Unique to this operation, Cunningham decided there would be no operational orders. Enemy dispositions were liable to alter during battles, requiring frequent order amendments. Therefore, all plans had to be elastic, with innovation playing a pivotal role. Much would depend on the cooperation and initiative of junior commanders and the enterprise of tank commanders. Success in this operation relied heavily on the skill, resolve, and creativity of the commanders in the field.²³⁵

On the morning of 18 November 1941, the BIA began a long march approaching the south of the Sollum Line. The XXX Corps was able to advance unopposed for 90 kilometres, pushing back the *Afrikakorps* by two forward positions near Gabr Saleh. The 4th Armoured Brigade was to stay at Gabr Saleh to cover the left flank of the 13th Corps to the northeast and the right flank of the 7th Armoured Division to the southwest. The 22nd Armoured Brigade was ordered to advance and engage the Ariete Division at Bir el Gubi, while the 7th Armoured Brigade was to seize the high ground overlooking the road from Tobruk to Sollum. Cunningham and Auchinleck's brilliantly prepared offensive caught Rommel in a highly awkward position. His forces were deployed, ready to attack Tobruk in forty-eight hours. This was when a heavy sandstorm made air surveillance for the Luftwaffe impossible. There were 414 Axis tanks pitted

²³³ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Points of Interest, 15 July 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part I, MODHS, New Delhi.

²³⁴ Auchinleck Papers, Secret Cipher Message to Troopers from Mideast, 4 July 1941, Manchester United Library, 275–291, England, United Kingdom.

²³⁵ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 147–148.

against 648 British, 57 armoured cars against 464, 289 anti-tank guns against 200, and 87 bombers against 125.²³⁶

By November 1941, the 8th Army was ready with the 4th Indian Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st Army Tank Brigade of XIII Corps; the 7th Armoured Division and the 1st South African of the recently established XXX Corps were joined by the 70th Division and 32nd Army Tank Brigade of the Tobruk garrison and 2nd South African Division in Army Reserve. Opposing the 8th Army was the newly formed *Panzer Gruppe Afrika*, comprising the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, the freshly arrived *Afrika* Division of the *Afrikakorps*, and the five Italian infantry divisions of the XXI Corps, which was supported by two Italian divisions of the *Corpo d'Armati di Manovra XX*.²³⁷

In terms of workforce, the two forces were relatively equal. However, the 8th Army enjoyed a considerable numerical advantage in material. It had 173 light, 339 medium and 199 heavy tanks at its disposal against 70 light, 174 medium German and 146 medium Italian tanks. The Italian mediums were little better than the light Stuarts of the British Army and light Panzer IIs of the Germans. Thus, the 8th Army enjoyed a 538 to 174 advantage in main battle tanks. The Germans had no operational armoured reserves, while the British had a sizeable one—about 259 tanks—and expected a further convoy to arrive imminently with about 236 tanks. In the air, a reinforced RAF deployed about 554 serviceable aircraft. The RAF enjoyed a superiority of 554 to 313 in the air, a sizeable advantage. With the 8th Army largely replenished and the *Wehrmacht* fully committed to Russia, Auchinleck launched Operation Crusader, a battle that would decide the whole course of the war.²³⁸

The British had struck in full force three days before the date set for Rommel's attack on Tobruk. Thus, his supplies to Tobruk were cut off, and the British 8th Army came to the front. General Henry Ewart Gott, commander of the 7th Armoured Division, decided to advance and take Bir el Gobi and Sidi Rezegh. The 22nd Armoured Brigade was to advance and attack the Ariete at Bir el Gobi, the battle's opening. The Ariete's artillery and the Bersaglieri were deployed at three vital points, and a company of their tanks met the approaching 22nd

²³⁶ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Administrative Notes, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²³⁷ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 156.

²³⁸ Reuth, *Rommel*, p. 131.

Armoured Brigade.²³⁹ They were checked, and at noon, the 22nd Armoured Brigade began attacking with the British tanks advancing in a large semi-circle. The main thrust was centred and defended by the Bersaglieri. The organised Italian tanks reacted from their defence positions and hit the BIA tanks at an angle. This frustrated the 22nd Armoured Brigade and made their fire suffer. The artillery and AT guns of the BIA restored the situation. By 1330 hours, the Italian positions began to crack, and few defenders surrendered. The BIA continued to advance, but the Italian high-profile trucks were mounted with 102 mm guns, which created havoc among the Crusader tanks. Then, a battalion of the Ariete hit the flank and rear of the disordered 22nd Armoured Brigade and forced it to retreat with substantial losses. The Ariete was left in possession of the field. The Germans and Rommel were unaware of this action for hours. The Italian army believed this improvement was due to the impact of the Germans in the theatre. The weapons were the same but were better used with improved leadership.²⁴⁰

Over the next three days, there were a series of armoured clashes in the area west of Sidi Omar and south of Sidi Rezegh. The 22nd Armoured Brigade clashed with the Ariete Division on 19 November, and Rommel went to the front to watch the battle. The Panzer pounced on the right flank of the British group and knocked out twenty-three Stuarts. Had the 7th Armoured Division concentrated on its forces, it could have dealt a deadly blow to the 21st Panzer Division. Rommel now had to admit that 'Crusader' had become a major offensive. The *Afrikakorps* made a mistake by running around the desert, hunting down an imaginary enemy and wasting precious fuel. Once again, shoddy reconnaissance work and precipitous action drew a blank for the Axis. The BIA went on an offensive that day. The South Africans engaged the Ariete Division at Bir el Gubi while the 7th Armoured Division hammered away at Sidi Rezegh. Units of the 7th Armoured Brigade attacked the *Luftwaffe* airfield at 1800 hours, destroying eighteen fighters, taking several prisoners, and seizing some trucks. Rommel then realised that Sidi Rezegh was the key to the British plan and ordered the 15 Panzer Division to stop its wild goose chase at Gabr Saleh, move back to Sidi Rezegh and hit the 7th Armoured Brigade from the rear. Major-General Ronald Mackenzie Scobie ordered the 7th Armoured Division, supported by the 1st South African Division, to step up the attack on Sidi Rezegh. In

²³⁹ Auchinleck Papers, Cipher Message in Immediate to General Claude Auchinleck, 2 July 1941, Manchester United Library, 275–291, England, United Kingdom.

²⁴⁰ Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, p. 73.

addition, the 22nd and 4th Armoured Brigades were ordered to counterattack Gabr Saleh and knock out the two Panzer divisions.²⁴¹

Even when the *Afrikakorps* tried to take the airfield at Sidi Rezegh, it failed due to the excellence of the British artillery. According to the Panzer Group calculations, Rommel was at a severe disadvantage. On 21 November, the Germans were massed in preparation for an attack on Tobruk and put up a ferocious resistance. But their 37 mm anti-tank guns proved virtually worthless against the heavily armoured British tanks. With Cunningham ordering the 13th Corps to advance westwards, the attack on Sidi Rezegh resumed, and Tobruk was to be relieved. Cunningham's broader aim for Crusader revolved around finding and destroying the enemy armour.²⁴² Auchinleck had taken great care to conceal the concentration of troops before the start of the operation. The British tanks were covered with metal tubing and sun shields and camouflaged to look like 3-ton lorries. Rommel was entirely surprised by this move. Auchinleck also took great care to keep the British armour in good condition. Hitler was now worried about the recent developments. He considered the North African campaign to be of prime importance and knew that an Axis defeat here would have an unfortunate effect on morale. He had great faith in Rommel's abilities, but he also realised that he had not been able to give him the troops and equipment he required for success. In an act of generosity, he praised the Italian soldiers for their fantastic help. Showing great concern for North Africa, he remained cautiously optimistic. He then ordered a tank battle for the next two days.²⁴³

The First Battle of Sidi Rezegh (November–December 1941)

Theoretically, the flat ground around Sidi Rezegh was perfect for an armoured clash. As Rommel began to grasp the significance of the 8th Army's advance and decided to respond, an extremely troubling dynamic emerged. The open terrain brutally exposed the difference between British and German armour. All the British tanks in the desert were armed with 2-pounder guns, both the standard anti-tank and tank guns of the British Army. This weapon could not penetrate the face of the hardened armour of the German Mark III and IV Panzers beyond 500 yards. The German Panzers could engage British armour and anti-tank guns at a safe distance using their superior 50 mm and 75 mm guns. With the short, effective range of

²⁴¹ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Information about the Enemy, 15–17 June 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁴² Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 156–157.

²⁴³ Roy, *Fighting Rommel*, p. 68

the inferior British tank and anti-tank guns, the British armoured units resorted to charging the enemy tanks and guns in the hope of knocking them out. Commanders relied on increasingly extreme means to motivate their men to take such risks. Auchinleck was mainly out in the desert to assess the situation.²⁴⁴

The 1st South Africans attacked the *Afrikakorps*' 155th Infantry Regiment at Sidi Rezegh on 22 November 1941. The attack was successful but with heavy losses. Heading towards Trigh Capuzzo, they met the 3rd Reconnaissance Unit Forward, supported by 88 mms, an action that resulted in the 6th Royal Tank Regiment losing all its tanks. The 22nd Armoured Brigade had to withdraw, and the 4th Armoured Brigade was late in reaching its place. By nightfall, the BIA airfield was once again in German hands. They lost to the 8th Panzer Regiment the following day at dusk, losing thirty-five tanks, several armoured cars, guns, and valuable paper. Cunningham immediately ordered the New Zealanders to advance to Tobruk. Rommel ordered the 15th Panzer Division and the 5th Panzer Regiment to join the Ariete Division to wipe out the remnants of the 7th Armoured Division and drive them to the south of Sidi Rezegh. They ran directly at the British 7th Support Group and overran it. After that, the next phase of the battle began, the Battle of Totensonntag or the 'Day of the Dead'.²⁴⁵

The rest of the 7th Armoured Division successfully advanced to Sidi Rezegh. It was a focal point in this battle as one of the three escarpments blocking the way to Tobruk ended there. Above it, the BIA would not move further until infantry support arrived. Rommel finally woke up from his slumber and ordered the *DAK* to take back Sidi Rezegh. This move against the BIA with the full force of *DAK* armour would be a high point for the Axis in this operation. It began with an indecisive armour action between the 15th Panzer and the 4th Armoured Division on 21 November 1941, in which the latter was forced back. Twenty-six Stuarts were damaged, and German losses were negligible. The 22nd Armoured Brigade arrived late, and so did the 21st Panzer, due to the slowing down of vehicles, which were both low on fuel. On 21 November 1941, the BIA succeeded in the escarpment above Sidi Rezegh. The Support Group's King's Royal Rifle Corps charged the ridge under heavy Axis artillery fire. The 6th Royal Tank Regiment followed up and supported the assault. The Bren Carrier platoons led the attack, with infantry on foot marching up the hill and capturing 700 German and Italian troops.

²⁴⁴ Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, p. 95.

²⁴⁵ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 159.

A 400-men battalion supported by the 6th Royal Tank Regiment achieved this with eighty-four casualties.²⁴⁶

After crossing the second escarpment, the 6th Royal Tank Regiment pushed on towards El Duda. Rommel ordered the 3rd Recce Battalion from the 21st Panzer to move up with 88 mm, 37 mm and 50 mm AT guns. By the end of the day, they destroyed all the 6th Royal Tank Regiment tanks that had crossed the escarpment. Nominally speedier, the BIA tanks never came to grips with the German tanks due to the Panzer crew's brilliant training and interaction. This armour action, later called the First Battle of Sidi Rezegh, ended in a German victory. What was notable here was that even when the Desert Rats were severely drained, they held off the *DAK* and exhausted the ammunition of the German Panzers with their defensive stand. On 22 November 1941, a battle for the airfield raged with the 15th Panzer, which overran the 7th Support Group of the BIA, and many tanks were destroyed. Then, the 15th Panzer called for the 21st Panzer, which brought about a fresh disaster for the British at Sidi Rezegh. The 21st Panzer overran the 4th Armoured Brigade and smashed the 8th Hussars. The 7th Armoured Division was down to 100 tanks.²⁴⁷

Cunningham concluded that the battle had taken a turn and was now an infantry battle. He ordered the New Zealanders to begin their advance from the rear of the Sollum front. Its 4th and 6th brigades moved towards Tobruk with their Valentine tanks. The 5th New Zealand and New Zealand cavalry stayed on the frontier. He felt this would be the key to victory in Operation Crusader and the linkup to relieve Tobruk. The 15th Panzer Division moved south with the Ariete and ran into units from the 1st South African Brigade, which was moving up to Sidi Rezegh. This was the opening move of what the *Afrikakorps* called the Battle of Totensonntag, resulting in a day of dramatic events in the Battle of the Desert. The British called this the Battle of Sidi Rezegh. General Ludwig Cruewell commanded this battle alone, as Rommel's directives were too late to reach him. The 5th South African Brigade's defensive position on the high ground south of Capuzzo was attacked by the 5th Panzer Regiment on the right flank and by the 8 Panzer Regiment at the centre. Using innovatory tactics, the Panzers were drawn up in long lines, with the infantry following behind in trucks.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Report on Operations, 15–17 June 1941, Administrative Notes, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁴⁷ Barnett, *Hitler's General*, p. 366.

²⁴⁸ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 156.

The main attack of the *Afrikakorps* came from the south, with the Ariete supporting the 5th Panzer's flank attack. But they were soon attacked by the 22nd Armoured Brigade on its left flank. The BIA continued to hammer away at the Panzer army the whole afternoon. But the fiercest fight was when the 15th Panzer and 21st Panzer were called upon to tackle the entire length at the front. Twice, they were beaten back by the ferocious anti-tank fire with heavy loss of life. General Cruewell decided to start from the north of the battlefield and sweep to the escarpment at Sidi Rezegh. The 15th Panzer along with the Ariete proceeded from Bir el Gobi, scattered the 7th Support Group, halted the transport portion of the 5th South African Brigade, and attacked it.²⁴⁹

The 5th South African Brigade was formed in a defensive laager or box, backed by field and AT artillery. The 15th Panzer broke into the South African position. The BIA artillery acquitted itself with 25-pounders firing solid shots, effective from 600 yards against the German tanks. But the 5th South African Brigade was dislodged and annihilated. The battle had been costly for both sides. The South Africans lost 3,394 men; the *DAK* lost 72 tanks. The immediate threat to Tobruk was checked, but Rommel was about to make a mistake. In the Battle of Totensonntag, the Germans had succeeded in beating back a severe threat to the Tobruk front, destroyed a large part of the British armour, and inflicted a severe blow to the 8th Army's morale. But the *DAK* suffered crippling losses. Unlike the British, they had no reserves. They would soon pay a heavy price for this remarkable tactical success. Encouraged by the victory, Rommel ordered the Panzer Division to head for the border, finish off the 7th Armoured Division and attack the British troops at the Sollum Line. This was one of Rommel's worst mistakes during the North African Campaign.²⁵⁰

The Dash to the Wire

Rommel attempted to seize the moment and break the opponent's will. On 24 November 1941, to exploit his success at Sidi Rezegh, he used the 21st Panzer Division, supported by the 15th Panzer Division, to launch an armoured attack towards the Libyan wire. He called this movement the 'dash to the wire'. He hoped the attack's strength and ferocity would surprise and disorientate the 8th Army so severely that it would be forced into a general retreat as in

²⁴⁹ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Intelligence Summary No. 161, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁵⁰ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Operational Instruction No. 46, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

April and June 1941. But Auchinleck held on and decided that there would be no retreat. Thus, Rommel found himself increasingly at the end of a long and uncertain logistical chain. His Panzers began to run out of fuel back at Sidi Rezegh. The 2nd New Zealand Division and 70th Division, which had sortied from Tobruk, could exploit the absence of the German armour and open a small corridor to the besieged fortress. Rommel's gamble failed, and he had no choice but to turn the 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions around.²⁵¹

Rommel had greatly overestimated his previous successes. The Panzer Group had yet to assess the damage inflicted upon them. He had less than one hundred serviceable Panzers, and the South Africans decimated his infantry. *OKW* ordered the German Navy to send its U-boats operating in the Mediterranean and concentrate on attacking the British supply convoys between Alexandria and Tobruk. While Rommel rejoiced in his pyrrhic victory, Cunningham fell apart under the strain. Rommel could not support his fantastic goals with his damaged troops. On 23 November, he ordered the destruction of the remaining 7th Armoured Division at Sidi Rezegh. They were pushed back to the Egyptian borders, enabling the 8th Army's supply dumps to be seized.²⁵² The following day, Rommel took complete command of the *Afrikakorps* and the Ariete to deliver the final *coup de grace*. Some of his officers were full of praise for Rommel, who had achieved astonishing success with minimal means. Rommel believed he could drive the 8th Army 'back to the wire'. But he had no idea how his forces were deployed. His superiors had no idea where he was or what he was doing. He did not maintain radio contact, and his outdated and incomprehensible reports gave no clue about his intentions.²⁵³

Rommel first ordered the 21st Panzer Division to advance along Trigh el Abd to cut off British retreat by closing the Halfaya Pass. Cruwell suggested a limited operation, trapping the British west of the Sollum Line to the south of Bardia. This afforded a better chance of success, given the *Afrikakorps*' limited forces and the imagined strength of the British positions. But Rommel remained adamant. The British, too, were surprised by the sudden dash of the *Afrikakorps*. Cunningham was alarmed by the number of tanks lost, and he called Auchinleck to the 8th Army headquarters to discuss the situation. Cunningham suggested a retreat to Egypt, while Auchinleck ordered a regrouping to the west of the Sollum Line. Auchinleck was adamant that 'Crusader' would continue, if necessary, till the last tank. The Panzers were to be destroyed,

²⁵¹ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, pp. 162–164.

²⁵² Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 143.

²⁵³ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 160–161.

the siege of Tobruk was to be relieved, and the enemy had to be sent back to Tripoli. Friedrich von Mellenthin, Staff Officer at the Panzer Group headquarters, praised Auchinleck's fighting spirit and shrewd strategic insight. In his opinion, this saved the 'Crusader' battle.²⁵⁴

Cunningham was frustrated and on the verge of a nervous breakdown due to overwork and sleep deprivation. Auchinleck decided to relieve him and replace him with his deputy, Major-General Neil Ritchie, who was well versed in the details of the 'Crusader'. Auchinleck was correct; Rommel had lost complete control of the situation, and his glorious campaign degenerated into uncoordinated, piecemeal actions. Troops from the 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions received Rommel's contradictory and frequently incomprehensible orders.²⁵⁵

However, they still followed orders, desperately short of fuel and with strong British forces on both flanks. The 5th Panzer Regiment got lost trying to meet up with the division. They soon confronted the 7th Indian Brigade and were beaten back. They headed back for fresh ammunition, only to find that their supply column had been bombed. Rommel planned another attack, but the Indian units were well positioned behind their minefield. The attack failed: seven more panzers were destroyed, the command posts lost connection with their aerial counterparts, and the regiment was lost due to being divided into two groups with no means of establishing contact with the division.²⁵⁶

The Tobruk front was largely intact, while the British columns at Bardia had nasty surprises for the Germans up their sleeves. What at first sight appeared to be a victory for the *Afrikakorps* was a shattering defeat. The Panzers fought brilliantly but suffered crippling losses. They were left with 17 of their 73 Panzer II's, 31 of their 144 Panzer III's, and 9 of their 38 Panzer IV's. But Rommel refused to accept the fact that he had been badly beaten. It was doubtful whether the *Afrikakorps* would be able to survive in Cyrenaica.²⁵⁷

Rommel knew he had to hang on to the Sollum front to survive this battle. But he was told that the Command Supremo could not send him the supplies and reinforcements that he badly needed. His urgent appeals to the *OKW* and *OKH* fell on deaf ears, and he reluctantly agreed

²⁵⁴ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 183.

²⁵⁵ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division Operation Instruction No. 47, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁵⁶ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 167.

²⁵⁷ Auchinleck Papers, Letter to Auchinleck, Private and Confidential, 5 August 1941, Manchester United Library, 292-305, England, United Kingdom.

to abandon the siege of Tobruk, ordering a withdrawal back to Gazala. He faced the difficult task of fighting his way back across Cyrenaica. The terrain was exceedingly rugged to defend with such modest forces because of the present threat of being outflanked. The Panzer Group's staff admired the 8th Army's brilliant build-up for the offensive and skilful deception. They felt the operation was clumsily carried out by dissipating the forces into small groups rather than delivering one blow or *Schwerpunkt*. The Germans also greatly admired the Long-Range Desert Group (LRDG) and the British Special Air Service (SAS). The Panzer Group considered it had done well against a numerically superior and better-equipped army used to fight in the desert. The object now was to preserve one's forces, counterattack and regain all that had been lost.²⁵⁸

Still determined to take Sidi Omar, Rommel ordered his forces back to Tobruk on 27 November 1941. Rommel's ill-considered and pointless raid ended with no relief to his troops on the Sollum Front and with irreplaceable loss of assets. The RAF established superiority over the airfield at Gambut. The British had been able to break out of Tobruk and had valuable time to bring up supplies and replacements from Egypt. Rommel did not have a complete German division at Tobruk; his forces were exhausted after six months of fighting. All now depended on the Panzer Group's response to the British offensive south of Tobruk. Rommel knew he had to win this battle to hang on to the Sollum front.²⁵⁹

The Axis had been able to stop the main Allied thrust. The 7th Armoured Division and the 1st South African Brigade were refitting in the south. Rommel decided to move dramatically forward with the *DAK*, with the Ariete under his command, to the frontier. Mussolini shifted the Ariete, Trieste and the Italian *Raggruppamento Esplorante* or *RECAM* reconnaissance group to Rommel's command. With this dash, Rommel aimed to relieve the garrisons along the frontier, hoping to find a cache of the Commonwealth supplies to replace his own and cut off those of the BIA and break their spirit. He had been close to achieving this and might have brought an outright Axis victory. But his luck had run out; the depleted strength of the Axis and Auchinleck's indomitable spirit thwarted his goals.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 154.

²⁵⁹ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Operation Instruction No. 15, Part A3, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁶⁰ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Instruction for Exercise of Western Desert Force, Part A3, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

The Trieste was now to assist the *Afrikakorps* division and the 3rd Recce battalion in facing the New Zealand division. This plan was doomed as the 3rd Reich was too weak. Rommel thought he could crush the remains of the XXX Corps, encircle the XIII Corps and return in twenty-four to thirty-six hours. This was a very unrealistic estimate as the XXX Corps had retreated to the south. ULTRA intercepted Rommel's plan on the Sollum front, and this influenced the BIA's decision-making at the operational level.²⁶¹ The 15th Panzer, in the middle of their Dash, had identified locations to be RAF air landing areas and forward supply depots. But they failed to communicate this to Rommel. The 4th Indian Division went into a defensive stance from where it could not be dislodged. The Axis tried to link up the garrison in Bardia but could not harm the BIA. The fighting strength of the BIA remained intact, while the *Afrikakorps* suffered from wear and tear and expenditure of fuel and supplies. The New Zealand troops continued advancing along the escarpment to fight through Tobruk. The final breakthrough was a night attack, a sporadic form of warfare that the BIA had incorporated from their training in mountain warfare during the inter-war period, which the Germans were not adept at. This attack succeeded; Rommel's 'Dash' ultimately failed, and the three Axis divisions returned to Tobruk.²⁶²

The Second Battle of Sidi Rezegh (November–December 1941)

Rommel, for the first time, had trouble controlling the campaign. The *DAK* had replenished itself at Bardia. The 15th Panzer had overrun the New Zealand Brigade Headquarters. The Ariete swung from much deeper into the desert and then north. But it was bombarded by artillery, likely from a BIA formation and Jock Columns. The 4th Armoured Division, now reinforced by reserve tanks and seventy-seven Stuart tanks, and the 22nd Armoured Brigade by forty-two to fifty cruisers, deployed themselves to stop the *DAK* from moving along the escarpment. This standoff caused heavy losses to both armies.²⁶³ The BIA displayed poor tactics by withdrawing from the field. This surprised the Germans and allowed them to destroy the damaged British tanks stationed on the field and recover some of their damaged ones. This withdrawal style had later become standard British practice. The New Zealand brigades withdrew to Tobruk for supply until 28 November 1941. The South African Brigade, supported by the remains of the British 7th Armoured Division, went on the move to enter Tobruk and

²⁶¹ Reuth, *Rommel*, p. 139.

²⁶² Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 177–178.

²⁶³ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 203.

Bardia near the escarpment. The Ariete inflicted heavy losses on the British 4th and the 22nd Armoured brigades, captured 200 men and liberated 200 prisoners of the 21st Panzer. The Axis had succeeded in stopping the BIA, but their losses were high. Auchinleck and Ritchie were adamant about not accepting defeat. Fortunately, they received reinforcements of troops and equipment, while the Axis did not. This was where the margin for victory turned towards the BIA.²⁶⁴

The 4th Indian Division was brought in, and on 4 December 1941, the advancing British Army Corps proceeded with the 11th Indian Brigade and the 31st Royal Artillery Regiment. Several Valentine tanks were deployed to clear the position of the corps to continue the advance and supply lines to the west of Tobruk with protection. The Indian brigades moved brilliantly through the night to take up a position to the rear of the Italian position and attacked at dawn from the west.¹³⁸

The 4th Armoured Brigade found the mobile part of the *RECAM* reconnaissance group, consisting of five armoured cars, four M tanks, and one L tank supported by nine 65 mm artillery pieces. The 4th Armoured Brigade defeated them and ended *RECAM*'s supplies. In the afternoon, the *DAK* arrived and launched an attack on El Duda, but it was repulsed. Rommel was forced to abandon the eastern face of the Tobruk siege line and concentrate all mobile forces to the south. Meanwhile, the remains of the Ariete division were strained by Jock Columns and air attacks of the RAF, and the Trieste was slow in assembling. They had to cover twice the distance of the *DAK*, and like most of the Axis arms, they ran out of fuel and ammunition. The divisional commanders of the Ariete and Trieste lacked energetic initiative. Poor communication status and problems in the Italian command structure led to the slow arrival and execution of orders. By 5 December 1941, Rommel knew that no reinforcement would arrive before the end of December 1941, and he decided to withdraw from Gazala. With the Italian infantry in the north, the Italian mobile forces in the centre, and *DAK* to the south, the Axis withdrew over the next few days. By 10 December 1941, the eight-month siege of Tobruk was entirely over. The BIA now focused on moving forward and planning their next attack on the Gazala line.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴ Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel*, p. 145.

²⁶⁵ Auchinleck Papers, Minister of State's Strategic Questionnaire of 16 December 1941, Manchester United Library, 306–321, England, United Kingdom.

With the BIA attacking the Gazala line throughout December, there were disagreements in the Axis camp about whether they should hold or fall back in a better position. Rommel decided to withdraw. The BIA again attacked on 15–16 December when ULTRA indicated that the Axis was retreating. The 4th Indian Division, the 7th Armoured Division, the Polish Brigade, the 5th New Zealand Brigade, and some miscellaneous units started moving. The 7th was to raid the Axis rear, and the 4th Indian Division, 5th and 7th Armoured brigades attempted to press through the Ariete and Trieste. The Ariete counterattacked with thirty M13s, twenty-three tanks of the 15th Panzer, and nineteen tanks of the 21st Panzer. The *Bersaglieri* stopped every infantry attack from the BIA, which led to stiff fighting between the armies. Rommel formed a *Kampfgruppe* of a battalion of *Bersaglieri*, and the Axis could retreat on 17 December successfully. By 23 December 1941, the remnants of the Italo-German forces were back at Benghazi and echeloned along the Via Balbia with the Gulf of Sirte to their immediate rear. The RAF tried to harass the Axis retreat as best as possible, but winter weather had already taken over, and the air attacks became less effective.²⁶⁶

The Crusader battle had become more of a technical clash of armour, which had evolved into a climatic struggle for physical and mental endurance. Crusader was the BIA's first successful offensive against the Germans, forcing Rommel to retire and abandon Cyrenaica. It was celebrated in London as if the Axis forces in North Africa had been destroyed. The BIA had succeeded because of overwhelming superiority in men and material. The Germans proved to be vastly superior at the tactical and operational levels. But Rommel made colossal blunders by hammering away at Tobruk, making his 'dash to the wire' before taking Tobruk, and constantly underrating his opponents.²⁶⁷ The Axis was still short in protecting the convoys to North Africa. The Italians had no aircraft carriers, which soon became a severe deficiency. The British had managed to decrypt the Italian naval code, so they knew all the details of the latter's movements. The Italian Navy put up a miserable performance in the Mediterranean. The Indian brigades and divisions traditionally had one-third of the units as the British. The artillery, though British, was mostly Indian-led and manned. The 4th Indian Division was particularly noted for its mountain capability, and of the 200 Indian races that fought in it, ten were considered the 'best fighting races': the Gurkhas and the Sikhs, along with other 'martial races'

²⁶⁶ Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, p. 99.

²⁶⁷ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 171.

such as the Jats, the Pathans, the Dogras, the Islamic Punjabis, the Rajputs, the Mahrattas, the Madrasis and the Bengalis.²⁶⁸

Operation Crusader was over, and the global war scenario changed with the entry of the United States of America into the war. Rommel and the Axis forces attempted to reverse their fortunes and continue to advance to Tripoli. Losses on both sides had been heavy. The Italian losses included 1,320 dead, 3,100 wounded and 13,000 missing. The Germans had just over 1,000 killed and over 3,500 injured and 10,100 missing. The BIA losses were 2,900 killed, 7,300 wounded and 7,500 missing, who were probably taken as prisoners.²⁶⁹ Auchinleck showed himself more capable of handling Rommel and the *Panzer Gruppe Afrika* than Wavell. By the end of the operation, both sides were exhausted. On 1 December 1941, the *Afrikakorps* received few replacements and reinforcements, while the 8th Army received a steady stream of men and armaments from its bases. By 4 December 1941, the *Afrikakorps* had only forty tanks left. In comparison, the replenished 7th Armoured Division alone had 140. By 6 December 1941, Rommel issued the order to retreat, Tobruk was relieved, and the 8th Army spent much of December driving the Axis forces out of Cyrenaica and mopping up enemy garrisons holding out at Bardia and Halfaya.²⁷⁰

A great victory had been achieved; the 8th Army had outfought and outlasted the *Panzer Gruppe Afrika* in a chaotic battle. This had placed an enormous strain on the troops and the junior leaders in charge of them, a fact that was emphasised in many censorship summaries of the operation. The BIA troops were prepared to outfight and outlast the Germans and destroy the enemy, tank for tank, man for man. This was a time in the battle when the men on both sides were exhausted, yet the one who could hold on the longest and fight with the most significant determination would win. By mid-December, the German infantry had been reduced almost to the level of the Italians. ‘Crusader’ had been conceived and fought with the understanding that the result would depend on the junior officers and their men’s determination, ingenuity and creativity. The soldiers of the 8th Army rose to the challenge and, along with Auchinleck’s remarkable *sang-froid*, allowed itself to capitalise on the considerable reserves of material and outlast the *Panzergruppe* in the battle of attrition that ensued.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 289–291.

²⁶⁹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 145.

²⁷⁰ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 176.

²⁷¹ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel’s North Africa Campaign*, pp. 190–192.

The first convoy of the Axis to Tripoli in 1942 arrived on time and without loss on 5 January. Along with unspecified Italian supplies, the *Afrikakorps* received 152 men, 147 vehicles and 3,504 tons of supplies, with fifty-one Panzers, sixteen armoured cars and a considerable number of anti-tank guns allotted to the *Afrikakorps*. This was enough to encourage Rommel to launch a second offensive. He saw the North African Campaign as Germany's grand strategy. He was set to win a glorious victory that would silence many critics and further enhance his reputation as a 'Master of Modern Warfare'. Japan's entry into the war dramatically affected the situation in North Africa. The British had to withdraw substantial resources to meet the threat in the Pacific. Rommel argued that the British were now equal in strength, but the British were superior. In armoured cars, the difference was 24 to 292; in artillery, 118 to 280; in anti-tank guns, 151 to 216; in anti-aircraft guns, 107 to 144; in fighters, 57 to 200; and in bombers, 75 to 125.²⁷²

The Germans were beginning to live in a fantasy world, with Hitler imagining that he could achieve his outlandish plans for world domination. Barbarossa was already having severe difficulties by November due to the early onset of winter. Hitler expected social tensions in Britain to grow so intense that a political arrangement would be in the realm of possibility. At times, Hitler hinted that the war was lost and that he was preparing for a national suicide. However, the *OKW* took a more realistic approach and concentrated on building up forces in North Africa, assuming that the United States could not open a second front in Europe in 1943. Hitler, too, recovered from his bout of pessimism and decided to provide the troops in North Africa with enough tanks, which, if on time, would lead to a dramatic change in the situation.²⁷³

Towards Gazala

There was a brief recovery period after the Crusader's victory, with the 8th Army losing 18,000 men and the *Afrikakorps* losing 38,000 men. Shortened lines of communication and supply for the Axis allowed the German and Italian units to regain their material strength. By mid-January, reinforcements arrived in the *Afrikakorps*, and this rest period granted to the soldiers had a favourable influence on their fighting spirit. Crusader was built up as the climax of the desert war. Auchinleck considered his main task to study the psychology of this mixed array of soldiers that comprised his army. The worst aspect of the morale problem was the army losing

²⁷² Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, p. 107.

²⁷³ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Defence Notes No. 2, 18 May 1942, Part A7, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

confidence in themselves and their equipment. The inferior penetrative power of the 2-pounder anti-tank gun left the infantry without adequate protection from tanks. The BIA infantry demanded that British tanks and 25-pounder batteries protect it. In addition to the ineffective anti-tank guns, during Crusader, the 25-pounder proved to be the best destroyer of the German tanks. The German Panzers were equipped with dual-purpose firearms capable of firing armour-piercing and high explosive rounds.²⁷⁴ They could act both as tank killers and destroyers of mobile artillery. They could sit out of range of the 8th Army's anti-tank gun detachments and knock them out using high explosive and machine-gun fire. BIA tanks, by comparison, only fired an armour-piercing shot. This could be achieved by different units from separate branches that co-operated closely. But this ideal was not always possible in desert combat's chaotic and fast-moving conditions. Innovative tank commanders had to resort to extreme methods to find solutions to the tactical challenges they faced in the desert. This brave and reckless approach was arguably the best way to face the *Panzergruppe*. However, this was dangerous and eventually led to morale difficulties as armoured units lost confidence in defeating the enemy without appalling and unsustainable casualties.²⁷⁵

Between January and May 1942, the frontline strength of the 8th Army increased from 88,000 troops to 126,000. Some 1,078 guns, 1,297 tanks, 30,566 vehicles and 320,204 tons of stores arrived from the United Kingdom and North America. But this meant little if the troops were not capable of making effective use of their mounting strength. At short notice, there was also tiny Auchinleck could do about the inferior quality of the British tanks and anti-tank guns. He could compensate for technological deficiencies by training and organising the 8th Army to function as a more effective team. He decided to emphasise the cooperation of all arms in the battle.²⁷⁶ With the tactical training of junior officers in collective training areas large enough to exercise a complete division, commanders, staff, and men, it would be possible to enhance skills that would allow infantry, tank, artillery, and anti-tank units to work together and negate the qualitative advantage over the *Afrikakorps*. To facilitate greater cooperation, a degree of reorganisation was required, and the changes finally provided brigade commanders with direct control over the army. Auchinleck's forces were ready to fight the next battle with a fully devolved command system. The power lay with local commanders in charge of a significantly

²⁷⁴ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Special Supplement Attached to 4 Individual Divisional Summary, No. 25, Part A, Vol No. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁷⁵ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Report on Operations, 15–17 June 1941, Administrative Notes, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁷⁶ Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, p. 192.

more significant proportion of the all-arms team. The new weapons included the Grant tank and the 6-pounder anti-tank gun. The Grant significantly improved all British armour seen before in a desert.²⁷⁷ The 8th Army now had an anti-tank weapon to take on the Panzers on an equal footing. By May 1942, the 8th Army was a hotbed of ideas, activity, and reorganisation.²⁷⁸

The Battle of Gazala

Auchinleck and Ritchie were preparing for a new offensive. With improved morale and cooperation, there was also the need for a bit of luck for the 8th Army. It appeared to them that Rommel had two options for the impending attack. He could assault the 8th Army's line frontally on the general axis of the Trigh-Capuzzo or swing around the open desert flank near Bir Hacheim and attack the 8th Army from the south and the rear. No matter Rommel's route, meeting his thrust with a concentrated armoured riposte was important.²⁷⁹ When the battle opened on 26 May 1942 at 1400 hours, Rommel knew the broad dispositions of the 8th Army on the Gazala Line. He began his great offensive in North Africa with a diversionary attack to the north, using the German 15th Infantry Brigade and the Italian infantry divisions of X and XXI Corps. He led the three divisions of the *Afrikakorps* and the two divisions of the Italian XX Corps, using 10,000 vehicles all around the desert flank, attempting a *schwerpunkt*. The BIA now saw 'a whole bloody German armoured division' smashing forward with infantry and gunners. Only seventy-five minutes after the first armoured clash, Rommel was already in the heart of the Gazala defences. The plan to meet Rommel's armour with a concentrated and coordinated counterthrust had failed utterly for the BIA.²⁸⁰

By the next day, Rommel's forces were almost as scattered as those of the 8th Army. Rommel had no choice but to pull back his forces and concentrate them in a position later known as the 'Cauldron'. Rommel's moves had a punch and urgency that his opponent lacked. On 4 June 1942, Ritchie pulled the 8th Army together and launched a coordinated counterattack, using three divisions and a tank brigade named 'Operation Aberdeen'. This was intended to be a forceful pincer movement from the north and east. But it proved to be a catastrophe. The infantry and the armour fought the battle in an uncoordinated manner. The location of the

²⁷⁷ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Occupation of a Defensive Position, 23 November 1939, Part A, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁷⁸ Barnett, *Hitler's General*, p. 319.

²⁷⁹ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Operation Instruction No. 10, Part A3, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁸⁰ Messinger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox*, p. 143.

enemy's frontline was incorrectly identified, so the initial artillery barrage hit an empty desert. According to British historians, the battle had been so ill-coordinated and inadequately handled that it was later believed to be one of the worst-executed British operations of the war. The *Panzerarmee's* logistic situation was secure for the time being, so Rommel continued his relentless offensive, and on 11 June 1942, he took on the British armour in a defensive clash around Knightsbridge.²⁸¹

Conclusion

These engagements on the Gazala Line showed that the BIA and its units failed to work effectively as a team. Empowered junior leaders could not compensate for a lack of grip, control and coordination at the army, corps, and divisional levels. Those engaged on the frontline were required to use their initiative and judgement without knowing whether their decisions aided or undid the plans of their superiors. The fighting power of the 8th Army was dissipated and dislocated, amplifying the natural confusion of the battle. Separate actions of the units could not be coordinated beyond a local battlefield by a higher command to produce a broader strategic effect throughout the Gazala battle.²⁸² The morale and cohesion of the 8th Army had also begun to falter. The *Panzerarmee* launched its other offensive on 20 June with an aerial bombardment and entered the town the following day. Tobruk's commander, Major-General H.B Klopper, decided to surrender, making the second siege of Tobruk last a little longer than twenty-four hours. This sent shockwaves throughout the British Empire. Auchinleck realised that digging into Mersa Matruh would be headlong or chaotic. So, on 30 June 1942, the 8th Army reached a miniature railway halt some 60 miles west of Alexandria called El Alamein. In the desert, the El Alamein position was on the sea to the north and the impassable Qattara Depression to the south, making it Egypt's most robust defence line. Every British soldier was happy as it was a turn in the tide in literal terms, as the coast from the Depression was 40 miles. In these 40 miles, one could watch over the approaching enemy and the lines of communication simultaneously.²⁸³

Auchinleck faced other difficulties, including dealing with a disorganised and demoralised army. There was disappointment among all ranks of the 8th Army, accompanied by admissions of weariness or fatigue. Troops also criticised leadership in the field, and it was said that some

²⁸¹ Brighton, *Patton, Montgomery, Rommel*, p. 132.

²⁸² Schmidt, *With Rommel in the Desert*, pp. 173–174.

²⁸³ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 154–155.

Allied forces thought that Rommel was a better commander. There was a growing belief that the BIA forces would have proved more than a match for the Axis forces under exemplary leadership. With the 8th Army's morale potentially on collapse, Rommel launched his next attack on the El Alamein Line on 1 July 1942. The 8th Army unleashed concentrated firepower in the bottleneck of El Alamein. This had a devastating effect on the troops of the *Panzerarmee* as they tried to drive out of the El Alamein Line. Panic broke out in the divisions, and, this time, the *Afrikakorps* were more exhausted than the British and Commonwealth armies. Rommel had pushed his army so far and fast that the *Luftwaffe* could no longer provide meaningful air cover. The RAF had a numerical superiority over *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika*, which had 780 operational aircraft—the critical moment of the war had passed. By 3 July 1942, *Panzerarmee* was reduced to twenty-six German and five Italian tanks fit for action, and Auchinleck had gained a firm grip aided by the natural strength of the El Alamein position, the rapid reinforcement of the 8th Army, and the extraordinary efforts of the Desert Air Force.²⁸⁴

The 8th Army had also received two new, relatively fresh, and well-trained infantry divisions and a new armoured division for the attritional warfare, which was to be developed in the confined spaces of the El Alamein position. These formations were largely uncontaminated by the disasters at Gazala, Tobruk and Mersa Matruh and brought new life to the 8th Army. By the end of July 1942, there was an improvement in morale among all ranks, but victory had still not been achieved. Something dramatic must happen if the 8th Army was to reserve its fortunes in the desert.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Intelligence Summary No. 57, Part A3, Vol. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

²⁸⁵ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Points of Interest, 15 July 1941, Part I, Vol. 601/221/WD/Part I, MODHS, New Delhi.

CHAPTER 4

Stalemate and Victory: 1942

The importance of the general's reputation means that unpleasant reserves and defeats are not allowed to obscure the fact that Auchinleck was the real 'victor at Alamein', Rommel a true 'desert fox' and that Montgomery was the 'master of the battlefield'.

—Niall Barr²⁸⁶

Introduction

The war in North Africa was a campaign in which the British-Indian Army (BIA), the Italian Tenth Army and the *Afrikakorps* fought against a physical enemy and a challenging climate. For both sides, the goal remained the possession of North Africa and the Mediterranean. As discussed in the previous chapters, the Allies hoped to use the occupation of North Africa to close the blockade ring from the south around the Axis powers, to protect their bases in Egypt, the Suez Canal, Malta, and Gibraltar, and to create a strategic assembly area for future operations. The Axis powers hoped to secure the Italian colonies and, significantly, to block the Allied threat to Europe from the entire Mediterranean. In this kind of war, innovation became the norm for organisations, materials, and personnel. In the summer and autumn of 1941, the British government established the 8th Army in north-western Egypt. It increased its strength to four motorised divisions, one armoured division, two armoured brigades, and several regiments. The commander of the 8th Army, Alan Cunningham, strengthened his offensive plans behind a veil of secrecy. He collected 30,000 tons of supplies in depots, primarily on his southern flank, laid a pipeline to increase fuel supply, and established a forward railhead 120 km west of Mersa Matruh. The XIII Corps had the task of fixing German-Italian forces on the border and breaking up their communications and formations. The German troops never discovered any British activity due to well-conducted British plans, which included night marches, effective use of cover and camouflage by day, radio silence, as well as

²⁸⁶ Niall Barr, *Pendulum of War: The Three Battles of El Alamein* (London: Pimlico, 2005), pp. xxxviii–xxxix.

making use of storms and rainy weather that grounded Axis reconnaissance flights, thus making it impossible for the Germans to decipher their communications.²⁸⁷

General Erwin Rommel, the ‘Desert Fox’, entered Egypt in June 1942 at the El Alamein checkpoint to push onto the Nile. According to intelligence reports, Rommel, the commander of the *Afrikakorps*, did this in a rush because the 8th Army was depleted, confused, and in a low morale condition. He had also captured ample supplies at Tobruk, which boosted his confidence. The impending invasion of Malta had to be cancelled, though, as Axis air power was insufficient to handle both operations simultaneously. But nothing could stop Rommel from advancing as he was steadfast about capturing Alexandria by the end of June. Unfortunately, his speed diminished quickly through the attrition of the vehicles and the weapons of the Axis army.²⁸⁸

The Allies, on the other hand, were acquiring rapid reinforcements from across the Middle East. It is also crucial to note the change in command here as General Claude Auchinleck took over personal command of the Middle Eastern Theatre from General Archibald Wavell in July 1942. From then on, he would command from the front and stop the Axis forces. He would mould the 8th Army into a body that would continue to fight through the Middle East in fluid defence. All medium and heavy artillery was also placed under Auchinleck’s direct orders, thus giving the headquarters a real punch. Auchinleck also continued forming mixed brigade-sized fighting units, a tactic adopted before Gazala. The British–Indian Army tried to resist this as it forced them to operate in a way that was neither trained nor designed.²⁸⁹

Holding Mersa Matruh

Auchinleck ordered to thwart the Axis forces and then to fall back on Matruh. Orders were issued to the 8th Army to prepare a decisive action around Matruh while simultaneously delaying the Axis advance as far as possible with a covering force. General Neil Ritchie, Commander-in-chief of the 8th Army, had to find two forces to delay the advance of the Axis powers and another to construct a defensive position at Matruh. The former task was entrusted

²⁸⁷ David French, *Raising Churchill’s Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 214–216.

²⁸⁸ Auchinleck Papers, Confidential Letter, 18 November 1942, File- LVIII-1001-1017, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

²⁸⁹ Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *Rommel’s North Africa Campaign: September 1940–November 1942* (USA: Da Capo Press, 1999), pp. 187–189.

to the XIII Corps and XXX Corps. The X Corps was supposed to arrive from Syria and relieve the XXX Corps. The main burden of defence fell on the XIII Corps, as its role was to delay the Axis troops until the defences of Matruh were ready. The corps had the 7th Armoured Division and three infantry divisions. The Armoured Division consisted of the 4th and the 22nd Armoured Brigade Groups with 70 and 22 tanks, respectively, along with the 7th Motor Brigade Group of four battalions and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade Group. The infantry comprised the 50th British, 10th Indian, and the 1st South African Division. It was decided to organise the three infantry divisions into one block of forces and the four armoured brigade groups into another. The infantry block was then named the holding force and assigned a static defensive role, while the armoured block became the mobile striking force. Thus, the XIII Corps was split into two elements, and it was hoped that this division would permit it to play to its strengths. On 22 June 1942, General Ritchie authorised a partial withdrawal of the XIII Corps from the frontier. Accordingly, the 10th Indian Division, the 151st Infantry Brigade, and the 2nd South African Brigade began a gradual retirement unit by unit. At the same time, the 7th Armoured Division positioned itself on the frontier to prevent Axis forces from crossing the border.²⁹⁰

The distance from the frontier to Matruh was about 140 miles, meaning there was no scope for fighting a delaying action. This task was assigned to the 69th Infantry Brigade, the 7th (British), and the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, as they were the only Allied formations in contact with the Axis troops. The significance of such a situation was that there was a surplus of infantry for which field artillery support could not be provided. With many vehicles necessary for its movements, such infantry would prove an incumbrance and tend to decrease mobility in a battle. Thus, it was imperative to reorganise the defence of Matruh on a different basis.²⁹¹

All surplus infantry was sent to the rear area to help prepare for the El Alamein position. The remainder was then organised into what was called 'battle groups'. These battle groups had as their foundation the maximum number of field guns that could be provided for each; this was the best way to keep the defence mobile as the battle groups were rapidly moving to the front where danger was the greatest. This unconventional method of fighting has been referred to as a sign of the bankruptcy of generalship in certain quarters. This system broke up the fighting

²⁹⁰ B.H. Liddell-Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), pp. 238–239.

²⁹¹ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from Lord Linlithgow to Auchinleck, 17 July 1942, File- LVI-978-989, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

force into small bodies, with divisions and brigades not being allowed to fight. Due to this, units could not develop their maximum fighting strength. While it is true that this method was hardly different from the tactics of guerilla warfare (usually the last resource of a defeated army), it is also true that not using such a formation might have led to a bigger disaster because there was a deficiency of artillery. The surplus infantry transferred to El Alamein early was instrumental in ensuring that the Allied position was somewhat ready in time. Otherwise, the Axis forces would have swept El Alamein and overrun the rest of Egypt.²⁹²

By the evening of 24 June 1942, the Allied columns were at level with Sidi Barrani and on the following day with Matruh. This was when Auchinleck decided to take over direct control of the 8th Army from General Ritchie. However, no changes were made to the other commanders and staff officers of the 8th Army. Auchinleck feared that unless decisions were taken rapidly and energetic measures were implemented, the 69th Infantry Brigade might be cut off in its retreat, or a more significant part of the 8th Army would be stuck in Matruh. Two corps were engaged in the task of defending Matruh. The X Corps was garrisoning the town and strengthening its defences, while the XIII Corps was organised in battle groups to fight mobile actions to prevent Axis groups from reaching Matruh. The 10th Indian Division was replaced by the New Zealand Division as the former was better equipped for mobile warfare. The X Corps had under its command the 10th Indian Division and the 151st Infantry Brigade and withdrew from Sidi Barrani to Matruh. Both met Axis forces on the way, while the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade and the 7th British Motor Brigade from the 7th Armoured Division fought similar delaying actions to the west.²⁹³

The Matruh position consisted of a forfeited perimeter around the town itself. The perimeter was reinforced by an additional covering position to the west of the town from where the most significant threat was. This external position was further protected by a deep minefield, which ran from the coast, then in front of it, onwards to Charing Cross, and thence eastward. About 20 miles south of Matruh was another protective position, a detached strong point on the high ground near Minqar Sidi Hamza El Gharbi. Two more minefields started from there, running northwards and sealing the area behind. There was a gap of 6 miles between the two groups of minefields, and infantry was needed to close this gap. The 29th Indian Infantry Brigade was

²⁹² Lieut-General Sir Francis Tuker, *Approach to Battle: A Commentary-Eighth Army, November 1941 to May 1943* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1963), pp. 209–211.

²⁹³ Auchinleck Papers, Most Immediate Message from Prime Minister to Auchinleck, 9 June 1942, File- LI 908-924, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

tasked with completing the defence around Matruh. The Axis forces were west of this ring, more vulnerable from the west and south than from the north or east. Thus, the western flank was strengthened by an additional cover, but the southern flank was a more difficult front to handle.²⁹⁴

The prominent escarpment on the southern flank formed a natural obstacle. Between this and the defensive ring enclosing Matruh was a wide corridor of level country, which required many tanks and infantry to defend adequately. Further south, between Minqar Qaim and the escarpment, were the 4th and the 2nd Armoured Brigades of the 1st Armoured Division under the XIII Corps.²⁹⁵ Despite everything, all these forces were too inadequate to ward off the threatened thrust from the *Afrikakorps*. There was a significant shortage of armour and artillery, and the infantry considered worthy were sent away from El Alamein. Thus, the existing forces had to closely watch the long stretches of minefields and the gap in the southern flank. There was an ever-present risk of the Axis forces penetrating one of the sides overnight.²⁹⁶

Although Auchinleck decided to evacuate Matruh, the Axis tanks broke through the gap held by the 29th Indian Brigade on the evening of 26 June 1942. The brigade was too weak to obstruct this move, and a wedge was driven between the X Corps and the XIII Corps. General William Gott and Auchinleck ordered the troops to withdraw to Fuka. Still, the X Corps could not withdraw at such short notice because it had transferred its transport to the New Zealand Division to make its battle group fully mobile. Thus, the road of retreat of the X Corps was cut off at a point 20 miles east of Matruh, resulting in the 10th Indian Division and the 151st Brigade being isolated and placed in imminent danger of being captured or destroyed.²⁹⁷ On 29 June 1942, the X Corps decided to break out southwards and complete its withdrawal through the desert, covered by the 7th British Motor Brigade, which kept attacking northwards against the flank of the advancing *Afrikakorps* to screen the former's withdrawal. The withdrawal was successful, and the X Corps reached El Alamein before the morning. But the corps was disorganised and had to be reorganised and re-fitted. At the same time, the XIII Corps was fighting a delaying action to the west of El Alamein. The *Afrikakorps* were

²⁹⁴ Daniel Allen Butler, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel* (USA and Great Britain: Casemate Publishers, 2015), p. 382.

²⁹⁵ Montgomery Papers, Remarks of an Army Commander after Exercise Tiger, 4 June 1942, Part II, LMD 19, Imperial War Museum, London.

²⁹⁶ Philip Warner, *Auchinleck: The Lonely Soldier* (Great Britain: Sphere Books, 1982), pp. 184–195.

²⁹⁷ Kaushik Roy, *Fighting Rommel: The British Imperial Army in North Africa during the Second World War, 1941–1943* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 102–103.

advancing rapidly, and their forward troops were already at Sidi Abd El Rahman, 15 miles from El Alamein.²⁹⁸

The 50th Division, the 10th and 20th Indian Brigade of the 5th Indian Division, and the 2nd New Zealand Division joined post-Mersa Matruh, the 8th Army. The 1st and the 7th Armoured Divisions continued defence tactics despite being depleted. Still, they could not do so to the best of their ability due to incomplete British intelligence on the Axis tank strength. While the estimate was that the Axis had 339 tanks, 220 of them German, the reality remained that they had 104 tanks by the end of June. The Royal Air Force (RAF) stepped up by bombing the advancing Axis columns. It supported the retreating British-Indian Army (BIA) and constantly bombarded the enemy at night with the help of Albacore, a naval torpedo bomber.²⁹⁹ The men of the 8th Army knew that they were as challenging physically as their opponents; they believed that their adaptation to desert conditions was better than that of the Germans. They knew their native intelligence and shrewdness were enough to withstand enemy onslaught. In contrast to the defeats in the previous few months and the inadequacies of the men who commanded them, they also stood their successes against the efficiency and coordination of the *Afrikakorps* under their legendary commander, Rommel.³⁰⁰

Rewinding on the performance of the Axis forces, on 26 June 1942, the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* (DAK) had advanced into the centre of the British deployment, while the XXI and X Corps advanced near the Matruh perimeter and the XX Motorised hit the south. The 29th Indian Brigade stopped the 21st Panzer Division after having met one of Auchinleck's Jock columns. In the following two days, the DAK reached the Fuka area, cutting off the retreat routes of the British divisions. On the next day, they tried to open the defensive perimeter of Mersa Matruh but achieved no success. The *Trento*, with the 7th Bersaglieri regiment, had to attack from the Charing Cross trail to Matruh, while the 90th Light assaulted from the east and finally captured Mersa Matruh. They took some 2,000 BIA prisoners this time.³⁰¹

During the retreat from Mersa Matruh, the New Zealanders engaged in one of their most dramatic war actions. They utilised the darkness of the night to escape the Axis forces. They

²⁹⁸ Reports on Operations: Alamein 1 Armoured Division, 18 November 1942, WO169_4054, PRO, KEW, UK.

²⁹⁹ Alan Moorehead, *Desert War: The North African Campaign, 1940–1943* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 194–195.

³⁰⁰ Barrie Pitt, *Year of Alamein: 1942, the Crucible of War* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), p. 170.

³⁰¹ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, pp. 189–191.

stuffed troops into whatever vehicles they had and went directly up to the 21st Panzer Division. The ensuing action saw the night filled with gunfire and lit up with flames. However, Rommel's incredible success at Tobruk and Mersa Matruh had dampened the morale of the 8th Army, resulting in a crisis among the latter. Rommel's rapid advance hindered Auchinleck's planned halt at Fuka because he realised it was essential to save the units of his disorganised 8th Army, which could not be done under pressure at Fuka. Auchinleck ordered his army to retreat to El Alamein; aware of this retreat, Rommel urged his troops to advance there before the BIA columns. Panic now spread through the Commonwealth forces. The Royal Navy hurriedly evacuated Alexandria as a naval base, and demolition units were installed. The hasty process prevented them from adequately notifying the army of this evacuation.³⁰²

Towards El Alamein

The defensive positions that Auchinleck decided to hold at El Alamein would later be well-known as the Alamein Line. El Alamein was a minor station on the Desert Railway, which ran along the coast. It was also the northernmost strong point of the Alamein Line. The southernmost point was formed by the Qattara Depression, a vast expanse of quicksand and salt marshes that made it a perfect obstacle to vehicular traffic. To the south of the Qattara Depression lay the Great Sand Sea, equally impenetrable. Thus, the Alamein Line was flanked to the north by the sea at Arabs Gulf and to the south by the sandy wastes of the Qattara Depression and the Sand Sea. Therefore, the only piece of land suitable for the passage of an army was the area between these two extreme obstacles. This stretch measured about 40 miles across its narrowest point, not long for armoured manoeuvre.³⁰³

The Alamein Line was open to a frontal attack over this narrow distance since it could not be outflanked from either side. This stretch of 40 miles was covered by ridges and hillocks in the centre, which could be used for defensive solid positions and other high features. The Alamein Line was constructed in 1941 as a routine defensive position to fall back upon, not as an ideal bastion for the last-ditch defence of Alexandria and the rest of Egypt. Nevertheless, the Alamein Line was no more than a chain of scattered positions, weak in troops, disconnected, and lacking in depth. There were only three prepared positions: the semi-permanent

³⁰² O'Connor Papers, Divisional Commanders Correspondence Reports, June 1940–October 1940, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Studies, Kings College, London.

³⁰³ Auchinleck Papers, Telegram Extract from Churchill to Auchinleck, 16 June 1942, File- LII 925-942, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

fortification in the north around El Alamein itself, the defences in the centre, Bab El Qattara, and those in the extreme south, around Naqb Abu Dweiss. The troops available to manage those positions were neither sufficient nor well organised. They were the New Zealand and the 5th Indian Divisions under the XIII Corps, and the 50th (British) and the 1st South African Division under the XXX Corps. The New Zealand Division had already suffered 650 casualties at Minqar Qaim.³⁰⁴

The First Battle of El Alamein

Auchinleck had to re-group and redistribute the troops to the best advantage. He hoped to fill the corps with armour, supplemented by mobile battle groups. The *Panzerarmee* attacked the XXX and XIII Corps on the morning of 1 July. The 1st South African Division held the El Alamein fortification in the north, and the 18th Indian Infantry Brigade Group of the 5th Indian Division held the Deir El Shein. The *Afrikakorps* launched simultaneous attacks on the South African and the Indian positions. The more powerful of the two attacks were aimed at the Indian Divisions. With solid artillery support, this infantry attack was launched with great dash and vigour. The 18th Indian Brigade was new to such experience, having just arrived from Iran and taken up their positions quickly. But it held its ground, retaliated, and repelled the attackers. The *Afrikakorps* returned with a strong support of tanks under the cover of a heavy dust storm. Then, a five-hour-long battle broke the shock of the first attack, robbed the Axis of a precious initiative, and gave the BIA time to organise the rest of the Alamein Line.³⁰⁵

Auchinleck decided to use the South African Division to launch fierce counterattacks against the *Afrikakorps* and create significant diversions. He ordered the XIII Corps to wheel north and strike at the flank and rear of the Axis disposition, while the XXX Corps would hold the ground in the north and check all attempts to advance eastwards. The XIII Corps started its attack in the afternoon of 2 July 1942, employing the New Zealand and the 5th Indian Divisions. The attack received support from the air force and progressed very rapidly at first. The next day, the corps took several prisoners and destroyed several Panzer tanks. Next, it occupied El Mreir

³⁰⁴ Heinz Werner Schmidt Aide-de-Camp, *With Rommel in the Desert* (USA: The Noonday Press, 1991), pp. 49–50.

³⁰⁵ Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, pp. 275–277.

and approached Deir el Shein, where the 11th Indian Brigade had been annihilated only a few days earlier.³⁰⁶

Resistance was strong here; the *Afrikakorps* had consolidated the locality and converted it into a point of solid defence. They laid out a series of strong points in the westerly direction to safeguard their line of communication with Daba. The BIA realised it needed more time to strengthen the northern and central sectors of the Alamein Line. This included moving up the 9th Australian Division to a position just behind the El Alamein fortress and dispatching one of its brigades to the Ruweisat Ridge to buttress that crucial position in the centre. The XIII Corps followed the three New Zealand Brigades, then withdrew eastwards to occupy the ground about Deir el Hima, thus closing a gap that existed between the left flank of the XXX Corps and the right flank of the XIII Corps. The *Afrikakorps*, too, occupied Deir el Qattara on 9 July 1942 to keep a gap open in the extreme south. They settled down along a line running through Qaret el Khadim and the El Taqa plateau, which put them on the left flank of the XIII Corps, making it difficult for them to build an attack for a while.³⁰⁷

Auchinleck ordered the XXX Corps to attack the Tel el Eisa feature, which consisted of a group of mounds on the railway west of El Alamein. The heights of these mounds were of tactical importance as this helped the BIA to overlook the Axis positions to the south. This attack was launched early on 10 July 1942 by the 9th Australian Division, supported by the 1st South African Division and infantry tanks. The attack took shape quickly and was successful, and the Australians entrenched themselves at the Tel el Eisa mounds. There was opposition, but they held fast to their gains. They destroyed several tanks and captured guns and a thousand Italian prisoners.³⁰⁸ Retaining a firm base from the Tel el Eisa feature, they continued to threaten the western and southern positions of the Axis forces. The *Afrikakorps* launched several counterattacks to retake the features, all successfully repulsed. Auchinleck wanted to give the Axis no time to wrest any other initiative. On the night of 14 July 1942, the New Zealand Division and the 5th Indian Infantry Brigade attacked the centre, along with a feature of great

³⁰⁶ Auchinleck Papers, Secret Cipher Message to the Commander-in-Chief of the Eighth Army, 3 July 1942, File-LV 963-977, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁰⁷ Martin Blumenson, 'Rommel,' in *Hitler's General*, ed. Correlli Barnett (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 185–187.

³⁰⁸ Auchinleck Papers, Private message from Auchinleck to the Prime Minister, 10 June 1942, File- LII 925-942, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

tactical importance named the Ruweisat Ridge. This was an essential point in the series of parallel ridges in the Alamein Line.³⁰⁹

Running from east to west, the ridges were at right angles to the front, which made them more salient. The attack was successful, and the 5th Indian Brigade consolidated its position around Pt. 64 while the New Zealanders occupied a position to its west. These two formations, in a combined manner, gained considerable ground. The *Afrikakorps* successfully overrun the New Zealand positions on the afternoon of 16 July 1942, and the 5th Indian Brigade became dangerously exposed in the Alamein Line. It was attacked for two days by artillery and aircraft, with the German 8th Tank Regiment and 155th Lorrain Infantry Regiment conducting a full-fledged assault at 18:05 hours on 16 July. There was heavy fighting for about three hours. This was when the 2nd Armoured Brigade, assisted by artillery, came to the rescue and helped the New Zealanders retain their foothold on the Ruweisat Ridge.³¹⁰

Of all Axis prisoners taken during this operation, most were Italian. Further, to relieve pressure on the Ruweisat sector, Auchinleck arranged for a two-corps offensive on the rest of the front. The idea was to press the Axis back simultaneously on the northern and southern flanks. This attack commenced on the night of 16 July. The 9th Australian Division in the north of the sector was the first to strike, capturing Tell el Makh Khad, a low ridge about 8 miles west of the Alamein railway station; it took about 500 prisoners. Two days later, the 7th Armoured Division struck in the southern sector with light tanks and motorised units and tried to exert pressure against the Axis positions on Jebel Kalakh and the Taqa plateau. Unfortunately, neither of these forces could achieve any notable success. The Axis continued to attack the ridge intermittently during 18 and 19 July, during which the 5th Indian Brigade luckily repulsed. The only objective achieved was that the *Afrikakorps* were kept busy fighting all day along the front and given no time to take any initiative. Immediately after, Auchinleck wanted to strike at the centre to divide the *Afrikakorps* into two and then roll up the northern half.³¹¹

None of these attacks were successful as the Allies couldn't relieve the pressure against the Ruweisat Ridge since the Axis continued to attack the ridge intermittently during 18 and 19 July. The 5th Indian Brigade repulsed all attacks. The primary aim of the offensive was to keep

³⁰⁹ Alan Jeffreys, *Approach to Battle: Training the Indian Army During the Second World War* (England: Helion & Company Limited, 2016), pp. 123–124.

³¹⁰ Montgomery Papers, Army Commander's Memorandum No. 2, 22 June 1942, Part II, LMD 19, Imperial War Museum, London.

³¹¹ 1st Armoured Division Intelligence Summary No. 75, 23 November 1942, WO169_4054, PRO, KEW, UK.

the *Afrikakorps* busy fighting on the front, and that was achieved more and less. This left the Allies with no time to open an offensive independently. The attack was to be preceded and supported by heavy artillery and aerial bombardment, while infantry in the central sector was to open the way through minefields for armoured forces to break through.³¹²

On 21 July 1942, the 161st Indian Brigade attacked towards Deir el Abyad and the 6th New Zealand Brigade towards El Mreir. The 9th Australian and 1st South African Divisions opened an offensive to support the main central thrust and to exploit the success gained earlier at Tel el Eisa. The operations on the southern flank aimed to capture the Taqa plateau and attempt to divert attention from the operations proceeding in the central sector. The initial advance in the centre went well, and the infantry achieved its objectives before dawn on 22 July. After that, the Axis troops counterattacked and overran the positions of the 6th New Zealand Brigade, taking many prisoners. They also practically destroyed the entire battalion of the 161st Indian Brigade. Nevertheless, the infantry went on with their task. The 23rd Armoured Brigade passed through the minefield gaps and progressed towards its objective. However, due to the breakdown of wireless communications, it soon lost its effectiveness and cohesion, and finally, the progress came to a halt. It had to, then, make a safe withdrawal.³¹³

The 2nd Armoured Brigade had to replace the 23rd Armoured Brigade as the loss of tanks was so heavy that it was in no position to stage a counter-attack. It attacked the same evening to support the main central thrust, which made fresh progress and gained some significant ground but ultimately failed in its main object. The situation on the northern and the southern flanks wasn't favourable for the BIA either.³¹⁴ The 9th Australian and the 1st South African Division reached the north of the Alamein Line. The 69th Infantry Brigade had secured the Taqa plateau in the south but was repelled by a counter-attack. Auchinleck had failed to maintain the momentum of the attack due to a lack of reserves. The infantry of the XXX Corps had been fighting continuously and was feeling the effects of exhaustion, so the 69th Brigade reinforced it. This weakened the front of the XIII Corps, but it was instructed to try and conceal its weakness by aggressive patrols and feint attacks to mislead the Axis about its strength. The operations commenced on the night of 26 July with an attack south of the Tel el Eisa salient.

³¹² Lieut-Colonel G.R. Stevens Obe, *Fourth Indian Division* (East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, n.d.), pp. 180–182.

³¹³ Auchinleck Papers, Telegram Extract from Churchill to Auchinleck, 16 June 1942, File- LII 925-942, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³¹⁴ B.H. Liddell Hart, *A History of the Second World War* (London: Cassell and Company, 1970), pp. 340–344.

The intention was to pierce the minefields and pass through the armoured and motorised formations.³¹⁵

The 9th Australian Division quickly secured Sanyet el Miteiriya, and the 1st South African Division began to clear the mines to the south of that point to give passage to the 69th Brigade and its supporting armour. The *Afrikakorps* counter-attacked the Australians and forced them to vacate their positions at Miteiriya. They also attacked the South Africans and attempted to hinder the clearing of the minefields. By then, the South Africans opened a way for the 69th Brigade's armour, which was expected to arrive. Unfortunately, the lanes were too narrow and unsafe to pass tanks, so they needed widening. The 69th Brigade found itself to the west of the Axis minefields without the protection of the tanks, and its leading battalions were cut off.³¹⁶

The 1st Armoured Division moved forward to extricate it from the situation and get it back east of the minefields. However, the losses suffered by the brigade were so heavy that it became unfit for further operational tasks and had to be taken out of the Alamein Line. Auchinleck was convinced that the 8th Army was unfit to undertake a successful offensive under the existing conditions—a continued lack of armour, infantry, and artillery, considering the long front it had to hold. The troops who could not be sent to the rear to rest, re-form, and train for fresh tasks were feeling the effects of exhaustion. Auchinleck, thus, decided that further offensive operations were not feasible for the time being and that it would be wise to remain on the defensive until there was confidence for a fresh and final drive, which, according to his calculations, would take until September.³¹⁷

The 8th Army made certain counterattacks in the following months and suffered significant losses. The casualties for this month were around 750 officers and 12,500 men, of which 300 alone were from the 5th Indian Division. Meanwhile, the Alamein Line was reinforced enormously. Attention was paid to the defensive zone in the triangle of El Alamein, El Hammam, and the Qattara Depression. The strong points of the Ruweisat Ridge and Alam el Halfa were brought within the artillery range of one other and kept out of the observation of the *Afrikakorps*. Each strong point was designed to take a garrison of two infantry battalions and one artillery regiment of 2.5-pounder guns. The rest of the field artillery was kept mobile.

³¹⁵ Major P.C. Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–1945: The North African Campaign 1940–1943* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), pp. 388–390.

³¹⁶ Richard Hammond, *Strangling the Axis: The Fight for Control of the Mediterranean during the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 111–114.

³¹⁷ Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2009), pp. 266–267.

Escorted by a motorised infantry and combined with armour, the mobile artillery was to attack the *Afrikakorps* with fire wherever they were spotted, using the most potent ways of manoeuvre and observation. Other tactical points needed patrolling, too, as the central defensive zone was about 30 miles deep, and there were areas to its north and the south.³¹⁸

In the north, lightly armoured troops guarded the passage towards Burg el Arab. In the south, the Sudan Defence Force kept a watch on the road from Siwa, leading to Cairo through the Bahariya Oasis, along the southern edge of the Qattara Depression. Another similar highway, known as the Barrel Track, directly linking the south of the Alamein Line to Cairo, was left unguarded, as it lay across vast patches of soft sand and was considered unfit for use by heavy vehicles. From 1 August, the activities of the 8th Army were confined to patrolling, exchanges of artillery fire, and preparations for the renewal of the offensive. The XXX Corps was ordered to begin intensive planning for a frontal attack south of the Tel El Eisa salient, and the XIII Corps was instructed to explore the possibilities of a breakthrough in the south and a movement around the southern flank of the Axis.³¹⁹

Nevertheless, Rommel had fallen short of one fundamental goal: he could not bring about the destruction of the 8th Army and his gains from the battle were minimal. He was also unaware of the presence of the 1st South African Division, which was in position and ready at El Alamein. His Axis divisions were depleted, and tanks and trucks suffered breakdowns. The Italian infantry was still marching on foot in the desert to reach the front. There was a delay in rebuilding units with men, guns, fuel, ammunition, and food. For every step he took east towards the delta, he was further away from supplies that came from Europe via Italy; by the end of June, the *Afrikakorps* were reduced to 55 medium German and 70 Italian tanks, 330 German and 200 Italian artillery pieces, 15 armoured cars; and 2,000 German and 8,000 Italian infantry.³²⁰

This was insufficient to overrun the firm Allied ranks, now partly defended by fresh troops. Facing the *Afrikakorps* was the 1st South African Division, led by General Pienaar, to the north; the 6th New Zealand Brigade at Bab el Qattara; and the weak 4th and 5th New Zealand

³¹⁸ Montgomery Papers, Review of the Situation in the Eighth Army, 12 August 1942–23 October 1942, Part II, LMD 19, Imperial War Museum, London

³¹⁹ Charles Messenger, *Rommel: Leadership Lessons from the Desert Fox* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 77–79.

³²⁰ Jonathan Fennel, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 255–257.

Brigades reorganised behind it. The 1st Armoured Division consisted of the 7th Motorised Brigade, the 22nd and 4th Armoured Brigades, and the strength of the 7th Armoured Division led by General Herbert Lumsden with 150 tanks. Auchinleck was given an intelligence warning of an enemy attack in the afternoon against the centre of his line through intelligence. The attack was a head-on assault, like the one at Mersa Matruh. The *Afrikakorps* had a plan that the 90 Light Division would attack the centre along with the *DAK*, break through, and then envelop the enemy position, the *DAK* turning it from the south. The Italian XX Motorised Corps and the Littorio Armoured Division would cover the south flank. The Italian units were depleted with losses from air attacks. While attacking and fighting a British tank and artillery group, they learned, yet again, that their M-13 was no longer a tank fit for battle in 1942. The 21st Panzer lost an entire day and 18 tanks while fighting the British line. The 90th Light was blocked by solid artillery fire from the boxes of the 1st South African Division and suffered artillery losses. The 7th Bersaglieri was also unable to gain terrain, and the day gained nothing for Rommel.³²¹

The *DAK* was heavily bombed, and the Trieste lost around 60 trucks from the RAF attacks. Its mobile strength was reduced to one reinforced company for each regiment. After one more engagement with the BIA, the *DAK* was left with 20 tanks in the 21st Panzer Division and six in the 15th Panzer. Rommel asked for infantry battalions of the non-motorised Italian divisions to the front on an urgent basis. He also asked for Stuka support, but the *Luftwaffe* and *Regia Aeronautica* could not help due to a lack of motor transport for support services.³²² The Ariete Division remained under British fire that morning for hours, and one New Zealand column overran a Bersaglieri battalion of the Ariete; the remnants of the Ariete broke off and escaped towards the north-west, leaving behind 88 mm and 90 mm AT guns. Even when Rommel blamed the failure on the poor performance of the Ariete Division, this attack was poorly supported in a nasty piece of terrain. This division lost 531 men, with 350 taken prisoner and the rest wounded or dead. Rommel launched fresh attacks, and they were again checked by the 1st and 2nd South African Brigades and by the 22nd and 4th Armoured Brigades. The RAF flew some 400 missions against the Axis at El Alamein the same day. Auchinleck's intelligence

³²¹ Disarmament Branch of the British Air Division, *The Supply Organisation of the German Air Force, 1935–1945* (East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, n.d.), pp. 60–62.

³²² Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 175–177.

services, ULTRA, continued collecting information about the Axis movements. He was aware of Rommel's upcoming plans to attack the south end of the British line.³²³

Auchinleck had also launched an attack against the concentrated, weak Italian XXI Infantry Corps deployed on the El Alamein defensive perimeter. This attack was launched by the 26th Australian Brigade of the 9th Division and by the 2nd South African Brigade, reinforced by 32 Valentine and six Matilda tanks. The Australian attack hit the newly arrived Sabratha Division, deployed to relieve the 7th Bersaglieri regiment. One battalion was destroyed, and each battalion of Sabratha and Bersaglieri was isolated. Two battalions of the 3rd Celere artillery regiment, the headquarters, and a commander of the 7th Bersaglieri were captured. Another battalion of the 7th Bersaglieri and a battalion of the 46th Artillery were sent to block the road.³²⁴ Rommel also sent a battalion of the 90th Light, a part of the 382nd Regiment, and the 164th German Infantry division to the action. The 164th was specially redesigned for service in North Africa, and the 90th Light had been reinforced with AT guns of the Russian 76.2 type. Rommel also lost his 621st Radio Intercept Company, which was of high tactical intelligence value to him. The Axis failed to take back the lost terrain, and the Australians attacked and captured a battalion of the Trieste Division. The total Italian losses were 700 men of Sabratha, 550 artillery men, 250 of Trieste, headquarters personnel, two Bersaglieri companies of the 7th Regiment (350 men), the 3rd Battalion of the 24th Artillery (with twenty men and a total of thirty artillery pieces). Rommel was not victorious despite the mass employment of *Panzerarmee's* artillery.³²⁵

The Role of the Indian Divisions

To focus on the skilled participation of the Indian divisions that fought to make the Allied resistance possible, one needs to study the battles from their prism. On 22 June 1942, the 5th Brigade less 4/6 Rajputana Rifles, with AT and Royal Horse Artillery gunners under command, left the Sollum Box and moved into Egypt through the Conference Cairn and the Railway Gap. The RAF flew an unprecedented number of sorties and gave excellent rearguard cover. On 26 June 1942, enemy panzer columns, well-supported by guns, burst through the minefield on the front of the 29 Indian Brigade, which had been incorporated into the 10 Indian Division's front.

³²³ Auchinleck Papers, Telegram Extract from Churchill to Auchinleck, 16 June 1942, File- LII 925-942, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³²⁴ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 425–426.

³²⁵ Franz Kurowski, *Panzer Aces: German Tank Commanders of WWII* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2004), pp. 451–452.

One of Brigadier Reid's blocking columns stood between the 25 Indian Brigade and what remained of the 29 Brigade. The first casualties were sustained when a reconnaissance patrol of 3/10 Baluchis was ambushed. Early next morning, the 5th Indian Brigade moved forward from the Matruh Box toward its new position on the escarpment line.³²⁶

On the morning of 28 June, Mersa Matruh was ominously quiet. The desert to the south was stippled with thousands of enemy vehicles moving to the east. The 4/6 Rajputana Rifles had ambushed the enemy guard at a gap in the minefield and reached Mersa Matruh. Finally, the 4/6 Rajputana Rifles and the 3/10 Baluchis reported to El Alamein. Here, the 18th Indian Brigade, which had arrived from Iraq, constructed a 'box' at Deir el Shein, under the western tip of Ruweisat. The Ruweisat Ridge is a bare outcrop of rock lightly covered with sand that stands amongst miles of lonely desert. Its features were intimately known by both the 8th Army and the *Panzerarmee Afrika*. The long, row ridge at Ruweisat became a critical terrain, and its possession would determine the battle's outcome.³²⁷

If the Ruweisat ridge were in the hands of the *Panzerarmee*, they would outflank the Alamein box and cut off its communications.³²⁸ However, if the 8th Army could secure possession of the ridge, its hump, like a whale's back breaking the waves, would make a perfect jumping-off point for a thrust at the Axis rear. The *Panzerarmee* was progressively worsening at the beginning of the attack. During the night, continuous attacks from the RAF disrupted and scattered the Axis supply columns with little replenishment. The Germans were pinned to the ground under concentrated artillery fire long before they had reached effective small-arms range, while the South Africans were well-protected by their series of bunkers and pillboxes. Their gun pits were subjected to the scattered, poorly directed fire of weak and composite German and Italian batteries.³²⁹

Even in its depleted condition, the *Afrikakorps* made a threatening advance along the Ruweisat Ridge. On the northern side of the ridge, the men of the 1st South African Brigade found themselves under increasingly heavy fire worsened by the complex and stony ground, which threw off rock splinters. This brigade group was instructed to use mobile tactics; the intensive

³²⁶ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from Viceroy to the Secretary of State in India, 25 May 1941, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³²⁷ Barr, *Pendulum of War*, p. 109.

³²⁸ Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, pp. 168–169.

³²⁹ Correlli Barnett, *The Desert Generals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), pp. 169–171.

fire prevented much movement from scratch and improvised defences. There was only an ‘illusion of mobility’, named the ‘Hotbox’, by the 90 Light Division and the *Afrikakorps*. The brigade felt exposed, and there was a call for armoured support. The 10th Indian Division arrived and took up a position in the centre of the Ruweisat Ridge. Still, there was no communication between these two beleaguered forces, and both fought independent battles until the evening.³³⁰

On 1 July 1942, they met with Rommel’s panzers under the cover of a sandstorm. The 11 Field Regiment reached El Alamein under Lieutenant-Colonel A.C. McCarthy, with ‘C’ Company of ¼ Essex to form ROBCOL to dispute the passage across the rocky saddle-back of the crucial high ground. After 1,000 hours, the next day, from a position near the tip of the ridge, the 11 Field Regiment began to hammer masses of the enemy transport in the Deir el Shein area. The Essex, in their covering positions, sat tight all day under continuous bombardment.³³¹ Rommel’s armour had broken off action for the first time since Tobruk and retired to the west. Early in the morning, ROBCOL thrust forward to Point 97, where Ruweisat merged into the desert plain. A furious artillery battle raged throughout the forenoon; the guns of the Royal Horse Artillery stiffened the blocking force. Elements of the 1st Armoured Division arrived, blocked the gaps on either side and gave firm flanks to the force holding the ridge. Furious gun duels and tank combats continued. When the crisis passed, the *Afrikakorps* had filled up the Ruweisat Ridge. Auchinleck had now decided to harass the enemy without ceasing.³³²

In the following week, the Allies blew up German gun positions and raided and burnt enemy leaguers. Rommel failed at his attempts of bypassing the New Zealanders and the South Africans at the seashore. The Alamein Line was fluid one day, elastic the next for the BIA, and in one short week it became an iron wall against which the invaders battered in vain. In two days, the 5 Brigade received a welcome reinforcement in the form of 6 Rajputana Rifles Machine Gun Battalion. This fine unit was destined to remain with the 4th Indian Division throughout the year.³³³ Into the El Alamein positions were arriving the 9th Australians, lean, fit, bored, and quite confident of their ability to deal with Rommel’s German soldiers, let alone the Italians. On 7 or 8 July, the men of the Australian 24th Brigade hit the 15th Panzer Division

³³⁰ Ian F.W. Beckett, ed., *Rommel: A Reappraisal* (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Military, 2013), p. 86.

³³¹ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 227–229.

³³² War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Intelligence Summary No. 159, Dated 4 July 1941, Part I, Vol No. 601/221/WD/Part- I, MODHS, New Delhi.

³³³ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 104.

which was mounted along the southern flank of the Ruweisat Ridge. They evacuated both El Mreir and the Bab el Qattara box, surprising Rommel as he had no reports about this move. Further, they released the bulk of their artillery to go further north. On 9 July, they mounted a full-scale attack preceded by heavy bombardment, after which the 90th Light Division came down and occupied El Mreir with tanks, guns, and lorries. The Germans lost another chunk of their armoured support, and the Italians were left with almost nothing. On the morning of 10 July, a bombardment was equal to those of the First World War barrages, and Rommel realised that he was outmanoeuvred.³³⁴

The Australians of the 26th Brigade, supported by 32 Valentine tanks, attacked westwards out of the El Alamein defences and captured the commanding feature of Tel el Eisa. The *Panzerarmee* saw hundreds of Italians fleeing past in panic; they had even discarded their boots and weapons to run faster. Rommel abandoned his plans for a sweep to the southeast and the delta beyond and even halted with his 15th Panzer Division due to terrific artillery fire. Rommel was forced to dance to the enemy's tune for the first time in many months. He immediately attempted to regain the initiative through an attack by the 21st Panzer on the Alamein box. Still, he failed due to the impeccable bombing of the box area by the RAF, followed by the shattering power of Auchinleck's massed artillery as the Panzers tried to move forward. Rommel was forced to break off the attack for the day. On 9 July 1942, they received the 4 Field Regiment and the 149 Anti-tank Regiment under command, and the 5 Brigade relieved the 24 Australian Brigade in the Point 97 Area. The formation now consisted of a re-formed 9 Indian Brigade and 161 Brigade, 1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, which had been under the 4th Indian Division at Sidi Barrani, the 3/7 Rajput Regiment and 3/14 Punjabis, formerly of 11 Indian Brigade, and the 161 Brigade which had been brought from Sudan during the critical period after the fall of Tobruk.³³⁵

The 5th Indian Division got to work at once. There had been no greater traitor than time in the war in the desert. Rommel's overworked Germans were nearing exhaustion and were given no rest. A change in strategy was the order of the day. Every stroke had to elicit an immediate counterstroke. Rommel's decision to dig in and concentrate on holding the ground won. Auchinleck ordered the XIII Corps to drive north-westwards through the El Mreir positions

³³⁴ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Points of Interest, 15 July 1941, Part I, Vol No. 601/221/WD/Part- I, MODHS, New Delhi.

³³⁵ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 180–183.

across Rommel's communications. Still, the New Zealand Brigade was the only formation that made the slightest effort to obey. However, the brigade that came up against the Italian X Corps was heavily dive-bombed and, in due course, fell back to their start line. The commanding officers of other formations seemed hardly to have given the instructions serious consideration. However, Rommel had seen the movement and moved the 21st Panzer back and down towards El Mreir, leaving the 15th Panzer and 90th Light to fill the Ruweisat Ridge gap. These movements were, in turn, seen and reported by the 1st Armoured Division, now the XXX Corps. In anticipation of the *Afrikakorps* withdrawing, Auchinleck ordered both the XXX and XIII Corps forward in the early afternoon, and the 1st Armoured Division, with two squadrons of Grants, overran the 15th Panzers Rifle Regiment. They were in the process of taking nearly 200 exhausted men prisoner when some of the leading Grants blew up on mines, and a single 88 mm gun opened up on them, at which they hastily retreated, leaving the Germans to be captured later by a weak marauding column.³³⁶

It was time now for Operation Hercules or C3, the invasion of Malta. On the afternoon of 13 July 1942, attacks were launched against Tel el Eisa, which was an Arabic term for the 'hill of Jesus'. Auchinleck, aware of the locations of the *DAK* divisions through ULTRA, launched an attack against Ruweisat Ridge on the night of 15 July 1942. He used the 4th and the 5th brigades of the 2nd New Zealand Division, while the 2nd and the 22nd Armoured brigades of the 1st Armoured Division had to protect the operation. They overran eight X Corps, Pavia, and Brescia divisions battalions and reached the divisional artillery and Brescia's headquarters. Even when they attacked from all directions, many of these vital points resisted and hindered the advancement of the Allied vehicles and equipment. This action later evolved into a prosperous German counterattack, and the *Afrikakorps* regained the positions seized by the Commonwealth armies. This made the BIA soldiers feel bitter about the untimely British tank support as the Allied armour intervened too late to affect the outcome. This section remained quiet while Auchinleck launched another attack with the excellent 24th Brigade of the 9th Australian division against Tel el Makh Khad on the Miteiriya Ridge.³³⁷

There were orders on 14 July 1942 for the 5 Indian Brigade to attack in conjunction with a New Zealand brigade on its left. The New Zealand infantry had been equipped with six-pounders. It was a general impression that this attack had been ordered to incite the enemy to counterstroke,

³³⁶ Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, p. 168.

³³⁷ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, pp. 202–204.

in which the value of the new weapons had to be demonstrated. On the map, this operation looked like a finger poked into the enemy's midriff, a liberty that invited reprisal. The 5 Indian Brigade's attack was entrusted to the 3/10 Baluchis and 4/6 Rajputana Rifles at Point 63 and Point 64 on the flanks of the high ground to the west. Shortly after midnight, the two Indian battalions filed through the belts of wire covering the British minefield and thrust towards the tip of the Ruweisat Ridge from the southeast. Fighting broke out, and the advance proceeded only after the resistance of the successive enemy outpost lines was broken.³³⁸

The Baluchis reached the ridge by dawn, but the dug-in Panzers had held up the Rajputana Rifles. When the Baluchis renewed their advance with tanks in close support, they overran a battalion of the Brescia Division. At 11:20 hours, the 4/6 Rajputana Rifles and Point 64 sappers from 4 Field Company blew gaps in the wire. The infantry flooded through and took nearly 1,000 Italian prisoners by nightfall. By midday, the New Zealanders had aligned with the enemy territory. In the evening, Rommel struck with his Panzers and overran the adjacent forward companies of the New Zealanders. This left the 5 Indian Brigade manning Point 64 at the tip of the finger, as though on the hook. The 21 Panzer Regiment had been ordered to attack the New Zealand positions on 16 July, with a follow-up assault by the Panzer Regiment and 155 Lorried Infantry Regiment against the Baluchi positions. Support arms immediately moved to the threatened sector. The 11 Field Regiment swung its guns into the half circle towards the front. Six-pounder detachments from Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and the Buffs joined the Rajputana Rifles and Essex near Point 64.³³⁹

Throughout the afternoon of July 16, Stuka attacks and enemy artillery fire gradually intensified. At 18:05, as the setting sun struck the defenders' eyes, movements began in the Deir el Shein depression to the west and northwest of the Indian positions. Twenty-five minutes later, dust clouds appeared over a ridge less than 2,000 yards from the 5 Brigade's forward lines. As the panzers came into view, they were engaged by British armour from a hull-down position and by six-pounder guns that had been dug in along the northern edge of the ridge. A fierce battle ensued above the infantry, who were primarily protected in their sangars and slit trenches. Light tanks and armoured cars skirmished as darkness fell, continuing the required engagements. A remarkable pyrotechnic display ensued. Streams of interlacing tracers marked the clashes, the flat trajectory of the Breda guns easily distinguishable from the bouncing

³³⁸ Tucker, *Approach to Battle*, pp. 184–185.

³³⁹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 186–188.

golden balls of the British fire. The armour battle continued for three hours, heavily supported on both sides by artillery. At 21:00 hours, the enemy broke off the fighting and withdrew. Daylight revealed the extent of the victory. Around 800 yards from the Indian positions, the first victims lay sprawled. Behind them, the ground was strewn with wrecks as far back as the lip of the Deir el Shein depression. Several panzers heavily damaged panzers had been towed back by the Germans. Throughout the day, detachments from 4 Field Company dealt with the wrecks. Demolition reports suggested that the enemy had mounted a full-scale attack and had sustained substantial losses. Twenty-four tanks, six armoured cars, five 20 mm anti-tank guns, eight 75-mm field guns, and six 88-mm self-propelled guns had been abandoned on the battlefield. The six-pounder guns were primarily responsible for these kills. All this became the pride of the 8th Army; the jeeps they captured were a case of love at first sight for them.³⁴⁰

Auchinleck had decided on two further principles of action; first, the bulk of the artillery would be grouped and operate directly under his control. Second, to destroy the most potent enemy formations opposite Rommel's Panzer divisions. The opening attacks of the following offensive line would be directed at his weakest link—the tired, static, under-equipped, and not over-enthusiastic Italian infantry. Rommel had already withdrawn his *Afrikakorps* formations to the neighbourhood of Deir el Shein and Deir el Abyad to give them rest, leaving the line from the coast west of El Alamein down to and across Ruweisat.³⁴¹ Rommel tried to revive the attack the next day, but he faced similar depressing results, and he understood that his precious armour strength had worn down, all to no avail. On the same night, Auchinleck launched the second phase of his plan. This began with another attack on the Italian frontline infantry, aiming to sweep them from Ruweisat Ridge, attacking the Deir el Shein area, in which the 15th Panzer Division was assembled with the bulk of the *Panzerarmee*'s reserve artillery, severe supply dumps, an intense concentration of anti-aircraft guns and the headquarters of the *DAK* and the Italian X Corps.³⁴²

Auchinleck was here using the Foch tactics of 1918—a combination of gradual hammer blows on the point of impact to wear down the reserves both by casualties and exhaustion. Unfortunately for Auchinleck, his juniors were unfamiliar with this concept, and his plans failed. A reason behind this remained that the Dominion troops always had the right to appeal

³⁴⁰ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from Auchinleck to all ranks of the 8th Army, 25 July 1942, File- LVI 978-989, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁴¹ Michael Carver, *El Alamein* (Great Britain: Wordsworth Editions, 1962), pp. 35–37.

³⁴² Warner, *Auchinleck*, p. 189.

over the heads of their British commanders to their governments if they felt a lack of confidence in their orders. Even though much had been left to the New Zealand brigade commanders, everything was messed up due to poor planning.³⁴³ The 5th Brigade's next objective remained Point 63, but with armoured support from the 22nd Armoured Brigade for flank protection for its heavy armament. The brigade came with 31 Grants and a mix of 44 Stuarts and Crusaders. By daybreak, the New Zealanders had attained all their objectives: the ridge was in their hands, and some companies had fought their way into Deir el Shein with over a thousand prisoners.³⁴⁴

But, at that very moment, the 15th Panzer Division arrived, circled them, and reversed the situation. Had the 22nd Armoured Brigade been present, it would have made an appreciable difference, but it was stuck at Alam Nayil. By the time it arrived, the New Zealanders had lost 1,500 officers and men before the situation stabilised. But Ruweisat Ridge remained in the hands of the New Zealand survivors and the two brigades of the reconstituted 5th Indian Division. The material captured and the commanding positions won by the 8th Army between 5 and 17 July were sufficient to show Rommel that his forces were not strong enough to advance further towards the Nile and would be miserable if they didn't retreat to the frontier.³⁴⁵

The malaise throughout the British and Commonwealth fighting troops in the Middle East was fading away as a tiny, defensive victory raised their morale. On 17 July 1942, a robust Australian force raided the divisional front deep into enemy positions along the Alamein–Qattara trail. Panzers chased them back, but a company of 4/6 Rajputana Rifles under Lieutenant Nand Lal Kapur advanced from Point 64 through a gap in the minefield to destroy an enemy machine-gun post 2,000 yards before the position. Within 1,000 yards, they came under fire, but Lieutenant Kapur pushed on until confronted with several Panzers that suddenly emerged from the shelter of a ridge 800 yards away. For a moment, the men thought they were doomed, but with great coolness, Lieutenant Kapur ordered his men to lie down while he walked up and down in front of them.³⁴⁶

Meanwhile, 500 yards ahead, the Panzers opened fire, but the Rajputana Rifles sat there throughout the night until the enemy withdrew, suffering fifteen casualties. The same evening,

³⁴³ Auchinleck Papers, Divisional Orders to Auchinleck, 17 June 1942, File- LII 925-942, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁴⁴ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General* (Great Britain: Sceptre Books, 1984), pp. 566–569.

³⁴⁵ O'Connor Papers, Notes on the Mareth Defence Line, June 1940–October 1940, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Studies, Kings College, London.

³⁴⁶ Blumenson, 'Rommel', p. 295.

the 9 Indian Brigade continued its probe to the west and awaited the next attack phase. A heavy thrust by British armour was projected with infantry assaults by 1st South African Division in the north, 69 Brigade of 50th Division and 161 Indian Brigade along the Ruweisat Ridge, and 2nd New Zealand Division in the south. The 5 Indian Brigade planned to go as far as Daba. For this operation, the 4 Field Regiment and a company of Rajputana Rifle machine gunners were taken under the command of the 5 Indian Brigade. Unfortunately, this ambitious operation was never undertaken. In fluctuating fights, the 161 Brigade was roughly handled, and the 69 British Brigade suffered heavily in an attempt to destroy enemy minefields. On 28 July 1942, the 5 Brigade stood down from active notice and was ordered to relieve the 161 Brigade the following day. All these Allied raids restored the soldiers' morale and probably improved their tactics.³⁴⁷

An attack was launched by the two infantry battalions and the 44th Royal Tank Regiment, which pierced the line between the *Trieste* and the *Trento* divisions, destroyed one *Bersaglieri* company and the remnants of the 32nd *Guastatori* battalion, and encircled another battalion of the *Trieste* division. With the counter-attack of the German *recce* units, the front was stabilised; the Australians had collected 700 prisoners and suffered about 300 casualties. This Allied strategy of hitting the Italians and avoiding the Axis armour was affecting the Axis. Even Rommel acknowledged that the enemy was now using its superiority in infantry. As they were destroying the Italian formations one by one, the German formations were becoming too weak to stand alone.³⁴⁸

The BIA was aware of the tension between the German and Italian armies and utilised this to its full advantage. It was always difficult for the Germans to take orders from the Italian territorial headquarters. Relations between the troops were never cordial because of the Germans' sense of superiority, who saw through the shortcomings of the Italian soldiers in battle. There was also no comradeship between the soldiers. Besides, ULTRA gave Auchinleck the impression that the Axis was on the verge of collapsing. They had lost most German and Italian artillery and had 42 tanks in the *DAK* and 50 in the Italian units. However, many of these reports were exaggerated; the defensive strength of the Axis positions was improving with digging mines and barbed wire.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 203.

³⁴⁸ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 179–183.

³⁴⁹ 1 Armoured Division Intelligence Summary No. 74, 20 November 1942, WO169_4054, PRO, KEW, UK.

Auchinleck launched another well-prepared attack on Der el Abyad el Meir to destroy the *DAK*. The attack occurred on 22 July 1942 but backfired after running into the Axis force's strong points. The 6th New Zealand suffered from the fire of two strong German battalions and was counter-attacked and overrun by the 8th Panzer Regiment. The 161st Indian Brigade had to occupy Deir el Shein, defended by the two battalions of the *Brescia* and a battalion of the German 104th Regiment. While the Allies gained ground due to the intervention of the 23rd Armoured Brigade, the BIA was forced to retreat.³⁵⁰

Another attack was attempted on 27 July 1942 by the BIA. The 24th Australian Brigade and the British 69th Brigade (supported by the 2nd Armoured Brigade) attacked the 164th Infantry, the German 200th Regiment, and a battalion of the *Trento*. However, it gained little ground as the Axis minefields had been substantially strengthened by this time. In the First Battle of El Alamein, the BIA under Auchinleck stopped the German advance, primarily by depleting the Axis infantry by the middle of July. However, his aim of destroying the *Panzerarmee* failed. This resulted in a standoff. A general comparison of the losses shows 7,000 for the Axis and 13,000 for the Commonwealth forces. The Italian infantry had insufficient training, and the soldiers were tired of their rotation of duties in the North African desert for three years without any rest. The First Battle of El Alamein accomplished very little on paper but served an essential strategic purpose. It convinced Rommel that the 8th Army was not content to adopt a static role. The time had come when the Allies could think of decisive quantities. The North African campaign's termination had been prioritised on the highest level. A supply buildup began on a scale hitherto unknown in the Middle East. The 44 and 51 British Divisions arrived with sufficient new tank formations to give the 8th Army four new armoured divisions.³⁵¹

The Calm Before the Storm

Throughout August on the Ruweisat Ridge, the 5 Indian Brigade endured hell on earth. The area was intolerable, with few sandy hollows and no cover. A slit trench could only be cut with an air drill out of solid stone or blasted with high explosives. A shallow, saucer-shaped sangar preserved the appearance rather than the reality of protection. The sun beat upon the solid rock, and the glare struck one's eyes like a knife. Every passing vehicle threw dust into the air, choking one's mouth and nostrils and revealing movement to the enemy. Water and fuel were

³⁵⁰ Appendix A, Move of the 10th Indian Division from Mersa Matruh, 23 June 1942, File No. 601-233-WD-PT-II, War Diary of the 10th Indian Division, MODHS, New Delhi.

³⁵¹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 217.

precious and continued to be issued sparingly. On the other hand, labour was constant; there were always loads to carry, mines to lay, and wires to string. At the rocky tip of the ridge, there was the continual threat of shellfire or Panzers. Stukas always flew out west, with the rhythmic pumping of the Bofors as a prelude to the monstrous blast, followed by the leaping crowd as they struck. Yet, these dangers and discomforts were less than the horror of the clotted masses of flies that maintained their filthy siege in the cloying warmth of the air. These troubles pestered men to the limits of their endurance.³⁵²

Stukas always flew out west, with the rhythmic pumping of the Bofors as a prelude to the monstrous blast, followed by the leaping crowd as they struck. The *Afrikakorps* were given extravagant promises of generous logistical support despite persistent difficulties in sending supplies by sea as Malta was always in British hands. Rommel now just hoped to hold on to the line. The *Panzerarmee* was vulnerable as the British had destroyed 85 per cent of Rommel's trucks. It was now a matter of urgency to obtain new weapons from Italy. Ironically, both the *Panzerarmee* and the 8th Army had reorganised and were prepared frantically for the next round, but both were fearful that the other would be ready first.³⁵³ Rommel wanted to strike before massive reinforcements for the 8th Army arrived. But he no longer believed that it was possible to go through the Nile. With their seemingly limitless supplies and superiority in numbers, the British were superb in static warfare. All Rommel had now was his mastery of mobile operations. The estimated Allied superiority in the desert was a 3:1 advantage in tanks and 5:1 in air power. But, by 15 August, the *Panzerarmee* was refreshed, defensive positions had been greatly improved, and fresh troops were brought in by air. However, they wrongly estimated that the 8th Army had 400 tanks when they had 700. Time was of the essence, as by the following full moon, the British would have strengthened their defences and brought up more reserves.³⁵⁴

Before this occurred, Churchill came to survey the battlefield dressed in a siren suit and an out-size solar *topi* himself. Seeing the need for a change in command, Churchill visited the 8th Army without Auchinleck's knowledge on 3 August 1942. He decided that Auchinleck never brought him the victory he wanted in all the years of fighting in North Africa. He had decided

³⁵² Auchinleck Papers, Letter to Lord Linlithgow from Auchinleck, 24 August 1942, File- LVII-900-1000, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁵³ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Administrative Notes, Part I, Vol. No. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

³⁵⁴ Neal Dando, *From Tobruk to Tunis: The Impact of Terrain on British Operations and Doctrine in North Africa, 1940–1943* (England: Helion & Company Limited, 2016), pp. 123–125.

on a clean sweep and sent out highly qualified commanders to complete the task left unfulfilled by Auchinleck. General Auchinleck's replacement was viewed with disapproval by all ranks of the Indian Army. Unfortunately, his first successor, Lieutenant-General William Henry Ewart Gott, was shot down while flying to take command. The following person to be appointed was General Bernard Law Montgomery, referred to as Monty, who took up command of the 8th Army on 15 August 1942. Monty was trained and had excellently commanded the 3rd Infantry Division in the campaign in France in 1940. At the same time, General Alexander assumed the command of the Middle East Forces on 15 August 1942. While his command area was smaller than that handled by Auchinleck, he was given the prime duty of destroying the Italo-German Army, commanded by Field Marshal Rommel, at the earliest, together with all its supplies and establishments. General Alexander established an advanced tactical headquarters at Burg el Arab, adjoining the headquarters of the 8th Army. The command of the 8th Army was given, as mentioned, to General (and later, Field Marshal) Montgomery of Alamein, KG, GCB, DSO.³⁵⁵ Unlike previous commanders in the desert, he was popular among the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) troops as he communicated well with them. He moved the army headquarters near the RAF headquarters so they could better coordinate their actions. He envisioned that a decisive battle had to be fought to establish Allied supremacy over the Axis, and the upcoming El Alamein battles would prove this. This would not be a static battle but a dynamic one, something that Monty excelled at. His methods of employing overwhelming strength backed with the excellent intelligence of ULTRA were crucial to the Allied success.³⁵⁶

Monty focused on improving the dispositions of the troops and bringing a strategic balance to the distribution of fighting forces. For this, he needed a reserve corps to supply the deficit. This corps had to consist primarily of armoured divisions, be well-equipped and highly trained, and never be used to hold static fronts. It must be specifically trained to act as a spearhead in offensives and held in reserve to be unleashed at a suitable moment in a battle. This would tip the scales at a critical juncture, force the fight to conform to a pre-determined pattern, neutralise surprises, and maintain a steady keel.³⁵⁷ Such reserves seldom consisted of highly trained and powerfully equipped troops, and Monty decided to use the X Corps. For him, the soldiers'

³⁵⁵ Montgomery Papers, Reports on Situation in August 1942, Part II, LMD 19, Imperial War Museum, London.

³⁵⁶ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from General Headquarters to Auchinleck, 13 September 1942, File- LVIII-1001-1017, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁵⁷ Stephen Brooks, *Montgomery and the Eighth Army* (London: The Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1991), pp. 104–105.

morale was paramount; they needed confidence in their leaders. Soldiers should know their plans, and their living conditions should balance comfort and toughness. They should not be assigned tasks beyond their abilities and training. Instead of breaking them into independent units, they should be allowed to fight as a cohesive and integrated division. The army, navy, and air force must cooperate closely in any significant operation. Fresh minds should replace exhausted commanders, and the 8th Army should be restructured based on strong leadership, proper equipment, and practical training. Monty toured his command, met with his officers, explained his plans and views, and took them into his confidence without reservation. The 8th Army proved highly receptive to his suggestions and responded with enthusiasm. The troops felt new and rejuvenated; their self-confidence and morale returned.³⁵⁸

In July and August of 1942, reinforcements had been flown to the front for the Allied forces after the fall of Tobruk. This saw the arrival of 820 artillery pieces, over 7,800 vehicles, and 368 tanks from the United Kingdom alone, as well as 7,989 vehicles from North America. Even foodstuff for the BIA was arriving from India. The new British 6-pounder AT gun was distributed among various units, giving them much tank-stopping power. Monty immediately went to work. He began implementing his new measure of creating a counterpart to the *DAK* and maintaining a highly trained reserve force with two armoured and one motorised division. This was formed with X Corps, the 1st and 8th or 10th Armoured Division, and the motorised 2nd New Zealand Division. The jock columns were disbanded, and formations were to fight as coherent units in the future, no longer as *ad hoc* combinations.³⁵⁹

Another of Monty's methods of improving the overall ability of the BIA was the nature of his numerous visits to the frontline troops. All reinforcements were taken care of before Alam el Halfa, which Monty considered a key position. The newly arrived 44th Infantry Division was chosen to defend the Alam el Halfa ridge. On the other hand, the Axis army brought two new units, along with replacements, to the front: the Italian *Folgore* parachute division and the German *Ramcke* parachute brigade. They received new tanks, though the Italian tanks were as always obsolete and could never keep up with the rate of evolution in other countries. But the Germans could field 64 Panzer IIIs and 27 Panzer IVs with long barrel guns. Even when their

³⁵⁸ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, p. 435.

³⁵⁹ Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, p. 235.

armoured formations were of full strength, the truck shortage was forever a logistical problem for the Axis. The infantry divisions had to rely on their feet and bring their weapons by hand.³⁶⁰

On 29 August, a particular 'Order of the Day' from the German commander was announced with the imminent aim of destroying the 8th Army. The main blow of the new offensive fell on the 44 Division deep in the desert. Still, diversionary attacks also struck the 9 Australian Division on the seacoast and the 5 Indian Division on the tip of the Ruweisat Ridge. Shortly after midnight of 30 August, the Bologna Division attacked to the southeast against the New Zealanders, but losing direction in the darkness, it crashed into the Indian Brigade. There was a shift in the balance of power with the entry of the United States into the war as it decided to finish off the Germans first and then the Japanese. This brought immense resources to the Mediterranean for the Allied forces to fight the Axis, which was crucial.³⁶¹

The BIA had absolute superiority in the air, limitless supplies, an excellent plan inherited from Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith, and the intelligence provided by Ultra Decrypts. Rommel's operational goal was to conquer Alexandria, Cairo, and the Suez Canal, though his forces were still weak. He was still short of 15,000 men and needed 210 panzers, 120 anti-tank guns, 1,400 trucks, and various armoured vehicles. The British continued to sink shipping at such a rate that it became clear that Rommel would not have enough fuel to mount a major operation.³⁶² For this reason, the Afrikakorps had their objectives limited to beating the British forces at El Alamein, after which, if fuel was left, they might continue the advance to the Suez Canal. Rommel wanted to go further on 30 August, but his operations after Alam el Halfa would depend entirely on the logistical situation. They had seriously underestimated the strength and positioning of the 8th Army by failing to realise that the Western Desert Air Force now dominated the skies. Monty carefully positioned his armoured units to push into Rommel's thrust with his outflanking movement. He did all of this while rushing around to give a pep talk to his troops. He did not change the 8th Army's basic approach but created a new atmosphere of confidence and determination.³⁶³

³⁶⁰ 1st Armoured Division Exercise Orders No. 2, 11 October 1942, WO169-4054, PRO, KEW, UK.

³⁶¹ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from General Headquarters to Auchinleck, 19 August 1942, File- LVII-900-1000, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁶² Auchinleck Papers, Cipher Message in Immediate to General Claude Auchinleck, 2 July 1941, Manchester United Library, 275-291, England, United Kingdom.

³⁶³ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 306-307.

The Axis also lost the war of convoys at sea in the Mediterranean. The Allies received their supplies in Malta in a convoy battle named Operation Pedestal, while the Axis convoys had difficulties disembarking enough supplies. That, too, was disrupted by heavy bombing from the RAF. The main attack by the Allied side foresaw the attack of the Axis motorised formations against the southern part of the line. Facing the Axis tanks were 935 tanks of the 8th Army. Of these, 713 were effective, 164 Grant, 370 Valentine and Crusader, and 179 Stuart Tanks. The Six Days Run, or the Battle of Alam el Halfa, began on the night of 30 August with *Brescia* trying to secure a fixed flank position in cooperation with the 90th Light towards Alam Nayil, with a mixed group of eight battalions of the *Brescia*, *Folgore*, and *Ramcke*, and a battalion of the *Bersaglieri*. But things soon went wrong for them; the minefields were much more profound than expected and took too long to be cleared in the face of strong opposition by the British 7th Armoured Division or the Desert Rats. The RAF's air attacks—night and day—were highly effective, and many senior officers fell in the first hour. Rommel's plan to advance 50 kilometres east by nightfall had failed.³⁶⁴

An unexpected attack came after midnight on 30–31 August. This was a crucial battle, losing, which would have resulted in the BIA's exit from North Africa. Rommel was highly confident that this battle would cause the destruction of the BIA from the desert, and he even announced to his troops that they would be in Alexandria in the next two to three days. On the night of the attack, the BIA forces were from north to south, the 9th Australian Division, the 1st South African, the 5th Indian Division, and the 2nd New Zealand Division. Behind them were the 44th Infantry Division and the 22nd Armoured Brigade of the 7th Armoured Division.³⁶⁵ The 5th Indian Division on the Ruweisat Ridge and the 44th British Division on the Alam el Halfa Ridge were the most critical dispositions of these. The Alamein Line was held by two corps: from the coast to the Ruweisat Ridge, the XXX Corps was with the Australian, African, and Indian Divisions, and from there to the southern end was the XIII Corps front. The German-Italian dispositions opposing the Allied forces were from the north to south: the 164th German Division, the Italian Trento Division, the German Parachute Battalion, the Italian Bologna Division, another German Parachute Battalion, and the Italian *Brescia*, *Trieste*, *Ariete* and *Littorio* Divisions. In the rear and centre of this line were the German *Afrikakorps*.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ Moorehead, *Desert War*, p. 338.

³⁶⁵ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from Churchill to Auchinleck, 8 August 1942, File- LVII-990-1000, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁶⁶ Barr, *Pendulum of War*, pp. 130–131.

In such a crucial situation, Monty was a breath of fresh air, a brilliant administrator and trainer. He had inherited an army that had suffered defeats at Tobruk and Gazala at the hands of numerically weaker forces with far less armour, artillery, aircraft, transportation, and reserves. And he was also suffering from a moral crisis. Frequent changes in command caused confusion and concern within the army. Monty knew from the beginning that the 8th Army would no longer have a reason to exist if the Suez Canal was lost. He clearly stated that there would be no withdrawal, regardless of what happened. This was to be a final stand.³⁶⁷

Brimmed with Monty's remarkable morale-boosting visits to the troops and his 'do or die' orders, the confidence of the 8th Army recovered, and their spirits were lifted. It felt it had been given a forceful and energetic commander, and its mission was unambiguous. Montgomery commenced his task at Alam el Halfa by reviewing the Alamein Line. The line was already partially taken over by the *Afrikakorps*, so the Alamein 'box' had to be taken care of. To the Allied dispositions from north to south (as already mentioned before), the 50th British Division. Overall, the 8th Army had a strength of about eight infantry divisions and four armoured divisions with four independent brigades, which consisted of three armoured divisions. This entire force faced an equivalent force of four German and nine Italian divisions, plus one German Para Brigade.³⁶⁸

Rommel shared control of these forces with Field Marshal Albert Kesselring. Rommel's headquarters bore the name *Deutsch-Italienisch Panzerarmee Afrika*, the Italian name of which was *Armata-Corazzata Italo-Tedesca*.³⁶⁹ These designations both meant 'The German-Italian Armoured Army of Africa'. This army comprised four corps, three Italian and one German. The German Corps was the *Afrikakorps*; the others were the X, XX, and XXI Italian Corps. The *Afrika Korps* had the 15th and the 21st Panzer Divisions, the 90th Light (Motorised) Division, the 164th Infantry Division, and the Rancke Brigade of Parachutists. There were also the 288 Special Forces, a heavily motorised armed group. The Italian force had two armoured and seven infantry divisions, the *Ariete* and *Littorio* divisions, their infantry, and the *Trieste*,

³⁶⁷ Auchinleck Papers, Letter from General Headquarters to Auchinleck, 13 September 1942, File- LVIII-1001-1017, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

³⁶⁸ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Operation Instruction No. 15, Part A3, Vol. No. 601/221/WD, MODHS, New Delhi.

³⁶⁹ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, p. 323.

Trento, Bologna, Brescia, Folgore, Pavia, and Pistoia Divisions. In the Siwa Oasis, another newly arrived formation was known as the Young Fascists Division.³⁷⁰

Almost all German formations were motorised. The Italian divisions were foot infantry except for the three formations under XX(Mobile) Corps, the *Ariete* and *Littorio* Armoured Divisions, and the *Trieste* Motorised Divisions. The 164th German Division was not motorised; its function here was to stiffen the Italian infantry. It was nominally under the command of the XXI Italian Corps while administered directly by the *Panzerarmee*. The XXI Corps comprised the *Trento* and *Bologna* Divisions and the German 164th Division. The Italian forces consisted of the *Brescia* and *Folgore* Divisions with two battalions from the Ramcke Parachute Brigade. This Italo-German force was suitably equipped for desert warfare. The German armoured divisions had Mark III and Mark IV tanks. Some had high-velocity guns of 75-millimeter calibre and were of the latest model. The Italian armoured divisions were equipped with M-13 tanks, which were poorly armoured and mechanically untrustworthy.³⁷¹

The front at El Alamein had been pushed back to its point of final resistance by a series of seemingly miraculous defeats by the Axis forces, which had previously always been outnumbered. The Allies requested more submarines in the eastern Mediterranean and more aircraft capable of effective anti-shipping operations. Thirty-two submarines were brought in across the theatre and were given clear instructions for bombing enemy shipping. The arrival of more RAF and we units gave these efforts a boost. Any orders to remove aircraft from the theatre for work elsewhere were immediately cancelled. General Alexander had earlier emphasised the importance of aircraft like Pounds and Portals. These decisions make it clear that Churchill and Montgomery agreed that destroying Axis supplies even before they could land was the key, and this continued to be an essential strategic policy till the campaign ended.³⁷²

As Rommel launched his attack at midnight on August 30–31, Monty realised the vital tactical importance of the Alam el Halfa, as it commanded a wide area of the desert. It was so positioned that it could serve as a base from which the progress of the Axis forces to the north could be

³⁷⁰ Panzer Army Afrika, German-Italian Forces in Africa, Extracts from Changes in Organization in Africa, 14 February 1942, GMDS File 22924/1, Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.

³⁷¹ Montgomery Papers, Report on the Battle of Mareth, 21 March 1942, Part II, LMD 19, Imperial War Museum, London.

³⁷² Extracts from the Panzer Army War Diary in Africa, February 1942, GMDS File 22924/1, Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.

blocked, as it was towards the Ruweisat Ridge as a central bastion of Alamein defences.³⁷³ Any position attempt to drive east or northeast could also be quashed from this same hill. Monty decided to garrison this to a whole division. He asked for the 44th Division to be immediately sent up from the Delta and entrusted them with withholding and strengthening the Alam el Halfa defences. Simultaneously, the Royal Air Force kept relentlessly attacking Rommel's supplies and lines of communication.³⁷⁴

Rommel planned to bypass the main defensive line of the 8th Army to the south and attack the critical rear position at Alam el Halfa Ridge. The main attack was to be launched on the western edge of the Alam el Halfa ridge instead of the eastern one. The 21st Panzer attacked first, followed by the 15th Panzer, but it was late in reaching Point 132. Instead, it attacked Point 102 and was hurt by the defence of the 22nd Armoured Brigade, which had its Grant tank hulls buried with turrets exposed and supported by the 44th Division's artillery. Rommel's petrol stocks were depleted, and he had to stop the attack. He began to retreat the following morning under continuous attack by the RAF. Monty was satisfied with the battle's progress, and his next move was to cut off the main body of the motorised Axis troops with a dashing attack. About 400 tanks were concentrated between the New Zealander's positions and the Alam el Halfa ridge to cut off the Axis supply lines.³⁷⁵

Four merchant ships from the *Pedestal* convoy reached Malta, and a tanker, *Ohio*, brought in 12,000 tons of precious fuel two days after Monty reached Egypt. On the other hand, Rommel had to halt his offensive due to an acute fuel shortage. The campaign of the Soviet Union was not going well, and the *Luftwaffe* was losing the air war over the Atlantic, which had disastrous effects on the U-boat campaign, the only area in which the German forces so far were seeing a degree of success against the Allies. Rommel had urgently requested two more defensive divisions with sufficient anti-tank weapons, pioneers, and artillery. Hitler refused to send the same and sent weaker divisions in its place. Fuel was a permanent headache for the *Afrikakorps* and remained so until the bitter end of the North African Campaign.³⁷⁶

³⁷³ Messenger, *Rommel*, p. 140.

³⁷⁴ Preliminary Instructions for Attack by Panzer Army Afrika, Extracts from the Panzer War Diary Africa, 22 August 1942, GMDS File 22924/1, Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.

³⁷⁵ Greene and Massignani, *Rommel's North Africa Campaign*, p. 155.

³⁷⁶ Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, pp. 202–215.

Rommel was indeed forced early on to the El Alamein defensive, which made him suffer losses equivalent to four Italian and three German divisions. He had lost 70 per cent of his workforce, 85 per cent of his panzers, 60 per cent of his anti-tank weapons, and half his heavy anti-aircraft guns. This left him with only 45 panzers in service, facing 160–180 American M3s of the Allied forces. His urgent requests for 36, 88 mm and 100, 5 cm anti-tank guns, 20, 10 cm K17 field guns, and a thousand trucks remained unanswered. Mussolini's Italian troops were exhausted after fighting in the desert for thirty to almost three years. The front was so thin that the 8th Army could have easily achieved a breakthrough. However, *Commando Supremo* assured Rommel that reinforcements were on the way and that Kesselring assured the *Luftwaffe* was still a fighting force.³⁷⁷

An infantry attack was ordered on the Axis flank in 'Operation Beresford' on September 3, 1942. The 132nd Infantry Brigade led the attack, while the 6th New Zealand Brigade had to cover her flank and create diversions, supported by Valentine tanks. The attack fell on the positions of the eight Italian mixed battalions and suffered many casualties. These battalions suffered heavy losses from the 5th New Zealand Brigade, too. The next attack came in three thrusts—in the north, the centre, and the south. The main thrust was in the south. It came in between the left flank of the New Zealand Division and the isolated hill, Himeimat. Rommel employed his entire *Afrikakorps* and the 20th Italian (Mobile) Corps, including the *Ariete* and *Littorio* Armoured Divisions. The southern thrust was an intense affair, while the north saw a weak effort and was easily repulsed by the Australians, being no more than a raid. In the centre was a medium-sized advance that hit the right of the 5th Indian Division and scored some success on the Ruweisat Ridge. At this time, the western end of the Ruweisat Ridge was occupied by the *Afrika Korps*, who were pressing to their advantage. However, the BIA successfully took back the ridge at first light on 31 August 1942.³⁷⁸

It seemed to the BIA that the *Afrikakorps* planned to break through the lightly held southern sector of the Allies, then turn north to drive towards the sea behind the XXX Corps, thus rolling up the Allied Line or encircling the Allied forces from the centre and right. On the far right flank and the edge of the Qattara Depression, a specialised battalion tested some of the Wehrmacht's latest weapons, which included fully automatic rifles and highly destructive

³⁷⁷ O'Connor Papers, Summary of an Army Commander's Address, 12 June 1942, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Studies, Kings College, London.

³⁷⁸ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Divisional Intelligence Summary No. 57, Part A3, Vol. N.-601/221/WD,MODHS, New Delhi.

mortars that scattered shrapnel at chest height—introducing an incredible lineup: a sleek recoilless 75 mm field gun for precision, an innovative magnetic anti-tank bomb with a smart delayed fuse, and some pistols designed to unleash high-explosive rounds! They also used their finest weapon, the MG-42, a belt-fed machinegun that was lightweight, seldom jammed and fired at the fantastic rate of 1,200 rounds per minute.³⁷⁹

Monty thought it necessary to wait and ascertain that there was no other hidden plan involved in these moves. On the morning of 1 September, he ascertained that this advance was directed on the Alam el Halfa Ridge and thence north towards the Ruweisat Ridge. He now switched all armour, which was under the headquarters of the 10th Armoured Division, to the area between the Alam el Halfa Ridge and the New Zealand Division's position. By the afternoon, nearly 400 tanks had been concentrated to block the northward move of the Axis troops towards Ruweisat. Monty then decided to close the gaps through the minefield through which the Axis tanks would come in, thus bottling up Axis armour. Rommel withdrew on 2 September, declaring a shortage of supplies as the reason. The Axis forces took three days to withdraw, during which they faced the full force of British firepower without being able to counterattack. The XIII Corps formations started moving southwards to close those gaps on the night of 3 September 1942. The *Afrikakorps* withdrew two days later. Their fighting continued until 7 September, when Monty called off the battle. He neither wanted to chase the Axis troops off the western edge nor did he want to waste time, which they could use more methodologically for the next offensive.³⁸⁰

This ended the significant Second Battle of Alam el Halfa, the 8th Army's first major offensive under Monty, its new commander. Monty now decided to destroy more of the soft-skinned Axis vehicles. He stressed the importance of knocking out as many supply lorries as possible to increase Rommel's difficulties, as he was already known to be short on fuel. Thus, the destruction of supplies would be a proper and timely move. A night bomber raid was conducted on the Tobruk harbour, which proved quite effective. In this battle, the 8th Army fought as a single, united body under the direct control of the Army Headquarters. Artillery and armour were used in concentrated groups, and tactical balance was maintained throughout the combat by re-grouping and continually drawing reserves. The *Afrikakorps* were now facing a dead wall wherever they went. The RAF provided full support to the 8th Army, thus boosting its strength.

³⁷⁹ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, pp. 241–243.

³⁸⁰ Armoured Division, Intelligence Summary No. 68, 7 October 1942, WO169-4054, PRO, KEW, UK.

This battle achieved everything Monty expected and gradually paved the way for the Allied victory.³⁸¹

The Battle of Alam el Halfa ended in six days. Rommel blamed the failure on the solid Commonwealth resistance and the RAF's air mastery. The Allies lost 1,750 men, 15 guns, and 67 tanks. The Axis lost 2,855 men, 53 guns, and 47 tanks. The critical points to victory for the Allies remained the superior effect of ULTRA, which supplied vital information to the Allies, and the dominance of the air by the Allies. This was tied to their superiority and growing confidence in defeating the Axis.³⁸² The 8th Army was well prepared for the offensive thrust coming from the *Panzerarmee*, so it suffered immediate and significant losses through unmarked minefields, artillery fire, and the RAF and halted its advance to Alam el Halfa with the help of well-positioned artillery and anti-tank guns.³⁸³

Despite everything, the 'Six Day Race' ended back at the starting line for the Axis. Its failure resulted from a lack of fuel and the overwhelming superiority of the British in artillery and the airforce. It was the RAF that made this battle a decisive victory. Their command of the air gave the 8th Army continuous reconnaissance reports. The RAF ground attack aircraft made Rommel's supply columns extremely vulnerable, thus suspending his tactical rules of mechanised warfare. The Axis air force was feeble. Monty had fought an unimaginative defensive battle, refusing to let his armour at Alam el Halfa be drawn out. For the 8th Army, this battle was much needed to boost their morale: the legendary Desert Fox had been beaten back, confidence in their new commander was high, and the future had a renewed assurance for them.³⁸⁴ The bulk of the total losses for the Germans were due to heavy aerial bombardments and artillery fire. The *Afrikakorps* were left with sufficient fuel for eight days, ammunition for a fortnight, and food for twenty-three days. The 8th Army lost only 124 tanks and armoured cars, 100 vehicles, 10 guns, and 22 anti-tank guns, with 400 soldiers taken as prisoners.³⁸⁵

The engagements along the El Alamein Line in July revealed that the strength of the 8th Army lay in its artillery and the Desert Air Force, or RAF. The battle unfolded according to General

³⁸¹ Tucker, *Approach to Battle*, pp. 245–250.

³⁸² Hammond, *Strangling the Axis*, p. 133.

³⁸³ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 197.

³⁸⁴ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, p. 307.

³⁸⁵ Brooks, *Montgomery and the Eighth Army*, pp. 19–23.

Montgomery's plan. This time, the Panzerarmee could not break through beyond Gazala. The combined and coordinated firepower of the 8th Army achieved its intended effect, significantly impacting the morale of the German and Italian troops and causing substantial material losses. The RAF dropped approximately 15,600 bombs over the five days following the offensive. This bombardment covered an area ranging from 7 to 9 miles in length and 5 to 6 miles in depth, resulting in nearly 250 bombs being dropped per square mile.³⁸⁶

The success at Alam el Halfa did wonders for the 8th Army. They improved their tactics by learning from their previous mistakes. There were no more sacrificing wretched tank crews as before. The old-fashioned idea of cavalry charging head-on with tanks was also given up. There was also a general appreciation of the massive support given to the land forces by the RAF. Monty had devised a plan that catered to the actual situation on the ground. He avoided asking too much from his men, unlike Auchinleck. The success of the 8th Army was also significantly boosted by support from the RAF, the Royal Navy, and intelligence from ULTRA, all of which had a devastating effect on the Axis supply lines.³⁸⁷

Fuel became a headache for Rommel as the Axis troops received oil in tankers via the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy's submarines and the RAF attacked the tankers without a break, and most of them were sunk. Thus, the existing fuel shortage became acute and had a vital effect on the *Afrikakorps'* morale.³⁸⁸ Rommel found the logistical chain excruciatingly insufficient. He believed this was due to administrative reasons, and he travelled to Rome personally to re-energise efforts for supplies to North Africa. He blamed his seniors' disorganisation, inefficiency, and unwillingness for setbacks in his desert war and continued to do so until his death. He repeatedly informed Mussolini they would be forced out of North Africa unless the supply situation improved.³⁸⁹

In many ways, the stars began to align for the 8th Army as it began preparing for the final phase of the El Alamein battles. Post Alam el Halfa, a new shipment of weapons arrived in the Middle East. There came a delivery of 300 Sherman tanks from the United States in the middle of

³⁸⁶ War Diary of the 5th Indian Division, 5 Ind Div Adm Instruction No. 3, 28 March 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

³⁸⁷ Montgomery Papers, Letter from Headquarters of the Eighth Army, 23 March 1943, Part II, LMD 19, Imperial War Museum, London.

³⁸⁸ Panzer Army Afrika, German-Italian Forces in Africa, Supply Reasons for Lull in North Africa, February–May 1942, GMDS File 22924/1, Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.

³⁸⁹ Fennel, *Fighting People's War*, pp. 279–285.

September after the loss of Tobruk. The Sherman carried a 75mm high-velocity gun firing either armour-piercing or high explosive shells. Unlike the Grant, it was reliable and had its big gun in the turret. Another arrival was the British Crusader Mark-III with a 6-pounder gun. 78 of these new tanks were available by the beginning of the next battle.³⁹⁰

By the middle of October, the 8th Army also had 849 6-pounder anti-tank guns at its disposal. Introducing these guns meant that every infantry battalion received eight 2-pounder anti-tank firearms to add to its defenses. This would allow the infantry a better chance of dealing with German Panzers without the complexities of cooperating closely with the armoured regiments.³⁹¹ The British operational approach demonstrated in the Field Service Regulations (FSR) proved inadequate in North Africa. Thus, Monty decided to distance the 8th Army from FSR as it was judged that the commanders could not apply abstract principles in practice on the battlefield. Alan Cunningham and Neil Ritchie employed a system of directive command, which sought to adapt to and exploit battlefield opportunities. Monty recognised that his army was quite incapable of fighting effectively in this manner. Instead, he sought to impose a more centralised system of command and control to create opportunities through a united effort. Although less dynamic and flexible, this approach, it was hoped, would limit the impact of poor training and questionable motivation on the outcome of events. Monty hoped he could get more out of the combined resources, especially firepower, available to the 8th Army by controlling operations tightly.³⁹²

Monty wanted to perfect the training of his formations for the battle of attrition that would take place during the final battle of Alamein. He removed five divisions from the line for intensive preparations—the 1st, 10th, and 8th Armoured Divisions from X Corps, the 2nd New Zealand Division, and the 51st Highland Division from the XXX Corps. The armoured divisions of X Corps were required to break through the gaps in the Axis defenses. Once the four attacking infantry divisions of XXX Corps broke into the enemy defence, they needed specific training for this ‘key’ task. The 2nd New Zealand Division, too, needed training after its heavy casualties during the fighting in July. The 51st Highland Division required extra training to take

³⁹⁰ Corps Commander Sitreps, Letter from Lt. General C.W Alfrey, 7 December 1942, Alfrey 3/3-14, LHCMA, Kings College London Archives.

³⁹¹ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 267.

³⁹² Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, p. 271.

part in the assaults of October. The remaining formations of the 8th Army were required to hold the line and train one brigade at a time.³⁹³

Monty's pamphlet on command and control, issued to senior officers after El Alamein in December 1942, captured the essence of this new approach. It emphasised maintaining objectives despite external frictions, pressures, and battle temptations. This approach greatly burdened the 8th Army commander to devise a coherent and effective battle plan. However, once the plan was developed, it became possible to train the troops precisely. This did not mean that subordinate initiative was unnecessary under Monty's new operational technique. The initiative was still recognised as an essential means of developing the full fighting power of the army. However, the vital importance of commanders setting and maintaining an overall aim to guide actions was emphasised in a manner beneficial to the 8th Army.³⁹⁴

In this new paradigm, by October 1942, the jigsaw puzzle pieces were falling into place for Monty and the 8th Army. New operational doctrines were introduced, and quantitative enhancements accompanied qualitative improvements. Post Alam el Halfa, the 8th Army technically won the battle of logistics. With Tripoli, Benghazi, and Tobruk, 1,300, 800, and 375 miles, respectively, from the front at El Alamein, the *Afrikakorps* were using one-third and one-half of their total fuel deliveries just to run vehicle convoys with supplies into Egypt. As Allied reinforcements piled into the Middle East, Rommel's catastrophic death spiralled. In August 1942, 35 per cent of the Axis tonnage for North Africa was sunk in the Mediterranean. This gradually grew to 50 per cent by October.³⁹⁵ In the first three weeks of August, the Italians received 15,000 tons of supplies and the Germans 8,500. In comparison, the BIA received more than 4,00,000 tons via Suez. By late October, the 8th Army had twice as many troops as the *Afrikakorps*, 2,20,000 versus 1,08,000. The material advantage was considerable: the Allies had twice as many tanks, 1,029 versus 548, and over four times as many medium and heavy tanks. It had a 3:2 advantage in artillery, 892 versus 552, more anti-tank guns, 1,451 versus 1,063, and nearly 200 more planes, around 530 versus 350.³⁹⁶

³⁹³ War Diary of the 5th Indian Division, Instruction to Officers Only, 12 March 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

³⁹⁴ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, pp. 249–251.

³⁹⁵ War Diary of the 5th Indian Division, 5 Indian Division Administration Instruction No. 1, 5 March 1942, Part II, MODHS, New Delhi.

³⁹⁶ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 219.

Though the 8th Army had enjoyed quantitative advantages in the previous campaign phases, it was still defeated by the *Afrikakorps*. This was because its units were almost all untrained. Monty had to stage-manage the coming battle so the troops could do what was demanded. He also had to be careful about not being too ambitious in his demands, as foolish mistakes could lead to the 8th Army losing heavily in the first few days of the battle. Like Alam el Halfa, he wanted to ensure that the next war was fought so that formations and units were not given tasks they would fail to accomplish.³⁹⁷ Generally, the 8th Army's approach to operations had been to eliminate the enemy's armour in a battle of manoeuvres and then destroy the remaining unarmoured portion of the *Afrikakorps*. At the final phase of El Alamein, Monty would reverse the process; he would first contain the German panzer units facing him in the desert. Simultaneously, the 8th Army would carry out systematic destruction of the unarmoured troops on the Axis side. He referred to this tactic as a 'crumbling process'.³⁹⁸ Monty accepted that his armoured forces could not beat the *Afrikakorps* in a straight fight. He concentrated his best troops, the Australians, New Zealand, South African, and Scottish infantry of XXX Corps, against the infantry of the Germans and Italians. This would force the *Afrikakorps* to react and counter-attack the 8th Army's plentiful anti-tank guns and armour. Monty judged that it was far easier to train units for a frontal assault and then fight behind anti-tank guns than to train them in the intricate combined arms operations as the Germans were so efficient in conducting mobile battles in the desert's open spaces.³⁹⁹

The 51st Highland Division, in the two months leading up to El Alamein, laid out exact replicas of the parts of the enemy defences they were supposed to attack. The entire operation was rehearsed so that every man knew in detail what he was expected to do regarding divisional exercises. All divisions benefited directly or indirectly from this process. This training period was necessary because of the complete change in infantry battalion commanders. Under Monty's training regime, even though the fighting force was reduced in numbers, the division was fit to participate in the battle in every way. Troops, both officers and men, were determined to give more than 100 per cent. Monty ensured the troops did not think the enemy would surrender because they had tanks and powerful artillery support. Because the Axis forces would

³⁹⁷ Major F.R. Jephson Mc Td and Chris Jephson, *The Day Rommel was Stopped: The Battle of Ruweisat Ridge, 2 July 1942* (Great Britain: Casemate Publishers, 2017), pp. 47–49.

³⁹⁸ Montgomery Papers, Reports on Training Arrangements of Anti-tank Regiments, February 1943, Part II, LMD 18/13, Imperial War Museum, London.

³⁹⁹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 187.

not surrender, there would be bitter fighting. The infantry had to be prepared to fight and kill over a prolonged period.⁴⁰⁰

The Third Battle of El Alamein

The day determined for the attack, the final phase of the El Alamein battles, had to be during the whole moon period since moonlight was necessary for infantry attacks and the operation of lifting mines. The next full moon was on 24 October 1942, and 23 October 1942 was fixed as D-Day.⁴⁰¹ After the victory of Alam el Halfa, the 8th Army threw itself heartily into preparing for the offensive. The most important feature of these preparations was a deception scheme calculated to mislead the *Afrikakorps* commanders about the actual date and direction of the attack. Monty called it a ‘cover plan’, perhaps putting impenetrable cover on all preparations. It started with a simple, elaborate camouflage, which had to maintain cover over the vehicles throughout the zone of operations and in the rear area. The Axis air survey relied heavily on clues from these to anticipate the moves and intentions of the 8th Army. Monty decided to begin the main attack from the north while staging a fake one in the south, portraying the day of the attack to be a fortnight after the actual attack date. The layout of vehicles needed for the main assault in the north was established on the ground as early as October 1. Initially, this was done using dummy vehicles, later replaced with actual operational transport. This activity occurred at night to facilitate the easy transfer of reinforcements and artillery in the dark. As units and formations moved out from the rear, efforts were made to quickly substitute the dummy vehicles to maintain a consistent pattern for any Axis observers in the air.⁴⁰²

By then, the Axis and the Allies in the Middle East had inexperienced forces in desert-related problems. The troops were familiar with the nature of desert warfare, which included maintaining direction by compass, controlling the movement of convoys, lifting mines, and using the wireless. Monty modified his plans by intending to destroy the *Afrikakorps* infantry first, keeping the hostile armour at a distance. It was Monty’s idea that the Axis armoured force wouldn’t be able to function unless it had enough infantry to ensure a firm base from which to operate and manoeuvre. Without such bases, held and protected by infantry, an armoured force would be entirely at sea, without the idea of where to refuel or draw supplies or ammunition.

⁴⁰⁰ Jephson, *The Day Rommel was Stopped*, pp. 61–63.

⁴⁰¹ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Wear and Tear of Vehicles in the Desert, of 8th Army, 21 September 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁴⁰² Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, pp. 307–310.

In such a predicament, an armoured force would perish. Thus, Monty changed the typical attack sequence and boldly departed from the textbook standards.⁴⁰³

On the other hand, the supplies and reinforcements Rommel needed were overwhelming: 5,200 men, 2,000 trucks, 70 guns for the Italians, and 6,000 men, 1,080 trucks, and 120 tanks for the Germans. Additional men were needed to strengthen units and replace the 17,000 Germans who had fought in North Africa for more than a year. The frontline units would require 30,000 tons of supplies in September and 35,000 in October. On the other hand, Monty saw the ranks of the 8th Army swell with newly arrived units and replacements, and he worked hard to ensure that they received sufficient training. The 8th Army also received the latest equipment, with an influx of American tanks and aircraft. Wehrmacht High Command (OKW) was not expecting another battle with the BIA before 1943. Churchill contemplated an offensive as early as possible, while Monty needed time till late September or October.⁴⁰⁴

The upcoming operation, codenamed 'Lightfoot', was believed to be the most decisive point of the El Alamein battles, which, if won, would destroy the backbone of the Panzer Army Afrika. This would be the ultimate turning point of the war. At 2140 hours on 23 October, the guns of the 8th Army opened fire at El Alamein. The exact time of each weapon was calculated so that every one of the first 882 shells would land on its target simultaneously. The guns fired for 15 minutes at the known positions of the enemy's batteries. Then, after a five-minute gap, they opened up again to the forward positions of the German and Italian infantry.⁴⁰⁵ At 2200 hours, XXX Corps, under Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese, comprising the 9th Australian Division, 51st Highland Division, 2nd New Zealand Division, and the 1st South African Division, with the 4th Indian Division carrying out all diversionary tasks, advanced on a 6-mile front and attacked the northern part of the Axis line. Behind them came the 1st and the 10th Armoured Divisions of the X Corps, the newly formed 'corps de chasse'. The X Corps' job was to follow closely on the heels of XXX Corps and clear lanes through the estimated 445,358 mines laid by Rommel in his 'devil's garden'. After this, the X Corps would hold the ring beyond the central defensive area and destroy the panzers when the *Afrikakorps* counter-

⁴⁰³ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 435–437.

⁴⁰⁴ Corps Commander Sitreps, Reports on Operations and Activities between 16 November 1942–11 December 1942, Alfrey 3/3-14, LHCMA, Kings College London Archives.

⁴⁰⁵ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 173.

attacked, implementing the ‘crumbling process’ planned by Monty.⁴⁰⁶ In the south, the XIII Corps, comprising the 7th Armoured Division, 44th Home Counties Division, and the 50th Northumbrian Division, were tasked with a diversionary attack to hold Rommel’s armoured forces away from the main attack as much as possible.⁴⁰⁷

Operation Lightfoot made substantial gains for the Allies, considering the profusion of mines around the Axis defenses. But the Axis survived this heavy bombardment. By the dawn of 24 October, chaos reigned, and traffic jams developed in the few lanes cleared of mines. Although Monty’s scheme did not go according to plan, the 8th Army’s advance had the planned impact.⁴⁰⁸ The next day, the *Afrikakorps* launched its first set of counter-attacks, where the 21st Panzer and half of the Ariete Division were ordered to move to the northern half of the line. Monty’s controlled and deliberate approach to the battle began to pay off in phases. Monty called these ten days a ‘dogfight’ as they were the days of the fiercest struggle. The first day was marked by several counter-attacks from the 15th Panzer Division, including one near Kidney Hill, where the Axis used about a hundred tanks. The 8th Army repulsed all attacks with heavy casualties to the *Afrikakorps*. Tank clashes continued near Kidney Hill, and Monty decided to switch the crumbling operations from the New Zealand sector to the 9th Australian Division’s industry in the north. He wanted to stop the XIII Corps’ advance altogether and push the 1st Armoured Division north-westwards towards the Rahman track to cut off the main Axis supply line.⁴⁰⁹

The 1st Armoured Division was in the XXX Corps sector, and the 7th Armoured Division was kept intact to preserve the tactical balance of the 8th Army’s front. The Australian operations went well, though they faced strong defences formed by the *Afrikakorps*. Rommel began to suspect that the main thrust of the 8th Army was going to come from the Australians, so he massed his soldiers to that sector. While preparing for Lightfoot, anti-shipping operations to degrade Rommel’s army by attacking its communications on land and at sea continued. The

⁴⁰⁶ War Diary of the 5th Indian Division A/Q, HQ 5 Ind Div Movement Order No. 1 of 13 April 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁴⁰⁷ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 333.

⁴⁰⁸ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Intelligence Summary No. 49, 3 July 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁴⁰⁹ French, *Raising Churchill’s Army*, p. 251.

aim was to destroy as many supplies arriving at the Axis ports and harbours as possible. Submarines and aircraft from Egypt and Malta were dedicated to this task wherever possible.⁴¹⁰

Monty had initially planned to pin down the Axis forces from all sides—the north and the south—by implementing powerful armoured thrusts through breaches in Axis positions. But he had to change his plans to a more straightforward pattern after receiving intelligence that Rommel's defensive positions were more vital than he assumed.⁴¹¹ Operation Lightfoot caused significant disruption, and the Afrikakorps encountered substantial resistance, resulting in the breakthrough of minefields. Despite the Axis' extreme anti-tank and artillery fire resistance, the BIA took Miteiriya Ridge, but advancing beyond it wasn't easy. This was known as an 'attritional slog' in desert warfare.⁴¹² The 8th Army and RAF made full use of their available firepower but suffered heavy casualties. The *Afrikakorps* were broken but had not completely given up yet. While heavy warfare continued on land, further decisions were to be made on force allocations to sustain anti-shipping efforts and ease the 8th Army's targets. Portal agreed to cancel the transfer of thirteen Beaufighters equipped for maritime work that were destined for India; these were sent to the Middle East to accelerate the anti-shipping campaign. 35 submarines were stationed by the end of November for the same purpose.⁴¹³

While the Australians were engaging against the German troops, the 1st Armoured Division began penetrating westwards. The object of that move was to pass an armoured brigade onto the Rahman track, which was the main supply route for the Axis. This would not only cut Rommel's supply line but also pave the way for getting behind the defenses of the coastal salient. The Rahman area was the key to the Axis supply routes in their rear, and capturing that area complicated Rommel's supply problems even further by accentuating his petrol shortage. The *Afrikakorps* became very sensitive to this problem and thus offered strong resistance. The 2nd New Zealand Division was withdrawn into reserve, and the 4th Indian and 1st South African Divisions filled the gap. They spread themselves out and covered all the New Zealand positions.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹⁰ O'Connor Papers, Secret and Personal Reports of the Headquarters of the Western Desert Force, 23 June 1940, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Studies, Kings College, London.

⁴¹¹ War Diary of the 5th Indian Division A/Q, HQ 5 Ind Administration Instruction No. 4, 20 April 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁴¹² Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 340–343.

⁴¹³ Montgomery Papers, Notes on Conference for Supercharge, 25 March 1943, Part II, LMD 19, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁴¹⁴ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 175.

Post 26 October, the situation did not seem optimistic for the 8th Army. The *Afrikakorps* had withdrawn their anti-tank guns and infantry and re-arranged them in greater depth to lock in the X Corps. This would limit their space for manoeuvre. Among the infantry divisions, there were heavy casualties, and XXX Corps needed a short pause to reorganise themselves. There was also a lack of replacements for the New Zealand and South African Divisions. The XIII Corps relapsed into dormancy, and the *Afrikakorps* withdrew from their position and moved northwards. With this, Monty ordered the 7th Armoured Division and other troops to move to the northern sector. These other troops were the 44th, 50th and the Greek Brigade. All these formations were to be sent to the north front to assist the Australians, by relief and otherwise, in developing a vigorous drive in that sector. On 27 October, the 15 and the 21 Panzer Divisions were ranged against the northern corridor. Throughout the day, the German divisions made heavy counter-attacks against Kidney Hill. Nevertheless, they all were repulsed with considerable losses to themselves. The 1st Armoured Division knocked out 50 Axis tanks alone.⁴¹⁵ The RAF played similar havoc with its constant bombing of Axis tanks while preparing for attack. German armour had been sufficiently destroyed to prepare for another attack. Thus, Monty put that area into defense and withdrew the 1st Armoured Division and the 24th Armoured Brigade into reserve. It was time for a vigorous drive to the west—this was the final break-out stage.⁴¹⁶

By 29 October 1942, the BIA suffered considerable losses: 213 tanks had been knocked out and recovered, and many more were damaged beyond repair. However, by comparison, the entire count of German tanks was reduced to 81. *Afrikakorps* received 109 tanks by 1 November, but the 8th Army received 487 medium and 100 heavy tanks. And that very night, Monty launched his knockout blow—‘Operation Supercharge’.⁴¹⁷ The 9th Australian Division was only to prepare the ground for launching this operation. The Australians attacked on the night of 28/29 October and succeeded in driving a wedge into the *Afrikakorps* positions and reaching out to the coastal road. Much opposition was encountered around Thompson’s Post, which was the bastion of that terrain. The Australians could repulse almost all the counter-

⁴¹⁵ Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, pp. 335–337.

⁴¹⁶ Jephson, *The Day Rommel was Stopped*, pp. 80–81.

⁴¹⁷ Montgomery Papers, Letter from Headquarters to Horrocks and Freyberg, 25 March 1943, Part I-0216, Imperial War Museum, London.

attacks made with its tank and infantry support. After this set of attacks, Supercharge was finally put into action.⁴¹⁸

On the morning of 29 October 1942, Monty received intelligence that the 90th Light Division had moved to Sidi Abd el Rahman; this showed that Rommel was anticipating the 8th Army to attack from the extreme north. This meant that Rommel had indeed cracked Monty's plan, which left him with no choice but to modify it. Monty moved the axis of the westward drive further to the south. This meant the blow would fall mainly on the region where the Italian and German troops formed a junction. However, the Australians would continue their drive northwards towards the sea so that Rommel wouldn't suspect the modification in the plan.⁴¹⁹ Instead, the offensive would be intensified, and Rommel's suspicion would grow stronger. After crossing the coast road post on the night of October 30th to 31st, the Australians turned east to attack the Panzer Grenadiers, successfully trapping them. However, the Panzer Grenadiers received reinforcements in the form of tanks, which forced the Australians to retreat and resulted in considerable casualties. On 1 November, Monty learned that the 21st Panzer Division had joined the 90th Light Division in the north. This meant the bulk of the German force was now concentrated on the coast, away from the new line of advance he adopted. This was an excellent form of deception used by Monty. The way to commence 'Supercharge' was now clear.⁴²⁰

Operation Supercharge began at 0100 hours on 2 November 1942. The assaulting infantry advanced behind a creeping barrage. This included the 151st and 152nd Infantry Brigades, under the command of the 2nd New Zealand Division. The frontage of their attack was 4,000 yards, and the depth of their advance was 6,000 yards. The attack was supported by 300 25-pounders and the corps' medium artillery, which intended to blow a new gap through the *Afrikakorps*. The X Corps, which consisted of the 1st, 7th and 10th Armoured Divisions and two armoured car regiments, was to bring the German armour to battle and cut off the Axis lines of communication. The first part of the operation went well, as the infantry fought through the night and established the corridor. Now, the armour had to be removed, for which the 9th Armoured Brigade was to pass through and establish a bridgehead. Through the bridgehead,

⁴¹⁸ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 325-330.

⁴¹⁹ Montgomery Papers, Notes on Conference of Supercharge, 25 March 1943, Part I-0216, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁴²⁰ War Diary of the 5th Indian Division A/Q, HQ 5 Ind Div Administration Instruction No. 6, 22 May 1942, Part II, MODHS, New Delhi.

the 1st, 7th, and 10th Armoured Divisions were to engage with the panzers, and the armoured car regiments made deep raids in the Axis rear.⁴²¹

On the other hand, amid the battle, Monty designated the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 1st, 7th and 10th Armoured Divisions to create a new mobile reserve under the command of the X Corps. This new reserve was employed to launch a fresh attack to the north of the line—this time, Monty's plan was successful. By morning, the 1st Armoured Division had gone as far as the Rahman track. The German war diaries at this stage acknowledged that their troops were exhausted. They even admitted after a ten-day desperate struggle against a superior enemy, on land and in the air, that their troops were in no condition to prevent further attempts at breaking through.⁴²² The 9th Armoured Brigade did its part before the first light on 2 November, but as daylight approached, the Axis troops rallied and slowed down the progress of the BIA. The 9th Armoured Brigade faced a tough anti-tank gun screen, suffered casualties, and held the gains until the 1st Armoured Division came to assist them. The 1st Armoured Division fought an intense battle near Tel el Aqqaqir and suffered heavy losses. Post the afternoon of 2 November, the width of the corridor was extended, and the anti-tank screens could pass through. This was successfully done, and the 51st Division enlarged the salient at the southern edge, while the New Zealand divisions did the same in the north. But the 1st Armoured Division altogether was unable to pierce it.⁴²³

Monty thus decided to outflank the screen and ordered the infantry to attack south of Tel el Aqqaqir, in the direction of the Rahman track. Accordingly, the 51st Division and the 5th Indian Brigade mounted an attack and quickly reached the Rahman track by penetrating the weaker section of the screen to the south; they bypassed the stronger resistance in the north. The attack took place during the nights of November 3 and 4, 1942. The armoured divisions had already moved through, which allowed the armour and infantry of the XXX Corps to proceed quickly and execute the breakout. Consequently, the final phase of the Alamein battles concluded.⁴²⁴ It is important to note here that the 5th Indian Brigade delivered some of the final winning strokes of this combat. Even Monty agreed that the brigade made an extraordinarily deep penetration

⁴²¹ Robert Forczyk, *Desert Armour: Tank Warfare in North Africa, Gazala to Tunisia, 1942–1943* (Great Britain: Osprey Publishing, 2023), pp. 74–75.

⁴²² Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 182.

⁴²³ Montgomery Papers, Eighth Army Intelligence Summary No. 467, 28 March 1943, Part I-0217, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁴²⁴ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 237.

that enabled the armoured divisions to succeed. The anti-tank gun screen established by the 1st Armoured Division served as a rearguard action while the *Afrikakorps* had already begun their withdrawal. The Desert Air Force reported on the overall conditions faced by the Axis forces. Their retreat was challenging, primarily due to a shortage of fuel. They were in a situation where they had to make difficult decisions about who could advance and who would be left behind.⁴²⁵

Rommel's army began withdrawing from the El Alamein front at nightfall on 4 November. It was a pitch-dark night, so vehicles frequently strayed away from tracks and became stuck in the sand. They knew it would be impossible to establish a temporary defensive position before Fuka. The Panzer Army lost a critical twenty-four hours that could prove fatal. The Italian X Corps had severe difficulties due to the acute fuel and ammunition shortage.⁴²⁶ The *Afrikakorps*, thus, were in danger of being outflanked by the X Corps. The 90 Light Africa Division managed to get back to Fuka in safety, but the 21 Panzer Division did not have the fuel to counter-attack. Rommel hoped to be able to hang on to Fuka until he managed to bring back all the slow-moving units. This soon became impossible because his forces were too weak for a viable defence. Therefore, he was forced to abandon the idea and order a withdrawal to Mersa Matruh. The 21 Panzer Division suffered a terrible beating and ran out of fuel. The Italian 10 Corps and 1 Luftwaffe Light Infantry Brigade disintegrated. There were ugly scenes between Italian and German troops and even exchanges of fire as they scrambled for transport. Some Italian units were abandoned in the desert to die of hunger and thirst when German troops seized the few remaining trucks.⁴²⁷

At Fuka, Rommel hoped to remain at Mersa Matruh for a few days to sort out the Panzer Army, rapidly declining into demoralised shambles. Fearing that the 8th Army would outflank him, Rommel felt he had to retreat westwards. He received orders from Mussolini that he was to make a stand at the Halfaya Line. Axis forces had already lost most Italian infantry, armour, and artillery. Rommel was still desperately short of supplies, and heavy rains had rendered the roads dangerously soft; it was impossible to halt the 8th Army in this condition. The 21st Panzer

⁴²⁵ Montgomery Papers, Most Secret Report to General Alexander, 27 March 1943, Part I-0216, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁴²⁶ Andrian Stewart, *The Early Battles of Eighth Army: Crusader to the Alamein Line, 1941–1942* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2002), pp. 139–140.

⁴²⁷ War Diary of the 5th Indian Division A/Q, HQ 5 Ind Div Field Return of Officers, 3 May 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

Division had lost nearly all its tanks during a battle on November 6, 1942, in the afternoon.⁴²⁸ However, by the evening of 8 November, the bulk of the Panzer Army was between Sidi Barrani and Buq-Buq. It was calculated that the narrow winding road near Sollum would be the scene of massive traffic jams that would hold up the withdrawal for two days. Rommel was gradually losing control of the situation because he had lost his means of communication, and the 8th Army had successfully jammed all radio transmissions. The Germans had only 0.4 of daily fuel ration, despite frequent and urgent requests for help. The real problem for them was the Allied forces' complete domination of the Mediterranean at sea and in the air.⁴²⁹

Rommel knew that his position was desperate and could only play for time. None of this, however, made any difference to the OKW. Hitler sent a message to the *Afrikakorps* asking them to send its list of needs, but this was a pointless gesture. It was virtually impossible to ship supplies to North Africa. Even if supplies arrived, there would be a shortage of transport and fuel to supply the front.⁴³⁰ The BIA made a difficult breakout against these forces and wiped out most of the stubborn Italian units in the process, which also caused aerial harassment to the remainder of the *Panzerarmee*. But the 8th Army failed to catch the bulk of the *Panzerarmee*, obstructed by congestion on the line of advance, minefields, the remains of the rearguard, and some ill-timed heavy rainfall. Even then, Tobruk was captured by 13 November, and Benghazi was reached by the following week. Despite repeated requests, Rommel was forced by Headquarters to put a halt on the Mersa al Brega Line just after El Agheila. Advance elements of the 8th Army pushed the Axis rearguard out of Agedabia on 22 November.⁴³¹

Rommel had 45 German tanks and a handful of Italian machines, whereas the British could muster around 420 tanks, 300 armoured cars, and large quantities of artillery and aircraft. Now, even Kesselring and Italian Commander Ugo Cavallero refused to vote for a withdrawal from Libya.⁴³² Simultaneously, Monty had already begun his methodological preparation for the next push. This took seventeen days, and Rommel visited both Hitler and Mussolini to plead for permission to retire further west. Hitler strongly opposed the idea, and Mussolini agreed, but for a withdrawal to western Libya, from where they were supposed to build up for a new

⁴²⁸ Corps Commander Sitreps, Letter from Lt. General C.W Alfrey, 7 December 1942, Alfrey 3/3-14, LHCMA, Kings College London Archives.

⁴²⁹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 183–184.

⁴³⁰ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 387–391.

⁴³¹ Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, pp. 343–345.

⁴³² Administrative Reports, 29 May 1941, File No. 601-232-WD-PT-A, War Diary of the 10th Indian Division, MODHS, New Delhi.

offensive. Despite such brutal defeats and Allied triumphs in North Africa, Hitler referred to the loss of Cyrenaica as temporary. This proved that he was still hoping for fantastic reversals of fortune.⁴³³

With the heavy losses of the *Afrikakorps* due to Allied superiority in the air and artillery, the Germans showered complaints on the Italians, who they claimed had failed in every aspect. They could not fight in the desert because they could not make quick decisions. Their tanks had weak motors and limited range. Their artillery was also limited in range. Their officers were inexperienced, and the men were poorly led and badly fed. They were useless in defence unless supported by German manuals and were incapable of standing up to a British bayonet charge. The Germans had to bear the entire load of the offensive. The Panzer Army could not stand up to such an attack unless the 22 Infantry Division came for help. The supply problem remained acute. The bread ration had to be halved, leaving the troops undernourished. Around 17,000 men were needed to replace those utterly exhausted, having served in the desert for over a year.⁴³⁴

British losses in the Alamein battles totalled 13,500 men, including killed, wounded, and missing, and 600 tanks. German losses were 180 tanks, 1,000 dead, and 8,000 prisoners. As oil and blood leaked slowly into the sand of the battlefield that carried so many British dead, Monty felt that this was not a complete and absolute victory yet. He always believed that a good commander always thinks and plans two moves. Monty formed the X Corps as a *corps de chasse*. He wanted his battles always to go the way he planned. In short, the pursuit turned to the coast, though all the experienced desert commanders advised a long march through the desert parallel to the enemy.⁴³⁵

Conclusion

In the battles of El Alamein, the Axis forces suffered severe blows. By 6 November 1942, there were at least 30,000 prisoners, including nine generals captured by the 8th Army. Casualties were in the thousands, the *Littorio* and the *Trieste* divisions were practically destroyed, and only a fraction of the *Ariete* escaped. The 15 and 21 Panzer Divisions lost all their tanks. Overall, the Italo-German Army was reduced to almost two-thirds of its original strength,

⁴³³ Notes on Occupation of Cyrenaica, 25 November 1942, WO169_4054, PRO, KEW, UK.

⁴³⁴ Fennel, *Fighting People's War*, pp. 365–377.

⁴³⁵ Barnett, *The Desert Generals*, p. 272.

equivalent to losing about eight divisions. Losses in tanks, guns, and stores were also immense. Rommel started with 600 tanks, out of which 450 had to be left behind due to fuel shortage, and 75 were lost during the retreat. Many vehicles and over a thousand artillery pieces were either captured or destroyed by the 8th Army. The fleeing troops left behind weapons and ammunition they could not carry. In comparison, the Allied losses were not very heavy.⁴³⁶

Monty devised a relatively simple and conventional approach to tackling the Panzerarmee along the El Alamein line. He maximised the vast material resources provided by the factories of Britain and the USA. By carefully training his men for the specific roles he required of them, he ensured that they entered the fight fully prepared. His strategy was logical and profoundly tactical; he effectively aligned his goals with the available means, leading to victory. However, the Battle of El Alamein did not destroy Rommel's forces in North Africa. Historians believe Monty's new slow and cautious "Colossal Cracks" approach ultimately led to that outcome. The battles at El Alamein drove the first decisive nail into the Axis coffin in Africa, with a second blow delivered just days later. By November 4, 1942, the battle was practically over. The balance of forces and supplies had shifted entirely against Rommel. He estimated that he had only twelve tanks left, and all his anti-tank guns were gone. His army was almost without air cover. The man who had brought the Axis so close to victory in the desert was forced to retreat to preserve the Panzerarmee's forces for future battles. The German War Diaries from the battle praised the BIA soldiers for their tenacity and resilience in combat. Despite their heavy losses, they continued to attack repeatedly and ultimately succeeded.⁴³⁷

To analyse the situation from the German perspective, Rommel recognised that the defeat at Alam el Halfa marked a turning point in his campaign. Since January 1942, he had been operating with only 40 percent of the supplies he needed while the British forces enjoyed ample logistical support and complete air superiority. Rommel acknowledged that he had made a significant error by launching an offensive without ensuring he had enough fuel. He also held Kesselring accountable for this mistake, believing that Kesselring had intentionally delayed the shipment of weapons, ammunition, and fuel to Alamein. He also thought that Kesselring was jealous of his status as a commander. But it was a fact that Rommel was no longer the overconfident swashbuckler; he was a commander who was now exhausted, worn out, and

⁴³⁶ Corps Commander Sitreps, Troops Commanders Reports, Alfrey 3/3-14, LHCMA, Kings College London Archives.

⁴³⁷ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Army Commander's Message to All Ranks of Eighth Army, 30 May 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

depressed.⁴³⁸ There was a shortage of trucks, water supplies were affected by several storms, and fuel supplies were inadequate. On 19 October 1942, the Panzer Army Africa had 273 Panzers and 289 Italian tanks. Of these, only the 88 Panzer IIIs and 35 Panzer IVs were modern weapons; the remainder were either obsolete or useless, especially the Italian ones. They had intelligence that the 8th Army had 1,029 tanks, among them 170 Grants and 252 Shermans, both with 75mm guns, and the Shermans also had long barrels. The Sherman was a vastly improved version of the Grant, with a fully rotating turret and an armour-piercing shell capable of penetrating the enemy armour, an excellent match for any Panzer, except for a handful of Panzer IVs.⁴³⁹

Panzer General Georg Stumme, who oversaw the *Afrikakorps* while Rommel went on a break to treat his ill health, also addressed the problem of the Panzer Army's poor survey and the importance of improving the quantity and quality of patrols. But their major problem remained with supplies. Inadequate food resulted in a sharp increase in the number of sick soldiers. There was a long list of troops suffering from gastroenteritis, dysentery, and jaundice. Many 17- and 18-year-olds were thrown into the battle before being appropriately acclimatised in the desert. There were also insufficient hospital beds in North Africa. This led to a marked decline among the Axis troops, particularly among the Italians.⁴⁴⁰

Stumme made another blunder by refusing to bombard the British positions to save ammunition. This scarcity of ammunition was also another reason behind the silence of the German guns, rather than the 8th Army's counter-battery fire. The German outposts 'J' and 'L' were quickly overrun by the Australian Divisions of the Allied forces. The Italian 62 Infantry Regiments and two battalions of the 164th Infantry Divisions were wiped out by the British artillery. Stumme died the following day on his visit to the 90th Light Africa Regiment. However, Hitler was still convinced that Rommel would stop the 8th Army at El Alamein. OKW concentrated entirely on the Soviet Union campaign when Stalingrad was a culmination point.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁸ Forczyk, *Desert Armour*, p. 126.

⁴³⁹ Jephson, *The Day Rommel was Stopped*, p. 95.

⁴⁴⁰ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 320–322.

⁴⁴¹ Toker Papers, Draft Broadcast by Lt. General Francis Toker, November 1942, 71/21/2/10, Imperial War Museum, London.

The ongoing problem for Rommel in North Africa remained logistics when he returned to take his position. The *Panzerarmee* had only three units left between Benghazi and the front, whereas it had eight when Rommel left. Ideally, with supplies, it should have been thirty. This showed that the *Panzerarmee* was tactically hamstrung. Rommel had no fuel to fight the 8th Army, even when he believed the *Afrikakorps'* tactical strength might have outweighed their numerical inferiority. He was locked in a battle of attrition and could not win anymore. He wrote to his wife that he was sure that the British would win over North Africa in a few days because their superiority was staggering and their own resources meagre.⁴⁴²

Monty's morbid plan, codenamed 'Operation Lightfoot'—where he decided that this would not be a repetition of 'hit and run' tactics for the 8th Army, but only a 'killing match'—proved disastrous for the *Afrikakorps*. Hitler firmly believed that the 8th Army could not break through Rommel's positions at El Alamein. Persistent aerial attacks and massive barrages by the armoured divisions of the BIA were of an intensity that the *Afrikakorps* had never experienced. The Allied artillery was supported by massive air attacks, resulting in communications between the forward and the rear positions being severed. The 5.5-inch howitzers and 2.5-pounders, along with Wellingtons and Halifaxes of the Desert Air Force, played a decisive role in the destruction of the *Panzerarmee*. The Germans were unnerved. The 25-pounders, onomatopoeically called 'Ratsch-bums' by the Germans, were particularly feared because it was impossible to hear the shell coming.⁴⁴³

The German forces collapsed in a few days and withdrew after suffering heavy losses. Rommel had started sending frantic messages to the Headquarters for supplies, but he realised there was little chance they would be heeded. He reconciled himself to the idea that the 8th Army would grind him down. With the end of 'Operation Supercharge', the Axis forces were at the end of their strength. They had used up its ammunition reserves, and Rommel knew he was fighting blindfolded. He was sure it was time to withdraw, fighting his way back. He knew his *Afrikakorps* were exhausted, having fought against a vastly superior adversary for ten days. The nature of the war in North Africa had changed at this point. What was previously a colonial

⁴⁴² Pitt, *Year of Alamein*, p. 345.

⁴⁴³ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Minutes of a Conference at the Main Headquarters of Eighth Army, 30 May 1942, Part IIIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

war was now a war of material, in which tactical skill, courage, and morale were no longer significant. It was now a war the Axis could not possibly win.⁴⁴⁴

In another letter to his wife, Rommel wrote that he realised that the decisive battle of North Africa was lost. He attributed this to the lack of supplies, the overwhelming Allied superiority in the air, and the absurd order to stand and fight to the last man and the last round. He believed that even the bravest of men could not fight without a gun, that the best guns were worthless without ammunition, and that in mobile warfare, firearms and ammunition were useless if they could not be moved around in vehicles with enough petrol. Air support was needed, which could not be provided by the Luftwaffe. This was now a battle of attrition fought from the air, with overwhelming air power seriously limiting operational and tactical options.⁴⁴⁵

Hitler had also understood by now that Rommel was no longer a loyal soldier. The 8th Army had avoided a fight in the open and opted for an unimaginative battle of attrition. With its overwhelming quantitative and qualitative superiority in material, it was almost bound to win. Rommel generously praised the British infantryman's disciplined training, the artillery's speed and accuracy, and the air forces' skill and courage. The 8th Army, especially the Indians, were also exceptionally skilled at night-time attacks. Such attacks were usually spearheaded by heavy tanks, which came to within 1,800 meters, where they were out of the range of the Axis anti-tank guns. November 1942 was, thus, a month of doom in modern German history.⁴⁴⁶ It was evident that a profound change had occurred in the power of the Allied forces in the Middle East. The three services were working together in an increasingly coherent and coordinated fashion. The Allies were facing a changed picture in North Africa.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴⁴ Stewart, *The Early Battles of Eighth Army*, p. 144.

⁴⁴⁵ Corps Commander Sitreps, Report of the 11 Infantry Brigade, 28 December 1942, Alfrey 3/3-14, LHCMA, Kings College London Archives.

⁴⁴⁶ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, p. 352.

⁴⁴⁷ Auchinleck Papers, Secret Cipher Message to the Troopers, 23 June 1942, File- LIV 949-962, Manchester United Library, England, United Kingdom.

CHAPTER 5

Triumph at Tunisia: 1943

‘Sir, it is my duty to report that the Tunisian Campaign is over. All enemy resistance has ceased. We are the masters of the North African shores.’

—General Harold Alexander to Prime Minister Winston Churchill.⁴⁴⁸

Introduction

Tunisia was the last battleground for the Axis forces in North Africa. Geographically, Tunisia was about 500 miles long, from the north Mediterranean coast to the south Sahara Desert. The northern uplands were covered with thick scrub and small forests. The south of Tunisia was dotted with oases and salt marshes. The Tebessa Mountains began from the Atlas Mountains, crossed Algeria, and ended in central Tunisia. As the terrain changed for the 8th Army, their battle tactics had to evolve from the ‘Desert Warfare’ prototype that had kept them engaged for so long. The 4th Indian Division of the British-Indian Army (BIA) played a significant role in this Tunisian victory that destroyed the *Afrikakorps* from the vicinity of the Mediterranean. It used the traditional methods of mountain warfare in which it gained expertise through its combat against the Pathans in the North-West Frontier of India. It also used the combat experience it had gained from fighting the Italians in Eritrea through implementing innovative doctrine and tactics. The Pathans were ‘uncivilised’ tribesmen, but the Italians, especially Germans, were organised and equipped to conduct industrial warfare in the mountainous terrain. The BIA dealt with warfare in the mountainous region between modern armed forces through campaigns fought in Norway, East Africa, Greece, Crete, and the Caucasus, analysed the lessons it learned, and used them in future campaigns. The most important of these was an imperative need for cooperation between infantry, artillery, and air support in the hills.⁴⁴⁹

From Alamein to Tunisia

With the fall of Tripoli, the Axis forces withdrew westwards, lengthening their line of communications and making delivering supplies difficult. The 8th Army had already advanced

⁴⁴⁸ Major P.C. Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, 1939–1945: The North African Campaign 1940–1943* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), p. 515.

⁴⁴⁹ Kaushik Roy, *Fighting Rommel: The British Imperial Army in North Africa during the Second World War, 1941–1943* (New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 183–187.

1,400 miles from Alamein and was only 600 miles from Benghazi, its nearest port of supply. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, Commander of the *Afrikakorps*, believed that the lack of supplies by the higher authorities caused difficulties for his army. The ideal course for the *Afrikakorps* was to avoid battle. A successful defense against a British outflanking drive was beyond all hope.⁴⁵⁰ Rommel believed that they were left with only a third of the fighting power they had before Alamein. They neither had supply dumps nor stocks. They were living hand-to-mouth, in the truest sense of the phrase. Whatever tankers were sailing from Italy were falling victim to British torpedo-carrying aircraft and submarines. Rommel's suggestion to disguise the supply ships as the relevant authorities ignored merchant ships. This attitude towards the *Afrikakorps* adopted by higher authorities was based on mistaken notions of their situation and prospects. An order had arrived from the Führer, Adolf Hitler, that the *Afrikakorps* were to hold the Mersa el Brega line at all costs. Large reinforcements of tanks and guns, both anti-tank and anti-aircraft, were promised, but Rommel knew from experience what these promises meant. A withdrawal from Mersa el Brega to Tunisia required the maximum possible time and flawless execution of the upcoming operations with minimum loss of men and material.⁴⁵¹

With the long and slow winter ebbing away, the *Afrikakorps* went from one lay-back position to another without hastily employing its troops. Tripoli fell to the Allies without resistance. With the triumphal entry of the platoons of 4/6 Rajputana Rifles and 3/10 Baluchis, who acted as Army Headquarters guards, the 4th Indian Division was well represented. At the end of February, the X Corps moved to Tripolitania, and the 4th Indian Division took to the roads. The desert faded behind them as they passed the Via Balbia between the marshes and the sea. Patches of grass began to appear, and some of the innumerable *wadis* carried water. The columns passed the Italian Duce's Benito Mussolini's grandiose Arch of Empire, and scattered fields appeared where the winter sowings were already green.⁴⁵² The road ran through a countryside checkerboarded with olive and citrus groves. At Tripoli, the highway found ancient towns through an avenue of wattles, passing through Arab slums. The troops emerged at the battered waterfront, where the Royal Navy and engineers worked tirelessly to make the

⁴⁵⁰ David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 243–245.

⁴⁵¹ B.H. Liddell-Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1953), pp. 359–360.

⁴⁵² Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Taker, *Approach to Battle: A Commentary-Eighth Army, November 1941 to May 1943* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1963), pp. 273–275.

port serviceable. Here, the 7th Armoured Brigade took over the garrison, while the 5th Indian Brigade and Divisional Troops covered the outskirts of the town.⁴⁵³

Tripoli was a helpful port, but the Germans destroyed it before withdrawing from the city. General Bernard Montgomery, later called Monty, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Theatre, decided to send forward only the 7th Armoured Division and hold the rest of his troops in the Tripoli area. This was required for the re-equipping and re-organising of supplies until the port was functional again. By 25 January 1943, the 7th Armoured Division had pushed the retreaters back to Zuara, less than 50 miles from the Tunisian border. Zuara proved difficult to occupy for the 8th Army as the 90th Light Division and the 164th Divisions put up a strong resistance there. The wet weather and the bad ground hampered the movements of armoured cars and other vehicles. However, by 4 February, Tripolitania was in Allied hands, and the Italian colonial empire had ceased to exist. The 8th Army had finally entered Tunisia—the last bastion of the German defense and the last hope of the Axis powers in Africa. The *Afrikakorps* tried to resist any Allied advance into the country with all their might. Here, Rommel was critical of Monty's attitude of never taking risks of boldly following the Axis forces and overrunning them. He believed this daring would have cost him far fewer losses in the long run than the methodical insistence on overwhelming superiority in each tactical action, which he could only obtain at the cost of his speed. The retreat to Tunisia was necessary to force the British into as many approaches marches as possible. This would be a gamble for the *Afrikakorps*, with the first stop being Buerat and the second being Tarhuna-Homs. They had no intention of accepting losses at this point.⁴⁵⁴

The war would take place 185 miles ahead, 90 miles beyond the Tunisian frontier at the Gulf of Gabes, which was gouged deeply into the Tunisian headland. A few miles inland, a large mountain block sprang out of the plain. The main highway passed under the shadow of this massif, along a narrow neck of foreshore where first the French and then the Italians had built the massive defences of the Mareth Line. Rommel stood waiting here, prepared to give the 8th Army a battle. This compelled Monty to forsake his customary caution and close on Mareth to avoid lines of communication being extended beyond safety limits. He wanted to wait until the Desert Army's supply build-up warranted such an advance. Rommel, meanwhile, had every

⁴⁵³ Tucker Papers, Notes by Major-General Francis Tucker, 6 October 1945, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁵⁴ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 361.

intention of waiting until Tripoli became fully functional. At the earliest opportunity, he planned a sharp counter-stroke at the gathering of British forces.⁴⁵⁵ The most vital defensive position in Tunisia was the Mareth Line. This region had natural obstacles, built-up defenses, and hilly terrain and was almost as strong as the Alamein line or the El Agheila position. Rommel made his most determined stand in this part of the country, and his intelligence reports confirmed that his Mareth defenses were being improved and strengthened with great haste. To ensure enough time to complete their preparations, the *Afrikakorps* needed to delay the approach of the 7th Armoured Division as far as possible.⁴⁵⁶

For the 8th Army, the first and foremost Axis post to be destroyed was Ben Gardane. It was a fortified village, to the southwest of which was the 15th Panzer Division headquarters. This was a delaying position, and the *Afrikakorps* intended to hold the BIA for at least a week or ten days here. The 7th Armoured Division proceeded to tackle this position from the southeast. Monty moved the 22nd Armoured Brigade close behind the front line to provide tactical balance. However, the attack was no longer possible due to sudden rains; the weather did not clear for the following few days. The desert had turned into a quagmire. This situation continued for a long time. By then, the *Afrikakorps* had completed their preparations on the Mareth Line and left Ben Gardane. It was thus taken the next day without any resistance. Monty now wanted to secure the Mareth Line. This needed capturing important road centers such as Medenine and Fom Tatahouine.⁴⁵⁷ Medenine was especially important as it had an airfield that would be an asset during an attack on the Mareth Line. It could also be a station for troops to assemble before an attack. Evidently, the *Afrikakorps* would offer strong resistance; thus, the 51st Division was also considered a precaution. Medenine was attacked and taken on 17 February by the 8th Army. Fom Tatahouine was taken the next day. The route for the Mareth Line was thus clear. This attack would be a significant offensive and would be made after 20 March 1943. This time was needed for the 8th Army to prepare itself sufficiently. Necessary reconnaissance was made locally with the help of the Long-Range Desert Group or LRDG. Reinforcements and supplies were arriving simultaneously. The port of Tripoli was working at

⁴⁵⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel G.R. Stevens Obe, *Fourth Indian Division* (East Sussex: The Naval & Military Press, n.d.), pp. 205–206.

⁴⁵⁶ Montgomery Papers, Preparations for the drive to Tripoli, 14 January 1943, Personal Diary, Notes Preparations for the Battle of Buerat and the Drive to Tripoli, Part II, LMD 26, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁵⁷ Martin Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 431–435.

its highest total capacity, discharging some 3,500 tons of cargo daily, with tanks arriving as replacements.⁴⁵⁸

However, there was a slight diversion as the 8th Army was called upon to fight Rommel's attack on the Gafsa sector. This forced the IIInd US Corps to withdraw to the Tebessa sector, allowing the *Afrikakorps* to outflank the Anglo-French American Line from the south. The 8th Army, though, was not ready for such a move. If Rommel decided to quit the Tebessa drive and turn back to counter-attack the 8th Army, the latter would be caught in an awkward situation. Nevertheless, Monty decided to respond to both the needs of the hour and proceed against the Mareth Line and defend the Gafsa sector. But Rommel reacted exactly as anticipated; he halted his drive towards Tebessa and began to regroup for an attack on the 8th Army. The 21st Panzer Division started moving south again. The 15th Panzer was already in the Mareth region, and a new German armored formation, the 10th Panzer Division, had arrived in Tunisia to join them.⁴⁵⁹

It was evident that Rommel wanted to strike hard at the 8th Army, taking advantage of its overstretched communications. He also had at his disposal the new German 'Tiger' tanks. He was ready to deal a solid blow to the 8th Army in its existing vulnerable state and gain some valuable time in which he could make the situation worse for the 8th Army in Tunisia. But Monty lost no time in bouncing back and facing the threat. He ordered the New Zealand Division to leave Tripoli immediately and reach Medenine. This was a very speedy move, made secretly, and the division concentrated south of Medenine on 2 March 1943. He then focused on bringing sufficient armour for the troops. Tanks that had arrived in Tripoli to equip the 2nd Armoured Brigade were handed over to the 8th Armoured Brigade, which was to be made ready for an attack by 4 March 1943, by which time more than 400 tanks would have arrived for the battle. Monty already had the 22nd Armoured Brigade, besides the eighty Valentines he had from the 23rd Brigade. He also had a strong artillery force of about 500 anti-tank guns. Monty waited until he had sufficient infantry, armour, and artillery to fight a defensive battle at Medenine.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁸ Daniel Allen Butler, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel* (USA and Great Britain: Casemate Publishers, 2015), pp. 495–496.

⁴⁵⁹ Toker Papers, Notes by Major-General Francis Toker, 6 October 1945, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁶⁰ Martin Blumenson, 'Rommel', in *Hitler's General*, ed. Correlli Barnett (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 305–306.

The Battle of Medenine

On 4 and 5 March 1943, Rommel was on the move in the mountains west of Medenine with his infantry and tanks. His plans were easy to decipher from the air observation reports: he was planning to launch his main attack from the mountains, coming down at the BIA dispositions. The BIA dispositions were, from north to south, the 51st Division, the 7th Armoured Division, and the 2nd New Zealand Division. The New Zealanders were disposed around Medenine, and the Armoured Divisions covered the Medenine-Gabes road and the Tadjera feature. The 51st Division was deployed in the gap between the coast and the Tadjera feature. Around 500 anti-tank guns were positioned around Medenine. They were all inclined to shoot at tanks from short range, an innovation-driven by the urgent need to lay minefields or erect barriers.⁴⁶¹

For Rommel, an attack against the 8th Army at Medenine was bound to be a challenging undertaking, not only because of the excellent battle experience of Monty's troops but also because of the nature of the terrain. This offered him significantly few tactical choices, as the approach march would require large quantities of petrol. His whole idea was based on the hope that the British would not have had time to complete the organisation of their defenses in the Medenine area. On the other hand, the decision of the 8th Army to attack was based on the realisation that Rommel had only two choices: to await the British attack in their line and suffer a crushing defeat or attempt to gain time by breaking up the enemy's assembly areas. The attack had begun extraordinarily well for the *Afrikakorps*. Still, they soon came up against the strong positions of the 8th Army in a hilly country, protected by mines and anti-tank guns. The enemy had constructed a strong defense line facing the south-east. Repeated attacks continued to occur and were launched but achieved no success. German dive-bombers tried to take a hand and ran into an anti-artillery of unparalleled intensity over the Metameur Hills.⁴⁶²

However, it soon became clear to Rommel that his attack had failed and nothing more could be done about it. The attack had been bogged down in the break-in stage, and the battle never had a chance of becoming fluid. The 8th Army had grouped its forces exceptionally well and completed its preparations. This made it evident to the *Afrikakorps* that the British were ready to defeat them. The Germans suffered tremendous losses; more than 40 Panzers were destroyed. Their intelligence was not comparable to Monty's careful preparations. Rommel

⁴⁶¹ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 439–441.

⁴⁶² B.H. Liddell Hart, *A History of the Second World War* (London: Cassell and Company, 1970), pp. 505–506.

now firmly believed that it was nothing more than plain suicide for his army to remain in North Africa, but he could not go against the orders. At 0800 hours on 6 March, the first clash occurred in front of the anti-tank gun screen north of Medenine. That attack was repulsed by the loss of twenty-one tanks to the Axis. The next major attack came at 1430 hours, which was again held. The 8th Army's dispositions remained firm and stable and could not be penetrated. Two more similar attacks were made, and they met the same fate. The Battle of Medenine was over.⁴⁶³

Battle of the Mareth Line

After the Battle of Medenine, Rommel was highly disappointed that Führer still disagreed with any of his judgements regarding the situation. He could have better defended the great expanse of Tunisia if his forces were properly motorised, armed with modern weapons, and provided with adequate supplies. But he had no opportunity to ensure this. Hence, the only possibility was to base their defense on well-fortified and thickly held positions and to use small, motorised forces to iron out enemy penetrations in the front. The non-motorised troops would have the front in any density, but the longest of it would be 100 miles and not 400 miles. The British armaments were more up-to-date and efficient than they had been, and their units had larger establishments of guns and anti-tank guns.⁴⁶⁴

On the other side, Monty decided the 8th Army would drive straight on Sfax. It would cross a stretch of the plain between Medenine and Gabes. On one side was the sea, on the other a mountain range known as Matmata Hills, and in between was a gap that narrowed down to 22 miles somewhere near Mareth. This gap was named the Mareth Line. The western end of the Mareth Line was considered impenetrable. To the eastern end, the base of defense was Wadi Zigzaou. Monty had two courses open before him for overcoming the Mareth defenses: to break through with a frontal attack or to get around it by an outflanking move. He could also pursue both courses simultaneously and then transfer the weight of the primary attack to whichever seemed the more promising. This was the gist of his plan, which was named 'Operation Pugilist.'⁴⁶⁵ For this operation, the 8th Army was to be organised into two corps, the XXX and X, with an additional outflanking force called the New Zealand Corps. The XXX Corps was to

⁴⁶³ Tucker, *Approach to Battle*, pp. 275–276.

⁴⁶⁴ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 416–418.

⁴⁶⁵ Tucker Papers, 4th Indian Division, Note in the Desert, May 1942, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

have under it the 50th and 51st British and 4th Indian Divisions and the 21st Guards Brigade. The X Corps was to have the 1st and the 7th Armoured Divisions, the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, and an army reserve. The frontal attack was to be made by the XXX Corps, after which the X Corps was to pass through and exploit its success. The New Zealand Corps was to carry out the outflanking move. So, it consisted of the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 8th Armoured Brigade, and General Leclerc's L Force.⁴⁶⁶

Only the 7th Armoured Division and the 51st Highland Division had positioned themselves against the Mareth positions. Three enemy armoured divisions were identified on this front, indicating a potential attack on the 8th Army before its build-up was complete. The 2nd New Zealand Division and an additional tank brigade were rushed forward as British forces fortified Medenine, the gateway to Tunisia, with 500 anti-tank guns and 400 tanks. Rommel addressed his troops in the mountains, warning that the days of the Axis forces in Africa would be numbered unless they achieved a victory. Meanwhile, Monty began preparations and training for an assault on the Mareth Line, which was 22 miles long, stretching from the Zarat Sea to the high buttresses of the Matmata mountains. Behind these defenses, a switch line ran north and south across the El Hamma plain, with one flank anchored on the Matmatas and the other against the Chott el Fedzada, an impassable salt marsh. This switchline covered the port of Gabes and prevented an approach from the west. The Matmata mountain block could be bypassed to the southwest only after a circuitous march of nearly 200 miles through a broken and waterless country. The LRDG declared it to be a problematic but passable route. The right jab and the left hook gave the 8th Army its battle plan. The XXX Corps would smash frontally at the Mareth Line and the coastal corridor. At the same time, the 2nd New Zealand Division, reinforced to corps strength by additional armour, would take the long detour around the Matmatas to bring Rommel's panzers to decisive battles on the El Hamma switch line.⁴⁶⁷

On the morning of 15 March 1943, this battalion returned from a successful investigation of the El Djouamea Pass, a deep cleft leading into the heart of the Matmata mountains. They had covered a great distance and had brought back prisoners. On 16 March, a preliminary operation to destroy the enemy's last covering positions on the Mareth Line involved all elements of the XXX Corps. The participation of the 4th Indian Division was restricted to a raid by the ½

⁴⁶⁶ Richard Hammond, *Strangling the Axis: The Fight for Control of the Mediterranean during the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 150–151.

⁴⁶⁷ Tucker, *Approach to Battle*, pp. 279–280.

Gurkhas, who, under the leadership of Captain Ramsay-Brown, overran a platoon position containing a nest of medium and light-medium guns. Not a shot was fired by the raiders, but at least 9 Germans died under the *kukris*. One Gurkha rifleman was killed and one wounded.⁴⁶⁸

The New Zealand Corps commenced its outflanking on the night of 19/20 March 1943, marking the opening of the Mareth offensive; the battle began the following day. Protected by the cover of a tremendous barrage of artillery, the 50th Division crossed Wadi Zigzaou and attacked three previously selected strong points on its opposite bank. The idea was to capture those points and turn them into bridgeheads, after which crossings could be built across the *wadi* for tanks, guns, and carriers to pass on to the other side. The *wadi* proved a difficult obstacle, as feared. The banks were steep and wide apart, and the bottom was muddy and, in some parts, covered by standing water. The assaulting infantrymen crossed the wadi on foot despite frontal and flanking fire by the *Afrikakorps* on the parts of the banks that were captured and the required bridgeheads that were firmly established. For this attack, the 4/16 Punjabis were placed under the command of the 69th Brigade on the left flank of the assault area, with instructions to hold Point 33. This was a knoll from which enemy machine gunners might enfilade the battlefield. The remainder of the 7th Brigade was briefed under the command of the 23rd Armoured Brigade for an exploitation role after the breakthrough. The 5th Brigade would be employed similarly under the 50th Division when a hole had been punched in the defenses. A heavy artillery barrage heralded the new battle at 2200 hours on 20 March under a brilliant full moon. The 151st Brigade of the 50th Division crossed Wadi Zigzaou and established a bridgehead. With the battle going well, the 5th Brigade came forward, reaching its assembly position after a fatiguing march of 17 miles. Amid a thunder of war, the tired sepoy endeavored to snatch some sleep before their turn came.⁴⁶⁹

The taking of the strong points had involved the 50th Division in rather heavy fighting as those spots had been thickly wired and were protected by minefields and weapons. After a whole month of battle, there remained some pockets of resistance in the locality of the bridgeheads at dawn on 21 March. A few Valentines managed to get across but were insufficient, and the tank losses were somewhat heavy. The anti-tank guns and other transport could not follow up, and consequently, the bridgehead troops were disadvantaged.⁴⁷⁰ Throughout 21 March, fierce

⁴⁶⁸ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 207.

⁴⁶⁹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 208–209.

⁴⁷⁰ Toker Papers, Personal Note by Major-General Francis Toker, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

fighting continued. At this juncture, the situation on the Wadi Zigzaou gave rise to anxiety. This moat was 200 feet wide and 20 feet deep, with sheer banks on either side. Its bottom was soft, wet mud with shallow water in the center. The enemy artillery and mortars had ranged this obstacle to a yard, and enfilade guns raked it from the left flank. As a result, the Northumbrian sappers suffered heavy casualties as they strove to build crossings. One bridge was completed but was of such a temporary nature that it was decided to send over tracks rather than wheels, which was a momentous decision. Instead of establishing an anti-tank screen, Valentine tanks crossed to support the infantry. On the night of 21 March, a foothold had been gained on the opposite bank of Wadi Zigzaou, and fighting was in progress; however, the odds were almost balanced, and the result was in doubt. The crying need of the moment was suitable crossings to carry weapons and transport.⁴⁷¹

The remedy was to expand the bridgehead both laterally and in-depth to put more distance between the *Afrikakorps* firearms and their targets. To achieve this, the XXX Corps began a heavy artillery barrage on the night of 21 March 1943; however, the effort failed due to heavy rainfall flooding the *wadi*, after which German reinforcements began to arrive, and fighting increased in intensity. On the morning of 22 March 1943, their 15th Panzer Division formed an attack. The light bombers of the Desert Air Force might have brought them down, but owing to the rain, the aircraft could not take off. The *Afrikakorps* had reinforced their front heavily and were making rapid progress. Monty realised that the attack on Wadi Zigzaou had failed, and the real hope lay in the western sector of the Mareth Line, something that the New Zealand Corps would achieve. The New Zealand Corps, consisting of 27,000 men and 200 tanks, was at a juncture of its flanking move. Monty directed the Corps Commander to speed up his advance by moving during the day and reaching the El Hamma switchline. This narrow defile led to El Hamma, between the two high features known as Djebel Tebaga and Djebel Melab. Under the caterpillars, the crossing collapsed, and in the evening, British infantry and light tanks were isolated on the far bank of the *wadi*. That same day, heavy rains fell, and stormwater stalled the completion of the crossing. The weather bogged down the Desert Air Force, creating ideal conditions for the enemy counterstroke. This area was a prize worth fighting for, as its possession would open the way to Gabes in the rear of the Mareth Line. The 8th Army called it the Plum defile.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 445–447.

⁴⁷² Tucker, *Approach to Battle*, pp. 283–284.

On the afternoon of 23 March 1943, the 15th Panzer Division, supported by a brigade of 90 Light Division and the Ramcke paratroops, struck at the luckless Northumbrians and recaptured most of the bridgehead. The enemy was alert. As the moon rose in the east, the workmen on the eastern tip of the *wadi* were silhouetted in plain view. When fire opened, British covering detachments replied. Mortar shells and sheets of machine-gun fire streamed from the front and rear over the heads of the sapper's tracer shell. The field guns joined in; the engineers struggled with their task within the confines of the shell. The area around Wadi Zigzaou was transformed into a block of dust and fumes, with flames rising into the luminous sky. On approaching the *wadi*, vehicles continued to unload infantry for the coming assault. The transportation operation continued smoothly despite the barrage of bullets. Enemy guns opened with extremely heavy concentrations that looked like a counter-attack. Amid a torrent of shells, the crossings received their final touches. Monty reached a radical decision. Rommel's crack troops were identified on the eastern flank, where the right side had been blocked. He switched roles without delay and made the left hook his knock-out blow. The New Zealanders made a good approach on time, and the 1st Armoured Division was despatched to reinforce them. The intention was to smash through the El Hamma switch line before the *Afrikakorps* could disengage on the Mareth front.⁴⁷³

Another alternative was the secondary road from Medenine, which traversed the Matmatas to emerge at the Halfaya gap, 35 miles to the west. Soon after entering the mountains, this road split, with one branch turning north and climbing to the crests at Toujane and Techine. Then it dropped down through Matmata village and Beni Zelten and, traversing through canyons, opened on the Gabes plain in the rear of the Mareth positions. This route to the plains across the mountains offered the opportunity to thrust a force into the rear of the Mareth Line and the El Hamma positions. Monty designated the opening of the Halfaya Pass as the 4th Indian Division's immediate objective. After that, the seizure of Techine on the northeastern spurs of the Matmatas would ensure control of the mountain block. A decisive and individual role had been allotted to the 4th Indian Division and its commander, General Francis Tuker, who quickly rearranged its threads. He reclaimed its formations from their marching and countermarching, secured the release of 5 Brigade from the 7th Armoured Division, 4/16 Punjabis from 69 Brigade, and organised the task of crossing the Matmatas.⁴⁷⁴ The 7th Armoured Brigade was

⁴⁷³ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 449–450.

⁴⁷⁴ Tuker Papers, Note on the Mareth Battle, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

despatched to the south to encircle the central buttresses, passing through the Khordache Gap into the Gabes plain. The 5th Indian Brigade was ordered to thrust through the mountains and seize Halfaya, turning north to clear the crests. On reaching Halfaya, the 7th Armoured Brigade would enter the pass from the west and follow behind the 5th Brigade to assist or exploit as needed. The summits won, and both brigades became mobile battle groups to descend into the plain.⁴⁷⁵

On the night of 24/25 March 1943, the 5th Brigade concentrated at the eastern entrance of Halfaya Pass. The 1/9 Gurkhas led the advance, with ¼ Essex closed to take over the running; the 4/6 Rajputana Rifles were detached to enter a valley four miles to the north, where a track led upwards along a deep defile. The mission of the Rajputana Rifles was to distract the enemy by stimulating an advance towards Toujane and simultaneously protecting the right flank of the actual thrust towards Halfaya. At the entrance to the Halfaya Pass, a minefield was encountered. This technique of minelaying was used to a great extent in the Tunisian campaign. The entrance to the Halfaya Pass was cleared by midnight, and the 1/9 Gurkhas thrust down the road along a narrow, winding ravine. No opposition was encountered in the first few miles, but the advance was slowed down by the discovery that the road's verges were heavily mined. At dawn, the advance continued into the heart of the mountains, and early in the forenoon, the enemy was located.⁴⁷⁶

The 'D' Company of the 1/4 Essex over-ran a rear guard, killing several Italians of the Pistoia Division and taking twenty-five prisoners. The Techine trail and Halfaya road junction were reached early in the afternoon. Essex explored the rolling foothills until they saw the open El Hamma plain. The 'C' Company of Rajputana Rifles machine gunners with a battery of 149 Anti-Tank Regiment took station to guard the western entrance of the pass. The Essex turned northward and upwards on the Techine Trail, knocking out several unsubstantial rearguards and picking up thirty prisoners. Despite mines, demolitions, and enemy resistance, the Home County men covered 10 miles during the afternoon, with the 1/9 Gurkhas following close behind. In the afternoon, the Essex screen reached a junction on the crest of the Matmatas, where an east-west trail intersected the main track. Accurate artillery fire by German guns revealed the presence of enemy forces holding a crescent of crests only approachable along a

⁴⁷⁵ French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, p. 252.

⁴⁷⁶ Toker Papers, Notes on Royal Artillery, 4th Indian Division 1942–1944, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

knife-edged ridge. The 7th Armoured Brigade was struck heavily after detaching through the Khordache Gap.⁴⁷⁷

Operation Supercharge

This detour led to the plan being modified, and it was now renamed 'Supercharge', equating to the success at El Alamein. 'Supercharge' catered for a lightning attack and a breakthrough into the open tank country on the other Plum defile. This attack was to happen on 26 March, preceded by a heavy night-long bombing to make the defenders sleepless and overwrought. After reaching the climax, the artillery would take over and carry on for over an hour. The attack was to commence with the sun behind the back, an old gambit of Rommel. The infantry aimed to push the armour through on a narrow front, and the fighter-bombers were to maintain continuous operations overhead. All troops had to be in position before the launching of 'Supercharge'.⁴⁷⁸ The 7th Armoured Division moved close to the Mareth Line to heighten the effect, and aircraft were kept active over the front. The 4th Indian Division was making good progress towards Halluf, although the progress of the X Corps Headquarters and the 1st Armoured Division was somewhat lagging. The route the X Corps took to reach the Plum defile was the same, but the troops had a very rough and challenging going; the last vehicles of the Armoured Division struggled to get before the start of the attack.⁴⁷⁹

Heavy dust storms from early morning characterised the day of the attack. This upset the bombing programme of the Air Force but also helped to conceal the forming of the X Corps and the New Zealanders. The storm subsided in the afternoon, and the Desert Air Force went into action. Its light and fighter bombers machine-gunned and bombed their targets for two and a half hours, causing great destruction to Axis guns and transport. Then, the New Zealand Division moved to attack, with the 8th Armoured Brigade leading. The 1st Armoured Division soon broke the defence of the Germans. Reaching the bottleneck before dawn was imperative to stop the *Afrikakorps* from gaining observation posts during the daytime. At daybreak, the 8th

⁴⁷⁷ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: The Making of a General* (Great Britain: Sceptre Books, 1984), p. 810.

⁴⁷⁸ Montgomery Papers, Letter to Horrocks and Freyberg, Main Headquarters Eighth Army, 25 March 1943, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁷⁹ Toker Papers, Notes by Major-General Francis Toker, 21 July 1944, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

Army's tanks were only 2 miles from El Hamma when a robust screen of 88mm deadly guns anti-tank guns stopped them.⁴⁸⁰

The Germans needed to hold El Hamma to safely withdraw their troops from the Mareth Line. Their main forces at Mareth were the 15th Panzer, the 90th Light, and the 164th German Divisions, besides the Italian Divisions of Trieste, Spezia, and Pistoia. As a result of all these moves, the positions of the Allied and Axis troops had become very complicated. The 21st Panzer Division was sandwiched between the New Zealand Corps on the left and the 1st Armoured Division on the right. The latter was similarly squeezed between the 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions on its left and right. Cornered, the 21st Panzer Division put up a fierce struggle to free itself. However, the New Zealand Corps remained engaged in a very stiff 'mopping up' operation on the Plum features, after which it could move towards Gabes. The Battle of Mareth Line was finally won by an outflanking move completed on the evening of 27 March 1943. 'A' Company of the Essex under Major H.C. Gregory, MC, advanced with artillery support against the Italian positions which covered Hardy Crossroads. The line of attack lay along the track on the crest of the razor-backed ridge. Enemy artillery opened up, and as a result, several vehicles were hit, and the track was blocked. Tucker came forward and ordered the road cleared by pushing the damaged cars over the cliff sides. He gave orders that the position must be forced by nightfall. The Essex dashed to the close in the early afternoon with their bayonets. The Italians broke, leaving behind 116 prisoners and numerous dead and wounded in return for nine Essex casualties.⁴⁸¹

The Allied forces continued their advance and, by late afternoon, reached the junction where the uplands road split. The right fork led to Toujane and then crossed the northern spurs of the Matmatas to the Beni Zelten defile, while the left fork directed to Matmata village via Techine. The 4/16 Punjabis, under the command of the 5 Brigade, took the right fork and established a blockade, sending patrols to Toujane. Meanwhile, the Essex unit advanced along the left road and arrived at the unique village of Techine, where the inhabitants lived underground, with only tombs visible on the surface. Simultaneously, the 7th Armoured Brigade, minus the 4/16 Punjabis, was surveilling the Beni Zelten defile, which the division might use to descend into

⁴⁸⁰ Montgomery Papers, Notes on Conference of Supercharge, 25 March 1943, Part II, LMD 27, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁸¹ Montgomery Papers, Personal Diary Notes, Preparations for Moving Westwards from Tripoli against the Mareth Position, 23 January 1943 to 19 March 1943, Part II, LMD 27, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

the Gabes plain. Patrols reached the top of the pass at midday on March 27. The road clung to the edge of a steep ravine.⁴⁸² There had been no demolitions, but stretches of the stone abutments had crumbled and fallen away, leaving wide gaps. Rock drills and a bulldozer were eased down to the first gap and began cutting the overhang away. The Gurkhas formed four human chains on the side of the gorge to pass up stones, which the sappers built into a retaining wall. That evening, the 4th Indian Division had completed two-thirds of its allotted task; it had opened a supply route to the western flank of the Mareth battlefield and seized the heights above the El Hamma plain. The exciting prospect of intervening in the battle now remained. Early in the afternoon of 28 March 1943, the leading elements of the division began the descent of the defile. Behind the infantry, the guns gingerly edged down the ravine with the 7th Armoured Brigade leading. On reaching the mouth of the defile, a secure base was established, and patrols were despatched to locate the enemy. It was then learned that the battle was over.⁴⁸³

The New Zealanders and the 1st Armoured Division penetrated the opposite flank of the defences and swung toward Gabes to strike at Rommel's rear. The 4th Indian Division played a minor role in the victory; it wasn't entrusted with either of the major thrusts, and the Halfaya Pass's opening had proved a mountain exercise rather than a battle. This demonstrated that this division required a specific skill set for mountain warfare. The hallmark of a top-tier fighting force was its speed, power, ability to overcome obstacles, and capacity to improvise. Every unit performed exceptionally well. The 4/16 Punjabis had given a firm flank, and the Sappers and Miners had built the Wadi Zigzaou bridges. The 7th Armoured Brigade burst through minefields and had kept to its timetable. The Rajputana Rifles had seized the heights, the Gurkhas and Essex had cleared the roads at top speed, and infantry and sappers had opened the Beni Zelten defile in several hours under the estimated time. The Indian troops' confidence to deal with the principal enemy had been restored. The tide had turned, and victory seemed close.⁴⁸⁴

The Gabes Gap

After losing the Mareth Line, Rommel wished to stick to his desert strategies, which taught him to disengage with defeated forces with the utmost speed and to withdraw in the face of

⁴⁸² Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 212.

⁴⁸³ Montgomery Papers, Personal Diary Notes, The Battle of Mareth, 20–28 March 1943, Part II, LMD 28, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁸⁴ Montgomery Papers, The Battle of Gabes Gap, 29 March 1943, Personal Diary Notes on the Battle of Gabes Gap, 29 March 1943–7 April 1943, Part II, LMD 29, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

danger. If this were successful, his next lay-back position would have been the ramparts of the leading Tunisian mountain block, 150 miles north. But the much-publicised Axis commander was no longer the master of his fate. He was now an element in an overall defence system, and he was obliged to conform to the requirements of the orders. A battle was in progress 80 miles to his right flank rear, where the II US Corps was endeavouring to thrust into southern Tunisia through El Guettar and Gafsa. This advance, together with the British 1st Army's assault on the western outworks of the Tunisian fortress, limited Rommel's independence of manoeuvre. The chief Axis requirement at the time was to prevent the junction of Monty's troops with the North African Allied armies coming from the western direction.⁴⁸⁵

Therefore, the *Afrikakorps* and its satellite divisions had to give as little ground as possible. Rommel, thus, sought a defensive position near at hand. Around 20 miles north of Gabes, the impassable Fedjadi salt marshes extended for 120 miles inland, with a gap of less than 15 miles separating the beginnings of these soft sloughs from the Mediterranean. Across two-thirds of this gap stood Djebel Zemlet el Beida, a high-puckered ridge system that divided the Gabes from the Sfax plain. As at Mareth, a neck of flat foreshore joined the plains. As at Mareth, a broad and deep nullah interposed its moat between the sea and the high ground. Around 5 miles inland was the Roumana saddleback, approximately 500 feet in height and a mile in length, running into the northwest on a bearing roughly parallel to the coast. To the west of Roumana, the easy contours of a series of rolling hills extended for 2 miles before ending in the fantastic pile of Fatnassa. A series of transverse crests merged in a labyrinthine tangle of pinnacles, escarpments, counter-escarpments, deep fjord-like chimneys, and corridors. On the left of this wild tangle, a ravine pierced the El Beida feature, carrying a military road that connected the two plains. Beyond the road, the high ground fell away in a series of cones and ridges until, 5 miles to the southwest, the barrier ended within a mile of the oozy shore of the salt marshes.⁴⁸⁶

Rommel recognised both the strengths and the weaknesses of this position. He recollected the number of times that Monty's mobile forces had turned his flank. The barricade of high ground was shallow since a bare 3 miles separated the Gabes and the Sfax plains. The low rolling ridges that connected Roumana and Fatnassa weakened the position; a short advance across this easy ground brought the rear slopes of Roumana under fire. To stiffen this central sector,

⁴⁸⁵ Montgomery Papers, Eighth Army Intelligence Summary no. 467, 28 March 1943, Part II, LMD 27, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁸⁶ Neal Dando, *From Tobruk to Tunis: The Impact of Terrain on British Operations and Doctrine in North Africa, 1940–1943* (England: Helion & Company Limited, 2016), pp. 147–148.

Rommel hastily constructed an anti-tank ditch 2 miles in length, which continued the obstacle of the Akarit nullah across the base of the rolling ridges. Fatnassa appeared to offer an insuperable obstacle on the western flank, and it seemed evident that the 8th Army's attack would be staged against the easier ground along the Mediterranean foreshore. Monty began to plan this battle. The 51 Highland Division was given the task of overrunning Wadi Akarit and of opening a passage. At the same time, the 4th Indian Division would protect the left flank of the main assault by seizing Roumana and holding it as a barrier against counter-attack from the west until the British armour had fulfilled its mission.⁴⁸⁷

Tuker did not want the second-highest ground to be taken as a postulate of mountain warfare. He declared that the battlefield should be widened and the entire Zelmet el Beida barrier should be brought under attack. He prepared the 4th Indian Division to assault Fatnassa, which, if won, would achieve access to the Akarit sectors. The 50 Division was brought into the battle to attack frontally against the anti-tank ditch and the rolling ground between Roumana and Fatnassa. The timing was arranged for the 4th Indian Division to open the fight with a silent night attack several hours before the main assault to obtain the advantage of surprise on the most challenging terrain. Tuker decided not only to win Fatnassa but to win the battle. The 7th Armoured Brigade was ordered to seize and hold the mountain block while the 5th Indian Brigade would plunge through a hole into the Sfax plains. The New Zealand Corps occupied Gabes on 29 March. The *Afrikakorps* received tremendous knocks, and about 700 men were taken prisoner. The next objective of the 8th Army was Sfax, which was a bottleneck, then known as the Gabes Gap. From east to west, Tunisia is divided horizontally into two halves by lakes and salt marshes. The eastern portion was known as Shott el Fejaj, which had a narrow neck of coastal plain, about 12 to 15 miles wide, till the sea; this was known as the Gabes Gap.⁴⁸⁸

The Battle of Wadi Akarit

The more significant portion of the Gabes Gap was covered by a deep *wadi* known as Wadi Akarit, which formed a severe obstacle to wheeled traffic and blocked the passage to the Tunisian plains. The Wadi Akarit had two hills on its northern banks, Gebel Fatnassa and Gebel

⁴⁸⁷ Tuker Papers, Notes on Conversation between General Horrocks and General Tuker, 6 April 1943, File no. 71/21/3/3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁸⁸ Montgomery Papers, The Advance Northwards from the Gabes Gap, 8 April 1943, Personal Diary Notes on the Advance Northwards from the Gabes Gap, 8–22 April 1943, Part II, LMD 30, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

er Roumana, on the west and the east, respectively. The *Afrikakorps* wanted to exploit this position by blocking the gap between the sea and Shott el Fejaj. They could turn it into a position of great strength if given sufficient time. Therefore, the 8th Army was to prohibit the *Afrikakorps* from settling down into that position. This required two operations: the occupation of the two hills, Fatnassa and Roumana, and then crossing the Wadi Akarit. This would also make the passage into the plains of Tunisia comparatively easier. On 29 March 1943, the X and the XXX Corps were to cross the Wadi Akarit. The XXX Corps was to take over the New Zealand Division and attack Akarit with the 50th, 51st and the 4th Indian Division. The plan's basis was an infantry assault on Wadi Akarit with these three divisions. The 4th Indian Division was opposite Gebel Fatnassa, the 51st Division against Gebel er Roumana, and the 50th Division in the centre.⁴⁸⁹

On 1 April 1943, both the brigades of the 4th Indian Division, concentrated in the Gabes area, were placed at four hours' notice for the move forward to the new battlefield. On the night of 2 April, they were carried up the coastal road to the small village of Oudref. Both the brigades sent out patrols that night. The 1st/4th Essex reconnoitred the anti-tank ditch while the ½ Gurkhas explored the entrance to the corridor between the escarpments. The 164th and 90th Light Divisions were reported as holding Fatnassa, the intervening rolling ground, and Roumana. Italian formations from Pistoia, Spezia, and Trieste Divisions were interspersed under German command. The 21st Panzer Division was concentrated in close support as a reserve. The battle plan called for assault by the 50th and 51st Divisions to begin at 0430 hours on the morning of 6 April 1943. The 5th and 7th Brigades of the 4th Indian Division would begin their approach march as soon as darkness fell the previous evening. The ½ Gurkhas would lead the silent attack, striking the key Fatnassa features. The 1st Royal Sussex would seize the El Media *kopje* at the end of the anti-tank ditch. The 4th/16th Punjabis would remain in the brigade reserve. Platoons of Rajputana Rifles machine-gunners would accompany the assault battalions.⁴⁹⁰

On 5 April 1943, a slender sickle moon hung in the sky. As dusk fell, the 7th Armoured Brigade began to move forward from Oudref with its units in a single file. This line of advance along Star Track crossed the main road near Divisional Headquarters, where Toker stood watching

⁴⁸⁹ Stephen Brooks, *Montgomery and the Eighth Army* (London: The Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1991), pp. 201–203.

⁴⁹⁰ Toker Papers, Duties of ADC 4th Indian Division, 11 November 1945, File no. 71/21/3/3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

the heavily laden infantrymen trudge forward over the rolling crests. The night was calm, with a slight ground mist. Enemy planes, aware of the imminent attack, quartered the area with parachute flares. 'D' Company of ½ Gurkhas then headed directly for the double row of jagged cliffs which marked the escarpment chimney. With C Company leading, the remainder of the battalion swung slightly left. Shortly after midnight, the guiding peak of Point 275 disappeared behind the black shadow of the escarpment ahead. The foremost platoons of the 'C' Company came under the ridge and began to pick their way silently up the slopes. The leading section sprang into a sangar, cutting down the unwary Italians. 'C' Company hurriedly scrambled to the top of the escarpment and closed against defenders firing wildly into the darkness. The Gurkhas, swarming over the high ground, guided each other with shrill voices.⁴⁹¹

Close behind 'C' Company, 'A' and 'B' Companies plunged into the battle. 'A' Company lunged at Point 275, 1,000 yards to the north-west. On reaching the base of the pinnacle, the leading platoons swung left-handed, working their way onto the southeast approach where easy slopes rose from the valley that carried the military road. 'B' Company thrust along the escarpment line to the right of Point 275. Under the command of Subedar Lalbahadur Thapa, two sections of Gurkhas moved forward to secure the only pathway that led over the escarpment at the upper end of the rocky chimney. Anti-tank guns and machine guns covered every foot of the way, while across the canyon, where the cliffs rose steeply for some 200 feet, the crests were swarming with automatic gunners and mortar teams. Thapa reached the first enemy sangar without challenge. His section cut down its garrison with the *kukri*. Without pause, with no room to manoeuvre, he dashed forward at the head of his men through a sleet of machine-gun fire, grenades, and mortar bombs. He leapt inside a machine-gun nest and killed four gunners single-handed, two with knives and two with pistols. The battle of Wadi Akarit was won even before it started.⁴⁹²

Monty sent his X Armoured Corps around the Matmata Hills and threw it against the Mannerini sector, simultaneously attacking the Mareth Line in the north. The Americans moved forward simultaneously from Gafsa with approximately one armoured division. Rommel agreed that the 8th Army was strategically well-conceived, and the *Afrikakorps* were thus forced to make constant tactical makeshifts due to effective coordination.⁴⁹³ Getting the army back from

⁴⁹¹ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 490–494.

⁴⁹² Toker Papers, Disagreements between British and Indian Armies over Commands, 30 November 1945, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁹³ Toker, *Approach to Battle*, pp. 302–304.

Mareth to Wadi Akarit could have been possible. Still, the *Afrikakorps* were given no time to install themselves in their new positions. Monty could penetrate their line deeply, making the Akarit position untenable for them.⁴⁹⁴ This attack would be carried out in darkness, as there would be no full moon in the next ten days, and there was no time to wait. The plan, therefore, was to make a silent attack in darkness, to take the defenders by surprise.⁴⁹⁵

The attack began on 6 April 1943, and the strategy of a noiseless advance in darkness produced excellent results for the 4th Indian Division. It was to capture the Fatnassa feature and prepare the way for the breakthrough by the X Corps. The Indian Division moved forward against the difficulties of the terrain with its two brigades, the 5th and the 7th. The 7th Indian Brigade, led by Royal Sussex and the 2nd Gurkhas, captured all their objectives by dawn. The 5th Indian Brigade passed through and cleared the surroundings, after which it advanced further and placed itself in a position to attack the Akarit defences from the rear. The situation had loosened up so much that Monty considered it a perfect time for a breakthrough. At 1200 hours on the same day, Monty instructed the X Corps to smash its way through to the open ground before nightfall. This led to fierce fighting, as the Germans and Italians resisted and counter-attacked with great determination; however, their strength eventually broke, and they were in no position to offer further resistance. The *Afrikakorps* made their withdrawal towards Enfidaville.⁴⁹⁶

The Italians practically ceased to exist as a fighting force. A large part of the German and Italian Axis armour had been lost in the Mareth Line without being allowed to affect the issue materially. The 10th Panzer Division had made a breakthrough to the rear of Gabes, with a heavy cost to itself. The remnants retired to the Enfidaville line. The *Afrikakorps* very thinly held the Enfidaville position. Their infantry and artillery were largely unfit for action. Their motorised forces had been worn away in the open south. Supplies to North Africa had ceased, and every single Axis soldier knew that the end was near, except for Führer. Parallely, the X and XXX Corps set out in pursuit along the inland route and the coastal margin. The following day, they came across the 1st Army—marking the first effective contact between two Allied forces approaching from opposite directions.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁴ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 420.

⁴⁹⁵ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, 4 Indian Division Instruction no. 12, File no. 601/225/WD/Part IV, vol. IV, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁴⁹⁶ Bharucha, *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War*, pp. 496–498.

⁴⁹⁷ Robert Forczyk, *Desert Armour: Tank Warfare in North Africa, Gazala to Tunisia, 1942–1943* (Great Britain: Osprey Publishing, 2023), pp. 210–211.

The Battle of Wadi Akarit cost the Axis some 7,000 prisoners, most of whom were Italians. The major credit for this went to the 4th Indian Division, as it broke through successfully on the left of the *wadi*. At the same time, the 51st Division on the right was thrown back a counterattack, and an impossible resistance seriously delayed the 50th Division in the centre. On 7 April, the leading elements of the 8th Army were lined up in the area between Cekhira and Sebkhet er Noual. The XXX Corps was pressing along the coastal margin, and the X Corps was doing the same to its west. Sfax was exposed to well-directed pressure. The X Corps, which was operating inland, was already to the west of Sfax, trying to secure the airfields of Triaga and Fauconnerie. Monty ordered them to alter their course and swing east to appear on the more vulnerable side of Sfax at some point near La Hencha. The XXX Corps entered Sfax on 10 April. The *Afrikakorps* had no natural defensive position available except at Enfidaville. On 11 April, Monty directed the X Corps towards Enfidaville. It was to capture Sousse on the way and join the 1st Army at Kairouan. Sousse fell on 12 April, and the X Corps were up against the Enfidaville position the next day.⁴⁹⁸

Capturing the Enfidaville Defences

The country around Enfidaville was well situated for defence. Had the enemy time to organise his defences thoroughly, any attack would become risky as this would give him excellent observation over his territory to the south. Thus, the X Corps, now consisting of the 7th Armoured Division, the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 4th Indian Division, and the 50th Division, was instructed to endeavour to push the enemy out of the position before he had settled in. The attempt would be made on the coastal axis, and then on Bou Fichta, a road junction at the northern end of the coastal corridor, 12 miles from Enfidaville.⁴⁹⁹

The high ground north of the town formed a barrier to the maritime plain behind it. It reached out almost to the sea, narrowing the coastal margin to a thin strip. At the foot of this hilly barrier was an expanse of broken ground unsuitable for the movements of tanks and armoured vehicles. Even on the narrow coastal strip, water channels and other obstacles would make deployment of the armour difficult. The mountainous barrier and the rough ground surrounding it extended westwards up to Gebel Fkirine massif, and together, they presented a continuous wall to any advance from the south. The Enfidaville position was more like a line of defence

⁴⁹⁸ Montgomery Papers, The Battle of Enfidaville, 20 April 1943, Part II, LMD 29, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁹⁹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 305.

than a single, impregnable position. It was a chain of widely separated defensive localities placed along Enfidaville–Pont du Fahs–Medjez el Bab–Sedjennane.⁵⁰⁰

The 8th Army faced this 120-mile front. The 1st Army and the IInd US Corps faced the rest. Three roads emerged from Enfidaville and converged on Tunis from the 8th Army front. Three more roads led to the latter city from the 1st Army area. The *Afrikakorps* wanted to block access to the Enfidaville-Sedjennane line to block access to the capital of Tunisia. The 8th Army front was unsuitable for the deployment of armour and was overlooked from the high ground to its north; the latter was free from either handicap. The 1st Army front had one road which offered particularly brilliant scope for using tanks. This was the Medjez-Massicault road, the most direct route to Tunis. This meant the 1st Army was better positioned to reach Tunis than the 8th Army. Therefore, it was decided that the 1st Army should make the main effort in this battle of North Africa. The 8th Army would, during operations, pin down as much of the *Afrikakorps* strength as possible by exerting pressure from the south of Enfidaville. Monty decided to transfer an armoured division and an armoured car regiment to the 1st Army and further make the 1st Armoured Division and King's Dragoon Guards join the 1st Army in due course.⁵⁰¹

On 12 April 1943, high-level planning for the capture of Tunis and Bizerta began, with the aim of the final liquidation of the Axis in Africa. Tunis was the first objective, and 22 April was fixed as the date for its capture. The operations were to be initiated by the 8th Army on its front on the night of 19/20 April. The reason for requiring the 8th Army to initiate operations was to pin down as much of the Axis strength as possible in that part of the front before the 1st Army was to launch its final thrust. The main thrust of the 1st Army was to be directed towards the Medjez el Bab portion of the Enfidaville-Sedjennane line. Monty, however, considered the 8th Army operations to be critical. He attacked on the night of 19/20 April, directing his assault from the centre of his front towards the Enfidaville sector. The attacking force consisted of the 7th Armoured, the 2nd New Zealand, the 4th Indian, and the 50th Divisions. The New Zealanders and the Indians were to thrust the village of Takrouna, while the 50th Division was to make a subsidiary move against the town of Enfidaville along the coast road axis. The 7th

⁵⁰⁰ Forczyk, *Desert Armour*, pp. 213–215.

⁵⁰¹ Jonathan Fennel, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 341–344.

Armoured Division was to guard the west flank and eventually link up with the XIX French Corps.⁵⁰²

On the night of 22/23 April 1943, the 153 Highland Brigade, in a holding role, relieved the 5th Brigade on the mountaintop. The battered but indomitable Essex, Rajputana Rifles, and Gurkhas moved to a reserve area to the south-west of Enfidaville. The 7th Armoured Brigade moved into the extensive olive groves covering the accessible hillsides north and northwest of Enfidaville. The immediate objective was Tebaga, a feature of moderate height 5 miles north of Enfidaville. This crescent-shaped ridge masked a high mountain block and controlled the coastal corridor slightly over 4 miles wide. The ejection of the enemy from Tebaga would allow British armour to deploy and would leave only 7 miles to be transversed to the end of the bottleneck at Bou Fichta.⁵⁰³

On the night of 29 April 1943, the Londoners seized Point 130. The enemy followed up the withdrawal, driving vigorously on Enfidaville. The heavy concentration of field regiments was covered by the deployment of the 7th Armoured Brigade along the borders of the olive groves, with the ½ Gurkhas and 4/16 Punjabis in the forward zone. The enemy was within 2,000 yards of the leading wave of field guns when the alarm was sounded. The Punjabis and Gurkhas reacted with precision and assurance. On 30 April 1943, Tucker and his staff conducted an all-day survey north of Enfidaville. There were no instructions to end the Tunisian campaign with a breakthrough at Medjez-el-Bab. At 1100 hours, a signal flashed to the 4th Indian Division, 7th Armoured Division, and 201 Guards Brigades. These formations would leave the 8th Army immediately and cross central Tunisia to join the 1st Army at Medjez-el-Bab, where Tunis's final thrust would be.⁵⁰⁴

The opening of the attack was brutal but failed to produce the desired result. The 50th Division captured Enfidaville. The New Zealanders advanced to a point 3 miles west of that town. The 4th Indian Division held Gebel Garci after a fierce struggle. The Germans suffered many casualties and lost more than 800 troops as prisoners on 20 and 21 April. However, the results were not satisfactory for Monty. He called off the attack and switched the main thrust from the centre to the coast. This required some re-grouping, and the 4th Indian Division and the 2nd

⁵⁰² Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 452–454.

⁵⁰³ Forczyk, *Desert Armour*, pp. 220–222.

⁵⁰⁴ Montgomery Papers, The Battle of Enfidaville, 20 April 1943, Part II, LMD 29, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

New Zealand Division were pulled out and transferred to the coast. The 50th Division, too, was withdrawn so they could train to take part in the invasion of Sicily. The new sector was to be attacked by three divisions: the 50th, the 4th Indian Division, and the 2nd New Zealand. The object was to establish all three divisions in the Hammamet area at the base of the Cape Bon peninsula. This was to commence on 29 April 1943.⁵⁰⁵

The Fall of Tunisia

The 4th Indian Division now moved to the climatic operation of the North African Campaign. It was now moving over to the 1st Army. Its reputation was such that it stood at the very top of the 8th Army, mainly because of its fighting men's courage and refusal to ever give an inch of ground that they had won, even if they had to fight with fists and stones.⁵⁰⁶ Throughout the afternoon of 30 April 1943, column after column of vehicles emerged on the main road, picked up their timing, and fell into place with that absence of fuss and bother that only seasoned troops can attain. The 20-mile-long column moved to the southwest to the Divisional Headquarters, followed by the 5th Brigade and the artillery regiments, with the 7th Armoured Brigade in the rear. It was only after darkness fell that the 7th Armoured Brigade fully disengaged and embarked on the long trek. After darkness fell, a steady stream of vehicles was passing through the holy city of Kairouan, on the long southern route to Sbeitla. Headlights were allowed but after years of blackouts, only one vehicle in five had bulbs. Driving steadily through the night at a regulated pace, they passed Sheiba and came into the fertile valleys of central Tunisia, with trim, tidy crops mounting to the hill crests, neat villages reminiscent of the Midi girt about with almond and fruit orchards, or with rich pasture lands in which contented sheep continued to graze as the leading convoys bowled past. The division was now in a new country, filled with civilians who stood along the road.⁵⁰⁷

The 4th Indian Division drew nearer to the bastion which the enemy defended so desperately—the Medjez-el-Bab gateway into the open plains of Tunis. With their new vehicles, camouflaged in dark colors to blend with the trees and fields, were the battered old trucks of the 8th Army, painted a lightly sandy grey, with barely a few still carrying a windscreen or a hood, with mudguards tied on with bits of wire, scratched, rusty veterans of an advance of 2,000 miles.

⁵⁰⁵ Kitchen, *Rommel's Desert War*, pp. 460–462.

⁵⁰⁶ Montgomery Papers, Appendix 'A' Main Headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division, 8 May 1943, Personal Diary Notes: The Last Phase in Tunisia, the Last Battle for Tunis, Part II, LMD 31, 26 April 1943–14 May 1943, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁵⁰⁷ Forczyk, *Desert Armour*, pp. 225–227.

The plan of battle called for the 1st British Division to secure Bou Huaker. After that, at dawn on 5 May 1943, the 4th British Division on the right, followed by the 7th Armoured Division, would smash through behind a monumental barrage of 1917–1918 type on a front of 3,500 yards and would drive on Tunis, 30 miles away. The weapons and formations available for his support far surpassed anything the 8th Army had ever provided. 400 guns stood ready to blast his front. With the new Churchills, the 25th Army Tank Brigade would support his infantry.⁵⁰⁸

Troops of Scorpions, the armoured minesweepers, were available with their flails to cleanse deadly ground. A seventeen-pounder regiment and an additional six-pounder regiment would be available to thicken the anti-tank screen. Mortar groups were ready to meet the Panzer counter-attacks. The air programme supported this positive luxury in supporting arms. The assaulting Indian brigades were given no less than twenty squadrons of fighter bombers and tank busters on their private tentacles. Tucker suggested that the 4th Indian Division would lead the way, burst into the enemy positions by night, and establish a hedge of support weapons through which the 4th British Division could pass to exploit the gains by day. The attack had to begin under darkness; zero hours was set for 0300 hours. Tucker insisted upon an assault by both divisions, shoulder to shoulder, but the 4th Indian Division was allotted the heavier task and the deeper penetration.⁵⁰⁹

The 8th Army attacked in a fiercer way to eliminate Axis resistance in Africa. The 56th Division took up positions for the battle on the high ground which flanked the attack area of the 4th Indian Division. It came under artillery fire and suffered heavy casualties. The 8th Army was authorised to abandon the attack. Monty diverted troops to the 1st Army to strengthen it and deliver the final assault. The revised formations were as follows: the 1st Army now had in its quota the 1st Armoured Division, the King's Dragoon Guards, the 7th Armoured Divisions, the 4th Indian Divisions, the 201st Guards Brigade, and some medium artillery. The 8th Army had the 2nd New Zealand Brigade, the 51st and the 56th Divisions, two armoured brigades, and the 12th French Division. With these, the 8th Army was to hold its sector while the 1st Army would undertake the final assault. At dusk on 5 May 1943, after a ferocious bombardment, the 1 British Division stormed Bou Hacker.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁸ Tucker Papers, Notes of Major-General F.S. Tucker for Regimental Albums, File no. 71/21/6/1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁵⁰⁹ Tucker, *Approach to Battle*, pp. 325–327.

⁵¹⁰ Liddell-Hart, *A History of the Second World War*, p. 439.

With the left flank secured, the 5 Brigade moved forward at 2300 hours, with the 1/9 Gurkhas leading. A company of Rajputana Rifles machine-gunners accompanied the hillmen. The 4/6 Rajputana Rifles and ¼ Essex followed, then came the 7th Armoured Brigade with the ½ Gurkhas in the lead, and the 1 Royal Sussex and 4th/16th Punjabis closing. The 145 Royal Tank Regiment was attached to the 5th Brigade, and the 142 Royal Tank Regiment to the 7th Armoured Brigade. Six successive objectives had been selected, three allotted to the 5 Brigade and three to the 7 Armoured Brigade. After that, the 7th Armoured Division would crash through for the *coup de grace*. The armour was expected to break loose as soon as possible after daybreak. The artillery barrage opened, and 25-pounders and the mediums deafened the surroundings with their roar. Thousands of shells went over the enemy positions and they were surprised by the intensity of the barrage.⁵¹¹

The apt timing of this attack enabled the assault troops to escape the enemy's defensive fire, which fell behind the 1/9 Gurkhas as they drew up to Ragoubet Souissi, a low ridge on the right flank of the 4th Indian Division's front. Three companies deployed and swept uphill. After a short, sharp encounter, the success flare rose. The 4/6 Rajputana Rifles crossed their start line at 0400 hours and, having contacted the reserve company of the Gurkhas, deployed 'C' and 'D' companies as a covering party while an anti-tank screen, facing west, was rapidly organised behind them. The Rajputana carrier platoon reconnoitred the front while the armour rolled forward to battle positions. As a slate-grey streak of dawn showed in the east, the British tanks, slightly too far forward, drew a deadly volley from 88-mm guns dug in along the sides of the valley. At 0440 hours, the ¼ Essex closed to the Gurkhas, who were well established on Point 145, their second objective. As the sky lightened overhead, the thunder of the guns added to a more resounding roar. Squadron after squadron of fighter bombers and tank busters streaked out of the south and struck venomous low-level attacks. The weight of the metal and perfect timing proved to be a significant blow to the Axis forces. The enemy line began to sag and crack. Several German artillery groups fought to the death while forward posts of enemy machine gunners continued to indicate targets with white tracers. The Churchills rolled through to the kill, a last venomous reaction.⁵¹²

⁵¹¹ Montgomery Papers, Appendix 'A' Main Headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division, 8 May 1943, Personal Diary Notes: The Last Phase in Tunisia, the Last Battle for Tunis, Part II, LMD 31, 26 April 1943–14 May 1943, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁵¹² Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 360–362.

The tide of the battle quickly receded from Ragoubet Souissi, where the 1/9 Gurkhas played their part. As the ¼ Essex passed through the Gurkhas, they veered to the right, across the front of the 4th British Division. The tanks had closed, and men had moved on to their final objective with an escort of 30 Churchills. The confident spirit of this great battalion was reflected by their transport, of which some seventy vehicles followed less than 800 yards behind the firing line. The line had been broken. The road to Tunis was open as the Axis forces in Africa fled from their last battlefield. The 11 Hussars had won the race for Tunis, a well-earned entry in the gamebook of this splendid regiment. The 1st Army launched its offensive in great strength on 6 May from the Medjez el Bab sector, directing it on Tunis. It was a complete success. Tunisia fell the next day.⁵¹³

At 1800 hours that evening, all organised resistance ceased. 220,000 prisoners crowded the cages, with more to come. In the mountains around Enfidaville, the enemy surrendered to the New Zealanders. The German High Command (OKW) stated that Africa would be abandoned, and the troops would be withdrawn by sea. However, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force laid effective blockades, and very few troops could get away. There were mass surrenders throughout May. About a quarter of a million soldiers laid down their arms and surrendered with immense stocks of weapons, ammunition, and supplies of all kinds.⁵¹⁴

Conclusion

Two years and 336 days after Italy declared war, the Allies in North Africa had won a final and complete victory. This Tunisian Campaign, fought between April and May 1943, witnessed fierce fighting between the Allied and the Axis troops. Specific Indian units performed bravely and won many awards for gallantry and courage, including two Victoria Crosses. The first was Subedar Lalbahadur Thapa of the ½ Gurkha Rifles, who participated in the fight for Fatnassa in the first week of April. He cut his way into a small arena while trying to secure a passage when the defenders opened a sleet of fire. Undaunted, he led his men on and fought up a narrow gully, overcoming all opposition in close-quarter combat with his *kukri* and revolver. He won a brilliant victory for the 4th Indian Division almost single-handedly. The second was Company Havildar Major Chhelu Ram of the 4/6th Rajputana Rifles, who won the award for his fight on 19 April 1943 at Gebel Garci. Armed with only a Tommy gun, Chhelu Ram dashed through a

⁵¹³ Roy, *Fighting Rommel*, pp. 199–201.

⁵¹⁴ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, 4 Indian Division Administration Instruction no. 15, 29 June 1943, File no. 601/225/WD/Part IV, vol. IV, MODHS, New Delhi.

hail of fire and captured a German post. He then rushed to an exposed place where his Company Commander was lying wounded. Seeing all officers down, he took command, reorganised his company, and led the assault with great skill, rushing from one post to another and encouraging his men. Chhelu Ram ultimately laid down his life on the battlefield, but the Germans were driven away.⁵¹⁵

Monty believed his soldiers' high morale was unbeatable; his army was invincible and could do no wrong. The low sick rates among the soldiers were an example of this morale. However, the fighting in Tunisia had cost the British and Commonwealth armies dearly. The 1st Army suffered 25,742 casualties, and the 8th Army suffered an additional 12,618.⁵¹⁶ The front collapsed for the Germans—they had no more supplies, arms or ammunition. The *Afrikakorps* surrendered, and many Italian and German soldiers found their way into Anglo-American prison camps. Even more shattering was the realisation that their star had declined and the knowledge of how little their command measured up to the trials ahead.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁵ Liddell-Hart, *A History of the Second World War*, pp. 450–453.

⁵¹⁶ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 380.

⁵¹⁷ Liddell-Hart, *The Rommel Papers*, pp. 420–422.

CHAPTER 6

Fighting at High Altitudes: 1943–1944

Introduction

When Italy joined the war in 1941, the Axis forces were achieving significant victories in Europe. Benito Mussolini, the Italian Duce, was eager to capitalise on this situation. An army of approximately 215,000 troops in Libya was prepared to attack Egypt, while another force of about 200,000 was stationed in Italian East Africa, which comprised Eritrea, Italian Somaliland, and Abyssinia. This second army was ready to invade Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland. In early 1941, the Italian forces performed well, successfully overrunning British Somaliland, occupying Kassala and Gallabat in Sudan, and positioning their troops south of Bardia in preparation for an invasion of Egypt. However, this marked the furthest advance of the Italian army. At that point, General Archibald Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Forces, launched a powerful counteroffensive that resulted in the defeat of the Italian forces. This led to their disastrous retreat to El Agheila on February 7.⁵¹⁸

The situation changed dramatically with the arrival of General Erwin Rommel, the commander of the well-trained Afrika Korps. On March 31, 1941, he launched an attack on the Allied forces, pushing them into Egypt by April 13. On November 18, General Auchinleck became the new Commander-in-Chief of Middle East Forces and initiated an offensive against the Axis forces. The Allies delivered powerful blows, forcing Rommel's troops back to El Agheila by the end of December. Rommel did not hesitate to respond; he commenced a counter-offensive on January 21, 1942, which pushed the Allies back to the El Gazala positions by February 7, 1942. The Allied forces were further pushed back to the El Alamein Line by June 30, 1942. However, the tides turned again when Rommel failed to break through the El Alamein line between August 31 and September 6, 1942.⁵¹⁹ General Bernard Montgomery, the newly appointed Commander-in-Chief of the 8th Army, famously called Monty, made a fresh, decisive attack on 23 October 1942 and, by 4 November 1942, inflicted a crushing defeat on the Axis forces, which were soon withdrawing to Tunisia. The 8th Army pursued the Axis

⁵¹⁸ Dharm Pal, *The Campaign in Italy (1943–1945)*, ed. Bisheshwar Prasad (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012), pp. 3–5.

⁵¹⁹ Most Secret Report to the Deputy Prime Minister, 17 December 1943, General Situation Report for 15th December, File no. HW1/2293, The National Archives (PRO), London, United Kingdom.

forces westward and ultimately forced their surrender in Tunisia on May 13, 1943. Out of a quarter of a million Axis soldiers in North Africa, only about 700 managed to escape; the rest surrendered. Meanwhile, Italian forces in Eritrea, Somaliland, and Abyssinia were also defeated despite strong resistance, particularly during the defense of Keren. The Allied forces were now ready to launch their offensive against Italy.⁵²⁰

The Allied grand strategy aimed to capitalise on their success in North Africa by eliminating Italy from the war. This move would force Germany to defend the Italian peninsula and redirect Italian troops stationed in the Balkans. To achieve this objective, plans were quickly developed, which included clearing Axis forces from North Africa, capturing the island of Sicily to serve as a base for operations against southern Europe, and reopening the Mediterranean shipping for the United Nations. General Dwight D. Eisenhower was appointed as the Supreme Commander, and General Sir Harold Alexander was tasked with the assault and capture of Sicily—operations were code-named “Husky.” During the Trident Conference, it was determined that knocking Italy out of the war was a crucial preliminary operation that should take place immediately after the capture of Sicily. At that time, the Germans were already engaged in operations in Russia and faced potential challenges in the Balkans and threats in Italy, France, and Norway. If the Allies succeeded in removing German forces from Italy, it would force the Germans to disperse their reserves along the Spanish and Italian frontiers.⁵²¹

The Attributes of Mountain Warfare

Mountain warfare in Italy presented significant tactical and administrative challenges for the Allied and German forces, ill-equipped to handle these issues during the winter of 1943–1944. The rugged terrain of the mountains posed unique difficulties, hindering troop movement and complicating operations. Good roads that pass through a mountainous tract are usually few, side roads are even fewer, and whatever else exists is in poor condition. There are steep ascents and descents and broken and serrated ridges that tax the physical strength and endurance of men.⁵²² The British, American, and German forces were large and well-supplied with heavy weapons, light automatic weapons, and fighting vehicles. They were largely dependent on

⁵²⁰ Brigadier C.J.C. Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol. V: The Campaign in Sicily 1943 & The Campaign in Italy 3rd September 1943 to 31st March 1944*, Vol V, Part I, History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series (East Sussex: The Naval and Military Press, 1973), pp. 387–388.

⁵²¹ Toker Papers, 4 Indian Division Training Instruction no. 40, 10 December 1943, File no. 71.21.6.3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁵²² War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 145, 29 August 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part VI, MODHS, New Delhi.

motor transport for their operations. The equipment used by these armies was designed for warfare on flat terrain, which made the differences in desert, jungle, and mountain warfare noteworthy. However, an exception to this was the Indian Army formations serving in Italy, which included the 4th, 8th, and later the 10th Indian Division. These units were primarily composed of soldiers from hilly regions accustomed to the mountainous terrain and its unique conditions.⁵²³

British and American commanders, from the highest down to the brigade commanders, British and American commanders faced the perhaps insoluble problem of adapting their heavily equipped, highly mechanised, road-bound formations to launch the offensive in wild, lofty, and almost roadless mountains. Although no more suitably organised for mountain warfare than the Allies, the Germans enjoyed the advantages of being in the defensive. This was a more robust and accessible form of war in the mountains than the offensive. The British and American commanders faced a significant challenge in creatively leveraging the mountains to their strategic advantage. Mountain warfare demands the initiative, strength, endurance, and ‘know-how’ of regimental officers and men. The mountains are everything from rough to frightful. Yet, they offer significant advantages to those who know how to use them and the difficulties of directing and controlling small units by voice, visual, line, or wireless signals. The soldiers, individually or in small groups, must consistently act independently. British and American troops had already gained such valuable experience in Tunisia and Sicily and were set to achieve even more in Italy.⁵²⁴

The Conquest of Sicily

Within two months of the collapse of the *Afrikakorps* in Tunisia, the Allied troops landed in Sicily to carry out ‘Operation Husky’. The interval between the surrender in North Africa and the invasion of Sicily had been fully utilised to prepare this assault, which began as early as January 1943. A planning staff was set up, and heavy air raids were directed on Axis bases along the Italian mainland and in Sicily. As a preliminary to ‘Husky,’ the Allied troops occupied some Italian bases in the central Mediterranean—Pantellaria on 11 June and Lampedusa on 13 June.⁵²⁵ The Sicilian operation had been delayed owing to the shortage of shipping. General

⁵²³ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 16–17.

⁵²⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel G.R. Stevens Obe, *Fourth Indian Division* (East Sussex: The Naval and Military Press, n.d.), pp. 263–264.

⁵²⁵ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Instruction no. 8, File no. 601/236/WD/Pt VIA, Part VIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

Eisenhower's assault force in the Mediterranean was organized as the 15th Army Group. It was commanded by General Alexander and included the American 7th Army, led by General George S. Patton, and the British-Indian 8th Army, commanded by General Montgomery.⁵²⁶

Monty planned to use two corps for the assault: the XIII Corps on the right and the XXX Corps on the left. The XIII Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Miles C. Dempsey, was assigned to attack the northern half of the Gulf of Noto. The 5th Division was to capture Cassibile and then move northward to Syracuse, while the 50th Division was tasked with capturing Avola and safeguarding the left flank of the corps. A brigade from the 1st Airborne Division would land in gliders west of Syracuse. Commando troops were scheduled to land south of the port to execute the operation to capture Syracuse. After completing the assault phase of the operations, the XIII Corps would advance north to seize Catania. The XXX Corps, under the command of Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese, had the initial objective of capturing the town of Pachino and its airfield. The 51st Indian Division was assigned to provide flank protection for the XXX Corps. A Special Service Brigade of two Royal Marine Commandos was to land on the Canadians' left. After securing Pachino, the XXX Corps was to seize the line of the road from the Noto to Ispica and then to secure the high ground in Pozzalo-Ragusa.⁵²⁷

The Axis forces in Sicily consisted of two German Divisions—the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division and the Hermann Goering Panzer Division, which was reinforced by the 1st Parachute Division, the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, and nine Italian Divisions (four field and five coastal). The Italians were very weak in equipment and in fighting quality. Their morale was at its lowest as they spread out around the coastline. By the beginning of July, five German Divisions were concentrated in south Italy, one in Sardinia and a regimental group in Corsica.⁵²⁸

On the afternoon of 9 July 1943, the assault convoys began to arrive in volatile areas south and west of Malta, from where they sailed to the north. Each convoy was assigned its beach. The seaborne troops went ashore early on 10 July, and a complete tactical surprise was achieved. The Italian resistance was rarely more than nominal, and only in Gela was a genuine attempt to oppose the landings. Here, the German tanks could break through the American front but

⁵²⁶ Jonathan Fennel, *Fighting the People's War: The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 341.

⁵²⁷ Major General DK Palit VrC, *Italian Campaign*, (Dehra Dun: Natraj Publishers, 1956), pp. 13-14.

⁵²⁸ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 145, 29 August 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part VI, MODHS, New Delhi.

were overtaken by the American troops the next day. That evening, Syracuse was captured. By 25 July, the Allied troops had pushed the Axis forces back to the island's north-east. The fighting developed into a German rearguard action to cover evacuating the forces from Sicily to the Straits of Messina. By 17 August, the whole of Sicily was under British occupation. Two Indian infantry battalions, the 3rd Battalion 10th Baluch Regiment and the 3rd Royal Battalion 12th Frontier Force Regiment, did the task. The latter was with the 5th and 50th Divisions, while the former was with the 50th Division and the 231st Brigade.⁵²⁹

The conquest of Sicily yielded rich political and strategic results, as the Allied lines of communications through the Mediterranean were made safe. The Fascist regime in Italy collapsed with the resignation of Mussolini on 25 July 1943. Now, the stage was set for the invasion of the Italian mainland. The Allied conquest of Sicily was a creditable achievement. It resulted from an amphibious assault planned and executed on an unprecedented scale. Allied ground forces had taken over a rugged country against a clever and stubborn foe who took full advantage of the defensive possibilities that rugged terrain could offer.⁵³⁰ The War Diaries of the Indian Divisions also pay tribute to the fighting qualities of the German soldiers. The strategic and tactical skill of Field-Marshal Albert Kesselring is praiseworthy here as he met the deteriorating situation with skill and confidence. His plans failed because the Italians had no heart in the business, and there was little opposition to the landing of the Allied troops on the beaches of Sicily. He failed to stem the tide of the Allied success, but he managed to get time to organise his forces for the defense of Italy. The German evacuation of Sicily must be remembered among the most successful retreats in the history of warfare. But full credit for the Allies' success in Sicily must be given to Patton's 7th Army and Monty's 8th Army for having defeated such skillful antagonists on that rugged terrain.⁵³¹

Towards the Mainland of Italy

With Mussolini's resignation, the new government was headed by Marshal Badoglio, who was politically friendly towards the Allies. As a result, Italy signed an armistice and withdrew itself from the Axis block. The occupation of Sicily was crucial for the North African strategy, as it opened the Mediterranean for Allied shipping and served as a base for attacks on southern

⁵²⁹ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 45–47.

⁵³⁰ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part I*, p. 399.

⁵³¹ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Instruction no. 12, File no. 601/236/WD/Pt VIA, Part VIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

Europe. The main offensive against Germany in northwestern Europe must be executed by the spring of 1944. Consequently, the Italian Campaign was restructured into a secondary effort aimed at tying down German forces in Italy to support the success of the Allied attack in northwestern Europe. It's important to note that the German troops stationed in Italy were effectively organised to counter the Allied threat of invasion. On September 3, 1943, the German forces in southern Italy comprised eight divisions under the command of Field Marshal Kesselring. These divisions were arranged under the headquarters of the 10th Army into two corps: the XIV Panzer Corps in the north and the LXXVI Panzer Corps in the south, with the XI Flieger Corps, or Air Corps, directly reporting to Kesselring. The XIV Panzer Corps comprised the 16th Panzer Division, Hermann Goering Panzer Division, and the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division.⁵³²

The LXXVI Panzer Corps comprised the 29th Panzer Grenadier Division, the 26th Panzer Division, and the 1st Parachute Division. The XI Flieger Corps comprised the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division and the 2nd Parachute Division. The 29th Panzer Grenadier Division and the 26th Panzer Division were in Calabria, and the 1st Parachute Division was in Altamura to meet the Allied invasion of Italy's 'toe to heel.' The 16th Panzer Division, the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, and the Hermann Goering Panzer Division were in Naples, where the Allied attack was the strongest. The 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division and the 2nd Parachute Division were stationed in Rome to block the Allied progress in the city. The dispositions of the German forces in south Italy were intended to cover the vital points likely to be attacked by the Allies—Calabria, Naples, and Rome. Additionally, there were German forces in north Italy to act as a reserve or meet any Allied threat in the Genoa-Spezia area. Army Group 'B' was stationed in north Italy and consisted of four corps commanded by Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel.⁵³³

General Alexander planned a double attack, one directed at Calabria and the other against the Gulf of Salerno, south of Naples. The XIII Corps of the 8th Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General M.C. Dempsey, which consisted of the 1st Canadian Division and the 5th British Division, was to attack across the Strait of Messina and secure the 'toe' of Italy. The D-Day for

⁵³² Brigadier C.J.C. Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol. V: The Campaign in Sicily 1943 & The Campaign in Italy 3rd September 1943 to 31st March 1944*, Vol V, Part II, History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series (East Sussex: The Naval and Military Press, 1973), pp. 593-595.

⁵³³ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, 4th Indian Division Intelligence Summary, 5 September 1944, File no. 601/221/WD/VIII, MODHS, New Delhi.

this operation was 3 September 1943. The main attack, code-named ‘Avalanche,’ was to be made a few days later by the American 5th Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General Mark Clark, consisting of the VI US Corps and the X British Corps. The 5th Army was to assault the Gulf of Salerno and capture Naples. Alexander’s plan was also to conduct a third operation, codenamed ‘Slapstick,’ where the 1st Airborne Division was to seize Taranto, a port of vital importance in the build-up of the 8th Army. The 78th Division and the 8th Indian Division were to join the 1st Airborne Division. The V Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Charles Alfrey, was to command three divisions to secure a base in Italy, covering parts of Taranto, Brindisi, and Bari. In short, Alexander planned to secure Italy with the help of the XIII Corps of the 8th Army and the V Corps.⁵³⁴

The Allies and the Germans were nearly equal in strength, fighting along a front of approximately 90 miles. Both ends of the German positions extended to the sea, making it challenging to outflank them without significant naval support. German defenses were strategically placed to cover the main routes through the mountains, while the mountains provided strong, natural barriers in other areas. The primary tactics of the Allies became willy-nilly head-on battering. The mountainous terrain caused the battering to be mainly infantry work, long slogging on foot up slopes and crests and along ridges, and actions fought by small units spread over and among these features. On 3 September 1943, the XIII Corps of the 8th Army landed an assault across the Strait of Messina, where they hardly faced any opposition.⁵³⁵

The 5th Division moved up to the west coast while the 1st Canadian Division secured Reggio di Calabria and advanced to Catanzaro, captured on September 10. Kesselring had predicted that the Allies would deliver their main attack in the Gulf of Salerno area. He completely disregarded the ‘heel and toe’ theory and instead prepared for a confrontation in Naples. The German rearguards aimed to slow the advance of the XIII Corps with mines and demolitions. However, on September 9, 1943, the 5th Army landed on the beaches of Salerno. The battle fluctuated for several days, with the 5th Army successfully repelling fierce German counterattacks, particularly intense between September 12 and 14. Finally, on September 15, the German assaults weakened, allowing the XIII Corps of the 8th Army to join the 5th Army. They then pushed north to capture Potenza, a crucial road center about 55 miles east of Salerno. Then, they reached the Avellino-Castrovillari-Scala line to attack and capture Naples.

⁵³⁴ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, p. 45.

⁵³⁵ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 267.

Good progress had been made in the ‘heel’ of Italy. The 1st Airborne Division captured Taranto without opposition on 9 September and then moved forward to Bari; the V Corps was then in a position with its two divisions—the 1st Airborne Division and the 78th British Division—to push on from the Bari area to secure Foggia, which was captured on 27 September. This was a significant gain, as possessing the airfields at Foggia enabled the Royal Air Force (RAF) to strike at essential centers of Axis war production. The 5th Army secured Naples on 1 October 1943, and the 8th Army secured Potenza and Foggia. With this, the first phase of the Italian campaign came to an end.⁵³⁶

The Quest for Rome

The Allied forces were now ready to push towards Rome. Kesselring, too, knew the vital importance of Rome, and he exhibited his supreme skills by deploying forces to prevent the Allied troops from entering the city. The German strategy gradually withdrew to a solid defensive line on the northern Apennines, popularly known as the Gothic Line. But Hitler changed his policy by commanding the troops to hold a robust defensive line as far south as possible in Italy. This line was to be renamed the ‘Winter Line.’⁵³⁷ This line was based on the east coast of the river Sangro. The west of the Garigliano was backed by the Aurunci Mountains on the coast. The strong Cassino position rose to the massif of Monte Cairo, the peninsula's center. The rugged mountains of Abruzzi were difficult to maneuver by forces that were large in number.⁵³⁸

The 5th and the 8th Armies stood poised for an attack on the outposts of the Winter Line behind the rivers Volturno, Biferno, and Trigno. The X Corps launched the attack on the night of 12 October with three divisions: the 46th Division on the left, the 7th Armored Division to the center, and the 56th Division on the right. The VI Corps attacked the mountainous area in the east of Capua. The 8th Army with the V and XIII Corps tried to secure the line Termoli-Campobasso-Vinchiaturò. Monty sent the XIII Corps with its two divisions to cooperate with the 1st Canadian Division to advance from the plains of Foggia into the mountain mass to the north and the west. The 78th Division, with the 4th Armored Brigade and the Special Service (SS) Brigade under command, attacked along Route 16 to capture Termoli. Armour and

⁵³⁶ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 41, File no. 601/236/WD/Pt VIA, Part VIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵³⁷ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol V, Part I, pp. 405–406.

⁵³⁸ Palit, *Italian Campaign*, pp. 19-20.

infantry carried out a frontal assault while the SS Brigade fought tough, and the 8th Army captured Termoli on 7 October 1943.⁵³⁹

The 1st Canadian Division was joined by the XIII Corps and the 5th Division on its right, and they captured Casacalenda on 13 October 1943. The 1st Canadian Division captured Campobasso on 14 October and Vinchiatturo on 15 October. Monty reorganized the 8th Army to keep the two corps aligned using Routes 16 and 17. The V Corps, which comprised of the 78th Division and the 8th Indian Division, was also brought forward. The 8th Army had to advance along Route 86 between Vasto and Isernia. Route 86 was one of the main roads from central Italy and ran parallel to the river Trigno, 15 miles beyond the Biferno.⁵⁴⁰ The 8th Indian Division was to play an essential part in the attack on the Winter Line and landed at Taranto in September 1943. It served in West Asia and North Africa during the summer of 1943 and underwent intensive training for combined operations and mountain warfare. It was well equipped to play its part in Italy's operations. The 8th Indian Division was commanded by Major-General Dudley Russell and comprised the 17th Indian Infantry Brigade (IIB), the 19th IIB, the 21st IIB, and Artillery.⁵⁴¹

The 17th IIB included the following battalions: the 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers, the 1st Battalion 12th Frontier Force Regiment, and the 1st Battalion 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles. The 19th IIB consisted of the 1st Battalion 5th Essex Regiment, the 3rd Battalion 8th Punjab Regiment, and the 6th Battalion 13th Royal Frontier Force Rifles. The 21st IIB comprised the 5th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment, the 1st Battalion 5th Mahratta Light Infantry, and the 3rd Battalion 15th Punjab Regiment. The artillery units included the 3rd, 52nd, and 53rd Field Regiments of the Royal Artillery (RA), the 4th Mahratta A Tank Regiment, the 26th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, and engineers and other ancillary units. This division was assigned to V Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General C.W. Alfrey, who also oversaw the 4th Indian Division during the final phase of operations in Tunisia and held a high regard for the Indian formations. The Divisional Headquarters opened at Ururi at midnight on 19/20 October 1943, and the 8th Indian Division assumed command of the Larino sector.⁵⁴²

⁵³⁹ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 348–349.

⁵⁴⁰ General Report from Ops Division of Naval Staff, 16 December 1943, File no. HW1/2293, The National Archives (PRO), London, United Kingdom.

⁵⁴¹ Palit, *Italian Campaign*, pp. 45–46.

⁵⁴² Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 56–58.

One must understand the country's topography where the operations would take place. It consisted mainly of the eastern Apennine foothills, rising in places to 2,000 feet. Numerous watercourses ran from the southwest to the northwest into the Adriatic Sea at right angles to the 8th Army's line of advance. They cut the hills into a series of steep-sided, irregular ridges of high ground. Up the Adriatic coast, as far as the plains of the Po Valley, the ridges continued monotonously. The troops' vision was thus limited from one ridge to the next. Occasionally, at some high altitudes, one could glimpse the ridges beyond. Roads followed the crests of the ridges at right angles to the 8th Army's line of advance and were rarely good. The road allotted to the 8th Army was second-class, and rain had softened its surface because it was not intended for the armored traffic rolling on it. The Germans had systemically destroyed bridges in their withdrawal, and the hilly nature of the country made diversions impossible. They also used mines and booby traps to delay the Allied advance.⁵⁴³

Nevertheless, as the V Corps advanced, with the 78th Division on the right and the 8th Indian Division on the left, it secured Montecilfone and established a bridgehead over Trigno. After driving the Germans out, they prepared fresh attacks on the leading German positions of the San Salvo ridge. The Indian Divisions were fired at on 20 October 1943 for the first time in Italy. The 1st Royal Fusiliers crossed the Biferno and secured the Serra del Larco high ground, one mile beyond the river. They had a brief firefight with a German standing patrol, which didn't develop into anything serious. A Squadron 6th Lancers reached and moved with two battalions of the 17th IIB to the positions gained by the 1st Royal Fusiliers. The 1/12 Frontier Force Regiment, supported by the Mahratta Light Infantry machine guns, occupied Palata. The 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles occupied Acquaviva, both on 24 October. By 27 October, Montemerino was taken by the 19th IIF and the 1/5 Essex. So was M. Majardo and Montefalcone.⁵⁴⁴

The occupation of these positions gave the division a firm grip on the east bank of the Trigno, as excellent observation was obtained in every direction through the villages in this position. Fifteen miles from the Adriatic, the 8th Indian Division crossed the river Trigno. The arrival of the two Indian Mule Companies, the 13th and the 14th, solved the supply problems. The main objectives of the attack were Tuffilo and the 2,000-foot peak beyond it, M. Farano, which was

⁵⁴³ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 146, 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part VI, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁴⁴ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part II*, pp. 613-616.

ideal for defense. The 8th Indian Division was to cross the river Trigno and attack the strong position at Tuffilo. The 19th IIB was selected for the main task of capturing Tuffilo, and the 21st IIB was to cross the river Trigno opposite Celenza to advance on Torrebruna and protect the division's left flank. The 17th IIB was to move through San Salvo to Gissi. The inter-battalion boundary ran from the bridge along the western slopes of the Tuffilo spur to the track, half a mile west of Tuffilo by the 1/5 Essex. This 1/5 Essex was to be aided by C Squadron 6th Lancers, B Squadron 50th Royal Tanks, 15th Anti-Tank Battery with six 6-pounder guns, towed by carriers from 3/8 Punjab, C Company and the 5th Mahratta Light Infantry with medium machine guns.⁵⁴⁵

On November 2, the 19th Infantry Brigade launched an attack, and the leading troops waded into the waters of the Trigno River. As they crossed, artillery bombardments from supporting units erupted ahead of them. Kittyhawks from the Desert Air Force descended, targeting German gun positions. However, they had to stop 300 yards short of their objective because German grenades and mortar shells created a dense wall of fire across their approach. The 1/5 Essex Battalion suffered heavy losses; they endured intense artillery and mortar fire while attempting to navigate the riverbed. Upon ascending the hill, they were met with relentless fire from German machine guns. The convex shape of the hillside rendered it impossible for the Essex troops to gain an advantage over the German positions. The heavy casualties inflicted made their position unsustainable. Similarly, the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles could not progress significantly, as German paratroopers remained strong. Many casualties from both battalions had to be evacuated over challenging terrain.⁵⁴⁶

No vehicles could be employed in the direction of Montemiro. Mules and men were, therefore, employed for this purpose. Stretcher bearers were heroic. They were steadfast under fire; some lent a hand in the battle. They tied up their mules in a comparatively safe spot, unslung their rifles, and opened fire on the Germans. It was realized that the Germans were in much greater strength than anticipated, and thus, the Allied forces were joined by the 5th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment, which moved immediately south; the 3/15 Punjab patrolled across the river, the 3/8 Punjab were pushed down the hill, and 1/5 Mahratta Light Infantry was ordered to concentrate at Acquaviva. On the night of 2/3 November, the regiments resumed

⁵⁴⁵ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division, Instruction Summary No. 16, File no. 601/236/WD/Pt VIA, Part VIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁴⁶ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 59–60.

their attack. Thick shrubs and a moonless night led to confusion and made inter-force communication difficult.⁵⁴⁷

German bullets set fire to a haystack and put up a strong counterattack. The Germans also had possession of good observation points over the positions occupied by the troops of the 8th Indian Division and took full advantage of this. German infantry attacked the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles, the German Air Force, using its ME 109, put up a behind-time appearance. However, aided by artillery defenses, the Indian battalions dodged the attack without losing ground. By 4 November, the 3/8 Punjab occupied M. Farano, 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles Tuffilo, and the Essex Palmoli. The 21st Independent Indian Brigade (IIB), based in Carunchio, was responsible for protecting the left flank of the 8th Indian Division. They conducted patrols deep into the south and west, identifying German positions and assessing their strength. Meanwhile, the 17th IIB secured the areas of San Salvo, Vasto, Cupello, and Montedorisio. The 78th Division captured Cupello and proceeded on foot along Route 86. The 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles acted as the advance guard and successfully secured Furci despite facing mortar and machine gun fire from hostiles. On November 7, the 17th IIB rejoined the 8th Indian Division, bringing the 166th Newfoundland Army Field Regiment from the Royal Artillery. This Newfoundland unit had previously supported the 4th Indian Division during its final attack on Tunis and was set to serve alongside all the Indian divisions throughout the Italian campaign.⁵⁴⁸

On 12 November 1943, the Gurkhas took the lead by capturing points Pt. 407 and Pt. 374. Their next objective was Atessa, situated on a hill overlooking the river and defended by the 11th Battalion of the 76th Panzer Grenadier Regiment. Major Morland Hughes, the battalion commander, described the attack in an after-action report. He explained that they managed to get quite close to the enemy and then charged in with their bayonets. The troops attempted to position their guns for counter-battery fire, but as is often the case in crises, all communications failed. The wireless network broke down, signalers were wounded, and equipment like lamps was damaged. Strict fire control measures were enforced. Intense mortar and shell fire descended upon them, and there were significant counterattacks led by a German officer

⁵⁴⁷ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 345–347.

⁵⁴⁸ Toker Papers, Notes by Major-General Francis Toker, 21 July 1944, File no. 71.21.6.1, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

wearing an Iron Cross, with the Germans being supported by their rapid-firing machine guns. The main weight fell on 15 Platoon of C Company, the key to the whole position.⁵⁴⁹

A surprise countercharge was led by L/Naik Bhagtabahadur Thapa, who was later awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal. Despite being nearly out of ammunition, he allowed the enemy to advance within 20 yards of his position. Then, drawing his kukri, he attacked them. The enemy fled in disarray, and Bhagtabahadur and his men were able to reform their positions and capture one of the covering machine guns. Rifleman Okel Gurung is another youngster who distinguished himself through his performance during this attack. He was later awarded the Indian Order of Merit and the Military Medal and was killed in the last battle of the campaign.⁵⁵⁰

While the Germans were being pushed back to the Sangro, Monty outlined a plan to break through the river Sangro position and push on to secure the road from Pescara to Avezzano before the weather became worse and the Germans could reinforce the Winter Line. He preferred the coastal highway to Pescara, providing better air and naval bombardment opportunities. He decided to concentrate the 2nd New Zealand Division under his direct command in the area between Furci and Gissi to relieve the 8th Indian Division, which was to move right. The V Corps was set to concentrate in the coastal sector for the main offensive in that area. The 19th Indian Infantry Brigade and the 19th New Zealand Armoured Regiment began their advance from Atessa on 15 November 1943. The 3/8 Punjab Battalion was on the right flank, while the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles were on the left. The battalions were supplied entirely by mules and, where possible, by jeeps. It was now time for the Battle of Sangro. The 8th Indian Division had achieved an apparent victory over some of the best German formations despite fighting in a region ideally suited for defense. The weather conditions were detrimental to movement and were particularly harsh for troops accustomed to tropical climates. But this division proved they could live and fight like any other trained division. It was stationed in the line of elaborate defenses on which the German command intended to take a stand for the winter.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁹ Palit, *Italian Campaign*, pp. 49-50.

⁵⁵⁰ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, 4th Indian Division Directive no. 1, 29 November 1944, File no. 601/221/WD/VIII, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁵¹ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 100, 6 May 1944, Part IVB, File no. 601/236/WD/Part IVB, MODHS, New Delhi.

The Battle of Sangro

By mid-November 1943, the 8th Army had closed on the river Sangro. In the V Corps sector, the 78th Division had extended its line from the coast to Monte Calvo, while the two brigades of the 8th Indian Division, the 17th and 21st, were concentrated around Scerni-Pagleita. The 19th IIB, screening the deployment of the 2nd New Zealand Division, was in the Archi area. The XIII Corps on the left, storming through the southern Apennines, had reached the headwaters of the Sangro at Castel di Sangro, 33 miles in a straight-line northwest of Campobasso. The Canadian patrols were active in that area and at Agnone, where contact was established with the New Zealanders.⁵⁵²

The 5th Army, too, moved up to the Winter Line, which consisted of two defensive lines—the first was the Bernhardt Line, based on Monte Camino, Monte Maggiore, and the hills on the north side of the Mignano defile. The Gustav Line was established on the high ground behind the Garigliano and Rapido rivers, with the crucial fortress of Cassino at its center. General Alexander planned to execute the operation in three phases. In the first phase, the 8th Army was to cross the Sangro and Pescara rivers, secure the high ground north of Pescara, and then move southwest along the major lateral road that runs across the peninsula from Pescara through Avezzano to Rome. This maneuver aimed to threaten the flank of the German forces defending Rome. In the second phase, the 5th Army was to attack the valleys of the Liri and Sacco to reach Frosinone. In the third phase, a seaborne and airborne operation was to be made south of Rome directed on the Alban Hills. The 5th Army was comparatively more exhausted by bitter fighting, so the 8th Army was selected to lead the attack.⁵⁵³

The most robust defensive line of the Germans at this time ran from east to west across the waist of Italy, starting on the Adriatic coast at the mouth of the Sangro and running south-west along the valley of the Sangro to the southern slopes of the 7,000-foot-high M. Groce. From there, the line followed the steep hills of the north side of the Volturno valley, cut across the Mignano gap southeast of Venafro to M. Camino, then ran down to the sea to the Tyrrhenian coast. This was known as the Gustav Line, a formidable natural obstacle turned into a fortified defensive system by the Germans. Fresh formations were moved down from northern Italy and aided by conscripted Italian labor who had been hard at work with explosives, mines, concrete,

⁵⁵² Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part I*, p. 411.

⁵⁵³ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 99, File no. 601/236/WD/Part IVB, Part IVB, MODHS, New Delhi.

and wire. In the 8th Army sector, the Sangro was fed by the innumerable water courses that drained the Maiella mountains and was as much as 300 yards across its lower reaches. However, the water channel was usually about 100 feet wide and 18 inches deep. After heavy rain, the river became a torrent, filling the entire channel, and the depth was 5 feet or more. It was a malignant river, rising to flood and fury at various stages of the operation.⁵⁵⁴ The positions on the left flank of the Gustav Line were established in the villages of Fossacesia, Santa Maria, Mozzagrona, Romagnoli, and Andreoli. The Germans had dug deep, as much as 20 feet underground, and constructed a series of machine gun nests and connecting trenches designed to withstand heavy shelling. The houses had all been converted into command posts, and the streets of the villages were strategically filled with machine gun emplacements. On the roads and road verges leading up to the defenses from the river, thousands of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines had been laid to make the banks of the Sangro a veritable death trap for the hostile patrols.⁵⁵⁵

The Sangro bridgehead was held by two German divisions—the 65th Infantry Division and the 1st Parachute Division—supported by the 16th Panzer Division, which was later relieved by the 26th Panzer Division. The 65th Infantry Division held the coastal sector, a front of nearly 12 miles, with only two regiments. The 145th Infantry Regiment was on the coast, with two battalions forward and one reserve at Lanciano. The 146th Infantry Regiment held the right of their front. On the right was the 1st Parachute Division, holding a front of about 25 miles. The 90th Panzer Grenadier Division reinforced the defenders.⁵⁵⁶ The 8th Army embarked on an inventive deception strategy to keep three crucial pieces of information hidden from the German High Command. They skillfully narrowed the front of the 78th Division, strategically relieved the 8th Indian Division to concentrate in the Scerni area—excluding the 19th IIB—and welcomed the 2nd New Zealand Division into their ranks. Ingeniously, they disguised new artillery positions from German reconnaissance pilots by setting dummy guns along the gun lines and creating false supply dumps. A duplicate Tactical Headquarters Army was formed in a brilliant move to generate misleading wireless communications. As a result, the Germans mistakenly believed that the attack was postponed for another two days after the actual launch date. Meanwhile, the weather took a turn, bringing in frigid temperatures and relentless rain.

⁵⁵⁴ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 272.

⁵⁵⁵ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 349–350.

⁵⁵⁶ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Training Instruction no. 1, 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part VI, MODHS, New Delhi.

The roads became slippery, making it challenging for heavier vehicles and causing lighter ones to skid into ditches. Through their creativity and determination, the 8th Army turned the tides in their favour, showcasing their resilience and strategic brilliance.⁵⁵⁷

This hampered operations, and it was not until 27 November 1943 that the 8th Army could mount its main attack on the German defences. The 17th IIB and the 8th Indian Division attacked with two brigades of the 2nd New Zealand Division (the 5th and the 6th) attacking northwards over the Sangro towards Castelfrentano, while the 19th IIB on the left flank provided a diversion at the bridge over the river Aventino, a thousand yards from its junction with the Sangro. Monty had, however, modified his plans to make his V Corps independent of tanks and weather. He instructed the V Corps to re-organize the bridgehead on a two-divisional basis, bringing the 8th Indian Division up on the left of the 78th Division to capture the Sangro ridge by a series of minimal operations, each supported by the corps artillery.⁵⁵⁸

The eventual plan for the attack was that the 17th IIB would capture Mozzagogna and S. Maria one thousand yards to the north. The 21st IIB was to advance on the left of the former to seize Romagnoli and the high ground of Andreoli. Shells from the Field Regiments of the 8th Indian Division crashed down on the German defenses. The German troops withdrew into their subterranean refuges and, when the barrage had passed over, came out to rake the forward slopes with machine gun fire as the Gurkhas slithered and scrambled their way up to the German positions. At midnight, two 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles companies pierced the German defense line and broke into hand-to-hand fighting with the enemy. The village had become a stir of exploding mines, clattering machine guns, and war cries of the Gurkhas.⁵⁵⁹

The 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers had an unpleasant experience as the roads and the verges were heavily mined, and German shell fire caused panic among their mules. The animals were tough to control, and their weight, as they moved about, detonated box mines sown just below the road metalling. On 28 November, Major-General Russell ordered the 17th IIB to renew the attack on Mozzagogna. On the right of the 8th Indian Division, the 78th Division was ordered to attack the R. Li Colli feature frontally on the morning of 29 November and afterward to seize S. Maria.⁵⁶⁰ The 4th Armoured Brigade, less the 50th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment, was to

⁵⁵⁷ J.F.C Fuller, *The Second World War* (USA: Da Capo Press, 1993), pp. 265-266.

⁵⁵⁸ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 61-62.

⁵⁵⁹ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part II*, pp. 637-638.

⁵⁶⁰ John Keegan, *The Second World War*, (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 289-290.

attack Fossacesia, astride the road, and mop east towards the coast. The 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers was responsible for covering Indian sappers at work on the crater south of the village. Soon, Mozzagrogna was reduced to a ruin; hardly any building stood where the flames from the flame-throwing tanks had ravaged the walls. Houses bore the marks of small arms fire and grenade splinters. The Indian Sappers worked frantically all night under intense mortar and shell fire to clear the cratered road which had proved such an obstacle to the success of the first attack. They lifted hundreds of mines, and the Germans surrendered without firing another shot. Three of the Panzers were facing the wrong way and were destroyed by the guns of the Indian infantry in seconds. More than a hundred prisoners were captured from the German 65th Infantry Division. The German defence of Mozzagrogna had collapsed. It was a tiring but triumphant morning on 29 November for the 17th IIB; they also received a special message of congratulations from Monty.⁵⁶¹

North of the 8th Indian Division, the 78th Division had attacked the Colli feature on 29 November and cleared the ridge. There was a night attack by the 8th Indian Division where the 1/5 Gurkhas pushed forward and secured the vital road junction. The 1/12 Frontier Force Regiment attacked and established itself in the large monastery near S. Maria, linking with the troops of the 78th Division. The Germans launched their final counterattack against the 17th IIB with infantry and self-propelled guns. In fifty minutes, they were given a severe mauling by the Allied artillery, tanks, and planes, which sent them back to Imbaro. By 30 November 1943, the V Corps was firmly established across Sangro.⁵⁶² It had been a tough fight and a bloody battle. Three weeks after reaching the river, the corps had smashed through the line the Germans intended to hold through during winter. The 8th Indian Division successfully breached the German defenses and was prepared to advance. The 78th Division secured a solid position on the right coastal sector and across the river, effectively dismantling the German line by breaking through the Fossacesia area. The Germans had been hard hit in the Battle of Sangro. More than a thousand Germans had been taken prisoner, and many more had been hit. The 65th Infantry Division had borne the attack's brunt and was destroyed. On the other side, on the west of Italy, fighting had intensified in the 5th Army sector, and the German High Command found itself in great difficulty. The Germans had sprung to the defense of the Gustav

⁵⁶¹ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, Interrogation Report, 2 April 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Pt VIA, Part VIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁶² War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, 4th Indian Division Situation Report no. 2, 12 December 1944, File no. 601/221/WD/VIII, MODHS, New Delhi.

Line and reacted boldly and swiftly; fresh troops were rushed into southern Italy. The 90th Panzer Grenadier Division replaced the 65th Infantry Division.⁵⁶³

The German forces were in a tight spot, but the Allied forces had no better disposition. The V Corps was in no position to follow up the victorious crossing of the river obstacle with an advance in strength. Harsh weather made movement extremely difficult and compelled the air forces to remain grounded, so their air superiority could not be enjoyed. Additionally, the troops of the 8th Army were tired and needed rest; there was no reserve division to exploit the gains. The 78th Division had suffered heavy casualties and needed rest as well. However, there were orders to advance beyond Sangro. The next target was Romagnoli, which was smaller than Mozzagrogna but similar. It stood on the crest of a highly cultivated ridge, little more than a mile west of Mozzagrogna.⁵⁶⁴ The Germans launched three assault attempts, but the defensive fire, artillery support, and air attacks from the 8th Army repelled these assaults and forced the Germans to seek cover. As a result, Romagnoli came under the control of the 5th Royal West Kent Regiment. However, the Germans had deep dugouts and strategically positioned machine guns. Trees had been cut down to create a clear field of fire, making the entire position challenging to breach. With the support of tanks, the Mahrattas advanced against heavy machine gun fire to capture the German posts. Numerous acts of courage and bravery marked the battle. One Naik witnessed his platoon commander being hit by enemy fire and immediately charged at the machine gun position, tossing a hand grenade among the crew. He then seized the muzzle of the weapon and snatched it out of the hands of the terrified German.⁵⁶⁵

On 1 December 1943, the 3/15 Punjab (21st IIB) moved to C. Ruzzo to support the Mahrattas. But they soon found the Germans had pulled back from Redicoppe and Andreoli under darkness. The two places were occupied. The headquarters of the 21st IIB moved from the Casone area to a position southeast of Romagnoli. At the same time, the 5th Royal West Kent Regiment and the Mahrattas consolidated their gains in the Romagnoli and Andreoli sectors. The 3/15 remained in reserve. As quickly as possible, the Germans withdrew their battered

⁵⁶³ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, p. 67.

⁵⁶⁴ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part I*, pp. 423–425.

⁵⁶⁵ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, Sun and Moon Tables, April 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Pt VIA, Part VIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

forces from patrol and interrogation reports to the Moro valley, where nature offered another solid defensive line. Their withdrawal tactics were much the same as before.⁵⁶⁶

Small mobile detachments of infantry with self-propelled guns stayed behind to hinder the Allied forces from making advances and needed to ensure the safety of their engineers working on demolitions. Montgomery recognized the importance of strengthening the assault formations. He transferred the 1st Canadian Infantry Division from the mountain sector to the Adriatic coast. On December 2nd, command of the area previously held by the 78th Division was passed to the Canadian Division. The 4th Armoured Brigade, which had been operating with the 78th Division, came under Canadian command, and the 38th Irish Brigade of the 78th Division also joined them. Two brigades, the 1st and 2nd of the 1st Canadian Division, concentrated behind a barrier provided by the 4th Armoured Brigade and the 38th Irish Brigade, which were in contact with German forces near San Vito and Treglio. To the left of the Canadians, the 8th Indian Division had secured Romagnoli and Anderoli and was advancing towards Lanciano. South of the 8th Indian Division, the New Zealanders had pushed forward and captured Castelfrenteno, 3 miles southwest of Lanciano, and were on the road to Guardiagrele.⁵⁶⁷

The two main thrusts were now to be developed by the Canadians towards Ortona and the New Zealanders towards Orsogna. On the night of 2/3 December 1943, the 25th Battalion of the 6th New Zealand Brigade opened the attack towards Orsogna. They penetrated Orsogna soon after the first light but were pushed back by a fierce counterattack. The Germans were determined to hold Orsogna at all costs. The Canadians encountered difficulties. Although the 38th Irish Brigade captured S. Vito on 3 December and reached the line of the river Moro, the weather conditions were so bad that the Biley bridges were washed away. The role of the 8th Indian Division in crossing the river Moro was minor: they were to conduct surveillance in the direction of Frisa. The 21st IIB was to capture the road junction, half a mile southeast of Lanciano, where the road from S. Vito through Treglio met the road Mozzagrognna-Lanciano.⁵⁶⁸

On December 3, 1943, the road junction was secured without any opposition. In response to this advance, the Germans retaliated with intense force. Their artillery and mortars bombarded

⁵⁶⁶ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Planning, Note no. 22, 3 August 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part VI, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁶⁷ Tucker Papers, Notes by Francis Tucker on Some of His Experiences in April 1965, File no. 71.21.6.3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁵⁶⁸ Palit, *Italian Campaign*, pp. 52-53.

the road junction and bridge, while Focke-Wulf fighter bombers conducted repeated dive-bombing attacks on the forward positions of the Punjabis. Despite the ferocity of these German assaults, the Punjabis remained resolute and held their ground. By evening, they were securely positioned outside Lanciano, with a detachment successfully cutting Route 84 on both the north and south sides of the town—one company moving two miles north and south of Lanciano. During the night of December 2-3, patrols from the Lancer and 3/15 Punjab units entered Lanciano and reported that the town was clear. D Company of the 3/15 Punjab subsequently entered the city, marking it as the largest capture by the 8th Indian Division since its involvement in the Italian campaign. The soldiers took great pride in their achievements. After this, the 21st IIB established its headquarters in the town. Lanciano was to provide good warm billets during the winter months and was an excellent base for operations farther north.⁵⁶⁹

The 8th Indian Division accomplished its double task of capturing Lanciano and making a thrust towards Treglio. It was now preparing for its second task, advancing towards Frisa. The capture of Lanciano opened several routes that could be used for the pursuit of the Germans. The headquarters of the 21st IIB converted the town into a base for future operations. On 3 December 1943, waves of German light bombers came over to bomb the forward positions held by the 21st IIB. Still, they lost one or two aircraft in each raid, the Light Anti-Aircraft Brigade Regiment with the 8th Indian Division taking a toll on German planes. To supplement the Bofors fire, the infantry fired everything at the attacking planes, and the German raids were cut short. On 5 December, a mobile column of the 21st IIB moved forward and occupied the Frisa-Casone ridge against slight opposition, then pushed on to the destroyed bridge over the Moro, 1 mile north of Casone. The brigade headquarters was established in Frisa, and patrols contacted the Canadians on the right and the New Zealanders on the left.⁵⁷⁰

In the first few days of December, the 8th Army followed the retreating Germans, who yielded ground reluctantly and only under pressure. The country they were advancing was now more broken than before by streams flowing through steep ravines and vineyards on their sides alternated by olive groves enclosed by low stone walls. The local cultivators lived in small, strongly built, scattered stone cottages, converted into solid points and used by both sides at different periods. The weather hindered movement and aggravated the supply problem for the

⁵⁶⁹ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 69–70.

⁵⁷⁰ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 96, File no. 601/236/WD/Pt VIA, Part VIA, MODHS, New Delhi.

8th Indian Division. All operations had to be conducted on a mule-pack basis. The Divisional Transport Company, or RIASC, became responsible for all transport demands. Each of the three Brigade Transport Companies specialized in handling three primary commodities—ammunition, petrol, and food. On December 7, the New Zealanders launched their first large-scale attack against Orsogna, with two brigades supported by a heavy artillery barrage. Men of the 24th Battalion fought their way into the main square of Orsogna. The 17th IIB moved into the Frisa area. The new role of the 8th Indian Division was to carry out a demo attack to draw the German reserves away from the Canadian and New Zealand sectors. It was to develop a thrust to cut the Ortona-Orsogna lateral road. The main attack was to be made by the Canadian and New Zealand sectors. The 2nd Canadian Brigade moved into the area of S. Apollinare to launch the main attack through San Leonardo and onto the lateral road.⁵⁷¹

On the west flank of the Moro valley, the hills were held by the 90th Panzer Grenadier Division from the sea to V. Caldari. Their neighbor in the south was the 67th Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the 26th Panzer Division. The 361st Grenadier Regiment held the Adriatic. Meanwhile, on 8 December 1943, the 8th Indian Division ordered the Mahratta Light Infantry to distract the German attention from the central Canadian attack near the coast secured S. Leonardo. C Company, given this job, carried it out exceptionally well. It had to cross the river over what was known as the ‘Impossible Bridge’, attack the ridge, and then withdraw behind the cover of an artillery barrage and smoke screen.⁵⁷²

A creeping artillery barrage was laid to advance from the escarpment west of the river to V. Caldari. The platoon crossed the river behind the barrage and fired almost 2,000 rounds of small arms, ammunition, and several grenades at the German positions. A mortar smokescreen was laid a few hundred yards to the platoon's flank. Long-range machine gun fire was put through the smokescreen in short bursts to stimulate Bren gun fire. The Germans were taken in complete surprise by this ‘Chinese-cracker attack,’ as it drew heavy shell fire and mortar fire on the smokescreen. The amount of metal the Germans put down in and behind the mortar smokescreen was noticeable. Their job was well done, and the Mahratta patrol withdrew

⁵⁷¹ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, p. 273.

⁵⁷² Short Air Situation Report of 6/12/43, File no. HW1/2293, The National Archives (PRO), London, United Kingdom.

without casualties. During this period, German shelling gradually became heavier and was notoriously unhealthy. Tip-and-run air raids were more frequent.⁵⁷³

Further, the completion of the Impossible Bridge on 9 December 1943 made it possible for the 50th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment to attack Moro and the 3/15 Punjab with its supporting arms to cross over it. The battalion attacked houses on the crest of the ridge, which were German solid points and observation posts. The German attack on the 5th Royal West Kent Regiment in Ruatti, directed toward the bridge site, led to confusion for some time. During the mopping-up period, the tanks provided valuable close support to the infantry. Amid this action, Havildar Badlu Ram of the 3/15 Punjab displayed extraordinary bravery. He was known for stalking German soldiers with a Tommy gun. When his ammunition ran out, he returned to the 50th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment crew, who supplied him with fresh Tommy gun magazines. This non-commissioned officer was posthumously awarded the Order of Merit after he was killed during the fighting at Consalvi. Ultimately, the consolidation of the 1st Canadian Division's Moro bridgeheads signified the end of the first phase of the Battle of Ortona.⁵⁷⁴ The second phase of the battle lasted till 19 December when the Canadians succeeded in driving out the Germans from their defensive solid positions across a 'gully', carrying a tiny watercourse across the front just south of the lateral road from Ortona to Orsogna. German trenches manned by troops of the 1st Parachute Division, who had been brought up to reinforce the battered 90th Panzer Grenadier Division, were on the Canadian side of the gully, where Canadian gunners could not see their target area and where mud, machine gun fire, and mines halted the tanks and infantry.⁵⁷⁵

On 11 December 1943, the Canadians attacked the gully. During the day, a Canadian tank officer taught the Germans a sharp lesson. He was conducting reconnaissance around the lateral road, almost due west of S. Leonardo and on the extreme left of the Canadians when he discovered a German tank leaguer of five or six tanks with the crews asleep. He reported the location, and a mixed force of tanks and Canadian infantry set out to deal with the unsuspecting Panzer Grenadiers. The Germans were taken entirely by surprise; all their tanks were destroyed, and a battalion headquarters, the III Battalion 361st Regiment, was captured. This engagement had a significant result as the area dominated a small sector of the lateral road, and the

⁵⁷³ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part II*, pp. 653-655.

⁵⁷⁴ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 353-354.

⁵⁷⁵ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, Instruction Summary No. 15, 18 May 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part IVB, Part IVB, MODHS, New Delhi.

destruction of the German tanks gave the Canadians a valuable footing for later operations. Again, on 18 December, the German positions were subjected to the fire of thirteen artillery regiments. Under cover of this devastating fire, the Canadians surged forward for the attack and compelled the Germans to pull out of the ‘gully’ on 19 December after a keenly contested engagement. The fight for the gully was over, and the Canadians secured the crossroads preparatory to the attack on Ortona.⁵⁷⁶

The next target was Villa Grande, and several battles were fought to capture this post. The 19th IIB advanced toward the village while the Germans made frantic preparations to defend it. They had no intention of surrendering Villa Grande without a fight. The town was held by the 1st Battalion, 3rd Parachute Regiment, and as the 19th IIB approached from the lateral road, the Germans finished their defensive preparations. Their defenses were formidable. They constructed dugouts below the ground floors of houses, which overlooked potential approaches to the village. The floors themselves were reinforced with wooden beams and earthen mounds. Anti-tank guns were positioned in houses and at the ends of village lanes, effectively covering all tank approaches.⁵⁷⁷ The plan for the 19th IIB was to take Villa Grande on 22 December, then cut the road running west from the village towards Tollo. The 21st IIB was to be ready to pass through the 19th IIB after the capture of Villa Grande and exploit the line of the Areilli River. The first plan was to attack Villa Grande from the south with one battalion supported by all divisional and corps artillery. A diversionary attack was to be staged towards C. Vezzani by a small force of tanks, one squadron of 6th Lancers, and one company 3/8 Punjab.⁵⁷⁸

On the bitterly cold night of 21/22 December 1/5, Essex, with the C Squadron of the 50th Battalion Royal Tank Regiment in support, moved to a start line south of Villa Grande. The men began to freeze as they waited for the barrage to start while the gunners back in the gun lines stamped their feet and tried to warm their numbed hands. A fury of heavy artillery in the barrage broke on Villa Grande. Flashes from hundreds of guns stabbed the darkness of the night; it seemed that all the artillery in the world was firing shells into the village. The Germans fought with determination to break the Essex hold, but the British infantry grimly held on to its gains. There was a clap of bursting grenades, the quick clatter of German machine guns, and shouts in English and German as the battle climaxed. On December 23, the 1/5 Essex Battalion

⁵⁷⁶ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 85–86.

⁵⁷⁷ War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Situation Summary no. 1, 25 December 1944, File no. 601/221/WD/VIII, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁷⁸ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part I*, pp. 433–435.

launched its second attack on Villa Grande. Advancing along the same route as in previous assaults, the infantry and tanks moved forward to engage the paratroopers again. For a second time, the battalion was halted on the southern outskirts of the village by German machine gun fire. The 1/5 Essex fought tenaciously and secured the first few houses while British tanks bombarded the German strongholds with high-explosive and armor-piercing shells. As the weary forces pushed forward, German artillery struck the attackers, signaling the onset of a fierce counterattack. Paratroopers emerged from their dugouts, only to be met with a barrage of fire; after an intense battle, they were forced to retreat to their shelters. The 1/5 Essex had won the second round of the Battle for Villa Grande and held the southern outskirts of the village despite repeated German attempts to dislodge them during the day.⁵⁷⁹

The fighting in Villa Grande was relentless on Christmas Eve. While the 3/5 Punjab dealt with a German counterattack at C. Vezzani, the Essex regiment and the paratroopers entered the fray for the third round of the Battle for Villa Grande. Heavy combat engulfed the village throughout the day, and the Essex had to fight fiercely for every yard of ground gained. The battle continued to rage on Christmas Day and for the following two days, December 26 and 27, 1943. During this time, there was an attempt to drive out the remaining German forces with the support of tanks; however, this effort faltered in the face of intense machine gun fire. In response, the commander of the 8th Indian Division ordered the 21st IIB to capture the high ground north of Villa Grande, which offered a strategic view of the junction between the roads to Ortona and Tollo. This junction was of great importance, for here, the highway Villa Grande-Tollo met the only lateral route that could be used by German transport between Villa Grande and Ortona. Its capture would compel the Germans in Villa Grande to withdraw or surrender. The 5th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment was tasked with capturing this high ground, and it moved to the area on the road, due east of Villa Grande, on the night of 27/28 December. The 1/5 Mahratta Light Infantry was sent to meet the 5th Royal West Kent Regiment on its way to the start line and to cover its left flank by dealing with the paratroopers still in Villa Grande. On 28 December, the Germans pulled out of Villa Grande and the spur north of the village. A fighting patrol from 1/5 Mahratta Light Infantry penetrated the town and discovered that it had been evacuated by the German paratroopers, except for a few stragglers.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁹ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 361–363.

⁵⁸⁰ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 275–276.

The XIII Corps failed to break through German defenses at Orsogna and remained uncaptured.⁵⁸¹ From Villa Grande, the 21st IIB exploited the north and northwest. The Mahratta Light Infantry passed westerly through the 5th Royal West Kent Regiment to seize the high ground half a mile northwest of the junction of the Tollo and Ortona roads. Foot patrols from B Squadron, 6th Lancers probed northwards, on the right flank through S. Nicola, towards S. Tommaso, held by a German rearguard. The final exploitation stage was for 1/5 Mahratta Light Infantry to advance to the crossroads on the crest overlooking the Arielli valley after dusk on 31 December 1943. It would have been comparatively simple as a night operation in normal circumstances. Still, the adverse weather conditions broke up the battalion attack as effectively as a complete German division might have. A blinding blizzard swept over the divisional front into the faces of the advancing troops, making any controlled movement impossible. Visibility was nil, and men floundered about in the snowstorm until touch between neighboring companies was lost. The cold was so severe that the unfortunate Mahrattas in the open could barely stand.⁵⁸²

By 2 January 1944, the 21st IIB was sitting on the high ground astride the Tollo road, northwest of Villa Grande, to push on along the road towards Tollo. On the night of 2/3 January, the 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles relieved the 5th Royal West Kent Regiment north-west of Villa Grande. They went out by daylight over relatively open ground and were repelled by well-directed machine gun fire, losing some men. The Silo area was occupied without opposition. Twenty-four hours later, the 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles put in a battalion attack to capture some farmhouses on the track from S. Tommaso to Tollo where the track crossed the northern end of the Plan di Moregine. By 0500 hours on 4 January, the battalion had achieved its objective.⁵⁸³

On 5 January 1944, the 14th Canadian Armoured Regiment replaced the 50th Royal Tank Regiment, and the Headquarters 1st Royal Fusiliers moved to S. Nicola. Under darkness, the 1st Royal Fusiliers established two companies in the track and stream crossing area, 800 yards west of S. Nicola, and closed the gap between the Canadians and the Gurkhas. This marked the most northerly advance by the 8th Indian Division on the Adriatic sector during the winter of 1943/1944. Fierce German resistance, coupled with bad weather conditions, seemed to impose a halt on the 8th Army. The early days of the New Year marked the army's advance limit before

⁵⁸¹ Tucker Papers, Notes on the Monastery, File no. 71.21.6.3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁵⁸² War Diary of the 4th Indian Division, Notes on German Tactics, File no. 601/221/WD/VIII, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁸³ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 95–98.

the offensive renewal in the spring. Since the 8th Army had landed at Reggio in September 1943, the Germans had been pushed back 650 miles, with the 8th Indian Division taking its total share in the pushing. This was a proud moment for Monty to end his brilliant leadership of the 8th Army and time to hand over the command to General Sir Oliver Leese.⁵⁸⁴

The Battle of Monte Cassino

The Gustav Line was the next target for the Allies, based on high ground behind the Garigliano and Rapido, with its vital fortress being Monte Cassino. Many observation posts on the mountains gave the Germans a perfect view of the approaches to the Rapido. The town of Cassino was strongly fortified. Self-propelled guns and tanks guarded the approaches to the city while several machine gun emplacements were in the buildings. Snipers and well-armed troops garrisoned posts of strategic importance. Many machine-gun emplacements on the slopes of the hills behind the town afforded it good protection. The area around Cassino was the key to the portion of the Gustav Line lying north of the Liri River. Four miles northwest of Cassino towered the massive, snow-covered M. Cairo. The vital defense area was half of the district, extending 2 miles to the west and 3 miles north of Cassino. The Germans held this area. The Monastery Hills and the surrounding area dominated the town. Pt 593, about one half-mile to the northwest, served as the outer bastion of Monastery Hill. In its turn, Pt 593 was protected by S. Angelo and the Majola Hills. This ridge, which ran north-east to Cassino, had three critical points, terminating in Castle Hill, which was Pt 193 on the western outskirts of the town. Another crucial point was Hangman's Hill, which was Pt. 435, three-fourths of the way up the southwestern slopes of the Monastery Hill.⁵⁸⁵

By mid-January 1944, the 5th Army approached the Gustav Line, preparing to launch attacks against its strong defenses. General Alexander planned a frontal assault on the Gustav Line, which would be coordinated with an outflanking amphibious landing at Anzio to disrupt the German lines of communication. Preliminary operations were completed by January 15, with the French Expeditionary Corps successfully capturing Monte Santa Croce and the II US Corps securing Monte Trocchio, the last hill before the Rapido River. With these objectives accomplished, the 5th Army was ready to attack the Gustav Line. Opening the offensive, the X

⁵⁸⁴ War Diary of the 10th Indian Division, 10th Indian Division Instruction no. 8, 11 May 1944, File no. 601/233/WD/Pt III, Part III, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁸⁵ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 365–367.

Corps crossed the river Garigliano towards the Aurunci Mountains.⁵⁸⁶ To the east, the II US Corps launched a frontal assault across the Rapido River on January 20. Meanwhile, the French Expeditionary Corps, positioned on the right, attempted to flank the Rapido defenses by moving through the mountains from the north. Two days later, the VI US Corps landed at Anzio to cut off the road from Cassino to Rome. The X Corps succeeded initially, while the 94th Infantry Division could not halt the Allied advance. After six days of intense fighting, American and French forces secured the hills overlooking the village of Cairo. This was the situation on 29 January 1944, when the II US Corps opened its new offensive of capturing Cassino and the area around it.⁵⁸⁷

The forces in the hills achieved significant success against determined opposition. On February 2, 1944, much of Castellone was held by American troops. Four days later, they fought within 300 yards of Monastery Hill, enduring intense fire from the Germans. The II US Corps suffered heavy losses after ten weeks of nearly continuous fighting. The surviving troops were exhausted from the battle and harsh weather conditions. This marked the end of the first phase of the Battle of Monte Cassino. On February 3, the New Zealand Corps was formed, initially consisting of the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 4th Indian Division, and was placed under the command of the 5th Army. The 4th Indian Division, which was now prepared to take part in the Battle of Monte Cassino, was a veteran formation that had taken a prominent part in the operations in North and East Africa.⁵⁸⁸

The division arrived at Taranto from Egypt on December 8, 1943, and on January 17, 1944, it moved forward to the static Orsogna sector on the Adriatic coast, where it stayed for only two weeks. After handing over the Orsogna sector to the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, the 4th Indian Division prepared to participate in the Battle of Monte Cassino. The 7th Indian Infantry Brigade of this division was the first to enter the line, concentrating its efforts on the lower eastern slopes of Monte Castellone near Cairo village at midnight on February 11. This brigade was selected to lead the attack, and, as a preliminary fight to that operation, it was to take over from the American troops on the front of its advance on the night of 12/13 February.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁶ Palit, *Italian Campaign*, pp. 61-62.

⁵⁸⁷ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part II*, pp. 691-692.

⁵⁸⁸ Keegan, *The Second World War*, pp. 295-296.

⁵⁸⁹ Toker Papers, Possible Thoughts of a German Commander, 4 April 1963, File no. 71.21.6.3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

At the same time, the II US Corps had four infantry regiments on M. Castellone and one on the northern outskirts of Cassino town. It was now convinced that the clearing of Monte Cassino was essential to its drive down the Liri valley. The Allied forces were to wear themselves out in fruitless frontal attacks on Cassino. The plan was to utilize the 4th Indian Division, operating from the Castellone feature, to attack and capture Monastery Hill and the high feature of Pt. 593, exploiting the south to cut Route 6 and capture Cassino from the west. The 2nd New Zealand Division was to assist with the fire on Cassino and Route 6 from the east side of the river Rapido. It was to be prepared to cross the river to help the 4th Indian Division capture Cassino. After the capture of Cassino, the US Task Force undertook exploitation towards Pignataro and the construction of crossings over the river Rapido on Route 6. The 78th Division was placed under its command to complete the New Zealand Corps on 8 February. This third division, consisting of the 11th and 36th Infantry Brigades and the 38th Irish Infantry Brigade, was to be used for exploitation only unless operations by the Germans compelled its employment in a defensive role.⁵⁹⁰

The 7th IIB encountered many difficulties in carrying out the relief. In the early morning of 12 February 1944, the Germans had launched one strong, unsuccessful counterattack against the American regiment holding M. Castellone, which began to infiltrate from the direction of Terelle. At nightfall on 13 February, the Indian Brigade moved forward to relieve the American forces. The climb was a long one over a rough mountain trail, and it was rendered more arduous by a recent spell of bad weather. German artillery and mortar fire fell on the route throughout its length, causing casualties among the troops moving up. All the positions held by the US corps were on open hillsides, exposed to German fire, and the more forward positions were close to the Germans and overlooked by them. Movement by daylight was a hazardous task. It was not until the early hours of 15 February that the 7th IIB took command of the sector with the 1 Royal Sussex astride Pt. 593, the 4/16 Punjab on the left, holding the ridge about 1,000 yards north of the Monastery, and ½ Gurkha Rifles in reserve. The divisional headquarters was set up at Cervaro, 5 miles east of Cassino, across the Rapido valley. The 5th IIB east at Portella and the 11th IIB at S. Michele were 3.5 and 2.5 miles northwest of Cervaro, respectively.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁹⁰ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 101–102.

⁵⁹¹ War Diary of the 10th Indian Division, 10th Indian Division Instruction no. 8, 11 May 1944, File no. 601/233/WD/Pt III, Part III, MODHS, New Delhi.

Monte Cassino, also known as Monastery Hill, was a fortress of considerable strength. The methods for attacking it were regularly studied at the Italian Staff College. Without any artificial fortifications, the position was widely regarded as impregnable. However, it had been fortified with steel and concrete pillboxes and emplacements drilled and blasted into the rock, making it one of the critical bastions of the German defenses. On February 15, heavy and medium bombers conducted a bombardment to breach the walls of the monastery. 142 heavy and 87 medium bombers participated, dropping 380 tons of bombs and 66 tons of incendiaries. Although the bombers demonstrated remarkable accuracy in their targeting, their timing was less precise. Owing to a lack of coordination between the commanders of the ground and the air forces, the forward troops on the ground could not be given timely information to adjust their positions to conform with the bomb safety line.⁵⁹²

However, the operation was ultimately successful. The monastery buildings were wrecked, but the breaches of the walls did not reach the ground level. The direct attack by the New Zealand Corps on Cassino had failed. On 19 February, the New Zealand Corps could not break the central front at Cassino, while the Germans could not drive the Allied into the sea at Anzio. General Sir Henry Maitland Wilson succeeded Eisenhower as the Supreme Allied Commander Mediterranean Theatre (SAMCED). He emphasized the importance of compelling the Germans to commit as many divisions as possible to operations in Italy. He was planning a major offensive along the Liri Valley to connect with the Allied forces at the Anzio bridgehead. To ensure success, achieving a local infantry superiority of 3:1 was essential. An additional seven and a half divisions were to be reinforced alongside his existing twenty-one divisions. A single corps to the Adriatic coast, the 5th Army on the Garigliano and the Anzio-bridgehead, and the 8th Army were to be transferred to the Cassino front.⁵⁹³

The challenges of launching a direct attack on Cassino were nearly insurmountable. Monte Cassino served as a formidable fortress, providing the Germans with excellent observation points and allowing them to effectively concentrate their defensive fire. The rugged terrain, marked by deep, narrow gullies and subject to heavy fire, made it impossible to deploy large forces that could achieve quick and decisive success. The most viable strategy was to conduct a direct assault on Cassino, preceded by intense air and artillery bombardments to disorient the

⁵⁹² Martin Gilbert, *The Second World War: A Complete History*, (Great Britain: Phoenix Paperback, 1989), pp. 490-491.

⁵⁹³ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 284-286.

defenders. There was hope that the sheer volume of munitions would be enough. Once Cassino was effectively devastated by these heavy attacks, success could be attained with the support of infantry and tanks. Capturing the town of Cassino was the campaign's primary objective, and launching an attack from the north appeared to offer the best chances of success. Castle Hill was the key to the northern part of the town (Pt. 193). German supply vehicles were using the steep, winding tracks up to the monastery from the southern end of the town. Castle Hill was, therefore, the first and essential objective. The only approach to Castle Hill was through the town since the northern face and the shoulder of the hill fell away almost vertically and contained caves and dugouts in which machine guns had been installed.⁵⁹⁴

Lieu-General Freyberg issued instructions on 21 February 1944. The corp's plan of attack envisaged a three-and-a-half-hour air bombing program on the town. Immediately afterward, the 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade and the 19th New Zealand Armoured Regiment, assisted by fire from the 5th New Zealand and 7th IIB, were to capture Castle Hill and the part of the town north of Route 6. One battalion of the 5th IIB was to relieve the New Zealanders on Castle Hill as soon as the situation would allow. This gave the troops and the supplies enough time to refurbish. After that, the 6th New Zealand Brigade was to advance to a second objective, south of the town, while the 5th IIB would exploit southwards from Castle Hill along the eastern slopes of the Monastery Hill to capture Hangman's Hill and finally the Monastery. The codeword for this operation was 'Operation Dickens.'⁵⁹⁵

Operation Dickens

The 4th Indian Division was to play a significant role in the first phase of operations; it was to attack and capture Pt. 445, hold the existing positions firmly, and construct positions along the general line of Pt. 450–Pt. 455 eastwards to the divisional boundary, sited to cover the western outskirts of Cassino and the northern and eastern slopes of Monte Cassino by fire. This was to be done by the 7th IIB, which was to assume command of the complete sector. The operations' second phase consisted of an air attack on Cassino by twelve groups of heavy bombers and seven groups of medium bombers. The third phase would see the 2nd New Zealand Division capture Cassino and Pt. 193. The outline plan of the 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade was as follows: one armored regiment was to lead, followed by two infantry battalions. The 7th IIB of

⁵⁹⁴ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, G Secret Battle Log, 26 May 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part IVB, Part IVB, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁹⁵ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part II*, pp. 708-709.

the 4th Indian Division would assist in the attack by neutralizing German guns. The 5th IIB was to take over Pt. 193 after its capture by the 2nd New Zealand Division by neutralizing the German movement on the northern and eastern slopes of Monte Cassino.⁵⁹⁶

To implement these plans, the New Zealand Corps stood poised for an attack on Cassino. It had lined up so that, on its right, it was in touch with the 3rd Algerian Division, while facing south towards Monte Cassino was the 7th IIB, with one battalion of the 11th IIB in the line and another acting as porters. Major-General Francis Taker, who had led the 4th Indian Division through failures and victories since January 1942, had to leave his command due to sickness, and his position had been taken over on 15 February by his energetic artillery commander, Brigadier K. Dimoline. Pitted against the New Zealand Corps were the best German troops in Italy, the 1st Parachute Division. The paratroopers relieved the 15th Panzer Grenadier Division, which had borne the brunt of the Allied attacks in January and February, towards the end of February. The men of the parachute division were known as the 'Green Devils' of Cassino. In the defence of Cassino, they displayed courage and heroism, which elicited praise even from their enemies. The New Zealand Corps, composed of the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 4th Indian Division, the 78th Division, Combat Command B, and the 1st US Armoured Division, was deployed on the Cassino front, ready to commence Operation Dickens. On 15 March 1944, the air attack on Cassino began, lasting until midday; 338 heavy and 176 medium bombers took part in this attack. 1,100 tons of bombs were dropped on the town. While the attack on Cassino was in progress, more than 300 fighter bombers attacked targets in the immediate vicinity while 280 fighters gave cover protection. The terrific bombardment reduced the town to a heap of rubble.⁵⁹⁷

When the bombing ceased, the artillery program opened. Around 610 artillery pieces from the X British Corps, the II US Corps, and the New Zealand Corps were employed. Eighty-eight guns laid down a creeping barrage undercover, and the 2nd New Zealand Division advanced to the attack on Cassino while the 78th Division held the line west to the X Corps boundary.⁵⁹⁸ The remaining artillery was tasked with neutralizing German defense positions in addition to counter-battery work. The artillery program lasted until 1,200 tons of shells were fired into the

⁵⁹⁶ War Diary of the 10th Indian Division, 10th Indian Division Location Statement no. 6, 26 May 1944, File no. 601/233/WD/Pt III, Part III, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁵⁹⁷ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 112–113.

⁵⁹⁸ Taker Papers, Notes on the Second Battle of Monte Cassino, File no. 71.21.6.3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

town. The tremendous weight of bombs and artillery fire on 15 March 1944 failed to destroy altogether the German defenses in Cassino and on the Monastery Hills. The German troops did not suffer heavy casualties, as cellars, steel, concrete pillboxes, caves, and tunnels sheltered them. Though ammunition dumps were blown up and possibly protected weapons destroyed, the heavy weapons and artillery did not suffer severe damage. The heavy bombing and shelling did not lower the morale of the German soldiers, who emerged out of their cellars, dazed but undaunted, to offer dogged resistance to the Allied advance. They fought with a grim tenacity that evoked admiration. General Alexander was so impressed by the high morale of the paratroopers that he could not help paying them a noble tribute.⁵⁹⁹

Behind a creeping barrage, the 6th New Zealand Brigade led the assault on 15 March 1944. The leading 25th Battalion entered Cassino, then turned west and captured Castle P. 193 after confused fighting at 1630 hours. The second battalion, the 26th Battalion, followed close on the heels of the leading battalion advanced to within 150 yards of Route 6 by 1700 hours. Rubble blocked the narrow sheets and provided a cover for the Germans, who emerged from their shelters unscathed by the bombing. In the other places, the craters were filled with rainwater, which made them an efficient anti-tank obstacle.⁶⁰⁰

Deprived of their tank support and with their wireless sets rendered almost entirely useless by the rain, the New Zealanders were compelled to crawl over the debris in a continuous battle with snipers and machine gun posts, making slow progress. After fierce house-to-house fighting, the New Zealanders penetrated much of the town before the city closed. Rainfall stopped the progress of the 5th IIB, but it still entered Cassino and moved forward to take over from the 25th New Zealand Battalion. Heavy rain, a pitch-dark night, and the German defensive fire hampered its movement. On 15 March, the ¼ Essex, the leading battalion, had relieved the 25th New Zealand Battalion. At the same time, the 1/9 Gurkha Rifles scored a remarkable success. Following the wake of the 1/6 Rajputana Rifles, it arrived on the outskirts of Cassino on 16 March. The C and D Companies were now given the objective of Hangman's Hill, Pt. 435. They achieved this goal by night, but their success was known to the other battalions much later. On 17 March, the 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade resumed its attack on the town of Cassino, and they succeeded in securing the railway station and Pt. 202. The Germans, too,

⁵⁹⁹ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, Vol V, Part I*, pp. 523–524.

⁶⁰⁰ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, 8th Indian Division Planning Note no. 23, 22 August 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part VI, MODHS, New Delhi.

realized that the battle's climax was near, and they launched vigorous counterattacks on 19 March.⁶⁰¹

The 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment launched the German attack on the night of 18/19 March 1944, as it moved down the hill through its forward-defended localities in the direction of Pt. 236 and Pt. 165. The Germans led the attack here, hurling grenades over the walls into the courtyard, while snipers on the hillside took a toll on the defender. This attack failed, and they developed a second attack, as fierce and vehement as the first, but it was beaten back. A third attack was launched, and British mortars and medium machine guns found heavy concentrations close to the western wall. The New Zealand tanks covered the southern wall. The fierce German onslaught was checked with firmness and courage. During the Cassino operations, smoke was often used to neutralise the German observation posts on Monastery Hill. However, the efforts of the New Zealand Corps were unsuccessful; German forces still held out in Cassino town. On the other hand, the Germans almost succeeded in blocking the bottleneck, proving they could still threaten the vital British line of communication. By 20 March, they had reinforced their garrison, and the Battle of Monte Cassino became a test of endurance.⁶⁰²

The New Zealand Corps was crucial in cutting off German supply routes from the west and south. The 5th Indian Infantry Brigade was set to recapture Point 165, while the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade aimed for Point 445. On March 23, 1944, after careful consideration, it was decided to pause further assaults on Cassino. This led to the withdrawal of the brave 1/9 Gurkha Rifles and other troops from Hangman's Hill under the operation code-named 'Roche' on March 24, which thankfully met no opposition. The New Zealand Corps completed its mission by disbanding on March 26, paving the way for the 4th Indian Division, which then joined the XIII Corps in Venafro, a strategic 30 miles from Cassino. Despite the Allies' unwavering determination to break through the heavily fortified German defenses, the campaign did not culminate in capturing Cassino. Over six weeks, the 4th Indian Division faced significant challenges, recording 1,079 casualties and remaining engaged in relentless action for eight days

⁶⁰¹ War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, Secret Battle Log, 10 May 1944–11 May 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part IVB, Part IVB, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁶⁰² Toker Papers, 4th Indian Division at Monte Cassino, 15–18 February 1944, File no. 71.21.6.3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

without resting their reserves. Their bravery and perseverance testify to their dedication during this brutal campaign.⁶⁰³

Major-General Taker was highly appreciative of the performance of his troops and even sent them congratulatory messages from the hospital. The 5th Army, too, had worn itself out in fruitless and costly frontal attacks on Cassino. The only alternative was to launch a main attack up the Liri Valley, as it offered an easier route to Rome. Thus, General Alexander launched simultaneous attacks with the 8th and 5th Army in the scenario between Cassino and the sea. The 5th Army was to take the sea flank, including Anzio and the Aurunci mountains south of the Liri valley. The 8th Army was to launch the assault in the Liri valley and advance along Route 6, while the 5th Army was to seize the Ausonia defile and push forward parallel with the 8th Army, keeping south of the Liri. Lieu-General Lesse, who was the commander of the 8th Army, planned to attack with the II Polish Corps on the right and the XIII Corps on the left. The role of the II Polish Corps, operating from the north of Cassino, was to outflank the Monte Cassino Abbey, cut Route 6, capture the monastery, and move to Piedimonte and the high ground in the Roccasecca area (which was to the north-west of Piedimonte). Regarding air support, this time, the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces (MAAF) had 3,960 combat planes to support the ground campaign. The Germans could only muster 700, of which only 320 could affect the battle tactically. Thus, complete supremacy was obtained by the Allied Air Force over the Luftwaffe in Italy.⁶⁰⁴

From 24 March 1944 onwards, all German rail-through tracks to Rome for the German troops and the front were continuously cut by two lines of interdiction across Italy—one on the general line Cecina–Ancona and the other roughly San Stefano–San Benedetto. There were also simultaneous attacks on ports, shipping, mechanical transport, and northern Italian railyards, which contributed to the attrition of German supplies. 25 March saw the main effort switched to reducing German air strength in Italy by attacks on airfields and aircraft concentrations. Both tactical and strategic air forces were used in this phase. The selection of D-Day for the main attack on Monte Cassino was subject to many factors. Preparations have been ongoing since March and have continued until April. May was thus the best period for campaigning, both on the ground and in the air. The weather would not be too wet or dry to impede movements, face

⁶⁰³ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 293–295.

⁶⁰⁴ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 114–117.

water supply problems, or unending dust. The average temperature would be between 32 to 85 degrees. Visibility would be excellent. Thus, 11 May was the final day to open the offensive.⁶⁰⁵

The Führer had commanded Field-Marshal Kesselring to hold the Gustav Line and the Hitler Line with all their might to bar the advance of the Allied troops to Rome. Kesselring was deceived by the idea of Alexander building up his forces on the main Liri front and the strong possibility of them attacking Civitavecchia, north of Rome. The Hitler Line was 8 miles west of Gari, later renamed the Dora Line. These defenses branched off the Gustav Line on M. Cairo. They ran through V.S. Lucia, circled Piedmonte, Aquino, and Pontecorvo on the east, along the river Liri, where it ran southwards, and descended into the foothills of the Aurunci Mountains at S. Oliva. The mountains acted as a natural barrier here, making defense formations unnecessary. The Hitler Line was built over five months during the winter and was never entirely completed. The fields of fire were neglected, and thus, the strong emplacements were almost blind when the final assault was launched. The Hitler Line was naturally a formidable obstacle, but the inadequate number of troops manning it proved its greatest weakness.⁶⁰⁶

Early in April 1944, the 8th Indian Division was relieved by the 4th Indian Division in the Orsogna sector on the Adriatic coast to enable it to prepare for the Second Battle of Monte Cassino. The 21st IIB took over the front between Cassino railway station and La Pietra. The 17th IIB and 19th IIB moved to a training area along the Volturno River, 20 miles south of Cassino. The day of attack on the Gustav Line was 11 May. As the moon rose, 650 guns opened up on the XIII Corps front in the evening, shattering the lull in the Liri valley. The divisional machine gun unit, the 5th Royal Battalion Mahratta Light Infantry, using the newly acquired 4.2-inch mortars, sent bombs over the river on the German positions near the stream. Machine guns and 4.2-inch mortars from the 78th Division joined the artillery to neutralize the Liri. The first assault boat was launched at 2345 hours, with men of the 17th and the 19th IIB starting to cross the river. Before this, the guns had changed from counter-battery to concentrations on the nearer targets and to the barrage, which advanced from the river at 100 yards every six minutes. German machine gunners, who had gone to the ground when the fury of the artillery bombardment broke on their positions, came out of their dugouts and sent heavy, intermittent streams of fire into the pitch-black screens to rake the meadows where the British infantry was

⁶⁰⁵ Tucker Papers, A Note on Cassino by Lt. Col G.R. Stevens Obe, 22 April 1965, File no. 71.21.6.3, Imperial War Museum, London, United Kingdom.

⁶⁰⁶ War Diary of the 10th Indian Division, HQ 10th Indian Division Movement Order no. 1, 31 May 1944, File no. 601/233/WD/Pt III, Part III, MODHS, New Delhi.

struggling forward. German mortars opened, and bombs crashed down on the crossing places; the noise of the battle echoed tremendously.⁶⁰⁷

On the left, the 1/12 Frontier Force Regiment, having crossed the river on a two-company front 400 yards downstream from S. Angelo, engaged in fierce fighting. It was subjected to machine guns and mortar fire from both flanks. This fire and the fog made forming a complex operation. While forming up on the west bank, the 1/12 Frontier Force Regiment was subjected to machine guns and mortar fire from both flanks. When cut or pulled, the Germans had erected some trip wires that activated smoke canisters, alerting the German machine gunners to open fire on fixed lines. As the men advanced, the smoke grew thicker until visibility was nil. Some stumbled blindly on, others fell, and some were killed or wounded by machine gun fire.⁶⁰⁸

Stick grenades were thrown from the trenches and showered on the companies. The men of the Frontier Force Regiment made the best of their opportunity to get to close quarters with the Germans in their dugouts, caves, and quarries. It was revealed by the morning that the Germans were in occupation of parts of the escarpment within a few yards of the ½ Frontier Force Regiment. The Allied reserve force, B Company, was called up, and it made clever use of the folds in the grounds, crept forward, and destroyed the German garrison in the remaining dugouts. The Germans initially wanted to bomb the east bank heavily with their mortars and create a thick smoke screen. Phosphorus smoke shells did this on the west bank. Their object appeared to create confusion among the assaulting troops, and they were partially successful in this. Smoke slowed down the crossing of the river but caused enough damage to the benefits of the artillery. Confusion from losing contact between the sub-units prevented an immediate assault on the German river line defenses. Several lines of wire obstacles isolated eastward loops in the river, 2–2.5 feet above the ground. There was no continuous minefield, and the troops behind the wire were not in large numbers.⁶⁰⁹

On the south flank, pillboxes were encountered. The artillery fire had little visible effect on them. The 3/8 Punjab was so closed off under the German positions that their hand grenades came rolling down the slopes and burst among the Punjab soldiers. A 19-year-old sepoy, Kamal Ram, of Karauli State, new to the battalion and fighting his first action, attacked two German

⁶⁰⁷ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, pp. 401–408.

⁶⁰⁸ Reports from LXXVI Panzer Corps, 16 December 1943, File no. HW1/2293, The National Archives (PRO), London, United Kingdom.

⁶⁰⁹ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol V, Part I, p. 709.

machine gun posts single-handed. He shot or bayoneted the German garrison, capturing both the posts. He was later awarded the Victoria Cross. German counterattacks against the 19th IIB were not very heavy, but the valley between the 17th and the 19th IIB was greatly affected by their harassing tactics. Concentrations of German guns consistently shelled crossing points at the Gari.⁶¹⁰

S. Angelo was still a thorn in the side of the 8th Indian Division. It was the key to the position of the Gustav Line. With it, the Germans could check the 8th Indian Division's advance, the most Allied severe threat in the area now. Without it, it had to pull back from the Gari. At midnight on 13 May, the 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles launched the final attack. Ahead of them, S. Angelo was given a sharp, five-minute pounding by seven field regiments. All the forward troops of the 17th IIB, who would have been in danger from the bombardment, had previously been withdrawn to a safe distance. As soon as the shelling ceased, two companies of the 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, C on the right and B on the left, aided by two troops of tanks from B Squadron 11th Canadian Armoured Regiment, attacked Sant Angelo along the axis of the lateral road. There was a grim close-quarter battle amid the ruins for nearly three hours in the fierce afternoon heat.⁶¹¹

One by one, isolated parties of Germans, holding out in deep cellars and improvised strong points, were destroyed or captured. Canadian tanks shot down those who tried to escape. Those who did escape withdrew north-west from the village. Eventually, on 13 May 1944, all resistance in S. Angelo ceased. Success was made possible by the efforts of the infantry, the dogged persistence of the Canadians operating their tanks over the rugged country, and the excellent fire support from the artillery. In the valley 800 yards west of Sant Angelo, the battalion captured the headquarters of the II Battalion 576th Regiment, responsible for the defense of S. Angelo. The Germans were not strong in anti-tank weapons there; hence, few anti-tank mines were encountered. They had never expected British tanks to cross the Gari, but they played havoc with the German infantry strongpoints. The Germans now appeared to be shy of committing their tanks in close support of their infantry.⁶¹²

⁶¹⁰ Obe, *Fourth Indian Division*, pp. 301–304.

⁶¹¹ Pal, *The Campaign in Italy*, pp. 140–142.

⁶¹² War Diary of the 8th Indian Division, Secret Battle Log, 10–11 May 1944, File no. 601/236/WD/Part IVB, Part IVB, MODHS, New Delhi.

In the battle area, medium bombers blasted German communications at the western end of the Liri valley. In contrast, fighter bombers concentrated on gun and mortar positions near the Gari on 13 May 1944. The 21st IIB had the 13th Battery and D Company 5th Royal Mahratta under command. The 165th Jeep Artillery Regiment was in support. On 14th May, the 3/15 Punjab A Squadron 6th Lancers and C Squadron 12th Canadian Armoured Regiment crossed the Gari through Oxford Bridge into the 19th IIB's bridgehead. It moved to an assembly area in the valley, 100 yards south-west of Pt. 63 between 3/8 Punjab and the 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles reserve company. Their task was to push through the 19th IIB in three bounds toward C. The ground was hilly and rough, cut by ravines, and contained a lot of scrub and other covers.⁶¹³

On the 13 of May 1944, the 1/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles had also captured S. Angelo, the 19th IIB pushed out westwards along the southern arc of the Horseshoe. The 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles were to capture Pt. 68, Pt. 61, and Panaccioni. As the morning mist cleared slightly, the Germans began to shell and mortar Oxford and Plymouth bridges. The first advance by 6/13 Royal Frontier Force Rifles went through very close country, intersected by leafy lanes and sunken roads, ideal for the concealment of anti-tank guns. The infantry spotted the Germans and indicated their positions to the tanks using tracer bullets, and the tanks engaged the guns with armor-piercing shells. Several German armored vehicles and anti-tank guns were destroyed. Numerous machine gun posts were also knocked out. The companies quickly completed mopping up and were securely established on Pt. 68. A company and its tanks, in advance to Pt. 61, accounted for four German Mk. III tanks and two self-propelled guns. D Company knocked out two German tanks. A Company's objective, from which the Canadian tanks had pulled back the previous evening, had been reoccupied by the Germans with infantry and an anti-tank solid defence. There was fierce fighting for an hour before the Germans were compelled to withdraw from Pt. 61. The next attack against Panaccioni found strong German resistance in and around. Still, they suffered heavy casualties, and it was captured with forty prisoners. This day saw that the attacks had worn down the Germans to such an extent that they compelled them to employ their local reserves and throw their troops into confusion.⁶¹⁴

On 16 May 1944, the I Canadian Corps moved up on the left of the XIII Corps and took over the 8th Indian Division's front; the 8th Army made substantial gains. The 8th Indian Division

⁶¹³ War Diary of the 10th Indian Division, 10th Indian Division Intelligence Summary no. 7, 2 May 1944, File no. 601/233/WD/Pt III, Part III, MODHS, New Delhi.

⁶¹⁴ Molony, *The Mediterranean and the Middle East*, Vol V, Part II, p. 743.

secured the Sant Angelo's Horseshoe, the British 4th Indian Division had enlarged the Gari bridgehead and, along with the 78th Division, was making thrusts to cut off Route 6. The II Polish Corps gained a foothold on the Phantom Ridge, north of Cassino, but was subjected to heavy artillery fire and compelled to withdraw. It was imperative to capture Cassino and simultaneously close speedily to the Hitler Line.⁶¹⁵ The I-Canadian Corps continued the westward advance; the XIII Corps shifted its weight to the right to concert with the II Polish Corps in an attack on Cassino. The II and XIII Corps launched their attack on 17 May. The British 4th and the 78th Divisions of the XIII Corps wheeled northwards to cut Route 6, and the II Polish Corps attacked southwards to meet them. During the afternoon, the British 4th Indian Division cut Route 6 two miles west of Cassino. The Polish Corps captured the Phantom Ridge and the commanding Colle S'Angelo ridge in the mountains west of the Monastery. The 7th Division met stern opposition from the parachutists at Piumarola and was checked there until 2000 hours on 17 May. The British 4th Division captured Cassino and the Monastery the following morning, and the Poles made contact on Route 6 at Pt. 58. Meanwhile, the I Canadian Corps maintained a steady advance westward towards the Hitler Line.⁶¹⁶

Conclusion

Having accomplished its task of seizing the Sant Angelo, the 8th Indian Division pulled out of the line and surrendered command of its sector at 2300 hours on 16 May. With the capture of Pignataro, the task of the 8th Indian Division was accomplished; after five days of fierce fighting, the Gustav Line had been broken. While smashing the line, the division had captured 600 Germans, killed and buried 400, and, with the Canadian tanks, accounted for seven tanks, sixteen anti-tank guns, five self-propelled guns, and a large quantity of material. In the process, the Germans had been confused and could not offer coordinated resistance or put up a large-scale counterattack. The achievement of the 8th Indian Division is highlighted by the inability of the Polish Corps to break through the German solid defenses north of Cassino and by the precarious bridgehead secured by the British 4th Division in the early stages of the attack. It was the initial success gained by the 8th Indian Division in seizing and holding a firm

⁶¹⁵ Gilbert, *The Second World War: A Complete History*, pp. 500-501.

⁶¹⁶ Andrew Hargreaves, *Learning to Exploit Depth: The Application, Evolution, and Value of Allied Special Forces in Sicily and Italy, 1943–1945*, in *Allied Fighting Effectiveness in North Africa and Italy 1942-1945*, ed. Andrew L. Hargreaves, Patrick J. Rose, Matthew C. Ford, *History of Warfare*, Vol. 99, (Leiden; Brill, 2014), pp. 210-214.

bridgehead at S. Angelo that paved the way for the final victory. The 8th Indian Division emerged from the battle with added glory and prestige.⁶¹⁷

The summer campaign in Central Italy redeemed the fame of the Allied arms in the Mediterranean theatre. Before this, the Allied armies had successfully pushed back the Germans; this summer offensive was a breakthrough, a triumph of strategy as opposed to the tactical successes of the Volturno and the Sangro. The 5th and the 8th Armies achieved great surprise in their regrouping for the attack, thus concealing their strength and the point of intended attack until the very last moment. Armored superiority was both achieved and exploited to the full. The concentration of land forces affected the front of the attack. Previously, a superiority of two-to-one or three-to-two over a wide front was considered sufficient, provided adequate air and fire support were available.⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁷ Fennel, *Fighting the People's War*, p. 413.

⁶¹⁸ Palit, *Italian Campaign*, pp. 65-66.

Conclusion

This thesis is a humble attempt to establish the North African Campaign as a study of operational history from the tactical and technological perspective, focusing on the Indian Divisions or formations that formed the majority of the British Army deployed to fight at this front. It speaks of the training of the Indian Army under British regulations in the interwar period, where the troops were rigorously trained for acclimatising and gaining mastery over different terrains. To my knowledge, this thesis is one of the few works created on this particular theatre of World War II, with special emphasis on the North African Campaign. This thesis has used War Diaries, Brigade Diaries, and Regiment Diaries of the Indian Divisions that participated in the campaign, available at the Ministry of Defense, Historical Section, New Delhi. These diaries contain official letters, instruction summaries, after-action reports, maps, and many other records of valuable information. Many authors have not accessed these sources and are exclusive to the few Indian hands that gained permission to view them from the authorities. Apart from these, this thesis has also used private papers of the commanders who served in the campaign: General Sir Francis S. Taker, General Sir Archibald Wavell, General Claude J. Auchinleck, General Bernard Law Montgomery, Lieutenant-General Sir Reginald Arthur Savoury, and General Sir Richard O'Connor. These private papers provide an insight into the direct view of the generals administering orders and exchanging instructions and letters of the day, thereby making it insightful to understand the battles and operations from the direct prism of the officers commanding them. This thesis has also looked into some Panzer Division Diaries from the National Archives of New Zealand. It has tried to view the campaign from the British perspective and validate it through records and sources that speak of the British victory and the reasons that led to it. The findings of this thesis are primarily based on the documentation of these papers and diaries.

This thesis attempts to establish a detailed study of the phenomenon of 'desert warfare'; the technicalities of fighting a war in the barren sands for almost four years is something that has not been attempted to date. Some exceptional works individually deal with certain parts of the campaign, but none have covered the entire campaign. The thesis also tries to investigate the nitty gritty of mountain warfare as the victory of the campaign of North Africa led to the moving ahead of the 8th Army at the high altitudes of the Italian Campaign with its participation in the famous battles of Monte Cassino. There is a shift from the tactics of fighting a war in the deserts to an opposite climate and terrain in the mountains. So, this thesis is also an attempt to

look into the pros and cons of fighting high-altitude warfare, though in much lesser detail than what it has attempted for desert warfare and desert tactics.

This thesis's final findings remain that the British Indian Army went into the war to fight the Italian invasion of the Mediterranean theatre, where it had to continue fighting the *Afrikakorps* commanded by the Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel. This campaign saw the 8th Army fighting the *Panzerarmee* for the most extended duration, for which this campaign continued. Initially overwhelmed with the superiority in terms of armour and especially the Panzers that Rommel brought in, it became a difficult task for General Wavell and General Auchinleck to bring over decisive victories in Operation Compass and Crusader, and also the First Battle of Alamein. It was only after the coming of General Montgomery, who is famously known as Monty, that the tides turned over. This thesis would also argue that it was somewhere due to the logistical inefficiencies of the *Afrikakorps*, it became favourable for the 8th Army to utilise the dearth of resources to strike at the right moments without leaving time for the *Afrikakorps* to rebuild their supplies. Every chapter of this thesis presents a different perspective on the Indian Army's training from the inter-war period to the campaign's conclusion at the Gustav Line. This work invites comments, suggestions, corrections, and criticisms to develop this research area further and enhance future studies and explorations.

To analyse the historical role of the Indian Divisions, particularly the Fourth Indian Division, it is noteworthy that they fought bravely in various terrains. The British Indian Army transformed volunteers with limited outlooks and skills into professional soldiers with broad general knowledge and proficiency. Training in specialized weapons, adopting new battle tactics, exposure to unfamiliar lands, engaging with diverse social systems, and using several foreign languages expanded the soldiers' understanding of the world. Every chapter of this thesis presents a different perspective on the training of the Indian Army from the inter-war period to the campaign's conclusion at the Gustav Line. This work invites comments, suggestions, corrections, and criticisms to develop this research area further and enhance future studies and explorations. To analyse the historical role of the Indian Divisions, particularly the Fourth Indian Division, it is noteworthy that they fought bravely in various terrains. The British Indian Army transformed volunteers with limited outlook and skills into professional soldiers with broad general knowledge and proficiency. Training in specialized weapons, adopting new battle tactics, exposure to unfamiliar lands, engaging with diverse social systems, and using several foreign languages expanded the soldiers' understanding of the world. The soldiers

practised tactical exercises with live ammunition on an impressive scale during the inter-war period.

It cannot be said that the British-Indian Army was completely unprepared for another world war after 1919. In the first year of World War II, the BIA was led by a cadre of committed professional generals who had successfully predicted the nature of the upcoming conflict, which would require extensive cooperation and integration among all branches of the armed forces. They had also developed a doctrine that encouraged commanders to take responsibility during battles and to trust their subordinates, a leadership style reminiscent of the German Army in World War II.

However, in 1939, the BIA was repeatedly overwhelmed on the battlefield. General Montgomery directly addressed the army's core challenges when he took command in North Africa in August 1942. He implemented an extensive, intense, and meticulous training program, effectively overcoming existing flaws within the ranks. Monty also tackled morale issues, capturing his troops' imagination in ways that marked a turning point for the BIA in the war. He developed a combat strategy tailored to the realities on the ground, seeking to establish a more centralized system of command and control. This approach aimed to create opportunities and leverage his significant advantages regarding material resources and firepower in the desert. He believed that firepower alone could not win battles. The parallel effect of artillery and aerial bombardment was not to kill the enemy but to degrade their morale and suppress their fire so the troops could cross the fire-swept zone. His approach to the 'Colossal Cracks' depended, to a large extent, on the speed with which attacking infantry could follow up with bombardments. If there were a massive gap between the end of a bombardment and the arrival of the attacking troops, defenders would typically be able to recover from the shock of massed firepower and fight effectively. The ability of the commanders and staff to ensure their offensives were perfectly planned. Availability of resources was not sure to be allocated at the exact time, time, and place, provided unexpected events slowed the advance, allowing the defenders to react and respond.

The resilience of German forces played a pivotal role in the unfolding events of World War II. A swift maneuver was essential to encircle and penetrate their defenses, and by applying such relentless pressure, surrender became inevitable. Still, General Montgomery's strategy, while formidable, encountered its challenges. During the intense campaigns of late 1942 through 1944, the British 8th Army faced difficulties transitioning from initial engagements to complete

breakthroughs. Yet, what truly stands out is the BIA's impressive ability to adapt and evolve its strategies, training, and resource management in the face of the extraordinary difficulties presented during those years. From the German viewpoint, there was a strong belief that their setbacks in North Africa stemmed mainly from the Allies' material superiority and the shortcomings of their Italian allies. They felt confident in their unmatched operational and tactical skills, trusting their training was superior at every level. Meanwhile, the atmosphere at Hitler's headquarters grew increasingly dire as he reluctantly recognized the severe blow to German forces. Despite these challenges, a sense of determination persevered through these trying times, reflecting a complex interplay of strategy and resilience on both sides.

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